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### Personal Development Strategies for Students Across Varying Agency Levels

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#### Abstract

This study is important due to the increasing importance of understanding the psychological factors and mechanisms behind personal self-development. The research aimed to investigate the factors influencing students' choices of self-improvement strategies—such as acquisition, rejection, transformation, and limitation—based on their levels of agency. The sample included 271 students, aged 17 to 27 years, mostly female, from various universities in Russia and Kazakhstan, with a mean age of 19.5 (SD = 1.5). An original diagnostic tool, the “square of self-improvement,” was developed, alongside the M.A. Schukina's “level of personal autonomy development” questionnaire, to measure the variables. Data analysis was performed using the  $\phi^*$  criterion (Fisher's angular transformation). The results showed that students with high agency levels were more likely to adopt acquisition, disposal, and transformation strategies, while those with lower agency levels showed a lower preference for “transformation” and a stronger inclination towards “acquisition.” This process was influenced by intrinsic value, which serves as an indicator of agency. Furthermore, qualitative differences were found in how the “acquisition” strategy was manifested in students with high versus low levels of agency. The study concludes that the selection of self-improvement strategies is strongly influenced by a student's level of agency—defined as their ability to control and direct their life and personal growth. These findings can be applied in professional education for planning individualized self-development paths and in psychological consulting services at universities.

**Keywords:** Self-improvement, Self-development, Agency, Self-improvement strategies

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#### Introduction

The connection between an individual's agency and self-development is a subject of ongoing relevance and debate in modern psychology [1-3]. The importance of this issue lies in understanding the psychological mechanisms that shape a person as the agent of their own life. These debates arise from differing interpretations of how agency and self-development relate to one another.

Agency consists of several properties that can manifest in varying ways within an individual, shaping the overall expression of agency. Some personality traits are commonly agreed upon by researchers as part of the agency structure, while others



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remain contested. One such debated trait is self-development, understood as the internally motivated process through which an individual's personality changes according to life goals and current circumstances.

### *Literature review*

The structure of the agency is explored in numerous works, often describing it as a set of subjective qualities that enable a person to be the initiator and creator of their own life. For example, Brushlinsky [4] emphasized traits such as activity, autonomy, creativity, and integrity. In his self-efficacy theory, Bandura [5] identified activity, autonomy, reflexivity, and self-regulation as key components. Alekseeva's concept of agency [6], later refined by Schukina [7], distinguishes six pairs of agent properties: activity-reactivity, autonomy-dependence, integrity-non-integrity, indirectness-immediacy, creativity-reproductivity, and intrinsic value-low value.

Other scholars incorporate self-development or self-improvement as part of the agency framework. Rubinstein [8] noted that agency involves traits such as activity, self-determination, development, self-regulation, and self-improvement. Serykh [9] also included self-determination, self-organization, and self-development as essential elements of agency.

The authors of this paper align with Slobodchikov's view [10] that a person becomes an active participant in their self-development after reaching a certain stage of development, typically during adolescence, when an individual begins to take control of their life. However, not everyone reaches this stage, and self-development is not always a positive or socially accepted process; it can sometimes take an asocial direction.

Another important consideration is that self-development, as a process of personal change, manifests in various forms, including self-affirmation, self-improvement, self-actualization, and self-realization. Self-affirmation is the desire for one's significance (or lack thereof) to be validated by others or oneself. The primary strategies of self-affirmation include constructive, dominant, and self-suppression strategies [11]. Self-improvement is generally understood in two ways: the pursuit of excellence and the process of self-change, often for the better. Self-actualization refers to realizing one's potential, while self-realization involves applying that potential in real-world situations. These different forms of self-development are interconnected and work in tandem.

### *Self-improvement and agency in the context of self-development*

In the context of this research, we focus specifically on self-improvement as a distinct form of self-development. The concept of self-improvement has been explored in various ways within modern psychology. Adler [12] was among the first to highlight the pursuit of self-improvement or excellence as a motivational force in self-development. Self-improvement can be driven by multiple motivations, such as striving for life goals, cultivating a desired self-image, or the need for feedback [13], especially when the process elicits positive emotions.

Both self-improvement and self-affirmation require specific strategies, though there is no unified understanding of these strategies in contemporary literature. These strategies are often seen as tools or conditions that facilitate self-improvement. For instance, Schaffner [14] identifies strategies like self-knowledge, self-control, and self-education. Other researchers focus on specific elements of self-affirmation and self-improvement, such as self-elevation and self-defense. Hepper *et al.* [15] list strategies like defensiveness (the tendency to adopt an avoidant or defensive stance), positive acceptance, favorable constructs, and self-affirming speculation among self-elevation and self-defense strategies.

In some studies, self-improvement strategies are treated as broad approaches to personal change, including acquisition, rejection, transformation, and limitation [16].

- Acquisition refers to gaining something new, such as knowledge, skills, or personal qualities.
- Rejection involves getting rid of something unsatisfactory, like bad habits or undesirable traits.
- Transformation involves either qualitative self-improvement or a more radical restructuring, such as converting negative feelings into positive ones, like turning resentment into forgiveness or laziness into motivation.
- Limitation refers to restricting certain behaviors, such as controlling the number of cigarettes one smokes or managing irritability toward others.

Research indicates that the choice of strategy is influenced by the intensity of an individual's motivation for self-development. When motivation is high, individuals tend to favor acquisition strategies, whereas those with lower motivation are more likely to choose rejection or limitation strategies [17].

The study now turns to the relationship between agency and self-development, particularly focusing on self-improvement. The agency is a topic frequently explored concerning students. Vaughn [18] defines student agency as the desire, ability, and power to control one's course of action. Jaaskela *et al.* [19] identify individual, relational, and contextual components of agency in students. Geikhman and Kabanov [20] highlight the motivational, evaluative, regulatory, cognitive, and practical parameters of an agency, which vary depending on its developmental stage, including levels of competence, objectness, agency, professionalism, and skill.

Bandura [21] argues that self-efficacy is the foundation of agency. As a result, many studies focus on self-efficacy rather than directly addressing the agency itself when exploring self-development and self-improvement [22-24]. However, some research has identified a direct link between agency and self-development. For example, Lo-oh and Neba [25] found that aspects of agency such as foresight, self-reactivity, self-efficacy, self-reflexivity, and self-esteem positively correlate with self-development in Cameroonian students.

Most of the current research focuses on identifying how self-improvement relates to characteristics of agency but overlooks how individuals, particularly students, approach the practical aspects of self-development, such as strategies for self-affirmation, self-improvement, and self-actualization. This leaves a gap in understanding how students, as active agents of their development, make decisions regarding the methods they use to address personal growth and challenges.

Our study addresses this gap by examining how students with different levels of agency choose strategies for self-improvement. We hypothesize that students with higher agency are more likely to prefer acquisition and transformation strategies, while those with lower agency are more inclined to choose rejection or limitation strategies.

## Materials and Methods

This study is based on the agency approach to self-development, as proposed by Schukina [26], which underscores the dialectical relationship between an individual's agency and self-development. According to Schukina, "The ability for self-development is a core feature of the subject/actor, and the capacity to be a subject is a prerequisite for self-development" [26]. In this research, a combination of theoretical, empirical, and mathematical methods for data processing was employed. Specifically, Schukina's "Level of Agency and Personality Development" questionnaire and our methodology, the "Square of Self-Improvement," were used.

Schukina's "Level of Agency and Personality Development" questionnaire [7] was created to assess both the general level of personal agency development and its various indicators: 1) activity vs. reactivity; 2) autonomy vs. dependence; 3) integrity vs. disintegration; 4) indirectness vs. immediacy; 5) creativity vs. reproductivity; and 6) intrinsic value vs. insignificance. The questionnaire includes 61 items, with results calculated according to a key for both the overall questionnaire and individual scales, enabling the creation of a personalized agency development profile.

The "Square of Self-Improvement" [27] is a technique we developed for this study. Participants are instructed to draw a large square and divide it into four sections, each representing one of the following self-improvement strategies: acquisition, rejection, limitation, and transformation. The instructor explains each strategy to the students. The task for participants is to: "Write in the appropriate section the personality traits or behaviors you wish to acquire, eliminate, transform, or limit. It is not necessary to fill in all sections; if there are no traits you wish to acquire or remove, simply leave those sections blank. Afterward, rank the qualities according to their importance, with the highest priority given to the trait you most want to acquire, remove, transform, or limit, and rank others in descending order of priority."

The data collected were analyzed using general statistical methods, with the  $\phi^*$  criterion from Fisher's angular transformation applied for statistical analysis.

The study involved 271 participants, aged 17 to 27 years, with a mean age of 19.5 (SD = 1.5), of whom 96% were women. The participants were from various universities in Russia and Kazakhstan, including 82 students from Cherepovets State University (Cherepovets, Russia), 54 students from Shadrinsk State Pedagogical University (Shadrinsk, Russia), and 135 students from Kazakhstan National Women's Pedagogical University (Almaty, Kazakhstan).

## Results and Discussion

In this section, we present the main findings from our study. First, we provide an overview of the participants based on the parameters we studied. The choices of self-improvement strategies by students are summarized in **Table 1**.

**Table 1.** Distribution of self-improvement strategies chosen by students

Self-improvement strategy	Number (n)	Percentage (%)
Acquisition	117	43.17
Rejection	83	30.63
Transformation	49	18.08
Limitation	22	8.12
Total	271	100

Note: Only the first-priority selections by students were considered

As shown in **Table 1**, the majority of students (43.17%, or 117 students) preferred the acquisition strategy. The rejection strategy was chosen by 30.63% of students (83 participants), while transformation was selected by 18.08% (49 students). The limitation strategy was the least chosen, with only 8.12% (22 students) opting for it.

Next, we examine the specific personal qualities, skills, and competencies that students prefer to develop:

- **Acquisition Strategy:** Many students expressed a desire to acquire qualities such as confidence, patience, perseverance, the ability to accept criticism, public speaking, interpersonal skills, foreign language proficiency, and artistic abilities (e.g., drawing, playing musical instruments).
- **Rejection Strategy:** Students who chose this strategy aimed to rid themselves of traits such as laziness, procrastination, insecurity, shyness, irritability, weak will, dependency on others' opinions, and bad habits.
- **Transformation Strategy:** This strategy reflects a desire for qualitative changes, such as turning negative traits into positive ones. Students selecting this strategy were focused on developing memory, logical thinking, stress resistance, time management, academic skills, and improving their English, cooking, and sports abilities.
- **Limitation Strategy:** Those who preferred the limitation strategy wanted to reduce time spent on social media, limit bad habits (e.g., smoking, swearing, overeating), and curb traits like irresponsibility, laziness, passivity, irritability, and pessimistic thinking.

**Table 2.** Average values and standard deviations for agency and its indicators

Agency indicator	Mean (M)	Standard deviation (SD)
Overall agency	6.59	1.32
Activity vs. reactivity	6.54	1.45
Autonomy vs. dependence	6.75	1.33
Integrity vs. disintegration	6.74	1.32
Indirectness vs. immediacy	6.73	1.50
Creativity vs. reproductivity	5.92	1.55
Intrinsic value vs. low value	6.92	1.12

**Table 2** reveals that all values are above the mid-range. The most pronounced indicator was “Intrinsic value vs. low value” ( $M = 6.92$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ), while “Creativity vs. reproductivity” showed the least pronounced difference ( $M = 5.92$ ,  $SD = 1.55$ ). This indicates that most students exhibit a high level of agency and perceive themselves as valuable individuals. However, they tend to prefer reproductive activities rather than creative endeavors.

Finally, we address the core focus of this study: examining students' preferences for self-improvement strategies based on their overall agency and its specific indicators. The results of this analysis are shown in **Table 3**.

**Table 3.** Self-improvement strategy preferences based on agency levels, overall data, and specific indicators

Agency level and specific indicators	Acquisition	Rejection	Transformation	Limitation	Total
<b>Overall agency</b>					
High	16 (33.33%)	12 (25%)	18 (37.5%)	2 (4.17%)	48 (100%)
Medium	79 (43.64%)	57 (31.49%)	31 (17.13%)	14 (7.74%)	181 (100%)
Low	22 (52.38%)	14 (33.33%)	2 (4.76%)	4 (9.53%)	42 (100%)
<b>Significance of differences (<math>\phi^*</math>)</b>	1.79, $P \leq .05$	0.87, ns	4.14, $P \leq .001$	1.01, ns	
<b>Activity</b>					
High	24 (37.5%)	17 (26.56%)	18 (28.13%)	5 (7.81%)	64 (100%)
Medium	74 (45.96%)	49 (30.43%)	27 (16.77%)	11 (6.84%)	161 (100%)
Low	20 (43.48%)	17 (36.96%)	6 (13.04%)	3 (6.52%)	46 (100%)
<b>Significance of differences (<math>\phi^*</math>)</b>	1.34, ns	1.15, ns	1.94, $P \leq .05$	0.25, ns	
<b>Autonomy</b>					
High	34 (37.36%)	28 (30.77%)	25 (27.47%)	4 (4.4%)	91 (100%)
Medium	60 (49.18%)	27 (22.13%)	21 (17.21%)	14 (11.48%)	122 (100%)
Low	27 (46.55%)	21 (36.22%)	8 (13.79%)	2 (3.44%)	58 (100%)
<b>Significance of differences (<math>\phi^*</math>)</b>	1.11, ns	0.67, ns	2.04, $P \leq .05$	0.30, ns	
<b>Integrity</b>					
High	29 (40.85%)	17 (23.94%)	18 (25.35%)	7 (9.86%)	71 (100%)
Medium	68 (43.87%)	48 (30.97%)	29 (18.71%)	10 (6.45%)	155 (100%)
Low	18 (40%)	18 (40%)	4 (8.89%)	5 (11.11%)	45 (100%)
<b>Significance of differences (<math>\phi^*</math>)</b>	0.04, ns	1.82, $P \leq .05$	2.36, $p \leq .01$	0.11, ns	
<b>Indirectness</b>					
High	26 (34.21%)	23 (30.26%)	22 (28.95%)	5 (6.58%)	76 (100%)

Medium	66 (47.48%)	38 (27.33%)	24 (17.27%)	11 (7.92%)	139 (100%)
Low	26 (46.43%)	23 (41.07%)	4 (7.14%)	3 (5.36%)	56 (100%)
<b>Significance of differences (<math>\phi^*</math>)</b>	1.41, ns	1.27, ns	3.39, $P \leq .001$	0.29, ns	
<b>Creativity</b>					
High	17 (38.64%)	17 (38.64%)	8 (18.18%)	2 (4.54%)	44 (100%)
Medium	50 (44.64%)	33 (29.46%)	21 (18.75%)	8 (7.15%)	112 (100%)
Low	51 (44.35%)	33 (28.7%)	22 (19.13%)	9 (7.82%)	115 (100%)
<b>Significance of differences (<math>\phi^*</math>)</b>	0.66, ns	1.18, ns	0.13, ns	0.77, ns	
<b>Intrinsic value</b>					
High	35 (35.71%)	25 (25.51%)	30 (30.61%)	8 (8.17%)	98 (100%)
Medium	54 (45.76%)	41 (34.74%)	17 (14.41%)	6 (5.09%)	118 (100%)
Low	29 (52.72%)	17 (30.91%)	4 (7.27%)	5 (9.1%)	55 (100%)
<b>Significance of differences (<math>\phi^*</math>)</b>	2.04, $P \leq .05$	0.71, ns	3.71, $P \leq .001$	0.19, ns	

### Key

- High indicates a high level of the specific agency indicator.
- Medium refers to a medium level of the specific agency indicator.
- Low refers to a low level of the specific agency indicator.
- \*Significance of differences ( $\phi$  - Fisher's angular transformation)\*\*: ns = non-significant,  $p \leq .05$ ,  $p \leq .001$ .

The findings presented in **Table 3** suggest that the adoption of self-improvement strategies varies among students with different agency levels. Students exhibiting high agency predominantly engage in three strategies: acquisition (33.33%, 16 students), rejection (25%, 12 students), and transformation (37.5%, 18 students), with a minimal inclination toward the limitation strategy (4.17%, 2 students).

In contrast, students with medium levels of agency show a higher preference for acquisition (43.64%, 79 students) and rejection (31.49%, 57 students). However, there is a noticeable decline in the choice of the transformation strategy (17.13%, 31 students), while the limitation strategy shows a modest increase to 7.74%.

Among those with low agency levels, the preference for the acquisition strategy continues to rise (52.38%, 22 students), with a stable preference for rejection (33.33%, 14 students). However, the proportion of students favoring the transformation strategy drops significantly (4.76%, 2 students), and the use of the limitation strategy increases to 9.53% (4 students).

Further analysis of specific agency indicators reveals that low levels of directness, integrity, autonomy, and activity are linked to a reduced frequency of selecting the transformation strategy. Additionally, a low sense of intrinsic value not only diminishes the likelihood of choosing transformation but also increases the preference for acquisition. Students with a lower sense of integrity tend to use the rejection strategy more frequently, with an increase in the avoidance strategy (up to 40% compared to 23.94% in students with high integrity).

In conclusion, students with high agency levels tend to prefer acquisition, rejection, and transformation strategies, aligning with their self-development and improvement goals. Conversely, students with lower agency levels utilize the transformation strategy less and are more inclined toward acquisition, particularly those with lower intrinsic value. Additionally, lower integrity levels seem to encourage students to adopt an avoidance strategy.

A further qualitative comparison of the acquisition strategy reveals distinct differences between students with higher and lower agency levels. High-agency students prioritize qualities like perseverance, time management, confidence, and self-discipline, often seeking specific skills such as learning to draw or mastering a foreign language. On the other hand, students with lower agency levels focus more on boosting confidence and independence, with a priority on these personal attributes rather than specific skills.

This pattern is also observed in the use of the avoidance strategy. High-agency students aim to eliminate laziness, rigidity, irritability, and time mismanagement, while low-agency students share similar goals but are more focused on overcoming shyness, weak will, dependence, anger, and negative influences, which hinder their independence and self-acceptance.

In conclusion, the hypothesis of the study was only partially validated, particularly regarding the transformation strategy. For other strategies like acquisition and rejection, the results contradicted the initial expectations, especially concerning the higher use of the acquisition strategy by students with lower agency levels. This comparison with existing psychological data leads to the following observations.

### Motivational aspects of self-development and self-improvement in contemporary psychology

Modern psychological research highlights the importance of motivation in self-development, a key component in the process of self-improvement. Studies have shown that the motivation for professional growth and self-improvement evolves as individuals progress in their careers. However, this area is underdeveloped among young professionals [28], suggesting the



need for interventions starting at the undergraduate level to nurture this motivation [29]. Factors like receiving appreciation from others [30], recognizing personal failures [31], practicing self-compassion [32], and building self-efficacy [33] are all known to stimulate self-improvement. Self-improvement can also arise from competitive environments [34] or specialized training such as emotional self-regulation techniques [35]. Furthermore, individuals who are predisposed to self-improvement are more likely to engage in positive social behaviors, such as altruism [36].

The current study reveals that the desire for self-improvement is not only driven by motivation but also by specific strategies individuals adopt for self-betterment. Our research's innovation lies in understanding the role of personal agency in how students select their self-improvement strategies. We observed that lower levels of agency and its associated traits limit the use of self-improvement strategies. At present, the strategies of acquisition and rejection are the most actively used, both focused on enhancing an individual's self-worth. Students with higher levels of agency are more likely to choose strategies that align with real-world needs for change, rather than focusing on boosting self-esteem, which they already possess. As a result, these students favor transformation strategies, with limitation strategies being used minimally.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this study underscores that self-improvement plays a vital role in personal development, emphasizing the active pursuit of positive traits while addressing negative ones. The strategies for self-improvement—acquisition, rejection, transformation, and limitation—are influenced by an individual's sense of agency, which impacts their ability to direct their self-growth. Students with high agency levels tend to prefer acquisition, rejection, and transformation strategies. In contrast, students with lower agency levels favor acquisition strategies, often tied to a weaker sense of intrinsic value, which is a critical component of agency. When students demonstrate lower integrity, rejection strategies become more prevalent. Overall, the limitation strategy is infrequently utilized across all groups.

## *Limitations and future research directions*

A key limitation of this study is the predominance of female participants, which is typical of many teacher-training universities in Russia and Kazakhstan, especially in fields like pedagogy and psychology. However, this does not diminish the validity of the findings but provides valuable insights into how students choose self-improvement strategies. Future research could address these limitations by: (a) testing these patterns in male student groups and (b) exploring how psychological and human capital influences students' choices of self-improvement strategies.

The findings of this research have practical applications for the professional training of future educators and psychologists. They can be used to tailor self-development programs to better suit students' preferences for specific self-improvement strategies. Additionally, the results can inform psychological counseling in academic settings, helping students navigate and enhance their growth pathways.

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