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**EXAMINING PSYCHOLOGICAL COPING OF  
COLLEGE STUDENTS: HOW CAN  
WE STRENGTHEN THE EFFICIENCY OF INDIVIDUAL  
COPING?**

We have examined college students' personality characteristics that determine psychological immune competences, to reveal which characteristics show relationships with learning and achievement motivation, scholastic records, and their attitude towards work at the college. The study was conducted at a teacher training college in Eger, Hungary.

The psychological immune system is a sum of personality features that enable the individual to cognitively evaluate a stressful situation, choose an adequate coping strategy, search for and use possible sources. Individual coping potential dimensions may influence motivations, problem solving abilities, self-efficiency, etc., moreover, they may affect information processing and integration.

We administered the Psychological Immune System Questionnaire (Oláh, 1999) to measure personality characteristics that determine psychological immune competences.

The results of the study will be integrated in teacher education and learning efficiency trainings.

**Psychological Immune System**

The term "psychological immune system" represents a set of measurable personality traits that enable the individual to cognitively evaluate of stressful situations, select and use appropriate coping strategies and effective coping, so that the integrity, effective functioning and the developing potential of the individual are damaged (Oláh, 1999).

**Subsystems of the Psychological Immune System**

*The Approach - Belief Subsystem* measures the extent to which a person trusts the environment and his or her ability to make a difference in it. It is composed of the following dimensions:

- Positive Thinking
- Sense of Control
- Sense of Coherence
- Sense of Self-Growth

*Monitoring - Creating - Executing Subsystem* refers to the ability to operate effectively in the environment. It consists of:

- Change and Challenge Orientation
- Social Monitoring Capacity
- Creative Self-Concept
- Social Mobilizing Capacity
- Self- Efficacy
- Goal Orientation
- Problem Solving Capacity
- Social Creating Capacity

*The Self-Regulating Subsystem* refers to the ability to change adaptively as required.

Its dimensions are:

- Synchronicity (the ability to keep step with environmental changes, to pulse in sync with the present events in an open and flexible manner)
- Impulse Control
- Emotional Control
- Irritability Control

The three interacting systems optimize a person's action in the world.

## **Achievement motivation**

### **Success-oriented**

- Tasks evoke positive emotions.
- They are more persistent.
- Strong ambition for success
- Lower level of social motives
- Accomplishment of tasks is important.
- Feeling of competence
- Failure, because of lack of effort

### **Failure-avoiding**

- Anxious, nervous.
- They are not aware of their possibilities.
- They do not trust their strength and abilities.
- Feeling of incompetence
- Negative emotions
- Concerned with avoiding failure.
- Steps out of task-situations, or rejects the task or gets scared.

### **Demand-level**

Sum of demands, which apply to future achievement .The concept first appears in Levin's work in connection with achievement motivation, which is not a uniform motive itself, but a complicated network of a number of motives.

#### **Influencing factors:**

- Wanting to achieve (for the pure sake of achievement).
- Social success, appreciation
- Fear of failure and depreciation
- Level of anxiety
- Protection of self-image
- Need for security
- Sense of reality
- Importance of achievement, experience

### **Aims of our study**

1. What kinds of psychological coping methods do success-oriented and failure-avoiding people use?
2. Which subsystem of PIS correlates most with the dimension of success-orientation, and failure-avoidance?
3. Are there significant gender differences considering the use of PIS dimensions?
4. What is the correlation between exam-anxiety, social well-being and PIS dimensions?

## Methods

1. We administered the Psychological Immune System Questionnaire (Olah,1999) to 177 College students in Eger, Hungary, to measure the personality traits that determine psychological immune competence.
2. Demand-level test: indicators of the demand level test:
  - *Intention-difference*: difference between achievement and the next pledge
  - *First pledge*: the value the subject estimates at a guess, without achievement, after trying one screw (usually between 10-15)
  - *Mean of achievement*: we calculate the mean of 5 achievements.
  - *Difference between first and last achievement*
  - *Changes of demand-level*: success usually increases, failure decreases intended achievement.
3. Questionnaire about studying at the college by Maria David to measure exam-anxiety and social well-being.

Considering the above-mentioned factors, we defined 3 groups in the beginning:

1. Ambitious group: the first pledge is within the real value zone, but at the upper edge (15), the intention-difference is high (+4, +5), the mean achievement (13-14 or higher) and achievement-increase is the highest (3-4) in this group.
2. Unambitious group: the first pledge is low but real (10), the intention-difference is low -2, +2), the mean achievement is low, which means avoiding frustration and expecting easier success, the subject does not insist on achieving what was once not achieved in case of failure.
3. Unreal group: the first pledge is either over 20 or below 5, the intention-difference is very high or very low (10!), they insist on keeping the intention never approached, achievement does not increase.

## Results

In our study, we did not find any significant differences between the unambitious and the unreal groups regarding the PIS scales, and therefore we united these two groups and named them failure-avoiders.

Comparing the scores of success-oriented and failure-avoiding groups, we found significant ( $p<0.05$ ) differences regarding positive thinking, creative self-concept, sense of self-growth, sense of coherence, synchronicity, and impulse control. That is, success-oriented people:

- are more optimistic (this scale always goes together with success-orientation),
- are able to see task-situations as a challenge, they believe that things are going in a rational, expectable way; they face the conflicts, rather than run away from them, try to see the essence of difficulties.
- They are proud of their achievements, they see their success as development.
- They are able to concentrate on the task, they have control over their attention and mind.
- By analysing the situation, they choose the most appropriate behaviour. They work with a rational program, they are able to maintain rational control.

Success-oriented and failure-avoiding people differ ( $p < 0.05$ ) from each other considering the Monitoring-Approaching subsystem as well. It means that success-oriented people have a higher ability for understanding their physical and social environment, and have a better control over it. They are more optimistic, have a better sense of coherence and control (they believe things happen up to them, they make an effort to get and keep control over events), they seek challenge.

Comparing grade point averages, success-oriented people had higher achievement again, it was 3.84 for success-oriented, and 3.55 for failure-avoiding people.

We did not find any significant differences between the two groups considering general well-being and feelings in exam-situations.

### **Gender differences**

Comparing the groups of male and female subjects, we found significant differences ( $sign < 0.05$ ) regarding creative self-concept, self-efficacy and goal orientation. Males have higher self-confidence, they are prouder of their achievements, and are more convinced that they are able to achieve their goals and cope with problems, and their frustration tolerance is higher.

Considering the subsystems, we found significant differences regarding the creating-executing subsystem. That is to say, males are more effective in choosing the appropriate coping methods for the increasing challenges, achieving their goals through changing their physical, social environment or even themselves. They are inventive, creative, good problem- solvers, they have high self-confidence, and can convince other people, so they have good social skills to get partners if themselves are not enough to reach their goals.

## **Well-being, feelings in exam-situations**

We wanted to know how anxious our subjects are in exam-situations, what the effect of the exam-situation on them is, what they think about the teachers' attitude, behaviour, and whether the atmosphere of exams helps or inhibits their achievement.

The results show that exam anxiety correlates with scales of sense of control, creative self-concept, sense of self-growth, self-efficacy, problem-solving. That means if someone is inner-controlled and thinks that the outcome of the situation depends on him, if he has a high self-confidence, and is able to work out alternative solutions and help his own coping with restructuring his given experience, and trusts that he is able to cope with the problems, then he does not feel anxious in exam-situations.

As to well-being, we wanted to know, whether our subjects feel that they can get all the information they need in order to be successful in their studies, whether they feel lonely and who think loneliness is up to themselves or the environment. Our results show that the variable of well-being correlates to the scales of positive thinking, sense of control, sense of coherence, self-concept, social mobilization, social creating capacity, sense of synchronicity. That is, an inner control attitude, positive thinking, facing challenges, trying to solve conflicts, self-confidence, high self-reliance, involving partners in coping if needed, and good social skills can contribute to well-being. We should emphasize, though, that most of these scales refer to the activity of the person („things are up to me, and if I'm not sufficient, I should seek help, resources in my physical and social environment”).

And a result, that is not surprising: grade point average shows correlations to sense of synchronicity and goal orientation. This means the more one can concentrate one's attention on the task one is working on, the more one can go on with one's work despite obstacles, or the more one can play down one's personal needs if needed, the more one can achieve.