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THE IMAGE OF SOCIALLY ACTIVE INDIVIDUAL IN THE REPRESENTATIONS OF STUDENT YOUTH

Dr. Rail M. Shamionov, Faculty of Psychological, Pedagogical and Special Education, Saratov State University, Saratov, Russia, E-mail: shamionov@info.sgu.ru
Dr. Anton V. Grigoryev, Faculty of Psychological, Pedagogical and Special Education, Saratov State University, Saratov, Russia, E-mail: muadibone@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The study of students' representations of a socially active individual is one of the major tasks of psychology of education. The purpose of the study is to carry out analysis of characteristics of an image of a socially active individual in the representations of student youth and to correlate them with self-assessment of social activity and assessment of real social activity. Students aged 17-23 years (n=251) took part in the study M=20.11, SD=1.2 (41% men). We used the polling method with the scales developed by the authors of the present study in order to identify self-assessment of social activity, to evaluate real activity; and the associative experiment method. In the study we analysed qualitative and quantitative characteristics of the image of a socially-active individual in the representations of university students. We have established major meaningful characteristics of representations (personal qualities, self-improvement and personal transformation, states, representation in the group, process and activity-related characteristics). Conclusion has been made about the connection between the intensity of students' social activity and cognitive complexity of the image of a socially active individual and the content of subjective (initiative, confidence) and psychodynamic (vigour) categories in it.

1. INTRODUCTION

The study of an individual's representations regarding certain life events and their connection with the implemented behavior is an important task of cognitive psychology. On the one hand, representations play an essential role in the perception of objects of the surrounding world. On the other hand, representations are the basis of implemented behavior in relation to perception objects. Researchers (Levine, Leslie, Mikhail, 2018; Samoylenko, Bogdanova, et.al. 2017) point out that, since representations accumulate attributes of various single images, thanks to mental processing of information, they carry a lot of generalized and synthesized elements of the object. J. F. Richard points out that representations include the entire set of elements of the perceived/represented situation (Richard, 1998). That is why despite the more vague nature, the secondary image (representation) contains considerable information that influences various processes - decision-making, their implementation, etc. Finally, representations participate in understanding and interpretation of other people's behavior (Petrenko, 2016). That is why analysis of images of certain phenomena of the social environment is necessary from the point of view of predicting both cognitive and behavioral consequences in relation to these phenomena.

Cognitive psychology has been interested in various characteristics of representations for a long time (Piaget, 2004; Lewine, 2000). Despite the differences in theoretical positions, researchers adhered to the notion that representations are associated with reality. At the same time, as a result of a number of studies, it was found out that the connection between reality and representation does not form an isomorphism (Eysenk, 2015).

A number of researchers (Velichkovsky, 2017; Sergienko, 2017; Petrenko, 2016) study

Corresponding Author
Dr. Rail M. Shamionov, Faculty of Psychological, Pedagogical and Special Education, Saratov State University, Russia, E-mail: shamionov@info.sgu.ru

representations as a result of psychological reflection of reality in the form of images, symbols, subjective description of experience, subjective semantics, etc.

However, as R. Jackendoff (2016; 2017) points out, all representations form the level of mental representations, which is a conceptual structure where information obtained through different channels (for example, sensory, motor, etc.) can be compared with verbal information. In other words, a sign, meaning contained in the verbal expression of a certain reality, corresponds to mental representation. That is why researchers, as a rule, use semantic features as a unit for describing mental representation of an object.

As applied to social phenomena, representations accumulate not only concrete reality and perception experience, but also public opinions (Markova, 2016; Batel and Castro, 2018). Transformation of the "imaginary" into the "real" is a complex process involving both cognitive mechanisms and social communication (Moscovici, 2000). Meanwhile, representations of social reality include more complex objects as well, which are interactions of an individual with others. Personal characteristics and behavior are a relatively complex object of representation. Particularly, personality of a socially-active individual is this kind of object. Represented cognitive characteristics in this case may relate to various manifestations of personality and human behavior. At the same time, they reflect the attitude towards this personality, which can be the basis for their own behavior. Modern studies of student representations cover various phenomena starting from general cognitive (Pilipenko, 2017) and up to basic emotions (Arapova, Dolgova, 2017), happiness under various conditions of student socialization (Zhdanova, Pecherkina, Strokanov, 2017). The studies of human action (Brown et al., 2012) and the phenomenon of social activity are mostly related to the analysis of characteristics and determinants of the activity itself (mostly volunteer and civil activity) and, as a rule, presuppose group participation analysis (Shamionov, 2014; 2017). At the same time, representation of an individual as a subject of social activity (diverse and multidirectional subject in case of students) has not been studied sufficiently. Such a representation is important both for realization of the student's own personal activity and for his/her social identification.

Thus, the study of ideas regarding a socially active person will help to understand what specific cognitive elements are embedded in his image among young people and to what extent they determine social activity of young people. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to study characteristics of the image of a socially active person in representations of the student youth and correlate them with self-assessment of social activity and assessment of real social activity.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The sample consisted of 251 students receiving education in Saratov region, Russia, age M=20.11 (17 to 23 years) SD=1.2 (41% men). The sample is formed using the simple randomized selection method. It should be noted that the vast majority (more than 90%) of young people aged 17 to 23 years are students of universities and colleges (Federal, 2018).

Associative experiment was used to analyze characteristics of representations. As an incentive, the notion of "a socially active individual" was proposed. Processing of the obtained associations assumed standard grouping and categorization procedures. Semantic proximity was calculated by the number of matching answers and similarity of associations used in the course of the experiment.

To identify the level of self-esteem of activity and assess real activity, we used scales with the dimension of 10 points (1 point means that a trait is not expressed, 10 points mean that a trait is expressed to the highest degree).

Indicators of social activity preferences and general self-assessment of social activity were identified using specially designed scales defined on the basis of a pilot research project. The pilot study involved 80 students from Saratov State University aged 18 to 23 years. They were asked to identify social activity and define its main characteristics and directions. The authors developed 11 scales of social activity based on the findings. Then, 5 qualified psychology experts evaluated the scales for their compliance with the identified forms of social activity. The most frequently mentioned areas of social activity were selected. Among them were: recreational and cognitive social activity (group tourism), self-development activity (trainings, etc.), educational and developmental activity (participation in educational initiatives), hobby and communication-related social activity (related to friends and acquaintances), Internet and network-related activity, socio-political activity, culture and mass social activity, social activity in the spiritual and

religious sphere, informal social activity in the collective, creative social activity (art studios, etc.), volunteer social activity (volunteering), general (generalized) subjective assessment of social activity. All scales have undergone reliability check: α Cronbach = 0.68-0.69; $\chi 2$ Friedman = 964.1, with $p < 0.001$.

The socio-demographic parameters were singled out using the questionnaire compiled by the authors of this article.

Data analysis. All statistical analyses were conducted with the aid of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS 22.0).

3. RESULTS

Being manifested in various spheres, social activity has various qualitative characteristics. These characteristics attract the subject to its implementation, orient him/her specifically towards this type of social activity, contribute to person's self-realization. Constancy of personal interest and desire to implement this type of activity depend on how accurately and clearly an individual represents the specifics of a particular type of social activity. In this sense, attitude to activity is primarily manifested in the ideas about it and its emotional and value significance. Let us turn to content analysis of ideas about personality of a socially active person.

According to data obtained in the associative experiment, on average the share of substantial characteristics about a socially-active person in the representations of the test subjects is 74% of the total number of the listed traits, the share of emotional characteristics is 16%. This means that substantial representations, that reflect a non-evaluative and non-emotional attitude, prevail. At the same time, some substantial characteristics are the basis of emotional and evaluative attitudes. Thus, substantial characteristic "active" is specified in the evaluation characteristic "very active", substantial characteristic "participation in events" is combined with emotional characteristic "participates in everything with interest".

Making up an image of an active person, the respondents on average use 2,25 traits (from 1 to 4 characteristics), which testifies to lesser cognitive complexity of an image.

The method of grouping characteristics of young people's ideas about a socially active person allowed them to be grouped into meaningful groups and to clarify frequency distribution of concepts in various groups. Identified meaningful groups and their frequency distribution are presented in Table 1.

As we can see from data presented in the table, the largest frequency distribution belongs to ideas about personal characteristics of a socially active person. In representations of the youth a socially-active individual is characterized by vigour (0.083), purposefulness (0.053), cheerfulness (0.043), responsibility (0.04), activeness (0.04), independence (0.03), diverse interests (0.03), high level of intellect (0.007), spontaneity (0,007). In brackets you can find indications of frequency distribution of a characteristic as a measure of ratio of the number of names of this characteristic to the total number of all characteristics in the sample. They show that an active person in the representations of young people possesses, above all, subjective qualities that contribute to strength, targeted orientation of social activity, its relative independence, both in terms of manifestation and responsibility for its results. The image of a socially active person in the representations of young men and women is also associated with emotional positive background, cheerfulness and spontaneity.

Table 1. Frequency distribution of meaning groups of representations regarding a socially-active individual

Meaning Groups	Frequency
Personal qualities	0.31
Self-improvement and transformations	0.23
States	0.20
Presence in the group	0.14
Process and activity-related characteristics	0.12
Total: 453	

According to the number of traits in the representations of the youth the second most important meaning group is the one related to dynamics and changes in personality and environment (see Table). This indicates that young people perceive social activity as a means of self-change and impact on the environment, including social environment. Such traits as "tries to be useful in everything" (0.08), "self-improvement" (0.043), "interest in changes" (0.03), "development" (0.023), "improves living conditions" (0.01) are included into this meaning group. The presence of signs of

change in the image of a socially active person is associated with young people's awareness about the role of social activity in active transformations of the surrounding world and their personality, although, in general, their responses show undifferentiated, overly generalized signs of changes.

The third largest frequency distribution group is the group regarding representations of the state of a socially-active person. Characterizing a socially active person through states, research participants do not focus on the external manifestations of activity, but rather on the internal signs that contribute to activity. In this case, internal states of a person, obviously, are seen as the conditions for individual activity implementation. This meaning group consists of the following traits: "need for movement" (0.04), "often experiences the state of success" (0.027), "healthy" (0.02), "confident" (0.011). From the point of view of internal states, a socially active person appears to respondents as an individual with a high level of need for their own dynamics, successful and, as a result, self-confident, whose somatic and psychological health allows to satisfy this need.

The use of the notion of a "socially active person" as a stimulus in an associative experiment implies the disclosure of this concept's content through traits associated with the inclusion of an individual into social environment. However, the frequency of traits characterizing a person as a group member is low in the representations of young people. Perhaps this is happening due to lack of differentiation between general and social activity of a person. This may also indicate the leading role of individual's social activity in all forms of social and individual functioning, since individual forms of personal activity in any case correlate with socially accepted norms and values. Such traits as "sociable" (0.07), "leader" (0.043), "participates in public events" (0.027), "professional" (0.017), "participates in the lives of other people" (0.007), "a great reward for the state" (0.007) can be singled out in this meaningful group. It should be noted that only a group of professionals has clear definition of a social group in the representations about a socially active person among the respondents, for some young people they are associated with awareness of the social value of a socially active person, although this is not often manifested.

Process and action related characteristics, i.e. "takes the initiative" (0.027), "does something useful" (0.027), "workaholic" (0.017), "expresses his life position" (0.013), "strives to do something new" (0.007), "lives a full life "(0.007) have a relatively low frequency distribution in the representations of a socially-active person. Despite the low frequency of these traits, they are quite clear and define actions that are external markers of social activity. Initiation of actions, both their own and those of other people, striving for a socially useful result, hard work and creativity are combined with the courage to express their life position and the feeling of fullness of life with events and impressions in the content of this meaning group.

Thus, the image of a socially active person in young people's view is primarily associated with personal and subjective qualities and traits of self-changes and changes in the surrounding reality. In their representations young people do not clearly associate social activity with a person entering a certain social group, which indicates the refusal to associate social activity with any (official) political or civic groups. The actions of a socially active person are quite clearly represented, but the use of these traits is limited. When forming image of an active person in his/her mind, an individual relates this image to both generally accepted social norms and assessments, rather than to their own personality.

As a result of correlation analysis of generalized characteristics of realized social activity and cognitive complexity of the image, we managed to identify the connection ($r = 0.233$, $p < 0.001$), indicating the congruence of these variables. It should be noted that as a result of the ANOVA procedure, it was possible to reveal that real social activity is significantly better expressed in cases when the image of a socially active person contains subjective and energy-related categories, such as initiative ($F = 9.9$, $p < 0.001$), confidence ($F = 4.08$, $p < 0.05$) and vigour ($F = 4.2$, $p < 0.05$), and its self-assessment is expressed through the image of determination category ($F = 4.1$, $p < 0.05$).

4. DISCUSSIONS

Summarizing the above stated, it can be noted that the category of activity has differentiated representation in the images of a socially active person. In particular, these are personal characteristics that reflect psychodynamics and subjective characteristics, as well as characteristics that reflect the dynamics and changes of personality and environment, as well as the state of a socially active person.

The study shows that the category of activity in students' representations is transformed in various meaningful environments through the prism of either current personal activity or the perspective one. It should be noted that in representations of a socially-active person, an indirect relation to it is expressed using evaluative judgments. In addition, a socially active person in student representations is characterized by the category of change. Perhaps this is the most important moment for educational practice in this study, since the interpretation of a socially active person's behavior as changing and contributing to changes in the social environment is an important achievement in the individual's socialization. This interpretation allows you to use this image as a pattern of one's own behavior, aimed at the social environment and expectations from others. To some extent, this is consistent with studies that show that conscious perception of the world is mediated by mental models of the events that it constructs (Gruter et all, 2018).

An important result is the establishment of connection between the level of cognitive complexity of a socially active person's image and the assessment of social activity of the test subject. This suggests that the level of cognitive regulation of social activity depends on the size of the semantic environment in relation to this phenomenon. This data is consistent with studies of adaptation readiness, which shows that, depending on the size of the semantic environment and, accordingly, the areas of adaptation that a student thinks of, different options are possible for both adaptation and readiness for it (Shamionov, 2017; Grigoryeva, 2018).

5. CONCLUSIONS

The study of characteristics of a socially active person's image in student representations made it possible to reveal that the image of a socially active person among students is primarily connected with personal and subjective qualities and traits of self-changes and changes in the surrounding reality. The actions of a socially active person are quite clearly revealed in the representations, but the use of these traits is limited. Social activity in the representations of young people is not associated with a person's entry into a certain (official) social group.

The overwhelming majority of categories of student representations belong to the content and meaning characteristics; emotional and evaluative characteristics make up a quarter of the entire set of selected categories. Meaningful categories of innovation, social success and positive development prevail in the structure of the cognitive component of students' attitude to social activity.

The implemented social activity of students is associated with cognitive complexity of the image of a socially active person and the content of subjective (initiative, confidence) and psychodynamic (vigour) categories in it.

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Conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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