

Views on Psychological Immunity in Russian Psychology

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Abstract

Introduction. Numerous multidisciplinary studies examine non-physical types of immunity in recent years. By analogy with physical immunity, psychological immunity provides the comprehensive protection of the human psyche in extreme stressful situations and also in everyday activities. Psychological immunity can potentially become the phenomenon that may combine disparate views of defense mechanisms of the human psyche. Therefore, it seems reasonable to introduce and develop this concept.

Theoretical Basis. The concept of psychological immunity was first introduced by A. Olah. He defined it as a mental phenomenon that brings together all the adaptive resources of an individual. Previous research has demonstrated that psychological immunity is a widely accepted concept with clear conceptual and theoretical grounds and practical tools for diagnosis, development, and correction. The development of the concept of psychological immunity aroused our interest in Russian researches in this field.

Results. Russian researchers agree that psychological immunity is a personality trait that contributes to the preservation of an individual's adaptive state when exposed to adverse factors through the use of resources. These resources are not only psychological defenses and coping strategies, but also self-regulation, reflection, consciousness, meaningfulness, coherence, etc. Very few but diverse previous studies of psychological immunity have outlined its content-related, structural, and functional concept.

Discussion. Psychological immunity is a mental phenomenon that helps to maintain the state of psychological well-being and psychological safety. The functions of psychological immunity are identical to those of physical immunity and include monitoring the functional state, memorizing the impact, reducing the intensity of re-experiencing, maintaining the state of psychological well-being, and facilitating negative experience. Aversion (as a reaction to potentially unpleasant phenomena) and anxiety (as a reaction to potentially dangerous phenomena) are the mechanisms that trigger a psychoimmune response.

Keywords

psychological immunity, psycho-immunity, psychological well-being, psychological safety, consciousness, meaningfulness, security, adaptation, Russian studies

Highlights

- ▶ Psychological immunity is a complex phenomenon that helps to maintain the state of psychological well-being through the sense of security.
- ▶ Psychological immunity effects everyday minor stressor events and becomes most obvious

during adaptation failures under the influence of extreme stressors.

► Psychological immunity is worldview characteristic that manifests itself in everyday life through consciousness and meaningfulness.

► The concept of psychological immunity is interdisciplinary and international which allows researchers to enrich its understanding with data from psychology-related disciplines and other cultures.

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Introduction

Psychological immunity is a new and poorly understood concept in Russian psychology. Meanwhile, most recent studies in this field suggest various concepts that describe content, structural, and functional characteristics of psychological immunity, as well as tools for its diagnostic, development, and correction.

By analogy with the physical immunity of the organism, psychological immunity protects the human psyche from the harmful effects of the external and internal environment by recognizing potential dangers, activating and mobilizing resources to overcome the negative effects through a directed immune response. Psychological immunity 'memorizes' the characteristics of negative impacts and decreases the intensity of their re-experiencing. We should note that psychological immunity protects individuals against extreme stressful effects (for example, experiencing the loss of a loved one), as well as against the effects of minor, regular stressor events (for example, waiting in a traffic jam, short-term communication with unpleasant people, etc.).

However, no fundamental works are available in Russian scientific literature that address the issue of psychological immunity. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to provide a literature review of available Russian studies of psychological immunity and systematize the authors' views. Using the abstract-logical method, we will first consider theoretical and empirical works of psychologists. Subsequently, we will examine the works of authors of other humanitarian areas of scientific knowledge. In the scientific literature the earliest mentions of psychological immunity date back to 1995. Therefore, the works of European and American psychologists underlie the subsequent description of this concept. Having established the similarities and differences in their ideas, we will examine the general aspects of the concept of psychological immunity, its functions and content, which will enable us to formulate a common definition and to discuss possible future research directions.

Theoretical Basis

Back in 1995, being guided by the principles of positive psychology, health psychology, and A. Antonovsky salutogenic approach, Hungarian psychologist A. Olah defined psychological immunity as a multidimensional but integral phenomenon that combines all the adaptive resources (cognitive, motivational, and behavioral) of an individual, which contributes to maintaining an optimal mental state in stress situations and ensuring healthy mental development (Olah, 2009).

A. Olah developed the technique for diagnosing psychological immunity that contained 16 scales (optimism, self-control, coherence, self-esteem, creativity, etc.) representing the components of psychological immunity. Several studies were conducted with the use of this technique. For example, Szy (2016) compared two groups of subjects: (a) a group comprised the subjects aged 20–25 years and (b) a group comprised the subjects 50–75 years.

She concluded that because of the increased consciousness and decreased negative emotional reactions psychological immunity is higher in older age. However, this technique is neither modified nor translated to be available to Russian readers. Psychological immunity does not manifest itself in everyday life. Consequently, the use of diagnostic tools for its studying seems to be inappropriate.

The ideas of A. Olah underlay the works of Indian psychologists Bhardwaj and Agrawal (2015). Thus, they proposed a new concept of psychological immunity and defined it as a five-component model of psycho-immunity (Pentacle model of Psycho-Immunity), consisting of self-esteem, consciousness, emotional maturity, psychological well-being, and positive memories of the past.

American psychologist D. Gilbert interprets psychological immunity as a mental phenomenon that protects “the human mind from the feeling of misfortune” (Gilbert, 2017, p. 199). The psychological immune system must find a balance between negative effects of the environment (loss, grief, failure, etc.) and mental responses to them (Gilbert, Pinel, Wilson, Blumberg, & Wheatley, 1998). Kagan (2006), another American psychologist, consider psychological immunity as a defense and survival mechanism and defines it as a genetically determined program of protection, preservation, and improvement of personality, psychological well-being, property, and possession. According to H. Kagan, property and possession mean any types of property (movable, immovable, and intellectual) and the phenomena of reality (relationships, groups of people) with which individuals identify themselves and which determine their self-esteem, identity, well-being, and life activities.

Ferencz (2008) believes that the psychological immune system is a structure that creates a positive internal emotional background when confronted with the negative influence of the external environment. She argued that the psychological immune system is formed in childhood; the analysis of early memories can elucidate its dynamics. If an individual has memories of his/her own value for significant Others, experience deep emotional interpersonal relationships, courage, confidence, as well as solitude and loneliness, then

his/her psychological immune system provides better 'protection' in stressful situation, compared to those not having such an experience in childhood.

Murray & Schaller (2015) take a slightly different view of the essence of psychological immunity. They introduced the concept of "behavioral immune system", which is triggered every time when individuals face the threat of infectious diseases. Kenrick (2010) and Mortensen et al. (Mortensen, Becker, Ackerman, Neuberg, & Kenrick, 2010) conducted a series of experiments proving that physical immunity starts to prepare an immune response even when instead of a real threat of infection, there is a social threat (for example, the threat of a fight or violence). This clearly demonstrates, firstly, the close relationship between the physical and the mental, and secondly, the presence of a structure responsible for changing behavior under adverse conditions.

Besides, some of the representatives of European popular literature concentrate on certain aspects of psychological immunity. Thus, Norwegian psychologist Brurson (2015) considers psychological immunity as a mechanism of resistance to negative obsessive thoughts ('viruses') that affect human functional state and behavior.

Thus, psychological immunity is an applied concept actively developed in scientific literature that provides comprehensive insights into human adaptive abilities. In this regard, the development of this concept in Russian psychology is of our particular interest.

Results

In Russian scientific literature Anuashvili (2008) was the theorist who provided a detailed description of the phenomenon of psychological immunity. Thus, A. N. Anuashvili describes the patterns of information perception from the standpoint of the wave model of the brain and the concept of the structure of the psyche and the characteristics of human interaction in space.

Anuashvili (2008, p. 73) defines psychological immunity as an attribute of a harmonious individual, providing protection by realistic perception of objective reality and the development of adequate responses. The main function of psychological immunity is to maintain harmony – namely, individuals' ability to adequately perceive information through recognition of certain characteristics of perceived objects and phenomena, insight, foresight, and strategic planning. The author notes that a harmonious individual is characterized by a high level of psychological immunity, which manifests itself in the ability to creative work, meaningful creativity, and harmonization of the environment (see Anuashvili, 2008, p. 74).

In the concept of A. N. Anuashvili, psychological immunity represents an individual cognitive characteristic that determines realistic perception of the surrounding environment.

Following A. N. Anuashvili, most authors consider psychological immunity in the context of human interaction in information space, transforming the original concept into information-psychological immunity.

Luchinkina (2015) defines informational-psychological immunity as an integral personality trait that enables critical analysis and transmission of information. In turn, Rashitova (2016)

suggests that information-psychological immunity has a three-component structure and consists of the following components: (a) cognitive component (comprehension of information and its critical analysis); (b) personality-motivational component (information needs, motives, interest, and preference for information channels), and (c) behavioral component (methods and techniques for working with information, attitudes, relations, abilities, and skills of safe behavior in information space).

Kireichev (2015) interprets psychological immunity as a result of ‘immunization’ of individuals from the destructive information impact. By acquiring psychological knowledge about behaviors in various situations and shaping the ability to use these patterns, individuals develop their psychological immunity which may potentially protect them from psychological problems. Training aimed at developing constructive forms of behavior in conflicts and self-regulation skills appears to be the main method for the development of psychological immunity (Kireichev, 2015).

Vedzhatova & Menaeva (2016) studied the informational-psychological immunity in students and defined it as the resistance of the psyche to the negative and destructive effects of the information environment. Information-psychological immunity is a mental filter, which major task is to provide figure-ground perception. The functioning of mental filters is affected by ethnic, social, cognitive, cultural, gender, and other human characteristics. The authors rightly noted that there are no tools for studying information-psychological immunity and psychological immunity as well. Therefore, they focused on studying tolerance of perception.

N. N. Stroev, A. V. Lagun & A. N. Stroev (2018) elaborated the concept of informational immunity. They introduce this concept into the field of economic science and define it as individuals’ ability to perceive information based on their beliefs and attitudes, demonstrate criticality and selectivity. The authors suggest that each individual has a basic level of informational immunity, consisting of beliefs and delusion (worldview categories). The impossibility of resisting the negative informational impact (a low level of informational immunity), develops false/illusory beliefs about the surrounding environment.

Other authors consider psychological immunity as a socio-psychological phenomenon.

Vardanyan & Artamonova (2017) consider psychological immunity from the standpoint of the formation of resistance to addictive behavior among adolescents. They interpreted psychological immunity as the ability to master and apply the system of self-regulation, which is activated in risk situations and mobilizes mental stability to overcome or neutralize the threats associated with narcotization. In their study they examined the tendency to addictive behavior in adolescents and then conducted training aimed at the formation of psychological immunity. The training program was designed to develop personal competences through training in self-regulation skills, developing social competence, developing social skills, informing about narcotization, and developing skills to counter the negative effects of the narcotizing environment. After the training, the authors re-measured the tendency to addictive behavior in adolescents and came to the conclusion that training is an effective method of developing psychological immunity (Vardanyan & Artamonova, 2017).

Considering the issue of counteracting the ideology of terrorism among students, Bliznetsova (2013) defines socio-psychological immunity as the resistance to social pressure and counteraction to traumatic circumstances. The author explains the necessity of identifying psychological mechanisms that create the prerequisites to counteract the terrorist ideology. From her point of view, knowledge about the essence of terrorism is paramount. This knowledge determines moral attitudes and, consequently, training in self-regulation skills to ensure freedom and willingness of moral choices (Bliznetsova, 2013).

In Russian scientific literature, psychological immunity is not only an attribute but also a neoformation arising from the integration of life experience.

Kanevskaya (2012) considers psychological immunity as a result of sustainable development of an individual through adaptive overcoming of life difficulties and stressful situations.

Semenov (2017) introduces the concept of the psychological immunity of the subject of labor. He defines psychological immunity as an individual's ability to predict and level stress states in everyday and professional activities. The main function of psychological immunity is to counteract the negative informational impact of others. Once again, psychological immunity protects individuals from destructive or undesirable information. In this case, psychological immunity may be interpreted as critical thinking, which, in turn, provides the ability to change non-adaptive (destructive) stress responses to adaptive (constructive) ones.

In his concept of psychological immunity, D. S. Semenov introduces the component of consciousness as a key factor in its effective functioning. D. S. Semenov carried out the study of the components of professional and psychological health among medical personnel and demonstrated that constant reflection (as a manifestation of consciousness) helps increase the level of professional skill and preserve professional health. Therefore, by developing consciousness, individuals develop the ability to resist negative external influences and to analyze the current state and emotional reactions, which ultimately leads to psychological well-being. This state of psychological well-being is the result of the functioning of psychological immunity.

The review of Russian researchers' views on the phenomenon of psychological immunity demonstrates that there is no unambiguous definition of this concept. However, all the authors agree that:

(a) Psychological immunity is a personality trait that enables the successful overcoming or prevention of negative external or internal influences.

(b) Psychological immunity is a cognitive-behavioral category, where its key function results from the perception, processing, and retransmission of information.

(c) Psychological immunity is somehow associated with consciousness, self-regulation, awareness, and meaningfulness.

Nevertheless, diagnosing psychological immunity remains an open question. Psychological immunity is a cognitive-behavioral category that includes values, meanings, beliefs, and delusions and may differ from individuals' expectations under real circumstances. Therefore, the use of textual methods appears to be invalid. The same applies to the methods of

development and correction.

Our literary review would not be complete without considering the views on psychological immunity in other humanitarian fields of knowledge.

The sociological theory of social immunity provides the most elaborated concept of non-physical immunity (Babloyan & Vasilenko, 2018; Zhapuev, 2013; Khramtsova, 2015).

Being guided by the provisions of the paradigm of 'organicism' and generalizing other sociologists' views on protective mechanisms of society, Zhapuev (2013) introduced his concept of social immunity. On the one hand, he defines social immunity as the ability of society to resist social risks (mainly the intervention of alien values, norms, and ideals). On the other hand, social immunity is a defense mechanism regulating the level of risks and threats of alien intervention and maintaining stability and high adaptability of society. He suggests that there is a congenital and acquired social immunity. Congenital (basic) social immunity is provided by the institutional system of society and its values; acquired social immunity is the result of overcoming external threats (Zhapuev, 2013).

Khramtsova (2015) expanded the concept of social immunity by adding the following levels of its manifestation: (a) personal-individual, (b) social, (c) political, and (d) global-local. The personal-individual level represents the greatest interest for the present study, because according to F. I. Khramtsova, this level results from the process of internalization (during socialization) of social norms, values and ideals, the formation of national and gender identities. In fact, this is psychological immunity.

In turn, Babloyan & Vasilenko (2018) establish diagnostic features that can determine the current state of social immunity of society: sociocultural integrity, social health, level of social polarization, demographic index, etc., which determines the practical relevance of the theoretical model of social immunity.

Pedagogical science has also contributed to supporting the paradigm of 'organicism'. Spiritual and moral immunity is considered as a pedagogical category, which, being a result of civic and patriotic education, describes an individual's ability to resist the negative influences of the external and internal environments through the stability of meanings and values (Gilmeeva, 2015).

The concept of mental immunity by Sidorov (2015) attracts a great interest. It represents a compilation of all the types of immunities and is aimed at maintaining integrated (mental) human safety. He defines mental immunity as a system of biopsychosocial and spiritual protection that provides a high level of comprehension of values and meanings, manifesting themselves in a stable identity and adaptive forms of behavior.

Sidorov distinguished the following types of immunity: (a) biological – protecting the body from infections and invasions, changing its cells, and maintaining physical health; (b) psychological – protecting individuals and society from traumatic impacts of the external and internal environments and maintaining psychological health; (c) social – protecting individuals and society from negative impacts of sociogenic factors and maintaining social health; (d) spiritual and moral – protecting individuals and society from destructive impacts and maintaining spiritual and moral health (Sidorov, 2015a, 2015b).

Mental immunity is the main mechanism of counteracting various negative impacts including globalization, which imposes values and ideals that are alien to harmonious and prosperous life of individuals (e.g. thoughtless consumption, unrealistic ideals of a successful and beautiful person, etc.), but beneficial for the formation of mass culture that facilitates the processes of managing and manipulating the masses (Sidorov, 2015a).

Despite the fact that Russian scientists started to examine the issues of non-physical immunity much later than their western colleagues, sufficient theoretical materials have been accumulated for conceptualizing the concept of psychological immunity and determining its structure and functions.

Discussion

Being guided by the above stated, we consider psychological immunity as a cognitive-behavioral construct that is developed during ontogenesis (Ferencz, 2008; Szy, 2016) and provides a sense of psychological well-being (Kuznetsova, 2017) and a state of psychological safety (Grachev, 2003; Krasnyanskaya & Tylets, 2015; Moskalenko, 2018). Psychological immunity cannot be innate, because individuals are born only with certain unconditioned reflexes that ensure their survival in the first month of life (Vygotsky, 2019). Subsequently, emotionally interacting with surrounding adults, the child learns the appropriate ways of reacting and counteracting various environmental factors (including negative ones) that affect the entire mental structure. Therefore, psychological immunity is rather an integral psychological construct, than a discrete attribute, process or ability. Psychological immunity is an attribute, a process, and an ability.

By the analogy of physical immunity, we should distinguish the following functions of psychological immunity (Moskalenko, 2018):

1. Monitoring (tracking) the current situation for its potential danger.
2. Maintaining the state of psychological safety and the sense of psychological well-being.
3. Capturing the effect of any stimulus and reducing the intensity of response to it in case of invariance of the stimulus and in the event of its repeated exposure without increasing intensity.
4. Relief from negative feelings.

We should note that psychological immunity appears to be rather the concept of the psychology of everyday life, than that of extreme life situations. Undoubtedly, maintaining psychological well-being under the influence of excessive stresses is a part of the functional range of psychological immunity. However, an ordinary person who is not involved in extreme professional activities and in military operations, not being in the zone of natural and man-made disasters, rarely experiences the impact of stressors. The stressors of everyday life that are almost imperceptible but have a cumulative effect influence individuals much more often but less intensively. Involving the entire protective system of the psyche is excessively energy-consuming (Garkavi, Kvakina, & Ukolova, 1990). Therefore, psychological immunity most easily manifests itself when exposed to stressors of low or medium intensity. This proposition explains the difference between

psychological immunity and stress resistance, which are similar, but nonetheless different concepts. In most definitions, stress tolerance is considered as a volitional characteristic of personality that provides conscious control of emotions and behavior in situations that individuals characterize as stressful ones (Mikheeva, 2010). Psychological immunity, as noted above, manifests itself in everyday situations that are ordinary for individuals; they are rather unpleasant than extreme or extraordinary. Therefore, there is no need for conscious regulation. In addition, conscious regulation of emotions can contribute to distortion of perception, which, in turn, can transform everyday situations into stressful ones; this contradicts the importance of consciousness (Rashitova, 2016; Semenov, 2017; Sidorov, 2015b; Bhardwaj & Agrawal, 2015) and meaningfulness (Szy, 2016) as basic personality traits of psychological immunity, ensuring its sufficient level.

Aversion as a reaction to potentially unpleasant impacts (Kenrik, 2010; Mortensen et al., 2010; Murray & Schaller, 2015) and anxiety as a reaction to a potentially harmful effects (Gilbert, 2017; Kagan, 2006) are the signaling mechanism that trigger the development of the psycho-immune response. We should note here that using these signaling mechanisms individuals do not oppose themselves to the surrounding circumstances to which they must adapt (i.e. change themselves under their influence) (Kolpakova, 2015). They rather exhibit the unity of their external and internal worlds acquired in result of consciousness and meaningfulness.

In conclusion, we should note that the concept of psychological immunity requires more detailed analysis in Russian scientific literature and provides more questions than answers. Nevertheless, the development of this concept is promising, because it allows researchers to combine disparate views of the mechanisms of maintaining psychological well-being and safety. Clearly, further empirical research will be required (a) to elaborate the concept of psychological immunity by studying meaningfulness and consciousness, mutual influence and interdependence of psychological immunity and related concepts (stress tolerance, adaptability, psychological defense, etc.) and (b) to develop diagnostic tools or modify the existing ones (A. Olah technique).

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