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Strategies of Coping with Crisis in the Professional Development of Teachers

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ОТ РЕДКОЛЛЕГИИ

Стратегии преодоления кризиса профессионального развития педагогов

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Abstract. This article discusses professional crises and strategies of coping with them. The study was conducted in Yekaterinburg (Russia) and involved 291 secondary school teachers. The teachers wrote psychobiographical essays, which were processed through content analysis methods. As a result, two types of coping strategies were identified: reactive and proactive. Reactive strategies imply taking the initiative rather than merely adjusting to the situation while in proactive strategies defence and adaptation mechanisms prevail. We found that in their professional development teachers switch from reactive to proactive strategies. Reactive

strategies predominate in professional and educational orientation and profession choice crises while proactive ones, in crises of career choice, professional growth, professional expectations and non-normative crises.

Keywords: *professional development; crisis; coping strategies; psychobiographical method; content analysis*

Аннотация. В статье анализируются профессиональные кризисы и стратегии их преодоления. Исследование проводилось в Екатеринбурге (Россия) с участием 291 учителя средней школы. Учителя писали психобиографические эссе, которые обрабатывались методом контент-анализа. В результате были определены два типа копинг-стратегий: реактивный и проактивный. Реактивные стратегии предполагают проявление инициативы, а не просто приспособление к ситуации; в проактивных стратегиях преобладают механизмы защиты и адаптации. В ходе исследования выявлено, что в процессе повышения квалификации учителя переключаются с реактивных стратегий на проактивные. Реактивные стратегии преобладают в кризисах профессиональной и образовательной ориентации и выбора профессии, а проактивные — в кризисах выбора карьеры, профессионального роста, профессиональных ожиданий.

Ключевые слова: *профессиональное развитие; кризис; копинг-стратегии; психобиографический метод; контент-анализ*

Introduction

Recently, the concept of *crisis* has started to be used widely by the public. This concept usually carries negative associations: it creates tension and dissatisfaction and provokes a generally “critical” attitude people.

International psychological studies have paid a great deal of attention to age-related crises, in particular the mid-life crisis (Brim & Kagan, 1980; Halloran, 1985; Keyes & Ryff, 1998; Lang, Staudinger, & Carstensen, 1998; Neupert, Almeida, & Charles, 2007). Crises of professional development are often left outside the research area, since the main emphasis is placed on the process of professional development, its characteristics, and stages. For example, Mark Barnes discusses teachers’ needs in their professional development (Bandhu, 2007); Tom Guskey, the professional development of educators (Guskey, 2000; Guskey & Sparks, 1996) and Helen Timperley, teachers’ professional learning and development (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). In Russian psychology, however, researchers mostly focus on the crises which professionals face in the course of their development (Antsyferova, 1996; Khukhlaeva, 2006; Kuleshova & Strizhickaya, 2008; Kuz’mina, 1990; Markova, 1996; Zeer, 1999).

We define crises of professional development as situations when professional identity, including one’s motives and values, undergoes radical reconsideration while the individual’s professional excellence diminishes. There are two types of crisis in professional development: normative and non-normative. Many authors believe that crisis is a norma-

tive phenomenon. Eric Erikson considered normativity as “turning points, moments of decision between progress and regression, integration and retardation” (1996, p. 23). In his research, L. H. Ginsberg approached all crises as normative ones (Datan & Ginsberg, 2013). L. S. Vygotsky (1984) also described crisis as a normative phenomenon determined by internal and external factors.

Normative crises in professional development coincide with a person's transition from one stage of their professional development to the next. According to E. F. Zeer (1999), normative crises of professional development include crises of professional and educational orientation (optation stage); profession choice (stage of professional training); professional expectations (stage of professional adaptation); professional growth (stage of initial professionalisation); professional career (stage of secondary professionalisation); social and professional self-actualisation (stage of professional excellence); and separation from employment (stage of separation from employment).

These crises are often caused by external factors which disrupt the established routines of daily life. Non-normative crises of professional development can occur at any stage of this process and are usually provoked by accidental or extraordinary events. In cases of multiple non-normative crises, the process of professional development can be more time-consuming because coping with each of these crises requires considerable physical, mental, and temporal resources.

Methodology

The major objective of this study is to describe the strategies teachers use to cope with crises of professional development.

The survey was completed by 291 teachers aged 23–57 from secondary schools in Yekaterinburg. The respondents had a specialised vocational or higher pedagogical education and had opportunities for further training.

To conduct this survey, we applied the stratified sampling method: we randomly chose eight schools from different administrative districts of Yekaterinburg and surveyed all special subject teachers in each school. Since the vast majority of respondents were women, it would be reasonable to extrapolate the conclusions drawn from this survey to this specific category of teachers.

We applied the psychobiographical method to study crises in professional development (Alfred Adler, Gordon Allport, B. G. Ananiev, Charlotte Bühler, Sigmund Freud, N. A. Loginova, V. G. Norakidze, S. L. Rubinshtein, N. A. Rybnikov, etc.). This method is a psychological reflection on person's biographical data: its re-assessment provides a possibility to re-examine a person's professional past and professional development, to define further career trajectories and coping strategies. Thus, it allows a person to “pay attention to life from the angle of self-actualization in one's life acts” (Loginova, 1986, p. 106). To use this method a formalized biographical questionnaire (put forward by V. G. Norakidze (1989) was developed into a psychobiographical essay (Zeer, 1999). The

biography plan includes the following aspects: family background, social and economic life conditions, childhood history, professional development (including gender-based aspects), plans for future. The psychobiographies are later studied by means of content analysis — a method for identifying and assessing specific characteristics of texts. The psychobiographical method shows the dynamics of professional development at every stage and reveals critical periods in this process. As part of the research procedure, the teachers were asked to use this questionnaire to write an essay describing their psychobiographies. The length of the essay had no limit, although the teachers were given two hours to write it.

We processed the data by applying content analysis to find and evaluate specific characteristics of the texts. The texts were approached as personal, informal, primary documents explicitly intended for the purposes of this research. We should emphasise that the format of a free-form essay minimises the impact of the researcher when compared to questionnaires and interviews.

The psychobiographical texts were divided into meaningful units referring to the crises (*category A*) or the ways of coping with them (*category B*); these included evaluative judgements and specific descriptions. Definition of the categories of analysis stemmed from the research purpose and the content of the analyzed texts. On its basis a detailed description of the categories was worked out. Together with that, a coding instruction was elaborated. The following categories were distinguished: A — crises of professional development, B — coping strategies. When working out the coding instruction, subcategories of the first and second order were singled out within these categories. The frequency of occurrence of subcategories was entered into matrices with subsequent expression as a percentage of the total number of selected categories of analysis. Based on the data obtained, a level of expression of the semantic units (which were selected for the study) was determined. The statements were defined into categories and an indicator table for *category A, the type of crisis* was offered (*Table 1*).

Our analysis of the psychobiographies has shown that most often respondents became aware of crises in professional growth (27.6 %), professional and educational orientation (21.5 %), and professional expectations (19 %). The crisis which was identified least frequently was that of profession choice (6.5 %). Non-normative crises tend to be less pronounced (14.7 %), despite the psychogenic tension they create.

The next stage of our research was the study of coping strategies used by teachers. Coping mechanism is a complex multi-faceted phenomenon that is analysed by psychologists from different perspectives: problem — or emotion-focused coping (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980), 13-dimensional scale of coping (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989), etc. The approach offered in the present paper uses the cited theoretical models as guidelines and is developed in relation to coping process in a professional sphere, i.e. strategies of coping with professional crises through analysing the respondents' psychobiographies. We built an indicator table for *category B, ways of coping with the crisis* (*Table 2*).

We created a coding scheme for the category *Strategies of Coping with Crises in the Professional Development of Teachers* (*Table 3*). Within this category, we identified

subcategories of the first and second order. We designed matrices with the frequency of occurrence of the subcategories and calculated their share in the total number of the analysed categories.

Table 1

Indicator table (category A — crises of professional development)

Subcategory of the first order	Indicators
A1 — crises of professional and educational orientation	"Disillusionment" "It was a serious blow" "It came as a total shock" "For me it was a real tragedy, I had suicidal thoughts" "My castles in the air were ruined"
A2 — crises of profession choice	"When I was in my third year, I started to have second thoughts and suffered from anxiety" "A fatal mistake" "I felt that there was a stark contrast" "I started feeling an aversion to biology"
A3 — crises of professional expectations	"I felt hopeless and scared" "I felt that I was going through some kind of crisis" "I felt useless" "I didn't like the job, I experienced physical and mental discomfort" "Another moment of crisis" "Boredom, monotony"
A4 — crises of professional growth	"I felt restless" "A total crisis" "Frequent crises" "I felt that it was not for me" "I had feelings of growing frustration and dissatisfaction" "I was annoyed at how dreary and monotonous it all was"
A5 — crises of professional career	"Creativity crisis" "Nothing to devote my energy to, deadlock" "A feeling of exhaustion" "Went through a crisis" "Lost my professional edge"
A6 — non-normative crisis	"It all collapsed in one moment" "I didn't want to hear or see anybody" "I had this feeling of disaster" "I thought I would never get over this crisis"

Table 2

**Indicators of strategies for coping with professional development crises
(category B — coping strategies)**

Subcategory of the first order B1	
<i>subcategory of the second order (B10–B18)</i>	indicators
B10	“University studies”
	“Studies and advanced training”
	“I enrolled in a course of advanced training”
	“I joined a group of teachers to work in another country”
B11	“Continuing self-education”
	“I passed the attestation assessment for obtaining a qualification category”
	“I passed the assessment”
B12	“I was awarded the category”
	“I was transferred to another school”
B13	“I changed job”
	“Had to switch to teaching another subject”
	“Was promoted to another position that was more satisfying”
B14	“Changed occupation”
	“I learned to see good things in my work”
	“I feel that my job is significant”
	“What’s most important is that children ask me for help or advice; this is where my professional happiness lies”
	“I started to be more realistic about my abilities”
	“A new attitude to myself, my students, and work”
B15	“Passion for work, love for children”
	“I got help from my colleagues”
	“We had a good team and we helped each other a lot”
	“I was lucky to have good advisors”
B16	“I was lucky to have nice colleagues, we helped each other”
	“I was fortunate to have good supervisors, they always helped and supported me”
B17	“Retrained within the same specialisation”
	“Started to work as a teacher”
	“I didn’t like my new position so I returned to the old one”
B18	“I returned to my old position”
	“I accepted a higher position but after working there for some time and improving my expertise I went back to my old place of work”
	“So I quit”
B18	“I changed my career”
	“I decided not to go back to teaching”

Table 2 (continued)

Subcategory of the first order B2	
<i>subcategory of the second order (B20–B25)</i>	indicators
B20	“I became interested in community work”
	“Professional apathy”
B21	“I felt numb and indifferent about everything”
	“The world seemed bleak and monotonous, nothing brought me joy”
	“I couldn’t change anything about my work, everything went on as usual, only I couldn’t care less”
B22	“I dropped out of college and my parents insisted that I became a driver”
	“I followed my mother’s advice and went to the university”
	“The school director offered my a job”
B23	“I chose this college because they provided accommodation”
	“I entered the college by chance because I was too ashamed to return home”
	“I continue doing this work because I have no other options”
B24	“Lady Luck smiled on me”
	“I entered by chance and then I grew to love it”
	“I majored in pre-school education and later realised that I actually liked it”
	“I entered a pedagogical college and it turned out that it was something I actually wanted to do”
B25	“I adapted and became like everyone else”
	“I continued my studies in the field I wasn’t interested in”
	“I felt submerged in the same dreary routine”
	“I gradually became accustomed”
	“I got used to this since there were no other options”
	“I didn’t have anything else I could do at that moment”

Table 3

Coding scheme for the category strategies of coping with crises in the professional development of teachers

Category B — coping strategies	
Subcategories first order (B1, B2)	Subcategories second order (B10–B18, B20–B25)
B1 — proactive	B10 — advanced training;
	B11 — passing attestation assessment;
	B12 — changing employment;
	B13 — finding another job within the same field;
	B14 — revision of life goals, resources, and creation of new scenarios of professional life;
	B15 — asking supervisors and colleagues for assistance;
	B16 — retraining within the same profession;
	B17 — returning to the old job and position;
B2 — reactive	B18 — change of profession
	B20 — self-realisation in extra-professional spheres of life;
	B21 — professional apathy and stagnation;
	B22 — the conflict was resolved because parents, friends, and colleagues insisted on it;
	B23 — finding a compromise which relieved tension but did not solve the problem;
	B24 — adaptation to the situation;
	B25 — the solution was found accidentally and had a positive outcome

Results

As it can be seen from the *Tables 1–3*, professional crisis is not a homogeneous phenomenon, it comprises several types of crises that present the notion of crisis in dynamics. Thus, professional crisis, like any other activity, “represents by itself a complete act, a certain dynamic structure” (Luria, 1960, p. 205). These types of crises were analysed within the framework of coping strategies. We have identified two types of strategies for coping with crises of professional development: reactive and proactive.

Proactive strategies imply that a person actively pursues their goals and takes full responsibility for their decisions and actions. The choice of this strategy demonstrates a person’s psychological maturity. This strategy means that a person tries to handle the crisis in an effective manner.

Reactive strategies, on the contrary, are characterised by a low level of personality integration and by weak and unstable cognitive, emotional, and volitional attitudes (Aseev, 1981). This strategy is dominated by mechanisms of psychological defence and adaptation.

Let us analyse the coping strategies found in the way the respondents dealt with each crisis in their professional development. In the psychobiographies, the *crisis of professional and educational orientations* is most often associated with reactive strategies (93.6 %). The only category that reveals proactive strategies includes text units which demonstrate that the respondents *revised their life goals and resources and built new scenarios of professional life* (6.4 %).

The research showed that 14.5 % of the text units reflected a choice for *compromise solutions which did not eliminate the contradiction but helped the respondents to stop worrying*. It can be concluded that the majority of solutions falling within the reactive strategy type are targeted at relieving tension, not at dealing with the problem itself. Thus, reactive strategies lessen emotional tension but do not resolve the contradictions which provoked the crisis.

Let us now turn to the strategies used by teachers to overcome *crises of profession choice*. For this type of crisis, reactive strategies (66.7 %) still prevail over proactive ones (33.3 %), but they are used less frequently.

Our analysis has shown that the most popular way of coping with such crisis is to *gradually adjust to the situation* (44.7 %). Going through the crisis during professional training, many respondents prefer to get drawn into the daily routines of studying rather than trying to change educational institution or specialisation. In other words, they choose to adapt to the situation; however, some of the respondents preferred to look for other ways. At the same time, 16.7 % of the statements describe an active approach — these people changed their fields of specialisation.

According to the research findings, 11.1 % of the units described *the revision of life goals and available opportunities and the creation of new life scenarios*. Professional self-determination often makes people adjust their career plans and reconsider their ideas about different spheres of specialisation.

Reactive strategies are used to reduce stress by shifting the focus of the person's attention to an extra-professional sphere. Another example of such strategies is a situation where a person allows their parents or friends to talk them into 'taking a specific decision or just waits for the situation to change.

As for *crises in professional expectations*, most of the units corresponded to proactive strategies (79.6 %), while units reflecting reactive strategies accounted for 20.4 %.

The respondents tended to choose *advanced training* (24.1 %) more frequently. Since professional education in Russia focuses on providing students with sufficient theoretical knowledge rather than practical expertise, many specialists at the professional adaptation stage find themselves lacking in professional competence. On the other hand, many of our respondents attend courses of advanced training because they enjoy being students again.

According to the research data, 18.5 % of the units indicate that at the stage of professional adaptation many respondents choose to *seek assistance from their colleagues and supervisors* in order to cope with the crisis.

The study showed that 14.8 % of the units point out the option of *retraining within the same field of specialisation*. This way of overcoming a crisis is characteristic of teachers

with a vocational education since, after finishing a pedagogical college, young specialists start their careers at school by teaching vocational skills courses such as cooking, sewing, metal work, carpentry, and so on.

Another way of dealing with a crisis in professional expectations is *gradual acceptance of professional duties* (13.1 %). Even if a teacher is dissatisfied with their professional activity, they tend to put up with their functions rather than try to change anything or make any big decisions (“I gradually got used to it,” “I became accustomed,” “there was no other way,” and so on).

Changing employment is another statistically significant way of coping with this kind of crisis (11.1 %). Teachers often choose to look for another job because they are dissatisfied with their relationships at work or because their expectations come into conflict with reality.

To address *crises in professional growth*, the vast majority of the teachers resort to proactive strategies (98.8 %). 66.7 % of the text units indicate advanced training as a way of coping with this sort of crisis. Teachers realise their need for professional growth through various advanced training courses and thus raise their educational status.

Another way to cope with such a crisis is *to revise and adjust one's life goals and resources and create alternative scenarios* (5 %). Teachers reconsider their values, ambitions, and resources, define new perspectives, and set new goals.

If career aspirations remain unfulfilled, teachers may consider *changing their current occupation or seeking support from their colleagues*. In certain cases, the respondents view these solutions as temporary and do not rule out the possibility of returning to the previous place of work and their old position. If a person is unable to adapt to a new place or is dissatisfied with their new field of work, they tend *to return to their old duties and routines*.

The only reactive strategy that was mentioned for this type of crisis is gradual acceptance. In this case, teachers generally experience feelings of hopelessness and frustration, lose their motivation for showing initiative, and adopt a passive attitude towards the situation.

Some teachers decide to *change their employment* (5 %) if they feel unfulfilled, do not have promotional opportunities, are dissatisfied with their relationships with co-workers, or are disappointed with their low professional status. They believe that they can overcome all these difficulties if they change the job.

The distribution of reactive and proactive strategies remains the same for crises in professional career. The psychobiographies we analysed did not reveal any reactive strategies, which means that all respondents chose proactive strategies. Due to the psychological characteristics of this crisis, not all teachers are aware of it but their strategies are indicative of psychological maturity.

It was found out that 39.4 % of the units demonstrate that the respondents chose to *undergo attestation assessment* to deal with this variant of crisis. Many teachers associate attestation and the subsequent upgrading of their category with a higher social and professional status. The system of attestation thus satisfies teachers' need for professional development.

Another statistically significant way of coping with this is *advanced training* (27.3 %). Some teachers choose to *master a new profession or specialisation within the same field* (15.2 %): if they are not satisfied with their current occupation, they can seek to learn another one.

The process of coping with the crisis often involves *the revision of life goals and opportunities and the creation of alternative scenarios of professional life* (12.1 %). Teachers point out that their “attitude to themselves and others has changed,” that they can now “see good things in their work,” and that “the crucial thing is that children ask me for help and advice, which is a really rewarding experience!”

Let us now characterise the strategies of coping with *non-normative crises* in professional development. Most of the units in the psychobiographies reveal proactive strategies (83.7 %), while reactive strategies account only for 16.3 %. When dealing with a non-normative crisis, teachers often *try to change the job* (30.2 %) because these crises are accidental.

Some of the respondents reported that they *asked their colleagues and supervisors for assistance* (14 %). It is interesting that help provided by co-workers is often perceived as a sign of good luck: “I was fortunate to have such colleagues, we all helped each other,” “I was lucky to have good supervisors: they always helped and supported me.”

The two other ways of dealing with non-normative crises were *to retrain within the same profession* (11.6 %) or to *change profession* (11 %).

Discussion

There is extensive international (Guskey, 2000; Postholm, 2012; Timperley, 2008) and Russian (Kuzmina, 1990; Markova, 1996; Zeer, 1999) research on teachers’ professional development.

The main emphasis has been placed on professional stress (Austin, Shah, & Muncer, 2005; Jepson & Forrest, 2006), or the emotional burnout of teachers (Babita & Gurmit, 2014; Boyko, 1996; Formanyuk, 1994; Khukhlaeva, 2006; Rosenow, 2013; Tatar & Horenczyk, 2003) and its prevention (Chesnokova & Morozova, 2014).

Crises are essential for professional development. Our research has shown that in the course of their professional development teachers apply reactive and proactive strategies of coping with crises.

At earlier stages, especially in the crises of professional and educational orientation and profession choice, reactive strategies prevail (from 93.6 to 66.7 %). Proactive strategies are more characteristic of later stages: crises of professional career, professional growth, non-normative crises, and crises of professional expectations (from 80 to 100 %). The choice of strategies determines the further trajectory of the teacher’s professional development.

Conclusions

Our findings show that there are two clearly defined strategies for coping with crises in the professional development of teachers: reactive and proactive. We consider this classificatory approach useful to handle professional crises as it encompasses a wide array of psychological aspects in a coping process: psychological maturity and aptitude vs psychological defence and adaptation. In order to reveal strategies to cope with a professional crisis, it was considered from different perspectives: crisis of (1) professional and educational orientations, (2) profession choice, (3) professional expectations, (4) professional growth, (5) non-normative crises in professional development.

The research showed that coping strategies varied according to a type of crisis. Proactive strategies were prevalent for coping with crises of professional expectations, professional growth and non-normative professional crises. Teachers tend to use reactive strategies to deal with crises of professional and educational orientations and profession choice. As it can be seen from the research findings at the initial stage of career development the respondents were less psychologically mature and more dependent on aid and advice from the outside whereas further professional development provided them with greater confidence, psychological aptitude and tools to cope with professional crises effectively and self-dependently.

We hope that our approach to professional crises and coping strategies, their interrelation and dynamics may be useful to study coping processes in other professional communities.

At the same time, our results show that the problem of crises as part of professional development requires further research and specification.

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