

A Study on Motivation, Occupational Identity and Coping Amongst Freshman Students of the National University of Public Service, Faculty of Law Enforcement

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Police career requires renouncement and considerable endurance, thus, it is essential for would-be police officers to be motivated and committed to police work and to have adaptive coping mechanisms. I carried out my research on the first day of the basic training amongst full time police students in 2011. My aim was to learn how motivated and committed these freshman students were, what stress coping mechanisms they had, and what extent of self-esteem they possessed. According to my research findings, police students arrive with great motivation, their self-esteem is high, and they possess problem-solving coping strategies.

Keywords: *police students, motivation, coping, occupational identity*

To be admitted to the Law Enforcement Faculty of the National University of Public Service, candidates not only have to achieve a determined number of points at the school leavers' exam but also meet medical, psychological and physical requirements during the admission procedure. All of these are necessary to start a BA programme at the Faculty where the first semester begins with a basic training which is considered to be the first step of institutional socialisation.

The question of these candidates' motivational basis, commitment and stress coping mechanisms emerges as well as how well they can manage to take their first steps towards becoming police officers.

To answer these questions properly, it is inevitable to have a closer look at the student population in question. The age range of these admitted students marks the beginning of young adulthood as far as the concepts of classical developmental psychology are concerned. It is worth studying though whether these freshman students

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between 18 and 24 years of age can be considered to be young adults at all. The notion of emerging adulthood attempts to sort this out. Research findings show that the years between 18 and 25–30 are regarded as emerging rather than young adulthood, which indicates the prolongation of this former developmental period. Emerging adulthood is the time when the process of searching for identity, started in adolescence, comes to an end, which affects the consolidation of concepts concerning partner relationships, work and ideologies. Although many young people at the age of 18 – in most cases due to their studies – leave the family nest, they still rely on their parents. A lot of young people, however, continue living in the same household with their parents during and even after their studies. This idea is supported by foreign research findings, according to which only 38% of 18–25 agers consider themselves adults.² For this reason, the notion of emerging adulthood is of particular interest here, as it provides the conceptual framework of comprehensive developmental psychology, in which the aspects of the present study get clarified. This critical period is identical with the birth of responsible policer officers too. In the present study, motivation and the results of researches on occupational identity provide some connecting points in this respect. It is evident though that an elaborate study of emerging adulthood is out of scope in this paper, but the topic definitely raises further questions and may guide towards a possible continuation of the issue.

Young people applying for the Faculty of Law Enforcement choose not only a career path but also a vocation. The notion of vocation includes taking responsibility for citizens as well as working long hours and being on non-stop duty – regardless of holidays.

With regard to the above, candidates should have stable and strong motivational basis. Jenett et al.³ and Campbell⁴ highlighted the importance of motivation and commitment as two of the main aspects of a successful basic training and career start.

Commitment is an important part of occupational identity, thus it is essential to deal with this latter psychological construct too.

According to Ritoók's definition, occupational identity is a relative notion which shows the compatibility of job requirements and the personality traits of a worker.⁵ The author draws attention to the dynamic nature of occupational identity, which is a dynamic process related to the walk of life. Based on Ritoók's key research findings, a basic condition for occupational identity is aptitude, the existence of which provides a

2 ARNETT, Jeffrey Jensen: *Conceptions of the transition to adulthood: Perspectives from adolescence to midlife*, Journal of Adult Development, Vol. 8. 133-143. cited by: VIDA Katalin: *A kezdődő felnőttkor és a kapunyitási pánik*. Szakdolgozat, ELTE PPK, Pszichológia szak, Budapest 2011 [A Study on Emerging Adulthood and quarter-life crisis, Thesis, University of Eötvös Loránd, Faculty of Pedagogy and Psychology, psychology major, 2011]

3 JENNETT, Christine, ISLAM, Rabiul, WOOLSTONE, Rosemary: Occupational Identity of Police Recruits, WACE/ACEN Asia Pacific Conference 2008 E-Proceedings, Source: http://researchoutput.csu.edu.au/R/?func=dbin-jump-full&object_id=13523&local_base=GEN01-CSU01 (12.10.2015)

4 CAMPBELL, Matthew: *Learning in early-career police: coming into the workplace*, WACE/ACEN Asia Pacific Conference 2008 E-Proceedings, 2008, Source: www.acen.edu.au/docs/resources/WACE_ACEN_Asia_Pacific_Conference_2008_E-Proceedings-1.pdf (20.10.2015)

5 RITOÓK Pálné: *Ifjúkori identitás és pályaszocializáció = Pályalélektan*, ed. RITOÓK Pálné, G. TÓTH Mária, Tankönyvkiadó, Budapest, 1994, 48–69.

higher probability of successful occupational identity.⁶ The prognosis of the extent and the success of occupational identity depends on the special skills and personality traits necessary for the profession, rather than on part skills, as well as on the maturity and integration of the personality, which implies the sociability, emotional harmony and personality development of the family background. Moreover, occupational identity is parallel to the walk of life, which is defined by the compatibility of the profession's experience content and the extent of the individual's need for experience. This compatibility is a basic condition of self-actualisation at work. According to the author, this phenomenon may be experienced among those who identify themselves with their profession at a very high level, but its absence may even be more clearly observed in those cases when, for any reason, someone is forced to choose a profession different from their need for experience. Having a forced profession is coupled with the lack of motivation. It is also important to note here that the psychological causes behind corruption include professional disintegrity and the lowering of self.⁷

Self-esteem, i.e. the individual's self-assessment, determines behaviour. Self-esteem establishes a dynamic relationship with the outside world, that is to say, it functions like a filter when receiving information. Due to this characteristic, self-esteem is relatively difficult to alter.⁸

Appropriate self-esteem is the base of self-education and self-development, as only people with healthy self-esteem can develop their abilities, and make contact with their surrounding environment without applying defence mechanisms.⁹

It can thus be concluded that healthy, realistic self-esteem may contribute to favourable developmental processes.

The basic training is carried out by the Institute of Law Enforcement Training and Education, and given the name of this organisational unit, it also performs educational tasks. Besides studying service principles and the fundamentals of law, police students learn such values of the organisation like the sense of policing identity and vocation as well as formal and service disciplines.

Freshman students usually have a strong need for conformity and a demand of integration of police culture, formal and informal behavioural rules, attitudes and values during the basic training.¹⁰

During the intensive weeks of the basic training, students get familiar with the organisational culture and with one of its most striking phenomena: a rigid set of rules and a hierarchical structure.

Hierarchy goes beyond a theoretical form here, as a superior command and the compliance with the formalities associated with rank have a distinguished role at every-

6 *Ibid.*

7 KOVÁTS Daniella: *Az erkölcsi fejlődés*, Pszichológiai alapismeretek, Rejtjel kiadó, 2004.

8 HORVÁTH-SZABÓ Katalin, VIGASSYŇÉ DEZSÉNYI Klára: *Az agresszió kezelése*. Szociális és Családügyi Minisztérium, Budapest, 2001.

9 HORVÁTH-SZABÓ Katalin, KÉZDY Anikó, PETIK Krisztina: *Család és fejlődés*, Sapientia Szerzetesi Hittudományi Főiskola, 2007. Source: www.sapientia.hu/hu/system/files/Csalad_es_fejlodes_jegyzet.pdf (12.10.2015)

10 CAMPBELL: *op. cit.*

day work. Full-time students start their police officer's career at a very young age in the organisation. This is accompanied by a serious challenge, responsibility and stress amongst fresh secondary school graduates, since they have to prove themselves both professionally and humanly, and win respect and sympathy.

The strong hierarchical stratification of the population and the institutional operation play an important role in the explanation of psychological constructs to be examined.

In literature, stress research in police career is a priority area. What almost all researchers agree on is that it is a most stressful profession and that the source of stress is partly due to police work as such and to police organisation.¹¹ The stress experienced by freshman students participating in the basic training cannot originate from the unpredictable and violent nature of police work but it can easily be affected by the features of police organisation.

Certain authors point out that police organisation is at least as significant a stress factor in a police officer's life as police work.¹²

The stress coping mechanisms young police officers possess play an important role in meeting challenges.

Broadly speaking, coping abilities or strategies help an individual to handle difficult life situations. Oláh states that coping mechanisms may be interpreted in four approaches. That is, psychoanalytic approach, animal psychology approach, copying as a personality trait approach and cognitive transactional approach.¹³

The classic analytical concept highlights that ego has a key role in coping with threats coming from the outside world. In this sense, we have to distinguish the notions of coping and defence, as coping refers to a conscious activity. However, psychoanalysis rather deals with defence mechanisms which get activated when an individual is not able to apply an effective coping mechanism.

Among the researches on coping in the analytic concept Haan's theory is the most notable, according to whom, coping is a positive reaction to stress, which keeps the individual in the objective reality where he/she is free to make decisions and choices in a flexible way.¹⁴

The second approach to coping, the animal psychology model, was developed based on the coping and defence mechanisms observed in the world of animals. This strategy can be an offensive, fugitive or passive behaviour. According to the coping as a trait approach, a given personality's reaction to the stimuli of the outside world is a permanent feature of the individual.¹⁵

11 REGERH, Cheryl et. al.: *Acute stress and performance in police recruits*, Stress and Health 24, 2008.

BURKE: *op. cit.*

PATTERSON, George T.: *Mental Stress and Workers' Compensation Claims Among Police Officers*, Journal of Workplace Rights 14(2009)/4.

HART, Peter M., WEARING, Alexander J., HEADY, Bruce: *Police stress and well-being: Integrating personality, coping and daily work experiences*, Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology 68(1995).

12 PATTERSON: *op. cit.*

13 OLÁH Attila.: *Érzelmek, megküzdés és optimális élmény: Belső világunk megismerésének módszerei*, Trefort, Budapest, 2005.

14 HAAN, Norma: *Coping and Defending*. Academic Press, New York, 1977. Cited by: OLÁH Attila: *Érzelmek, megküzdés és optimális élmény: Belső világunk megismerésének módszerei*. Trefort, Budapest, 2005.

15 OLÁH: *op. cit.*

The most acknowledged representative of the cognitive transactional model is Lazarus, who claims that “every cognitive or behavioural effort may be regarded as transactional that an individual uses to handle those external or internal influences that are considered to be exceeding or consuming their current personal resources.”¹⁶

A stressful work environment may result in numerous negative consequences and maladaptive coping ways: physical problems, depression, couple disorders, alcoholism, drug use and smoking.¹⁷

Police officers’ reactions to stress could be categorised into three groups: physiological, emotional and behavioural reactions.¹⁸ Among physiological reactions, the probability of a heart attack is the highest but hypertension and stomach problems may also be listed here besides the ones mentioned earlier. Emotional reactions may lead to suicide in an extreme case. Behavioural reactions can be harmful not only at the individual’s level but also at that of the organisation. Absences, early retirement, quitting police career, or irresponsible, unmotivated behaviour may be classified here.¹⁹

The purpose of the present study is to explore the occupational identity, self-esteem and the features of stress coping mechanisms of full-time freshman students at the Faculty.

Sample and Data Reception

The sample consists of the admitted students in the year of 2011. The survey took place on the first day of the basic training. To put the survey together, I used an occupational identity scale, the individual coping profile by Olson and the Rosenberg Individual Self-esteem scale, supplemented by some questions concerning motivation and the parents’ occupation.

While processing data, I realised that the majority of students put their full name on the survey despite my request to use some other identity. The principle of anonymity was thus violated at the data recording, which may be considered as a limit or deficiency of data processing. A well-researched consequence of the lack of deficiency is that respondents using their names attempt to develop a better self-image, and give responses they believe are in harmony with the expectations.

As mentioned earlier, the sample consists of first-year students, of whom many skipped questions or even complete pages at times. After the process of coding and data entry 128 persons remained in the sample.

16 LAZARUS, Richard S.: *Psychological Stress and the Coping Process*. McGraw-Hill, New York, 1966. Cited by: OLÁH Attila *Érzelmek, megküzdés és optimális élmény: Belső világunk megismerésének módszerei*. Trefort, Budapest, 2005, 57.

17 BURKE, Ronald J.: *Work-family stress, conflict, coping, and burnout in police officers*, *Stress Medicine*, 9, 1993.

18 BARTOL, Curt R., BARTOL, Anne M.: *Introduction to Forensic Psychology*, Thousand oaks, Sage, CA, 2004.

19 JARAMILLO, Fernando, NIXON, Robert, SAMS, Doreen: *The effects of law enforcement stress on organisational commitment*, *An International Journal of Police Strategies and Management*, 28(2005).

Measurement tools

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) was developed by a sociologist named Dr Morris Rosenberg, and it is one of the most frequently used measurement tools.²⁰ My questionnaire contained 10 items which actually make a Likert-type scale, where responses may score from 1 to 4 points, and where 1 means ‘strongly agree’ and 4 means ‘strongly disagree’. The scale was created to measure comprehensive (global) self-esteem, and it asks respondents about their current feelings. The total score comprises the positive responses given to the 10 statements; therefore, a respondent can score between 10 and 40 points. The greater the number is, the higher self-esteem a respondent is supposed to have. This type of scale was originally developed to measure the sample of 5204 high school students in New York State. The Rosenberg self-esteem scale is considered to be a reliable and valid tool to measure self-esteem.

Occupational identity scale

To measure occupational identity, I used the OIS scale (Occupational Identity Scale) developed by Melgosa and translated to Hungarian by Zsuzsanna Andrási.²¹ This measurement tool originates from Marcia’s theory, and it measures the stages of identity achievement, identity diffusion, moratorium and foreclosure. Respondents had to assess each item on a five point Likert scale. All four subscales contain 7 items each; therefore, 7–35 points could be scored in each subscale.

Olson Coping and Stress Profile

To measure coping, I applied the Olson Individual Coping and Stress Profile.²² This measurement tool is part of the Multisystem Assessment of Stress and Health (MASH) model, the peculiarity of which lies in its biopsychosocial approach. The MASH model integrates previous family and personal stress models, and it has 3 primary components: stress, coping resources and adaptation (satisfaction), which are assessed at 4 levels in a person’s life: personal, work, couple and family. Coping resources and the

20 ROSENBERG, Morris: *Society and the adolescent self-image*, Princeton University Press, 1965. Cited by DORNER László: *A pályaválasztás vizsgálata versenysportolói mintán*, Szakdolgozat Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetem Pedagógiai és Pszichológiai Kar Pszichológia szak, 2011 [A Study on Occupational Identity on Sports Competitors Sample, Thesis, University of Eötvös Loránd, Faculty of Pedagogy and Psychology, psychology major, 2011.]

21 ANDRÁSI Zsuzsanna: *Pszichológus hallgatók pályaidentitásának vizsgálata*. Szakdolgozat. ELTE BTK, Pszichológia szak, Budapest, 1995. [A Study on the Occupational Identity of Psychology Students, Thesis, University of Eötvös Loránd, Faculty of Arts, Psychology major 1995] cited by DORNER László: *A pályaválasztás vizsgálata versenysportolói mintán*, Szakdolgozat Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetem Pedagógiai és Pszichológiai Kar Pszichológia szak, 2011 [A Study on Occupational Identity on Sports Competitors Sample, Thesis, University of Eötvös Loránd, Faculty of Pedagogy and Psychology, psychology major, 2011.]

22 OLSON, David: *Family Stress and Coping: A Multisystem Perspective = The Family on the Threshold of the 21st Century*, ed. DREANAN, Sally, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers, London, 1997.

type of the system are the intermediaries between stress and adaptation (satisfaction). The extent of experienced stress influences four dimensions (i.e. problem solution, communication, cohesion and flexibility) at all four levels.²³

The complete questionnaire contains 34 scales including 311 items in total. The items are rated in a five point scale where a respondent marks how typical a statement is and how often it occurs in his/her life (never, very rarely, often, very often). In the present research, the individual coping profile of the model was used, which measures the use of relationship coping resources at an individual level. These resources appear in four dimensions: problem solution, communication, cohesion and flexibility. One scale belongs to each dimension, the scale of problem solving consists of 7 items, and the other three scales have 10 items each.²⁴

Results

Sociodemographic variables

In the sample of 128 persons there were 73 men (57%) and 55 women (43%).

As far as the freshman students' age distribution is concerned, it ranges from 18 to 24. The most populous group is that of the 19 year olds with 44 persons (33.8%), and the smallest group is made up of only one person aged 22. The average age is 19.5, and the cumulative percentages show that 86.7% of students taking part in the questionnaire were under 21 years of age. Therefore, the majority was committed to police career before turning 21, soon after passing the school leavers' exam.

The questionnaire contained one question about the occupation of parents. What interested me most was if a parent of a respondent was a police officer or he/she worked in the field of law enforcement. The responses showed that the vast majority of respondents did not come from a family where there was a forerunner in law enforcement. Only 7.8% of the respondents (10 persons) had a parent working in the field of law enforcement.

Table 1. Occupational Identity

	Before the basic training
Identity achievement	105 persons 82%
Moratorium	7 persons 5,5%
Foreclosure	16 persons 12,5%
Identity diffusion	0 person 0%

23 KISSNÉ VISZKET Mónika: *A stressz és az egészség több szempontú értékelése: a Coping és Stressz Profil = Egyén, pár, család*, eds. BAGDY Emőke, MIRINCS Zsuzsanna, VARGHA András, Budapest, Animula Kiadó, 2008.

24 *Ibid.*

The number of persons in each identity stage and their percentage distribution

Motivation

The students of the Faculty of Law Enforcement are strongly motivated as far as the choice of career is concerned. The initial, prior to basic training, motivation of students was rather high (average=4.7656).

Self-esteem

The achievable points at the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale range between 10 and 40. The extent of self-esteem is considered to be average between 20 and 30 points, below 20 points, we talk about low self-esteem, above 30 points we talk about high self-esteem.

Provided we accept the range above, only 1 person’s self-esteem is low (19 points), according to the results. 20 persons belong to the average range, and the remaining 107 persons have globally high self-esteem.

The average score achieved by the students taking part in the research is 34, and the standard deviation is 3.5.

If we consider the scores of the researched population, along a plus-minus standard deviation compared to the average, we may conclude on an average range, and a below and above range respectively. From this it follows that most students’ self-esteem ranges from 30.5 to 37.5 points. Below 30 points self-esteem is considered to be low here, and between 38 and 40 points it is considered to be high as compared to the majority. In this respect, 90 persons may be regarded as having average self-esteem, 21 persons have lower and 17 persons have higher self-esteem.

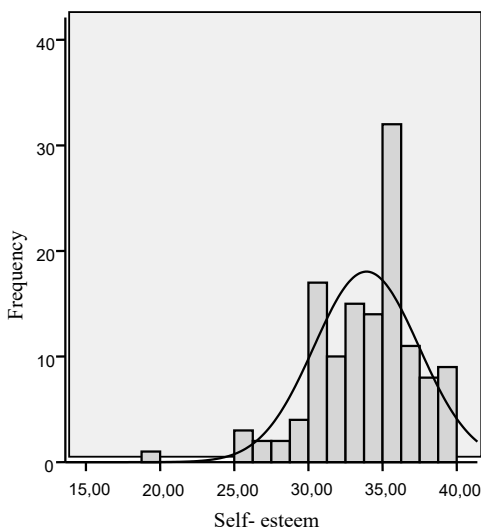


Figure 1. Self-esteem curve

Coping

Coping resources were assessed in four dimensions: problem solving, communication, cohesion and flexibility. To improve the reliability of the scale, I had to delete the third item from the problem-solving scale. The achieved average scores in each dimension are presented in the following graph.

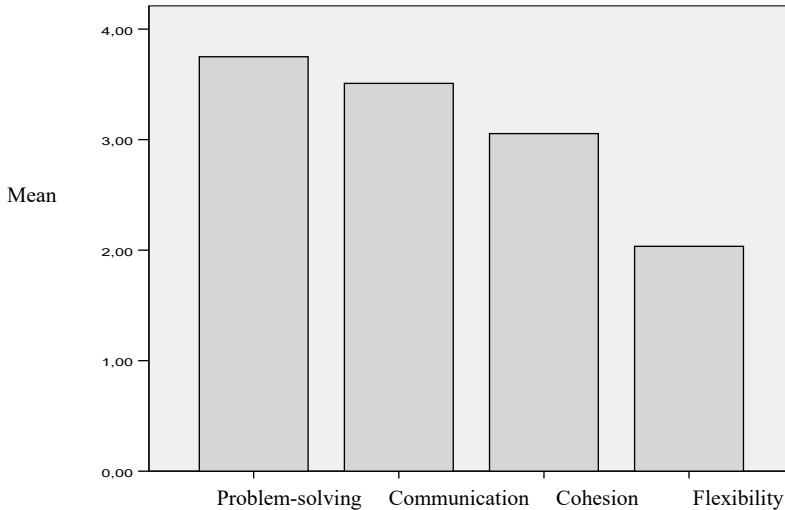


Figure 2. The achieved average scores in each dimension

Discussion

With regard to occupational identity, the results may seem to be surprising, but considering the educational system and the application procedure, they are not unexpected. As I explained in the theoretical part, a crisis precedes the achievement of real identity. These students made a decision about their studies when they submitted their application form to the Faculty. They stood by their decision when they participated in the different aptitude tests. As the present research took place on the first day at school, following a successful school leavers' exam, it is comprehensible that the newly admitted students' commitment was not yet threatened. As it turned out from the theoretical review, occupational identity is a dynamic phenomenon, the current identity stage is not lifelong, and if an individual can no longer identify him or herself with the chosen career, he/she returns to the stage of moratorium. A successful school leavers' exam, achieving sufficient points for admission, and meeting the requirements of physical, psychological and medical tests are such events that may influence self-esteem in a favourable way, and may explain why the majority of students have higher self-esteem. We know from the previously mentioned tests that the admitted students have appropriate stress tolerance, which is a criterion of psychological aptitude. The focus question is what resources freshman students have in difficult situations.

The most characteristic coping mechanism is problem solving. This time a person concentrates on the situation and the problem, attempting to change them. Therefore the focus is on the action in this case, which supposes an active, information retrieval and intervening attitude.

Regarding communication, the results are similar to those of the problem-solving dimension.

A behaviour that looks for others' closeness and emotional support is less typical. It should be noted that emotion-focused coping may play an important role in those situations where circumstances are unalterable, and where problem solving fails. Flexibility and an appropriate assessment of the situation are significant when the adaptive coping resource is activated. Based on our results, the achieved scores are the lowest in the dimension of flexibility. Our results are consistent with Larsson and Kempe's (1988) research on 54 Swedish police officers. The authors studied evaluation and coping processes in situations triggering time-bound stress. The research relying on self-declaration identified 7 coping types. The results showed that as compared to "ordinary people", police officers considered situations less threatening, and they put much more emphasis on problem solving. One of the most outstanding attitudes (with 4.16 scores on a 5-point scale) referred to the acceptance of the situation, which indicates that police officers did not feel personally involved in it, as the essence of their work involves solving problems in a controlled environment.

Conclusion

In my paper, I felt necessary to mention the constraints of my study and some untapped potentials. First, I would like to discuss the distorting effects given the circumstances partly related to myself. As mentioned earlier, the data recording took place on the first day of the basic training. The students could not place or classify the people in the institute hierarchy yet, but they were aware of being at the bottom level of the hierarchy, and that they had to follow orders in all circumstances. Due to this reason, I doubt anyone would have denied my request to participate in the research. A similar reasoning applies to filling in the questionnaire. Despite data protection, I believe that the students had a strong desire for compliance and integration, and they tried to develop a positive image of themselves. I would like to note here again that a psychological aptitude test is part of the application procedure, the results of which may be a refusal for admission. This test is unified, thus everyone fills in the same test including intelligence, attention and personality modules, and participates in a personal discussion. Much is at stake; therefore, the key is the 'good answer' and 'performance'. It may be imaginable that most freshman students automatically associate these expressions with the notions of psychology and psychologists. Moreover, the requirement of impeccable lifestyle applies to all workers of law enforcement, including students. The inspection of impeccable lifestyle is done partly directly and partly randomly, and it includes checking the students' presence on social networking sites and portals, and

tracking their activity. Being aware of all this, the students could have suspected that the data registered by myself served the same function, and anyone could access them anytime. In this light, it may be incomprehensible first why they put their full name on the questionnaire. The answer could lie in what I explained above: due to the development of a positive self-image. It is possible to believe that the students tried to give answers that show their commitment, 'health', and that meet presumed expectations best. They gave their name in order to be possibly rewarded rather than to avoid punishment in this case. This could partly explain the unanimously high self-esteem and the surprisingly high identity scores amongst these freshman students. In my view, it would be worth repeating the research at certain intervals as studies progress until the graduation day, thus making this research longitudinal.

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ABSZTRAKT

A Rendészettudományi Kar nappali tagozatára érkező hallgatók motivációjának, pályaidentitásának és stresszmegküzdési jellemzőinek vizsgálata

SIPOS Szandra

A rendőri hivatás számos lemondást és teherbírást követel a rendőröktől, ezért kiemelt szerepet kapnak a választott pálya iránti elköteleződés és motiváció, valamint az adaptív megküzdési stratégiák. Kutatásomat a 2011-ben felvételt nyert rendőrhallgatók körében, az alapkiképzés első napján végeztem. Arra kerestem a választ, hogy a karra érkező hallgatók mennyire motiváltak a választott hivatás irányába, milyen stresszmegküzdési mechanizmusokkal és önértékeléssel kezdik meg tanulmányaikat. Eredményeim szerint a rendőrhallgatók erős motivációval rendelkeznek pályaválasztásukat illetően, magas önértékelés, valamint problémamegoldó „coping” stratégia jellemzi őket.

Kulcsszavak: rendőrtiszthallgatók, motiváció, megküzdés, pályaidentitás