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Stress-Inducing Situations and Psychological Security of the Penal System Staff

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Abstract

Psychological security necessary to accomplish professional activities depends not only on environment characteristics and stress-producing situations but also on individual stress resistance. It primarily concerns risk-fraught and extreme conditions of activities, in particular, activities of the penal system representatives. Due to it, the requirements for the penal system specialists' personality capable of working under these conditions are much higher especially in terms of stress resistance than for "ordinary" citizens. The results by the penal system staff and civilians of stress resistance level analysis are compared and commented on.

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1. Introduction

The ongoing transformation of social, spiritual, political and economic life in Russia today constitutes important challenges to society and the state. The problem of psychological security provision is rightfully considered to be among the most important ones since "modern society shaping as well as moral values diluting have given rise to quite an amount of negative processes, which aggravates threats to individual, group and community consciousness, threats to Russia's psychological security" [1].

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The most important role in provision of personality psychological security in society plays the formation of activity-centered personality competence via mastering spheres of actions ensuring its security [2]. In researchers' view, "security creates conditions for cognition, exchange and interaction of the subjects and his socio-psychological environment" [3]. Scrutiny of personality psychological security implies that the following interpretation should be taken into account: "Security is seen as activity-oriented concept reflecting material and ideal interaction in objective and subjective components' integrity" [4].

The process of activity-centered competence originates from hypothetic forms and mechanisms of the subject's self-supposition. The development of this competence in stress-inducing situations is connected with the fact that the subject of activity is a bearer of opportunities realized in the outer. In this context self-supposition in the system of activity-centered personality competence constituting the basis of security provision acts as both actualization and fulfillment of a person's own potential. Self-realization of inward world is closely linked to social cognition, mechanisms of personality and group identification, specifics of origin of 'Other', 'Group', 'Environment' images. Environment properties, its psychological indicators, first of all, psychological security are essential for different psychological mechanisms employed in an individual's functioning.

Emphasis on security provision subject infers meaning-orientation and creative converting experience based among others on social representation of secure/insecure world, stress-generating situations' level. "The brink between danger and safety is extremely thin. In many ways actor's choice depends on moral and sociocultural fundamentals, attitudes and beliefs" [5].

Stress resistance represents a personality property that manifests itself in adequate response to stress-inducing situation through activating and modifying behavior in order to adapt to the conditions changed" [6].

Stress resistance is now an attractive feature of academic research due to increasingly complicating conditions of man existence in the modern world. Growth of social tension and conflicts, high crime rate, terrorism attacks treat are just a few examples.

Particular emphasis is given to stress endurance in the workplace where it becomes a compelling requirement for a candidate's personality in many lines of work. It relates, in the first place, to challenging, dangerous and extreme working conditions, and the penal system staff environment is surely to be among them [7].

Such stress factors as relative closure and remoteness of detention facilities, specifics of contacts with prisoners, danger and at the same time routineness and monotony of work, capacity of high authority, etc. explain particular stress level of this activity. This is especially true for specialists performing oversight and control functions, i.e. whose job is associated with application of power (convoy, special assignment, safeguard teams, etc.) [8].

Thus, in day-to-day routine of officers dealing with prisoners' safeguard in detention institutions these stress-producing variables – elements of suddenness (situations demanding rapid decision making under pressure of time), negative conduct of this peculiar contingent, readiness to apply physical force or arms are strongly pronounced [9].

The situational characteristics of the penal system staff described leave their imprints on risk perception, risk evaluation, risk avoidance in their line of work. The nature of response and stressful situation management apparently testify to individual potential to cope with and to overcome risk-fraught moments. "Much of the work to date on individual risk behavior has focused on how individuals respond to potentially unsafe conditions [10], [11]. However, this substantial body of work has focused attention on the role of individual perceptions and preferences, with only limited consideration of the potentially important impact of organizational context [12] and personal and organizational risk history" [13].

In spite of some difference in situation parameters, individual history of learnt behavior modes under pressure, the penal system staff activity is prone to certain threats concerning psychological activity. While conveying inmates they can face such unfavorable factors as time consuming route to destination, bad weather conditions, contacts with prisoners, war-like situations (readiness to use arms). All this generates emotional overload, negative feelings, anxiety, stress [7].

That is why requirements for the penal system specialists' personality capable of working under these conditions are much higher especially in terms of stress resistance than for "ordinary" citizens.

2. Method

The goal of this examination is to compare differences in stress resistance level of the penal system staff and civilians.

The questionnaire "Forecast" [14], social readjustment scale by T. Holmes and P. Rahe's [15], L. Reeder's psychosocial stress scale [16] were used to identify stress endurance characteristics of the sample.

"Forecast" questionnaire designed for identifying people with nerves-psyche instability makes it possible to assess the probability of nervous and psychic collapses manifested by the subjects in stress-inducing, extreme situations and to see whether a candidate is suitable for the line of work requiring high stress-resistance.

A person of high level of nervous and psychic endurance does not tend to breakdown in situations typical of significant physical and psychic overload and possesses high adaptability. His stability at that is mainly determined by biological features of his nervous system together with characteristic personal abilities and traits. The Social Readjustment Rating Scale is used to evaluate stress loading and risk of stress-related diseases. Every life event in the scale is scored according to its stress potential. The more events have occurred over the last year the higher the score is, which means a lower person's stress resistance. The given study considers events to be stress-inducing if they cause serious changes and result in physiological and/or emotional arousal in both groups' representatives (the prison system staff and civilians).

L. Reeder' scale measuring psychosocial stress is used for express-diagnostic of the subjects to identify stress intensity they are currently experiencing which is determined by psychosocial factors in the first place (unfavorable emotional background of contacts with prisoners, overload at work, etc.).

Therefore, the use of both scales (social readjustment and existing stress) provided material for estimating external, mainly, situational variables negatively affecting a person and generating stress. The data obtained via "Forecast" questionnaire allowed the authors to analyze personal characteristics which explain individual stress endurance or, on the contrary, the predisposition to stress aggravation.

The sample consisted of 120 subjects (Yekaterinburg, 2012), among them 60 respondents were the penal system representatives engaged mostly in escorting prisoners and armed guarding of imprisonment places (detention units and corrective facilities). The rest of the subjects were civilians whose activity does not involve accomplishing extreme or danger-associated activities. Comparative analysis was carried out using the Student t-criteria for disconnected samplings.

The data obtained are presented below (see Table.1).

3. Results

Table 1. Comparative analysis of stress resistance characteristics found at the penal system staff and civilians

	Social Readjustment scale	Psychosocial stress scale	"Forecast"
Average: the penal system staff	169,63	19,2	12,8
Average: civilians	168,3	18,95	17,53
Value of t-criterion	0,5	0,7	5,8
Significance level	insignificant	insignificant	0,01

Thus, taking into consideration the fact, that the penal system staff professional activities are characterized by high stressfulness from various sources one could assume that they have all grounds to demonstrate a higher level of existing stress status. However, as seen from Table 1, no significant difference between two groups in the parameters under study was found. It means that despite dangerous and extreme situations they are involved on a daily basis the prison system personnel hardly experience more intense stress than civilians. It would be reasonable to expect that they are able to cope with negative stress impacts both at work and at home. As Table 1 illustrates such level of resistance to unfavorable stress effects stems from personal characteristics of the penal system staff, namely, higher indicators of nervous and psychic stability in comparison with those of civilians who habitually express tendency to instability and risk of maladjustment under stress.

4. Discussion

Thus, based on the study results we can arrive at the following conclusions.

First, we found that the prison system personnel do possess higher stress endurance characteristics than civilians, and it allows them to properly perform their duties involving extreme and dangerous situations. From the organizational point of view it results from a thorough selection procedures of potential candidates and system of professional and psychological trainings aimed, among other things, at developing substantial stress resistance resources. [7], [8], [15].

Second, the study results indicate that differences in stress resistance or predisposition do not lie so much in the degree of situation's extremity in terms of the number of stressors present as in personality traits and features enabling people to manage negative stress effects. In the framework of this research it is nervous and psychic stability that acts in this capacity and serves as basis for psychological security development at the penal system personal.

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