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Risk and subjective rationality as decision-making factors in the professional activity of Police Officers

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Abstract

The relevance of the study is conditioned by the lack of development of the problem of forming the decision-making ability at the stage of professional training and the need to improve the modern daily practice of future law enforcement officers to ensure the accuracy and timeliness of decisions made against the background of a constant increase in the volume and complexity of incoming information. The purpose of the study was to determine the conceptual basis for the influence of subjective rationality and risk readiness in the decision-making system in the professional activities of police officers. The paper uses the method of comparative and correlation analysis, and statistical analysis of primary data. According to the results of the study, significant correlations were established between rationality and risk factors in decision-making among police officers in groups with different levels of experience and professionalism. The current study focuses on intra-group variations in risk maximisation and the use of rational traits, particularly vigilance, procrastination, avoidance, and over-vigilance in decision-making. These psychological phenomena are explained by studying the main group of law enforcement officers (n=116), divided by the sample according to the criterion of experience in practice (n=59, n=57). A significant difference and psychological difference in the decision-making process component was found between groups with and without practical work experience in law enforcement. This provides an opportunity for further expansion and development in this area, defining the main approach to creating professional skills, forming the ability to make decisions in law enforcement officers without practical experience, and consolidating the basic skills of law enforcement officers with practical experience. The practical significance of the study lies in the prospect of developing psychocorrective programmes and trainings aimed at various employees of law enforcement agencies, depending on the practical experience gained and the area of activity. The research materials can be used in the process of optimising the educational process in professional institutions

Keywords:

risk theory; practical experience; vigilance; stress; procrastination

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Introduction

In the context of the armed conflict, which is accompanied by increased requirements for the professional qualities of the military and law enforcement officers, the problem of studying the factors of effective decision-making, in particular, risk-taking and rationality, is becoming more relevant. The variability of internal and external factors characteristic of Ukrainian society in recent years and the impact of the Ukrainian issue on the global socio-psychological situation greatly complicates the decision-making process by law enforcement entities: it increases risks, complicates strategic planning, and reduces the predictive assessment of possible changes in the near and long term. To achieve effective solutions to problems of any complexity, it is necessary to constantly improve the decision-making process. It is important to focus on maintaining high professionalism of all employees of the law enforcement system, as an important condition for a correct and rationally informed decision, in order to better understand the processes taking place within the system, avoid service losses and low initiative of employees in the process of preparing decisions. Rationalisation of the activities of law enforcement officers in modern conditions is of particular importance, which explains the increased attention to this problem. This is conditioned by the acceleration of scientific and technological progress, the creation of breakthrough innovations focused on the individual characteristics of each person.

Various aspects of the decision-making phenomenon have been studied by a number of Ukrainian and foreign researchers. G. Lecoq *et al.* (2021) comprehensively examined the expansion of governance mechanisms, namely uncertainty, risks, and policing strategies in decision-making. According to the researchers' conclusions, a number of factors that create uncertainty in professional situations have been identified. According to the researchers, uncertainty is the central object of police activity when making decisions that need to be managed. Separately, the authors investigated the problem of complexity of risk mobilisation, which manifests itself in risk assessment and leads to excessive caution. R. Berkley *et al.* (2019) considered the phenomenon of decision-making under the influence of emotions. Researchers tried to understand how the subjects of managerial decision-making interpret for themselves the importance of certain situations, being under the influence of emotions. Researchers have substantiated and identified a significant influence of strong emotions on the adoption of difficult decisions by police officers. The benefit of such research was to update the identification of the main determinants that lead to making wrong decisions.

G. Penney *et al.* (2022) assessed the threats faced by police, military, ambulance, and fire service personnel when making decisions in critical situations. N. Shortland *et al.* (2020) investigated the impact of trait maximisation on police decision-making and found that police officers who 'maximised' decisions had more

difficulty. Gender and previous military experience also influenced the decision-making process, in particular, police officers with military experience needed more time to assess the situation, but they chose a course of action faster and followed it more clearly.

The transitivity (binary) of solutions was investigated by R. Wuthisatian *et al.* (2022). The researchers defined it as the consistency of preferences and the rational difference of choice theory. Based on the results of research, it was determined that personal preferences, as a rule, are not transitive. According to the maximisation postulate, the final condition for a rational decision is to choose an action that maximises the objective function of the problem solver or, less formally, the individual accepts the alternative that is best for him or her in the situation described.

V. Barko *et al.* (2020) analysed the professional and psychological potential of the head of the modern police. The researchers saw these characteristics as the basis for the development of an effective management system. The result of this study was the identification of the main components of the psychogram of the head of internal affairs agencies (IAA). T. Motl *et al.* (2017) investigated the impact and conditions of forming rational and intuitive decision-making strategies. Y. Guo *et al.* (2022) examined the role of decision-making subjects' understanding of "justice", and its significance for social behaviour in the system of social orientation at the level of individual differences, which allowed determining the fact of risky behaviour, which is more appreciated by society than cautious behaviour, which is usually associated with indecision.

The purpose of the study was to identify the main psychological factors that guide a law enforcement officer in decision-making and strategies for overcoming difficult situations by rationalising these decisions. In accordance with the goal, the research objectives are outlined: 1) to carry out a system-structural analysis to establish the content of the categories under consideration; 2) to investigate the factors of rationality and risk in the decision-making system; 3) to conduct a classification analysis in order to determine the main concepts related to decision-making, risks, and rationality.

Literature Review

Since the last quarter of the 20th century, the final institutionalisation of the general theory of risks has taken place, which is closely related to the theory of decision-making, which includes rationality as a fundamental property of the cognitive component of the individual, and is considered within the framework of a psychological and acmeological approach. In modern science, this approach has been used by a number of researchers, in particular, V.O. Ohneviuk *et al.* (2019) concretised the basic concepts of top and bottom stages of development within the framework of fundamental acmeology and studied the multilateral characteristics of

activity in order to identify important positions in decision-making and implementation. D. Zhu *et al.* (2022) examined the maximisation of decision-making style through three studies that focused on subject-specific variations of the maximised decision-making style within the concept of optimal decision-making, which corresponds to the maximum expected utility. M. Schulz & J.O. Zinn (2023) investigated the rationale for risk and uncertainty and their epistemological basis as a new phenomenology. Researchers argue that only by allowing subjects to engage in a dialogue with themselves can they find a solution to the irrational openness of their respective presence and their inherent uncertainty.

T. Kroker *et al.* (2022) studied how non-invasive stimulation of the ventromedial prefrontal cortex modulates human decision-making rationality. Researchers have reasoned that the same people make different decisions, depending on whether they act independently or in a group. O. Pol *et al.* (2022) also worked in this direction, investigating collective decision-making within the concept of “collective decision phenomena”: groupthink; polarisation effect; social facilitation effect; “committed dissonance” phenomenon; volume and composition effects; “decision quality asymmetry” effect; idiosyncratic credit phenomenon; false consciousness phenomenon; virtual decision-maker phenomenon; conformism phenomenon. Investigating the causes of groupthink, the researchers identified its eight causes: illusion of invulnerability, false rationality, group morality, stereotypes, pressure, self-censorship, unanimity, gatekeeping or gatekeeper-defence.

R.E. Dalafave & W.K. Viscusi (2023) examined the locus of fear of mass shooting risks, in particular, the analysis of panic moods in groups that faced such a risk. Researchers note that the main manifestation of the fear of mass shootings is the belief in the risk of their occurrence. Irrational fears can significantly influence risk assessment, which makes it important to consider perceptual errors in research on this phenomenon. Cognitive scientist D. Cummins (2021) studied public confidence in the media and its impact on people’s perceptions and actions in critical situations. In addition, this study also focused on techniques that promote effective actions in such situations. The researcher identified seven effective methods-techniques, namely: logic, moral judgment, similar reasoning, scientific reasoning, rational choice, game theory, and creative problem solving.

J. Overall & S. Gedeon (2023) empirically examined rational selfishness, ethical beliefs based on virtues, and subjective happiness. Researchers have found evidence that rational selfish beliefs are not the most important direct predictor of subjective happiness. B. Enke *et al.* (2021) examined the role of cognitive biases in decision-making and their role in the mistakes and shortcomings of deep personal choices. Individual psychological characteristics of law enforcement officers were also studied by Ukrainian researchers.

Thus, I. Okhrimenko *et al.* (2022) considered them as the basis for effective psychological selection of personnel for modern police organisations. It was found that representatives of the criminal police and police units show higher emotional stability compared to other categories of employees in law enforcement agencies. On the other hand, patrol policemen and investigators have high levels of self-confidence, independence, and leadership. All police officers, regardless of their specialisation in law enforcement, are distinguished by a high level of self-control, responsibility, integrity, thoroughness, and discipline.

Materials and Methods

The methodological tools were compiled by the general theory of decision-making (Kushlyk-Dyvulska & Kushlyk, 2014), which is based on both differentiation and integration of existing knowledge in various fields. The theoretical basis of the study is the results of the latest developments in the field of studying rationality, maximising the expected utility and risk in the decision-making system of representatives of various sciences, in particular, economic, psychological, legal, etc. This study used primary statistical analysis and correlation analysis performed using the Spearman method, since many related features differ from the normal distribution, although presented on a metric scale.

Research base and sample. The study was conducted in November 2022-February 2023. The study was based on an offline survey using paper forms and was conducted directly by the author of the study as part of the preparation of a dissertation with a number of questions that related to decision-making by law enforcement officers, their understanding of risk and the use of rational judgments. The survey was conducted at the Academy of Internal Affairs of Ukraine in Kyiv. The empirical sample of the study consisted of 116 law enforcement officers (44 women and 72 men), of whom 57 were patrol police officers, investigators, associate professors of the Department of Criminal Law, and employees of the bar with practical experience (average age of the respondents: 31 years). Another 59 respondents are cadets-psychologists and cadets-forensic experts, without practical work experience, whose average age was 20 years. During the study, it was decided to divide the main sample into groups A and B ($n = 59$, $n = 57$), since statistical differences were obtained from the primary data analysis.

The study focused on the ethical standards of psychological experimentation: anonymity, awareness of survey participants about the goals and further use of survey data, and associated risks. The research was conducted in accordance with the rules of the Helsinki Declaration (1975).

Procedure. The research was conducted in several stages. At the first stage, comprehensive tools were selected aimed at investigating external and internal

decision-making factors, the impact of uncertainty on decision-making, and identifying typical decision-making determinants. At the second stage, decision-making factors were diagnosed based on psychodiagnostic tools. At the third stage of the study, a correlation analysis was performed (according to the Spearman method). Interpretation of the results was carried out approximately to the indicators of statistical significance, for the sample size $n = 116$: 187 at $P \leq 05$; 245 at $P \leq 01$; 31 at $P \leq 001$.

Tools. Based on previous studies of the specifics of decision-making in the work of police officers, the following methodologies were used: 1) Melbourne Decision Making Questionnaire (MDMQ) (Mann *et al.*, 1997), which is comprehensively considers the decision-making procedure, namely at personal factors in decision-making, and is aimed at diagnosing individual decision-making style; 2) Wolfram Q-sorting (abbreviated according to Rorman), which is aimed at determining subjective rationality and risk (Wolfram, 1974).

Variables. The following parameters were identified as variables of correlation research: vigilance, over-vigilance, procrastination, and avoidance.

Statistical analysis. Both quantitative and qualitative methods of data analysis were used in the research process. Primary data processing methods, statistical analysis, correlation analysis, and presentation of re-

sults as tables were used to display the data. MS Office Excel 2016 software suite was used for the mathematical processing of the data obtained.

Results and Discussion

Interpretation of the results of the correlation study is based on the investigation of two main problems: the problem of orientation and the problem of the third variable. Regarding the problem of orientation, it is quite obvious that certain factors together determine the nature of decision-making in law enforcement activities. At the same time, the question arises of a third variable when analysing the correlation between two variables, which can simultaneously affect both one and the other variable in this correlation. This question remains open for further discussion, so when interpreting, the authors tend to use a probabilistic scheme of explanation. The study analysed how police officers make decisions about risk and subjective rationality.

The importance of determining the links between risk and rationality is to identify additional factors between these phenomena that can significantly influence the decision-making process of police officers at the training stage, considering the experience and resources in this process. Table 1 shows the correlations of personal decision-making among the respondents of the total sample ($n = 116$).

Table 1. Correlations between decision-making factors in respondents of the general sample ($n = 116$)

Stress management patterns	Personal factors of decision-making	r	α
Vigilance	Rationality	0.34***	0.999 (≤ 0.001)
Over-vigilance	Risk	-0.30**	0.99 (≤ 0.01)
Procrastination	Risk	-0.28**	0.99 (≤ 0.01)
Avoidance	Risk	-0.22*	0.95 (≤ 0.05)

Note: hereafter, p – significance (two-sided), *** – at $p \leq 0.001$; ** – at $p \leq 0.01$; * – at $p \leq 0.05$

Source: author's research

Thus, the following results were obtained: a significant correlation between rationality and vigilance ($r = 0.34$; $\alpha \geq 0.999$), from which it can be assumed that the higher the level of rationalisation of actions, the higher the level of vigilance. This is a professionally important quality of the police officer's personality and indicates observation, the ability to understand the individual psychological characteristics of another person by their external and nonverbal manifestations. The notion of professional vigilance as the ability to notice the essential properties of objects and phenomena for the profession is based on the concept of psychological observation. The specifics of the work of law enforcement officers provide for careful monitoring of the environment, the ability to note signs that cause the risk of committing illegal actions.

In addition, inverse correlations with over-intensity and risk readiness were obtained ($r = -0.30$; $\alpha \geq 0.99$), which allows making an assumption: the higher the

super-vigilance, the lower the risk readiness. That is, excessive vigilance is a reaction to anxiety stimuli that is common to everyone who is connected with law enforcement activities. It can be assumed that in this way, law enforcement officers who are in a state of excessive vigilance will be less at risk, due to rational decision-making.

Reverse correlation between procrastination and risk tolerance ($r = -0.28$; $\alpha \geq 0.99$) suggests that the higher the level of procrastination, the lower the risk readiness. Reverse correlation between avoidance and risk readiness ($r = -0.22$; $\alpha \geq 0.95$) shows that the higher the degree of decision-making avoidance, the less risk the policeman will take.

In the course of the study, the sample was divided into 2 groups, Group 1 ($n = 59$), which included cadets-psychologists and cadets-forensic experts (average age 20 years), who had no practical experience in official activities, and Group 2 ($n = 57$), which included police patrol officers (average age 31 years) with extensive

experience in practical work in the field and with experience in decision-making in various professional situations. This distribution gave more opportunities to in-

vestigate the latent variables that appear in the middle of both groups and can affect the overall result, which is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Correlations between decision-making factors in cadets (n = 59)

Stress management patterns	Personal factors of decision-making	r	α
Vigilance	Rationality	0.34**	0.99 (≤0.01)
Over-vigilance	Risk	-0.42***	0.999 (≤0.001)
Procrastination	Risk	-0.39**	0.99 (≤0.01)
Avoidance	Risk	-0.54***	0.999 (≤0.001)

Source: author’s research

Analysing data, it is established that a significant correlation between rationality and vigilance ($r=0.34$; $\alpha \geq 0.99$) confirms the above assumptions about the officer’s ability to rationalise the decision-making process and thereby increase vigilance. Defined, inverse correlation with over-vigilance ($r = -0.42$; $\alpha \geq 0.999$), procrastination ($r = -0.39$; $\alpha \geq 0.99$) and avoidance ($r = -0.545$; $\alpha \geq 0.999$), which confirms the previously made assumptions, namely the tendency of this group of respondents to solve problems that bring faster results, the tendency to shift responsibility to

others, delaying decision-making, constantly delaying the choice on any issue. This also applies when all the conditions for making a decision are available, fear of the task, avoiding the manifestation of activity and initiative. It is known that it is the lack of experience and age of respondents that can significantly influence decision-making, especially avoidance or postponement, which encourages further search for the causes of these manifestations. For comparison, it is worth analysing similar indicators in Group 2, which is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Correlations between decision-making factors in law enforcement officers with work experience (n = 57)

Stress management patterns	Personal factors of decision-making	r	α
Vigilance	Rationality	0.34**	0.99 (≤0.01)
Avoidance	Rationality	-0.26*	0.95 (≤0.05)

Source: author’s research

Comparison of the results provided a deeper understanding of the psychological component of the decision-making process for police officers with work experience. The significant correlation between rationality and vigilance ($r = 0.34$; $\alpha \geq 0.99$), which was obtained from the previous analysis, was confirmed with minor changes. However, it allows making an assumption when comparing the two groups (with and without practical experience) that it is rationality and vigilance that complement each other and are a property of representatives of law enforcement activities at any stage of professional training. When examining Group B, no relationship with risk was found, unlike Group 1, which indicates a significant difference between police officers. who have experience and those who are at the stage of professional training.

The inverse correlation between avoidance and rationality ($r = -0.26$; $\alpha \geq 0.95$) may indicate that the longer the avoidance of decision-making lasts, the less rational these decisions are. This means that by following the protocol that law enforcement officials must follow, they can shift responsibility for their decisions and actions to legislation and orders from senior management, which can affect the overall decision-making

process. Thus, the results revealed differences between law enforcement officers depending on their experience, which showed a greater tendency to maximise risk in the younger generation of police officers.

In the course of the study, a number of differences were found between groups with and without practical experience regarding the main criteria for making decisions, such as vigilance, procrastination and avoidance. A number of researchers who have investigated age-related issues and levels of work experience argue that the more experienced decision makers are and the more identified they are in previous decisions, the more likely they are to be biased (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009). This pattern is particularly evident when subjects face poor performance in their work (Gaba *et al.*, 2022). For this reason, decision makers are expected to become less sensitive to lower-than-expected performance as their work experience increases. Having a deeper reserve of experience means having a variety of successful experiences in the past (Gaba *et al.*, 2022), which reduces the urgency of responding to recent performance degradation and facilitates inactivity.

The scale of vigilance in the conducted study correlates in both groups and is the main distinguishing

feature that is inherent in all representatives of law enforcement activities, because this quality is important when performing official tasks and attention to detail can be a scale of foresight in various professional situations. There is no need to reinvent the concept of vigilance, it is necessary to clearly distinguish vigilance from other concepts, such as attention or arousal (van Schie *et al.*, 2021).

Procrastination manifested itself in law enforcement officers without experience and had an inverse relationship, which showed the practical application of this psychological defence mechanism in the younger generation of police officers, who thus avoid risk. Procrastination is associated with negative effects on productivity, as well as physical and psychological well-being. However, while this procrastination behaviour has never been particularly beneficial, the association with performance is not as strong as it seems at first glance, as confirmed by A. Rozental *et al.* (2022).

Avoidance, as a property, manifested itself in an inverse relationship with risk in Group A and with rationality in Group B, which may indicate that when risk or rationality decreases, avoidance also decreases. Based on traditional economic psychology, rational individuals tend to avoid making decisions if marginal benefits exceed marginal costs. In addition, as stated by A.A. Ngelo *et al.* (2022), avoidance practices allow the individual to retain more psychological resources. Manifestations of avoidance and procrastination, as psychological defences, allow maintaining resources when making difficult decisions, through postponing the latter. The parameters of rationality in choice theories are individualistic character, limitations and subjectivity, and among the prerequisites are individualism, optimality and self-care, which is also confirmed by the main results of the study.

The study shows the existence of specifics of risk readiness depending on experience in law enforcement. It is revealed that the experience and age of law enforcement officers significantly influence rationality, bias, and reasons for procrastination and avoidance when making decisions in their activities. In order to draw more accurate conclusions when studying problems in a particular area, it is necessary to pay more attention to the area of interest when developing scales.

Conclusions

Increasing the requirements for the professional activity of law enforcement officers under martial law in Ukraine requires the development of scientific principles of decision-making as the main component of any organisational function, first of all, the study of determinants that affect this process. The use of a comprehensive methodology determined the most significant internal and external factors of decision-making. The study focuses on the investigation of intra-individual variations in decision-making styles, special attention

was paid to such qualities as rationality and risk tolerance, which also applies to maximising these qualities in law enforcement officers with and without practical experience. The results confirmed the assumptions about the difference between the groups and the existence of certain specifics in decision-making. Law enforcement officers may show a tendency to maximise risk or rationality in various qualities depending on experience. Group A was more prone to risk-taking than rationalisation, in contrast to Group B, which had no significant correlation with risk-taking, which may indicate excessive caution on the part of experienced law enforcement officers who tend to calculate all possible consequences and then act on the basis of preliminary analysis of the input data and a thorough assessment of the situation. The study shows the existence of specifics of risk readiness depending on experience in law enforcement.

In the course of a comparative study, it was found that a group of respondents with no practical experience of professional activity had more correlations with risk than with rationality, and a group of police officers with professional practical experience were more determined to act, are not prone to procrastination and avoidance, and also rationalised their decisions to a greater extent.

Predicting solutions in complex dynamical systems is another modern challenge for science, as the complexity of the systems with which modern personality interacts is becoming more complex every day. Most decisions often defy logical explanation and are made intuitively, but considering the phenomenon of intuition, it can be assumed that there is a certain rational structure that guides intuitive thinking by creating certain heuristics that the individual is not aware of.

For future research, it is planned to investigate the professional activity of police officers by analysing the system of operations that support it, methods of execution and results obtained. The scientific originality of the study is the systematisation and generalisation of psychological knowledge about the phenomena of readiness for risk and rationality in the decision-making system of law enforcement officers, and the substantiation of subjective rationality and readiness for risk among representatives of law enforcement activities at various stages of professional activity in the decision-making process, based on empirical data obtained as a result of research in the framework of the dissertation work.

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Conflict of Interest

None.

Limitations of the study

The authors used a sample of law enforcement officers from one region and only a few variables. The uniformity of the study sample was relatively high, since it included law enforcement officers from different departments. Further studies may further confirm these results in a more representative sample and a wider range of variables. Even in the field of professional activity, only certain aspects, such as experience, were considered, but other aspects, such as combat experience, should be taken into account in future research. Secondly, it is not convincing enough to draw causal conclusions from cross-sectional data. The conclusion about a causal relationship follows mainly from the theoretical conclusion of the study. In future research, it will be possible to use several methods to further test the causality of basic relationships in decision-making and trends in risk readiness, such as

manipulating subjective values. The high correlation with vigilance suggests that future research should include more choice-related questions in the scale of professional expansion.

There are several problems regarding the specifics of risk phenomena and rationality in decision-making that require further study. For example, in addition to subjective forms of decision-making, there are many other cognitive variables that need to be considered and evaluated, in particular, self-efficacy can also influence the tendency to risk or rationality. In addition, previous studies have shown that the specifics of the subject area of risk styles are influenced by personality traits. People with a higher neuroticism score are likely to have completely different risk preferences in different areas. It is important to find out whether such traits affect the specifics of maximising decision-making styles.

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Ризик і суб'єктивна раціональність як чинники прийняття рішень у професійній діяльності поліцейських

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Анотація

Актуальність дослідження зумовлена недостатньою розробленістю проблеми формування здатності до прийняття рішень на етапі професійної підготовки та потребою в удосконаленні сучасної повсякденної практики майбутніх правоохоронців для забезпечення точності та своєчасності прийнятих рішень на тлі постійного зростання обсягу й складності інформації, що надходить. Мета дослідження полягала у визначенні концептуальних засад впливу суб'єктивної раціональності та готовності до ризику в системі прийняття рішень у професійній діяльності поліцейських. У статті використано метод порівняльного та кореляційного аналізу, статистичного аналізу первинних даних. За результатами дослідження встановлено значущі взаємозв'язки між факторами раціональності та ризику під час прийняття рішень у поліцейських у групах з різним рівнем досвіду та професіоналізму. Поточне дослідження зосереджено на внутрішньогрупових варіаціях максимізації ризику та використання раціональних рис, зокрема пильності, прокрастинації, уникнення та надпильності під час прийняття рішень. Надано пояснення цих психологічних феноменів за допомогою дослідження основної групи правоохоронців ($n = 116$), розділеної вибірки за критерієм досвідченості на практиці ($n = 59$, $n = 57$). Між групами з досвідом і без досвіду практичної роботи в правоохоронній діяльності виявлено значущу різницю та психологічну різність складової процесу прийняття рішень. Це надає можливість для подальшого розширення та напрацювання в цій сфері, визначення основного підходу до створення професійних навичок формування здатності до прийняття рішень у правоохоронців без практичного досвіду та закріплення основних навичок правоохоронців із практичним досвідом. Практична значущість статті полягає в перспективі розроблення психокорекційних програм і тренінгів, орієнтованих на різних працівників силових структур залежно від отриманого практичного досвіду й напрямку діяльності. Матеріали дослідження може бути використано в процесі оптимізації освітнього процесу в професійних закладах

Ключові слова:

теорія ризиків; практичний досвід; пильність; стрес; прокрастинація