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A conceptual review of proactivity in coping and daily life: perspectives following Kazakhstan's "proactive state" decree

Abstract. *Stress has been a constant in the lives of residents across cities in Kazakhstan. In recent years, Western and domestic researchers alike have paid great attention to shifts in thoughts and behaviors that can effectively combat stress. Proactivity appears to be a promising concept to address stress yet is an understudied concept in Kazakhstan and the psychology field, despite the utilization of the term by Kazakhstani authorities with the message, "A proactive state is a proactive citizen." Coping strategies may broadly focus on diminishing negative consequences of stress now while proactive coping aims to prepare and prevent potentially stressful events that may presumably occur in the future. Our theoretical review indicated that there is no clear single definition of the concept of proactivity, but rather, several interpretations. Through a scoping literature review of proactivity and its core concepts and psychological mechanisms, we summarize the principal components of proactivity and attempt to provide an integrated formulation of the concept: A person employing proactive coping is an initiator who is anticipatory and agentic in their actions, showing responsibility and perseverance in the realization of each step. Having a well-formed, holistic concept of proactivity will allow for its operationalization and inclusion in future research.*

Keywords: *proactivity, coping, freedom of choice, responsibility, initiative.*

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Introduction and background

The Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan launched its state program «Digital Kazakhstan» in 2017. The government's decree to implement the 4th point of the state program, «Transition to a proactive state,» has begun [1]. Today, Kazakhstan is the only country within the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) that

has taken a course towards the formation of a proactive state with the saying: «A proactive state is a proactive citizen.» The article attempts to clarify the definition of the concept of proactivity and how it may be used to promote coping and resilience in stressful times.

In the academic literature, the concept of proactivity is difficult to define. The difficulty in interpreting the concept has arisen from researcher

silos that lead to seemingly disconnected literature in identifying the antecedents and consequences of proactive behavior [2], which has led to inconsistencies in its definition across studies. If we consider this phenomenon from the point of view of linguistics, we acknowledge that the word «proactivity» is borrowed from the English language, which belongs to the Germanic language group that is within the Indo-European language family. The Germanic languages themselves are divided into three groups: western, eastern, and northern. English is part of the West Germanic group, which, in turn, is also divided into two subgroups: Anglo-Frisian and South Germanic. Accordingly, English belongs to the Anglo-Frisian subgroup. Words that entered a language without changes or with minimal changes are considered to be borrowed. There are foreign words borrowed from other languages within all languages, and English is no exception. The largest number of words were taken from languages such as Latin, Greek, French, Scandinavian languages, and German. If the etymology of the word «proactivity» is found in ancient languages, namely in Latin or Greek, then when it is decomposed into components: «pro» is a prefix, and «activity» is the basis of the word. At the same time, «pro» from Greek means «forward movement, preference, and also subsequent in time,» and the root of the word («active») comes from the Latin *activus*, which means «acting,» and further in history, from the word *actus*, «action.» It follows that proactivity can be defined as a previous action before the main one, i.e. any action before the activity itself.

Definitions of proactivity

The term «proactivity» was first used in Austrian psychologist Viktor Frankl's book, «Man's Search for Meaning» (1946) when describing different ways of decision-making in times of traumatic stress. Frankl was a prisoner and survivor of a Nazi concentration camp, in which he attributes his survival to his self-created «meaning» of his existence. Frankl posited that a proactive person could cope through seeing their choice in attitudes and responses across various stimuli or stressors. He wrote: «Everything can

be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's way.» [3] That is, freedom of choice can be present within each person. Forgetting one's human dignity and denouncing this freedom emphasizes an external locus of control rather than an internal locus of control. In Frankl's understanding, proactivity is an «inner freedom» that allows one to fill life with meaning, which begins with the agency.

Although the term «proactivity» was coined from Frankl's experiences of traumatic stress, the term is now often found in the field of business and entrepreneurship. For instance, business coach and consultant John Miller's book, «QBQ! The Question Behind the Question: Practicing Personal Accountability in Work and Life,» provides one method of exploring values. Miller considers proactivity as a personal responsibility that may be determined from self-reflective questions [4]. Furthermore, renowned business management consultant Stephen Covey's book, «The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People», lists proactivity as a primary skill. As stated by Covey, proactivity means «responsibility for your own life,» [5] as «our behavior is a function of our decisions, not our conditions.» The author also argues that all people are naturally proactive, and as they begin to face responsibility for their actions, most take the position of a reactive person. Proactive people are driven by their values and can subordinate their impulsive reactions in honor of their values. The choice of reaction is based on these values. Proactive, consciously aware people differentiate their circle of influence and the circle of concerns, albeit on a subconscious level. At the same time, the circle of concerns is the totality of those difficulties that are beyond our control and we have to reckon with them, and the circle of influence is everything that can be influenced by us. Proactive people are focused on the circle of influence (see Figure 1).

Frankl and Covey both assert that a person has the freedom of choice, including one's response to stressful circumstances, with empowerment arising from unique abilities that distinguish humans from other living beings, e.g., the presence of self-awareness, imagination, conscience, and independent will (see Figure

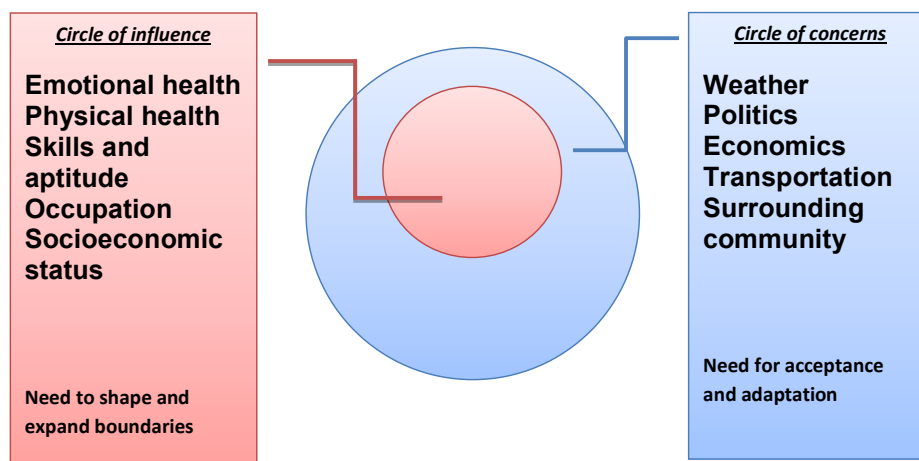


Figure 1. Circle of influence and circle of concerns, per Stephen Covey

2). Self-awareness is recognition of oneself in the process of development. Imagination is the ability to create images. Conscience relates to the awareness of moral responsibility for one's actions. Independent will is the ability to achieve one's goals. Owing to these abilities, a person's ability to influence oneself and the environment might be perceived as almost limitless. Submission to external stimuli, whether physical, social, or psychological stress, may produce a reaction incongruent to one's sense of self. Proactive people are also influenced by the environment, but their incentives are subordinated to their values and may thus choose a response that matches their values.

Despite the various interpretations of what constitutes proactivity, there appear to be two

overarching key elements of proactivity in dictionary definitions [6]. First is an element of anticipation that involves actions on the eve of a future situation, such as acting in anticipation of future problems, needs, or changes [7]. Second, definitions emphasize the need for control and empowerment in a situation to make a change, e.g., "by controlling a situation by causing something to happen rather than waiting to respond to it after it happens" [8].

Both of these elements – anticipation, and control - are present in some manner within most definitions of proactive behavior that may emphasize different underlying concepts:

- *Aspiration*: American psychologist Gordon Allport, one of the influencers of humanistic personality psychology, put forward

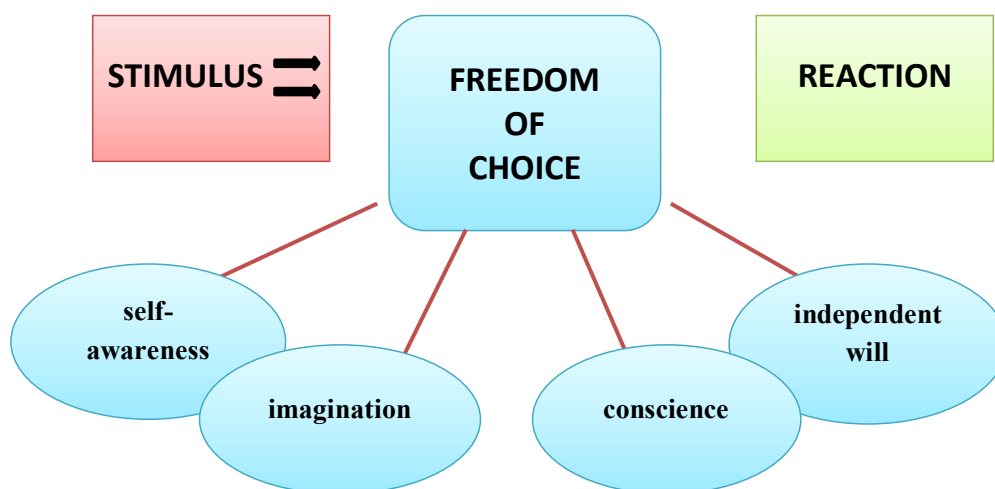


Figure 2. Proactive model, per Victor Frankl

a theory that encompassed the idea of proactive behavior as an alternative to reactive behavior. According to his view, behavior can be called proactive when the psychological factors inherent in a person (e.g., will, mind, consciousness) materialize as a source of aspiration. "Most of what we do in life is a matter of being who we are! Appropriate functioning can be characterized as proactive, future-oriented, and psychological" [9].

- *Initiative*: Crant calls proactive behavior "taking initiative in improving current circumstances or creating new ones; it involves challenging the status quo rather than passively adapting to present conditions." [2]. That is, proactive behavior may activate individual values, which may result in conflict between facilitating change versus disengaging in such action to avoid challenging the norm.

- *Perseverance*: Perseverance serves as a defining element of personal initiative. Being proactive means being persistent (e.g., persistence in achieving change) but perseverance itself is not always proactive (e.g., persistence in seeking help from another) [10].

- *Anticipatory action*: Proactive behavior is an anticipatory action that individuals take to impact themselves and/or their environments [11].

- *Self-initiated and future-oriented action*: Such actions aim to change and improve a situation or oneself [12].

A common feature across these positions is one's determination to improve the state of one's environment, both external and internal. A proactive person does not wait for what will happen in the future and is not limited in reactions to change. A proactive individual takes measures on their own to prepare for future events, to prevent certain events, or even to shape the future according to one's own hopes. Such an individual actively prepares alternative solutions.

Applications and implications

Proactive coping has applications and implications for our daily life stressors. Our environment can change rapidly given the

stressors and turbulence in the modern-day. Despite the instability of life situations, individuals can cope and be resilient. These are individuals who might be called proactive in addressing arenas of daily life stress. Proactive people look for opportunities, take initiative, take action, and are persistent in effectively driving change. They are characterized by the ability to create growth opportunities, to recognize or predict current or potential stressors, and, above all, to act. Therefore, proactive coping is both expectation and influence. Proactive coping is the ability to create opportunities and the ability to recognize or anticipate and act when an opportunity or threat arises. The factor that distinguishes proactivity from reactivity is time since proactivity means taking action before changes occur in the external environment and are often associated with responding to symptoms that herald forthcoming changes. This means not only simply getting by each day, but also initiating self-care and acting on one's realizations for growth.

Overall, proactive coping is about activity and action. The activity of a proactive person consists of two components: choice and change. First of all, a person decides what exactly needs to be changed, then consistently constructs a chain of actions to change it. All this is carried out with full acceptance of responsibility for the result and knowledge of the final result. At the heart of all this is innovation, a way of shaping reality in the name of one's own goals and values. Developing features of a proactive personality is needed for a fruitful life with lower levels of stress.

Synthesis and conclusions

To synthesize these definitions, the psychological factors of proactive coping comprise self-reflection, anticipation, internality, autonomy, and motivation. In this review, self-reflection is conceptualized as the ability of a person to look at oneself from the outside, making conclusions and constructively addressing life stressors. Anticipation relates to anticipatory behavior, i.e., anticipating a stressful event or action, anticipating problems, and

taking measures to eliminate them. Proactive people analyze their achievements, evaluate the consequences of their actions, and at the same time, look for opportunities to make positive changes in anticipatory stressful activities. Internality is an internal locus of control - the ability to take responsibility for one's actions, to be empowered to take action, demonstrating initiative.

These psychological factors determine the process of a person's realization of their proactivity with such opportunities that society provides, yet the choice of action is simultaneously made by the person. A proactive person seeks to change the surrounding social environment

to meet one's needs, which is an indicator of personal characteristics such as agency and empowerment. Proactivity means that a person is an actor within stressful situations, not just an "object" of influence to various stressful stimuli and conditions. Therefore, proactive coping is action-oriented and includes an attitude component and accompanying behavior that consists of purposefulness, perseverance, and long-term focus.

Thus, we venture to define the concept of a proactive personality: *A person employing proactive coping is an initiator who is anticipatory and agentic in their actions, showing responsibility and perseverance in the realization of each step.*

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**Копингте және күнделікті өмірдегі проактивтіліктің тұжырымдамалық шолуы:
Қазақстанның «проактивті мемлекет» туралы жарлығынан кейінгі перспективалар**

Аңдатпа. Стресс Қазақстанның көптеген қалаларының тұрғындарының өмірінде тұрақты құбылыс болғаны мәлім. Соңғы жылдары батыс және отандық зерттеушілер стресспен тиімді күресуге болатын ой мен мінез-құлықтағы өзгерістерге көп көңіл бөледі. Проактивтілік стресспен күресу үшін көп үміт күттіретін ұғым болып көрінеді, бірақ қазақстандық билікте бұл терминді «проактивті мемлекет-проактивті азамат» деген жолдаумен қолданғанына қарамастан, Қазақстанда және психология саласында бұл ұғым жеткілікті зерттелмеген. Копинг стратегиялары бүгінгі уақытта стресстің теріс әсерін азайтуға бағытталған, ал проактивті копинг болашақта болжанатын стресстік оқиғаларға дайындалуға және болдырмауға бағытталған. Біздің теориялық шолуымыз проактивтілік ұғымының нақты бірыңғай анықтамасы жоқ екенін, керісінше бірқатар түсіндірулер бар екенін көрсетті. Проактивтілік туралы әдебиеттерді және оның негізгі концептері мен психологиялық механизмдерін шолу арқылы біз проактивтіліктің негізгі компоненттерін жинақтап және осы ұғымның интеграцияланған тұжырымдарын жасауға тырысамыз: проактивті копингті қолданатын адам әр қадамды жүзеге асыруда жауапкершілік пен табандылықты көрсете отырып, өз іс-әрекетінен асып, оны насихаттайтын бастамашы болып табылады. Проактивтіліктің тұрақты қалыптасқан тұтас тұжырымдамасының болуы оны жүзеге асыруға және болашақ зерттеулерге қосуға мүмкіндік береді.

Түйін сөздер: проактивтілік, копинг, таңдау еркіндігі, жауапкершілік, бастамалық

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**Концептуальный обзор проактивности в копинге и повседневной жизни:
перспективы Казахстана после постановления о «проактивном государстве»**

Аннотация. Стресс стал постоянным явлением в жизни жителей многих городов Казахстана. В последние годы как западные, так и отечественные исследователи уделяют большое внимание изучению изменений в мышлении и поведении, способствующих эффективному преодолению стресса. Проактивность представляется многообещающим понятием для борьбы со стрессом, но является недостаточно

изученным понятием в Казахстане и в области психологии, несмотря на использование этого термина казахстанскими властями с посланием: “Проактивное государство - это проактивный гражданин”. Копинг-стратегии могут быть в целом направлены на уменьшение негативных последствий стресса в данный момент, в то время как проактивное совладающее поведение направлено на подготовку и предотвращение потенциальных стрессовых событий, которые предположительно могут произойти в будущем. Наш теоретический обзор показал, что нет четкого единого определения понятия проактивности, вместо этого существует огромное количество разных интерпретаций. С помощью обзорного анализа литературы о проактивности, ее основных концепций и психологических механизмов мы обобщили основные компоненты проактивности и попытались дать комплексную формулировку концепции: человек, использующий проактивный копинг, является инициатором, который предвосхищает и действует в своих действиях, проявляя ответственность и настойчивость в реализации каждого шага. Наличие хорошо сформированной целостной концепции проактивности позволит применить ее и включить в будущие исследования.

Ключевые слова: проактивность, копинг, свобода выбора, ответственность, инициатива.

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