Cross-cultural analysis of the relationship of social axioms, individual values and fear of COVID-19 among students of Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia

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*In this scientific paper we used the results of “Attitudes towards cross-cultural and social-economic interaction: cross-country and intergenerational analysis” project conducted within the framework of the HSE University Program of fundamental research in 2021.*

The study is a part of an up-to-date scientific direction aimed at identifying socio-psychological factors to control the spread of coronavirus infection in different countries. Moreover it is aimed to investigate effective adaptation of different socio-demographic and cultural groups to the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic and minimizing its adverse effects on the individual and social levels.

The focus of this study was on young students facing significant restrictions and lifestyle changes during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The study was carried out within the framework of the methodology of cross-cultural analysis, resource and generational approaches in social psychology. The theoretical basis of the study is the conceptual approach of G. Dragolov and K. Boehnke (2015), according to which social axioms are considered as predecessors of individual values. Social axioms and individual values are interdependent components of a worldview and influence on people’s attitudes and behavior in different spheres.

The results of the study make it possible to answer the question on the characteristics of the relationship between social axioms (psychological constructions on the cultural level) and individual values of the student youth of the post-Soviet’s countries (the millennial generation). Additionally it is crucial to investigate how do these relationships as well as the characteristics of the restrictive measures during the pandemic in the countries under study contribute to the fear of COVID-19. The study has novelty. No similar research has been conducted in national and international psychology.

Empirical data were collected from January to April 2021 on the anketolog.ru platform. The survey included validated and reliable psychological questionnaires. These were the Fear of COVID-19 Scale (FCV-19S), tested on the Russian-language sample by A. Reznik with colleagues (2020), the abridged version of the “Portrait Value Questionnaire” by S. Schwartz (ESS-21), developedfor the European Social Survey questionnaire and “Social Axiom Questionnaire” (QSA-31), developed and tested by A.N. Tatarko and N.M. Lebedeva (2020). We also took into account age and sex of respondents, residence in the capital or region, economic status, objective distance from COVID-19. According to the weekly epidemiological reports of the World Health Organization**,** at the time of data collection the amountof people infected and deceased from the coronavirus increased in all three countries.

The participants of the study were university students aged 18-25 (208 Belarusians, 200 Kazakhstanians, 579 Russians). All respondents were Russian-speaking citizens of their countries.

One of the reasons for our studying young people in these countries is the differences in the strategies of dealing with the pandemic and the differences in the severity of restrictive taken by the states. Modern researches confirm that this may affect the level of fear of COVID-19 and the current and delayed effects of the pandemic. Belarusian authorities denied the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 for a long time. Kazakhstan was the first among the three States under consideration to introduce restrictive measures and the only one to declare a state of emergency. A self-isolation regime was declared in Russia. The degree of stringency of the restrictive measures in the COVID-19 pandemic also differed between these countries and at the time of the survey.

Another reason to look at young people in these countries is the importance of analyzing the cultural and psychological factors of adaptation to the pandemic COVID-19 members of the millennial generation. This generation grew up in the independent states of the post-Soviet space, which have a common history and close ties but differing dominant values among the population. Differences in cultural values can determine variations in the relationship between social axioms, individual values, and the fear of COVID-19 among the youth of these countries.

The processing of empirical data was carried out with the help of descriptive statistics, analysis of significant differences, structural equation modeling, confirmatory factor analysis, multigroup analysis. The configural, metric and scalar invariance of all the models considered were confirmed.

Students in three countries have the same hierarchical structure (according to means) of social axioms (in ascending order: fate control, religiosity, social cynicism, social complexity, reward for application) and of Higher Order Values (in ascending order: Conservation, Self-Enhancement, Openness to change and Self-Transcendence values). These data show the existence of a similar profile of individual values and views on the world among the Russian-speaking members of millennial generation.

The two-factor structure of the Fear of COVID-19 Scale was confirmed. We called factors “physiological manifestations” and “psychological manifestations” of fear. Different levels of COVID-19 fear have been found among students in three countries. Russian students have a lower level of fear than Belarusians and Kazakhstanians. Fear of COVID-19 is more prevalent among young people in countries with the weakest and most severe restrictive measures during a pandemic.

We confirmed the hypothesis of the social axioms influence on formation of individual values among students of three countries. Common and culturally specific types of connections have been identified.

The direct link of social axioms and fear of COVID-19 among students of three countries has been identified, as well as mediative role of Higher Order Values “Conservation” and “Openness to change” in this relationship.

According to the results of our research commitment to “Social complexity” axiom and the value “Openness to change” we can consider as psychological resources of prevention of current and delayed psychological trauma from fear of COVID-19.

Discussion, careful systematic analysis and result’s comprehension are important for understanding the characteristics and mechanisms of the influence of sociocultural and socio-psychological factors on the adaptation members of the millennial generation to the COVID-19 pandemic. These results are important for predicting and preventing the adverse impact of the pandemic on the lives and health of young people.