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Mother's knowledge of child individuality as a parent-child relationship development factor

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Abstract

The paper reports on the results of the experimental investigation of mother's knowledge of her child individuality in relation to the characteristics of family environment. Our primary analysis uses direct associative experiment, drawing technique, Q-sorting, and the surveys to compare descriptions of children's personality, associations and drawings developed by three groups of mothers, and reveals that influence of family environment on knowledge of mother of the child individuality is uneven.

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Keywords: mother's knowledge, child's individuality, general family environment, individual family environment.

1. Introduction

Experts in family issues have registered multiple transformations of family relations caused by social changes in Russia in the past two decades. Parents experience enormous difficulties in the process of raising a child and are increasingly turning to expert consultation. However, modern programs of correction of parent-child relationships are not always efficient for various reasons. A new approach to the problem is offered by the psychology of personality cognition from the perspective of a subject who cognizes it [1]. In the context of the

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cognition of another, research into the specifics of a mother's cognition of her child's individuality is of special interest from a practical psychology viewpoint [1]. As an independent subject the mother [2] has the status of the Significant Other [3]. If practitioners have this special information about the mother's knowledge of the child's individuality that depends on the specifics of the family environment, they can use the opportunity to provide more targeted support in the counseling practice of family relationship harmonization [4].

The process of a mother's learning the child's identity takes place in a specific family environment. The influence of the family environment is heterogeneous: a number of factors that reflect direct interaction between mother and child (the number of children in the family, the child's ordinal position in the family) constitute the individual environment. The factors that equally influence the interaction between all family members (their educational level, the maternal age and the family composition) shape the general family environment [5].

The special features of a mother's cognition of her child's individuality (her status as the Significant Other, the influence of the family environment) manifest themselves in the specific understanding of her child's individual characteristics. This understanding develops through the inherent mechanisms of child cognition: identification, prototype, social comparison, reflection and anticipation, emotional display and transformation of a mental image [6]. Accordingly, the results of the mother's comprehension of her child's individuality will depend on the specific nature of the subject (the child) and the family background. Consequently, these will affect the interaction between mother and child.

The problematic area of the research covers the issues about how the mother learns about her child's individuality; what characteristics of the child's individuality are involved in the process of this learning; what factors are significant for the mother; to what extent this knowledge depends on such family environment factors as the number of children in the family, their ordinal position, educational level, her maternal age and the family composition. We assume that answers to these questions could help us to identify both general patterns in the Significant Other's cognition of the individuality, and some specific features in the maternal knowledge of her child's individuality depending on the types of family environment (either an individual family environment, or a general family environment).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The study was conducted from 2008 to 2011 on the basis of a secondary school in the village of Ust-Kachka, the Perm Region. 132 participants were involved in the study. The participants were divided into groups based on the number of children in their family. Group 1 included women with one child (44), Group 2 included women with two children (48), and Group 3 was represented by women (40) with three or more children. The pattern was balanced for the children's gender and age composition.

The methods included (free description (M. Lalljee, R. Angelova, 1995), the method of direct associative experiment (Serkin, 2004), a drawing technique (Wenger, 2005), the method of Q-sorting (Stevenson, 1958), and surveys. The methods selected form a necessary frame for the study and represent different aspects of cognition of the subject: non-verbal form of cognition (a drawing technique), a non-reflexive verbal form of knowledge (a direct associative experiment), a reflexive verbal form of cognition (the method of free description by M. Lalljee and the standardized method of studying the characteristics of knowledge (the method of Q-sorting). The choice of methods allows us to comprehensively explore the features of mothers' cognition of their child's /children's individuality and explore the respondents' explicit and implicit knowledge about their children's individuality.

3. Materials

The materials consisted of 200 texts – descriptions of a child's individuality by their mothers, about 600 associations and more than 250 drawings. The categorical matrix of interpretation was based on the categorical grid [1], in which the categories of content analysis are selected in accordance with the holistic conception of a personality, understanding a personality in a broad sense, considered as a dynamic system that expresses the individual nature of the interrelationships between all of a person's traits. We identified some general trends and specifics of the mothers' knowledge of their children's personality based on the results of a comparative analysis of the data obtained while carrying out the method of free description, the method of the direct associative experiment and the drawing technique.

4. Results and discussion

General trends show that the largest share in the structure of the mother's cognition of the child's personality is the characteristics that reflect the psychological aspects of the child (nature (85%), interests (64%), temperament (37%), motivation (33%), communication (80%) and social roles (75%). Mothers pay less attention to the individual characteristics of the child's appearance (10%), their gender (28%), age (24%), the peculiarities of communication between siblings (21%), reference to the child's name (28%) and their learning activities (24%). While gaining knowledge about the child's individuality each mother in the groups pays equal attention to her child's/children's interests and their learning activities. We identified some special features of a mother's cognition of her children's individuality in relation to the number of children in the family. The peculiarity of the cognition by a mother with one child mother is represented by specific indicators in the categories, which reflect some individual characteristics: a child's name, relationships with his/her father and relatives. This group of mothers wrote the most detailed texts with the largest number of words. Along with the identification mechanism the process of cognition of a child's individuality in one-child mothers includes prototypical categorization (establishment of references to the father), emotional display (emotional coloring of the cognition process) and transformation of a mental image (the distortion of the image of a child associated with an increase or decrease in his/her age). The one-child mothers' knowledge is fragmental and incomplete, and it is characterized by a high level of emotionality and anxiety. The cognition of the children's individuality in the group of two-child mothers demonstrated the lowest level of emotions compared to the knowledge of the child's individuality in the group of one-child mothers and the group of mothers with many children. The text descriptions of the child's personality in the group of two-child mothers are concise and they are characterized by the least number of words ($t= 2,60$; $p<0.01$). The knowledge of two-child mothers changes from individual characteristics to those that reflect the psychological characteristics of the child (traits of character, motivation, interests). Thus, with the increase in the number of children, there is a change in the structure of cognition of the child individuality. For these mothers the communication factor is an important indicator in the structure of their knowledge about their kid's individuality. In general, we can argue that this knowledge becomes deeper in the group of two-child mothers. The characteristics of child individuality knowledge in the group of mothers with many children are maximum awareness, integrity and realism. The largest share in the structure of knowledge in mothers with large families is made up by the category that reflects the peculiarities of the children's psychological sphere, communication and social roles. The process of gaining such knowledge in mothers of large families occurs without the influence of their environment.

In accordance with the theoretical viewpoint of A. Adler and W. Towman, we consider four positions of a child in a family: the only child, the first child, the eldest child, the youngest child. The results indicate significant differences in a mother's cognition of her child's personality, depending on the position of the child in the family. With respect to the only kid we identified the most significant differences in mothers' knowledge of the child's individuality. The peculiarity of the knowledge of the only child mother is the highest proportion of individual-level characteristics – her child's gender, age and appearance. Some changes in the structure of knowledge about

a child's individuality manifest themselves in decreased importance of individual characteristics and raising the profile of psychological characteristics and the socio-psychological level. In the process of cognition of their eldest child's individuality, mothers focus on the specifics of the child's individuality that are meaningful to family life. They describe the eldest child's quality in which he or she appears as a household helper, a caring nanny. Moreover, they expect their oldest children to be independent and responsible. The structure of the knowledge of the middle child's individuality includes characteristics that reflect the individual level to a lesser extent, and the characteristics of the psychological and socio-psychological levels of the individuality, to a greater extent. The cognition of the youngest child's individuality is revealed in the attitude towards him/her as a little and helpless one. This could indicate the existence of a mechanism of transformation of a mental image (the distortion of a child's image is associated with an increase, or decrease in his or her age). In this knowledge structure, the largest share belongs to the specifics of the psychological and socio-psychological sphere of the youngest child's individuality. At the same time, the proportion of individual-level characteristics in the structure of knowledge is higher, compared to the older siblings. The knowledge of the youngest child's individuality is similar to that of the only child's individuality.

Our findings demonstrate that the mother's educational level is the most significant factor among those of general family environment (the mother's educational level and age and family composition). Thus, mothers with higher education are more focused on the child's individuality, his or her interests and the father's involvement in the educational process than those with secondary vocational education.

The results obtained with the Q-sorting method show that the characteristics of the knowledge of mothers about the behaviour of the only child in the group manifest themselves in the mismatch and opposite types of behaviour: most of the one-child mothers note their child aggressive behaviour in the form of perseverance. Fewer one-child mother respondents report the non-conflict type of their child's behaviour in the form of dependence. With a larger number of children in the family, mothers' knowledge about the behaviour of the eldest child in the group tends to be more similar: most two-child mothers state the compromise type of behaviour of their children. Fewer mothers with two children and mothers with many children report on the non-conflict type of behaviour of their first child. The specifics of a mother's knowledge about the middle child's behaviour in the group refer to the greatest degree of coordination and defining their behaviour as the most aggressive in the form of rivalry. Mothers consider their youngest child's behaviour as the most conflict-free. The correlation analysis (by Spearman) indicates that the data obtained as a result of studying the characteristics of mother's knowledge of child's individuality in the outer environment, comply with those in the study of a mother's knowledge of her child's individuality depending on the characteristics of the family environment.

5. Conclusion

The main findings of the present study can be summarized as follows: 1. The mother's vivid emotional intensity of the knowledge gaining process is one of the general trends. The largest share in the structure of the mother's cognition of her child's individuality accounts for characteristics that reflect psychological features: traits of a child's character and his or her interests. 2. The leading role in the mother's knowledge belongs to the individual environment of the mother (the number of children in the family, the ordinal position of each child in the family). With a larger number of children there is a tendency for increasing reflexivity, detailing and psychologization.

In the structure of a mother's knowledge the proportion of individual-level characteristics (gender, age) decreases, while the proportion of such characteristics as temperament, motivation, communication, and the social roles increases. The one-child mother's knowledge concentrates on individual characteristics while the mother's knowledge of the individuality of her oldest child focuses on the characteristics of the socio-psychological level. The mother's knowledge of the middle child's individuality mostly refers to the properties of

the psychological level of personality (temperament, character and motivation). The mother's knowledge of the youngest child's individuality in a large family is the most holistic and structured. 3. The influence of the general family environment on a mother's knowledge about child's individuality is insignificant. Mothers' education is the most important characteristic. 4. In the conditions of the external environment the mother's knowledge of her child's individuality becomes fragmented, and reflects the specifics of communication and child behavior in the group.

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