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**THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIAL COMPETENCES AND
COPING STRATEGIES IN CZECH UNIVERSITY STUDENTS**

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Abstract

Social competences and the preference of coping strategies affect everyday functioning and dealing with demanding and stressful life situations, both in a general context and in the context of university study. The objective of this paper is to assess the relationship between these characteristics among university students. The Social Competences Inventory and the Coping Strategies Inventory (SVF-78) were used. The research sample consisted of 407 university students (average age = 26.38; SD = 7.09, range = 19-54, 114 males, 293 females). The results for the whole sample showed significant correlations between individual coping strategies and social competence scales, ranging from $r = -.467$ to $.426$ (explaining up to 22% of shared variance). Higher social competences generally increase the preference of avoidance and active control strategies and decrease escape strategies. Subsequent partial correlations and MANOVA test confirmed the impact of gender. Gender-related correlations revealed some differences in the strength and direction of the relationship. Male's preference of coping strategies is affected mainly by the level of perceived masculinity, while female's preference is more likely affected by their sensitivity to interpersonal functioning and by their social environment. An inference test confirmed significant differences of correlation coefficients between social orientation (control strategy) and reflexivity (negative strategy). The results suggest that interventions aimed at the development of social competences can positively affect the preference and use of desirable and effective coping strategies.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Social competences

Social competences and coping strategies (or preferences of specific stress coping strategies) are personality characteristics, which on a general level affect the ability of effective functioning of an individual in life and society and the individual's ability to cope with demanding and stressful life situations. In the context of university study, they may represent significant aspects that facilitate or impede the course of study. Therefore, the aim of the paper is to analyse the relationship between the level of social competences and preferences of individual types of coping strategies.

Social competences are understood as follows: a) Acquired skills that determine the effectiveness of functioning in social situations (Czechowski, Femiak, & Kuk, 2014); b) Abilities to optimize one's social behaviour according to available social information, which improves social relationships and interactions (Taborsky & Oliveira, 2012); c) Human capacity to use social skills effectively to attain one's goals in social interactions (Magelinskaitė, Kepalaitė, & Legkauskas, 2014); d) Showing socially appropriate behaviour under various circumstances and in accordance with social expectations of the environment (Gresham, 1997); e) Ability to reach compromises between the interests of an individual and the interests of the social environment (Kanning, 2017). This is a set of sub-competences, which primarily include teamwork, problem solving, decision making, ability to face challenges, development and maintenance of relationships, self-control, assertiveness, responsibility, respect, creativity, or critical thinking (Del Prette, Del Prette, & Mendes Barreto, 1999), and also self-esteem, openness, empathy, respecting the rights of other people, constructive problem solving, and socially creative thinking (Žygaitienė & Numgaudienė, 2016).

In his diagnostic instrument, which is also used in the present research, Kanning (2017) distinguishes the following four dimensions of social competences: 1) Social orientation (positive attitude to other people, empathy, ability to listen, and tolerance); 2) Offensiveness (active approach to people, efforts to establish contacts, successful advancing of one's interests, decisiveness, and ability to face conflicts); 3) Self-control (perception of oneself as an important cause of the surrounding events and the producer of their own behaviour, balanced emotional experiencing, behavioural control and prudence in stressful conditions); 4) Reflexibility (ability to perceive one's behaviour in interactions, perceive the reactions of others to one's behaviour, ability to perceive the needs of others and to adapt). Therefore, the development of social competences is one of the main objectives of current educational systems and institutions (Gedvilienė, 2012).

1.2. Coping strategies

Coping strategies represent behavioural, social or cognitive efforts of an individual to deal with internal and external pressures and tension accumulated as a result of interactions with other people and the environment (Folkman, Lazarus, Gruen, & DeLongis, 1986; Paulík, 2009), or adaptive changes in cognitive and behavioural efforts to deal with psychological stress (Englert, Bertrams, & Dickhauser, 2011; DeLongis & Holtzman, 2005). Initially, several disposition (trait) models were defined, but later a situational perspective was adopted, which considers coping as a process variable in time and dependent

on a situational context (Lazarus, 1993). Coping with a difficult situation may result in feelings of relief, personal value, or increase in performance capacity (Martyn–Nemeth, Penckofer, Gulanick, Velsor–Friedrich, & Bryant, 2009; Shalev & Ursano, 2003).

The concept of coping (and coping strategies) is divided into several different groups. The psychodynamic concept is built primarily on defence mechanisms (Vašina, 2002). A popular approach is the Lazarus' transaction concept (representing the cognitive perspective), which distinguishes between problem-focused coping strategies and emotion-focused coping strategies (Millová, Blatný, & Kohutek, 2008). Another type of classification is presented by Donnellan, Hevey, Hickey, & O'Neill (2006), who distinguishes between approach (or active) coping, which is a cognitive and behavioural effort to resolve a problem in an active way, and evasive coping, which is an effort to deny, minimise or escape from a stressful situation. An interesting issue is the theory of coping resources which consist in social and personal characteristics used by individuals to deal with a situation. These include for example personality/social competences, social support, sense of coherence, hardiness, self-efficacy, or optimism (Krohne, 2002).

A number of authors have described various specific stress coping strategies and procedures. Janke, Erdmann and Kallus (2002) defined 13 strategies classified in four dimensions. The first three are positive strategies (positive in the sense of an active strategy, i.e. an effort to resolve a situation in an active way). They include reassessment and devaluation strategies aimed at reassessing and decreasing the severity of a stressor, stress and stress response. They also include the disengagement strategy, which is an effort to deviate from a stressful situation or focus on alternative/different situations and activities. The final part is the control strategy, which involves an effort to control and resolve a situation in a constructive way. The fourth dimension includes negative coping strategies (escape strategies by which individuals try to escape from a difficult situation instead of resolving it), including an effort to escape from a situation, resignation or self-accusation.

1.3. The relationship between social competences and coping strategies

The relationship between social competences and preferences of coping strategies was confirmed by a number of studies. Higher social competences are generally associated with more frequent use of active and prosocial coping strategies (Kliwer & Sandler, 1993; Lazsadi, 2015; Reijntjes, Stegge, & Terwogt, 2006; Szabala, 2013; Zimmer-Gembeck, Lees, & Skinner, 2011) and decreased preference of passive coping strategies (Miller, Omens, & Delvadia, 1991; Szabala, 2013). Some authors even consider social competences a form of coping strategy, because their characteristics transformed into an active approach correspond with the nature of selected coping strategies, or directly affect the ability of decision making concerning the use of an adequate coping strategy (Han & Kemple, 2006; Howes & Ritchie, 2002; Chinaveh, 2013; Kostelnik, Whiren, Soderman, Stein, & Gregory, 2002). This relationship is affected not only by the level of social competences in relation to (pro)social abilities of an individual, but also by perceived emotions associated with interpersonal functioning (Hunter, Boyle, & Warden, 2004; Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2004). In the context of the present study it needs to be highlighted that most previous research studies involved populations of children and adolescents, while information about the relationship between these two characteristics in adults is relatively rare.

2. Problem Statement

Effective use of suitable stress coping strategies plays a role in the process of learning and in the context of meeting students' requirements and passing exams. One of the factors that may affect the selection of coping strategies are students' social competences.

In the context of Czech schools and universities, the effect of the selection of coping strategies, the ability to effectively deal with difficult situations, and the effect of other students' characteristics (including social competences) are still underestimated.

3. Research Questions

On the basis of previous studies and in the context of theoretical correlations between social competences and preferences of coping strategies, the following research questions were defined.

- *Research question 1:* What are the relationships between individual social competences and preferences of coping strategies in a sample of university students of teacher training courses?
- *Research question 2:* Are the relationships between social competences and preferences of coping strategies affected by any of the demographic characteristics of the respondents?

4. Purpose of the Study

The objective of the study is to test the correlations between social competences and preferences of coping strategies in dealing with difficult situations among students from the Faculty of Education, taking into account their demographic characteristics (gender, age, form of study and field of study). Regarding the fact that for a number of students university study causes stressful situations, which they address by means habitual coping strategies, the results of the present study will suggest the degree to which strategy selection is affected by students' social competences. Regarding the fact that these competences can be deliberately affected and developed (which should be one of the aims of university study), it is possible to use these findings to draft effective intervention measures to increase the effectiveness of the use of coping strategies and preferences of desirable forms of coping.

5. Research Methods

5.1. Research sample

The research sample consisted of 407 university students of teacher training courses aged 19-54 years (average age = 26.38, SD = 7.09), of whom 114 were male (average age = 27.32, SD = 6.36, range = 19-47 years) and 293 were female (average age = 26.01, SD = 7.33, range = 19-54 years).

5.2. Methods

Two research methods were used. *The Social Competence Inventory* (SCI) uses 33 items on a 4-point scale to identify the following four dimensions of social competences: social orientation (10 items), offensiveness (8 items), self-control (8 items), and reflexivity (7 items). The validity of the questionnaire

was verified by means of standardization (Hoskovcová & Vašek, 2017). The reliability of the questionnaire in all dimensions ranges from $\alpha = 0.72$ to 0.79 .

The Coping Strategies Inventory (SVF-78) is an instrument to identify the ways and strategies used by an individual to cope with difficult and stressful life situations. The inventory includes 78 items assessed on a 5-point scale. The questionnaire includes 13 individual strategies clustered in four scales of a higher order, of which three are positive: guilt reassessment and devaluation strategy (guilt undervaluation and rejection subscales), disengagement strategy (disengagement and substitute satisfaction subscales, control strategy (control of situation, control of reaction and positive self-instruction subscales), and negative strategies (escape tendency, perseveration, resignation and self-accusation subscales). The validity of the Czech version of the questionnaire was verified by means of standardization (Švancara, 2003). The reliability of the questionnaire in all scales ranges from $\alpha = 0.77$ to 0.94 .

The data were analysed by means of SPSS 21 using correlation and partial correlation analyses, multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA), Fisher's Z-score transformation, and inference test.

6. Findings

Table 1 shows mean values for the questionnaires.

Table 01. Mean values and SD

	Entire sample (N=407)		Men (N=114)		Women (N=293)	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
SCI SO	29.85	3.68	28.59	3.54	30.34	3.62
SCI OF	20.00	3.54	21.48	3.77	19.43	3.28
SCI SE	21.15	3.91	22.22	3.49	20.74	4.00
SCI RE	19.84	2.53	20.39	2.62	19.62	2.46
SVF POS1	13.01	2.64	13.39	2.77	12.86	2.57
SVF POS2	10.09	3.25	11.09	3.29	9.69	3.16
SVF POS3	11.98	3.67	11.72	4.21	12.08	3.44
SVF NEG	15.65	3.23	16.05	3.05	15.50	3.30

Note: SCI SO – Social orientation, SCI OF – Offensiveness, SCI SE – Self-control, SCI RE – Reflexibility, STAI – Anxiousness, SVF POS1 – Guilt reassessment and devaluation strategy, SVF POS2 – Disengagement strategy, SVF POS3 – Control strategy, SVF NEG – Negative strategy, M – Mean, SD – Standard deviation

The relationship between social competences and preferences of coping strategies were first analysed by means of the correlation analysis (see Table 2).

Table 02. Correlation analysis of the relationships between SCI and SVF for the entire sample

	SCI SO	SCI OF	SCI SE	SCI RE
SVF POS1	-.059	.334**	.338**	.156**
SVF POS2	.034	.119*	.042	.270**
SVF POS3	.234**	.426**	.334**	.316**
SVF NEG	-.095	-.465**	-.467**	.028

Note: SCI SO – Social orientation, SCI OF – Offensiveness, SCI SE – Self-control, SCI RE – Reflexibility, STAI – Anxiousness, SVF POS1 – Guilt reassessment and devaluation strategy, SVF POS2 – Disengagement strategy, SVF POS3 – Control strategy, SVF NEG – Negative strategy, * – significant as a level of .05, ** – significant as a level of .01

The results suggested several findings. As far as social competences are concerned, the preference of coping strategies is primarily related to offensiveness, self-control and reflexivity. In terms of individual types of coping strategies, social competences are primarily related to the control strategy and negative strategy, to a lesser extent with the guilt reassessment and devaluation strategy, and to the least extent with the disengagement strategy. The degree of shared variance ranged from 1.4 to 21.8% ($r^2 = .014 - .218$).

Another area of analysis was the effect of the respondents' demographic characteristics on the relationship defined above. The analysis of the effect of gender, age, form of study and field of study using partial correlations suggested changes in the sizes of the correlation coefficients especially in the context of gender (for other variables a significant effect was not confirmed) (see Table 3).

Table 03. Partial correlation of the relationship between SCI and SVF with controlled effect of demographic variables

		SCI SO	SCI OF	SCI SE	SCI RE
	Controlled variables				
SVF POS1		-.059	.334**	.338**	.156**
	Gender	-.019	.300**	.315**	.133**
	Age	-.062	.330**	.332**	.153**
	Form of study	-.059	.335**	.338**	.156**
	Field of study	-.045	.324**	.343**	.146**
SVF POS2		.034	.119*	.042	.270**
	Gender	.026	.136**	.050	.279**
	Age	.031	.112*	.032	.267**
	Form of study	.031	.116*	.038	.269**
	Field of study	.055	.100*	.047	.258**
SVF POS3		.234**	.426**	.334**	.316**
	Gender	.257**	.422**	.327**	.309**
	Age	.233**	.415**	.316**	.312**
	Form of study	.230**	.422**	.331**	.315**
	Field of study	.260**	.414**	.344**	.304**
SVF NEG		-.095	-.465**	-.467**	.028
	Gender	-.138**	-.441**	-.450**	.053
	Age	-.092	-.459**	-.460**	.033
	Form of study	-.093	-.463**	-.466**	.029
	Field of study	-.111*	-.456**	-.473**	.040

Note: SCI SO – Social orientation, SCI OF – Offensiveness, SCI SE – Self-control, SCI RE – Reflexibility, STAI – Anxiousness, SVF POS1 – Guilt reassessment and devaluation strategy, SVF POS2 – Disengagement strategy, SVF POS3 – Control strategy, SVF NEG – Negative strategy, * – significant as a level of .05, ** – significant at a level of .01

Therefore, the role of gender on the relationship between social competences and preferences of coping strategies was further analysed by means of the analysis of variance and inference test. A multi-dimensional analysis of variance (MANOVA, Hotelling's Trace) showed a significant multivariate effect for social competences in the context of gender: $T = .196$, $F(4, 402) = 19.682$, $p < .001$, $d = .20$. One-dimensional analyses confirmed that men and women significantly differed in social orientation: $F(1,$

405) = 19.507, $p < .001$, $d = .22$; offensiveness: $F(1, 405) = 29.611$, $p < .001$, $d = .27$; self-control: $F(1, 405) = 12.037$, $p = .001$, $d = .17$; and reflexivity: $F(1, 405) = 7.880$, $p = .005$, $d = .14$.

Similarly, a multi-dimensional analysis of variance confirmed a significant multivariate effect for the selection of coping strategies in the context of gender: $T = .060$, $F(4, 402) = 5.981$, $p < .001$, $d = .06$. One-dimensional analyses confirmed that men and women significantly differed in the selection of positive coping strategies (POS1): $F(1, 405) = 15.686$, $p < .001$, $d = .20$; and negative coping strategies: $F(1, 405) = 12.965$, $p < .001$, $d = .18$.

On the basis of these results, correlation analyses were performed between the monitored variables for both genders (see Tables 4 and 5).

Table 04. Correlation analysis of the relationships between SCI and SVF for men

	SCI SO	SCI OF	SCI SE	SCI RE
SVF POS1	-.133	.353**	.395**	.091
SVF POS2	.018	.107	.066	.305**
SVF POS3	.078	.474**	.303**	.340**
SVF NEG	-.066	-.584**	-.438**	.204*

Note: SCI SO – Social orientation, SCI OF – Offensiveness, SCI SE – Self-control, SCI RE – Reflexibility, STAI – Anxiousness, SVF POS1 – Guilt reassessment and devaluation strategy, SVF POS2 – Disengagement strategy, SVF POS3 – Control strategy, SVF NEG – Negative strategy, * – significant as a level of .05, ** – significant at a level of .01

Table 05. Correlation analysis of the relationships between SCI and SVF for women

	SCI SO	SCI OF	SCI SE	SCI RE
SVF POS1	.026	.276**	.288**	.151**
SVF POS2	.028	.151**	.044	.267**
SVF POS3	.319**	.404**	.335**	.298**
SVF NEG	-.169**	-.368**	-.460**	-.017

Note: SCI SO – Social orientation, SCI OF – Offensiveness, SCI SE – Self-control, SCI RE – Reflexibility, STAI – Anxiousness, SVF POS1 – Guilt reassessment and devaluation strategy, SVF POS2 – Disengagement strategy, SVF POS3 – Control strategy, SVF NEG – Negative strategy, ** – significant at a level of .01

The results suggested some differences between genders (only those relationships are specified where the difference exceeds .05). In the group of men, a stronger positive association was observed between the guilt reassessment and devaluation strategy and offensiveness and self-control, and at the same time a negative association with social orientation. In the context of the control strategy a stronger positive association was observed with offensiveness. Finally, in terms of negative strategies, a stronger association with reflexivity and offensiveness was observed. In women, a stronger positive association was observed between the guilt reassessment and devaluation strategy and reflexivity, and between the control strategy and social orientation, and finally a stronger negative association between the negative strategy and social orientation.

Subsequently, the inference test showed that the correlation coefficients for both genders differ significantly only for the relationship between social orientation and control strategy, and between

reflexibility and negative strategy. Other correlation coefficients in terms of gender do not differ (see Table 6).

Table 06. Analysis of significance of correlation coefficients in the context of gender (Z (p))

	SCI SO	SCI OF	SCI SE	SCI RE
SVF POS1	-1.43 (.15)	.77 (.44)	1.09 (.28)	-.55 (.59)
SVF POS2	-.09 (.93)	-.40 (.69)	.19 (.84)	.37 (.71)
SVF POS3	-2.26 (.02)*	.78 (.44)	-.32 (.75)	.06 (.95)
SVF NEG	.94 (.35)	-2.53 (.01)	.25 (.81)	2.01 (.04)*

*Note: Note: SCI SO – Social orientation, SCI OF – Offensiveness, SCI SE – Self-control, SCI RE – Reflexibility, STAI – Anxiousness, SVF POS1 – Guilt reassessment and devaluation strategy, SVF POS2 – Disengagement strategy, SVF POS3 – Control strategy, SVF NEG – Negative strategy, * – significant as a level of .05*

7. Conclusion

The primary objective of the study was to analyse the correlations between social competences and preferences of coping strategies in dealing with stressful situations. The results suggested a number of general correlations, which is consistent with previous studies (compare for example Clarke, 2006; Han & Kemple, 2006; Chinaveh, 2013; Kochenderfer-Ladd, & Skinner, 2002; Lazsadi, 2015; Reijntjes et al., 2006; Szabala, 2013; Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2011). Specifically, the guilt reassessment and devaluation strategy was significantly positively correlated with offensiveness and self-control. This implies that an active approach to other people, decisiveness, facing problems, behavioural control and balanced emotional perception are associated with greater use of guilt undervaluation and rejection. A positive relationship with undervaluation as a positive assessment of one's reaction compared with other people is likely to be associated with a higher degree of prosocial cognition. An interesting finding is the positive relationship between self-control and guilt rejection (as a subtest of the guilt reassessment and devaluation strategy). Higher self-control, including the perception of oneself as an important cause of the surrounding events and the producer of one's behaviour, is in certain contradiction with the guilt rejection strategy, i.e. adoption of responsibility. A possible explanation seems to be that greater awareness of one's responsibility is one of the sources of self-assessment and part of the image of oneself. A stressful situation may threaten this self-image (image of oneself as a capable, efficient and balanced person). In this case, guilt devaluation (i.e. rejection of one's responsibility for stress, and shifting the cause to external circumstances) is the easiest and fastest way to reduce tension and minimize the endangerment of one's self-conception. The preference of rejection strategies in relation to higher social competences is consistent with previous studies involving the population of underage participants (Kliwer, 1991; Kliwer & Sandler, 1993). From a more comprehensive perspective, the results confirmed a close correlation between active and evasive coping strategies (Zimmer-Gembeck & Locke, 2007).

Disengagement strategies are slightly correlated with reflexivity and offensiveness. Regarding the fact that both of these social competences are strongly associated with the social environment of the individual, orientation to the social environment and use of experience and support of other people help shift the individual's attention away from the stressful situation. The control strategy showed to have the highest number of associations with social competences. The results indicate that a generally positive approach to others and the capability of effective interaction with other people support a constructive

approach to stressful situations, whether in the form of direct support by the social environment, promotion of a positive approach to the perception of one's coping abilities, supporting the courage and determination for active coping, acquiring and use of other people's experience with coping with a stressful situation, etc. (compare Kliewer & Sandler, 1993; Kochenderfer-Ladd & Skinner, 2002)

Negative coping strategies are strongly negatively correlated with offensiveness and self-control. This is consistent with the finding mentioned above concerning the relationship between the two social competences and the guilt reassessment and devaluation strategy and previous research studies (compare for example Clarke, 2006; Kliewer & Sandler, 1993; Kochenderfer-Ladd & Skinner, 2002). An increase in these social competences leads to a significant decrease in the preference of using escape strategies, resignation and self-accusation, i.e. passive strategies. This finding helps understand the associations mentioned above. The guilt reassessment and devaluation strategy is, compared with other escape strategies, an active approach, the objective of which is to change the perception and experiencing of a stressful situation. According to the results, increasing offensiveness and self-control not only increases an effort to resolve a stressful situation in an active way by decreasing one's feelings of guilt, but at the same reduces the tendency to escape from the situation or surrender. An individual with higher social competences does not give up in stressful situations and does not escape, but tries to resolve them in an active way by means of procedures that decrease the intensity of the perception of stress and at the same time protect the desirable level of self-conception. A crucial aspect is willingness not to escape from a stressful situation but address it in an active way.

The secondary objective of the study was to test the effect of the respondents' characteristics on the correlations between social competences and preferences of coping strategies. The results did not confirm a change in the size of individual correlations in terms of the form of study (full-time versus combined) and field of study (teaching versus non-teaching). This result is consistent with the expectation that the choice of the form and field of study is not directly correlated with social competences or use of coping strategies by students. The form of study is primarily based on the students' life circumstances, while the field of study is based on their personal preferences and occupational/professional goals. However, the focus and content of these educational courses is very similar, they place similar requirements on the students, and this type of study (in the context of future occupation) is selected by individuals with similar personalities.

Similarly, the effect of students' age was not confirmed. The results suggest that the correlation between the degree of social competences and preferences of coping strategies is relatively stable in terms of its development, and its strength is determined rather by the effect of other variables (personality characteristics and traits, family and social environment, personality development throughout life, etc.) In other words, the relationship between social competences and coping strategies respects developmental changes and gradual development in both areas, but remains stable and invariable. This is a positive finding in terms of the effect of possible intervention programmes aimed at changing the selection of coping strategies through the development of social competences. Regarding the fact that their relationship remains stable and invariable, it is possible to define age-unrestricted intervention strategies, practices and methods that should achieve the desired effect in all age categories (in the context of this

study, it should be noted that the results of the present study confirmed this finding only in the population of adults).

In the group of men the results suggested a stronger positive association between the guilt reassessment and devaluation strategy and offensiveness and self-control, and at the same time a negative association with social orientation, a stronger positive association between the control strategy and offensiveness, and a stronger negative association between negative strategies and reflexivity and offensiveness. It appears that increasing 'masculinity' (i.e. the need to control one's life, consider oneself as capable, greater focus on oneself (in contrast to greater prosocial empathetic orientation), maintaining stereotypes according to which men do not evade problems but resolve them, etc.), in the context of the level of their social competences increases the tendency to use coping strategies, which use elements of situational control and allow to maintain a positive image of oneself as a capable and strong individual (compare Eisler & Blalock, 1991; Lipińska-Grobelny, 2011). It also seems that greater social competences in men (which are in a certain contradiction with the stereotype of men as less socially capable compared with women) significantly increase the preference of evasive coping strategies, which tend to be used more by women (Endler & Parker, 1990; Panayiotou, Karekla, & Leonidou, 2017).

In women, a stronger positive association was observed between the guilt reassessment and devaluation strategy and reflexivity, and between the control strategy and social orientation, and finally a stronger negative association between the negative strategy and social orientation. It appears that women are more sensitive to interpersonal aspects of their lives and functioning and that their stronger social orientation and more active and prosocial way of functioning combined with greater support by the environment gives women enough strength and supports their willingness to resolve stressful situations in an active way, and strengthens their self-confidence and belief in active resolving of a situation (compare Matud, 2004; Panayiotou et al., 2017).

The present study has some limitations. The first one is a disproportion between men and women in the research sample, which could have to some extent affected the representativeness of the results in terms of gender-based differences. Another limitation relates to the characteristics of the research sample, which includes a specific group of university students of teacher training courses. As a result, it is impossible to automatically generalize the results to include the general population of university students. A certain effect is also caused by the cross-sectional design of the study capturing only the current status. As a result, available data do not allow to identify causal relationships between the two characteristics of students and to determine whether the level of social competences affects the preference of coping strategies or whether the effect is opposite. To test causal relationships it would be necessary to perform a longitudinal study. Another limitation is the focus on a narrow spectrum of variables. Regarding the theoretical amount of effects that may influence the choice of coping strategies it would be desirable to include additional variables in the design of the study (e.g. personality traits, social and interpersonal aspects, etc.)

The authors of the present study believe that the results concerning Czech university students have a good potential for practical use. On a general level, the results confirmed the previously identified correlation between social competences and preferences of coping strategies in dealing with stressful situations. Regarding the fact that this relationship proved not to be influenced by age, the findings

support the assumption concerning the effectiveness of intervention and development programmes aimed at the development of social competences in university students, the objective of which would be not only to develop social competences but also positively affect patterns of behaviour in dealing with stressful situations (which includes the requirements of university study) and preferences of the desired types of coping strategies. A crucial aspect in the setting of intervention and developmental programmes and in the effort to influence stressful situations is respecting the differences between men and women.

In conclusion, the present study confirmed strong relationships between social competences and preferences of coping strategies. A higher level of social competences (especially self-control and offensiveness) is linked with the preferences of active coping strategies and significantly lower preferences of negative (escape) strategies. The most important seems to be the strategy of supporting one's control over a situation and decreasing the level of perceived stress using the guilt reassessment and devaluation strategy.

The preferences of coping strategies differ by gender in relation to the level of social competences. Increasing 'masculinity' increases the tendency to use coping strategies with elements of situational control and allow a positive image of oneself as a capable and strong individual. It appears that women are more sensitive to interpersonal aspects of their lives and functioning and that their stronger social orientation and more active and prosocial way of functioning combined with greater support by the environment gives women enough strength and supports their willingness to resolve stressful situations in an active way, and strengthens their self-confidence and belief in active resolving of a situation.

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