STRATEGIES OF SELF-IMPROVEMENT FOR STUDENTS WITH DIFFERENT AGENCY LEVELS

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ABSTRACT

The relevance of the issue is due to the importance of studying the psychological mechanisms and factors of personal self-development. The goal of this research was to identify factors of students' choice of self-improvement strategies: acquisition, rejection, transformation, and restriction, depending on the students' agency levels. Our study involved students from several universities in Russia and Kazakhstan, with a total of 271 people aged 17 to 27, mostly female, with an average age of 19.5 (SD=1.5) years. As diagnostic tools, we developed an original technique, "Square of self-improvement" and also used M.A. Shchukina's questionnaire, "Level of personal autonomy development." The processing was performed with the φ^* criterion (Fisher's angular transformation). As a result, it was found that students with high levels of agency prefer three strategies: acquisition, disposal, and transformation. Among students with low levels of agency, fewer participants choose the "transformation" strategy, whereas the number of students who prefer "acquisition" increases. The process depends on intrinsic value as an indicator of the agency. We have found that manifestations of the "acquisition" strategy vary between students with higher and lower agency levels, and these are qualitative differences. The study led us to the conclusion that the choice of self-improvement strategies is largely determined by the person's level of agency, i.e., their capability to be the masters and shapers of their lives and their self-development. The results obtained can be used in professional training (to plan trajectories of individual self-development) and in psychological consultancy at universities.

Keywords: Self-development, Self-improvement, Self-improvement strategies, Agency.

INTRODUCTION

The issue of the relationship between a person's agency and self-development remains relevant, but debatable in modern psychology. Its relevance is due to the importance of identifying psychological patterns and mechanisms for the formation of a person as an actor in his life. Discussions stem from various interpretations of the relationship between agency and self-development.

Agency integrates several properties that can be expressed in different ways in the same individual, thereby determining the qualitative originality of the manifestation of the overall agency. There are personality traits that almost all scientists include in the agency structure and those about which they disagree. The latter set of traits includes, among others, self-development, understood as an internally determined process of changing a person's personality, depending on their life goals and the current situation.

Literature Review

The issues of agency structure are discussed in many works devoted to this phenomenon. In some of them, the most general characteristics of a person are distinguished as subjective properties, which allow him/her to act as an initiator and creator of his life. Thus, A.V. Brushlinsky (Brushlinsky, 1996) included activity, autonomy, creativity, and integrity. In his theory of a person's self-efficacy, A. Bandura (Bandura 1989) listed activity, autonomy, reflexivity, and self-regulation. In L.V. Alekseeva's concept of agency (Alekseeva, 2003), concretized and developed by M.A. Shchukina (Shchukina, 2015), six pairs of agents' properties are distinguished: activity-reactivity, autonomy–dependence, integrity – non-integrity, indirectness – immediacy, creativity – reproductivity, and intrinsic value – low value. Other researchers add self-development or self-improvement, along with some of the above properties. In particular, S.L. Rubinstein (Rubinstein, 2003), listed such features of agency as activity, the capacities for self-determination, development, self-regulation, and self-improvement. A. Serykh (Serykh, 2006) also includes self-determination, self-organization and self-development in the structure of the agency.

The authors of the present article share the opinion of V.I. Slobodchikov (Slobodchikov & Isaev, 2013) that a person becomes an actor (subject) of self-development only after reaching a certain developmental level. More often than not, this happens in adolescence, when a young person is already the subject of his/her life. It may happen so that, for this reason, or another, some persons do not become subjects of self-development. Moreover, self-development as such is not always a positive and socially approved process of self-change; it may also take an asocial direction.

We would like to dwell on another important point. Self-development as a process of self-change is carried out in various forms, principally self-affirmation, self-improvement, self-actualization, and self-realization. Self-affirmation is the desire of a person to want their significance (insignificance) to be constantly confirmed by others or by themselves. The main strategies of self-affirmation include a constructive strategy, a strategy of dominance, and a strategy of self-suppression (Nikitin & Kharlamenkova, 2000). Self-improvement is usually understood in two aspects. The first is associated with the pursuit of excellence, and the second is with the process of changing oneself, most often for the better. Self-actualization is the process of revealing one's potential, and self-realization is the use of it in practice. All these forms are connected and work together.

In the context of the research topic chosen, we are interested in self-improvement as a specific form of self-development. In modern psychology, the issue of self-improvement is presented in many ways. A. Adler (Adler, 2007) was among the first authors to single out the desire for self-improvement (or for excellence) as a motivational trend in self-development. It is known that the desire for self-improvement can be driven by various motives related to the achievement of

life goals or the desired image of "self," as well as the importance of receiving feedback (Sedikides & Hepper, 2009), especially when this is associated with experiencing positive emotions.

Self-improvement and self-affirmation require specific strategies. In modern literature, there is no unified understanding of these strategies. They can be interpreted quite broadly and are understood rather as conditions or tools of self-improvement. For example, A.K. Schaffner (Schaffner, 2021) includes the following: self-knowledge, self-control, self-education, etc. On the contrary, other authors emphasize specific aspects of the manifestation of self-affirmation and self-improvement, which include self-elevation and self-defense. Among strategies for self-elevation and self-defense, E.G. Hepper and colleagues (Hepper *et al.*, 2010) include defensiveness (the tendency to take an avoidant/defensive position), positive acceptance, favorable constructs, and self-affirming speculation. In some publications, strategies of self-improvement are considered generalized ways of changing oneself. They include the strategies of acquisition, rejection, transformation, and limitation (Maralov & Nizovskikh, 2015). The acquisition means obtaining something that a person did not have before: knowledge, skills, personal qualities, etc. Rejection is manifested in a desire to get rid of something that does not satisfy a person, for example, some habits, character traits, etc. Transformation can act in two ways: as a qualitative improvement of oneself and as a radical restructuring and transformation of something, for example, the transformation of resentment into the ability to forgive, or laziness into diligence. The meaning of the limitation strategy is clear from the term itself: this involves restricting certain things, for example, how many cigarettes a person smokes, or the way they control manifestations of irritability towards close people.

It has been established that the choice of strategies depends on the intensity of the urge for self-development. If motivation is high, the person's priority is usually a strategy of acquisition, and if the level is low, strategies of limitation and rejection are more common choices (Maralov, 2017).

Further, we directly address the issue of the relationship of students' agency with self-development and self-improvement as one of its forms.

First of all, we draw your attention to the fact that the problem of agency/subjectness in schoolchildren and students constantly enters the research field of contemporary psychology. In particular, M. Vaughn (Vaughn, 2018) defines student agency as the desire, ability, and power of a student to build their course of action. P. Jaaskela and her colleagues (Jaaskela *et al.*, 2017) identify individual, relational, and contextual components of agency in schoolchildren and students. K. Geykhman and V.S. Kabanov (Geikhman & Kabanov, 2021) highlight the motivational, evaluative, regulatory, cognitive, and practical parameters of agency, which become specific depending on the level of its development in the context of professional maturity, at the stages of zero suitability, insufficient competence, objectness, agency, professionalism, and skill.

A. Bandura (Bandura, 2000) argued that the foundation of the agency is self-efficacy. Probably due to this opinion, most research is devoted to the study of the relationship of self-development (and self-improvement as its form) not so much to an agency, but rather to self-efficacy (Sharma & Rani, 2013; Cannon & Rucker, 2022). Yet, some publications reveal a direct relationship between indicators of agency and self-development. For example, in their article, J.L. Lo-oh and D.E. Neba (Lo-oh & Neba, 2019), a study of Cameroonian student

groups, found convincing facts that such properties of agency as foresight, self-reactivity, self-efficacy, self-reflexivity, and self-esteem positively correlate with self-development.

Looking at such data, we have to admit that the majority of current research is aimed at identifying the relationship between the drive for self-improvement and the actors' qualities or features related to agency; practically do not affect the operational components of self-development, for example, strategies and specific actions for self-development. This greatly plays down the idea of how people (in our case, students) as subjects of self-development solve their problems of self-affirmation, self-improvement, self-actualization, and self-realization. Based on this, several questions arise, and these are related to the need to identify the ways of choosing strategies for various forms of self-development in students with different levels of agency (overall agency and its components). This study is devoted to one of the aspects of this issue, namely, identifying the features of choosing self-improvement strategies by students with different agency levels. As our general *hypothesis*, we assumed that students with high levels of an agency will prefer acquisition and transformation strategies, and students with lower levels would rather accept strategies of rejection or limitation.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

We adopt the agency approach to self-development, as formulated by M.A. Shchukina (Shchukina, 2018), which focuses on a dialectical unity of a person's agency and his/her self-development. "The ability for self-development, as the author writes, is an integral feature of the subject/actor, and the ability to be a subject is a necessary condition for self-development" (Schukina, 2018). During the organization of the current research, we employed a complex of theoretical and empirical methods, as well as mathematical methods of data processing. As specific methods, we made use of M.A. Shchukina's questionnaire "Level of agency and personality development" and our methodology, "Square of self-improvement."

M.A. Schukina's questionnaire, *"Level of agency and personality development"* (Shchukina, 2015), was originally designed to diagnose the general level of personal agency development, as well as its indicators: 1) activity – reactivity; 2) autonomy – dependence; 3) integrity – disintegrity; 4) indirectness – immediacy; 5) creativity – reproductivity; 6) intrinsic value - low value (insignificance). Her questionnaire included 61 questions. The results are calculated in accordance with the key for the entire questionnaire, and for individual scales, which makes it possible to build an individual development profile of agency for each testee.

The method we name "Square of self-improvement" (Maralov *et al.*, 2019). Students are asked to draw a large square on a sheet of paper and divide it into 4 parts (four squares), designating them as follows, clockwise: acquisition, rejection, limitation, and transformation. The lecturer explains to them what each self-improvement strategy means. The instruction to students is, "Write in the appropriate box what personality traits or behavioral traits you would like to acquire, which of them you want to get rid of, which traits you would like to transform, and which to limit. It is not necessary to fill in all the boxes. If you do not want to acquire any, or if you do not want to get rid of any, leave the cells empty. Then, rank all these qualities, regardless of which box they are in. Give the top priority to the quality that you would like to acquire, get rid of, limit, or transform. Give the second place to a quality that is less significant for you, and so on."

The results were processed using general statistical methods. We employed the φ^* criterion from the Fisher angular transformation.

The participants were students from several universities in the Russian Federation and the Republic of Kazakhstan, totaling 271 people aged 17-27, 96% women, mean age of 19.5 (SD=1.5) years. The groups included 82 students at Cherepovets State University (Cherepovets, Russian Federation), 54 from Shadrinsk State Pedagogical University (Shadrinsk, Russian Federation), and 135 students from Kazakhstan National Women's Pedagogical University (Almaty, Republic of Kazakhstan).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Let us look at the main results of our study. First of all, we give a general description of a sample of participants according to the parameters studied. The results of students' choice of self-improvement strategies are shown in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Students' choice of self-improvement strategies*

Self-improvement strategies	n	%
Acquisition	117	43.17
Rejection	83	30.63
Transformation	49	18,08
Limitation	22	8.12
Total: 271	271	100

*__Note:__ Here, only the students' first priorities are taken into consideration.

In **Table 1**, we can see that the majority of students (43.17% = 117 participants) prefer the acquisition strategy. The second strategy in terms of choice frequency is rejection: 30.63% (83 students), and the third position is given to the strategy of transformation, chosen by 18.08% (49 students). Our participants choose the limitation strategy ostensibly less often than the other strategies, it is only 8.12% (22 students).

What specific personal qualities, skills, and competencies do the students prefer?

First of all, many students want to acquire such qualities as confidence, patience, perseverance, a positive attitude to criticism, an ability to defend their point of view, as well as address audiences, interact with people, foreign language skills, drawing, playing musical instruments etc.

Those who focus on strategies of rejection most often want to get rid of laziness, procrastination, insecurity, and shyness, as well as irritability, irascibility, weak will, dependence on the opinions of others, and bad habits.

Transformation is a more complex strategy, and it manifests itself in the qualitative development of an acquired ability or in a capacity to transform negative traits into positive ones; for example, laziness into diligence. Such students indicate their need for further development of memory, logical thinking, stress resistance, as well as academic competencies, and time management. Many of them want to improve their English, cooking skills, sports achievements, etc.

Lastly, those participants who embrace the strategy of limitation would like to reduce their time spent on social networks, as well as restrict their bad habits: swearing, smoking, excessive eating, etc. Some students would like to limit their lack of responsibility, laziness, aptitude to be led by others, irritability, pessimistic expectations, etc.

Table 2 shows the medium values of the levels of agency and, in general, the participants' indicators and standard deviations.

Table 2. Medium values and standard deviations for the agency factor and its manifestations

Agency	Mean values	Standard deviations
Overall agency	6.59	1.32
Activity – reactivity	6.54	1.45
Autonomy – dependency	6.75	1.33
Integrity – non-integration	6.74	1.32
Indirectness – immediacy	6.73	1.50
Creativity – reproductivity	5.92	1.55
Intrinsic value – low value	6.92	1.12

Table 2 shows that all the values remain above the medium range. The most differing parameter was "intrinsic value *vs.* low value" (M=6.92, SD=1.12), and the less pronounced parameter was "creativity *vs.* reproductivity" (M=5.92, SD=1.55). This means that the majority of students show a fairly high level of agency and perceive themselves as persons who possess value, but are not creative enough, as they prefer reproductive activity.

Let us turn to the main task of this study and identify students' preferences in their choice of self-improvement strategies, depending on the level of their overall agency and its specific indicators. These results are presented in **Table 3**.

Table 3. Strategies for self-improvement among students with different levels of agency, overall data, and specific indicators

Overall agency and specific indicators (levels)	Self-improvement strategies									
	Acquisition		Rejection		Transformation		Limitation		Total:	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
High	1 6	33.33	12	25	18	37,5	2	4.17	48	100
Medium	79	43.64	57	31.49	31	17.13	14	7.74	181	100
Low	22	52.38	14	33,33	2	4,76	4	9.53	42	100
Significance of differences of extreme groups (φ* – Fisher's angular transformation)	1.79, p≤ .05		0.87, non-significant		4.14, p≤ .001		1.01, non-significant			
Activity										
High	24	37.5	17	26.56	18	28.13	5	7.81	64	100
Medium	74	45.96	49	30.43	27	16.77	11	6.84	161	100
Low	20	43.48	17	36.96	6	13.04	3	6.52	46	100
Significance of differences of extreme groups (φ* – Fisher's angular transformation)	1.34, non-significant		1.15, non-significant		1.94, p≤ .05		0.25, non-significant			
Autonomy										
High	34	37.36	28	30.77	25	27.47	4	4.4	91	100
Medium	60	49.18	27	22.13	21	17.21	14	11.48	122	100

Low	27	46.55	21	36.22	8	13.79	2	3.44	58	100
Significance of differences of extreme groups (φ* – Fisher's angular transformation)	1.11, non-significant,		0.67, non-significant		2.04, p≤ .05		0.30 non-significant			
Integrity										
High	29	40.85	17	23.94	18	25.35	7	9.86	71	100
Medium	68	43.87	48	30.97	29	18.71	10	6,45	155	100
Low	18	40	18	40	4	8.89	5	11.11	45	100
Significance of differences of extreme groups (φ* – Fisher's angular transformation)	0,04, non-significant		1,82, p≤0,05		2,36, p≤0,01		0,11, non-significant			
Indirectness										
High	26	34,21	23	30,26	22	28,95	5	6,58	76	100
Medium	66	47,48	38	27,33	24	17,27	11	7,92	139	100
Low	26	46,43	23	41,07	4	7,14	3	5,36	56	100
Significance of differences of extreme groups (φ* – Fisher's angular transformation)	1,41, non-significant		1,27, non-significant		3,39, p≤0,001		0,29, non-significant			
Creativity										
High	17	38.64	17	38.64	8	18.18	2	4.54	44	100
Medium	50	44.64	33	29.46	21	18,75	8	7,15	112	100
Low	51	44.35	33	28.7	22	19,13	9	7,82	115	100
Significance of differences of extreme groups (φ* – Fisher's angular transformation)	0.66. non-significant		1.18. non-significant		0.13. non-significant		0.77. non-significant			
Intrinsic value										
High	35	35.71	25	25.51	30	30.61	8	8.17	98	100
Medium	54	45.76	41	34.74	17	14.41	6	5.09	118	100
Low	29	52.72	17	30.91	4	7.27	5	9.1	55	100
Significance of differences of extreme groups (φ* – Fisher's angular transformation)	2.04. p≤ .05		0.71. non-significant		3.71. p≤ .001		0.19. non-significant			

The results shown in **Table 3** lead us to conclude that manifestations of self-improvement strategies are ambiguous among students with different levels of the agency. Students with a high agency level embrace the following three strategies: acquisition (33.33%, or 16 people), rejection (25%, or 12 people), and transformation (37.5%, or 18 people). These participants rarely resort to the limitation strategy (4.17%, or 2 people).

Among students with medium levels of agency, the percentages of participants using the acquisition strategy (43.64%, or 79 people) and rejection (31.49%, or 57 people) increase, while the percentage of participants embracing the transformation strategy decreases (17.13%, or 31 people), and the strategy of limitation rises only slightly, from 4.17% to 7.74%.

As for students with low agency levels, the percentage of those who prefer the acquisition strategy continues to increase (52.38%, or 22 people), and those who prefer the disposal strategy remain approximately the same in number (33.33%, or 14 people), the proportion of people embracing transformation strategy decreases (4.76%, or 2 people), and the number of students using the limitation strategy increases to 9.53% (4 people).

Analyzing specific indicators of agency, we saw that low levels of directness, integrity, autonomy, and activity contribute to a decrease in the frequency of choosing a transformation strategy, whereas a low level of intrinsic value leads, in addition to a decrease in the frequency of choosing a transformation strategy, to an increase in the frequency of choosing an acquisition strategy. With a low level of self-integrity, there are increases in the percentage of students (up to 40%, as opposed to 23.94% for students with high levels of integrity) who use the avoidance strategy.

Thus, the general conclusion of the present study can be formulated as follows. Students with a high agency level prefer three strategies: acquisition, rejection, and transformation, and the result are in keeping to their specific needs for self-development and self-improvement. Students with a lower level of agency employ the transformation strategy less often than the first group, and they also tend to employ the acquisition strategy; this especially concerns students with a lower sense of self-intrinsic value. Thus, a lower sense of integrity encourages students to employ an avoidance strategy.

Then what are the qualitative differences in choosing the acquisition strategy among students with higher or lower agency levels? Students with high agency levels are driven by a desire to acquire such personal qualities as going through with what they have begun, managing their time schedules, defending their opinions, and maintaining confidence and restraint. Many authors point to acquiring such specific skills as learning to draw, mastering a foreign language, etc. Students with a lower agency level are challenged to increase their confidence and independence. Of course, this also requires the acquisition of specific skills, but the two former properties are often their priority.

The above data are also confirmed by a qualitative analysis of the use of the avoidance strategy in all these subgroups. Certainly, students with higher levels of agency will more often try to get rid of laziness, imposed standards, stubbornness, irritability, mismanagement of time, etc. But the same is true of students with lower agency levels: they also do want to get rid of laziness, shyness, weak will, and dependence, anger, resentment, "toxic" friends, – to sum it up, everything that interferes with positive self-acceptance and obvious manifestation of independence.

To sum it up, we have to admit that our hypothesis here is only partially confirmed, with respect to one of the four strategies, namely the *transformation* strategy. It is not fully confirmed for the other strategies of self-improvement. Moreover, it appears that the acquisition strategy was used more often by students with lower levels of agency than by those with higher levels, which completely refutes our initial supposition.

When we compare the results obtained here with other data available in psychology, we come to the following conclusions.

Contemporary psychology makes an emphasis on the motivational components of self-development (and self-improvement, as its form). It has also been established that the motivation for professional self-development and self-improvement evolves with maturity in the course of professional activity. This sphere is not fully developed in our young professionals (Kuanysheva *et al.*, 2019), so it makes sense to develop special activities for its formation, beginning this work at the undergraduate stage (Petrenko *et al.*, 2019). We are aware of the factors that stimulate self-improvement: people's gratitude (Armenta *et al.*, 2017), awareness

of one's failures (Breines & Chen, 2012), self-compassion and awareness of self-care needs (Chwyl *et al.*, 2021), and self-efficacy as the basis of sick people's expectation of their recovery (Szczepańska-Gieracha & Mazurek, 2020). Self-improvement can be realized as a result of a competitive struggle with a rival (Wolf *et al.*, 2021), as well as a result of special training, e.g., with strategies for emotional self-regulation (Wimmer *et al.*, 2019). Also, a disposition for self-improvement will have a positive impact on a person's attitude toward other people and shape their altruistic behavior toward people (Chernyak-Hai & Tziner, 2021).

The study we have conducted shows that a person's desire for self-improvement is manifested not only in their appropriate motivation but also in their choice of certain strategies for self-improvement. The novelty here as we see it lies in revealing the role of agency in the student's choice of self-improvement strategies. It is established that a decrease in the level of agency and its specific indicators have a restrictive effect on the use of self-improvement strategies. We have to admit that now only two strategies are used quite actively: acquisition and rejection. They are both aimed at increasing the value of one's own "self." In choosing self-improvement strategies, students with high levels of agency are guided by real-life needs associated with self-change, and not by self-acceptance or increasing self-esteem for themselves, as these students already possess this quality. Due to this, the transformation strategy is more common. And the *limitation* strategy is rarely used in either of the groups.

CONCLUSION

Summing up the results of the study, we state that self-improvement is one of the most important forms of personal self-development and is an active, purposeful human activity in the formation and development of positive qualities and the rejection of undesirable qualities.

Self-improvement as a specific form of self-development employs strategies of its own, which include: acquisition, rejection, transformation, and limitation.

The study shows that a personal choice of strategies is largely determined by the level of agency formed in the participant, and in their capacity to remain the masters and creators of their life and self-development. Students with a high level of agency prefer three strategies: acquisition, rejection, and transformation. Students with lower levels of agency do not often use the transformation strategy, as they prefer the acquisition strategy, primarily associated with a lower level of intrinsic value (the most important component of personal agency). At a lower level of expression of agency as a sense of integrity, the strategy of rejection becomes more active. As for the limitation strategy, it is less commonly used in both groups.

Limitations and Dimensions for Future Research

The main limitation of this study is that, due to the specifics of its preparation, the participants were mostly female students, which is quite typical of many teachers' training universities in Russia and Kazakhstan (especially their pedagogy and psychology departments). However, this does not undermine the objectivity of the research, as it contributes to understanding the patterns associated with the student's choice of specific self-improvement strategies. Thus prospects of our further research can lie in: a) verification of these patterns for groups of male students; b) study of the role of human and psychological capital in students' choice of self-improvement strategies.

The results obtained in this study can be used in the professional training of would-be teachers and psychologists, as well as in assisting students in shaping their trajectories of self-development, taking into account their preferences for certain self-improvement strategies. The results can also be used in psychological consultancy at universities.

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