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Kateryna Favorova, Candidate of Psychological Sciences (Ph.D.), Associate Professor, Department of Psychology, National Aerospace University "Kharkiv Aviation Institute". Kharkiv, Ukraine.

E-mail: ekavorova@gmail.com

ORCID 0000-0003-0921-6281

Psychological Mechanisms of Individual Adaptation to Chronic Stress under Conditions of Social Instability

Abstract:

This article is devoted to a theoretical analysis of the psychological mechanisms of individual adaptation to chronic stress under conditions of social instability caused by contemporary socio-political and economic processes. The relevance of the study is determined by the need for a systematic understanding of adaptation processes under the prolonged influence of stressors. The research problem is associated with the absence of an integral theoretical model that would allow adaptation to chronic stress to be considered as an integrative psychological process. The scientific novelty of the study lies in the theoretical reconstruction of adaptation as a multilevel system of interrelated cognitive, emotional and behavioural mechanisms. The object of the study is the processes of individual adaptation to chronic stress. The subject of the study is the psychological mechanisms of this adaptation under conditions of social instability. The aim of the work is to identify, systematise and theoretically substantiate the psychological mechanisms of individual adaptation to chronic stress. The methodological basis of the study consists of methods of theoretical analysis, generalisation, classification and comparative analysis of psychological concepts. The theoretical framework of the study is based on the works of Hans Selye, Richard Lazarus and Ann Masten. As a result of the study of the material on this topic, it has been established that individual adaptation to chronic stress is a multilevel process that includes cognitive mechanisms, such as reappraisal and interpretation of the situation; emotional mechanisms, such as regulation of emotional states; and behavioural mechanisms, such as coping strategies. It is shown that the interaction of these mechanisms ensures the stability of the mental system under conditions of prolonged stress. It is substantiated that psychological resilience acts as an integrative factor ensuring the coherence of adaptation processes. The article concludes that adaptation to chronic stress should be considered as a systemic multilevel process rather than as a set of separate reactions. The results obtained clarify existing theoretical models of adaptation and expand their interpretative potential. The practical significance of the study lies in the possibility of applying its conclusions in psychological counselling, educational programmes and social practice.

Keywords: psychological adaptation, chronic stress, social instability, coping strategies, psychological resilience, resilience, emotional regulation, cognitive mechanisms.

Introduction

In the context of contemporary social instability caused by economic, political and military transformations, the problem of individual adaptation to chronic stress acquires particular scholarly

significance. Prolonged exposure to stressogenic factors generates persistent psycho-emotional tension, which requires not only situational responses but also complex mechanisms of psychological adaptation that ensure the preservation of an individual's internal stability.

Contemporary research in the psychology of stress demonstrates considerable attention to the study of coping strategies, emotional regulation and psychological resilience. The works of Hans Selye (1976), Richard Lazarus (1984) and Ann Masten (2001) reveal key aspects of stress responses and coping mechanisms. However, existing approaches predominantly consider adaptation either through separate psychological components or through specific models of response to stress.

In this regard, a research gap can be identified, namely the absence of a holistic theoretical model that would make it possible to interpret individual adaptation to chronic stress as an integrative multilevel process comprising interrelated cognitive, emotional and behavioural mechanisms.

The scientific novelty of the study lies in the systematisation and theoretical substantiation of adaptation as a complex psychological system within which different mechanisms function not in isolation, but in interaction, thereby ensuring individual resilience under conditions of prolonged stress.

The research question is formulated as follows: how exactly do psychological mechanisms ensure individual adaptation to chronic stress under conditions of social instability?

The object of the study is the processes of individual adaptation under conditions of chronic stress, while the subject is the psychological mechanisms that ensure this adaptation.

The study aims to identify, systematise and theoretically substantiate the psychological mechanisms of individual adaptation to chronic stress.

To achieve this aim, the following objectives have been defined:

- to analyse theoretical approaches to understanding chronic stress and individual adaptation;
- to clarify the conceptual field of the key categories of the study;
- to identify and classify the psychological mechanisms of adaptation;
- to systematise coping strategies under conditions of social instability;
- to interpret adaptation as an integrative psychological process.

The theoretical significance of the study lies in clarifying the conceptual apparatus of the psychology of stress and in developing an interpretative model of adaptation as a systemic process.

The practical significance of the study consists in the possibility of applying the results obtained in psychological counselling, educational programmes for training specialists in the helping professions, and the development of adaptation strategies under conditions of social instability.

The results of the study are addressed to psychologists, researchers, specialists in social work and interpersonal interaction, and may also be used in further scholarly research.

Methods

The study has a theoretical and analytical design and is aimed at a systemic understanding of the psychological mechanisms of individual adaptation to chronic stress under conditions of social instability. Within this approach, adaptation is considered as a complex multilevel process requiring the integration of various theoretical models and conceptual approaches.

The research material consists of scholarly publications in the field of stress psychology, coping theory, and studies of psychological resilience. The analysis is based on the works of classical and contemporary authors, including Hans Selye (1976), Richard Lazarus (1984) and Ann Masten (2001), which makes it possible to ensure continuity in scholarly analysis and to situate the study within the current academic discourse.

The criteria for selecting sources included the theoretical significance of the works, their contribution to developing the problems of stress and adaptation, and their representativeness for various areas of contemporary psychological science. The analysis includes studies reflecting both classical concepts and contemporary interpretations of adaptation processes. The limitations of the material are related to the focus on theoretical sources and the absence of empirical data within the framework of the study.

The chronological scope of the study covers the development of stress theory from the classical works of the mid-20th century to contemporary research, which makes it possible to trace the evolution of scholarly views on adaptation mechanisms.

The analytical procedure involves the sequential application of theoretical analysis, comparative analysis and the systematisation of scholarly data. At the first stage, existing approaches to understanding stress and adaptation are analysed and generalised. At the second stage, different concepts are comparatively examined in order to identify their similarities and differences. At the third stage, the psychological mechanisms of adaptation are classified and integrated into a unified theoretical model.

The methodology of the study includes general scientific methods, such as analysis, synthesis, generalisation and classification, as well as specialised methods, namely comparative and interpretative analysis. This corresponds to the theoretical nature of the work and makes it possible to identify the structural and functional characteristics of adaptation processes.

The validity of the study is ensured by reliance on recognised scholarly concepts, the systematic comparison of different theoretical approaches, and the logical consistency of the stages of analysis. Reliability is achieved through the consistent application of the selected methods and the transparency of the research procedure.

The limitations of the study are associated with its theoretical nature and the absence of empirical testing of the proposed model, which defines the prospects for further research aimed at its empirical verification.

Literature Review

The contemporary research field of the psychology of stress and adaptation is characterised by considerable diversity of theoretical approaches, which may be conventionally divided into several key methodological strands: the physiological, cognitive-appraisal, coping-resource, emotion-regulatory, resilience-oriented and socio-ecological lines of research. Each of these directions contributes to the understanding of individual adaptation to chronic stress, while at the same time demonstrating certain limitations when considered in isolation.

The classical physiological strand, represented by the works of Selye (1976), considers stress primarily as a physiological response of the organism to external influences, emphasising the universality of stress processes and their biological determination. This approach laid the foundation for further research by conceptualising stress as a general adaptive response. However,

its limitations are manifested in its insufficient consideration of psychological, social and cognitive factors that influence individual adaptation. The further development of this line can be observed in McEwen's work on the physiology and neurobiology of stress, which demonstrates that stress and adaptation are associated with complex neurobiological processes affecting cognition, emotion and behaviour (McEwen, 2007). This perspective makes it possible to understand chronic stress not only as a physiological burden, but also as a factor that transforms the functioning of the whole psychological system.

The development of a psychological understanding of stress is associated with the cognitive-appraisal model proposed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984). Within this paradigm, stress is interpreted as the result of the subjective appraisal of a situation and of the resources available to the individual. This approach is particularly important because it shifts the focus from the external stressor itself to the individual's interpretation of the situation. Folkman (2013) further emphasises that appraisal and coping are interrelated processes through which individuals evaluate demands, available resources and possible strategies of response. Thus, cognitive appraisal becomes a central mechanism linking external stressors with emotional and behavioural reactions.

A separate line of research is associated with coping theory and the analysis of coping resources. Carver and Connor-Smith (2010) demonstrate that coping strategies are closely connected with personality characteristics and may take different forms, including problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping and avoidance-oriented responses. Taylor and Stanton (2007) also underline the importance of coping resources and processes, showing that adaptation to stress depends not only on situational responses, but also on the availability of psychological, social and personal resources. These approaches are significant for understanding how individuals attempt to manage chronic stress; however, when considered separately, they do not fully explain how coping strategies interact with emotional regulation, resilience and broader social conditions.

The resource-based interpretation of stress is further developed in Hobfoll's conservation of resources theory. According to Hobfoll (1989), stress arises when individuals experience the threat of resource loss, actual resource loss or insufficient resource gain following resource investment. This theory is particularly relevant to the analysis of chronic stress under conditions of social instability, since economic, political and social uncertainty may be perceived as a continuous threat to personal, social and material resources. From this perspective, adaptation is not limited to psychological adjustment, but also includes the preservation, restoration and redistribution of resources necessary for maintaining functioning.

The emotion-regulatory strand of research provides another important perspective on adaptation to chronic stress. Gross (2015) conceptualises emotion regulation as a set of processes through which individuals influence the intensity, duration and expression of emotional states. This approach is significant because chronic stress is accompanied not only by cognitive appraisal and behavioural coping, but also by prolonged emotional activation. Effective emotional regulation may reduce the intensity of negative emotional states, support psychological stability and prevent the development of maladaptive responses. At the same time, difficulties in emotional regulation may intensify stress reactions and reduce the effectiveness of coping strategies.

Contemporary research in psychological resilience focuses on the individual's capacity to maintain or restore functioning under adverse conditions. Masten (2001) conceptualises resilience as "ordinary magic", thereby emphasising that adaptive functioning under adversity is based not

on exceptional qualities, but on ordinary psychological and social processes. Bonanno (2004) also demonstrates that resilience may be understood as a relatively common response to loss and trauma, rather than as a rare or exceptional outcome. These approaches expand traditional understandings of adaptation by showing that individuals may preserve psychological functioning even under conditions of significant stress.

Further development of resilience research is represented by studies that conceptualise resilience as a dynamic and multidimensional process. Southwick and Charney (2012) emphasise that resilience is shaped by the interaction of biological, psychological and social factors. Kalisch et al. (2015) propose a conceptual framework for resilience research that focuses on the mechanisms enabling individuals to maintain mental health despite stress exposure. These approaches are important because they make it possible to consider resilience not as an isolated personality trait, but as an integrative process that coordinates cognitive, emotional and behavioural mechanisms of adaptation.

The socio-ecological perspective further expands the understanding of adaptation and resilience. Ungar (2011) argues that resilience should be analysed not only at the level of individual psychological characteristics, but also in relation to the social and cultural environment. This approach is especially relevant under conditions of social instability, where the availability of social support, institutional resources and cultural meanings may significantly influence adaptation. Thoits (2010), analysing the relationship between stress and health, also shows that social conditions, social roles and support systems play an important role in shaping the consequences of stress. These studies demonstrate that adaptation to chronic stress cannot be adequately understood without considering the social context in which stressors emerge and are processed.

The conceptual basis of the present study also requires clarification of the category of adaptation itself. The APA Dictionary of Psychology defines adaptation as a process of adjustment to environmental conditions, which allows an individual to maintain functioning in changing circumstances (*APA Dictionary of Psychology, 2020*). This definition is important because it makes it possible to interpret adaptation not as a single reaction, but as a continuous process of psychological adjustment involving cognitive, emotional, behavioural and social components.

An analysis of the literature shows that existing approaches to the study of adaptation to stress develop predominantly within separate research directions. Physiological theories explain the biological foundations of stress; cognitive-appraisal theories reveal the role of subjective interpretation; coping theories describe behavioural and psychological strategies of response; resource-based theories focus on the preservation and loss of resources; emotion-regulation theories explain the management of affective states; and resilience-oriented theories analyse the capacity to maintain functioning under adversity. Each of these approaches has considerable explanatory value, but none of them alone provides a complete understanding of individual adaptation to chronic stress under conditions of social instability.

Thus, a lacuna can be identified in the research field, associated with the absence of a comprehensive theoretical model that would make it possible to consider individual adaptation to chronic stress as a multilevel process comprising interrelated cognitive, emotional, behavioural, resource-based and socio-contextual mechanisms. The existing fragmentation of scholarly knowledge indicates the need for theoretical systematisation and integration. It is precisely this

circumstance that determines the necessity of the study, which is aimed at developing a holistic interpretation of adaptation as a systemic psychological process.

Results

1. Cognitive Mechanisms of Adaptation to Chronic Stress

The analysis established that cognitive mechanisms of adaptation play a key role in the interpretation of a stressogenic situation and in the formation of the subjective perception of threat. The main cognitive mechanisms include cognitive reappraisal, interpretation of the significance of the stressor, and the formation of semantic constructs that make it possible to integrate stressful experience into the system of personal representations.

It was found that cognitive processing of the situation determines the intensity of the emotional response and the choice of behavioural strategies. Under conditions of chronic stress, particular importance is attached to the capacity for flexible reappraisal, which makes it possible to reduce the subjective significance of negative factors and to form adaptive interpretations of ongoing events.

It was established that cognitive mechanisms perform not only the function of appraising the situation but also ensure its semantic structuring, thereby contributing to a reduction in uncertainty and an increase in psychological resilience.

Thus, cognitive mechanisms of adaptation constitute the basic level of processing a stressful situation, determining the subsequent functioning of emotional and behavioural processes.

2. Emotional Mechanisms of Adaptation and the Regulation of Stress States

The results of the analysis show that emotional mechanisms of adaptation ensure the regulation of an individual's psycho-emotional state under conditions of prolonged exposure to stress. The key components of this level are anxiety management, reduction of emotional tension, and the development of tolerance to frustration.

It was established that the effectiveness of emotional regulation directly depends on the cognitive interpretation of the situation; however, under conditions of chronic stress, emotional responses may acquire an autonomous character and require additional control mechanisms.

It was found that stable forms of emotional regulation contribute to the preservation of internal equilibrium and prevent the development of maladaptive states, such as chronic anxiety and emotional burnout.

Thus, emotional mechanisms of adaptation ensure the stabilisation of the mental state and act as a key factor in maintaining an individual's internal equilibrium under conditions of prolonged stress.

3. Behavioural Mechanisms and the Integrative Role of Resilience

The study established that behavioural mechanisms of adaptation are implemented through coping strategies aimed at changing the situation or the individual's attitude towards it. These include active strategies, such as solution-seeking and social support, and passive strategies, such as avoidance and distancing.

It was found that the effectiveness of behavioural strategies is determined by their coherence with cognitive and emotional processes. A mismatch between the levels of adaptation leads to a decrease in the overall effectiveness of adaptation processes.

It is substantiated that psychological resilience acts as an integrative mechanism uniting the cognitive, emotional and behavioural components of adaptation. It is resilience that ensures the coherence of functioning across all levels and enhances the individual's capacity for adaptation under conditions of chronic stress.

Thus, behavioural mechanisms implement adaptation at the practical level, while resilience acts as a system-forming factor ensuring the integrity of the adaptation process.

Discussion

The results obtained are of substantial significance for contemporary psychology of stress and adaptation, since they make it possible to move from a fragmentary consideration of adaptation processes to their systemic interpretation. In contrast to traditional approaches, in which individual mechanisms are analysed in isolation, the present study demonstrates the necessity of considering them comprehensively within a unified model.

Thus, the proposed interpretation of adaptation as a multilevel process contributes to a deeper scholarly understanding of the structure of adaptation mechanisms and expands the research perspective for analysing chronic stress.

The cognitive, emotional and behavioural mechanisms of adaptation identified in the course of the study should be regarded not as autonomous elements, but as interrelated components of a unified system of psychological regulation. Their interaction ensures not only a response to stress, but also the individual's resilience under conditions of prolonged exposure to stress.

Particular importance is attached to the identified integrative role of resilience, which makes it possible to coordinate the functioning of different levels of adaptation. This indicates that individual resilience is formed not through a single mechanism, but as a result of the coordination of various mental processes.

The results obtained correspond to classical and contemporary theories of stress and adaptation, including the concepts of Hans Selye, Richard Lazarus and Ann Masten. At the same time, they refine these approaches by showing that adaptation cannot be reduced exclusively to physiological responses or coping strategies.

The proposed model expands existing theoretical frameworks through the integration of different levels of psychological regulation and makes it possible to consider adaptation as a systemic phenomenon, thereby contributing to the development of the conceptual apparatus of the psychology of stress.

The practical significance of the results lies in the possibility of their application in psychological counselling and in work with individuals experiencing chronic stress. The presented model of adaptation may be used for diagnosing adaptation strategies and developing individualised approaches to psychological support.

In addition, the results of the study may be applied in educational programmes for training specialists in the helping professions, as well as in the development of psychological adaptation programmes under conditions of social instability.

A comparison of the results obtained with existing studies shows that most approaches focus on individual aspects of adaptation, whereas the proposed model is oriented towards their integration. This makes it possible to regard the results as a refinement and further development of existing scholarly views.

At the same time, the study has a number of limitations related to its theoretical nature, the limited scope of the material analysed and the absence of empirical verification of the proposed model. These limitations determine the boundaries of generalising the results obtained and indicate the need for their further testing.

The conclusions obtained are applicable primarily within the framework of theoretical analysis and cannot be directly extrapolated to all categories of stressful situations without additional empirical confirmation. The limitations of the study are also associated with the choice of conceptual field and the theoretical sources analysed.

Recognition of these limitations makes it possible to clarify the boundaries of applicability of the results and ensures the methodological transparency of the study.

A promising direction for further research is the empirical testing of the proposed model of adaptation using qualitative and quantitative methods, which would make it possible to clarify the role of individual mechanisms in different types of stressful situations.

It would also be appropriate to investigate the specific features of adaptation processes in different social and cultural contexts, as well as in different age groups, which would expand the area of application of the proposed model.

An additional direction is associated with the development of applied psychological support programmes based on the integration of cognitive, emotional and behavioural mechanisms of adaptation.

Conclusion

The study conducted made it possible to establish that individual adaptation to chronic stress under conditions of social instability constitutes a multilevel psychological process that includes cognitive, emotional and behavioural mechanisms. It has been shown that cognitive mechanisms ensure the interpretation of a stressful situation, emotional mechanisms ensure the regulation of the psycho-emotional state, and behavioural mechanisms ensure the implementation of adaptation strategies in practical interaction with the environment. It has been substantiated that psychological resilience acts as an integrative factor ensuring the coherence of functioning across all levels of adaptation.

As a result of the study, a theoretical model of adaptation has been developed, within which adaptation processes are considered as a systemic interaction of various psychological mechanisms rather than as a set of isolated responses. This makes it possible to refine existing scholarly views on the structure of adaptation and to expand the possibilities for its interpretation under conditions of prolonged exposure to stress.

The stated aim of the study—to identify, systematise and theoretically substantiate the psychological mechanisms of individual adaptation to chronic stress—was achieved through the consistent analysis and integration of existing theoretical approaches.

In the course of the study, the main objectives were fulfilled: theoretical approaches to understanding stress and adaptation were analysed; the conceptual field of the key categories was clarified; psychological mechanisms of adaptation were identified and classified; coping strategies were systematised; and an interpretation of adaptation as an integrative psychological process was proposed. Each of these objectives was implemented within the logic of the study and was reflected in the corresponding analytical results.

The author's contribution consists in the theoretical systematisation of disparate approaches to the study of adaptation and in the substantiation of an integrative model that unites cognitive, emotional and behavioural mechanisms. The interpretation presented makes it possible to consider adaptation as a holistic process, thereby increasing the conceptual clarity of the phenomenon under study.

The overall contribution of the article lies in clarifying the conceptual apparatus of the psychology of stress and adaptation, developing a theoretical model of adaptation processes, and expanding the research perspective for analysing chronic stress. The results obtained may serve as a basis for further theoretical developments and empirical studies, as well as for practical application in psychological counselling and social practice.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest associated with this study. The work was carried out independently, without any financial, institutional or personal interest capable of influencing the objectivity of the study, the interpretation of the results or the presentation of the conclusions.

The author confirms the absence of any affiliation, sources of funding or other circumstances that could be interpreted as influencing the content or results of the study. The study was conducted in compliance with the principles of academic integrity, transparency and the ethical standards of scholarly publication.

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