Ethnocultural Environment as a Factor in Psychological Health of First-Year Students

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Abstract: The work presents a theoretical analysis of the concept of psychological health. A set of techniques aimed at the study of psychological health of students is described. The results of comparative empirical research of the components of psychological health of first-year students of Russian and Kazakh divisions are disclosed. Empirical data revealing differences in the indicators of neuroticism, stress resistance, depression, adaptation and subjective control are provided. The factors that affect mental health are considered; a major one in the period of adaptation is changing ethno-cultural environment.

INTRODUCTION

At present in the Republic of Kazakhstan, as well as in the former Soviet Union, there is rise in the number of neuropsychiatric diseases (neurosis, post-traumatic stress and psychosomatic disorders), the growth of different kinds of addictions, as well as painful experiences as a result of socio-cultural factors: AIDS-phobia, obsessive fears resulting from the influence of mass media, noogenic anxiety disorders, etc. All this is aggravated by the global socio-economic and political crisis.

In education, the problem of psychological health of individuals is a priority, as students are the most socially active group of society, shaping the future of the country. Psychological health, in turn, is a necessary condition for successfulness of education, professionalization and socialization of young people. We adhere to the interpretation of mental health given by the author of this term I.V. Dubrovina: mental health is a lifetime education, which is based on a comprehensive mental development at all stages of ontogenesis [1]. Besides, our understanding of mental health is close to the one adopted within the adaptation approach (O.V. Khukhlaeva), where a healthy person is a successfully adapting and having a harmonious relationship with others [2].

The problem of psychological health of students is of particular relevance in connection with the reform of the educational system in the post-Soviet space and the increasing demands for quality training of specialists, which lead to an increase in psychoemotional tension, manifestations of stress, frustration and neuroticism of students and determine the direction and the content of the psychological guidance of students.

Analysis of the problem revealed the interest in it and at the same time, the lack of its development. There have been just a few comparative studies of the relation of the representatives of different ethnic groups to students' health [3].

The Republic of Kazakhstan is one of the typical modern polyethnic states, where more than 120 ethnic groups live. Multicultural environment impacts the socialization of children and young people, becoming one of the conditions for the development of both the individual and social groups and contributing to the formation of interethnic cooperation and tolerance.

The educational environment is a part of the overall ethnocultural environment. Education affects the process of individual socialization and assimilation of the norms and patterns of behaviors [4]. The scientists observed the objective conditions characterizing the learning environment of higher education as a stressogenic one.

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It has the following features: a high level of mental and physical activity, extremely increasing in the examination period; the lack of time; the need to process and learn a large amount of information in a short time; the increased requirements to address problematic situations; and strict control and regulation of regime [5]. The above conditions for many students are added with the factor of sociocultural adaptation. Ethnic diversity exists among students as a social group. Kazakh universities provide equal opportunities to realize the right to education for people of all ethnic groups living in the territory of the Republic. All higher educational institutions have the divisions where training is given in Kazakh (state) and Russian (language of international communication) languages. In the Kazakh division, the majority of students is rural youth and in the Russian branch there are students of Russian nationality, Russian-speaking Kazakhs and representatives of other ethnic groups (Ukrainians, Germans, Tatars, Uighurs, Koreans, etc.). Of course, the students from the rural areas face the problem of sociocultural adaptation and acculturation. According to the definition by Redfield R., Linton R. and Herskovits M. (1936), acculturation occurs when the groups of representatives of different cultures come into direct and long-term contact, which results in changing the models of the original cultures of one or both groups [6]. Often this process is accompanied by the so-called "acculturation stress", which has a negative connotation and at the same time, the possible positive experience in assessing and overcoming the challenges [7].

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In order to determine the impact of ethnic and cultural factors on the psychological health of the first-year students, we have carried out a comparative empirical study of the indicators of psychological health of the first-year students of Kazakh and Russian divisions of the University during their adaptation to training. The empirical sample consisted of 2 groups of first-year students, who studied at different departments of Kazakh and Russian divisions; each group numbered 90 people. We investigated the measures of psychological health: the level of neuroticism, depression, stress resistance, adaptation and subjective control.

The complex of diagnostic methods includes:

- Method for diagnosing the level of neuroticism by L.I. Wasserman;

- Method for diagnosing stress resistance and social adaptation by Holmes and Rige;
- The method for differential diagnostics of depression by Zunge (adaptation by T.I. Balashovoy);
- Methodology for determining the level of subjective control by S. Bazhin, E. Golynkina and A. Etkind (based on J. Rotter scale);
- Multi-level questionnaire for individual "Adaptability" (IPC-AM) by A.G. Maklakov and S.V. Chermyakin.

The experiment involved two samples:

- First-year students of Kazakh divisions, total 90 people;
- First-year students of Russian divisions, total 90 people (17-18 years old) of the Kazakh National Pedagogical University named after Abai, Almaty, A Branch of St. Petersburg University of Trade Unions.

Key Part: The study of neuroticism level using the method of L.I. Wasserman showed that among the students of the Kazakh division this level appeared to be higher (almost twice) than in the students of the Russian group (Table 1). While in the common social situation of adaptation to educational activities, students react to it in a varying degree. High level of neuroticism indicates a high emotional excitability that causes negative feelings: anxiety, restlessness, irritability, confusion, fixation on personal shortcomings, difficulties in communication, social timidity and dependence. Students from the group with a low level of neuroticism are characterized by resistance, positive background of experience, initiative, independence, social boldness.

Table 1: Distribution of tested students by the levels of neuroticism (based on the diagnostics of the level of neuroticism by L.I. Wasserman, %).

Samples of tested students	Level of neuroticism	
	High level	Low level
Students of Kazakh division	32.7	67.3
Students of Russian division	15.5	84.4

Table 2: Distribution of tested students by the levels of stress resistance (based on the method for diagnosing stress resistance and social adaptation of Holmes and Rige, %)

Samples of tested students	Degrees of resistance to stress		
	High (150-199)	Threshold (200-299)	Low (>300)
Students of Kazakh division	27.3	50.5	22.2
Students of Russian division	20.0	67.3	12.7

Table 3: Distribution of tested students by levels of depression (based on the method of differential diagnostics of depression by Zunge (adaptation by T.I. Balashova), %)

Samples of tested students	Level of depression			
	No depression (<50)	Mild depression (50-59)	Subdepression (60-69)	True depression (>
Students of Kazakh division	56.7	30.0	12	1.1
Students of Russian division	70.1	22.2	6.6	1.1

Table 4: Mean rates on the scales in the samples of students of Kazakh and Russian divisions.

N	Name of scale	Students of Kazakh division	Students of Russian division
1.	General internality (Ig)	3.4	5
2.	Internality in achievements (Ia)	5	6
3.	Internality in failures (If)	6	5
4.	Internality in family relations (Ifr)	6	4.5
5.	Internality in industrial relations (Iir)	4.4	5.3
6.	Internality in personal relations	5	5.5
7.	Internality in relation to health	4.5	5.5

Table 5: Distribution of tested students by the levels of adaptive capacity (using the questionnaire IPC-AM by A.G. Maklakov and S.V. Chermyanin, %)

Samples of students	Level of depression		
	Low level	Satisfactory level	High level
Students of Kazakh division	27.7	52.2	20.0
Students of Russian division	20.0	55.5	24.4

Besides, using a questionnaire IPC-Am we have obtained the results on the scale of moral norms.

Table 5: Distribution of subjects by the level of moral norms (using the questionnaire IPC-AM by A.G.Maklakova and S.V.Chermyanina, %).

Samples of students	Level of moral norms		
	Low	Fair	High
Students of Kazakh division	10.0	56.6	33.3
Students of Russian division	13.3	61.2	25.5

Stress resistance is determined by a combination of personal qualities that allow a person to withstand considerable intellectual, will and emotional loads, caused by peculiarities of the activity, without any harmful impact on the activities, surrounding people and proper health [8]. Data on the method for diagnosing stress resistance and social adaptation by Holmes and Rige also showed the differences in the degree of resistance to stress. In both samples, more than half of students are characterized by medium threshold degree of resistance to stress. In the Kazakh division there are 9.5% more students with low resistance to stress.

Psycho-emotional disorders in young age, in particular, the anxiety-depressive disorders, have a direct impact on the educational and social life of students, as well as on their personal lives and lead to significant social desadaptation (exclusion), which requires a careful approach to their detection, treatment and prevention [9]. Analysis of the data on the manifestations of depression showed that depression is absent in 70.1% of first-year students of the Russian division and in 56.7% of the students of Kazakh division. A mild depression was demonstrated by 30% of the students of Kazakh division and 22.2% of the students of the Russian division. Subdepression is specific for 12% of the students of the Kazakh division and 6.6% of the students of the Russian division (Table 3). This is the state of mild depression characterized by low mood, pessimism and efficiency decrease. In this case, the leading symptom is the sensation of grief, sadness and depression.

According to the mean values of depression in the samples, using Student's T-test we rejected the hypothesis on insignificant difference in the mean values of depression levels at a significance level of a = 0.05;

so, we can speak about the difference between the levels of depression among the students of Kazakh and Russian divisions (tkr (0.01) = 2.64). It can be noted that adaptation to the changing sociocultural conditions is associated with depressive symptoms, which can be regarded as a sign of mental desadaptation.

The method of LSC (level of subjective control) allows showing the dynamics of personality changing that occurs under the influence of ethnocultural environment. In addition to the generalized indicator of the individual level of subjective control and 2 indicators of the average level of generality, among the situation-specific indicators there is a scale of attitude to health. High rates on this scale indicate that the subject feels responsible for his health. Low rates indicate that the person considers health and illness as fortuitous and hopes that his health depends on the environment.

Kazakh students demonstrated external locus of control on the scale of general internality, internality in industrial relations and in relation to health and internal locus of control on the scale of internality in failure and family relations.

Comparison with a group of students of the Russian division shows that they have an internal locus of control in achievements and the external one - in the area of family relations. That is, Kazakh students are characterized by a lower level of subjective control. They feel less capable to control their lives than the students of Russian divisions and tend to believe that most of the events are the result of chance or the actions of others. The same can be said about their health: Kazakhs are characterized by a lesser responsibility for it.

The study of adaptive capacity showed that 27.7% of Kazakh students have low adaptive capacity, which may indicate rigidity, inability to switch over when necessary. New situations are experienced with difficulty. Half of the students of this group are characterized by a satisfactory adaptive capacity. The success of adaptation depends on the conditions of their environment. High level of adaptation is specific for a fifth of the students in the group. They are quite easy to adapt to new conditions, quickly become members of new teams and have high emotional stability. Comparative analysis showed that the number of students with low adaptive capacity in the group with Russian language of instruction is lesser by 7.7%.

Most 1-year students have an average level of moral norms. This proves the moral maturity of the student community. It can be noted that there are quantitative differences in representations in terms of high-level of moral norms: among the students of the Kazakh division this figure is 7.8% higher. By interpretation of the questionnaire such students realize their status in the team and are oriented to compliance with the generally accepted norms of behavior.

CONCLUSION

Analysis of the obtained data allowed establishing the differences in the groups on the studied indicators of psychological health. In the test group of students of the Kazakh division:

- The number of tested students with high level of neuroticism is larger by 17.2%;
- The number of tested students with a low degree of stress resistance is larger by 9.5%;
- The number of tested students with mild depression is larger by 7.8% and with subdepression - by 5.4%;
- The number of subjects with low adaptive capacity is larger by 7.8%;
- The number of subjects with a high level of moral norms is larger by 7.8%;
- The lower levels of subjective control and external locus of control in relation to health are observed.

The results show that first-year students of the Kazakh division are different in all the investigated indicators of psychological health. The factor of psychological health in the studied group is ethnocultural environment, in particular, the traditional system of values, attitudes and education.

Ethnocultural factor has a significant impact on social qualities, individual and typological properties and mental states of the person. Accordingly, mono-ethnic environment in rural areas, from where a large number of students arrive to study in higher educational institutions, considerably differs from the multicultural environment of large cities with plenty of opportunities to perceive the diverse traditions, norms and behavioral manifestations of the representatives of different ethnic groups.

First-year students of Kazakh divisions, coming mainly from mono-ethnic environments, need to adapt to multicultural environments; this is accompanied by the perception and awareness of cultural differences - from everyday behavior to organization of leisure activities and a wide range of cultural events. The researchers note that this process involves "correlation of the ethnic structure

of the world with the norms and values prevailing in other people, which may be expressed as inclusion of oneself into some interethnic cultural unity, or as isolation, contraposition to other people" [10, p.23-24]. In addition, students need to adapt to a particular kind of activity – university education, which is associated with the cognitive load, the growing requirements for self-organization and self-control and an increase of psycho-emotional stress.

According to V.G. Krys'ko, national psychological characteristics are the foundation on which the specificity rests, since it is the basis of the behavior and actions of specific individuals of one or another nationality and nationally distinctive perception of impacts, including the impact of education... "Training of students of different nationalities requires considering the regularities of their national mentality, because they affect the perception and assimilation of the received knowledge, the degree of effective adaptation of students to educational process, etc." [11, p.13]. The author believes that the main task of ethnic psychology and pedagogy is to investigate national specificity of perception of education and training in various national communities, the peculiarities of the content of educational activities and their impact on the individual, taking into account historical experience of teaching activity of different nations and peoples, as well as specific features of adaptation of a particular nationality to the educational and training activities.

Ethnocultural environment, among other components, is also presented by the educational settings based on the mentality and traditions of the ethnic group. According to V.G. Krys'ko, many features of national psychology are explained by original inherent norms and rules of social and cultural life. Thus, the Kazakhs still have strong tribal and congeneric links. Belonging to a group of people related by blood, imposes great responsibilities [11, p. 110]. Traditional for the Kazakhs are: respect for the elderly people (parents, grandparents, older siblings, teachers), orientation to social environment, a willingness to help and hospitality that form values governing the behavior and activities in general, including professional training. If a student experiences difficulty in education and can not cope with curriculum, he has a keen sense of guilt towards his family, sometimes even hiding if he was expelled for academic failure. Many first-year students feel anxious about possible failures that results in stress and neuroticism. Besides, it was observed that Kazakh students are more oriented to the support of relatives, less independent and self-sufficient.

Findings:

- For Kazakh first-year students (compared with the students from Russian divisions) the characteristic features of mental health are: higher levels of neuroticism, stress, depression, lesser adaptive capacity, high moral standards, external locus of control on the scale of the overall internality, internality in the field of industrial relations and in relation to health and internal locus of control - on the scale of internality in failures and family relations.
- These features of psychological health depend on ethnocultural conditions, traditions and accepted forms of educational influences, as well as the change of a mono-ethnic rural environment to polyethnic and multicultural environment of the city.

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