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Relationship between Self-Concept and Resistance in Terms of “Hardiness” in University Students

Abstract

The contribution presents new findings concerning the relationship between self-concept and resistance in terms of “hardiness” in university students. It points to the influence of self-concept on coping with stress in life.

Keywords: *self-concept, resistance, hardiness, challenging life situations*

The generally known definition of **self-concept** denotes a summary of ideas and evaluative judgements that one has about oneself (Blatný, Plháková, 2003). Van der Werff (1990) defines self-concept as a vision or mental representation of oneself, and other authors (Shavelson, Hubner, Stanton, 1976) talk, in a broader sense, about self-perceptions formed through experiences with one's environment.

Markus and Wurf, and Suls and Sanders say that self-concept is a product of social learning in the process of a person's interaction with the world (Blatný, Plháková, 2003).

Some authors (Brehm and Kassin, Greenwald and Pratkanis in: Blatný, Plháková, 2003) consider self-concept as an attitude towards oneself that may be characterized by three aspects: cognitive (content, organisation, structure), affective (relationship with oneself) and conative (emotional and rational processing, feedback and experience, motivational function). It is the last of the aspects, involved in self-regulation of behaviour, which is the subject of our interest.

The above shows that self-concept “is a complex construct implying a cognitive structure, consisting, albeit not exclusively, of verbally or semantically coded generalizations, into which new data and obviously also behavioural patterns of

specific importance to the subject are generated. These generalizations include qualities, skills, knowledge, values, attitudes and social roles, anything by which the subject defines and assesses himself. They are mainly the characteristics he considers self-profiling, and it depends on them, how any personal information will be treated” (Papica, 1985, p. 19).

Explanations of self-concept in contemporary psychology accentuate the following aspects or characteristics of self-concept as a whole (Blatný, Plháková, 2003):

1. Multifacetedness: self-concept is composed of orders of partial mental representations of Self (perceptions/schemata/prototypes) constituting a certain system and differing in terms of centrality, positivity/negativity, time localization and possibilities for realization;
2. Hierarchy: it is related to the multifacetedness and multidimensionality. Self-concept is a generalization of knowledge about oneself, derived from partial experience in specific situations. Such knowledge is organized hierarchically by the level of abstraction from particular, specific elements up to general categories;
3. Dynamics: it reflects the fact, that any of the representations of Self is activated depending on different situations, and at the moment fulfils the function of the central, controlling structure of self-concept;
4. Understanding Self as a system: interconnectedness and complementarity of the processual (Self as the subject of knowledge, agent of mental life) and structural (object of knowledge and assessment, product of such a process) aspect of Self.

Symbolic social assessment criteria constitute the basis for *assessing oneself*, **self-assessment**, residing in the fact that already in childhood one begins to form an image of oneself, containing not only a judgement about oneself, but also an emotional relationship with oneself (self-feeling). The self-assessment or perception of oneself in terms of one's own competence (in any domain - social, moral or performance competence) may be understood as a mental representation of the emotional relationship with oneself. One looks for one's own identity, wants to be oneself and accepts some attributed characteristics while not accepting others (the level of self-acceptance). It is the outcome of social comparison and assessment of oneself based on observation of one's activities. Some authors (Shavelson, Hubner, Stanton, 1976, Watkins, Dhawan, in: Blatný, Plháková, 2003) use the terms self-concept and self-assessment as synonyms arguing that the general public does not distinguish between them. For the needs of this paper, we decided to subscribe to this group of authors. **Self-esteem** is an evaluative component of

self-concept and includes internalized social judgements or conclusions. People with high self-esteem are usually active, communicative, optimistic, able to cope with criticism and generally more successful. They often have higher goals and achieve them more frequently. Low self-esteem is accompanied with lower goals, conventionality and dependence on opinions of others, health problems such as insomnia, headaches and indigestion. Cultivating self-esteem is an important part of guiding children to mental health. Sources of positive self-assessment are complex, but the parenting style and personal goals stand out. We can agree with Hayesová (2000) that personal self-esteem is supported by upbringing including elements of esteem, a clear definition of value criteria and demands and guidance to independent problem solving. A well-structured environment having reasonable requirements is more favourable for building independence than a too permissive environment.

Self-confidence is another frequently used term in relation to self-concept. We understand it as an attitudinal component of the self-system. It includes self-assessment, accompanying self-assessing emotions (happiness, satisfaction, pride, shame, etc.), and it determines also a pupil's final focus on preferred activities, tasks, subjects, interests, etc. Self-confidence reflects the feeling of self-worth and consequently determines activities which a person will prefer and which he/she will avoid, thus creating preconditions for the formation of successfully intelligent individuals in accordance with the Triarchic Theory of Intelligence (Kaliská, 2011). Reasonably self-confident, independent and efficient individuals trust their own abilities. Self-confidence is connected with the motivating emotional sphere through self-assessment, thus becoming an important regulatory element in the psyche of man. Coopersmith (in: Kusák, Dařílek, 2000) claims that already pupils of younger school age, but not later than before completing school attendance, form a stable idea about their self-worth.

Advantages of healthy high self-confidence are indisputable. Persons with high self-confidence are more active, assertive and express their opinions more openly; they are *more resistant to negative influences and excessive pressures*. Also, they are less conforming; they approach new tasks, situations and people with greater trust and make friends easily. They have fewer personal problems.

In relation to the domain of achievement, we talk about **self-assurance**. We understand it as anticipation of successful mastering of planned tasks or as a person's general belief that things will go as he/she wishes or expects them to.

In professional literature dealing, e.g., with teacher personality, we can see the self-terms organized in the "Six S" system (Petlák, 2000) as follows: self-reflection, self-assessment, self-confidence, self-control, self-regulation, and self-creation.

In connection with the conative aspect of self-concept, thus self-regulation, Bandura's concept of **self-efficacy** should be mentioned, thus an individual's general personal belief in his or her ability to cope with life difficulties and challenges, i. e. awareness of one's own efficiency (Bandura, 1997). In our opinion, this concept is very close to Meyer's self-concept of abilities, well-known mainly in international literature, where important implications to motivation, anxiety and school achievement have been proved (Man, Řepka, 2001), as well as to achievement motivation, motivation for creativity, and Origin behaviour (Ďuricová, 2003).

The question whether and how one copes with difficult life situations, contributes, no doubt, also to one's life satisfaction. When examining people successfully coping with life difficulties, frequently personal characteristics have been revealed, considerably helping those people to overcome the difficulties. As one of them, a personal characteristic has crystallized, one of the type "do not give up and fight with the difficulty", for which the name **resistance** has come into use.

The issue of resistance to mental stress has been dealt with in our country already for some time, by workers of the Institute of Experimental Psychology of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, under the leadership of Daniel (1984). According to this author (Daniel, 1984, p. 132): "resistance depends on the tasks one has to deal with (depending primarily on familiarity with them), then on the state of psycho-physiological functions and on motivation. This includes also permanent personality characteristics: nervous system structure, developmental influences, self-assessment and the course of emotional response".

At present, **resistance** is most frequently understood in terms of **hardiness, resilience and coherence**.

On the basis of his research, Antonovsky (in: Krivohlavý, 2001) formulated a personality characteristic called the sense of coherence - SOC - a feature of personality cohesion. He defined **coherence** by three basic characteristics: **comprehensibility of the situation, meaningfulness of the fight and manageability of the task**. These three characteristics of SOC are understood as dimensions with positive and negative poles.

Comprehensibility is the cognitive aspect of SOC, manifested in how the world and anything that makes logical sense is understood. A person at the **positive pole** of this characteristic can see connections among various life situations, on the basis of which the person perceives the world and its events as a well-arranged whole. The **negative pole** is characterized by seeing the world as excessively complex and ambiguous; everything seems illogical, unexplainable and incomprehensible to the person.

The dimension of **meaningfulness** includes a person's motivational orientation to his/her life goal. The **positive pole** is characterized by an attitude of a person who believes that the life situation into which he/she has got and its solution are meaningful. The person sees the encountered problems as challenges to be solved, where he/she will be able to show his/her initiative and creativity. At the same time, he/she thinks that his/her effort will be appreciated by other people. The **negative pole** is characterized by alienation. The person is not emotionally involved in what is going on, as a result of which he/she will find himself/herself in social isolation.

Manageability is the operative aspect of SOC, including a person's perception of possibilities to cope with requirements made on him/her. The **positive pole** is characterized by a person's belief that he/she has enough power and possibilities as well as that his/her closest people have enough power and possibilities to deal with the situation successfully. The **negative pole** is characterized by a person's belief that the requirements a certain life situation places on him/her are beyond his/her power and that he/she has no means to tackle the situation.

To observe the above-mentioned three SOC dimensions, Antonovsky developed a diagnostic method for SOC, detecting perception and understanding of the self, world and life as integrated - coherent realities. In his works he shows that people with a higher value in coherence measured by the SOC Questionnaire cope with life difficulties better than those with a lower value measured.

Persons with a higher level of coherence show higher flexibility, they are able to better cope even with less structured situations when looking for solutions of stressful and conflict situations. A high score both in hardiness and SOC indicates that the individual will focus rather on the so-called problem-oriented coping, seeking an active approach to problem solving. Cognitive processing of all aspects of the stressful situation and active consideration of possibilities for coping with it may be more dominant for him/her (Ruiselová, 2003).

According to Křivohlavý (2001), Werner, a developmental psychologist, uses the term "resilience" to denote a personality trait enabling successful coping with difficult life situations. The term "resilience" in Slovak translation means *elastičnosť*, *húževnatosť*, *nezlomnosť*. Werner's research findings show that children with resilience very often have a very good level of social support. However, studies on the conception of resilience indicate that resilience in one domain does not automatically mean resilient behaviour also in other domains.

Well-known is the conception of stress resistance in terms of "hardiness" by the US author Kobasa, (as cited in: Křivohlavý, 2001). The term hardiness is translated into Slovak as *nezdolnosť*, *tvrdosť*, *tuhosť*, *odolnosť*.

Křivohlavý (1991) understands resistance as a personality trait enabling a person to mitigate the negative effect of adverse life situations.

Kobasa further elaborated the conception of this personality trait with a team of colleagues (Maddi, Kahn). The authors of the conception define hardiness as a personality trait determined by the following components:

1. *Control* - standing for personal control of external (often stressful) events in a person's life. It is understood as a person's tendency to feel capable of controlling and managing the course of events. The opposite is a feeling of helplessness and hopelessness.
2. *Commitment* to a meaningful task, attachment, personal involvement. It is a disposition to get fully involved in something one considers worthwhile and meaningful. The negative pole of this characteristic is alienation meaning retreat from life and any events.
3. *Challenge* - the essence of this component resides in understanding tasks, challenging events and life changes as a challenge to cope with. The opposite is fatalism, threat and fear of what will happen next.

The label "hard, unyielding personalities" is applied to people whose results in the above components are the closest possible to the positive pole. When coping with difficulties, they manage to get a bird's eye view, remain above the thing, have control over their life, get involved in life and are stimulated even by events which others could see as threatening (Bratská, 2001).

The personality trait of hardiness can be examined with the use of the HARDINESS PVS questionnaire by Kobasa. The Czech translation has been made by Křivohlavý. It measures the score of the components, the sum of which represents the total H-score.

According to Paulík (2009), a person with optimally developed hardiness values sees oneself as an active participant in events which he/she can effectively intervene in, thus influence them and cope also with their subsequent developments. He/she gets fully involved in activities he/she considers meaningful and seeks to overcome adverse circumstances on the way to the set goal. He/she is active and has initiative in his/her conduct; difficult situations are a challenge for him/her to tackle.

On the contrary, if resistance in terms of hardiness is insufficiently developed, according to Paulík (ibid.), there is a feeling of helplessness and hopelessness, with a feeling of futile efforts to intervene in the events. This is associated with unclear value orientation, indecisiveness, a lack of trust in oneself and others, alienation, pessimism, dissatisfaction.

There are many studies dealing with the phenomenon of hardiness in relation to stress. Some studies (Wiebe, Křivohlavý in: Paulík, 2009) point out negative links

between hardiness and a negative affective and psycho-physiological response to stress stimuli. Persons with a higher level of hardiness show a lower level of distress while showing a higher level of self-control.

An important part of resistance to stress is positive self-assurance based on the process of self-assessment, awareness of one's own efficiency, and clarity of self-concept. Self-assessment is based on more or less thorough self-reflection residing in focusing on one's own behaviour and experiencing with the aim to capture their essential qualities. Clarity of self-concept is given by accuracy, conciseness of self-concept characteristics and their internal and temporal stability. Positive self-concept supports self-assuredness and experiencing positive feelings towards oneself (Paulík, 2009). Recent research has brought results concerning the relationship between self-concept and coping strategies. Authors researching this subject suppose that self-assessment plays an important role when choosing a strategy for coping with a stress situation. Low self-assessment usually correlates with a preference for maladaptive strategies. With high self-assessment, there is a tendency to use more effective problem-oriented coping strategies (Ficková, 2000, Blatný, Osecká, 1998).

Research Findings

The aim of our research probe was:

1. to find out the average level of individual factors of self-concept and hardiness within the research sample;
2. to find out correlation relationships between the factors of self-concept and factors of hardiness.
3. On the basis of the set aims the following research questions were asked:
4. What is the average level of individual factors of self-concept and hardiness within the research sample?
5. What are correlation relationships between the factors of self-concept and factors of hardiness?

The research sample consisted of 197 students in their 1st and 2nd year of studies at the Faculty of Education of Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica.

To find out empirical data, Engler - Meyer's questionnaire SCEA – M was used. The Czech version of Engler – Meyer's Self-Concept of Ability Questionnaire was validated by Man and Blahuš (1998). The questionnaire measures two factors: the concept of one's own talent (positive self-image, or the image of one's own abilities) and the fear of social consequences, or social anxiety, which can also be perceived as the fear of assessment.

The questionnaire consists of twenty-five simple questions. Respondents choose only one out of four or five answers and indicate it on the record sheet. Nine items measure the concept of one's own talent. Six items measure the fear of social consequences. Respondents can get 1 to 4 or 5 points for each answer. Their sum is the raw score; each of the measured factors has, de facto, its own raw score.

An additional method used was the Hardiness PVS questionnaire (S.C.Kobasa), examining three components: control, commitment and challenge, characterized above.

Research findings related to RQ1

Table 1. Descriptive values of the examined self-concept factors and hardiness components (RQ1)

Factors/Components	AM	SD	Min.	Max.
FSC	15.87	2.758	8	24
COOT	23.80	3.685	11	39
CA	28.11	6.549	9	43
CO	31.95	6.163	13	45
CM	30.74	6.502	13	43

Legend: FSC = fear of social consequences; COOT = concept of one's own talent, abilities; CA = challenge; CO = control; CM = commitment

Research findings related to RQ2

Table 2. Kolmogorov-Smirnov test for normality of the examined variables

	Kolmogorov – Smirnov test for normality		
	Coefficient	N	p – value
FSC	0.088	197	0.001
COOT	0.139	197	0.000
CA	0.041	197	0.200*
CO	0.080	197	0.004
CM	0.088	197	0.001

Legend: FSC = fear of social consequences; COOT = concept of one's own talent, abilities; CA = challenge; CO = control; CM = commitment

Since the tests for normality returned normal distribution of all the examined variables (Table 2), the next step was to use Pearson's correlation analysis.

Table 3. Correlation relationships between the self-concept factors and hardiness components

Item		FSC	COOT	CA	CO	CM
FSC	r	1	−0.159*	−0.328**	−0.164*	−0.202**
	p		0.025	0.000	0.021	0.004
COOT	r	−0.159*	1	0.352**	0.417**	0.470**
	p	0.025		0.000	0.000	0.000
CA	r	−0.328**	0.352**	1	0.456**	0.554**
	p	0.000	0.000		0.000	0.000
CO	r	−0.164*	0.417**	0.456**	1	0.707**
	p	0.021	0.000	0.000		0.000
CM	r	−0.202**	0.470**	0.554**	0.707**	1
	p	0.004	0.000	0.000	0.000	

Legend: FSC = fear of social consequences; ** $p < 0.01$; COOT = concept of one's own talent, abilities; * $p < 0.05$; CA = challenge; CO = control; CM = commitment

As shown in Table 3, statistically significant negative correlation relationships were found between the fear of social consequences, or social assessment, and challenge (CA), control (CO) and commitment (CM) as hardiness components. It is natural that people who are able to accept the problem to be solved as their own, seek to obtain as much information about it as possible and approach it as a challenge, have less fear of being assessed by their social environment and attach to it only appropriate importance. On the contrary, people who depend on assessment by others very much experience a problem as a threat, they do not try to analyse it, postpone its solving and handle it as something that is not their business.

Our most significant research findings include statistically significant correlation relationships of moderate intensity between the concept of one's own abilities, representing positive self-concept, and individual components of resistance in terms of hardiness. The more one trusts oneself, the more able one is to identify with a difficult life situation, comprehend it and get personally involved in its solution.

Our research findings also confirm the close positive relationship of the hardiness components and statistically significant, albeit a slightly weaker negative relationship between the self-concept factors according to Meyer.

Conclusion

The question whether we bring up children or students towards stress resistance has been dealt with also by Zelina (2013). He stresses the need to pay more attention to the support of an individual's positive, often latent strengths. He has elaborated this idea of "positive pedagogy" in his conception of superdispositions of personality resistance (VARGOS) including 6 areas: 1 – Viability, 2 – Self-regulation, 3 – Resilience, 4 – GAS, 5 – Liberation, and 6 – Liberty.

With regard to our research findings we may state that the strengthening of positive self-assessment has an increasing effect on resistance in terms of hardiness. As during their university studies students encounter and have to deal with stressful situations of various types and levels, it would be sensible to encourage their ability to cope with them appropriately through the strengthening of positive self-concept also within the educational process during their undergraduate studies. This could be done within psychological training activities aimed at self-knowledge and self-development, coping with stressful situations within the subjects: psychology of health, mental hygiene, and socio-psychological training. Their positive contribution could reflect in improved academic performance and subsequently in increased general life satisfaction.

Since the research sample consisted of the students of the faculty of education, thus mainly future teachers, increasing programmatically their resistance is of great importance also in terms of their preparation for the profession. Analysis of the demands of educational situations they will encounter daily has been dealt with, e.g., by Rovňanová (2013).

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