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Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 171 (2015) 1027 – 1032

Procedia
Social and Behavioral Sciences

ICEEPSY 2014

Personal Determinants of Coping with Fears of Modern Children

Svetlana V. Gridneva^{a*}, Anna I. Tashcheva^b^{a,b} *Academy of Psychology and Pedagogics, Southern Federal University, 13, M. Nagibina Street, Rostov-on-Don, 344038, Russian Federation*

Abstract

In the article the authors research the specificity of the relationship between coping strategies, personal characteristics, content, and particularities of display of fears by 9-10 year old children. Theoretical analysis of scientific literature, document analysis, observation, polls, psycho-diagnostic method, expert evaluation method, content-analysis of children's ideas about fears and coping-strategies, method of group comparison, and other research methods were used for the purpose. The authors conclude that characteristic features of child's interpersonal relationships can form his/her adaptive or disadaptive coping-strategies that are shown in a form of fears. Fears become a disadaptive coping strategy if the child's interaction with his/her significant close people contributes to arising secondary emotional problems, which reflect the child's dissatisfaction with the current system of interpersonal relations.

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Peer-review under responsibility of the Organizing Committee of ICEEPSY 2014.

Keywords: a child, fear, personal determinants, coping strategies.

1. Introduction

Personal determinants of children's coping with fears is very often considered by authors as an interrelated system of interpreting schemes – personal constructs [Izard, 2001; Ilyin, 2002]. Such understanding of personal determinants does not allow us to consider fears of children according to the developed in Russian psychology

* Svetlana V. Gridneva Tel.: +7-928-140-2197; fax: +7-863-243-0805.
E-mail address: gridneva-sveta@mail.ru

conception of personality as a multilevel system of relations with various sides of reality [Asmolov, 1990; Myasishev, 2001; Ilyin, 2002; Rubinstein, 1989] in which inter-individual (externally aroused, connected with the social context), intra-individual (internally aroused, inherent in the person) [Ananov, 2001; Petrovsky, 1982] and meta-individual (connected with the person's influence on other people) [Petrovsky, 1982] components of structure of a person are distinguished. Psychologically the personality of a younger teenager is studied rather not in the wide context of the life activity of the child, but in the context of description of the psychological and pedagogical problems arising in education (key activity) [Bogdanova, 2000; Bozhovich, 1995; Petchenko, 2002; Slavina, 1967, etc.] [1].

Fears of 9-10 year old children often interpreted as a sign of regress at an early stage of development of personality can be interpreted in the context of the conception of coping by Richard S. Lazarus, which is the basis for modern ideas about forms of an active/passive coping in frustrating situations, etc. [Danilova, 1990; Kryukova, 2004; Kuftak, 2003; Lazarus, 2003; Tashcheva, Gridneva, 2006]. Fear expression as a strong negative emotion is described as a passive (non-constructive, disadaptive) process of coping. But fear displays as a way of coping of a person at the "non-critical" age of development (younger juvenile age) are seldom analyzed in details.

2. Research Methods

The purpose of our study is to examine the specificity of correlation between personal characteristics and children's demonstration of fear as a coping-strategy [2].

The object of the research is personal characteristics of a 9-10 year old child.

The research methods: theoretical analysis of scientific literature, document analysis, observation, interrogation, psycho-diagnostic method, expert evaluation method, content-analysis of children's ideas about fears and coping-strategies, method of group comparison, statistical processing of psycho-diagnostic data and hypothesis verification.

Methodical tools consist of seven techniques revealing three psychological realities:

- 1) personal characteristics of children, their features of self-perception (R. Kettell's questionnaire (12 CPQ), the questionnaire «Attributive support of dialogue» by A.I. Tashcheva, the pictorial test «Non-existent animal»);
- 2) the content and «age dynamics» their fears (Phillips's questionnaire of revealing school anxiety (RSA); the pictorial test «My fears» and the authors' questionnaire of studying fears of 9-10 year old children) and
- 3) coping behaviour (a questionnaire of coping-strategies of school children by I.M. Nikolskaya and R.M. Granovskaya modified by E.V. Kuftak [4, 5]; a child's variant of Rosenzweig Picture-Frustration test; the authors' questionnaire studying fear response of children, their relatives and friends).

Standard techniques of mathematical statistics were used: Fisher criterion of angular transformation; Student's t-test for independent samples; Mann-Whitney U-test; Correlation coefficients by Pearson, Spearman and Kendall (tau-b).

The sample was simple, repetition-free and included 9-10 year old 140 children (70 boys and 70 girls). The sample was divided into two groups: the main and the control one. There were 35 boys and 35 girls in each of them.

Criteria of group division:

- 1) the fact of teachers and parents' asking for professional psychological help to the child having apparent fears;
- 2) psychodiagnostically proved disadaptive character of fears of the child who had behavioural disorders of social interaction; a psychological originality of fears and corresponding expert judgments of personality and behaviour of children (7 teachers and 7 psychologists who knew the children via their professional work).

3. Findings and their discussion

It is known that a key new growth of personality of a younger teenager is a social "Self" which was for the first time differentiated on actual and ideal components [Abramova, 2001; Bogdanova, 2000; Bozhovich, 1995; Feldshtein, 2004]. The latter allows the internal mechanisms of behaviour self-regulation to be developed in frustrating situations. But insufficient social experience of the child makes this mechanism weak and vulnerable, creating conditions for his/her applying to an external, social-psychological resource of coping – to the system of relationships with close adults and friends [Astapov, 2004; Bogdanova, 2000; Vygotsky, 1997; Gridneva, 2007; Isaev, 1996, etc.]. A stable orientation toward another person as a supporting partner is arisen. Social needs of the

child (social comparison and estimation, confirmation of one's own "Self" by other people, recognition of "Self") become the leading ones. The behaviour for the first time starts to function not only as a presentation of oneself to others, but also as a social mimicry (a representation of oneself to others in accordance with their expectations) [Krain, 2002]. Ability to reflexion is connected with the need for the purposeful influence on communication's partners for the purpose of forming a desirable "Self"-image. At the age of 9-10 actual and possible (phantom, imaginary) sphere of personality are differentiated. The mechanism of their division is strong emotions including fear [Kon, 1987]. Finding the borders of new one's own "Self" and checking their stability are realized by means of emotional expression which is often connected not with actual, but with imagined, phantom problem situations on which the child's notion about himself/herself is projected and includes external and internal resources of coping with problems.

Lack of development of the child's personality and heterochrony of forming a sufficient internal resource for coping lead to that fact that phantom threats in the child's fears connected with the doubts about his/her ability in efficient solving problem situations gain their object. The psychoanalytic interpretation of fear as a protective mechanism of a weak "Self" needs to be overcome [Leontiev, 2002]. There are theoretical bases to consider fear of a 9-10 year old child as a sort of passive coping-strategy – a destructive emotional expression of fear directed to attraction of attention of people around and intensification of their interaction with the child for the purpose to compensate for a deficiency in the external, social-psychological resource of overcoming of frustrating situations [Lazarus, 2003].

Let's consider our data about correlation of 9-10 year old children's personal factors with their coping-strategies [see Table 1].

Table 1. Correlation of coping-strategies with personal factors according to R. Kettell's questionnaire (Kendall's concordance coefficient (r))

Coping-strategies (by E.V. Kuftyak)	Sample in whole		Groups of respondents			
	Personal factor	r	The main		The control	
			Personal factor	r	Personal factor	r
Reflective leaving	Q+	0.139*	G+	0.230*	–	–
Passive abstraction, discharge	–	–	–	–	–	–
Search of a spiritual basis (support)	B-	-0.167*	B-	-0.219*	C+	0.260**
	D-	-0.138*			D-	-0.206*
					Q3+	0.214*
Destructive emotional expression	B-	-0.183**	B-	-0.205*	J+	0.192*
	J+	0.178**				
	Q+	0.127*				
Active abstraction	C+	0.123*	–	–	–	–
	D-	-0.132*				
Social contacts for the purpose to derive support (communication)	J+	0.193*	F-	-0.199*	–	–

In sample, in whole, the coping-strategy of reflective leaving has a significant positive correlation only with the "Q"-factor (anxiety and guilt) – children with intense anxiety and guilt more often apply the strategy of reflective leaving. The strategy of search of a spiritual basis and support has a significant negative correlation with intelligence ("B") and with the level of emotional excitement ("D") – emotionally reserved, phlegmatic, sluggish children with depressed mental ability more often use the given strategy. The strategy of destructive emotional expression turns out to be very closely connected (at $p=0.01$) to low value of intelligence ("B") and high value of "asthenic" factor ("J") which is responsible for higher lassitude, unsociability, rigidity. Both factors within the limits of the strategy of destructive emotional expression interact with higher indices of anxiety and guilt ("Q"). At first sight, respondents' low results in intelligence can be explained with an influence of emotional disorganization of the children from the main group on mentation. The following analysis in groups has confirmed the given thesis: a negative correlation

between the factor of intelligence and the coping-strategy of destructive emotional expression is revealed only in children with disadaptive fears (mainly – in boys). The strategy of active abstraction in the sample in whole is positively associated with emotional stability (“C” factor) and is negatively associated with emotional excitement (“D” factor). Thus, it is revealed that children, who well control their emotions, are free from neurological symptoms, balanced even in adverse situations, are to a greater extent disposed to the strategy of active abstraction. The respondents’ strategy of search of social support (communication) is positively associated only with high values of the “asthenic” factor (“J”). Concerning the strategy of passive abstraction, discharge the significant correlations with personal factors in children’s sample has not been revealed. It allows us to assert that 9-10 year old children’s choice of this strategy as a whole has a situational nature.

In the group of the children with disadaptive fears the correlation of coping-strategy with personal factors has another character [see Table 1]. These respondents’ dominating coping-strategy of destructive emotional expression is closely ($p=0.01$) positively associated ($r=0.263^{**}$) with “G” factor (social control) and moderately negatively associated ($r = -0.205^*$) with “B” factor (intelligence). The similar correlations indicate that in frustrating situations the child’s choice of a destructive emotional expression is based on his/her firm confidence in the efficiency of its influence on the people around. In this strategy the children of the main group show persistence, obstinacy, pedantry and a high level of self-organization when achieving the objects set by them. Under the influence of fear, under the deficient character of an external personal resource of these respondents and their uncertainty about getting the necessary help from the people around these children’s persistence and a high level of self-organization serve as a basis for developing their emotional disorganization. Their intellectual deficiency shown in low figures of “B” factor and depressed progress in studies is actually a consequence of these children’s strong anxiety accompanied by constant fear.

The strategy of destructive emotional expression and search of social contacts of the children from the main group are closely associated with low figures of “F” factor (free, sincere display of spontaneous emotions) ($r = -0.194^*$). This correlation confirms our thought that emotion of fear (as a destructive passive reaction to frustrating situations) is associated with the child’s perception of social deficiency in achieving his/her own purposes and satisfying the needs. In fact, their low figures of “F” factor are associated with a high level of anxiety, behavioural rigidity, higher caution, and a pessimistic estimation of the reality. R. Kettell believed that low values of this factor were closely associated with social situation of the child’s development, excessiveness of educational influences which compensated an insufficient personal involvement of the parents into the process of interpersonal communication with the child. The personality of the child with a low figure of this factor is disposed to internalization (concealment) of internal conflicts, to an internal discomfort. In these circumstances the child’s search of social contacts is to compensate his/her uncertainty caused by an insufficiency of a social-psychological resource for coping with problems.

The second, the most preferred by the children of the main group, coping-strategy shown in search of a spiritual support has a close association with low figures of intelligence, “B” factor ($r = -0.219^*$). Feeling fear for one’s own inconsistency in achieving the set objects and satisfying the needs, the child cannot concentrate on the process of an adequate estimation of the social situation; his/her own real strengths and abilities. That provokes him/her to search powerful and miraculous sources of support (magicians, wizards, God, etc.), which have to compensate the insufficiency of the system of the real interpersonal relations.

The strategy of reflective leaving of the children with disadaptive fears is positively associated ($r=0.230^*$) with a strong social control, a developed feeling of responsibility, conscientiousness, i.e. with their serious attitude to the arisen problem and persevering aspiration to think over the situation in order to solve it (“G” factor).

The children of the main group do not have significant correlations between the strategies of passive abstraction (discharge) and active abstraction. That allows us to state: the choice of this strategy for the given group of children is situational.

4. Conclusions

Thus, the carried out empirical research allows us to draw the following conclusions:

1. The choice of a passive coping-strategy is theoretically associated with a specific set of personal determinants which are formed into a certain system of the person’s attitudes. These determinants include stable patterns of social

interaction in frustrating situations; patterns of interaction with the child of people from the nearest environment (close adults and friends); a complex of social-psychological features of the personality distinguished by R. Kettell; the child's ideas about his/her personality and about the character of social interaction with close people around him/her; a self-estimation; the child's state of health; the level of his/her cognitive abilities to estimate the social situations which is shown in the content of attributive processes of communication.

2. The complex of the personal features connected with an external and internal personal resource of coping behaviour determines the content and other characteristics of fears of 9-10 year old children and reflects the availability for the child of an external (inter-individual) personal resource of coping with frustrating situations.

3. Boys' fears more often have disadaptive character in case of the father's absence in the family, girls' fears – in case of the grandfather's absence in the family. Owing to the age specificity of the personality in 9-10 years old the presence of a sibling (a brother or a sister) in a family of the same sex significantly reduces the probability of developing the child's disadaptive fears.

4. The children of the main group are more sensitive to social fears which content is associated with fears that people around will not participate in rendering them any assistance in frustrating situations. They describe their fears in more details, with generalized categories. The children of the control group have more specific fears.

5. The context of school education intensifies the child's perception of the most vulnerable for this age part of the personality – the system of social relations which forms the basis of an external resource of coping with difficult life's situations. In the personal structure of the children of the main group «the neurotic triad» of factors dominates. The "Self"-image of these children differs in domination of negative estimations and characterization of oneself as weak and socially incompetent persons. These children are not confident of their strengths, socially incompetent, reserved, shy, sensitive, and excessively cautious, as they have to rely to a greater extent on their weak abilities because of the inadequate social relations.

6. The insufficiency of an external personal resource of coping behaviour of the children of the main group is accompanied with a non-formed internal resource of coping: they are less developed cognitively. They have weaker psychophysiological abilities of coping with stress. They more often have impairments of somatic health that can be explained as "a flight to the disease". To a greater extent these characteristics are inherent in boys who, owing to cultural expectations, cannot openly show their weakness in the face of difficult life's situations.

7. The depressed social-psychological competence of the child, the cognitive simplicity of perception of situations of communication, the strong orientation to the importance of other people in estimation of one's own personality, the understated self-estimation, difficulties in support of the positive "Self"-image and in the self-expression, the high emotional excitability determined by frustration of social needs, acute perception of one's own difference (speciality) and touchiness predetermine the sphere of fears' display and the level of their intensity. There are four critical spheres where the fears' intensity of children with the described personal complex exceeds the bounds of the "normal" level: a) situations of examination of school knowledge; b) self-expression; c) relations with teachers; d) unconformity to social expectations. The children of the main group feel the strongest anxiety in situations of an estimation of their knowledge, achievements and abilities.

8. The presence of the described complex of personal factors in the child underlies his/her aspiration to frequent expression of emotion of fear as a sort of a passive coping-strategy in frustrating situations. This strategy is organically combined with more frequent choices of coping-strategies in the form of getting into social contacts (communication) and searching a spiritual support. By means of demonstration of strong fear the children of the main group achieve stronger intensity of communication and interaction with significant others (close adults and friends), successfully involving the latter in the process of solving frustrating situations. The preference of the strategy of destructive emotional expression by the children of the main group is not associated with their aspiration to deceive people around, to manipulate them.

9. The efficiency of the children's influence on close adults by means of destructive emotional expression is determined by the character of reaction: the more often the child expresses destructive emotions, the quicker the adults react to it with strengthening social contacts, communication with him/her. Thus, the certain coping-strategies of close people shown by them in response to active expression of fear by the child contribute to fastening patterns of coping in the personal structure of the child in the form of expression of an intensive fear, additive (complementary) to the deficient system of interpersonal relations in the family and to coping-strategies of the close

adults. The distinguished personal complex can be considered as a predictor of the disadaptive character of display of emotion of fear as a coping-strategy.

10. The influence on the critical personal factors of the children from the sample will allow us to realize the exact correction of their disadaptive characteristics connected with a destructive emotional expression.

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