

## Personal Factors of Coping Strategies for Undergraduate Students

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**Abstract:** Scientific interest of psychologists to problems of human behavior in difficult life situations increases recently, however, the researches analyzing development of constructive coping-strategy among undergraduates are presented insufficiently. The purpose of this study is to identify of personal features of coping-strategy among undergraduates of the Kazakh ethnic. Coping strategies were studied among 442 undergraduates of different specialties. We used the coping-test “Ways of Coping Questionnaire-WCQ” R.S. Lazarus and S. Folkman and Big Five personality traits P.T.Jr. Costa and R.R. McCrae. During the pilot study, the general and distinctive features in coping-strategies among undergraduates were found. The preferred and less important coping-strategies among undergraduates are revealed. It is shown that personality factors determine the choice of the dominant coping-strategies of behavior among undergraduates. The received results allowed to define the individualized methods of psychological work with undergraduates.

**Key words:** Personality factors, coping-strategies, undergraduate, assertive action, social support

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### INTRODUCTION

Currently in our country rather acute problem is of improving learning efficiency young professionals. Volumes and complexity of materials to be learned undergraduates for development of professional competence and full mastery of methodology of research activities increase significantly every year. Consequently, stress is enough in process of learning in universities. Thus important factors in learning process are all sorts of examination tests aimed to evaluate both teaching quality and knowledge quality of undergraduates. Intensification of learning process, complication of curricula, increase of responsibility for results of their educational and scientific activities lead to stressful situations of undergraduates. People use different strategies to cope with difficult situations. Studying of behavior directed on overcoming of difficulties held in psychology within researches devoted to analysis of “coping”. Coping, coping strategy, it is cognitive, emotional and behavioral strategies used to cope with demands of everyday life. Success, health and wellbeing of a person depend from coping-strategy. Consequently, ability to cope with difficult situations, developing a wide range of constructive ways of overcoming of a stress is an important indicator of a level of personality development.

Researches of coping behavior are held widely in recent years of Foreign psychology. However, questions are still debatable about a role of situational factors and

personal dispositions when choosing of coping strategy, sustainability or situational variability of coping. Besides, current researches analyzing constructive coping strategies are not available for undergraduates of the Kazakh nationality when increasing interest of domestic researchers devoted to problems of human behavior in difficult situations, learning in universities, development of professional competence of young professionals. We conducted our research to fill knowledge to structured theoretical materials for further studying of problems of coping strategies among undergraduates and thereby creating basis for practical psychological activities.

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

**Objective of the study:** The aim of our research is revealing features of coping strategies among undergraduates of the Kazakh ethnic.

**Literature review:** This area of psychological knowledge in Foreign science is studied from the second half of the 20 century. Maslow (2000) who was the first interested in this scientific area and introduced the term of “coping”. Coping behavior was contrasted with expressional behavior and was determined by culture and environment in his works. A. Maslow identified three main coping strategies: problem solving, avoiding of problems, search for social support. Then, Lazarus (1966), Folkman and Lazarus (1980, 1985, 1988), McCrae (1984), Compas *et al.*

(1988), Kossler (1989), Rost and Schemer (1989), Bolger (1990), Amirkhan (1990), Hobfoll *et al.* (1994) and Aldwin *et al.* (2011) continued studying of coping, etc. Foreign researchers attach greater importance to procedural and social aspects of coping; cognitive and behavioral efforts for weakening of influence stress. We define coping strategies as psychological overcoming by a person of stressful situations.

In recent years, there were researches which analyzed and summarized different classifications of coping strategies. According R.S. Lazarus and S. Folkman ways of response to life difficulties depend mainly from cognitive constructs. They offered the first binary classification (dichotomizing classification) which was bases on solution-focused strategies (including 11 copings) and emotion-focused strategies (including 62 coping activities). Problem-focused strategies are aimed at rational analysis of the problem. They are connected with creation of the plan of decision of difficult situation and manifest in such forms of behavior as independent (himself/herself) analysis of an incident, the asking to help, search of additional information. Emotional focused strategies are not accompanied by concrete actions and manifested in the form of attempts does not thinking about problems, involvement of others in his/her negatives, desire to forget all in dream, dissolve his/her troubles in alcohol or compensate negative emotions food. These forms of behavior are characterized by a naive, infantile assessment of events. Other researchers offered similar classification of coping strategies. For example, Moss and Schaefer (1986) allocated three strategies: focused on assessment-establishing for himself/herself values of situations, focused on the problem, decision-making and performance of concrete actions to overcome stress, focused on emotions, control of feelings and maintain emotional balance. Pearlin and Schooler (1978) offered similar classification, highlighting the following three strategies: strategy for changing way of vision problem, strategy for changing problem and strategy for management of emotional distress.

Matheny (1986), analyzed coping strategies through operative and preventive attitude to difficult situations. The researchers consider that preventive overcoming includes such ways as: avoiding of stressor by regulation of living conditions and activity, optimization of level of requirements of situation to a person, change of the behavior causing a stress, development of personal resources for coping. Operationally coping they allocated the following classes of behavior: assessment of situation and choice of adequate individually preferred strategy of behavior, 'Offensive' against stressors definition of

possibility direct removal of stressors, mobilization of effective efforts on overcome stress, increased resistance to stress by cognitive revaluation, strong-willed efforts, etc., reduction of mental intensity due to application of correction methods of condition. Koplik *et al.* (1992) considering cognitive coping strategies, offers dichotic classification: strategy of information search and strategy for closure of information. On the contrary, Vitaliano *et al.* (1990) allocated three ways emotionally-oriented overcoming: self-accusation, avoiding and preferable interpretation. Another theory also distinguishes three types of emotional coping strategies aimed at: regulation of inner emotions, regulation of behavior associated with experiencing emotions, regulation of context, causing emotion (Losoya *et al.*, 1998).

Weber (1992) considers that psychological destination of coping behavior is to better adapt a person of situation, helping him/her to take possession of it, to weaken or soften its demands. According to H. Weber basic repertoire of coping strategies of psychological overcoming of stress contains the following forms: real (cognitive or behavioral) solution problems, search for social support, reassessment of a situation to his/her own favor, protection and rejection of a problem, evasion and avoiding, compassion to himself/herself, low self-esteem, emotional expression.

Psychologists are concerned with coping behaviors have different views on efficiency of coping strategies. In many theories, it is recognized that coping strategies are inherently can be as productive, functional and unproductive, dysfunctional (Frydenberg, 2002; Frydenberg and Lewis, 2000; Lopez and Little, 1996; Koplik *et al.*, 1992; Vitaliano *et al.*, 1990; Compas *et al.*, 1988).

Resource-based approach is called comparatively new direction of coping-strategy. Resource approach emphasizes that there is a process of "commerce of resources" which explains why some people manage to keep health and adapt despite various life circumstances (Frydenberg, 2002).

In the COR-theory (Conservation of Resources) Hobfoll (1996) offers six axes in coping behaviors: prosocial/antisocial orientation, direct/indirect behavior and passive/active behavior.

Experimental researches provide different data on various coping strategies. Thus, data are obtained that coping reactions focused on problems are associated with lower levels of negative emotions in stressful situations which are perceived as controllable (Compas, 1998). Besides, using of problem-focused coping strategies is

negatively associated with behavioral problems (Ayers *et al.*, 1996) and social problems (Compas *et al.*, 1988a, b). It was shown if people have used less problem-focused coping strategies that they were experiencing more problems in adaptation. In contrast, frequent use of emotionally-focused coping is connected with more serious behavioral problems and also with a lot of symptoms of uneasiness and depression (Compas *et al.*, 1996, 2001). Such strategy as search for social support, aggressive coping, denial are also probably related to competence and ability to adaptation (Losoya *et al.*, 1998). Evidences of efficiency of strategy "search for social support" are data received in other researches (Parsons *et al.*, 1996). There was illustrated that examinees who received higher scores on progress scale, they used actively this coping strategy. The positive assessment is also deserved by strategy of active solution of problems. Thus, it was demonstrated that teenagers who are able to active solving of problems, they exhibit more easily adaptation (Ebata and Moos, 1991). Experimental researches provide different data on avoidance of coping; it is associated with higher levels of depression (Herman-Stahl *et al.*, 1995; Seiffge-Krenke, 1998) and difficulties at school adaptation (Causey and Dubow, 1993). In contrast, other researchers have shown that children with strategy of avoidance demonstrate fewer behavior problems at school (Kliewer, 1991) and by teachers' opinions have more social competence. Ambiguously evaluated and coping strategies such as "positive reassessment of situation" (Carpenter, 1992; Wethington and Kessler, 1991). Designation to problems of positive value reduces stress and serves for emotional adaptation to it, on the other hand, change in attitude distracts from solution of specific practical problems. However, it is represented that strategy of positive revaluation can be effective in situations when a subject can not control result. As for academic sphere, unfortunately, works on studying of influence to coping strategies for academic achievement are still insufficiently presented in psychological literature. Thus, for example, it is impossible to declare clearly and unambiguously that successful coping strategies conducts to overachievement in study. Nonetheless, it is already possible to refer to data for example, that teenagers (male) who have opted more productive coping strategies had distinct advantages in their study; namely, they demonstrated strong tendency to ensure that their studying was better than we expected based on their results on the IQ tests. It is generally considered that strategies aimed to solve problems are more effective.

However, research also suggest that using of several ways of coping is more effectively than only one concrete method of response to a situation (Carpenter, 1992; Wethington and Kessler, 1991).

Theoretical analysis of the literature allowed us to formulate the hypothesis of the study: personal factors influence to choice of prepotent coping strategies among undergraduates of the Kazakh nationality.

**Research model:** Our research was conducted in 2011-2014 on the basis of the Kazakh National Pedagogical University Abai and the L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University. Respondents were 442 undergraduates of the 1st-2nd courses of pedagogical specialties, average age of  $28.5 \pm 1.7$  years. There were 106 men and 336 women. Note that groups were uneven by quantity and gender of undergraduates. This gender distribution is typical for pedagogical specialties in our country.

The research was conducted in the form of group testing; 4-18 respondents were in a group. We used the "Ways of Coping Checklist-WCC" by Lazarus and Folkman (1984). Respondents were offered to answer 50 questions by which were determined coping strategies, such as: confrontational coping. Aggressive efforts on change of a situation. Assumes a certain degree of hostility and readiness for risk:

- Distantiation: cognitive efforts secede from situation and reduce its importance
- Self control: efforts on regulation his/her emotions and actions
- Search for social support: efforts in search of information, efficient and emotional support
- Assuming of responsibility: recognition of his/her role in a problem with accompanying theme of attempts to solve it
- Getaway-avoiding: mental striving and behavioral efforts to escape or avoidance of problems
- Planning of solution of problems: arbitrary problem-focused efforts for change of situation, including analytical approach to problem
- Positive revaluation: efforts on creation of positive value with focusing on self growth. Includes also religious measurement

Processing of obtained results was performed by content analysis. By means of the Big Five personality traits Costa and McCrae (1992), we have investigated personal features of undergraduates. The Big Five consists of the following subscales: extroversion, consent, consciousness, neuroticism and openness to experience.

Comparative analysis of groups was held on  $\varphi^*$  criterion of angular transformation of Fischer. The coefficient of correlation of Pearson was used for correlation analysis package of the Statistical Software SPSS 17.0 was used for data processing.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

**Data analysis:** By results of the research are defined dominant and less preferred coping strategies of undergraduates; average values of standard scores are calculated (Table 1).

During the research of the Kazakhs undergraduates were revealed the following dominant coping strategies: “Self-control”, “Search for social support”, “Positive revaluation” and “Planning of solution of problems”. By results of our research, it is visible that all respondents are less used such types of coping-strategy as “Confrontation” and “Getaway-avoiding”. It testifies that undergraduates attempt in difficult situations in any way to settle, solve them but not avoid problems.

Analysis of dynamics features of coping strategies depending on courses of undergraduates revealed insignificant correlation between them. Personal features of undergraduates and their impact on preferences in choosing coping strategies were studied in the next stage. The survey of personal factors revealed that the majority of undergraduates has medium and high degree of extraversion (40.5%). Manifestation degree of neuroticism were of undergraduates lower than average and average (34.4%). Degree of openness for new experiences were for most of respondents above average (60%) and high (35.7%). Consciousness degree of undergraduates was also above average (55.9%), high (28.7%) and average

(15.4%). Degree of consent was among undergraduates above average and high (65.6%). We assume that personal qualities of undergraduates which have high-significant communications with indicators of coping-strategy are their determinants. Results of correlation analysis are presented in Table 2.

Average value on scale “Confrontation” reveals that undergraduates have low level of confrontational coping. Consequently, adaptive variant of confrontational coping corresponds for undergraduates of the Kazakh nationality. Thus, the Kazakhs undergraduates rarely exhibit impulsive behavior; elements of hostility and conflict are not preferred in their behavioral strategies; unreasonable obstinacy is alien for them. However, such indicators testify that these undergraduates are not always capable to resistance to difficulties to defend own interests and to cope with anxiety in stressogenic conditions. Statistically significant distinctions by gender features are not revealed of undergraduates on this scale. Undergraduates often resort to coping strategies of distancing. Average value on scale “Distantiation” reveals that undergraduates have moderate level of tension for this coping but also their adaptive potential is in boundary condition. Undergraduates try to overcome negative emotions due problematic situation and to attach cognitive efforts to secede from a difficult situation and to reduce its importance. Statistically significant distinctions by gender features are not revealed of undergraduates on this scale.

Results of the study indicate that undergraduates prefer coping strategy “Self-control”. Average value on this scale testifies to high level of voltage and expressed disadaptation. Consequently, undergraduates try to overcome negative emotions with the problem of

Table 1: Average values standard scores by the technique “Coping-test of Lazarus”

Coping strategies	Women	Men	$\varphi^*$ -criterion
Planning of solution of problems	54.02±2.260	59.52±1.75	1.31 (p<0.1)
Confrontation	26.34 ±1.12	32.85±1.16	1.29 (p<0.1)
Search for social support	74.65±2.18	63.49±2.37	1.89 (p<0.05)
Assuming of responsibility	50.29±1.05	47.53±1.98	0.63 (p<0.1)
Self control	76.11±0.97	60.24±1.23	2.11 (p<0.05)
Getaway-avoiding	39.95±1.19	36.74±1.21	0.72 (p<0.1)
Distantiation	50.36±1.24	51.98 ±1.07	1.30 (p<0.1)
Positive revaluation	69.87±1.06	57.43±1.82	2.18 (p<0.05)

Table 2: Results of correlation analysis

Personal factors/coping strategies	Extraversion	Consent	Consciousness	Neuroticism	Openness for experiences
Planning of solution of problems	-0.217	0.150	0.604	0.283	-0.267
Confrontation	-0.578	-0.392	-0.247	0.256	0.213
Search for social support	-0.436	0.615	0.116	0.184	0.089
Assuming of responsibility	-0.148	0.194	0.581	-0.199	-0.264
Self control	-0.483	0.200	0.759	-0.211	-0.275
Getaway-avoiding	-0.395	-0.184	-0.125	0.205	0.116
Distantiation	0.214	-0.239	0.196	-0.035	-0.018
Positive revaluation	0.200	0.165	-0.188	0.124	0.241

purposeful suppression and containment of emotions, minimization of their impact on assessment of the situation and choice of behavior strategy, to avoid impulsive actions. Also, it testifies that undergraduates of the Kazakh ethnic have high level of control of their behavior, ability to self-control, aspirations to hide from others his feelings, demands of himself/herself. First of all, this is due to social factors upbringing in the Kazakh family, at school, in society, prevailing national and cultural traditions in the Kazakh society. Also, comparing gender features, we revealed distinctions in coping-strategy "Self-control" where data of indicators are higher for female undergraduates ( $p \leq 0.05$ ).

Data of coping-test indicate that undergraduates prefer of coping strategy "Search for social support". Average value of standard score on this scale evidence of high voltage level and intensity of adaptive strategies of coping behavior. It testifies that when undergraduates faced with a stressful situation, they rarely oriented to personal resources and seek to obtain support from society. According to the obtained data, if respondents are with high level in difficult life situations then most often they make efforts in search of information, effective and emotional support; they oriented on interaction with other people. Comparing men and women, we can note distinction in this coping-strategy ( $p \leq 0.05$ ). Women-undergraduates have higher indicators. However, men as women need of emotional support but they are interested in that nobody noticed because, it does not match their gender role. Thus, women are more eager to social contacts, to be heard, to receive empathic response, to share with someone her feelings.

Coping strategy "Assuming responsibility" are often used by undergraduates. Average value on this scale reveals that undergraduates have moderate level of voltage of this coping. Consequently, we can assume that undergraduates attempt to recognize their role in causing problems and responsibility for problems solution, they are capable of self-criticism and accusation. They strive for understanding of dependence between their actions and consequences, to analyze their behavior, to look for reasons of actual difficulties in own personal shortcomings and mistakes. Statistically significant distinctions by gender features are not revealed of undergraduates on this scale. Nevertheless quantitative indices of this scale testify that the Kazakhs female undergraduates are capable more than men to understanding of own role in causing of actual difficulties. The obtained data show that undergraduates have low level of coping-strategy "Getaway-avoiding". Average value on this scale reveals that undergraduates of the ethnic Kazakhs rarely resort to passive and

nonconstructive ways of coping (escape from reality to fantasy world, fascination with alcohol, smoking and eating). Besides, average level of this strategy testifies that avoiding-coping in the Kazakh culture is estimated positively in uncontrollable situations of stress when avoiding helps to prevent growth of negative situations. Statistically significant distinctions by gender features are not revealed of undergraduates on this scale.

"Planning of solution of problems" is one of the most preferred coping-strategy among undergraduates. We can assume that the ethnic Kazakhs undergraduates are able to deliberate and systematic resolution of problem situations, to plan their own actions taking into account objective conditions, past experiences and available resources. It means that most of undergraduates use transform behavioral strategies, try to cope with difficult life situations but they do not to secede from them. Statistically significant distinctions by gender features are not revealed of undergraduates on this scale.

Results of research indicate that undergraduates prefer coping-strategy "Positive revaluation". Average value of this scale testifies to high voltage level. Consequently, we can assume that the ethnic Kazakhs undergraduates are capable to positive revaluation of negative experiences due to positive rethinking a problem, consideration of a stressful situation as a stimulus for personal growth. Statistically significant distinctions by gender features are revealed of undergraduates on this scale ( $p \leq 0.05$ ).

According the study revealed that confrontational coping has inverse dependence with extraversion, consent, consciousness ( $p \leq 0.01$ ). At the same time, confrontational coping directly depends on emotional stability and openness to experience ( $p \leq 0.01$ ). Distancing coping positively correlates with extraversion ( $p \leq 0.05$ ), consciousness ( $p \leq 0.1$ ) and negative correlation with consent ( $p \leq 0.05$ ). Self-control as type of coping-strategy positively correlates with consent ( $p \leq 0.05$ ) and consciousness ( $p \leq 0.01$ ), negatively correlates with extraversion, openness to experience ( $p \leq 0.01$ ) and neuroticism ( $p \leq 0.05$ ). Coping strategy search for social support has direct correlation with the consent ( $p \leq 0.01$ ) and neuroticism ( $p \leq 0.1$ ), inverse dependence with extraversion ( $p \leq 0.01$ ). Getaways-avoiding is negatively correlates with extraversion ( $p \leq 0.01$ ) and consent ( $p \leq 0.1$ ) also correlated with neuroticism ( $p \leq 0.05$ ). Coping planning of solution of problems positively correlates with conscientiousness and neuroticism ( $p \leq 0.01$ ) is inversely dependence with extraversion and openness ( $p \leq 0.05$ ). Positive revaluation positively correlates at different levels of reliability with openness ( $p \leq 0.01$ ), extraversion ( $p \leq 0.05$ ) and with consent ( $p \leq 0.1$ ), has

inverse dependence with conscientiousness ( $p \leq 0.1$ ). Assuming of responsibility positively correlates with personality traits as conscientiousness ( $p \leq 0.01$ ) and consent ( $p \leq 0.1$  inversely correlates with extraversion ( $p \leq 0.1$ ), neuroticism and openness ( $p \leq 0.05$ ).

Thus, we can say that the ethnic Kazakhs undergraduates are able to realize constructive coping strategies; they make efforts to control their behavior in the context of universal human values and the national culture.

### CONCLUSION

- Such types of adaptive coping-strategies as “Self-control”, “Search for social support”, “Positive revaluation” and “Planning of solution of problems” are most often used by respondents
- To a lesser degree undergraduates prefer these types of coping strategies as “Confrontation” and “Getaways-avoiding”
- Coping-strategies “Planning of solution of problems”, “Distancing” and “Confrontation” are more expressed at men than at women.
- Coping-strategies “Self-control”, “Search for social support”, “Positive revaluation”, “Assuming of responsibility” and “Getaways avoiding” are more often common at female undergraduates than at male undergraduates due social factor of upbringing in a family, at school, in society, prevailing national and family traditions
- These coping-strategies of undergraduates “Self-checking”, “Search for social support” and “Positive revaluation” have significant differences by gender features
- Personal factors and the national culture are determinants of coping-strategies of the ethnic Kazakhs undergraduates
- Direct and inverse correlation dependences were established between coping-strategies of undergraduates and their personal features. Data indicate that there is a relationship between some types of coping-strategies and certain personal factors

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