

# Sanogenic Reflection And Coping Behavior Of University Students

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## Abstract

Analysis of the role of reflection in overcoming negative experiences and reducing anxiety in a stressful situation showed the presence of two diametrically opposed assessments: positive and negative. The aim of the study is to determine the psychological signs of sanogenic potential of students' reflexive processes to overcome stressful situations. The study was conducted in the 2020–2021 academic year on the basis of Poltava V. G. Korolenko National Pedagogical University. The sample comprised 110 students (40 male and 70 female). The age of participants was 18–19 years. The research methods were as follows: theoretical, empirical and methods of statistical data processing. The results of the correlation analysis showed positive statistically significant relationships between personal reflection and coping. It was found that students with a medium level of self-reflection often show a strategy of positive reappraisal ( $r = 0.267$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ), students with a low level – the seeking social support ( $r = 0, 273$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ). Correlation rates between social reflection and coping processes were statistically insignificant. It is established that the sanogenic potential has a pattern of reflex processes with the presence of self-reflection with indicators of average level of its development. Disclosure of the sanogenic resource of reflection is possible with the help of positive psychotherapy technology, which is aimed at actualizing self-distancing and the work of students with their own experience.

**Keywords:** reflexive process, sanogenic reflection, stress, coping behavior.

## 1. Introduction

Forced social isolation during a pandemic, restriction of direct contacts, lack of sensory experiences, uncertainty leads to a person's assessment of the situation as stressful. Studies of students' emotional experiences in a pandemic situation showed a significant increase in anxiety, deterioration of emotional well-being (Akan et. al., 2010; Baloran, 2020), decreased self-efficacy and psychological well-being (Nelson et. al., 2010; Roick et. al., 2017; Kay et. al., 2021).

Dealing with stressful experiences is accompanied by the manifestation of appropriate copings or ways of dealing with stress (Lazarus et al., 1984). We wondered how students' thinking

about their experiences in a stressful situation determines the dominant ways of coping with stress and helps them gain new positive knowledge about themselves. We assessed the sanogenic potential of reflection in the experience of stress through a comparative analysis of the features of the organization of students' reflexive processes pattern with coping strategies in a stressful situation.

Reflection is related to self-awareness. The emergence of reflection allows a person to be subjective, to able to generate his/her own motives, provide self-regulation, make decisions and evaluate oneself according to the consequences of the chosen decision. According to

(Csikszentmihalyi, 1993) reflexive consciousness is a kind of meta-brain that frees a person from any genetic programs giving an additional degree of freedom.

At the same time, discussions about the impact of self-esteem on one's own activity in crisis situations revealed two opposing views. According to the first one, reflexive reasoning is seen as a way to respond to distress. Person is passively focused on distress symptoms, possible causes and possible consequences, which exacerbates negative emotions and depressive symptoms (McIsaac et. al., 2004; Nolen-Hoeksema et. al., 2008; Grossmann et. al., 2010; Grossmann et. al., 2018; Tackman et. al., 2019).

The second view is based on the evidences that self-reflection can promote constructive reasoning and effective regulation of negative emotions (Grossmann et. al., 2014; Kross et. al., 2014; Nook et. al., 2017).

Reflection provides an opportunity to objectify one's experience and analyze it from the position of another, to find hidden psychological resource and to break existing stereotypes. Empirical data suggest that retrospective reflection of negative events from the standpoint of another reduces the number of negative emotions (Ayduk et. al., 2008), mitigates emotional distress (Kross et. al., 2011; Grossmann et. al., 2014) and provides a sanogenic effect on the emotional state (Orlov et. al., 2006; Gilman, 2016).

The advantage of self-distancing over self-immersion in reducing negative emotionality has been experimentally proven not only immediately after the event, but also when the event is remembered a month later (Kross et. al., 2008; Penner et. al., 2016; Dorfman et. al., 2021).

Thus, the possibilities of reflection, depending on the way of its implementation have different consequences in situations of stress. Self-immersion, as a kind of introspection, increases the manifestation of negative feelings, whereas self-distancing helps to reduce depressive symptoms.

Some studies analyze the role of self-reflection in experiencing emotional events that threaten life and health (Shand et. al., 2015). There are studies examining self-reflection in experiencing daily distress (Aldwin et. al., 2004).

A review of empirical research has shown that it is common practice to consider self-awareness in two forms: self-distancing and self-immersion (introspection).

In our opinion, (Lefebvre's, 2006) concept of the reflexive system gives an

opportunity to define a different approach to determining the role of reflection in the processes of emotional self-regulation. (Lefebvre's, 2006) metaphorically characterizes reflection as a reflexive system – a system of mirrors that infinitely reflect each other. Mirrors are understood as a subject whose ability to self-distance not only to his/her body, thoughts and experiences, but also to take the position of the researcher in relation to «other», his/her thoughts and actions (Lefebvre's, 2006). We think that from the standpoint of a systems approach, reflection can be seen as a pattern of reflexive processes that are included in various areas of human activity (e.g., thinking, self-awareness, interaction, communication, etc.). We assume that the degree of development and the degree of integration of reflexive processes is related to the choice of coping in situations of stress. Moreover, there is no clear explanation which parameters of reflection have the potential to be sanogenic for constructive coping in a stressful situation.

Experiencing stress is accompanied by the manifestation of an appropriate coping strategy. Coping is manifested in cognitive and behavioral ways of overcoming specific external and internal requirements that are assessed by a person as exceeding his/her capabilities (Lazarus et. al., 1984). So coping is a behavioral, cognitive, emotional activity aimed at eliminating a threat (Roth et. al., 1986).

Of particular interest to us is the cognitive-phenomenological theory of stress management by (Lazarus et. al., 1984). According to them, the cause of emotional experiences is a cognitive assessment of the situation provided by a person. Researchers distinguish between two strategies of behavior during stress: problem-oriented and emotional-oriented. The first is aimed at solving the problem, the second at maintaining control in a threatening situation.

In the analytical review of the problem (Rasskazova et. al., 2013) of individual differences in the implementation of the mechanism for assessing the situation as stressful pay attention to the studies of Connor-Smith, Flesbart who established links between coping strategies and Big 5 factors, in particular, neuroticism, integrity and openness to experience. Neuroticism is associated with the low rates of cognitive restructuring of the problem along with high values of avoidance of the problem, the manifestation of negative emotions, alcohol and «sedative» drugs, fantasizing, and denial. Integrity is associated with a high probability of using restructuring strategies and, conversely, with a

low probability of recourse to objections and sedatives. Extraversion is associated with seeking social support, actively solving problems and cognitive restructuring. Research on the role of optimism in the choice of coping strategy showed that dispositional optimism positively correlates with the strategies of active problem solving and emotional acceptance and negatively relates to the strategies of problem solving avoidance and emotional distancing from the problem (Rasskazova et al., 2013). The general assessment of reflection as a dispositional predictor of stressful experiences has limitations on specific forms and ways of dealing with stress (Lysenko et al., 2010).

## 2. Materials and methods

The aim of the study is to determine the psychological signs of sanogenic potential of students' reflexive processes to overcome stressful situations.

The study was conducted in the 2020–2021 academic year on the basis of Poltava V. G. Korolenko National Pedagogical University. The sample comprised 110 students (40 male and 70 female). The age of participants was 18–19 years. The participants' reflection scores were in the range of medium and low values. High rates of reflexivity exclude the possibility of reflection as a systemic formation that can have a sanogenic effect on the regulatory mechanisms of the psyche (Yanovich, 2007; Karpov, 2013). The survey was anonymous to ensure the confidentiality and reliability of data. The procedures of this study complied with the provisions of the Declaration of Helsinki regarding research on Human participants and the Deontological Code of the American Psychological Association.

The research methods were as follows:

- theoretical – analysis and generalization of modern psychological and pedagogical, culturological, educational and methodical literature to identify the relevance of the problem;
- empirical – testing, surveys, in-depth interviews, pedagogical observation of students' reflexive processes to overcome stressful situations; pedagogical experiment;
- methods of statistical data processing – for mathematical processing of the obtained research results.

In order to determine the features of reflexivity of subjects with different coping behavior in a stressful situation (Karpov, 2003) survey for diagnosing reflexivity, Grant's questionnaire for diagnosing direction of reflection (adapted by Karpov et al., 2005) and (Lazarus et al., 1984) «Ways of Coping

Checklist» (adapted by Kriukova, 2010) were used as data collection tools in the study.

The level of personal reflexivity was assessed with 27-item (Karpov, 2003) survey for diagnosing reflexivity. The survey is based on theoretical assumption that reflection is a synthetic mental reality that acts as a mental process, state and property at the same time, but cannot be reduced to any of them. Items of the survey take into account all these three modes of reflection and assess additionally the direction (intrapsychic and interpsychic) of reflection. Subjects responded on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = absolutely wrong to 7 = absolutely right).

The level and direction of reflection was assessed with Grant's questionnaire (Karpov et al., 2003). The theoretical foundation of the questionnaire is Grant's model of «reflective act» which combines subject's metacognitive, reflective and emotional spheres. The questionnaire consists of 20 items that form two scales: self-reflection and social reflection.

Coping was assessed with the 50-item revised Ways of Coping Checklist (Folkman et al., 1986) adapted by (Kriukova, 2010). The checklist contained a broad range of coping and behavioral strategies that people use to manage internal and external demands in a stressful encounter. A factor analysis produced eight scales: confrontive coping, distancing, self-control, seeking social support, accepting responsibility, escape-avoidance, planful problem solving, and positive reappraisal.

Statistical analysis was performed using SPSS 20.0 for Windows. The results of statistical analysis were present as percentage for variables. The Kolmogorov Smirnov test revealed that the data did not show normal distribution; therefore, the nonparametric Spearman correlation coefficient ( $r_s$ ) was applied to evaluate the association between variables. The significance level was determined at  $p < 0.05$ , and all tests were 2-tailed.

## 3. Results and Discussion

The obtained indicators of coping behavior in the sample indicated the prevalence of emotionally-oriented coping strategies: self-control (52 %), seeking social support (44 %), avoidance and positive reappraisal (66 %). Such problem-oriented copings as confrontive coping (26 %) and planful problem solving (24 %) are less commonly used. Emotionally-oriented coping aims at reducing physical or psychological impact of stress and alleviating stressful situation, but not at solving the problem itself. Problem-oriented persons have to do with attempts to improve their

relationships with the environment by finding information about how and what to do, restraining themselves from impulsive actions. Thus, respondents in a situation of stress are focused, to a greater extent, not so much on solving the problem as on working with their experiences.

Determining the features of reflexive processes in respondents according to A. V. Karpov's method showed that 58 % of respondents had an average level and 42 % – a low level of reflexive processes development. According to the indicators of reflection's

direction (Grant's method) in 90 % of respondents personal reflection exceeded social reflection.

The analysis of statistical relationships between reflexive processes, reflection's direction, degree of its development and dominant coping strategies in a stressful situation was carried out using the Spearman method. The results of the statistical analysis confirmed the previous conclusion that emotionally-oriented coping strategies are predominant in stressful situations for young people (Table 1).

**Table 1. The relationship between reflection and coping strategies of the students**

Reflection Coping type	Overall rate of reflexivity	Average level of reflexivity	Low level of reflexivity	Personal reflection	Social reflection	Average level of personal reflection	Low level of personal reflection	Average level of social reflection	Low level of social reflection
Confrontive coping	-0.089	-0.088	-0.109	-0.105	-0.114	-0.199	-0.114	-0.067	-0.117
Distancing	-0.145	-0.109	<b>-0.228*</b>	-0.183	0.005	-0.148	-0.032	-0.013	0.066
Self-control	0.098	-0.165	<b>-0.239*</b>	0.083	0.175	-0.053	0.015	-0.050	0.142
Seeking social support	0.100	0.032	0.208	<b>0.222**</b>	0.167	0.288	<b>0.273*</b>	-0.085	0.154
Accepting responsibility	0.223	-0.153	-0.183	0.171	-0.007	0.122	-0.071	-0.297	0.084
Escape-avoidance	-0.063	-0.129	-0.115	-0.227	-0.002	-0.312	-0.097	-0.050	-0.066
Planful problem solving	0.297	0.083	0.079	0.278	0.175	0.121	0.218	-0.177	0.186
Positive reappraisal	<b>0.129*</b>	0.057	-0.018	<b>0.252**</b>	0.287	<b>0.267*</b>	0.250	0.059	0.150

Note: \* – Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

\*\* – Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

It was found that between the reflexivity of respondents and coping behavior there is a statistically significant relationship for the strategy of positive reevaluation ( $r = 0.129$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ). In the group of respondents with a low level of reflexivity there are negative statistically

significant correlations for distancing ( $r = -0.228$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ) and self-control ( $r = -0.239$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ). That is, respondents who are not inclined to pre-plan, to consider the program of their actions, to predict their consequences, but on the contrary, focused on spontaneity and impulsiveness of

response show an inability to control their emotions in order to reduce their impact on perception and behavior. They are characterized by a low desire to cope their behavior in a stressful situation; they cannot overcome negative experiences due to the subjective reduction of significance and the degree of emotional immersion in a stressful situation.

Analysis of the relationship between the types of reflection (social and personal) and coping showed the presence of positive statistically significant correlations only for personal reflection. However, depending on the level of development of personal reflection, different dominant response strategies in a stress situation are identified. Thus, students with a medium level of reflexivity often show a strategy of positive revaluation ( $r = 0.267$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ), young people with a low level of reflexivity – the seeking social support ( $r = 0.273$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ).

Thus, with the optimal level of development of self-reflection, students try to overcome negative experiences in a situation of stress through a positive rethinking of the problem situation. This strategy is to focus on the problem as an incentive for personal growth through its inclusion in the broader context of self-development.

Instead, students with a low level of personal reflection in stressful situations seek help from others in the form of advice, compassion, and concrete practical actions. However, such a strategy in certain circumstances, such as the lack of a positive social environment, low level of communicative competence, high rates of development of the external locus of control, can increase negative feelings and anxiety in a state of stress. According to statistical analysis, it is established that the social reflection of students is not involved in the formation of strategies for mastering negative experiences.

The starting point of our study was the idea that reflection exists as a systemic formation, which includes a variety of reflective processes that affect the characteristics of students' experience of stress and the choice of the type of coping. The subject of our attention were the processes of self-reflection (awareness of the basics of one's own actions and experiences) and socio-reflection (awareness of the experiences and actions of other people). We tried to determine the parameters of reflexive processes that constitute its sanogenic potential, i.e. reduce negative experiences in a stressful situation and stimulate optimal coping strategies.

Defined relationships between variables allow us to suggest that sanogenic reflection

provides productive coping in stressful situations and manifests itself in a pattern of reflexive processes in which the leading place is occupied by self-reflection in a range of mean values of its development. It is obvious that sanogenic reflection is such an organization of reflexive processes that contributes to the development of autopsychological competence of the individual. This type of competence is an integrative intrapersonal mechanism aimed at knowing a person, its individual characteristics in general; it is the ability to use and develop one's own mental resources and to optimize internal state according to the circumstances. The results that we obtained confirmed by the data of (Gilman, 2016) that high tolerance to stress determines sanogenic thinking and sanogenic reflection.

Sanogenic reflection contributes to the understanding of a stressful situation not as a threat, but as an opportunity to improve life, creating resources to ensure a high quality of life. (Schwarzer et. al., 2008) call such states proactive. Thus, sanogenic reflection is related to the self-efficacy of the individual and can be considered as its psychological predictor. Representatives of the theory of self-determination associate reflection with the phenomenon of mindfulness, i.e. the willingness to coordinate behavior with one's own value-meaning formations (Brown et. al., 2004). Studies of anxiety factors in students (Nelson et. al., 2010; Roick et. al., 2017) confirm the link between anxiety reduction and the ability to think positively about oneself.

Given the rich experience of the experimental study of the positive effects of self-distancing compared to introspection, it can be assumed that the method of reflection may affect the intensity of the reflection itself. High rates of reflexive processes are associated with self-immersion, medium rates – with self-distancing. However, these assumptions need to be thoroughly tested, which may be a prospect for further study of the problem. The results obtained about the lack of connection between the processes of social reflection and coping need special consideration. That is, when experiencing stress, the reflections of the attitudes of others, their thoughts and actions are ignored or are of little importance to students.

In general, the results indicate the need for psychological assistance in order to optimally develop self-reflection, which will effectively overcome negative experiences in stressful situations and promote the development of personal self-efficacy and authenticity. The effectiveness of this practice has been proven in

work with students of different specialties (Hsieh et. al., 2012; Kay et. al., 2021).

Optimization of the reflection's sanogenic potential for development of the best self-understanding and formation of the ability to use effective coping strategies can be carried out within the various humanistic-oriented approaches of psychotherapeutic work among which Pezeshkian Positive and Transcultural Psychotherapy occupies a special place. Positive transcultural psychotherapy is based on Positum-approach, which allows to consider a person, on the one hand, as one who has problems (conflicts, stress, illness, etc.), and, on the other hand, as endowed with the ability to solve them. This direction avoids the pathogenetic approach to personality and its problems, strengthens person's faith in his/her capabilities and abilities, allows to distance from the problem (stressful situation) and motivates to self-knowledge and self-development (Amodeo et. al., 2007; Wang et. al., 2019). The universal strategy of Pezeshkian Positive and Transcultural Psychotherapy is a five-step model that can also be offered to the client as an algorithm of self-help in everyday life and crisis situations, as it allows to develop cognitive, emotional, communicative and other skills (Remmers, 2013). The practical experience of the authors of the publication allowed to test the effectiveness of this approach to overcome the client's anxiety in stressful situations. Accordingly, the actualization of the mechanism of sanogenic reflection should include the following stages of the psychotherapist's work: (1) «Distancing» – allows to see the situation as a whole; to look at the problem as a chance for development; to be acquainted with different ways of reacting in similar situations; (2) «Inventory» – involves the formulation of substantive questions aimed at determining the content of the conflict and understanding the capabilities of the individual in its resolution; (3) «Situational encouragement» – the use of knowledge, resources and positive aspects that exist; (4) «Verbalization» – concrete and constructive speaking and problem solving; (5) «Expansion of goals» – awareness of one's own capabilities and abilities after the problem solving.

#### 4. Conclusions

The sanogenic potential of reflection in stressful situations is manifested in students' ability to reduce negative experiences of anxiety, to stimulate cognitive processes aimed at finding a positive perspective in solving the problem. It is established that students with an average level of

self-reflection are focused on dispositional factors in coping with stress, in particular on rethinking the problem situation, considering the problem as an incentive for personal growth through its inclusion in the broader context of self-development. Instead, students with a low level of personal reflection processes in the regulation of their coping behavior are focused on situational factors, including external assistance. The results of empirical research suggest that the sanogenic potential of reflection has a pattern of reflexive processes with a predominance of self-reflection with indicators of average level of its development.

Actualization of the sanogenic potential of personal reflection requires psychological assistance which should ensure the development of student's autopsychological competence. A possible psychotherapeutic approach that promotes the development of students' sanogenic potential is the Pezeshkian positive transcultural psychotherapy, which is aimed at actualizing self-distancing and working with one's own experience.

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