IDENTIFYING STUDENTS' LEVEL
OF PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING AMIDST
THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Dr. Aislu Akisheva, Assoc. Prof.
L.N. Gumilyov Eurasin Nnational University (Kazakhstan)

Abstract. An empirical psychological survey has been conducted with students of the L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University (Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan) to reveal the psychological conditions of students in the COVID-19 pandemic. A comparative analysis is presented with the results of a similar study with students from N. Vaptsarov Naval Academy (Varna, Bulgaria) has been made. It has been found that the mood of respondents is directly related to the level of optimistic or pessimistic moods of respondents. Those who determine their mental state as good, stable one have higher values of optimism as well as lower values of negative expectations. The survey shows that indicators of negative expectations such as: fear, anxiety, fatigue, depression, loneliness, burnout have been revealed despite a rather high positive indicator of stress resilience among Kazakhstani students. Such students should not be neglected, they should be given psychological support.

Keywords: pandemic; social isolation; level of stress tolerance; psychological state

Introduction

In today's world, we are exposed daily to stress related to our living conditions and personality traits. But during the COVID-19 pandemic, stress levels are several times higher than usual. People are overwhelmed by anxiety, fear, and uncertainty about their future.

In the second half of 2019, a previously unknown, rapidly spreading virus began to be reported steadily from China. In line with worldwide measures, a pandemic was declared in Kazakhstan on March 16, 2020. The first outbreaks of infection were recorded in the capital of the country, Nur-Sultan. In this context, steps to strengthen measures to prevent contamination were taken in this city and systematically spread throughout the country. All educational institutions ranging from pre-schools to higher education institutions were closed between March 16, 2020, and September 1, 2021.

The entire population of the country has gradually switched to a distance learning format. It should be noted that education has been the most prepared area for the transition to distance working. The prerequisite for this is the computer skills of young people, the information and communication competence of the teaching staff and a good level of technical equipment in educational establishments.

Higher education students have adapted most quickly to the distance learning environment that has been created. This is due to the pre-pandemic use of the Moodle educational platform, the student learning system based on Platonus, and interactive teaching and learning literature by students in the teaching process of higher education institutions. The country's leaders have taken steps to make the transition to online learning painless for students in schools, colleges and universities. But despite all these actions, all the hardships of the pandemic have been felt first and foremost by young people who have been forced to isolate themselves and stay in closed spaces 24 hours a day, deprived of lively communication, contact and movement. The country's younger generation is at risk of being affected by the pandemic with increasing decadence among young people, rising pessimism and depression. Increased anxiety levels among young people have been caused by isolation, uncertainty about the future and decreased motivation to gain new knowledge caused by changes in the learning environment (distance learning format).

Given the global scale of the COVID-19 pandemic, the problem is not only of concern to young people in Kazakhstan but has become an international one. Young people from every country in the world have found themselves in a position of social isolation and restriction in every way and have similarly suffered the full brunt of the pandemic, with all its psychological consequences (Chan JFW et al. 2020).

A comparative analysis of the psychological state of both Kazakhstani and Bulgarian students during the pandemic has been carried out in view of the long-standing cooperation with Bulgarian colleagues. Professor Valeri Stoyanov's article "Impact of Optimism on Stress Accumulation, Mental State and Perceived Risks for the Future of Students under COVID 19 Pandemic", published in Journal "Pedagogika-Pedagogy" has been taken for comparative analysis (Stoyanov 2021, 63 – 72). The Bulgarian study uses a battery of three questionnaires and three unfinished sentences, which have been posted on the Google Forms platform. The collection of empirical information has been conducted among 92 1st-4th year students majoring in "Transport, Shipping and Aviation" at the N. Vaptsarov Naval Academy, Varna, Bulgaria.

The goal of our survey is to examine the relationship between psychological well-being, level of optimism and stress resilience among Kazakhstani students during the COVID-19 pandemic and to identify experiences of social isolation and

perceived future and career risks, as well as to identify the influence of cultural differences on the students' negative attitudes and fears.

Research methodology. Over 140 1st-4th year students of L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University (Nur-Sultan) majoring in "Foreign Language", "Kazakh Language", "Inorganic Chemistry", "Biology", "Electric Power Engineering", "Geodesy/Cartography" have participated in the survey. Four kinds of questionnaires have been generated in Google Forms for the study and have been sent out to the students.

The survey has been conducted anonymously, giving respondents a high degree of sincerity and accuracy in their answers. The questionnaire used has been the ***dispositional optimism questionnaire*** proposed by American scientists as Michael Scheyer and Charles Carver (adaptation by T.O. Gordeyeva, O.A. Sychev, E.N. Osin) "Determination of Optimism Level in Students under COVID-19 Pandemic" (Cheremiskina 2021, 197 – 206).

The ***"Optimism and Activity Scale" method***, aimed at identifying personal factors that contribute to stress tolerance, has been applied to identify the mental state of the students (Vodopyanova N.E. 2021). This method focuses on identifying the cause of stress, recognising the signs of stress with an eye toward the negative consequences in order to manage stress.

Another tool for identifying the psychological mood of young people during the pandemic has been the use of the ***"Three Unfinished Sentences" technique***, where these sentences should be read and immediately filled in with the first thoughts that came to mind. The three sentences are as follows:

1. "How I endure social isolation during a pandemic...".
2. "The worst-case scenario of my future as a result of the pandemic is...".
3. "I rate my mental state at the moment as..." (Stoyanov 2021, 63 – 72).

Outcomes

For the ***first research method***, students have been asked 12 questions aimed at identifying levels of optimism and pessimism. Pursuant to researchers, the prevalence of dispositional optimism suggests that respondents expect good events and positive emotions in the future. The predominance of answers with pessimistic sentiments indicates the worst expectations of the test takers regarding the future. The test has been administered to 143 students of different specialties (45 males / 98 females) of the L. N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University aged between 18 and 22. The test takers have been given 5 answers to each question, allowing them to choose one of them. The questions and their answers are divided into three categories:

– Direct statements (positive expectations subscale): 1, 4, 5, 11.
– Reverse statements (negative expectations subscale): 3, 8, 9, 12.
– "Filler" statements: 2, 6, 7, 10 (Cheremiskina I.I 2021, 197-206).

Outcomes of the dispositional optimism test (Tables 1, 2).

Table 1. Direct statements (positive expectations subscale): 1, 4, 5, 11

No.	Scale	Agree	Disagree	Not sure	No answer
1.	Confidence	116 / 81.7%	10 / 7%	16 / 11.3%	1
2.	Positivity	106 / 74.6%	10 / 7%	27 / 19%	1
3.	Optimism	113 / 80.7%	9 / 6.4 %	18 / 12.9%	3
4.	Believing for better days	114 / 80.3%	9 / 6.4 %	19 / 13.4%	1

Table 2. Reverse statements (negative expectations subscale): 3, 8, 9, 12

No.	Scale	Agree	Disagree	Not sure	No answer
1.	Pessimistic future	9 / 6.3%	116 / 81.7%	17 / 12%	1
2.	Expectation of negativity	16 / 11.2%	108 / 76%	18 / 12.7%	1
3.	Lack of optimism	19 / 13.3%	102 / 71.8%	21 / 14.8%	3
4.	Lack of hope for the good future	18 / 12.6%	102 / 71.4%	23 / 16.1%	1

The test results show that the subscale of positive expectations dominates the subscale of negative expectations by a significant margin. Confidence, positivity, optimism, and belief for better days as personal characteristics predominate in students' moods. At the same time, there is disagreement with positive expectations, as well as uncertainty about their necessity. This subscale correlates from 6.4% to 19% and is an indication that respondents with lower levels of positive mood are most susceptible to negative expectations during a pandemic.

The survey has revealed a low level of negative expectations subscale. For a small proportion of respondents, indications of personal characteristics such as a pessimistic future, expectation of a negative future, lack of optimism and lack of hope for the good future range from only 6.3% to 13.3%.

Table 3. "Filler" statements: 2, 6, 7, 10

No.	Scale	Agree	Disagree	Not sure	No answer
1.	Mental ballast	66 / 46.8%	39 / 27.7%	36 / 25.5%	1
2.	Communication pleasure	116 / 84.4%	5 / 3.5%	17 / 12.1%	1
3.	Keeping busy is important	66 / 46.5%	27 / 19%	49 / 34.5%	3
4.	Hard to become emotionally distraught	52 / 36.8%	39/ 27.6 %	50 / 35.5%	1

The table shows that even in difficult life situations, young people need to socialise with friends and derive great satisfaction from this process

(116 respondents/84.4%) *test* (Table 3). It is also important for Kazakhstani students to be busy, to combine study and work (66/46.5%). But at the same time, there are students who are unsure whether employment is a priority for them.

It should be noted that most Kazakhstani respondents are women (98 females). Despite this significant preponderance of women in the survey, indicators of optimism, activity and confidence prevail over pessimistic sentiments. The women in the Kazakhstani survey group have showed higher levels of stress tolerance in contrast to the Bulgarian women, who have showed higher levels of stress. The stepwise regression of the influence of accumulated stress, optimism and negative expectations on the affective state is shown in the article by Prof. V. Stoyanov – Tables 4 and 5 in Pedagogika – Pedagogy (Stoyanov 2021, 63 – 72).

In the ***second research method***, 90 young people have participated in the test and have answered 15 questions. The processing of the respondents' answers has made it possible to classify the students' condition and mood into two categories: active (optimistic) and passive ones (pessimistic) (Table 4).

Table 4. Optimism and activity scale

No.	Questions/answer options	No, I completely disagree. (%)	Sometimes it's like this (%)	Usually/ frequently (%)	Yes, I totally agree/always (%)
1.	I think my life goals are too difficult to achieve	54.5	40	4.4	1.1
2.	Fate is more unfair to me than to others	70	23.3	5.6	1.1
3.	I am less happy than others	54.4	24.4	13.3	7.8
4.	It is impossible to believe in anything good at the moment	53.3	35.6	6.7	4.4
5.	I'm scared of my future	45.6	28.9	18.9	6.7
6.	I think there is more bad than good in people	34.4	47.8	14.4	3.3
7.	I am in a cheerful, upbeat mood	1.1	23.3	37.8	37.8

The processed test results show that a positive mood prevails over a negative one. The percentages are as follows: active/positive – 50%; passive/negative – 3.6%. Despite their forced social isolation, young people are not afraid of the future, they believe in good things and are optimistic. At the same time, however, 3.6% of students who are pessimistic cannot be ignored. They should be provided with timely professional psychological support in higher education institutions, which,

unfortunately, is not currently provided at the appropriate level in Kazakhstani higher education institutions.

Another tool for identifying the psychological mood of young people during the pandemic is the use of the *"Three Unfinished Sentences" technique*, where these sentences should be read and immediately filled in with the first thoughts that came to mind. The three sentences are as follows:

1. "How I endure social isolation during a pandemic...".
2. "The worst-case scenario of my future as a result of the pandemic is...".
3. "I rate my mental state at the moment as..." (Cheremiskina 2021, 197 – 206).

A total of 63 students have taken part in the test. The processed responses to the open-ended questions have been divided into 7 categories and the following results have been obtained (Tables 5, 6, 7):

Table 5. Sentence 1: How I endure social isolation during a pandemic…

No.	Categories of responses processed	Number of responses	%
1.	Did not experience any difficulties	17	27
2.	Progress in knowledge	8	12.7
3.	Experienced calm	7	11
4.	Experienced loneliness	16	25.3
5.	Missed my friends	10	15.9
6.	Felt fear, hopelessness	3	4.8
7.	Felt depressed	2	3.2
	Total:	**63**	

Table 6. Sentence 2: The worst-case scenario of my future
as a result of the pandemic

No.	Categories of responses processed	Number of responses	%
1.	No risks	11	17.7
2.	Loneliness	8	12.9
3.	Getting sick with a coronavirus	7	11.2
4.	Reduced quality of knowledge	8	12.9
5.	Fear of losing family and friends	6	9.7
6.	Lack of communication	15	24.2
7.	Laziness and burnout	7	11.2
	Total:	**62**	

Table 7. Sentence 3: I rate my mental state at the moment as...

No.	Categories of responses processed	Number of responses	%
1.	Excellent	16	25.8
2.	Stable	18	29
3.	Optimistic	17	27.4
4.	Feeling of fear	6	9.7
5.	Anxiety and fatigue	3	4.8
6.	Depression	2	3.2
	Total:	**62**	

Analysis of respondents' answers has revealed the following results. According to the responses to the 1st open-ended question, 27% of respondents have no particular difficulties with social isolation during the pandemic. According to 12.7% of students tested in time of isolation, they have the opportunity to devote more time to self-education and improve their quality performance. At the same time, 25.3% of students feel themselves lonely and 15.9% missed their friends. Feelings of fear, hopelessness and depression were experienced by between 3.2% and 4.8% of students.

The majority (50.7% of respondents) of Bulgarian students show intolerance for social exclusion. For them, tolerance of social exclusion is expressed through semantic units such as: difficult, unpleasant, stressful, disturbing, demotivating, traumatic, oppressive. For the 25 (34.2%) quoted students in the sample, the experience of social isolation is definitely on the pole – severe, traumatic, depressing (Stoyanov 2021, 63 – 72). Of the sample, 23 students (31.5%) experienced social isolation calmly, well, and another 5 (6.8%) with an understanding of the situation.

The incomplete sentence "The worst-case scenario of my future as a result of the pandemic is..." as shown by the test is the lack of communication (24.2%), it is important for students to meet friends, socialise and spend their leisure time together. The test has revealed that Kazakhstani students are concerned about the health and lives of relatives and friends (9.7%). Fear for the life and fate of loved ones is primarily dictated by the mentality of the Kazakhstani people, which is based on family values. Consequently, concern for relatives is a priority for today's young people.

Students are concerned about the declining quality of knowledge (12.9%) associated with distance learning, while 17.7% of respondents do not see any risks for their future and are optimistic and confident about their future. Both Kazakhstani and Bulgarian students are concerned about the quality of knowledge and skills acquired during the pandemic of online learning, which may negatively affect their future employment.

The answers of Bulgarian respondents, noting the risks associated with the economy and financial stability of the country, are of interest. Such worries are not denoted in the responses of the Kazakhstani respondents.

Responses to the 3rd incomplete sentence: "I rate my mental state at the moment as..." are divided into opposite categories: optimistic and pessimistic ones. 82.2% of respondents have described their mental state in relation to the impact of the pandemic as stable, excellent and optimistic one, while 17.7% have responded they felt fear, anxiety, fatigue and depression. Young people in Kazakhstan have a higher level of optimism than those in Bulgaria, reflected in a greater degree of separation between positive and negative emotions (Kazakhstan – 82.2% (positive)/17.7% (negative); Bulgaria (39.7% (positive) / 34.2% (negative)). It should be noted that the respondents' answers are directly related to the level of optimistic or pessimistic moods of the respondents. Those who define their mental state as good, stable one have higher values of optimism as well as lower values of negative expectations.

Conclusion

The results of the survey indicate a direct correlation between the respondents' answers and their psychological state, which is directly affected by the events associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, primarily a period of enforced social isolation. In general, both Kazakhstani and Bulgarian students are optimistic, balanced and positive. Of course, the period of isolation has an impact on the mood and behaviour of young people, but students with a high degree of stress tolerance and optimism are able to cope with the difficulties of the pandemic. At the same time, the following has been revealed: stressed and optimistic young people are concerned about the decreasing quality of education during the distance learning period; there is a lack of live communication with friends; due to the Kazakh national mentality there is a fear for the health and life of relatives and friends. For their part, young people in Bulgaria are worried about the risks related to the country's economy and financial stability.

The survey shows that despite a rather high positive indicator of psychological resilience of Kazakhstani and Bulgarian students, indicators of negative expectations such as: fear, anxiety, fatigue, depression, loneliness, burnout are revealed. These students should not be neglected and should be given psychological support.

REFERENCES

CHAN, JFW, YUAN, C. & KOK, H., 2019. Family Cluster of Pneumonia Associated with a New Coronavirus Indicating Human-to-Human Transmission: a Family Cluster Study. *Lancet* [Online]. Available from: DOI 2020: 10.1016 / S0140-6736 (20) 30154-9.

CHEREMISKINA, I.I., 2021. Optimism and Activity as Resources for Normalising Mental State in Young People during Pandemic and Self-Isolation. Territory of New Opportunities. *VGUES,* (3), 197 – 206.

LANDRY, GEDDES L, PAK MOZMAN A., LEFLER J.P., RAMAN, S.R. & WEICHEN, S.P., 2020. Early Reflections on the Global Impact of COVID19 and its Implications for Physiotherapy. *Physiotherapy,* **107**, A1 – A3.

STOYANOV, V., 2021. Impact of Optimism on Stress Accumulation, Mental State and Perceived Risks for the Future of Students under COVID 19 Pandemic. *Pedagogika-Pedagogy*, **93**(6s), 63 – 72.

VODOPYANOVA, N.E., 2009. *Psychodiagnostics of Stress.* St. Petersburg: Peter.

✉ **Dr. Aislu Akisheva, Assoc. Prof.**
ORCID ID: 0000-0001-7227-6901
L.N. Gumilyov Eurasin Nnational University
Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan
E-mail: kafedra_rfil@enu.kz