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MEANING-LIFE ORIENTATIONS AND COPING STRATEGIES OF GIRLS OF DIFFERENT STUDENT AGES

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Abstract. *Student age is a sensory age for the formation of world outlook and life goals, realisation of responsibility for one's life. The search for answers to these questions contributes not only to the formation of an adequate assessment of reality, understanding and awareness of the meaning of life, but also to the formation of constructive ways of solving life problems, the formation of their own special strategies of behaviour. The aim of the work is to establish the correlation between meaning-life orientations and coping strategies of female students of different age groups. The study was conducted on a sample of female students of Tolstoy State Pedagogical University (n=69) aged from 18 to 24 years, studying at different courses of bachelor's and master's degrees. As diagnostic tools we used the D. Leontiev's SZHO test and the questionnaire 'Ways of coping behaviour' (WSQ) by R. Lazarus. Correlation analysis showed strong direct correlations between the goals, process and performance of life, the general indicator of life meaningfulness and planning strategy. Strong inverse correlations were found between the index of life performance and the strategies of distancing and escape/avoidance. The study showed that the values of life meaningfulness of female students are higher the older in age the respondents are. Meaning-life orientations influence the choice of coping strategies: for respondents in the age group (≤21) avoidance-type coping strategies, i.e. unproductive strategies, are more characteristic, whereas for subjects in the age group (≥22) problem-oriented coping is the most typical.*

Key words: *meaning-life orientations; coping strategies; female students; student age; different age groups.*

Introduction

The problem of studying meaning-life orientations is directly related to the issues of formation and development of personality. The presence of the meaning of life is the leading criterion of personality formation, an indicator of how ready a person is to manage his life and independent of external circumstances. In the works of Russian psychologists, the meaning of life is understood and experienced by a person as a value of extremely high order, the loss of which is disastrous for his or her existence [1; 2]. The understanding of the meaning of life as a psychological formation representing a system of various 'meanings' is considered close to this point of view in [3; 4]. These meanings are realised by a person in the process of choosing goals, ideas, which acquire for him the character of the most important values of the highest order. Finding the meaning of life makes it possible to solve complex problems in all spheres of life activity.

Foreign researchers also adhere to a systemic view of the meaning of life and argue that a meaningful life, expressed as the pursuit of personally significant goals, contributes to positive experiences and positive life [5; 6]. In their research they come to the assertion that goals are a concretised expression of future orientation and act as a criterion for exploring the vital elements of a positive life.

The meaning of life is the most important new formation of adolescence, in this age period the question about the meaning of life becomes global. The adolescent age is characterised by another important new formation - the emergence of life plans, which indicates a person's aspiration to consciously build his life as the beginning of the search for its meaning.

It is in adolescence that a stable system of values and meanings is formed, which is the basis of personal autonomy and self-determination. In 18-19 years of age a person enters a new stage of meaning regulation based on the hierarchy of meaning-forming values. The transition to a new age stage is often accompanied by a crisis, reassessment of previously formed values and reflection on one's life activity. During this period, everyone needs to turn inside themselves, to realise their significance in the world [7]. According to the age periodisation, adolescence falls on the years of studenthood, when the formation of personality is determined by the success of solving the problems of internal development: understanding of oneself, one's own needs, direction of life aspirations and meaning of life. Student age is a stage of active life search, making vital choices that determine the life path of a person [8]. Psychologists consider adolescence as a crisis age, because during this period life sets quite complex developmental tasks for the personality. The age crisis is complicated by the specificity of the student's life situation, which requires students' readiness and ability to cope with various personal, academic and social problems.

The new stage of meaning regulation in the period of adolescence leads to the aspiration of young people to make decisions independently and bear responsibility for them. The degree of a person's readiness to take responsibility for what happens to him/her and people around him/her is conditioned by the manifestation of subjective control. In this case, we are talking about a person's sense of strength, dignity, responsibility, self-respect and social maturity. The uncertainty of adolescence makes special demands on the adaptive capabilities of young people to respond to the rapidly changing conditions of the social environment. Overcoming difficult life situations requires from young people special strategies of behaviour, called in psychology coping behaviour or coping behaviour [9].

Coping, or coping behaviour, involves the application of purposeful actions, the ability to predict the outcome of the process, the ability to find new ways out and creative solutions in difficult situations. In difficult moments of life a person can apply different styles of coping strategies depending on his/her own assessment of a particular situation. It should be noted that in different age periods coping behaviour strategies undergo changes associated with reassessment of events and opportunities for overcoming life difficulties, i.e. changes in meaning and life orientations. Coping strategies also include the reflection of social, cultural and other aspects that characterise a person's worldview, the formation and dynamics of value and meaning-life orientations [10].

Theoretical review and analysis of scientific works allows us to state that in numerous studies of value and meaning-life orientations of modern student youth various methodological approaches, theoretical bases and aspects of this problem are presented. Thus, the peculiarities of meaning-life orientations in groups of students with different professional orientation, peculiarities of meaning-life orientations in the structure of personal characteristics of young men and girls, strategies of psychological assistance to students in realising personal meaning-life orientations and values, etc. have been studied. A number of works reflect the problem of interrelation of meaning-life orientations and coping strategies of today's students. Nevertheless, these studies trace general tendencies in understanding the role of formation of the value and meaning sphere at the student age, which influences the choice of strategies for overcoming difficult situations in the process of future professional activity. In this regard, it is relevant to address the problem of the relationship between the meaning-life orientations and coping strategies of female students, who statistically represent the dominant number of students studying in pedagogical universities.

As a hypothesis, we consider the statement that college-age girls with a lower indicator of meaning-positive orientations tend to choose unproductive coping strategies, in contrast to girls with medium and high values of meaning-positive orientations who prefer to choose productive behavioural strategies.

The aim of the study is to establish the correlation between meaning and life orientations and coping strategies of female students of different age groups.

Materials and Methods

The respondents of our empirical study were female students of L.N. Tolstoy State Pedagogical University (n=69) aged 18 to 24 years, studying at different courses of bachelor's and master's degrees. The study was conducted during the period of 2021/22 academic year. All subjects were divided into two age groups based on the median age value (Me=21). The first group (n=43) consisted of subjects between 18 years and 21 years (≤21), while the second group (n=26) was between 22 and 24 years (≥22). Based on the division of the subjects into two age groups, the correlation between meaning-positive orientations and coping strategies was analysed.

To identify the meaning-lifestyle orientations and the general indicator of life meaningfulness we used the test 'Meaning-Lifestyle Orientations' (SLO) by D.A. Leontiev, which includes five scales that reflect three specific meaning-lifestyle orientations and two aspects of locus of control [11]. The SJO test allows us to assess the 'source' of the meaning of life, which can be found by a person either in the future (goals), or in the present (process), or in the past (result), or in all three constituent periods of life.

In order to determine the preferences of female students of different age groups in the strategies of coping behaviour, the questionnaire 'Ways of coping behaviour' (WSQ) by R. Lazarus (adapted by T.L. Kryukova, E.V. Kuftyak) was used [12]. The primary data of the study were processed through the methods of mathematical statistics: descriptive statistics of indicators, Pearson correlation analysis (r). The parametric Student's t-test and Mann-Whitney U-test for independent samples were used as a method of comparison of quantitative indicators. Data were presented as mean and standard deviation (Mean±SD), quartiles of distribution (Me [Q1; Q3]). Statistical processing of data was carried out in the SPSS Statistics 27 programme (IBM).

Results

Primary descriptive analysis of the research results was carried out in order to obtain comprehensive information about the empirical data, distribution and homogeneity of data and the possibility of using parametric analysis methods.

Analysing the values of the mean and standard deviation, we can talk about the stability of the values of the studied indicators. Close values of the mean and median indicate symmetrical distribution.

On the basis of empirical data of the present study (n=69) and experimental data (n=200), presented in Table 1, a comparative analysis of the mean and standard deviation values for the general indicator of meaningfulness of life (MIL) and five subscales was carried out, which allows us to speak about the absence of significant differences between the data of the experimental female sample and the sample of female students in our study, which confirms the objectivity of the obtained results.

Table 1

Mean values of the scales of the SJO methodology according to the experimental data (n=200) and empirical data of the present study (n=69)

Scales	Mean±SD (n=200)		Mean±SD (n=69)		
	M	W	W (n=69)	≤21	≥22
Goals in life	32,90±5,92	29,38±6,24	29,6±9,4	27,3±9,8	33,4±7,4
Life process	31,09±4,44	28,80±6,14	27,5±10,1	24,9±10,5	31,8±7,8
Life Performance	25,46±4,30	23,30±4,95	21,3±9,3	18,5±9,9	25,9±5,6
Locus of Control - Self	21,13±3,85	18,58±4,30	20,5±7,9	19,1±8,2	22,9±7,1
Locus of control - Life	30,14±5,80	28,70±6,10	29,8±7,9	28,0±8,2	32,8±6,5
Overall LS score	103,10±15,03	95,76±16,54	98,4±27,9	90,7±29,2	111,2±20,2

Note. The table uses the following designations: M - men (male sample); W - women (female sample).

Further comparative analysis of the values of the scales of the SZHO methodology within the experimental sample of the present study makes it possible to highlight the peculiarities of meaning-life orientations of female students of different ages. Thus, the first three scales of the methodology: 'Goals in life', 'Life process' and 'Life performance' characterise meaning-life orientations in three time coordinates - future, present and past.

All three scales show differences in mean and standard deviation between the two age groups. In the group (≥22) the subjects demonstrate a greater focus on the goals and prospects of their future. The subjects in this age group are final-year bachelor's and master's students, which determines their life goal at this stage - to complete their university studies and receive professional education. The subjects in the group (≤21) have a weak awareness of life goals, they mainly rely on the meaningfulness of the present period of life. This is confirmed by a small differential range of values on two scales - 'Life goals' and 'Life process'. The assessment of life performance, i.e. past productivity, also differs in both age groups. In the group (≤21) students evaluate the results of their past much lower than students in the group (≥22). These differences can be explained by the fact that for the period of adolescence, to which the subjects (≤21) belong, the most important is the awareness of one's present, the change to one's present and the formation of the image of the future. The most important acquisition of temporal awareness in adolescence is the change of attitude towards the present and the future, whereas for the students of the group (≥22) the events of the past are much more important, acting as an indicator of the realisation of past plans when assessing their present.

Quite high scores in both age groups were obtained on the scales 'Locus of Control - Self' and 'Locus of Control - Life'. Students recognise themselves as strong individuals with sufficient freedom of choice to control their lives independently, freely make meaningful decisions and plan for the future.

The overall meaningful life (ML) score in the group (≤21) was lower than the values obtained previously and much lower than the value in the group (≥22). We applied regression analysis and obtained a curve of life meaningfulness dependence on age. We found that the period from 18 to 21 years of age is characterised by a rather sharp increase in the values of the life meaningfulness index. Starting from the age of 22 and further on, a smooth increase of the indicator is observed. Thus, the values of life awareness of female students are higher the older the respondents are.

To compare coping behaviour strategies of female students of different age groups, let us refer to Fig. 1.

To analyse the expression of coping strategies in different age groups of female students, we will focus on the average values of the scales of the questionnaire 'Ways of coping behaviour' (WSQ). It was found that the most pronounced strategies for both age groups are 'distancing', 'escape/avoidance', 'decision planning' and 'positive reassessment'. Statistically significant strong direct relationships were found between these strategies (r=0.524÷0.797, at p≤0.01).
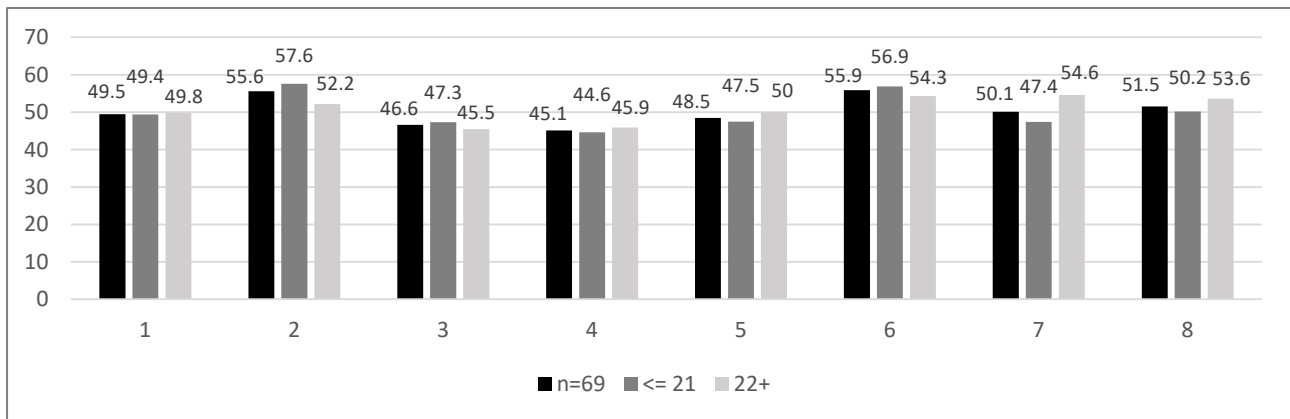
Fig. 1. Expression of coping strategies in different age groups of female students in comparison with the average index of the whole sample according to the questionnaire 'Ways of coping behaviour' (WSQ).

Numbers indicate coping strategies: 1 - confrontation; 2 - distancing; 3 - self-control; 4 - seeking social support; 5 - taking responsibility; 6 - escape/avoidance; 7 - decision planning; 8 - positive reappraisal

Comparing the preferred strategies in each age group, it should be noted that the respondents of the group (≤21) are more characterised by avoidance-type coping strategies, i.e. unproductive strategies 'distancing' and 'escape/avoidance'. Such strategies do not induce a person to search for an optimal and effective way out of a problem situation, but at the same time protect him/her from a strong emotional shock. Thanks to these strategies, any situation can be resolved without any active actions of the person himself.

For the group of subjects (≥22), the most characteristic coping strategies are 'solution planning' and 'positive reappraisal', i.e. problem-oriented coping. These strategies are aimed at the source of the problem and independent resolution of the situation. Such behaviour is characterised by awareness, the ability to analyse the causes of a given situation, and to manage one's emotional state based on objective reality.

The solution of the problem of determining the nature of the correlation between meaning-life orientations and preferred coping strategies in female students of different ages required correlation analysis, for which the Pearson's r-Pearson coefficient was used. For the analysis we took indicators for all scales of the test-questionnaire SJO and the most pronounced coping strategies. Correlation analysis (Pearson's r-Pearson's coefficient) showed numerous direct and inverse relationships between the indicators of meaning-life orientations and coping strategies.

Statistically significant correlations between productive coping strategies and meaningful life orientations were revealed. The strongest direct correlations were found between goals, process and life performance, the general index of life meaningfulness and the strategy of planning (with coefficients $r=0,526 \div 0,715$, at $p<0,01$), as well as with the strategy of positive reappraisal (with coefficients $r=0,252 \div 0,639$, at $p<0,01$ and $p<0,05$). At the same time, strong inverse correlations were found between the life performance indicator and the strategies of distancing and escape/avoidance (with coefficients $r=-0.258 \div -0.321$, at $p<0.05$). This indicates that the satisfaction of female students with the lived part of life, their successes and achievements, awareness of the pros of the present and the idea of their future determines the choice of productive strategies of behaviour in difficult situations.

The indicators of locus of control - Self and locus of control - Life are characteristics of the extent to which a person presents himself as a strong and independent person, capable of making important life decisions in accordance with his life goals. The expression of these indicators directly correlates with the choice of strategies of planning and positive reassessment (with coefficients $r=0,268 \div 0,546$, at $p<0,01$ and $p<0,05$), there is a strong inverse correlation between locus of control - I and the strategy of distancing ($r=-0,237$, at $p<0,05$). Thus, we can conclude that the more self-

confident subjects are, the more significance they attach to events in their lives and choose productive behavioural strategies.

Discussions

The study has shown that meaning-life orientations, as a person's understanding of the content and direction of his/her life, are manifested in a meaningful assessment of the results of life, the presence of goals for the future, understanding of readiness to make vital decisions. We agree with the authors [13; 14] that meaning orientations are the most important characteristic of personality and are stable regulators of human behaviour.

The data we obtained on the relationship between meaning-life orientations and coping strategies in female students agree with the authors' opinion [15-17] that the process of forming a value and meaning system is rather long. Firstly, a person needs to understand the meaning and significance of values themselves. Then the formation of value perceptions takes place, on the basis of which value-meaning orientations are formed.

We share the authors' point of view [18; 19] that each age period contains a certain ratio of age features and the formation of meaning-life orientations. At any age, meaning orientations should be adequate to the circumstances, realities and situations in which a person finds himself, and the meaning of life is realised when a person faces certain life difficulties.

In our study, all subjects are students aged 18 to 24 years, thus two age periods are covered - adolescence and early youth. The age limits of adolescence (17 - 21 years) are determined by the stages of physiological development and sexual maturation of a person. Youth is a sensory period of development of the main sociogenic potential of a person [20]. The main psychological neo-formations of a person at this stage of formation are the acquisition of independence and achievement of social maturity. The period of adolescence is an active stage of searching for the most optimal meaning of life. But this period is complicated by the fact that the choice of life path and the main meaning of life is carried out without knowledge and sufficient life experience in solving problems. This determines the fact that young people under the age of 20 have the lowest values of the strategy of systematic problem solving. With increasing age there is a gradual formation and consolidation of productive behavioural strategies.

Early adulthood refers to the period of a person's life between the ages of 20 and 30. However, modern age psychology increasingly adheres to the author's point of view [21] that it is quite difficult to define the boundaries of the stages of development of adult people, since the main feature of development during adulthood – is minimal dependence on chronological age, while the changes that occur in thinking, behaviour and personality are determined by the conditions of a person's life – his goals, attitudes, experience and occupation. It follows that the most significant meaning-life orientations in early adulthood, influencing the choice of coping behaviour style, are life performance, life process and life meaningfulness.

The data we have obtained on the differences in the expression of the indicators of meaning and life orientations of female students at different age stages, as well as the preferred coping strategies, confirm our hypothesis that college-age girls with a lower indicator of meaning and life orientations tend to choose unproductive coping strategies, in contrast to girls with average and high values of the indicator of meaning and life orientations who prefer to choose productive behavioural strategies.

Thus, the study of meaning-forming life orientations of today's students is particularly relevant, as it contributes to the formation of an adequate assessment of reality, the development of the ability to analyse their past to build a promising future. Acquired knowledge and formed meaning-life orientations will help young people to choose appropriate behavioural strategies to achieve their life goals.

The research materials can be used in the work of psychological service of educational organisation. Understanding of age differences in the formation of meaning-life orientations contributes to the targeted work on the development of productive coping behaviour of young people.

Conclusion

It was determined that the structural components of meaning-life orientations in different age groups have different levels of expression. The values of life awareness of female students are higher the older the respondents are.

A direct correlation between age and coping strategies of female students was revealed. Respondents aged 18 to 21 are more characterised by avoidance-type coping strategies, i.e. unproductive strategies. Problem-oriented coping is the most characteristic for the subjects aged 22 to 24 years old.

It has been established that meaning-life orientations influence the choice of coping strategies. Low values of indicators of structural components of meaning and life orientations determine the choice of unproductive coping strategies, while average and high values determine productive behavioural strategies.

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The article contains one table and one figure:

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Fig. 1. Expression of coping strategies in different age groups of female students in comparison with the average index of the whole sample according to the questionnaire 'Ways of coping behaviour' (WSQ).

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