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Characteristics of Teenager-to-Parent Relationships and Their Inputs into the Formation of Juvenile Personality Helplessness

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Abstract

The article presents an empirical study of styles of family education and relationships in families having teenagers with personality helplessness. It shows differences in the characteristics of family education for teenagers with helplessness and for those with self-dependence, and notes low level differentiation of family relationships in families having children with personality helplessness. It analyzes indicators of patronage parents, the degree of satisfaction of the teenagers’ needs in the family, the demands and sanctions imposed on the child, especially the mechanisms of family integration, and the structural and role-playing aspect of family life. Styles of family education, in which significantly more children grow up with personality helplessness, i.e. hyper protection, hyper moral responsibility, rough handling and family upbringing inconsistence are defined.

Keywords: personal helplessness; family; violation of family relationships; factors of personal helplessness formation

1. Introduction

In modern Russian psychology, a scientific interest in the phenomenon of helplessness resulted in a multitude of private investigations into both the phenomenon itself, and those adjacent to it. Among scientific schools of modern

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indigenous psychology that study helplessness, it is possible to distinguish the research of medical aspects of helplessness (Vvedenskaya, 2003) and the investigation of the psychology of a person's helplessness (Tsiring, 2010a, 2010b).

A detailed approach of D. A. Tsiring (2010a, 2010b) to the phenomenon of learned helplessness described by M. Seligman (1997) in a theory of the same name has led to the study of a new phenomenon in psychology and to the creation of an integral concept devoted to personality helplessness. The concept of personality helplessness, put forward by D. A. Tsiring (2010a), while representing another level of comprehending the phenomenon of helplessness in general, does not contradict traditional concepts of learned helplessness and considers it as a possible manifestation of personality helplessness.

The subject-and-activity approach, being a theoretic-methodological basis of studying personality helplessness, predetermines the content of this concept. Thus, personality helplessness is a subject's quality representing a unity of certain personality features resulting from the interaction of internal conditions with external ones and determining a low level of subjectivity, that is, a person's low ability of transforming the reality, managing events of their own life, setting and achieving goals and overcoming various difficulties. Such internal conditions are presented by emotional, motivational, cognitive and volitional features of a person. It should be noted that D. A. Tsiring has proved a continual nature of personality helplessness. Thus, a subject's self-independence appears as an opposite characteristic of this phenomenon (Tsiring, 2010b).

The formation of personality helplessness is an extremely important and yet actually unexplored issue. The understanding of how this process takes place will offer a clue to understanding the psychological sense of the phenomenon of personality helplessness. The question of the formation of personality helplessness serves as a cornerstone in creating a system of prevention and correction. The present research deals with some formation factors which appear to be the most important. However, they certainly do not exhaust the whole list of environmental influences that may play a certain role in the course of the formation of personality helplessness.

We view violations, including traumatizing relations, in the system of family relationships as the most important factor of the formation of personality helplessness. A family is considered by many psychotherapists and psychologists as the most important factor of the traumatization of a person and a reason for their various psychological problems (Seligman, 1997; Ponomareva, 2014). It appears to be obvious that the existence of violations in the style of parents' upbringing is a major risk factor of the formation of personality helplessness. This proves to be especially significant if a child has some inborn features (characteristics of the nervous system, genetically inherited peculiarity of psychology) that increase their vulnerability to the emergence of the above-mentioned personality helplessness. Thus, a theoretical analysis of the problem of the formation of personality helplessness and an analytical review of the scientific literature have resulted in identifying an objective of the research and in advancing its hypothesis.

2. Objectives, methodology and research design

The objective of the research consists in revealing features of family relationships and their contribution to the formation of teenagers' personality helplessness.

The hypothesis of the investigation lies in an assumption that relationships between parents and teenagers with personality helplessness are characterized by disharmony, which determines personality helplessness of teenagers.

In order to verify the assumption made, an empirical investigation was conducted, in which 533 teenagers aged 13 till 16 and 557 parents took part (among them 182 fathers and 375 mothers). The study was conducted in April 2015.

The following aids were applied for diagnosing instances of personality helplessness: a questionnaire for determining teenagers' attributional style (Tsiring, 2010a, 2010b), a depression scale, a personality scale for assessing manifestations of alarm, a technique of defining self-assessment. The technique of "Analysis of Family Relationships" (AFR) by (Eidemiller & Yustitskis, 2000) was employed for the purpose of identifying violations of family relationships.

In order to check the hypothesis of violations in family education acting as an environmental factor of the formation of personality helplessness, we created some samplings of testees (contrast groups) with personality helplessness and of those with self-dependence. Personality helplessness and self-dependence were diagnosed based on several indices. In accordance with the concept of personality helplessness (Tsiring, 2010a, 2010b), as well as in
keeping with the existing theoretical conceptualisations and results of empirical investigations, we used indices of style of attribution, depression, uneasiness and self-assessment. These are indicators a combination of which serves for diagnosing personality helplessness and its inverse characteristic, self-dependence.

As a whole, they diagnose an integral (systematic) characteristic of a person, namely personality helplessness, as it was proved in D.A. Tsiring's research (2010b). Thus, the following factors act as diagnostic criteria of personality helplessness: a pessimistic style of attribution, a high rate of "hope" which in this context proves actually to be an index of hopelessness (causes of a failure are perceived as constant and universal), an increased level of depressiveness and uneasiness, as well as lowered self-esteem. Self-dependence as a person's characteristic opposite to personality helplessness is diagnosed respectively in case of an optimistic style of attribution, a low rate of "hope" (causes of failure are perceived as temporary and specific), a low level of depressiveness and uneasiness and adequate or slightly overrated self-esteem.

3. Discussion of the research outcomes

Based on the above-specified diagnostic criteria, 533 testees of juvenile age were examined, after that a cluster analysis was applied. Two of the clusters obtained by us are characterized by opposite values of diagnostic indices of personality helplessness. Teenagers who were included in the first cluster, called "The helpless" (N=119), are noted for a pessimistic style of attribution (0.23), a rather high level of depressiveness (44.49) and uneasiness (24.45) and an underrated level of self-esteem (0.57), which testifies to these testees having signs of personality helplessness. The obtained data correspond to the results of previously conducted investigations of personality helplessness (Tsiring, 2010a, 2010b). The second cluster, called "The self-dependent" (N=114), was formed by testees for whom features that are opposite to personality helplessness are typical: an optimistic style of attribution (3.77), a low level of depressiveness (30.02) and uneasiness (13.90), adequate self-esteem (0.68), which corresponds to a description of a systematic characteristic of a person such as self-dependence (Tsiring, 2010a, 2010b).

In order to verify the reliability of distinctions between the clusters obtained based on the diagnosed criteria, a comparison of average indices was carried out by means of the single-factor variance analysis. The results of the comparison prove the fact that there exist authentically significant distinctions between the revealed clusters based on all the diagnostic criteria of personality helplessness: a level of depressiveness (to F=324.6, with p=0.000); a level of uneasiness (F=143.1, with p=0.000), a level of self-assessment (F=4.68, at p=0.01); a hope index (to F=20.3, with p=0.000); and a style of attribution (F=27.4, with p=0.000). Thus, the obtained clusters differ authentically from each other according to the intensity of signs of personality helplessness.

For the purpose of empirically confirming an assumption that violations of family relationships determine teenagers' personality helplessness, types of inharmonious family education in families of teenagers with personality helplessness and of those with self-dependence were studied. According to the results of the diagnostics, a comparative analysis of the revealed violations of intra-family relationships of teenagers with personality helplessness and of those with self-dependence was carried out. Parents of teenagers with helplessness (Nfathers = 42; Nmothers =119) and of those with self-dependence (Nfathers = 53; Nmothers =114) took part in the research.

Types of violations of interpersonal family relationships related to parents of teenagers with personality helplessness and of those with self-dependence were diagnosed by means of the technique of "Analysis of Family Relationships" by E.G. Eidemiller (2000). A nonparametric criterion U of Mann-Whitney was used for the two independent samplings as a statistical method of comparing violations in the family education of teenagers with personal helplessness and of those with self-dependence.

A comparative analysis of average values based on an index of patronage in the course of education (a sum total of forces, attention, time devoted to a child) showed that mothers of helpless teenagers are more inclined to the manifestation of hyper-patronage than mothers of self-dependent ones (U=4595, p=0.000), but as far as types of family education by fathers is concerned, no significant differences in the manifestation of hyper-patronage are to be found. Fathers of both self-dependent teenagers and of those with personality helplessness show hyper-patronage equally.

The hyper-patronage of mothers of helpless teenagers is manifested in excessively devoting their time, forces and attention to a child. Educating them becomes central business in a mother's life. E.L. Ptichkina (2001) assumes that a mother's claim for a predominating role in the life of a teenager prevent the latter from satisfying the need for autonomy first in the family and then in their independent life, which leads, in our opinion, to the formation of personality helplessness. Hyper-patronage promotes the development of interpersonal dependence because it
encourages the dependence of a child on their mother. Hyper-patronage is also unfavourable to a child in that in certain combinations it forms a component in such types of inharmonious family education as a factor which dominates and promotes hyper-patronage. In analysing the influence of family education on the formation of personality helplessness, it is important to note that dominating hyper-patronage does not give a chance to study on the basis of one's own experience and to reasonably use freedom. It accustoms one to dependence and suppresses a sense of responsibility and duty (Eidemiller, 2000). This type of education favours the fixation of dependence of a teenager, their psychological immaturity and, as a result, the formation of personality helplessness as a person's quality. Family education of teenagers with personality helplessness and of those with self-dependence do not differ from each other authentically on the scale of "hyper-patronage".

Based on the results of comparing degrees of the satisfaction of a child's needs, statistically significant differences between parents of self-dependent and those of helpless teenagers were also found on the scale of "conniving".

Mothers (U=4782, p=0.000) and fathers (U=87, p=0.000) of helpless teenagers aspire, to a greater extent than parents of self-dependent ones, to satisfy needs of the child as much as possible and non-critically, explaining such behaviour by an exclusiveness of the child and their "weakness", or by a desire to give them what they themselves were deprived of. While conniving, parents unconsciously project their previously unsatisfied requirements onto their children. A family, while creating an excessively safe educational situation, brings up a subject who is insufficiently prepared for self-dependent activity.

Mothers of helpless teenagers ignore the child’s needs more often than those of self-dependent children (U=5024, p=0.000). This testifies to a parent's insufficient aspiration to satisfy the child's needs. In this regard, spiritual needs are more often afflicted, especially a need for emotional contact and communication with the mother. Under the conditions of emotional rejection, traits of self-distrust and low self-esteem are formed, which is one of indicators of a teenager's personality helplessness. N. S. Bubnova has revealed that a style of interaction such as rejection is the most destructive for a teenager's self-image. In other words, the violation of the satisfaction of a child's needs on the part of a mother results in a decrease of a child's self-esteem of their identity and develops self-distrust and inability to manage situations. The absence of a parent's aspiration for controlling the child's needs in combination with other violations of family education leads to the formation of personality helplessness.

It should be noted that an excessive number of demands/duties is more often placed/imposed on teenagers by mothers who have brought up helpless teenagers than by mothers of teenagers with self-dependence (U=5185, p=0.001). Demands placed on a child are, as a rule, very high; they do not correspond to the child's capacity and not only fail to promote full development of their personality, but on the contrary pose a risk of psychic traumatization.

Mothers of helpless teenagers are more inclined to place a large number of demands/bans on the child (U=3838, p=0.000), limiting their freedom and self-dependence, which may be at the root of such an inharmonious type of education as dominating hyper-patronage (Granovskaya & Nikolskaya, 2003). The excessiveness of demands/bans placed on a teenager reflects a mother's fear of any manifestation of their self-dependence. This fear is manifested in sharp exaggeration of consequences to which even insignificant violation of bans may lead. Such education, unambiguously, delimits a child's self-dependence, depriving them of a possibility of choosing their way of behaviour.

Insufficiency of demands/duties placed by fathers (U=586, p=0.000) and mothers (U=5795, p=0.05) occurs more often in the styles of educating self-dependent teenagers. In this case, a child has a minimum number of duties in the family, and possibly, greater freedom, provided more frequently by the father than by the mother. Also, a feature such as insufficiency of demands/bans is more often found on the part of a father in the education of self-dependent teenagers (U=695, p=0.000); that is to say a child is allowed to do a lot of things, and there are no restrictions imposed on their behaviour on the part of the father, which is not traced in the education of helpless teenagers.

Severity of sanctions for a child's violation of requirements, exhibited both on the part of a father (U=660, p=0.000) and a mother (U=5638, p=0.02), distinguishes education in families of helpless teenagers from that of self-dependent ones. This commitment to the application of strict punishment is characteristic of such parents, which underlies education according to some type of abusive treatment.

A high degree of inconsistency and instability of parents' behaviour (U=352, p=0.000 (fathers), U=3809, p=0.000 (mothers)) is a feature of family interrelationships of helpless teenagers.

Instability of family relationships is manifested in non-predictability of a parent's responses to the behaviour of a child and in uncertainty of educational priorities, norms and principles. A teenager appears to be
unable to foresee the development of a situation and, consequently, to influence it. This feature may manifest itself as a groundless change of educational techniques with respect to a teenager, which leads to the growth of a teenager's uneasiness and self-distrust. These factors, in their turn, develop into a symptom complex of personality helplessness.

While analyzing the structure-and-role aspect of a family's life activity, it was found out that fathers of helpless teenagers prefer to see childlike qualities in their children credibly more frequently as compared to fathers of self-dependent teenagers \( U=771, p=0.006 \).

Fathers of helpless teenagers more often seek to stimulate the preservation of their childlike qualities such as inartificial ways, naivety and playfulness, thus revealing their parental fear and unwillingness to see their children grow up, particularly regarding manifestations of their children's self-dependence. They reduce the level of demands placed on the teenager in the course of education, creating encouraged hyper-patronage and thereby cultivating personality helplessness in the child.

A projection of one's own undesirable qualities onto a child is also diagnosed more often in the case of parents of helpless teenagers as compared with those of self-dependent juveniles \( U=679, p=0.000 \) (fathers), \( U=3088, p=0.000 \) (mothers). A parent sees imaginary character traits in a child, which they feel but do not recognize having themselves. They fight an active fight with these, deriving an emotional benefit for themselves. In such a fight, the parent obviously displays their unbelief in their child, an aspiration for establishing a negative reason for any acts of their child, which leads to the child's demotivation and unwillingness to show activity and self-dependence.

Significant distinctions between violations in interpersonal family communications of self-dependent and of helpless teenagers were obtained on the scale "a father's shifting a conflict between spouses to the sphere of education" \( U=310, p=0.000 \). A father's overt discontent with a mother's methods of educating helpless teenagers demonstrates not so much a way of bringing up a child as an assertion of who is right in educational disputes.

A more expressed educational diffidence of both parents of helpless teenagers \( U=582, p=0.000 \) (fathers), \( U=3981, p=0.000 \) (mothers), permits juveniles to manipulate their parents because a teenager has managed to find "a weak point", an approach to a parent, and they secure "a minimum of demands – a maximum of rights" for themselves in this situation. Violation such as encouraging hyper-patronage and, less frequently, just a lowered level of demands underlie this style of education. This type of violation in family education is found out both with fathers and mothers of helpless teenagers.

Backwardness of parental feelings is diagnosed with parents of helpless teenagers to a greater extent as compared with those of self-dependent juveniles \( U=437, p=0.000 \) (fathers), \( U=4697, p=0.000 \) (mothers). This feature of family education arises in the absence of a parental sense of duty, sympathy with and love of a child. Such parents are characterized by their unwillingness to participate in their child's life and by superficiality of their interest in their child's affairs. Backwardness of parental feelings determines a type of education, namely increased moral responsibility when a considerable share of parental duties in a family is shifted to a child.

4. Conclusion

So, the obtained data as a whole testify to obvious distinctions in violations in family relationships of teenagers featuring personality helplessness and self-dependence. Communicative processes in a family of helpless teenagers are noted by a larger number of violations determining the formation of personality helplessness as compared to family interrelationships of self-dependent teenagers. An inharmonious type of family interrelationships which support a low degree of differentiation in a family is characteristic of parents of helpless teenagers. This causes absence of a child's own internal resources for overcoming complexities of various nature, their excessive dependence on surrounding people, which results in the formation of personality helplessness.

While generalizing the studied features of family interrelationships of helpless teenagers, it is possible to draw a conclusion that parents of helpless teenagers as compared with those of self-dependent juveniles more often reveal dominating hyper-patronage, enhanced moral responsibility, abusive treatment, and an unstable type of family interrelationships. Following the results of the research, the hypothesis stating that violations of family interrelationships act as one of major environmental factors of the formation of personality helplessness has been confirmed.
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