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UDC 159.922

**THE ADAPTABILITY OF PREFERRED COPING STRATEGIES
AND THE DESCRIPTIVE COMPONENTS
OF STRESSFUL SITUATIONS**

SUMMARY. The article deals with an additional determinant of a coping-strategy choice — the differentiation of cognitive and emotional assessment of a stressful situation which is manifested in differentiation of cognitive and emotional components of this situation description.

KEY WORDS. Coping-strategy, stress.

The realities of life of the modern person (high speed of life, a flow of information demanding processing and understanding, the need to support and establish a large number of social communications, instability of the social and economic situation, etc.) often put a modern person in extreme living conditions. Stress is the most characteristic mental condition arising under the influence of extreme conditions. The failure or inability of a person to cope with stress is a basic reason for health problems or, at least, for life deterioration. Therefore, we understand the interest of many researchers in the question of what helps a person to cope and deal with difficult life situations, what is a mechanism of adaptation to unstable, intense living conditions. Theoretical, methodological, practical questions of the theory of stress are reflected in the works of a number of researchers [1], [2], [3], [4]. Investigating coping behavior, the authors point out different types of coping-strategies [5], [6], [7], [8], define its determinants [9], [10], [11] and resources [12], [13].

As researchers [7], [9] note, the reason for stress or, at least, its intensity, depends not on the environment parameters, but rather on intrapersonal features of the individual, including peculiarity of perception of a situation. In various therapeutic concepts, in particular in the theory of family systems of M. Bowen, the importance of differentiated perception of a situation which is understood as differentiation of understanding a situation from its experience is noted. In this case, we rely on the concept “differentiation I” introduced by Bowen. This concept “reflects the degree of the difference between emotional and intellectual functioning” [14].

The author theoretically proves and confirms by clinical examples that if the differentiation is higher, people function better, they are more flexible and adaptive

to stress. At the same time, at present there are no experimental data concerning the problem of how the differentiation of the mentioned components and the reaction to stress are connected. The establishment of the existence of this connection would help to create an additional method of working with stress.

The materials reviewed by us concerning the interrelation of cognitive and emotional factors in the learning process, and also stress and coping behaviour, can be summarized in the following theses:

Cognitive and emotional processes are closely interconnected; in particular, emotions substantially regulate the course of cognitive processes. The emotional assessment is not differentiated and is primary to cognitive processes. As a result, it often becomes an obstacle to an objective understanding of the situation. A stereotypical emotional reaction makes a person's behaviour rigid and therefore not adaptive enough and subject to a large number of stressors.

To cope with something (in this case, with our own emotional state), it is necessary to separate the object of coping from the instrument of coping, i.e. the ability to separate, to distinguish the experience from understanding, i.e. to differentiate cognitive and emotional assessment in the course of perception can be the way to regulate emotions.

The idea of separation of these two processes isn't new, we can find it in some therapeutic concepts (the concept of "differentiation I" of M. Bowen's family psychotherapy system). But having studied determinants and the resources of the coping behaviour pointed out by researchers now, we didn't find the ability to differentiate experience and understanding either among the first, or among the second.

Thus, that the ability to differentiate cognitive and emotional assessments is connected with the preference of an adaptive coping-strategy and needs an empirical check.

Empirical research

Research was carried out on a sample of 55 people aged from 25 to 50 years (15 people at the initial stage of the research, 40 people at the stage of the main research) to check the relationship between differentiation of cognitive and emotional components of the verbal description of a stressful situation and the adaptability of preferred coping-strategies.

Stage 1. The creation of a semantic differential for the definition of differentiation of emotional and cognitive components of the verbal description of a stressful situation. For this purpose:

— there was an interview on the problem of "Stressful Situation and I in It": the respondents had to name 3 stressful situations had happened to them lately, and to describe one of them in details. The respondents' answers were recorded in the form of protocols;

— the list of objects for semantic differential from the given by respondents as stressful situations (by combining identical names) was made;

— there is a final list of descriptors: the primary list has been processed with the help of experts, the descriptors have been divided into two groups—the words calling emotional processes and conditions, and the words calling intellectual processes and conditions (3 psychologists and 2 linguists were experts).

— on the basis of the given list the semantic differential has been made, where the most typical kinds of stressful situations were pointed out by the respondents in the first interview.

Stage 2. The process of carrying out and processing the semantic differential technique.

— The data of the semantic differential has been processed with the help of cluster analysis for each respondent individually.

— On the basis of the received clusters, the general matrix for all respondents on “differentiated”/“undifferentiated” clusters was made. We understand by a “differentiated” cluster, a cluster including descriptors only from one group: calling only emotional or only intellectual processes and conditions. By “undifferentiated”—we understand the cluster, including descriptors of both groups.

Stage 3. Carrying out and processing a technique of defining preferred coping-strategies by E.Hajma. Matrices were made according to the following criteria: adaptability/non-adaptability, the spheres of mental activity, kinds of coping-strategies.

Stage 4. The correlation of the matrices (with the help of the Pierson criteria) received according to both techniques was made. The results are:

1. According to the criterion “the adaptability degree of coping-strategies”: there is a positive correlation of “differentiated” clusters with adaptive coping-strategies, and the “undifferentiated” cluster with non-adaptive and relatively adaptive coping-strategies (tab. 1).

Table 1

**Results of correlation analysis
by the criterion “The degree of coping-strategies adaptability”**

Correlations (Spreadsheet 1) Marked correlations are significant at $p < ,05000$ N = 40 (Casewise deletion of missing data)		
	Differentiated clusters	Undifferentiated clusters
Adaptive coping-strategies	0,44	-0,09
Non-adaptive coping-strategies	-0,25	0,54
Relatively adaptive coping-strategies	-0,31	0,44

2. According to the criterion “the sphere of mental activity”: no significant correlations were revealed between “differentiated” clusters and kinds of coping-strategies on spheres of mental activity; but a positive correlation between “undifferentiated” clusters and cognitive coping-strategies (tab. 2) was revealed.

Table 2

Results of the correlation by the criterion “the sphere of mental activity”

Correlations (Spreadsheet 1)		
Marked correlations are significant at $p < ,05000$		
N = 40 (Casewise deletion of missing data)		
	Differentiated clusters	Undifferentiated clusters
Cognitive coping-strategies	-0,08	0,41
Emotional coping-strategies	0,19	0,26
Behaviour coping-strategies	-0,07	0,22

3. By the criterion “kinds of coping-strategies”:

— “differentiated” clusters correlate positively with such strategies as “problem analysis” (0.33) and “optimism” (0.45) but correlate negatively with the “ignoring” (-0.35) and “confusion” (-0.34) strategies;

— “undifferentiated” clusters positively correlate with the strategy of “ignoring” (0.40), “giving sense” (0.42), “humility” (0.40), “self-accusation” (0.43), “distraction” (0.37).

The results testify that people, differentiating emotional and cognitive components of a stressful situation, statistically, when they describe them, are more prone to use adaptive coping-strategies. The people who don’t differentiate emotional and cognitive components of a stressful situation while describing them, statistically are more prone to use non-adaptive and relatively adaptive coping-strategies.

Groups were also divided according to the preferred coping-strategies.

Thus, *examinees who differentiated an emotional and cognitive component* statistically choose “problem analysis” coping-strategies more often, i.e. they use the form of the behaviour directed at understanding difficulties and possible ways of getting rid of them, and “optimism”. It is peculiar to them to be always assured of having a solution to any situation. Such people are less prone to use the strategies of “ignoring” and “confusion”—passive forms of behaviour with the refusal of overcoming difficulties. The given research hasn’t revealed any preferences of this respondent group in the choice of coping-strategies for spheres of mental activity.

It means that for a way out of a difficult situation they use cognitive (situation analysis), emotional (regulation of emotions experienced) and behavioural (regulation of own actions and expressions of emotions) coping-strategies, without giving preference to any of them. It can testify to a considerable level of flexibility in decision-making, the ability to focus on the parameters of the environment, instead of reacting stereotypically.

Examinees with undifferentiated emotional and behavioural components statistically more often choose coping-strategies of “ignoring”, i.e. it is peculiar for them to avoid the solution of a problem situation by underestimating its importance; “giving sense”. They are prone randomly to give cause and effect relationships to occurring events and so to explain them to themselves, interpreting within their own

picture of the world; “humility” and “self-accusation”—these types of behaviour, characterized by a suppressed emotional state, the state of hopelessness, doom, blaming themselves, disbelief in their own ability to change something. It is peculiar for such people to use cognitive coping-strategies, and they are rather similar to protective mechanisms of “denial” and “rationalization”, when the strategies of “ignoring” and “giving sense” dominate.

Conclusions:

1. The people differentiating emotional and cognitive components when describing a stressful situation statistically are more often prone to use adaptive coping-strategies. The people, who don't differentiate emotional and cognitive components describing a stressful situation, statistically are more often prone to use non- adaptive and relatively adaptive coping-strategies.

2. The people differentiating cognitive and emotional components describing a stressful situation are prone to use adaptive coping-strategies (strategies of “problem analysis” and “optimism”), and aren't prone to use strategies of “ignoring” and “confusion”.

3. The people who don't differentiate cognitive and emotional components describing a stressful situation are prone to use non-adaptive and relatively adaptive coping-strategies, in particular such strategies as “ignoring”, “giving sense”, “humility” and “self-accusation”. In general this group of people tends to use cognitive coping-strategies.

Thus, it was empirically confirmed by us that the differentiation of cognitive and emotional assessments, excluding well-studied factors (self-assessment, a control locus, a level of anxiety, a feature of motivation, etc.), can also be the determinant of a coping-strategy choice, which is shown in the differentiation of the cognitive and emotional components describing a situation.

The establishment of this interrelation opens the way for the creation of additional ways of stress prevention. Work on increasing differentiation of perception can be carried out both within individual counselling, and training of various subjects.

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