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## Sense of Coherence and Stress-Coping Styles in the Group of Maladjusted Youth

**Abstract:** The objective of the article is to answer the question of whether the level of the sense of coherence is linked with stress-coping styles in the group of subjects. It was assumed that in the group of maladjusted youth the sense of coherence would positively correlate with stress-coping strategies based on problem-solving and looking for social contacts, and negatively with strategies based on the display of emotions. The research used the Life Orientation Questionnaire (SOC-29) and the Coping Inventory for Stressful Situations (CISS) Questionnaire. In the group of maladjusted youth, correlation coefficients indicate a moderate, positive relationship of the sense of coherence and its three components: the sense of comprehensibility, the sense of manageability, and the sense of meaningfulness with a task-oriented style. There was also a positive correlation between the general sense of coherence and looking for social contacts. Statistically significant correlation coefficients were also obtained between the emotion-focused style and the general sense of coherence and its three components.

**Key words:** sense of coherence, youth, social maladjustment.

### Introduction

Aaron Antonovsky's concept of salutogenesis should be recognized as important in the area of dealing with stress, according to which a factor necessary to effectively cope with stressors is a high sense of coherence. This is a model of approach to health, which in contrast to the existing common pathogenic model places em-

phasis on the preservation of welfare, and not on the treatment of the disease. The main problem standing at the basis of the its considerations is the question of how it is that, despite the ubiquity of stress factors (risk factors), people remain healthy. The main term in Antonovsky's concept is the *Sense of Coherence* – SoC. The sense of coherence is defined as “the global orientation of humans, expressing the degree to which a person has a strong and durable but dynamic sense of confidence that: stimuli flowing throughout life from the internal and external environment are structured, predictable and explainable. There are resources that will enable them to meet the demands posed by these stimuli, and these requirements are a challenge for them that is worth the effort and commitment” (Antonovsky 1995; Zboralski et al. 2010).

There are three main components of SoC: the sense of comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness. People with a high sense of coherence have the ability to a correct and accurate assessment of the surrounding world. The development of events is not a surprise for them, they do not succumb to fate, in a difficult situation they cope on their own or know where to turn to for help, and who could be their support. They have something in life they care about, that they're interested in, and what they think it is worth getting involved in and worth investing work and effort. Such a person will react to a stressor in an active way and with the belief that the resources they possess are in this situation valuable, effective, and enable them to overcome the difficulties. As a result, their emotions are not extreme and they manage to control them, because the tension does not automatically transform into distress and does not block the mechanism of coping with difficult situations. For this reason, the use of irrational defense mechanisms is rarely seen, and instead a rational attempt to focus on the task at hand is observed. It is worth noting that the sense of coherence has been studied so far mostly in the population of adults (Kasperek-Zimowska, Chądzyńska 2011), and those who are mentally ill (Rynkiewicz-Andryskiewicz et al. 2014). In contrast, there are very few scientific reports describing this variable among socially maladjusted youth. Therefore, the study undertook the problems connected with the sense of coherence from the perspective of the theory of stress and coping with it. Antonovsky felt that the sense of coherence of an individual is a determining factor in the ways of coping with stress. The greater the sense of coherence, the better the person will cope with stress. In this theoretical context, it was assumed that in the group of juveniles, the sense of coherence will be associated with ways of coping with stress chosen by them (Antonovsky 1995). The stress-coping styles were operationalized according to the classification by N.S. Endler and J.D.A. Parker (1992, 1994). This theory stems from an interactive model of Richard Lazarus for understanding a stressful situation (Lazarus 1986). Behavior in a particular situation is the result of mutual interaction between a given situation and the coping style preferred by a person, while this is a conscious action. Lazarus (1993) provides two ways

of coping. The first is focused on the task, on solving the problem, and the second is coping with stress focused on reducing emotional tension. Parker and Endler (1992) joined the third form of behavior in a stressful situation which is avoidance.

## Aim of the study

The purpose of this report is to answer the question of whether the level of the sense of coherence is linked with stress-coping styles in the group of subjects. The results of the research (Płaszkiwicz, Tucholska 2009) conducted in a group of young people (without emotional problems or breaking legal norms) make it possible to formulate research hypotheses on the issues of sense of coherence and related stress-coping styles in the group of maladjusted youth. Therefore, in the group of maladjusted youth the sense of coherence would positively correlate with stress-coping strategies based on problem-solving and looking for social contacts, and negatively with strategies based on the display of emotions. The study also considered:

1. Is the level of the global sense of coherence different in maladjusted adolescents and in the control group?
2. What stress-coping strategies are used by maladjusted youth and youth from the control group?

## Respondents

The study was conducted on a group of 184 teenagers of both sexes, aged 15–19 years old. Two groups of respondents participated in the presented study: 122 people were classified as social misfits, and 62 people were in the control group. The study was conducted in deliberately selected centers for socially maladjusted youth (Youth Educational Center in Goniądz, LOGIZ School Complex in Białystok at the Association of Voluntary Labor Corps, Center for Restorative Justice in Białystok, Youth Center of Therapy and Readaptation ETAP in Białystok, Youth Center of Socioterapy in Goniądz) and in junior high school in Zawady (youth without emotional problems and not breaking legal norms). The selection of the centers was deliberate due to their nature and specificity and due to the charges who were placed in these centers (as a result of behavioral disorders – criminal offenses, demoralization) by the family court or sent at the parents' request and the decision of a psychological and pedagogical clinic due to drug use and emotional disorders.

## Research tools

The sense of coherence (SoC) was tested using the Life Orientation Questionnaire (SoC-29). It consists of 29 statements and three subscales, i.e. the sense of comprehensibility (PZR), manageability (PZ), and meaningfulness (PS). The first scale has 11 statements, the second - 10, and the third - 8. The respondent answers using a 7-point Likert scale, where "1" means that a given attitude is always present, and "7" that it is never present. A general score can also be obtained (SoC-29), i.e. the severity of the sense of coherence in the subject (score within the range 29-203). In questions: 1, 4, 5, 6, 7, 11, 13, 14, 16, 20, 23, 25, and 27 the inverted scale is applied.

The Coping Inventory for Stressful Situations (CISS) Questionnaire contains 48 statements used to determine what stress-coping strategies are chosen by a person in a stressful situation. It makes it possible to measure the three basic stress-coping styles in a stressful situation: 1) the task-oriented style (SSZ) implies purposeful and resolute focus on solving the problem and an attempt to make changes in a situation that is perceived as stressful; 2) the emotional style (SSE) involves emotional responses - preoccupation with oneself, fantasy, self-blame; 3) the avoidance style (SSU) assumes the occurrence of activity focused on avoiding the problem, running away from the problem without attempting to solve it. It can take two forms: there may be an attempt to detach from the stressful situation by undertaking another type of activity, actions (ACZ) or seeking contact with other people (PKT). The respondent indicates on a 5-point scale the frequency with which they take action in difficult, stressful situations.

## The differences in the sense of coherence and stress-coping styles in the study groups

The scores of maladjusted youth in the sense of coherence scale were within the range 56-191 points, with an average of 117.5; additionally, the average of the sense of comprehensibility was 40.3; the sense of manageability - 41.9 points, and the sense of meaningfulness - 35.3 points. The scores obtained by the youth in the control group ranged between 74-167 points. The average overall sense of coherence was 118.1 points, the sense of comprehensibility - 41.7 points, the sense of manageability - 41.7 points, and the sense of meaningfulness - 34.7 points.

In the CISS scale, the average of the scores on stress-coping style was 55.6 points in the group of maladjusted youth, emotional style - 50.7 points, avoidance style - 55.3 points. In the control group the score of the task-oriented style was 53.9 points; emotional - 49.9 points; avoidance style - 51.7 points.

Table 1. The scores of the Life Orientation Questionnaire (SoC-29) and the Coping Inventory for Stressful Situations (CISS) Questionnaire in the maladjusted youth group and the control group

Variables	Maladjusted youth		Control group		Significance of differences	
	mean (M)	SD	mean (M)	SD	t	p
PK (total)	117.56	20.9	118.19	15.74	0.208	0.835
PZR	40.34	9.21	41.74	7.85	1.020	0.309
PZ	41.90	8.42	41.72	7.05	-0.141	0.888
PS	35.31	10.68	34.72	7.23	-0.394	0.694
SSZ	55.68	11.21	53.90	8.53	-1.098	0.274
SSE	50.76	12.75	49.95	11.05	-0.428	0.669
SSU	55.35	10.06	51.79	8.61	-2.377	0.018*
ACZ	25.15	6.34	24.01	5.02	-1.231	0.220
PKT	19.19	3.93	16.85	3.55	-3.939	0.000*

\* statistically significant differences at the level  $p < 0.05$ .

Source: own study.

The t-distribution test for independent samples showed that socially maladjusted youth ( $M = 55.35$ ,  $SD = 10.06$ ) differs significantly from youth in the control group ( $M = 51.79$ ,  $SD = 8.61$ ) in the use of the stress-coping style focused on avoidance;  $t(181) = -2.38$ ;  $p < 0.05$ . The mean in the group of maladjusted youth is statistically significantly higher than in the control group. In addition, the analysis showed that in the group of maladjusted youth, the mean ( $M = 19.19$ ,  $SD = 3.93$ ) associated with searching for contact with other people (PKT) is significantly higher than in the control group ( $M = 16.85$ ;  $SD = 3.55$ ),  $t(181) = -3.94$ ;  $p < 0.05$ . Maladjusted youth tends to use the mentioned stress-coping styles more often than the young people in the control group. There are no statistically significant differences in the sense of coherence (PK) and its constituent components (PAS, PZ, PS) as well as the task-oriented style (SSZ), emotional style (SEZ), and substitute activities (ACZ) between the groups.

## An analysis of the relationship between the sense of coherence and stress-coping styles

The purpose of the correlation analysis is to answer the question of whether the level of the sense of coherence is linked with stress-coping styles in the group of subjects. Table 2 presents the pair correlations between the global sense of coherence and its components as well as the stress-coping strategies.

Table 2. Correlations of the sense of coherence with stress-coping styles

		Maladjusted youth N = 122				Control group N = 62			
		SOC_PK	SOC_PZR	SOC_PZ	SOC_PS	SOC_PK	SOC_PZR	SOC_PZ	SOC_PS
SSZ	rho	.302**	.183*	.248**	.286**	.241	-.114	.337**	.297*
	p	.001	.044	.006	.001	.060	.376	.007	.019
SSE	rho	-.427**	-.300**	-.389**	-.320**	-.332**	-.106	-.309*	-.227
	p	.000	.001	.000	.000	.008	.414	.014	.076
SSU	rho	.075	.048	.059	.033	.001	.070	.098	-.110
	p	.411	.598	.517	.719	.995	.586	.447	.396
ACZ	rho	.045	.145	-.008	-.030	-.029	.013	.038	-.044
	p	.622	.112	.934	.746	.824	.922	.771	.734
PKT	rho	.302*	.183	.248	.286	.161	.184	.198	-.046
	p	.001	.044	.006	.001	.211	.152	.123	.722

\* correlation is significant at the level 0.05 (two-sided); \*\* correlation is significant at the level 0.01 (two-sided).

Source: own study.

In the group of maladjusted youth, the correlation coefficients indicate a moderate positive correlation of the sense of coherence (PK) and its three components: the sense of comprehensibility (PAS), the sense of manageability (PZ), the sense of meaningfulness (PS) with the task-oriented style (SSZ). The correlation coefficients can be interpreted so that the sense of coherence in global and partial dimension combine with the tendency for task-oriented coping in stressful situations. In other words, with the growth of the indicator defining the stress-coping style focused on the task increases the general sense of coherence, which means that both the external and internal environment are coherent, orderly, understandable, cognitively meaningful and structured. The following also increase: the sense of manageability (meaning that the incoming stimuli will be possible to explain and assign to something), the sense of manageability (i.e. belief in self-efficacy, which is sufficient to meet the demands of the stressors), and the sense that life is meaningful and at least some of the demands are worth the effort and commitment.

Statistically significant correlation coefficients were also obtained between the emotion-focused style (SSE) and the general sense of coherence (PK) and its three components: the sense of comprehensibility (PAS), the general sense of manageability (PZ), and the sense of meaningfulness (PS). It is a negative correlation, suggesting that the lower the sense of coherence, both in global and partial terms, the more the coping style preferred in a stressful situation consists in

focusing on oneself and one's own emotional experiences (anger, guilt, tension). Such people may have a tendency to wishful thinking and fantasies, which are intended to reduce the emotional tension associated with the stressful situation. There was also a positive correlation between the general sense of coherence (PK) and seeking contacts (PKT) as a stress-coping strategy. This means that the global sense of coherence is combined with a tendency to avoid stressful situations by seeking social contacts. In analyzing the values of the coefficients it is important to emphasize that none of them exceeded 0.50, which indicates a weak to moderate strength of the relationship between the analyzed variables. It must also be noted that these results are consistent with the study conducted in the group of adolescents by B. Płaczkiwicz and S. Tucholska (2009).

In the control group, the sense of manageability (PZ) and meaningfulness (PS) was significantly positively associated with the task-oriented style (SSZ). In contrast, the style focused on emotions (SSE) was negatively associated with the general sense of coherence (PK) and the sense of manageability (PZ). This means that with an increase of using the task-oriented style by the surveyed youth, the sense of manageability and meaningfulness grows. Regarding the style focused on emotions, it was found that with its lowering the general sense of coherence and the sense of manageability increases. In analyzing their value, it is important to note that none of the coefficients exceeded 0.40, which indicates a moderate strength of the relationship between the analyzed variables. The analysis of other relationships did not show statistical significance between the variables.

## Discussion of the results

Analyzing the data presented in the tables, it can be observed that the comparison of groups using the t-distribution test showed no statistically significant differences between maladjusted youth and the control group in relation to the severity of the sense of coherence and its components. According to the results of the studies, with caution, a thesis can be made about the insufficient impact of the sense of coherence on the formation of the phenomenon of maladjustment. Treating a low level of the sense of coherence as a component affecting maladjustment in light of the results obtained is of great interest. On the one hand, it may indicate a significant influence of other psychological and socio-ecological factors in the origins of maladjustment; on the other hand it shows that the sense of coherence can be used to overcome a variety of difficulties in the context of functioning in the family, school, and peer environment. The disintegration of the family, resulting from the accumulation of socially undesirable characteristics (unemployment, crime, alcoholism, drug addiction, poverty, etc.) (Nowak 2012) can cause a young person brought up in such an environment to activate their resources in order to cope with difficult situations and to overcome adversity. They try to cope with

stress and negative emotions through a variety of behaviors that are socially unacceptable but help them to function in society. Therefore, appropriate educational activities should rely on the activation of resources toward the socially desirable, which may cause the phenomenon of *resilience*, i.e. to give young people the power to strengthen and launch processes that counteract social maladjustment. If we want the measures to be effective, we should provide positive support in the broader social context associated with the support of the individual characteristics of a person, their personal and social competencies (Masten, Obradovic 2006). In view of the results obtained in subsequent studies, it would be legitimate to include socio-ecological factors as variables that may affect the sense of coherence.

The study presented was designed to show the relationship between the stress-coping styles and the sense of coherence in a group of maladjusted youth and a control group. Statistical analysis of the data revealed the existence of co-variableness between the styles of coping with stress measured by the CISS Questionnaire and the global sense of coherence and its components (measured by SoC-29).

It can be stated with caution that staying in prevention and social rehabilitation institutions, as well as care, contact with therapists and educators, have to some extent caused that in the surveyed group the sense of coherence was associated positively with the task-oriented stress-coping style, which consists in the rational assessment of a stressful situation and treating it as a task to solve. Task-oriented strategies for coping with stress include: searching for information needed to solve the problem situation, preparing to take concrete action, analysis of a stressful situation, the acceptance of this situation, awareness of the existence of stressful situations in the future, and trying to change the current situation to a more favorable one. The results show that maladjusted youth avoid the style focused on emotions (SSE) in difficult situations. It can be concluded that with the lowering of the emotional-focused style, the sense of coherence increases, which may mean that maladjusted youth concentrates on their own, negative emotional experiences, i.e. guilt, despondency or anger, but looks for other solutions to difficult and problem situations.

Probably being under the care of educators and therapists, and thus participation of the surveyed group of maladjusted youth in various therapy, social rehabilitation and prevention sessions, was conducive to the formation of the sense of coherence, which was associated with the task-oriented style consisting in a rational assessment of the stressful situation and treating it as a task to solve. Task-oriented strategies for coping with stress include: searching for information needed to solve the problem situation, preparing to take concrete action, analysis of a stressful situation, the acceptance of this situation, awareness of the existence of stressful situations in the future, and trying to change the current situation to a more favorable one.

The results obtained to some extent confirm Antonovsky's thesis (1995), that "a strongly developed sense of coherence motivates a person to act and for ac-



tivity. The internal or external resources are activated, which make it possible to give an opinion about the stimuli coming from the environment, whether they should be assessed as positive or burdensome for the regulatory mechanism, but with the content of challenge. If in the assessment of stressors the challenge dominates, the individual mobilizes itself, their abilities, in order to deal effectively with problems. As a result, the tension does not turn into chronic stress, which consequently will not adversely affect the health, while success will cause development and strengthening of resources”.

## Conclusions

1. The sense of coherence and components (comprehensibility, manageability, meaningfulness) is not significantly different in the compared groups.
2. Socially maladjusted youth is significantly different from the youth in the control group in using stress-coping styles focused on avoidance and the tendency to avoid stressful situations by seeking social contacts.
3. The sense of coherence and stress-coping styles correlate with each other in the group of maladjusted adolescents, and the control group:
  - a) in the group of maladjusted youth the sense of coherence and components (comprehensibility, manageability, meaningfulness) are connected positively with the task-oriented stress-coping style;
  - b) in the control group the sense of manageability (PZ) and meaningfulness (PS) was significantly positively connected with the task-oriented style (SSZ);
  - c) the sense of coherence negatively correlated with the emotional style in both groups.

## Literature

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