

SOCIAL INTEREST AND STRESS TOLERANCE

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Abstract. The article examines the role of social interest and stress tolerance in the successful performance of future educators and analyzes the significance of these qualities in their role as professional requirements. It includes a study with pedagogy students, which is aimed at determining whether there exists a relationship between the two aforementioned important qualities of a teacher's profession. This research featuring pedagogy students shows that the individuals who possess the highest level of social interest also demonstrate better stress tolerance. The results of the study are supported with statistics and analyzed from the perspective of the Adlerian understanding of personality as an indivisible whole.

Keywords: social interest; stress tolerance; professionally significant qualities; pedagogy students

Introduction

One of the most significant notions in the theory of Individual Psychology is connected with understanding human nature from the perspective of the social interactions and behavior of the individual, which take place within the social context.

The founder of Individual Psychology Alfred Adler defines the human being as an integrated system of interrelationships and an integral component of larger systems – families and communities. "Individual Psychology regards and examines the individual as socially embedded. We refuse to recognize and examine the isolated human being" (Adler 1956).

In his landmark work on Individual Psychology A. Adler places the cooperation between the individual and the community at the forefront, while any conflict between the two entities is regarded as unnatural.

The emphasis in the concept of social interest is placed on the understanding of personality within its social context. Human beings are social creatures and if they venture to acquire deeper understanding of themselves, it is necessary for them to examine their relationships with other people within the socio-cultural context they inhabit.

A. Adler claims that social interest or feeling is more than merely a feeling: it is an attitude to life (Lebensform). Lebensform is a cognitive structure that the

individual follows where a certain value performs the role of life-guiding force.

The essence of the meaning behind A. Adler's idea of "social interest as an innate potentiality" appears to be the possibility to determine and surpass the capabilities of the self (Adler 1959).

According to Adler, the ability to identify with others, which makes us capable of friendship, love for humanity, compassion, work and love, is the foundation of social interest (Ansbacher & Ansbacher 1956). The result of such identification or sympathy for other people is the discovery of a whole new world of values beyond the values and cares related to the self. If one values other people, that person will be more capable of noticing their plight, commiserating with them, thinking of possible ways to alleviate their suffering and taking action to achieve that. This exceedingly simple example demonstrates the impact of values on the cognitive, emotional, motivational and behavioral processes.

A. Adler believes that the factors determining the development of social interest are innate and, like other innate dispositions, it does not arise automatically but requires deliberate effort to develop. Social interest grows in the social milieu – the mother, the family and later the entire environment the individual inhabits play a role.

Based on the Adlerian theory on the nature of social interest, the focus of researchers in this field has been on establishing procedures to measure this human social phenomenon. One of them is James E. Crandall, a psychology professor at the University of Idaho in the United States. He attempted to devise a measure of social interest in its more narrow sense. The scale emphasizes the individual's care for other people. Choosing more characteristics related to empathy, readiness to provide help and involvement in other people's problems are all testament to the presence of higher levels of social interest. According to J. Crandall, the scale he developed correlates positively with values incorporated in an individual's belief system such as equality, peace, family safety (Crandall 1975, 1981).

Stress tolerance is another professionally significant characteristic for careers in the teaching professions. Hans Selye defines stress, its causes and effects as "a nonspecific response of the body to any demand made upon it" (Selye 1982). He further states that every demand made upon our body is in a certain sense unique or specific and stress results in adaptation to a particular problem regardless of the nature of that problem. According to him, it is of no significance whether the stressor is pleasant or unpleasant – it will always produce stress and the only factor of importance is its intensity.

Scientific literature has provided other definitions of stress as well.

J. G. Seamon and D. T. Kenrick (2002) define stress as physiological or psychological reaction to perceived threats from the environment.

R. Sternberg (1992) regards stress as an alarm system in an organism in a state of homeostasis. Stress is disharmony that jeopardizes the homeostasis. The latter, according to Cannon, is the ideal equilibrium state of the internal environment of the body (Seamon & Kenrick 2002).

Different approaches have been adopted to combat stress and those that stand out among them are the epidemiological, the psychological and the biological ones. In recent years, there has been a tendency to integrate them. A number of studies show that stress can disrupt the equilibrium of the biological, social and psychological structures of bodily function. New research by authors such as P. Valkov (2021), P. Martinez (2018) as well as M.P. Matud, A. Diaz, J.M. Bethencourt & I. Ibanez (2020)¹; S. Cohen et. al. (2016)²; K. Kruse (2016)³; C. Li, J. Cao, T. Li (2016)⁴ has contributed to revealing the sources of stress, examining its influence on the human being and developing possible strategies to overcome it.

In light of Hans Selye's definition, stress tolerance can be viewed as lack of or insignificant level of specific response by the body to the impact of non-specific stimuli.

The APA Dictionary of Psychology defines stress tolerance as "the capacity to withstand pressures and strains and the consequent ability to function effectively and with minimal anxiety under conditions of stress"⁵.

On the basis of this fundamental theory and the research experience acquired over the years, a concept was developed to examine the social interest of future pedagogy students and the relationship of this psychological phenomenon with the individual's stress tolerance.

Study Concept

The present study provides an opportunity to determine the level of social interest among pedagogy students under academic conditions and to explore its relationship with stress tolerance, which is seen as a quality of significance for the teaching professions. The aim is focused on examination of multidirectional correlations between the level of social interest and the level of perceived stress. The foundational principle is that young people's choice to enter teaching and social pedagogy professions is not accidental and is instead based on pronounced social interest concerning the problems of other people such as children, the elderly and the disabled. As Adler maintains, our life is valuable only insofar as we contribute to the value of other people's lives (Adler 1964).

At the same time, the teaching profession requires high tolerance to different types of stressogenic factors in the educational environment. The study hypothesizes that the increased level of social interest would enhance the stress tolerance of the individual and would lower the level of perceived stress. In connection with this hypothesis, a possible link between the levels of social interest and stress tolerance is explored. Grounds for that approach can be found in Adler's idea that social interest is a useful criterion for assessment of the individual's mental health. He believes that "Social interest is the barometer of ... normality" (Ansbacher & Ansbacher 1956) – an indicator that can be used to evaluate a person's quality of life.

The study is focused on testing this concept experimentally and the main source of information are the results obtained with the use of J. Crandall's Social Interest

Scale (SIS) in measuring the social interest of university students, as well as Sheldon Cohen's Perceived Stress Scale applied to the same contingent. The aim of the study is to establish the presence or lack of relationship between the level of social interest and the level of perceived stress, as they are both characteristics found at the core of the professionally significant qualities for the teaching professions.

The objectives of the study can be formulated as follows:

To establish the presence or lack of relationship between the level of social interest and the individual's professional orientation.

To establish the level of stress tolerance in pedagogy students as a basic characteristic of the profession of the teaching professions.

To establish the presence or lack of relationship between the levels of social interest and perceived stress.

Study Hypotheses

In line with the scientific literature and the research conducted on the level of social interest, it is hypothesized that general pedagogy and social pedagogy university students who aspire to pursue careers in their field of study would mostly exhibit medium and higher levels of social interest (Stoykova 2013). The second hypothesis is built upon Alfred Adler's idea of social interest as a barometer of mental health as described in the study concept. It hypothesizes that high social interest, interpreted as care for other people's problems, provides a higher degree of perceived stress tolerance.

The study contingent consists of 151 students pursuing degrees in pedagogy at the Faculty of Education at Trakia University – Stara Zagora. The participants form a representative sample of the students enrolled at their respective Bachelor's degree programs. Participation was strictly voluntary and the privacy of individual responses and results is guaranteed. The present article only includes summarized results.

Instruments

The study uses J. Crandall's Social Interest Scale (Crandall* SIS – Crandall 1975, 1981) and S. Cohen's Scale of Perceived Stress (Cohen S. et al. 1983, 1988, 2016).

Results and interpretation

The results of the study show that the average value of the social interest of the representative sample of student participants is $x_{av.} = 9,03$, which falls with the „medium level” portion of the scale of social interest according to Crandall's test (Graph 1, red line). This shows that these students exhibit pronounced social interest, which supports their capacity to train, educate and look after children and adults in the role of educators in the future.

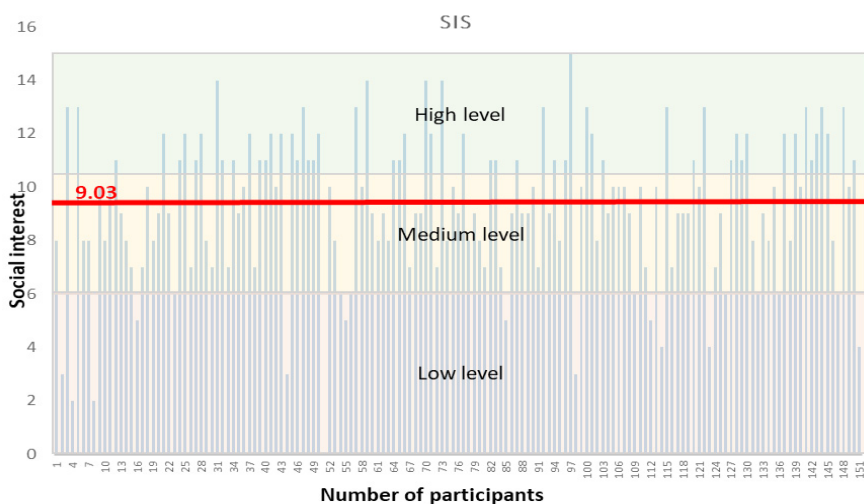


Figure 1. Average values $x_{av.}$ of the social interest of pedagogy university students

At the same time, the average values of perceived stress in this contingent fall within the lower half of the medium level portion of S. Cohen's scale $x_{av.} = 17,3$, which indicates relatively low levels of stress (Figure 2).

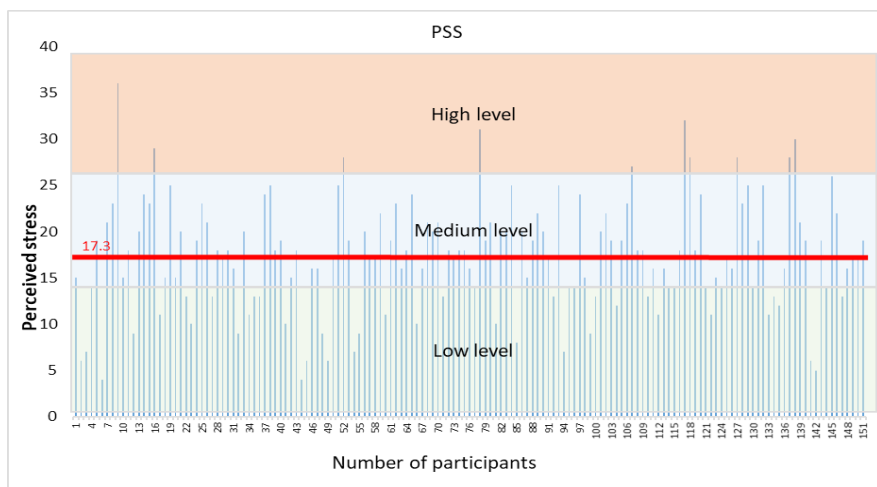


Figure 2. Average values $x_{av.}$ of perceived stress in pedagogy university students

The relationship between the level of social interest and the level of perceived stress in the student participants is expressed in the best way through the correlation coefficient r . In this case, the coefficient indicates negative dependence between the high levels of social interest in the study contingent and their low level of perceived stress. The value of the correlation coefficient is $r = -0,31542$, which falls within the boundaries of moderate dependence.

The results of the study categorically support the hypothesis that individuals with high levels of social interest demonstrate better stress tolerance.

The results of the present study have important implications for the practice and role of professionally significant qualities for success in the teaching profession.

Conclusions

The results of the study allow the following conclusion to be drawn:

The pedagogy university students in the research sample primarily exhibit medium, elevated and high levels of social interest.

The same sample exhibits average values of perceived stress that fall in the lower half of the medium level as described in S. Cohen's scale, which indicates relatively reduced levels of stress.

The pedagogy students participating in the study who possess higher level of social interest also demonstrate better stress tolerance.

NOTES

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