Psychological Stability of Orphans in Crisis Situations

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Abstract

The article presents the results of the study of psychological stability of orphans who survived abuse and violence in the parental home (N = 120). The structure of psychological stability of children and adolescents in difficult situations (cognitive, emotional, behavioral, presentational) has been specified. According to the results of the study some groups of orphans have been identified by levels of psychological stability (psychologically stable, with an average degree of psychological stability, with a low degree of psychological stability, psychologically unstable, with situational stability / instability). There has been defined the relationship between personal characteristics and protective coping strategies used by orphans. The article shows the dependence of the psychological stability of orphans on the level of personal anxiety, inner tension, the level of sociability and self-presentation in the society. The features of the self-concept of orphans who survived abuse and violence in the parental home have been analyzed.

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Keywords: psychological stability, a crisis situation, orphans, abuse, violence

1. Introduction

In modern science the concept of "psychological stability of a personality" is viewed as a complex integrative phenomenon with differentiated categorical meanings. In foreign and Russian psychology there are a number of synonymous meanings of "psychological stability" that let us view it within the criterion-oriented boundaries of different psychological approaches.

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On the one hand, it is connected with the problem of understanding the psycho-physiological mechanisms of stability of a personality and peculiarities of their formation, on the other hand, it is connected with the problem of ambiguity of the terms used by scientists for the treatment of this phenomenon.

The Russian researchers consider various manifestations of psychological stability as elements of the personality’s resistance to stress which is based on the equilibrium psychic state characterized by adequate, predictable, balanced behavior and optimal operation. An important distinctive feature of this state is, first of all, a complex human reaction involving a hierarchically organized set of mental processes and psychological properties at different levels: at the physiological level – neurophysiological characteristics, morphological and biochemical changes; at the psychophysiological level – vegetative reactions, changes of a psychomotility, sensory; at the psychological level – changes of mental functions and mood; at the social and psychological level – behavior, activity and relations of the person.

Among other distinctive features we differentiate the latent period of development and the activity of the personality aimed at the formation and stabilization of the current state, and counteraction to the development of a new mental state. In this regard the problem of the viability of the individual causing the formation of the person's ability to cope with difficult life situations, to overcome the circumstances connected with risk is considered. Such an approach reduces the notion of "psychological resistance" to potential and actual opportunities which are realized in coping behavior.

The formation of psychological stability as an integral characteristic of the personality is of great importance especially for teenage years in which any life adversity or temporary difficulties are very often subjectively perceived as extreme and crisis.

In this regard, special attention should be paid to consideration of the significant aspects of psychological stability and determination of its structure for children and adolescents through psychological measurement tools.

The purpose of the article is the study of the structural components of psychological stability and analysis of its influence on the formation of the self-concept of children and adolescents who survived abuse and violence in the parental home.

2. Theoretical Grounds of the Research

The concept of "psychological stability of a personality" in foreign psychology relates to the term "sustainability", "resistance", "endurance", "sense of coherence (coherence)", "expansion (swelling)", "non-susceptibility", "adaptation", "correction (regulation)" and others.

Russian research of "psychological stability" also varies: alongside with the concept of "psychological stability" such concepts as "stress tolerance", "emotional stability", "rigidity", "inertia", "endurance", "psychic self-regulation", "vitality", "personal adaptation potential", "balance", "resistance", "psychological security", "mental readiness", "stable behavior", "immunity" and others are considered.

Analysis of the research (Bozhovich, 1968; Maslow, 2009; Chudovsky, 1974; etc.) devoted to "psychological stability" allows us in a generalized sense to introduce this concept in three main positions:

1) Psychological resistance (Abolin, 1987; Medvedev, 1982; Nebylitsyn, 1976; etc.) as a psychophysiological mechanism of neurohumoral-hormonal regulation of the organism's adaptation, the property of the nervous system.

2) Psychological resistance (Bozhovich, 1968; Druzhilov, 2012; Kulikov, 2004; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Magomed-Emin, 2009; Tyshkova, 1986; etc.) as a mechanism of coping behavior and personality coping with difficult life situations.

3) Psychological resistance (Kazankov, 2010; Krupnik, 1995; Maklakov, 2002; Maslow, 2009; Shinyaev, 2011; etc.) as the adaptive capacity of a person that allows us to identify and block internal and external impacts, the mechanism of mental regulation of behavior and activity.

Thus, psychological stability determines the adaptive characteristics of a person, which are formed under the influence of environmental stress-producing impacts becoming subjectively significant personality traits, and determines the individual style of behavior and the way of human life in the post-traumatic life span.

Despite numerous studies of individual psychological aspects of "stability of a personality" in difficult situations there are very few studies of psychological stability of orphans. Although it is for them that any life adversity or
temporary difficulties very often become subjectively extreme and in the absence of effective psychological help lead to antisocial behavior, social disintegration, suicide.

Psychological studies (Andreev, 2008; Arshinova, 2007) show that the formation of sustainability as a complex system characteristic of a personality in ontogenesis goes through several stages:
- resistance to stress, which is formed in the psycho-physiological, emotional, cognitive, behavioral aspects in childhood;
- psychological stability, which is formed during adolescence, when in addition to the psycho-physiological, emotional, cognitive and behavioral aspects sustainable preimages of different activities are introduced;
- psychological safety, which is formed in adolescence;
- psychological culture, which is formed in youth and adulthood, which is reflected in the development of a sustainable career.

Difficult life situations are special psychological situations when the system of relations of a personality and its environment is characterized by imbalance or mismatch between the aspirations, values, goals and their feasibility, or personality traits. Awareness of imbalance between the individual elements of the situation is qualified as awareness of the difficulties that carry a certain level of threat to the individual. Threat alarms lead to an increase in the activity, which assumes a shape of negative emotions of different modality strength.

A difficult life situation affects the behavior of a person primarily through the mental reflection (perceptual, conceptual and emotional). A personality responds to the situation and behaves depending upon how it perceives this situation and interprets its meaning. Therefore, psychological stability in its main parameters depends on the individual's ability to adequately reflect the impact of the environment, despite experiencing difficulties.

Psychological patterns of development of personal qualities in orphans in crisis situations have their own features, which are determined by the peculiarities of a psychological trauma (PTSD), processing of traumatic experience, personal characteristics of a child, which are formed on the basis of genetic predisposition and its inclusion in various forms communication and activities with other people.

Basing ourselves on the view (Andreev, 2008; Darvish, 2008) that "self-concept" is a kind of internal "filter" that determines the character of the child's perception of a difficult situation, let us consider the features of the "self-image" of orphans who survived difficult (crisis) life situations.

The notion of "self-concept" is traditionally interpreted as a person’s system of ideas about himself/herself, his/her essence, his/her physical, intellectual and characterological, social and other properties, about how he/she looks in other people’s eyes, what position he/she occupies in the system of interpersonal relations, what is his/her attitude towards himself/herself. The content of the self-concept of a person is usually described by a system of categories - groups of statements about the spheres of reality, various aspects of his own position, used for self-description.

The "self-image" and "self-concept" of orphans who survived abuse in the family, as a result of the process of reflection, self-awareness in the future and relation with themselves in the present and the past, awareness of personal meanings coupled with their self-esteem, allow us to characterize the main components of psychological stability expressed in specific personal traits and behavioral reactions:

The cognitive component: the ratio of real and ideal life goals and attitudes, empathy, peculiarities of perception of a difficult situation, its subjective importance, a representative system of perception, psychological ways of protection, mental health, optimism and hope as the ability to adapt a positive point of view concerning future events, the ability to adapt to new requirements and to solve new problems (intellectual lability, mobility), a personal system of values, self-esteem and self-attitude as a reflexive response to the self-image, personal meaning.

The emotional component: an emotional reaction to stress (stress tolerance), lack of emotional tension, fear, aggression, hostility, a sense of safety, endurance, stamina as a moral standing feature (ability to withstand hardships, keep faith in oneself in the situations of frustration, permanent, high enough level of mood), self-satisfaction, positive attitude towards oneself (self-respect), attentiveness, switching, normal fatigue.

The behavioral component: sociability, being conflict-free, the level of locus control, social status in the team, resilience, self-control, the ability to control the situation and overcome circumstances connected with risk (the ability to act under risk), commitment, the ability to create and use the relations of support, assistance in times of
crisis, decision-making ability, independence, balance, responsibility, determination, adaptability, goodwill in relation to the surrounding world.

The presentation component: self-acceptance, self-confidence, low level of anxiety, peculiarities of self-presentation (presentation of oneself, one’s body, characteristic features that distinguish oneself from others, emotional relationships), dignity, the ability to self-modification, self-efficacy.

3. Methodology of the Study

The hypothesis of the study can be formulated in the following way: abuse and violence in the parental home as well as other life situations subjectively assessed by orphans as difficult or crisis undermine the structural components of self-concept, they contribute to the formation of psychological instability and protective coping strategies of stress coping behavior.

Sample. The study involved 120 orphan children of primary school age and adolescence, survivors of abuse and violence in the parental home.

Methods and techniques of research. During the diagnostic test the following procedure was used:

1. Multivariate Personality Inventory for children and adolescents by R. Cattell reveals personality structure as a set of psychological traits that determine behavior. Defining personal profile allows us to explain or predict human behavior in certain situations. During the study the subjects answered all the questions of the method. Factors AI, Q, Q3, Q4 were analyzed.

2. Methods of diagnosis of stress-coping behavior (coping behavior in stressful situations) "Indicator of Stress Coping Strategies" (Amirkhan, 1990) adapted by Sirotu, Yaltontski (1994, 1995). The technique is a brief self-assessment questionnaire consisting of 33 statements which defines the basic coping strategies, their expression in the structure of stress coping behavior. The three-stage factorial analysis of a variety of situation-specific coping responses to stress allowed D. Amirkhan define three basic coping strategies: problem solving, search for social support, avoidance (evasion). The questionnaire is designed to study teenagers, young adults and adults.

3. The scale of "self-concept" for children by E. Pearce, D. Harris (adaptation by Prihogon). It reveals an overall satisfaction, positive self-attitude as well as the level of consciousness by nine factors: behavior; intelligence, the position at school; the situation at school; appearance, physical attractiveness, physical development associated with popularity among peers; anxiety; communication, the ability to communicate; happiness and satisfaction; the position in the family; confidence. The retest reliability of the questionnaire is 0.77, the reliability of the parts of the test is 0.78 - 0.93.

4. "Test of 20 replies" by M. Kuhn, T. McPartland; modification by N.V. Morozova, M.V. Ovchinnikov. It is a non-standardized description based on the content analysis of students' answers to the question "Who am I?" followed by the processing of the content according to the predefined categories. This technique belongs to the class of projective methods of personality research and is aimed at obtaining an overview of the socio-psychological status of the individual and the "self-concept". The study assessed the total amount of reflective presentations, the repertoires of updated reference groups, internalized self-esteem, the scope of personal meanings following a 5-level rating scale, which is based on the number of reflective presentations expressed in different terms, phrases, images of the Russian language.

Processing. Processing and statistical data analysis were based on the methods of descriptive statistics and randomized selection, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov criterion to establish normal distribution, quantile, correlation and factor analysis using the visualized statistical package Deductor Studio Lite 4.4.

4. Discussion of the Research Outcomes

The analysis of the results of the diagnostics of personality traits (“Personality Inventory” by R. Cattell) of orphans, survivors of abuse and violence in the parental home, with the help of the method of quantization followed by grouping the data has made it possible to identify groups of children which differ significantly according to three main characteristics (the level of sociability, the level of anxiety and the degree of internal tension): Group 1 (psychological stability) included orphans with low sociability, anxiety and lack of internal stress (41%);
Group 2 (with an average degree of psychological stability) included children and adolescents with low or high levels of anxiety, and low internal stress (31%);

Group 3 (with a low degree of psychological stability) included orphans with an excessively low or high degree of internal tension (5%);

Group 4 (mentally unstable) is characterized by a high degree of internal tension (5%);

Group 5 (situational stability / instability) possesses variable characteristics of internal stress and anxiety, from very low to very high rates (18%).

The results obtained suggest that the majority of the subjects are characterized by psychological instability, of which 100% of children are identified as possessing low or medium level of emotional instability (Factor C), which significantly correlates (Table 1) with irresponsibleness (r = 0,51), shyness (r = 0,65), high anxiety (r = 0,55), low self-control (r = 0,48).

The anxiety factor (Factor Q) of orphans who survived abuse in the family significantly correlates with Factors C (emotional stability / instability), D (anxiety / restraint), H (boldness / shyness).

The degree of internal stress (Factor Q4) correlates with Factors A (communicative / unsociable), Q3 (high self-control / low self-control).

Table 1. Correlation Matrix of Results according to the Factors of the Personality Questionnaire by Cattell

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>a</th>
<th>b</th>
<th>c</th>
<th>d</th>
<th>e</th>
<th>f</th>
<th>g</th>
<th>h</th>
<th>i</th>
<th>q</th>
<th>q3</th>
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</table>

The results obtained during the study of stress-coping behavior of orphans in difficult situations (by D. Amirkanov) show equivalent percentage of coping strategies that are used by teens trying to cope with a difficult life situation (solving a problem - 33%, search for social support - 33%, avoidance - 34%)

Having traced the correlation between the results of the tests by Cattell and Amirkanov, we can state that the strategy of "problem-solving" is most often chosen by self-collected children and adolescents with low excitability (r = 0,65), a high level of courage (r = 0,41) and low levels of anxiety (r = 0,80). The strategy of "search for social support" is chosen by children with low levels of sociability (r = 0,53) and a low level of responsibility for their life (r = 0,45). The strategy of "avoidance" is preferred by self-confident children and adolescents (r = -0,68) with an advanced level of verbal intelligence (r = 0,48), and low levels of anxiety (r = 0,75).

30% of teens use several strategies (2 to 3) for coping with difficult situations. The most frequently used copings are "problem solving" and "avoidance", "problem solving" and "search for social support."

The study of self-concept of orphans, survivors of abuse and violence in the family, by the factor of "happiness and satisfaction" (Scale of "self-concept" for children by E. Pearce, D. Harris (adaptation by Prihogan) allows us to draw a conclusion about children’s and teenagers’ general dissatisfaction with their lives. Meaningfully it is also expressed in the statements "I am afraid that I will follow my parents’ footsteps", "I would like to be better than
now", "I'm stupid", "I'm doing a lot of nonsense", "I'm doing my best to change myself", "I really want to live well", "I try to think that everything will be fine" and others. Thus, there is a tendency to strive for better life in the future than in the present.

Examining the correspondence between the behavior of orphans and the requirements of the society according to the scale of "self-concept" shows that 18.7% of children and adolescents view their behavior as inconsistent with the requirements of the society, there are also negativistic tendencies in relation to the requirements. 48.19% of orphans have a realistic attitude to their behavior that corresponds to the data obtained with the help of the multifactorial questionnaire by R. Cattell. 33.1% rate their behavior as conforming to the requirements of adults.

This brings us to the conclusion that the image of the "I" of orphans who survived difficult life situations is contradictory and ambiguous. At that an important role is played by situations of interaction with other people, who form the "internal" self-esteem of adolescents.

5. Conclusion

Cognitive characteristics of the self-concept of orphans who survived domestic abuse reflect their understanding of the outer world, their place and status in it. The research shows that the outer world is often perceived by such children as completely indifferent or even hostile. In this case mistrust towards others, negative and even contemptuous attitude towards them are formed. A child feels like an outcast, feels his/her own "inferiority" in comparison with most peers, or vice versa, a child, especially a teenager, feels his "superiority" over others, as he/she has already acquired some negative social experience and "knows life" better than other, ordinary people. As a result, negativity and destructive, "substitute" activities are formed, the system of interpersonal relations is changed.

The emotional component is usually reflected in increased resentment, sharp, sometimes hysterical reactions to the most innocuous external "irritants". Low emotional stability noticeably complicates a child's communication with the outer world, which can lead to isolation and all sorts of geeky, inappropriate behavior, up to criminal.

The behavior is characterized by internal tensions and unsociability, especially in relation to adults and peers from ordinary families. Sometimes the opposite phenomenon is observed - swagger, the desire to "shock" the interlocutor, to attract attention and show their originality and difference from others, aggressive behavior (conflicts, tantrums, autoaggression). The dominant mood is bad, there are frequent and inadequate changes of mood. The main causes of disorganization of behavior of unstable children are the lack of effective ways to overcome difficulties and experiencing personal threats, which is reflected in the simultaneous use of several protective coping strategies. As a result, mentally and emotionally instable children and adolescents may develop the "helplessness syndrome" (by M. Seligman, 1980), expressed in the extreme instability to difficulties. This syndrome occurs when a person experiences a lot of stress that he/she cannot cope with.

The presentation component determines the degree of self-awareness of an orphan who is experiencing his/her uselessness, insignificance, shame, guilt, helplessness and insecurity, various fears (fear of the future, misgiving, fear of changes), an oppressive feeling of loneliness.

Thus, we can state that the majority of orphans who survived abuse in the family develop psychological instability to difficult (crisis) situations that causes negative structural changes in the main components of the self-concept (cognitive, behavioral, emotional, and presentational) and leads to the formation of orphans’ protective coping strategies of stress coping behavior.

Acknowledgements

This work was financially supported by the grant MK-99.2014.6 of the President of the Russian Federation.
References


