

Systems of social networks of delinquent young people

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Abstract. Social networks are considered an ontological attribute of the existence of a modern person. The modern ideas describe an important role of the system of social networks in socialization and adaptation of a person, motivation to the social activity, assistance and support in difficult life situations. The studies of criminals' social networks show their significance in motivation to crime, formation of criminal ideology. Besides, it is proved that the quality of social networks impacts the prevention and suppression of crimes among teenagers and young people. However, the attitudes of young people towards the social environment and their relationship to it are still not properly studied. Understanding it will allow explaining the impact of the social environment on the criminalization and social rehabilitation of young people. Objective of the research: to study the parameters of social networks of delinquent young people including the comparison with the similar parameters of law-abiding young people. Methods. The data collection method is a questionnaire that describes the parameters of social networks, i.e. volume, stability, homogeneity, subordination, and referentiality. The method of results processing is descriptive statistics and also a non-parametric analogue of the one-way ANOVA test (Kruskal-Wallis test). The research sample was made up of 220 people of 18-27 years old, 73.5% of respondents were men; among the participants in the research, 115 people have been convicted of committing a crime, 105 people are law-abiding and do not have any criminal record. Results and novelty: New data were obtained about the specific character of social networks of delinquent young people with regard to the small volume of relations, homogeneity of participants, low referentiality of the social environment; the perspectives of the study of the social networks in the conditions of the social regulation of interaction were determined taking into account the sex and social and cultural specific character.

Keywords: social networks, young people, criminal behavior, social rehabilitation, prevention of crimes

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1 Introduction

The study of the social networks of a person is understood as an analysis of the steady relations between the person and his or her social environment. The scientific interest in this sphere accompanies psychological science since the moment of its establishment. During the last decades, social networks were studied in the context of their influence on the various aspects of personal life [1]. Evidence was obtained confirming the impact of social networks on the sense of life satisfaction [2], and the role of social networks in overcoming the life situation was shown [3]. Understanding the diverse role and power of social networks of the person in various aspects of life and activity stimulates further research in this sphere.

By now, the social networks of delinquent young people are a separate field of study formed by several research directions possessing their own methodology [4, 5].

The first direction is the study of the structures of social relations inside criminal societies [6]. The formal characteristics of interaction are studied, i.e. the number of participants and the intensity of communication among them. The methodology of research is based upon the processing of the social statuses of the group participants, the frequency of contacts among them, and the way of communication [7]. Basing upon the obtained data, the visual images of interactive structures of criminal groups are built.

The second direction of research is the analysis of the impact of the social environment on the criminal behavior of teenagers and young people. Researchers consider the role of close relatives, friends, and age-mates in motivation to various crimes – thefts and murders [8], as well as the network practices of distribution of drugs [9]. The methodology is based upon the generalization of autobiographic data, a portrait of the social environment, and a retrospective of committed crimes. The result of the research is revealing the significance of the impact of the family, some relatives, close friends, or yard groups on the formation of a criminal lifestyle.

The third direction of the study of social networks is the estimation of their ability to regulate the criminal behavior of young people [10]. The subject of research is a role that the people close to the criminal play in the decision-making of the subject to refuse from committing a crime. It is presupposed that social networks can restrain or re-direct the criminal activity of young people to socially useful goals. The methodology of research is based upon the study of a person's attitude towards people from his or her social environment.

The analysis of the status of the scientific knowledge of these directions shows that the system of social networks impacts the decision-making of committing a crime by young people, as well as the refusal from criminal actions. At the same time, it is evident that the general factor of making social networks influencing the decision and acts of the person is a person's understanding of his or her social environment. Being independent in making the social networks, young people are selective in forming stable relations with other people around. The interrelations of delinquent young people with the social environment often differ from law-abiding young people [11]; however, the specific character of these discrepancies is not studied, especially regarding Russian young people. Basing upon the deficit of knowledge of the character of social networks of delinquent young people, it is reasonable to study this problem empirically.

The objective of the research was the study of the parameters of social networks of delinquent young people including the comparison with the similar parameters of law-abiding young people.

The hypothesis of the research was the assumption of discrepancies in the characteristics of social networks of delinquent young people in comparison with law-abiding young people.

2 Methods

The research used two groups of methods – data collection methods and methods of their statistical analysis.

Data collection was performed by means of a specially developed questionnaire. This questionnaire included the questions describing the characteristics of social networks: (1) volume (“What is the number of people you communicate with during a day?”); (2) stability (“How often do you make new relations and finish the old relations at the same time?”); (3) homogeneity (“Do the people you interact during a day look similar to each other?”); (4) subordination (“How many people influence you during a day?”); (5) referentiality (“The opinion of how many people from your environment is important for you?”).

A one-dimensional five-grade scale was used to measure the volume, barriers of interaction, and referentiality, where the minimal value symbolized the respondent; a two-dimensional scale was used to measure the characteristics of homogeneity and conflict in which the opposite values were the variants with alternative sense (for example, will make conflict – can make friends).

The methods of data analysis: measures of descriptive statistics. Statistical discrepancies of the groups were estimated using the one-way ANOVA test (Kruskal-Wallis test).

3 Characteristics of the sample

The sample of the criminal young people (n=115, average age 21.8 years old, SD=2.4 years, 71.9% – men). The studied people were sentenced to imprisonment and served the sentence at the correctional facilities of the Leningrad and Sverdlovsk Regions. The sample is composed of 31.2% respondents convicted for drug trafficking, 28.5% for thefts and fraudulent practices, 21.8% for robbery, brigandism, 18.3% for murder, infliction of severe bodily harm.

The sample of law-abiding young people (n=105, average age 21.3 years old, SD=1.14 years, 76.2% – men). All of the studied respondents studied at the institutes of Moscow, Saint Petersburg, and Yekaterinburg, they had no criminal record at the moment of study. The samples of young people were balanced according to the male sex.

4 Results

The results of the research are described in a successive order – first, the values of social networks are given, and then the statistic differences between the groups of delinquent and law-abiding young people.

1. Descriptive characteristics of the system of social networks of delinquent young people and its discrepancies from the law-abiding young people are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Discrepancies of subjective characteristics of social networks of delinquent and law-abiding young people.

Indicator	Delinquent young people (n=115)			Law-abiding young people (n=105)		
	Mean	SD	Median	Mean	SD	Median
Volume	2.1	1.7	2	5.9	1.9	5
Stability	4.1	0.7	4	4.5	0.6	4
Homogeneity	4.4	1.2	4	2.5	1.9	3
Subordination	2.1	1.3	2	2.4	1.2	2
Referentiality	2.3	1.4	2	5.1	1.1	5

Note: SD – standard deviation

2. Comparison of the ideas of delinquent and law-abiding young people regarding the social networks showed the statistical differences of:

a) volume ($H_{crit.(1, n=219)} = 94.7$; $p=0.001$, $\varepsilon^2 = 0.13$);

b) homogeneity ($H_{(1, n=219)}=14.65$, $p =0.001$, $\varepsilon^2 = 0.05$), conflict ($H_{crit. (1, n=219)} = 15.4$; $p=0.001$, $\varepsilon^2 = 0.05$) and referentiality ($H_{crit.(1, n=219)}=12.02$, $p =0.001$, $\varepsilon^2 = 0.05$).

The indicators of the stability of social networks and subordination do not differ statistically in the groups of delinquent and law-abiding young people ($H_{crit. (1, n=219)} = 1.29$; $p=0.28$ and $H_{crit. (1, n=219)} = 1.17$; $p=0.28$). The explanation of this seems to be in the specific character of the age and social development general for both groups of respondents.

5 Discussion

The objective of our research is empiric study of the social networks of delinquent young people as an important element of building the social space of a person. The results of the research confirm in general the hypothesis of the specific differences of the idea of social networks among the delinquent and law-abiding young people. Let us consider them in detail.

The volume of the interaction of delinquent young people with the people around is limited by a small group of people – 77.5% of respondents, for 37.9% these are diads and triads; 14.2% of respondents inform about loneliness and only 6.5% interact with several groups. These results find confirmation in the longitudinal study of social networks of convicted juveniles, performed by Zwecker with co-authors. They revealed that the social networks of criminals were limited and closed, the average volume was 1.8 people [12].

The homogeneity of the social environment of delinquent and law-aiding young people differs statistically. The law-abiding young people describe their acquaintances as more diverse according to their opinions and beliefs in comparison with the delinquent young people. The biggest discrepancies are observed in the criteria of the complete similarity (3.9% of delinquent young people and 21.9% of the law-abiding young people). Similar results were obtained by Haynie and co-authors; she demonstrated that half of the total number of social networks of the future criminals was delinquent young people [13]. It generates an ideologically homogeneous environment forming the criminal beliefs of a person.

The number of reference people of 69.3% of respondents-criminals was limited to 3 ± 2 people. Only 3.6% named more than 7 ± 2 people. It can be concluded that the volume of reference people corresponds approximately to the volume and interrelations of criminals and it includes the people close to them. These data are new for the Russian sample of delinquent young people and the authors could not find its confirmation in scientific journalism.

It should be mentioned that the system of connections of delinquent young people with the social environment is not homogenous in its formal characteristics (volume, homogeneity, conflict), as well as in the degree of referentiality. Along with the differences, the similarities of the systems of social networks were revealed. Thus, the delinquent and law-abiding young people percept their relations with other people around as stable considering them sustainable in the present and continuing in the future. The absence of discrepancies in the groups is explained by the objectives that people have to form social networks with other people. The other people around are the resource of psychological and physical assistance, they help to explain the events and plan the future [14]. Probably this is the reason why all groups of our respondents see their relations as unchanged and stable.

The second similarity was observed in the parameter of subordination to other people when interacting with them. Despite the interaction with social norms and rules, the majority of the respondents in delinquent and law-abiding groups do not consider themselves subordinated to somebody in something. The explanation to this seems to be in self-determination shown in the attribution to oneself the prevalence in interaction with the other

people around [15]. This assumption needs certainly to be proved under the more strict control of measurement conditions (for example, a study of ideas of young people about subordination when they are isolated from society).

It should be mentioned that when studying the impact of gender on the social networks of delinquent young people, the authors obtained statistically insignificant results due to the non-equivalence of the sample of gender. However, the comparison of the results showed the differences in the stability of connections of law-abiding girls and the non-stability of social networks of delinquent girls.

6 Conclusion

The conclusions of the research verified the concept of social networks regarding the sample of Russian delinquent young people and showed the heuristicity of the research of interactive and perceptive aspects of interaction with the other people around.

The specific character of the social networks of delinquent young people was revealed empirically. It was found out that they were limited by the volume of a small group in the aspect of interaction, as well as in the aspect of reference. The participants in the social network are similar in their life goals, values, and beliefs.

The limitations of the research are stipulated by the unbalance of sex, age, cultural and religious variables of the participants in the research.

The conclusions of the research show the perspectives of the study of social networks in the conditions of regulation of social interaction for delinquent young people, as well as the specific character of building social networks of girls and boys.

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