
THE RELIGIOUS CONTEXT OF HUMANISTIC SPIRITUAL AND MORAL VALUES AS A FACTOR IN COUNTERACTING SELF-DESTRUCTIVE TENDENCIES IN STUDENT BEHAVIOUR

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Abstract

Neglect of spiritual and moral values and orientations, destruction and loss of reference points that illuminate the life perspectives for the individual, contribute to the spread of self-destructive attitudes in society. The paper aims to give a theoretical justification and provide an experimental study of religious and humanistic spiritual and moral values as a factor in opposing self-destructive tendencies in student behaviour. The authors analyse the problem of the influence of religion, religious outlook and religious humanistic spiritual and moral values as a factor in countering self-destructive behaviour of an individual. Due to its anti-self-destructive influence, religion is rightly considered one of the most important regulators of a person's attitude towards suicide. In many countries of the world, religious and cultural traditions associated with the attitude towards the phenomenon of suicide play a huge role in regulating the level of suicidal activity. During the theoretical and empirical stages of the research, the authors found that religiousness is a significant factor in counteracting self-destructiveness in student behaviour.

Keywords: religion, values, self-destructiveness, behaviour, suicide

1. Introduction

The transformation processes taking place in modern society and signifying a transition to a new model of development are accompanied by a deep spiritual crisis that covers all spheres of society. Today, society is in a state of value-regulatory disintegration, when old norms and values no longer correspond to real relationships and new ones have not yet been established. In such conditions, a

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young person finds themselves in a difficult situation of choosing values, priorities and means of adaptation.

In modern conditions, self-destructive behaviour is becoming widespread. It is no coincidence that cases of youth drug and alcohol abuse, as well as risky and suicidal behaviour, are not uncommon. Of particular importance is the solution of these problems in the context of preparing a future professional who is capable of self-realization. The self-destructive behaviour of young people in the changing modern conditions necessitates special preventive work.

The purpose of the study is the theoretical justification and experimental study of religious and humanistic spiritual and moral values as a factor in countering self-destructiveness in student behaviour. The search for the meaning of life plays a decisive role in the formation of life strategies, hierarchy of values, and spiritual self-realization of the individual. Viability in standing against life's troubles creates the conditions for the search for new strategies for solving life problems, as well as the search for new life meanings.

As hypothesis of the study, the introduction of humanistic and religious spiritual and moral values into the youth consciousness is one of the conditions for preventing self-destructive behaviour of the student youth.

2. Methods

The following methods were used in the research:

- analysis of the scientific literature on the problem of self-destructive behaviour and the possibilities of counteracting it,
- empirical methods.

In accordance with the purpose of the study, we selected a set of methods for an empirical study of the level of self-destructive behaviour and religiousness among students:

- diagnostic methods: the methodology for studying the susceptibility to victim behaviour by V.A. Andronnikova [1], the 'Auto- and hetero-aggressive behavior' questionnaire by E.P. Ilyin [2], the test for determining the structure of individual religiosity by Y.V. Scherbatykh [3];
- the conversation method;
- statistical and mathematical methods of data processing (analysis of variance using MS Excel).

The sample group for the study consisted of 302 students of higher education institutions aged from 17 to 28, who were divided into groups according to gender, age, organizational and professional characteristics:

- by gender: 67.1% women, 32.9% men;
- by age: 1) 17-18 years (27.2%), 2) 19-20 years (36.1%), 3) 21-25 years (19.0%), 4) older than 25 years (17.7 %);
- by year of study: 1) 1st year (40.7%), 2) 2nd year (30.0%), 3) 4th year (8.7%), 4) 1st year students getting a second degree (20.6%);
- by field of study: Humanities (70.0%) and Technical sciences (30.0%);
- by residence area: city residents (89.3%) and rural residents (10.7%).

3. Results

3.1. Results of the analysis of scientific literature

Considering the concept of self-destructiveness, it should be noted that the terms most often used in research published in English are ‘self-destructive behaviour’ [4, 5], ‘self-injurious behaviour’ [6-8] and ‘self-aggressive behaviour’ [9, 10], which are often used interchangeably in Russian literature and include a variety of self-destructive actions: from mild non-suicidal forms to acts that can result in serious injuries or disabilities and completed suicides.

Analysis of various sources shows that for a long time, only such phenomena as suicides, parasuicides and suicidal thoughts were attributed to self-destructive behaviour. Non-suicidal manifestations of self-destructive behaviour were attributed to situationally determined self-destruction [11-13]. Only later did the concept of self-destructive behaviour expand and acquire its modern meaning. Now it also includes self-deprecation, self-accusation, feeling of anger, disgust or loathing towards oneself (psychological self-destruction); real actions that cause pain, suffering and pose a threat to one’s life (physical self-destruction); implicit self-destructive actions of various types (alcoholism, drug addiction, overeating or anorexia, risky sexual behaviour, traumatic sports, provocative behaviour, etc.) [14].

Having performed a theoretical analysis of the literature, we found several approaches to the study of the problem of self-destructive behaviour of a person: the psychoanalytic approach (self-destructive behaviour as a result of the complex interaction of the life instinct with the death instinct) [15], the humanistic approach (the solution of the existential contradiction depends on the form of appearance, direction, consciousness) [16], the phenomenological approach (a self-destructing act is seen as the only way to solve all problems) [17, 18], the cognitive approach (self-destructive behaviour as a result of cognitive distortion), the acmeological approach (self-destructive behaviour as a troublesome personality complex) [19].

Analysis of the age characteristics of student youth indicates that its self-destructive behaviour acquires specific forms of manifestation due to the specific characteristics of this age period. Most of modern students fall into the age range from 17-18 to 23-25 years, which I. Kon refers to as the period of early youth and early adulthood (late youth). During this period, a person’s value formation takes place, together with the projection of the search for the main ways of self-realization to other age stages [20]. The inability to solve or difficulties in solving important problems of this age period results in the loss of the meaning of life, constant stress, psychological difficulties in the educational process, which young people indicate as the cause of self-destructive behaviour. It has been determined that such types of self-destructiveness as tattoos, piercing, branding, scarification are typical for student age along with more dangerous ones, like alcoholism, drug addiction, tobacco smoking, high-risk sports, Toad’s syndrome (‘addiction to joyriding’), unregulated medication, anorexia and abuse of a number of medical interventions for the

sake of improving one’s physical appearance or, lastly, suicide. The latter is the most dangerous form of self-destructive behaviour [21].

3.2. Results of the empirical research

Diagnostic results received using the method of studying the tendency to victim behaviour by V.A. Andronnikova [1] are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Diagnostic results received using the method of studying the tendency to victim behaviour by V.A. Andronnikova.

Tendency on a scale	%		
	Above norm	Norm	Below norm
Aggressive victimization behaviour	27.8	26.7	45.5
Self-harming/self-destructive behaviour	26.4	23.6	50
Hypersocial behaviour	28.9	23.2	47.9
Dependent/helpless behaviour	32.6	22.6	44.8
Non-critical behaviour	34.8	23.3	41.9
Realized victimization	27.8	28.2	44

Diagnostic results received using the questionnaire by E.P. Ilyina ‘Auto- and hetero-aggression’ [2] are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Diagnostic results received using the questionnaire by E.P. Ilyina ‘Auto- and hetero-aggression’.

No.	Scale	%
1.	Auto-aggressive behaviour (aggression directed at oneself)	31.6
2.	Hetero-aggressive behaviour (aggression directed at others)	68.4

Thus, at the first stage of the empirical study, according to the diagnostic data, we summarized the distribution of the students according to the level of self-destructive behaviour (Table 3).

Table 3. Distribution of the students participating in the study by the level of self-destructive behaviour.

Level of self-destructive behaviour	Number of participants (%)
low	45.7
medium	24.6
high	29.7

As results from Table 1, almost a third of the students (29.7%) showed a high level of self-destructive behaviour, while a fourth of the participants demonstrated a medium level of self-destructiveness (24.6%) and less than half of the young people had a low level of inclination towards self-destructive behaviour.

At the same time, according to the results of the analysis of variance, we discovered the level of inclination towards self-destructive behaviour among the students depending on their gender. The level of inclination towards self-destructive behaviour was higher among the female participants of the study than among the male participants ($p < 0.05$). We found that the level of inclination towards self-destructive behaviour in women depended on the place of residence, being higher among the residents of rural areas, whereas in men, this factor did not affect the tendency towards self-destructive behaviour ($p < 0.01$). It was shown that women of the technical profile of education and men of the humanitarian profile of education had higher rates of inclination towards self-destructive behaviour compared to female students studying humanities and male students majoring in technical sciences ($p < 0.05$). It was established that with age, the inclination to self-destructive behaviour decreased (at a trend level, $p = 0.1$). The first-year students showed high rates of self-destructive behaviour ($p < 0.01$).

At the second stage of empirical research, based on the results of the analysis of variance, we investigated the influence of religiousness and the presence of religious spiritual and moral values on the predisposition of the students to self-destructive behaviour. We found that with an increase in the level of religiousness, the tendency to self-destructive behaviour among the young people decreased (differences at a trend level, $p = 0.1$).

4. Discussion

The results achieved in the study can be explained through an analysis of a conversation with religious students. We have not identified participants with severe self-destructive, including suicidal, tendencies, among the religious students (those who called themselves religious). Thus, 73.27% of the respondents who called themselves religious expressed a very negative attitude to the phenomenon of suicide, explaining it as ‘the greatest sin against God’, ‘weakness of spirit’, a manifestation of recklessness (‘only crazy people would be able to do that!’). The rest 26.73% showed less pronounced negativity, saying that ‘you can’t do that’ and ‘I would never do that to myself’.

Among the non-religious students (the students who identified as non-religious), the majority (68.72%) also expressed negative attitude to suicide, while appealing not to God, but to the mind. 12.77% of the non-religious students tried to justify suicide, and 18.51% expressed an indifferent attitude to it.

The results of the conversation generally confirm the thought of E. Durkheim who stated that religion possessed an inexhaustible anti-suicidal potential, which by force exceeded the influence of all other factors [22].

Thus, as shown by the results of the study, religious faith and religious world view have a powerful influence on human consciousness and serve as one of the most important regulators of a person’s attitude towards self-destructive behaviour. At the same time, in the current situation, when almost a third of students demonstrate a high level of self-destructiveness, restraining the growth of

student deviations and increasing the effectiveness of preventive measures become the most pressing and socially significant issues. However, according to the student participants, the efforts made in this respect in higher education institutions fall more within the framework of educational than psychological prevention. This work, according to the respondents, is aimed rather at providing information and imposing restrictions, whereas universities hardly take any real psychological and preventive measures.

In our opinion, a psychologist working in the education system should show sufficient attention to reducing the scale of self-destruction. To do this, psychologists need methodological support, which includes an algorithm for preventive actions. In general, we believe that it is advisable to carry out preventive measures to reduce self-destructive behaviour among students in several stages:

1. Identification of risk groups in terms of inclination towards self-destructive behaviour. At this stage, we find it advisable to perform an examination of students using a complex of selected techniques.
2. At the second stage of prevention, according to the results of diagnostics of the previous stage, one should identify the population of students who showed signs of self-destructive behaviour during the study. First, the psychologist meets them in person and starts working with them individually. This stage helps establish a sense of trust and identify the psychological problems of the young person. This creates motivation for further psychological training.
3. At the third stage, the prevention program activities and psychological training are carried out.

Prevention programs should be aimed at working not with the consequences, but rather with the causes of self-destructive behaviour. This work should be carried out in advance to the development of adverse episodes and should strive to establish control over the situation. One needs to work with cultural and social stereotypes in students' thinking and behaviour. The main goal of prevention of self-destructive behaviour among young people is the formation of a mentally healthy person through various training courses, psychological counselling, the propaganda of various ways of a healthy lifestyle and organization of recreational activities. It is necessary to note the importance of creating a single program, the purpose of which will be spiritual and physical education, starting with the first-years and ending with 22-25-year-old students who are obtaining a second degree.

Therefore, we consider it appropriate to review the conditions for preventing self-destructive behaviour among students at the macro level (society level), meso level (university level) and micro level (personality level).

At the macro level, preventive work with auto-aggressive behaviour should be aimed at creating a negative image of public opinion in relation to any types of self-destructive behaviour, especially through the mass media and social advertising in the context of the formation of youth's attitudes to a healthy

lifestyle. It should include special programs featuring celebrities popular among young people promoting healthy lifestyle choices, etc.

At the meso level, preventive work with self-destructive behaviour involves the introduction of educational and psychological activity programs in higher education institutions (lectures aimed at shaping attitudes towards a healthy lifestyle, recreational physical culture and sports activities, organization of assertive behaviour or personal growth training sessions, etc.).

At the micro level, preventive work with self-destructive behaviour should be aimed at helping young people understand their own stereotypes of thinking and behaviour, their own interests and needs, their feelings and emotions, themselves. This can be provided, in particular, in the process of psychological counselling.

This approach will help prevent the self-destructive behaviour of students. We propose a program of socio-psychological training to prevent the self-destructive behaviour of students. The goals of socio-psychological training aimed at levelling self-destructive behaviour by reducing the level of victimization and auto-aggression are:

- raising the level of knowledge about the causes of self-destructive behaviour,
- emotional regulation of victim behaviour,
- formation of skills of anti-auto-aggressive behaviour.

In determining the content of the program to prevent self-destructive behaviour among students, work on the prevention should be carried out according to the following components:

- cognitive, which provides for the promotion of students' awareness of the causes of the tendency towards self-destructive behaviour, the formation of their proper life values and meanings, etc.;
- affective, which is aimed at reducing anxiety, actualizing the need for self-knowledge, self-development, self-regulation and self-control;
- behavioural, which includes the formation of assertive behaviour skills, effective communication techniques, etc.

The training program is designed for 75 hours (including 60 hours of classroom activities and 15 hours of independent work) and consists of four interrelated training modules. Each module provides for the use of both individual and group forms of work.

The first module entitled 'Preparation. Learning relaxation techniques' is aimed at creating a favourable atmosphere in a group of participants, determining priorities, reducing anxiety and emotional instability, creating a positive attitude towards oneself, mastering methods of self-relaxation.

The second module entitled 'Adequate ways of expressing aggression' allows students to explore their own motives for aggressive and self-destructive behaviour, reduce feelings of guilt and resentment and create positive thinking that further develops assertive behaviour.

The third module entitled 'Life values and the meaning of life' is aimed at the formation of healthy lifestyle values, humanistic, spiritual life values, defining one's purpose in life, etc.

The fourth module entitled ‘Assertive behaviour skills’ provides assistance in shaping assertive behaviour, reducing behaviour rigidity, mastering effective communication techniques, developing the ability to plan one’s actions and life in general based on self-understanding and the desire for self-creation.

5. Conclusions

According to the results of the study, it can be concluded that the goal set in the study has been achieved.

The life practice of more than one generation proves that the discovery of spiritual potential in oneself, inner union with God fills a person’s life with true meaning and helps to overcome frustration states favourable for self-destructive behaviour. By identifying oneself with God, one improves their own self, undergoes moral development and contributes to the moral growth of the society in which they live, paving the way for universal spiritual development and unity. Underlining the instability of material earthly values, religion focuses on the true humanistic meanings of being. This, in our opinion, serves as a reliable psychological barrier in relation to self-destructive settings of morally desperate individuals.

As the results of the empirical study have shown, one of the conditions for the prevention of self-destructive behaviour among students is the introduction of humanistic and religious spiritual and moral values into the consciousness of the youth.

Psychological prevention of self-destructive behaviour among students is an extremely difficult and painful issue for the present, which should be solved at the level of the whole society. At the same time, the effectiveness of psychological prevention of self-destructive behaviour using the potential of religious faith should be systematic and complex, based on the religious interpretation of life as the highest human value, orientation to the highest humanistic and religious spiritual and moral values of existence.

The data obtained in the study do not exhaust all aspects of the problem under study. We find it promising to further specify the content of the proposed training program, as well as to study the psychological specifics and conditions for preventing various forms of self-destructive behaviour of students, studying the psychological readiness of practical psychologists and university professors to prevent self-destructive behaviour among students.

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