Psychological Defense and Safety in the Context of Development of Student's Professional Strategy

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This paper aims to test the training of implementation of student's psychological safety in the context of development of his professional strategy. Research methodology is based on the study of types of student's psychological defense, prevention of their action through awareness, anxiety reduction and empathy development, use of productive ways of psychological safety implementation. The results of the study lead to creation of psychological safety training. Its effectiveness as a technology of student's preparation to self-realization of psychological safety and generation of a psychologically safe environment for interaction with others is experimentally proved. The originality is in substantiation of the loss of identity between defense and safety during the transition from the physical to the psychical level of the problem consideration. Particular significance is given to ways of preventing the actions of psychological defense and technology of psychological safety implementation in the student community, which promote the development of professional strategy and personal basis of its application.

Key words: Psychological safety, psychological defense, student, Training, technology, personality's professional strategy.

In today's world, with accelerated rhythm of life and a large number to dangerous situations, the solution of which requires the involvement of mental, emotional, volitional resources, the need for protectability and safety transits to the next level: from physical to psychical. However, this transition leads to a qualitative change of connection between defense and safety, which on the psychical level (in comparison with physical one) acquires a paradoxical characteristic.

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To prove this let's analyze the following meanings of the word "safety" in Russian dictionaries: 1) (absence of danger; preservation, reliability (Dal, 2001, p. 44); 2) a position in which there is no danger to anyone or anything (Ozhegov, 2010, p. 47); 3) a state in which there is no danger, but defense from danger (Ozhegov, 2010, p. 39); 4) a warning of danger, conditions in which there is no danger (Explanatory …, 2009, p. 71). The analysis of the dictionary definitions shows that different aspects of the notions of safety, expressed in the first of these meanings are disclosed in the following three meanings through such key indicators as the *position*, *state* and *conditions* in which there is no danger. Thus, the safety is fully felt in its opposition to danger and threat. Their absence creates a perception of safety, which may

be expressed in the following formula: "*absence of danger = safety*". In the case of danger the same result is obtained by the presence of defense from danger, so the formula is changed to: "*danger→ defense → safety*".

However, everything changes significantly when applies to psychological safety. It is caused by the fact that one and the same life situation can constructively or destructively affect the psychological safety of direct or indirect participants of the particular event "depending on its reflection, arising experiences, ratio of mental and emotional dominants, further operational or delayed interpretation" (Vardanyan Y. & Vardanyan L., 2013, p. 92). In a situation of collision with psychological threat the human mind automatically runs mechanisms of psychological defense which can temporarily neutralize or minimize this threat. Consequently, psychological defense can be falsely attributed to the factors contributing to the enhancement of psychological safety. In reality psychological defense, which consists of the unconscious regulatory mechanisms, performs dual role toward psychological safety. On the one hand, it allows "to maintain the stability of the personality on the background of destabilizing experiences and achieve a more or less successful adaptation" protecting the psyche from painful feelings and memories, on the other hand – "deprives a person of the possibility to influence the situation actively and eliminate the source of experiences[22] (Great …, 2005, p. 173). All this can distort the perception of reality, prevent from remaking of pychotraumatic experiences, prompt to inappropriate actions, lead to a variety of negative consequences (isolation, feeling of being misunderstood, increasing of the level of anxiety, difficulties in communication, etc.), which becomes a significant obstacle for mastering and implementation of properties of a subject of psychological safety. It becomes necessary to prevent the actions of primitive immature defense reactions and master conscious constructive ways of behavior in this situation. Thus, the problem of studying the psychological defense mechanisms, approaches to solution to which were laid by Freud (1896), continues to attract attention in other aspects: it becomes the actual direction of preventing the activity of factors which reduce the personality's psychological safety, and testing the productive technologies of professional strategy development.

Background and theory

Analysis of the sources shows that psychological safety is considered from different perspectives. Separate researches are devoted to study of information-psychological and socio-psychological safety (Grachev, 2007; Kislyakov, 2011). The psychological safety model proposed by Eksakusto (2010) includes dynamic balance of the subject relations (to the world, oneself and the others), his activity and satisfaction, which correspond to the threatening impact of internal and external world, allowing him to "preserve the integrity, develop oneself, realize one's own goals and values in the process of life Kahn (1990; p232) proved that involved workers exhibited the condition of psychological safety, which "was experienced as feeling able to show and employ one's self without fear of negative consequences to self-image, status, or career" (p. 708). His understanding of psychological safety became the basis for various quantitative studies of communication behavior within professional environment. So, Tynan (2005) found that psychological safety was positively associated with the likelihood that employees would express self-criticism when dealing with supportive leaders so as the likelihood that employees would express disagreement or criticism when dealing with sensitive or supportive leaders. Edmondson (1999) focused on the studying of team psychological safety, defining it as a state of "a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking" (p. 354). More recent studies have proved these initial findings (e.g. Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006) and found additional characteristics of psychological safety in work groups. Psychological safety is supposed to be related to team performance and "can counter the cognitive and interpersonal obstacles that stand in the way of surfacing and engaging different points of view" (Foldy *et al*., 2009, p. 25). These studies provide the development of effective solutions to the problems of psychological safety in social and professional relations.

Baeva (2010), Bedrina (2010) and some other scientists deal with modeling and designing of educational environment in which a personality is claimed and freely functioning, while its members

feel security and basic needs satisfaction. Vdovina (2012) grounded the model of professional-value orientations development, which can be used "as a source of motivatinal and corrective basis of formation of a competence of a subject of psychological safety in the educational environment (p 147) Carmeli and Gittell (2009) proved that shared goals, shared knowledge, and mutual respect foster psychological safety and thus enable organizational members to engage in learning from failures. Siemsen *et al.*, (2009) found that employees' motivation to share knowledge with a coworker was positively correlated with psychological safety and that this relationship was strong when employees felt lack of confidence in the knowledge to be shared. Theoretical analysis of the literature shows that psychological safety of a subject of education (including student) is actively studied from different sides of its manifestations: the possible threats of psychological safety disturbance (Tyrsicova, 2011); mechanisms, factors and conditions of psychological defense (Robinson *et al.,* 2009); methods and technologies of improving the psychological well-being in the process of reducing barriers for students adaptation to study at university (Von Ah, Ebert, Ngamvitro, Park, & Kang, 2004). Ruskina (2013) substantiated the need to create the educational conditions for preparing students - future teachers to the development of psychological safety, which is "carried out in three areas: cognitive, valuable-meaning and competent (p.54). This acquires particular importance due to the presence of "multiple conflicts, stress, communication barriers in the interaction of the participants involved in the educational process" (Kechina, 2013) which lead to mental discomfort, anxiety and social frustration. Exploring the relationship between students' social skills and their well-being Segrin *et al.,*(2007) stated that a deficiency in social skills is associated with an extensive list of psychological problems, such as loneliness, anxiety and depression. Ribeiro *et al.,* (2012) confirm the findings of many scientists that "The first university year represents a period of vulnerability to the development of physical and psychological symptoms" (p. 170).

However, the student's psychological safety in the context of his professional strategy development remains a poorly studied problem.

We understand the psychological safety as the condition of protection from different negative effects of the environment, contributing to satisfaction of the needs of self-realization, communication, self-expression on the basis of acting of the ability to cope with emerging psychological dangers and threats in the process of designing and implementing of the professional strategy. It is a state of harmony that brings satisfaction from mutual relationships with people and contributes to the implementation of professional and personal potential of its subject. For its achievement at the university stage of education it is necessary to do a lot of work to develop the properties of the student as the subject of psychological safety, as well as to master and apply technologies of their development among others. At the Department of Psychology of Mordovian State Pedagogical Institute named after M. E. Evseviev there is the research laboratory "Development of professional competence of teachers and psychologists in the system of continuing education". As Vardanyan and Ruskina (2013) stated, in this laboratory "various ways of creation of competence and subjective basis for the development of psychological safety" were justified and tested (p. 967). However, students' psychological defense, which is formed on the basis of their prior life experience of coping with the crisis psychological situations, helps to minimize the impact of stressful factors without overcoming the difficulties. So it becomes a significant obstacle for mastering and implementing the properties of a subject of psychological safety.

Moreover, in the process of education a student is engaged in different types of practices, during which he establishes real professional relationships with subjects of interaction, giving the start for professional self-realization. So it is necessary to prepare him for awareness of triggered psychological defense mechanisms, their overcoming and implementing of psychological safety. For successful preparation for the practice students are involved in the activity of the studio of development of psychological safety established in the laboratory, which is "aimed at the increasing of experience of relationships building, which neutralize or exclude psychological dangers, threats, risks; mastering and application mechanisms and technologies of implementing

their own psychological safety by students; constructing of psycho-pedagogical support of psychological safety development of subjects of education in future professional activity" (Vardanyan *et al.,* 2013, p. 85).

METHODS

Properties affecting the student's psychological safety in communication are identified by using the following techniques: the level of multi-communicative empathy (Fetiskin, 2009, pp. 153-156); the scale of situational and personal anxiety by Spielberg-Hanin (Diagnostics , 2002, pp. 124-126); typology of psychological defense (Fetiskin, 2009, pp. 444-452). The training was used to prevent the acts of student's psychological defense, reduce anxiety, develop empathy and master the methods of using productive ways of implementing the psychological safety. The statistical significance of the relationship between the level of empathy, level of anxiety (situational and personal) and the types of students' psychological defense before and after the training was identified by using multiple correlation coefficient (coefficient of concordance) W, the significance measure of which was checked using the criterion χ^2 (Sociologist …, 1983).

Data analysis, hypotheses and results

In the years 2011-2014 we carried out a study of types of psychological defense mechanisms. 143 students of different specialties and training directions took part in it. On the basis of self-assessment data it is revealed that the majority of the examined students reported a high frequency of actuation of various combinations of almost all psychological defense mechanisms: negation, reactive formations, regression, compensation (14%); suppression, substitution, projection (12.6%); intellectualization (10.5%). The effect of these mechanisms is negatively reflected on relationships with others. Having difficulties in interpersonal relationships students become more vulnerable, less defended, and experience a decline of conflict resistance. It is found that today's students may experience the manipulative influence from other people (in high school - classmates, teachers, etc., in the places of practice - children, tutors, etc.) without even realizing it. Without special preparation for identifying and solving such problems it is difficult for them to find a constructive way out of such situations. All this leads to the problems in the relationships with others. This increases the vulnerability, reduces the security and conflict resistance, raises the possibility to feel loneliness, fear of being misunderstood, and becomes a significant obstacle to the mastering and implementation of the properties of a subject of psychological safety. This determines the relevance of development of student's psychological safety since the first year of education.

To substantiate the constructive ways of the problem solution in February-March 2014 was organized the work with a group of 25 freshmen getting the psychological-pedagogical education, who were to practice in pre-school educational institutions. The study examined the properties affecting psychological safety of students in communication and tested the training of psychological safety in the context of development

Table 1. Students' representation of their own type of psychological defense

Type of psychological defense	Number of respondents (in %)			
	Before the training	Changes after the training Diminution	Increase	Without changes
Negation	20	12	4	8
Displacement	12	8	-	4
Regression	12	8	4	4
Compensation	16	8	8	8
Projection	16	8	-	4
Substitution	12	4	4	8
Intellectualization	16	4	4	12
Reactive formations	20	12	4	8

of personality's professional strategy. 92 % of the students demonstrated normal level of empathy trends, 8 % - high level; 76% of students demonstrated moderate level of situational anxiety, 24% - high level; 56% of students demonstrated high level of personal anxiety, 44% - moderate level. A significant part of students have a high level of actuation of combinations of different types of psychological defense: more often we see reactive formations and negation (20%), equally - compensation, intellectualization and projection (16%), more rarely - regression, substitution, displacement (12%). Thus, the majority of examined students are poorly prepared for the self-realization of psychological safety and its provision for others.

After the data analysis, the following hypothesis were suggested: the more adequate is the level of empathy, the more like that a student will be able to feel and recognize different negative impacts of surrounding people; the less a student feels other people, the more difficult for him is to determine their true intentions; the more adequate is the correlation between the level of anxiety and the situation of interaction, the more defended a student feels himself; the higher is the frequency of operating of psychological defense mechanisms and lower is the level of their awareness, the more they hinder the realization of psychological safety.

To verify the validity of these assumptions on the basis of student studio at the lab the program of training was worked out and tested. This training aims at solution of a number of tasks: to optimize the levels of empathy, situational and personal anxiety, enhance the adequacy of their manifestation in different situations; realize the psychological defense mechanisms, learn how to minimize their actions; recognize the psychological defense mechanisms in the behavior of other people, behave oneself adequately in interaction with them; master the skills of non-conflict behavior and organization of psychological safety of the others (including pre-school children). The training program consists of four parts:

1)　"Psychological safety and communication with adults". Used for group cohesion, creating a trusty communication, training the skills for establishing and maintaining the contact.

2)　"Psychological safety and manipulative interactions". Most of the time is given to work on recognizing and using of constructive defense against manipulative influences: the set of manipulative methods and techniques is highlighted; the signs by which one can recognize the typical characteristics of manipulation are determined; the ways of neutralizing the manipulative influence in such situations are substantiated.

3)　"Psychological safety and psychological defense mechanisms". Train the skill of recognizing the psychological defense mechanisms and further neutralizing their action on the basis of awareness.

4)　"Psychological safety and communication with pre-school children". Aims to master the skills to implement not only ones own psychological safety, but also pre-school children's during interaction with them: the development of empathy in relation to children, understanding and prediction of their desires and actions, the ability to prevent possible difficulties in communication with them. This part helps to reduce the students' anxiety before the practice; form thoughtful and serious approach to work with pre-school children.

After the training the changes of initially studied characteristics were studied. It is revealed that 76% of students demonstrated normal level of empathy, 24% - high, i.e. most of the students (84%) demonstrated the same (normal or high) level, and 16% heightened their previous results. It provides the adequacy of the perception of other people in the situation of communication and facilitates the timely recognition of the interlocutor's psychological threats. 76% of students participated in the training demonstrated moderate level of situational anxiety, 12% - high and 12% - low, i.e. 76% demonstrated the same (moderate or high) level, 12% decreased it from moderate to low, 12% - from high to moderate. 72% demonstrated moderate level of personal anxiety, 16% - high, 12% - low, i.e. 48% remained unchanged, 40% decreased the level from high to moderate and 12% - from moderate to low. Students' representation of frequency of actuating of various psychological defense mechanisms changed (towards increase

or diminution) for each of the mechanisms: negation and reactive formations – in 16%; regression – in 12%; displacement, compensation, intellectualization, projection, and substitution - in 8%.

Thus, the data indicate that the significant part of the students who participated in the training, have the unstable state of the system of psychological defense mechanisms. More changes were made to such types of psychological defense as negation, compensation and reactive formations; then - regression; the least - displacement, projection, substitution and intellectualization. 8 % of the respondents demonstrated the increase of the frequency of operating of such type as compensation, 4% of students demonstrated the increase of the rest of the mechanisms (except displacement and projection, according to which the increase has not been found). Thus, the students who participated in the training, master the knowledge of the effects of various psychological defense mechanisms and how they are significant in the life of every person. The system of their psychological defense mechanisms is destabilized. It is brought to an unstable state, becomes more flexible and ductile, and as a consequence, more able to be corrected. This creates a need for further work with students in the direction of building a new more constructive system of conscious behavior by developing their psychological safety The research data help to study the statistically significance of the connection between the level of empathy, level of anxiety (situational and personal) and the types of students' psychological defense before and after the communicative training. Using the multiple correlation coefficient (coefficient of concordance) W we found that the connection between the studied data, the importance of measure of which has been tested using the criterion χ^2, is absent before the training, and after this training is expressed by a one percent significance level. All this allows to formulate the conclusion that at the result of participation in the training students have the knowledge and skills to recognize and take into account the manipulative impact, possible threats, psychological defense mechanisms; to understand their importance in human life and behave oneself adequate. The process of optimizing the levels of empathy and

anxiety began to operate. The system of students' psychological defense has been brought to an unstable state and became more flexible and able to be corrected.

To improve the results obtained in the course of training, the post-training support was performed. It was implemented on the basis of psychological studio through individual consultations of participants, development of recommendations for recognizing the features of acting of psychological defense mechanisms, etc. The possibility of creation of a virtual resource as a promising direction of psychological studio activity to share with new information of psychological safety, express one's thoughts and ideas, discuss topics is examined. The process of development and implementation of new training programs aimed at stabilization and further improvement of the obtained results is started.

CONCLUSION

During the transition from physical to psychical level of defense and safety consideration there is the paradox of diminution of their identity. The effects of psychological defense mechanisms in the context of professional strategy development can reduce the adequacy of behavior, so it is necessary to aware them and master some new ways of safe behavior. Psychological safety is considered from different perspectives: from the studying in the context of life safety to specifying its nature, structure, influencing factors, subjective and competent conditionality in different educational and professional contexts and situations.

In the course of activity in student studio of development of psychological safety there is an increase of psychological awareness of problems and ways to its solution; becoming of psychological competence of the subject of psychological safety in education and self-education; prevalence of valuable-meaning behavior regulation; learning and active use of technologies of psychological safety development by students. Student studio should neutralize the prior destructive system of personality's psychological defense and build a new, more flexible and constructive system of behavior, which is adequate in different sorts of real situations.

Students participation in the developed training promotes the development of properties of a subject of psychological safety, who feels protected; knows how to express one's feelings, moods and desires; possesses the skills of social communication, interaction and perception, teamwork skills; is ready to prevent and overcome internal and external negative influences, hazards, risks, threats, and is also able to respond to them in a plastic, mobile and effective way; is able to resist the negative effects of the social environment; freely and optimally subjective implements one's own psychological safety.

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