



Belief in life as a zero-sum game in terms of stress and the social world perception

Wiara w życie jako grę o sumie zerowej w aspekcie postrzegania stresu i świata społecznego

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Introduction. Zero-sum game as a classic conflict model

Motives of human behaviour are conditioned by two factors. On the one hand, people put their own interests ahead of the interests of others. On the other hand, the interests of other people also play an important role in our behaviour. It seems that these two kinds of interests are independent of each other, although they often generate various kinds of conflicts, tensions and misunderstandings.

The classic model of conflict is a zero-sum game, i.e. a situation constructed in such a way that two or more parties compete for some limited good, and a sum of profits gained by one party corresponds exactly to a sum of losses suffered by the losers – gains minus losses equals zero, hence the name of the game, which is sometimes also called a constant-sum game (Wojciszke 2012, p. 402).

Some actions serve self-interest and harm the interests of others (egoism, rivalry), others serve both self-interests and others (cooperation), yet others harm self-interests and help others interests (altruism), finally some of them harm both types of interests. The most common conflict is undoubtedly the conflict over limited resources, with a zero-sum game structure, where gain for one side equals (and is only possible) at the cost of the other party's loss. In such situation, one's own and other person's interests are impossible to reconcile and, instead of two separate dimensions, they become opposite edges of the same dimension (Wojciszke et al. 2009, p. 179).

The concept of life as a zero-sum game takes into account an important aspect of resources, namely their finitude. According to this

theory, regardless of the objective nature of the good (finite or infinite), people differ in belief that various resources are finite, and that life is competition for those limited resources. The more one person receives, the less the other can gain (Snarska 2010, p. 9).

Authors of the belief in life as a zero-sum game theory have proved that similar visions of the world and its resources characterise people with low socioeconomic status, who are convinced of the injustice of the social system. Such persons are also characterised by poor satisfaction with life and lowered satisfaction with its various areas. They fail rather than succeed. The stronger the belief in life as a zero-sum game, the lower the development of society. Thus, the belief that life is a zero-sum game is more common among losers and has a negative impact on their social functioning (Wojciszke et al. 2009, pp. 179–187).

Belief in life as a zero-sum game seems to be an important conclusion about social world. It maintains the same structure in many cultures. The conviction is quite strongly dependent on objective indicators of positioning in the social structure and is associated with a negative vision of the social world and an intense fear of exploitation. It is accompanied by lack of social trust and a belief in unfavourable balance of one's social exchange with others. It is probably conducive to withdrawal from social exchange, which may secondarily contribute to the decline in social trust by the game's followers (Wojciszke et al. 2009, p. 187).

Average person's perception about belief in life as a zero-sum game largely relates to the thesis that one man's success is possible at the cost of another person's loss.

Perhaps people who are convinced about life as a zero-sum game will be more prone to experiencing stress and therefore less able to deal with it. This may be the consequence of lack of trust, withdrawal from social contacts, and thus it may lead to social support deficit.

Stress as a stimulus, reaction and transaction

Stress is a state characterised by strong negative emotions, such as fear, anxiety, anger, hostility, as well as other emotional states that cause distress and the associated physiological and biochemical changes that clearly exceed the base activation level (Strelau, Doliński 2010, p. 704). The literature on the subject presents three complementary ways of understanding the concept of stress.

In the first approach, stress is understood as a stimulus, i.e. occurrences or situations taking place in the environment that evoke a state of tension and strong, most often negative emotions. People react similarly to stressful

events, and the severity of the stress experienced is determined by evaluating the events.

According to another concept, stress is defined as a reaction, i.e. the physiological and psychological consequences of experiences referred to as stressors that appear in humans. This approach refers to Walter Cannon's concept of homeostasis, according to which stress is an imbalance of the body. It also refers to the most popular concept of stress by Hans Selye, who saw stress as a non-specific reaction of the body to all demands that threaten a person.

In the third perception, stress is understood as a transaction, i.e. a kind of relationship (interaction) between an individual and the environment, in which the experienced event is not as important as the fact how it is perceived and interpreted. Physiological and psychological reactions appear only when an individual assesses a given situation in terms of a threat, loss or challenge (Juczyński, Ogińska-Bulik 2009, pp. 11–12).

The above ways of understanding the concept of stress are compatible. However, the most appreciated is the third approach, represented by Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman. According to it, stress is the result of a specific type of relationship between an individual and the environment, in which a person lives and functions.

Cognitive-transactional paradigm of stress by R. Lazarus

Richard Lazarus, the most outstanding authority in the field of psychological stress, created a concept whose main assumptions related to human activity taking place in a specific situational context. In this approach, relations between an individual and the environment are regulated by the mutual interactions, the so-called transaction.

The transaction between human and the environment is subject to cognitive appraisal, which is also a continuous process (primary appraisal). The assessment process concerns mainly those elements of relations with the environment that are essential for the well-being of an individual. From this perspective, the relationship may be assessed as: irrelevant, favourable-positive or stressful (Strelau, Doliński 2010, p. 705).

In the appraisal of the relationship as insignificant or favourable-positive, there is no violation of values that are important to a human being, and thus there is no threat to their well-being. However, if a transaction is understood as exceeding the individual's ability to deal with it, then it is expressed by stress.

In the concept of R. Lazarus and S. Folkman, stress is defined as a relationship between a person and the environment, which is assessed by the person as taxing or exceeding their resources and threatening their well-being (Lazarus, Folkman 1984, p. 19).

The transactional approach assumes that the relationship between a person and the environment takes into account both the requirements of the environment and the individual ability to cope with an occurrence understood as stressful.

Confrontation of the environment requirements with one's own abilities is done through the process of cognitive appraisal, which is a judgment of the personal significance of a given occurrence to an individual – primary appraisal – and their ability to use available resources in order to meet the requirements of the stressor – secondary appraisal (Juczyński, Ognieńska-Bulik 2009, p. 12).

The stress transaction may be recognized in the primary appraisal as: harm/loss, threat, or challenge (Strelau, Doliński 2010, p. 705).

Primary appraisal is therefore a confirmation whether a specific stressful occurrence means harm/loss, a threat or a challenge. Harm/loss is an occurrence with negative consequences that had already taken place, e.g. loss of job or loss of self-esteem. A threat is something that may occur and have negative consequences. Challenge is usually related to the possibility of development, improvement or some other benefit (Franken 2006, p. 330).

In case the relationship is considered to be stressful as a result of primary appraisal, it initiates the next cognitive process – secondary appraisal. This assessment relates to the possibility of taking action in order to remove the causes of stress or at least mitigate its effects, and in the case of a challenge – lead to the achievement of available benefits. Secondary appraisal relates to both the sources of stress and to one's own resources. Both cognitive processes – primary and secondary appraisal – are simultaneous and connected. The importance of secondary appraisal to human behaviour lies in the fact that it is the starting point for activity aimed at changing the stress transaction (Strelau, Doliński 2010, pp. 705–706).

Coping styles – human behaviour in a stressful situation and its effectiveness in overcoming stress

The huge number of stressors to which contemporary human is exposed requires various ways to cope with stress. When taking actions aimed at restoring the state of mental balance, people use different strategies and styles of coping with stress.

Through assessment of the situation in terms of stress, a person appraises the possibility of taking actions aimed at removal of the cause of stress or mitigation of its effects.

In the concept of R. Lazarus and S. Folkman it is the so-called secondary appraisal that addresses both sources of stress and one's own resources. A person evaluates their abilities, competences, social support or material resources that may turn out to be useful for restoring the balance between them and the environment. The secondary appraisal is the starting point for an activity aimed at changing the stress transaction, which is referred to as coping with stress (Juczyński, Ognióńska-Bulik 2009, p. 23).

In the concept of R. Lazarus and S. Folkman, coping is understood as cognitive and behavioural efforts aimed at managing specific external and internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person (Lazarus, Folkman 1984, p. 141).

Lazarus's theory on the influence of cognitive factors on stress assumes the existence of two coping strategies. The first one is oriented towards problem solving and the second one is focused on experiencing one's own emotions.

Problem-focused coping means taking actions aimed at solving it in such a way that it would change its stressful transaction by controlling the stressor in order to alleviate or completely remove its stressful properties.

Undertaking a challenge to act, appraisal of the situation and one's coping resources, then taking appropriate actions in order to remove or reduce the threat are problem-solving efforts that are helpful in dealing with controllable stressors, i.e. stressors that can be changed or eliminated by one's own actions (Gerrig, Zimbardo 2011, p. 409).

In turns, emotion-focused coping is mainly concentrated on controlling symptoms of stress.

Emotion-oriented approach is useful in dealing with the effects of stressors which are uncontrollable but threaten the well-being of an individual, and therefore the person takes certain steps to reduce this threat (Gerrig, Zimbardo 2011, p. 409).

According to Lazarus, application of one or the other strategy depends on two additional factors: whether the situation is actually controllable and whether a person perceives it as the one that can be controlled (Franken 2006, p. 333).

Taking into account all three terms – process, strategy and style in relation to coping with stress, style is seen as a permanent disposition of a person to deal with stressful situations in a specific way. Strategy is defined as actions that

an individual takes in a specific stressful situation. Process of coping with stress is understood as a sequence of strategies that change over time (Szczepaniak, Strelau, Wrześniewski 1996, pp. 188–189).

Referring to the transactional concept of stress, Norman Endler and James Parker proposed to distinguish three styles of coping. The first two correspond to the task-oriented and emotion-oriented coping functions mentioned by R. Lazarus and S. Folkman, while the third style complements the classification of coping with the avoidance-oriented style. It serves primarily to reduce the effects of the stressor and is more adaptive in solving short-term problems than in situations of chronic stress (Juczyński, Ogińska-Bulik 2009, p. 24).

Task-oriented style defines the style of coping with stress by taking up tasks. People characterised by high intensity of this style tend to make efforts to solve the problem in stressful situations by cognitively transforming it or trying to change the situation. The main focus is on the task or planning of problem solving.

Emotion-oriented style refers to the style characteristic of people who tend to concentrate on themselves and their own emotional experiences in stressful situations, which serves to reduce excessive emotional tension.

The style focused on avoidance defines the style of coping with stress characteristic of people who deal with stressful situations by avoiding thinking or engaging (Strelau 2002, p. 300).

These styles are independent of each other, therefore, with attempts to describe coping with stress by an individual, it becomes necessary to encompass all three styles, as in each of these dimensions a person has their specific position.

Coping with stress is an inseparable component of psychological stress, similarly to cognitive appraisal and emotions (Strelau 1996, p. 95).

Coping with stress is a process in its character, since it is continued as long as required by the situation, i.e. until the stressful situation that disturbs the mental balance in human functioning is resolved.

Subject and purpose of own research

The subject of the research in this paper are three thematic areas, including the perception of stress related to current life situation and strategies of coping with stressful situations (Juczyński, Ogińska-Bulik 2009, pp. 5–7), as well as belief in life as a zero-sum game understood as a conflict over limited resources, where gain of one party equals loss of the other (Wojciszke 2009, p. 179).

The first aim of the research is to search for the relationship between the belief in life as a zero-sum game and the perceived stress, and the use of specific strategies while coping with stress in the group of students of the second and third year of social rehabilitation faculty. The second aim of the research is to check whether perceived stress and coping strategies are predictors of the belief that life is a zero-sum game.

Research problems and hypotheses

The assumed goals have been achieved by answering the following research questions:

1. Is there a significant correlation between belief in life as a zero-sum game and perceived stress?
2. Is there a significant correlation between belief in life as a zero-sum game and the frequency of using specific coping strategies?
3. Are perceived stress and coping strategies predictors of belief in life as a zero-sum game?

Review of the literature on the subject has resulted in formulating the following research hypotheses:

1. Stronger belief in life as a zero-sum game is associated with stronger perception of stress.
2. Stronger belief in life as a zero-sum game is associated with more frequent avoidance behaviours and less active coping or seeking support and focusing on emotions.
3. Perceived stress and coping strategies are predictors of belief in life as a zero-sum game.

Research tools and techniques

For the purpose of this paper, three research tools have been used:

1. The Perceived Stress Scale – PSS-10 by Sheldon Cohen, Tom Kamarck and Robin Mermelstein (1983), adapted to Polish conditions by Zygfryd Juczyński and Nina Ogińska-Bulik (2009).
2. Multidimensional Inventory for Measuring Stress Coping – COPE by Charles S. Carver, Michael F. Scheier and Kumari Jagdish Weintraub (1989), adapted to Polish conditions by Zygfryd Juczyński and Nina Ogińska-Bulik (2009).

3. The questionnaire about the opinion on social world by Bogdan Wojciszke and colleagues (2009), used to measure the subjective perception of the finitude of resources, referred to by the author as belief in life as a zero-sum game.

Characteristics of the research group

The research group consisted of 100 people – students in the field of Pedagogy, specialization: Social Rehabilitation and Social Prevention of the Faculty of Pedagogy and Art at the Jan Kochanowski University in Kielce. The research was conducted in 2017 and covered 56 second-year and 44 third-year students of social rehabilitation. There were 83 women and 15 men in the group (2 data missing, because the answers of the respondents were excluded from the survey). The age of the researched ranged from 20 to 24, with the average at 21.12 ($SD = 0.82$).

Analysis of research results

Descriptive statistics of the studied variables

Descriptive statistics on the strength of belief in life as a zero-sum game, the level of perceived stress and the coping strategies are presented below. The results of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z test that studies the compliance of the distribution of the analysed variables with the normal distribution are also presented (table 1).

Based on the presented results, it may be concluded that social rehabilitation students are characterized by a moderate strength of their belief in life as a zero-sum game (average 3.34 on a scale from 1 to 7 points) and a fairly high level of perceived stress (sten 7). The most frequently used strategies for coping with stress by students are active coping and seeking instrumental support, the least frequently used strategy is denial and the use of alcohol or other psychoactive substances.

The results of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z test have showed compliance with the normal distribution for the variables of perceiving stress and belief in life as a zero-sum game ($p > 0.05$) as well as no compliance with the normal distribution in the case of coping strategies ($p < 0.05$).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the studied variables

		N	Min.	Max.	M	SD	Z	p
Belief in life as a zero-sum game		100	1.67	5.67	3.44	0.82	0.64	0.81*
Perceived stress		100	8.00	33.00	20.50	6.06	0.68	0.74*
Stress Coping Strategies	Active coping	100	1.75	3.75	2.81	0.38	1.87	0.00
	Planning	100	1.25	4.00	2.75	0.57	1.07	0.03
	Seeking instrumental support	100	1.25	4.00	2.81	0.63	1.39	0.04
	Seeking emotional support	100	1.00	4.00	2.76	0.73	1.17	0.03
	Avoiding competitive activities	100	1.25	3.75	2.56	0.54	1.45	0.03
	Turn to religion	100	1.00	4.00	2.01	0.82	1.45	0.03
	Positive re-evaluation and development	100	1.25	4.00	2.78	0.55	1.40	0.04
	Suspension of actions	100	1.50	3.75	2.54	0.44	1.38	0.04
	Acceptance	100	1.25	4.00	2.39	0.60	1.39	0.04
	Focus on emotions and their vent	100	1.50	4.00	2.73	0.60	1.05	0.02
	Denial	100	1.00	3.00	1.71	0.48	1.61	0.01
	Distraction	100	1.00	3.50	2.20	0.55	1.04	0.03
	Taking no further actions	100	1.00	3.00	1.76	0.54	1.27	0.00
	Consumption of alcohol or drug taking	100	1.00	4.00	1.63	0.76	2.25	0.00
Sense of humour	100	1.00	3.75	1.82	0.73	1.50	0.02	

* distribution of the variable consistent with the normal distribution

Source: own research.

1. Relationship between belief in life as a zero-sum game and the stress perceived by students of social rehabilitation

In the first hypothesis of the paper it has been assumed that stronger belief in life as a zero-sum game is associated with stronger perceived stress. In order to verify it, r-Pearson's correlations between the belief in life as a zero-sum game and perceived stress have been calculated. The results are presented in table 2.

At the level of statistical tendency, significant positive correlation between the belief about life as a zero-sum game and the perceived stress has been observed. The higher level of stress experienced by the students of social rehabilitation, the stronger their conviction about life as a zero-sum game.

Table 2. R-Pearson correlation coefficients between the belief about life as a zero-sum game and the perceived stress in the group of social rehabilitation students

	Belief in life as a zero-sum game
Perceived stress	0.19*

* correlation significant at the level of the statistical trend $p < 0.10$

Source: own research.

The presented results constitute the basis for the adoption of the first research hypothesis that stronger belief in life as a zero-sum game is associated with stronger perceived stress.

2. Relationship between belief in life as a zero-sum game and stress coping strategies used by social rehabilitation students

Table 3. Pearson's r-correlation coefficients between belief in life as a zero-sum game and coping strategies in the group of social rehabilitation students

	Belief in life as a zero-sum game
Active coping	-0.08
Planning	-0.30**
Seeking instrumental support	-0.06
Seeking emotional support	-0.06
Avoiding competitive activities	-0.15
Turn to religion	0.04
Positive re-evaluation and development	-0.17
Suspension of actions	-0.13
Acceptance	0.12
Focus on emotions and their vent	0.11
Denial	0.10
Distraction	-0.03
Taking no further actions	0.21*
Consumption of alcohol or drug taking	0.17
Sense of humour	-0.10

* correlation significant at the level of $p < 0.05$

** correlation significant at the level of $p < 0.001$

Source: own research.

In the second hypothesis of this paper it has been assumed that stronger belief in life as a zero-sum game is associated with more frequent avoidance behaviours and less intense active coping, seeking support or focus on emotions. In order to verify it, Spearman's rho correlations between the belief in life as a zero-sum game and strategies for coping with stress have been calculated. The results are presented in table 3.

The presented results constitute the basis for a partial acceptance of the second hypothesis assuming that stronger belief in life as a zero-sum game is associated with more frequent avoidance behaviours and less intense active coping or seeking support and focusing on emotions. The hypothesis has been confirmed in terms of the relationship between stronger belief and less use of active coping (planning strategies) and more frequent avoidance behaviour (stop of further actions). However, the hypothesis has not been confirmed in terms of the relationship between strength of belief and the search for support and concentration on emotions.

3. Predictors of belief in life as a zero-sum game among social rehabilitation students

In the third research hypothesis of this paper it has been assumed that perceived stress and coping strategies are predictors of the belief that life is a zero-sum game. In order to verify it, a linear regression analysis in stepwise model has been performed, where the explained variable is the strength of belief in life as a zero-sum game, and predictors are perceived stress, stress coping strategies, and also demographic variables such as gender, age and year of study.

The results have showed that the most effective regression model explaining the strength of belief in life as a zero-sum game is the model that takes into account only planning strategies as predictors, $F(1.96) = 15.41$; $p < 0.001$. It explains 13% of the variability in the strength of belief. Perceived stress, other studied stress coping strategies and demographic variables are not significant predictors (table 4).

Planning strategy is a negative, moderately strong predictor of the belief strength ($\beta = -0.37$; $p < 0.001$). Less frequent use of planning strategies creates stronger belief in life as a zero-sum game among social rehabilitation students.

The dispersion of the correlation between the frequency of using planning strategies and the strength of belief in life as a zero-sum game is presented in figure 1.

Table 4. Regression model summary

	Non-standardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	t	relevance
	B	Standard error	Beta		
(constant)	4.93	0.39	-	12.64	0.001
Planning strategy	-0.54	0.14	-0.37	-3.93	0.001**

Dependent variable: Belief in life as a zero-sum game

** a significant predictor at the level of $p < 0.001$

Source: own research.

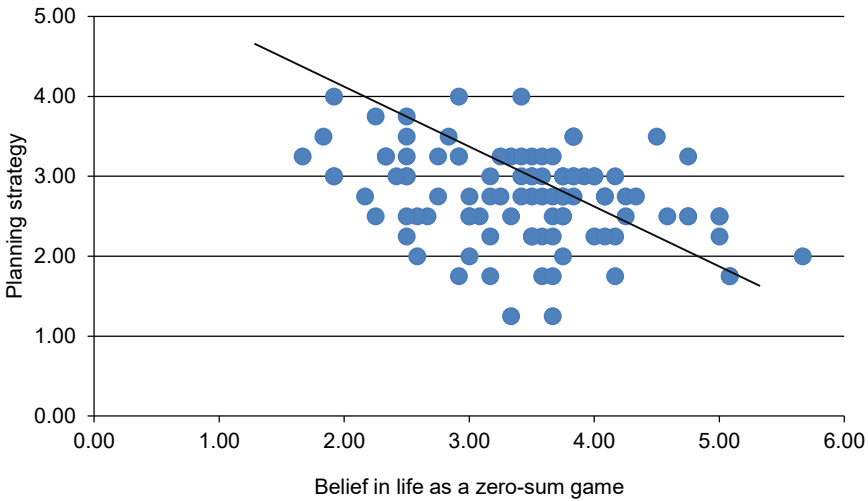


Figure 1. Dispersion of correlation between the frequency of using planning strategies and the strength of belief in life as a zero-sum game along with the regression line

Source: own research.

The presented results provide the basis for a partial acceptance of the third hypothesis, assuming that perceived stress and coping strategies are predictors of belief in life as a zero-sum game. The predictor of stronger belief about life as a zero-sum game in the group of social rehabilitation students have turned out to be only less frequent use of active coping in a stressful situation, i.e. planning strategies.

Discussion over the results

The primary purpose of the paper has been to investigate the relationship between belief in life as a zero-sum game, perceived stress and coping strategies.

In the literature on the belief in life as a zero-sum game it is indicated that this belief is accompanied by reduced trust in people and the perception of other persons as bad and immoral (Wojciszke et al. 2009, p. 184). The authors state that having negative views on the social world is associated with a decreased level of general satisfaction with life, more frequent negative emotions and less common experiences of positive emotional states. Researchers indicate that this belief characterizes failures and is typical of losers.

The conducted study has confirmed the first hypothesis that stronger belief in life as a zero-sum game is associated with stronger perceived stress. People who believe that life is a competition for finite resources conclude that the gain of one side is inextricably linked with the loss of the other side. Therefore, it can be stated that perception of life as a constant struggle, the necessity for people to bring themselves to do something, distrust of others and a tendency to experience negative emotions more often contributes to the appraisal of occurrences as more stressful.

According to B. Wojciszke et al. (2009, p. 185), people who strongly believe in life as a zero-sum game, are motivated by the fear of exploitation, so they will prefer to avoid risk, choose preventive actions and be conservative. Hence, it was expected that the believers would deal with stress by avoiding or focusing on emotions rather than using active coping strategies. The performed analysis has allowed for partial confirmation of the second research hypothesis, assuming that stronger belief in life as a zero-sum game is associated with more frequent avoidance behaviours and less active coping or seeking support and focusing on emotions.

As presented in the research, belief in the game is positively correlated with the conviction about the injustice of the world, in which offenses are not punished and also good deeds are not rewarded (Wojciszke et al. 2009, p. 181). Therefore, it can be stated that believing in the injustice of a world where virtues are not rewarded may lead to the conclusion that all actions are meaningless, which favours suspension of actions and the use of psychoactive substances to alleviate unpleasant emotions. It is also related to the reduced tendency to plan one's own actions and the difficulty of noticing the positive sides of the situation.

In the paper it has also been analysed whether perceived stress and coping strategies are predictors of belief in life as a zero-sum game. The third hypothesis assumed that the above-mentioned variables as well as gender, age and year of study significantly shape such belief. The hypothesis has been partially confirmed as it appears that the only significant predictor of the belief is the planning strategy. Therefore, it can be stated that the ability to consider various options and reflect on the sequence of one's own actions in a stressful situation lowers the belief in life as a zero-sum game (Wojciszke et al. 2009, p. 182).

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SUMMARY

Perceiving the world as a zero-sum game can intensify the level of stress associated with current life situation, and may condition adaptation of some coping strategies that are used by the people who are in stressful situation and have such understanding

of the surrounding environment. In addition, perceived stress and coping strategies may explain people's belief that life is a zero-sum game.

The purpose of this article is the attempt to answer the question whether there is a relationship between belief in life as a zero-sum game, perceived stress and the use of specific coping strategies. It also aims at checking whether perceived stress and coping strategies are predictors for belief in life as a zero-sum game.

KEYWORDS: Belief in life as a zero-sum game, stress, cognitive-transactional stress paradigm, coping strategies in a stressful situation

STRESZCZENIE

Postrzeganie świata jako gry o sumie zerowej może zintensyfikować poziom stresu związany z aktualną sytuacją życiową oraz warunkować adaptację niektórych strategii radzenia sobie, które są stosowane przez osoby znajdujące się w sytuacji stresowej i posiadających takie rozumienie otaczającego środowiska. Ponadto postrzegany stres i strategie radzenia sobie mogą wyjaśniać przekonanie ludzi, że życie jest grą o sumie zerowej.

Celem artykułu jest próba odpowiedzi na pytanie, czy istnieje związek między wiarą w życie jako grę o sumie zerowej, odczuwalnym stresem i stosowaniem określonych strategii radzenia sobie. Artykuł ma na celu również sprawdzenie, czy postrzegany stres i strategie radzenia sobie są predyktorami wiary w życie jako grę o sumie zerowej.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: wiara w życie jako grę o sumie zerowej, stres, poznawczo-transakcyjny paradygmat stresu, strategie radzenia sobie w sytuacji stresowej

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