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TRANSFORMATION OF THE PERSONAL CONSTRUCT SYSTEM
AND ACTUALIZATION OF PERSONAL MEANINGS IN
THE PROCESS OF TRAINING EDUCATION

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Abstract

The period of university training is the most sensitive for the formation and the
development of the personal meaning system. This system regulates the relationship of a
man with the surrounding reality. The actual meaning state and properties of the personal
construct system are analyzed as essential features of the personal meaning system. The
actual meaning state is considered as the result of synchronization of time loci of meaning,
the actualization of meanings of the past, present and future in one’s mind. The instrument
for comprehending reality is the system of personal constructs. The features of constructs
characterize cognitive complexity that defines the semantic content and boundaries of
subjective reality. The research tested the assumption that optimal synchronization of time
loci of meaning can be achieved through the transformation of the system of personal
constructs in the process of specially organized training education. The results show the
simultaneous expansion and the amplification of the system of personal constructs, the
rise of life meaningfulness indicators and synchronization of the time loci of meaning
in the training process. The model allows constructing the content of the psychological
mechanism of personal meaning actualization as amplification and expansion of the
applicability range of personal constructs.

Keywords: personal meaning, actual meaning state, mental health, personal
constructs, internalization, training, training education, students

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Relevance

The subjective conceptual reality of a human being is formed by the combination of the time loci of meaning of various events in his life. The process of comprehending a phenomenon or an object of reality is carried out through the synchronization of different time loci. This process is expressed in a certain mental state associated with comprehending the meanings of different time loci. This state is the comprehension of events or situations relevant to the moment, i.e., it is the actualization of meanings of the past, present and future, or their combination in one's mind. We define this experience as the actual meaning state, which is a set of actualized, generalized meanings, placed in a time perspective (experience, reality, purposes). The synchronization of the time loci of meaning is a necessary condition for effective individual life. Through this process, the expansion of the boundaries of the subjective reality, i.e., the integration of a personality into new conditions of life, takes place. Thus, the synchronization of the time loci defines the actual meaning state as a special condition. This special condition regulates the process of integration of a personality and the environment and, to a large extent, determines the adequacy of the subjective action for the objective reality (de la Fuente, Zapata, Martinez-Vicente, Sander, & Putwain, 2015; Kiel, Heimlich, Markowetz, Braun, & Weiβ, 2016; Sunaga, Shuto, Washizaki, Kakehi, Fukazawa, Yamato, & Okubo, 2016; Calderón-Almendros, & Calderón-Almendros, 2016; Yasko, & Kazarin, 2015).

The actual meaning state is directly interrelated with the mental health of a man, since it describes human activities and reflects their efficiency in specific life conditions and the sense of psychological well-being. The instruments, with which a man comprehends the surrounding reality, are his personal constructs. In G. Kelly’s theory personal growth and development are associated with the expansion of the range and scope of the system of constructs. Accordingly, the cognitive complexity that defines the content and scope of the subjective reality serves as the basis for the level (layered) organization of the meaning system. The level of the cognitive complexity reflects the content of the personal constructs of the individual — meaning systems that a man creates and then, with their help, interacts with the objective reality. The cognitive complexity can be interpreted as the number of
various independent constructs that are in hierarchical subordination. In other words, we are talking about differentiation of the individual meaning field, where the meanings expressed in the constructs are in coordination with each other (Valeeva, & Amirova, 2016; Srividhya, & Sharmila, 2013; Turchina, Beloborodov, & Danilina, 2013; Galaktionova, Maiseenko, & Taptygina, 2015; Rasskasov, & Komova, 2014).

The mechanism of forming and developing of a system of personal meanings in the educational process is the internalization of social values. The internalization can be defined as a complex process involving conscious and active reproduction of accepted norms and values in social behavior under the condition of taking responsibility for them, and interpretation of significant events as a result of one’s own activity. This is an essential condition for “sustainability of the human life world”. Comprehending one’s own life’s meaning largely depends on taking responsibility for the way this life goes on, i.e. for the process and results of the activities undertaken. These processes of personal dynamics at the university are based on the students’ implementation of educational activities related to giving and acquiring knowledge that bears meaning. The acquired information should be the value that, while internalizing in the category of personal experience, makes the process of actualizing personal meanings of the future in the context of the present life situation.

Dynamic development of the system of personal meanings in the process of higher school training is associated with the sensitivity of this life period for meaning-forming processes. The processes include internalizing values, converting them into the category of personal meanings of a higher level, amplifying a cognitive sphere and identity structure. Such sensitivity determines the possibility of mastering specialists’ training in higher school and shifting the emphasis in the training process towards the internalization of control locus by actualizing personal meanings of the past, present and future and identifying students with the subject of their future professional activities. They do it through increasing their interest in its axiological aspect in the course of specially developed educational technologies.

The pedagogical model, developed and implemented by us, focuses on creating opportunities for students’ personal growth. They do it through internalizing knowledge, forming students’ conscious approach to the unity of theory, methodology and practice via
the professional vision of the world. The students develop professionally relevant personal
abilities, such as individual and cultural empathy, intentionality, authenticity, by means of
introducing to the professional system of value orientations. The educational process carried
out in the framework of this model represents a balanced series of lectures, seminars and
training sessions. The main tool that allows internalizing the acquired knowledge, skills and
abilities in this model of educational process is the system of training education accumulating
the material in practically oriented courses.

We have developed the basic methods of training: role-playing and group discussions
in different combinations and modifications. The topics for the simultaneously ongoing group
discussions are the issues related to professional activities. In particular, we pay attention
to professional values, ethical standards, personal qualities of a professional and their
manifestation in training participants, theoretical and methodological aspects of teamwork, as
well as relevant life problems of the participants. In the process of role-playing games focused
on identifying the participants with the subject of their future professional activities situations of
the practical activity of a specialist in the psycho-pedagogical field are exercised. We tested the
developed model and found out, that the actualization of the participants’ personal meanings in
the context of training education promotes internalization of knowledge. The internalization of
knowledge in turn allows converting them into the category of personal qualities.

**Materials and methods**

We assumed that adequate synchronization of the time loci of meaning in the process
of training education can be achieved by means of transformation of the personal construct
system. Proceeding from this assumption, we have conducted a specially developed training
of professional self-identification. The training aimed at making initially rigid constructs,
evaluative positions and stereotypes more flexible. The basic principle of the targeted action
within the framework of this training was to create conditions for the free choice of the highest
values. We created them through amplifying the personal construct system and, thus, extending
the conceptual limits of the subjective reality. During the training we used the techniques of
the client-centered therapy (C. Rogers), gestalttherapy (F. Perls), logotherapy (V. Frankl). This
approach combining general ideas of the theories implements the principles of the generalized
theory by G. Kelly. 18 students of Kemerovo State University enrolled in teaching professions participated in the training. The total duration of the training was 40 hours.

To assess the peculiarities of the participants’ meaning sphere and personal construct system before and after the training we used the following methods: the Russian version of The Purpose-in-Life Test (PIL) by J. Crumbaugh and The Repertory Grid Technique (RGT) by G. Kelly. Eliciting personal constructs and studying the level of the participants’ cognitive complexity were implemented with the method of Triads. We included the following elements of the proposed role list to fill in the repertory grid: the real and the ideal images of “I”, “The luckiest”, “The happiest” and “The most moral” of all the people known to the subject of the test. The three latter elements, according to G. Kelly, are “the class of values” of the personal construct system. All possible options for eliciting three of these five elements constituted ten triads.

At the beginning of the procedure, the participants were to fill in the names of the people they knew in the appropriate column of the proposed role list. After that they were asked to make a decision in what way two out of three people, circled in the first row, were “similar to each other and different from the third”. They were to write down the appropriate characteristic and its opposite pole in the column “Construct”. Then the participants were to tick all other persons having the same characteristic. All the remaining rows of the grid were filled in similarly. As a result, for each participant ten elicited constructs representing his/her reality evaluation were recorded.

All the constructs elicited in the participants’ group were divided into two types. The first type, which we defined as “rigid”, comprised explicitly polarized constructs having clearly opposite poles, i.e. representing rigid dichotomy: “responsibility – irresponsibility”, “dependence – independence”, “high intelligence – low intelligence”, “optimism - pessimism”, “warmth – coldness”, etc. The second type, referred to as “flexible”, comprised those constructs which had implicitly opposite poles, i.e. more cognitively complex, free or “loose” constructs: “kindness – acrimony”, “intelligence – constiction”, “honesty – independence”, etc.

**Results and their discussion**

The described procedure conducted before and after the training revealed some changes in the personal construct system in the process of the training (table 1). The results allow us to speak
about some “softening” of the initially rigid system of personal constructs, making them more flexible and receptive, overcoming, in some cases, unproductive fixed evaluative stereotypes.

Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Constructs</th>
<th>Before the training</th>
<th>After the training</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“rigid”</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“flexible”</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[X^2=5.55; \, p<0.02\]

Positive dynamics of the cognitive complexity indicator during the training determined the process of the synchronization of the time loci in the individual systems of personal meanings. This indicator revealed an authentic relationship with the time loci of the present and future \((r= -0.21\) with \(p<0.05\) and \(r= -0.19\) with \(p<0.05\), respectively). Consequently, amplifying the personal construct system allowed to overcome the rigidity of the boundaries of the time loci of the participants’ subjective reality.

The expansion of the personal construct system gives an opportunity to go beyond fixed patterns and more adequately assess oneself and the environment. It turned out to be associated with understanding and extending conceptual boundaries of the subjective reality. During our training there was an increase in various indicators of life meaningfulness (table 2). This indicates an increase in the participants’ self-understanding, realizing and experiencing their life meaningfulness and goals, shaping the image of “I (Ego)” as a strong personality. This personality has sufficient freedom of choice to build a life in accordance with their goals and ideas about its sense.

Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PIL Scales</th>
<th>Indicators in the group tested</th>
<th>(p)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General life meaningfulness</td>
<td>5.3 before the training</td>
<td>6.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>after the training</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaningfulness of life goals</td>
<td>5.3 before the training</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>after the training</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaningfulness of life process</td>
<td>5.0 before the training</td>
<td>6.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>after the training</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaningfulness of life result</td>
<td>5.0 before the training</td>
<td>6.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>after the training</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Locus of control – I (Ego)</td>
<td>5.2 before the training</td>
<td>6.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>after the training</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Locus of control - Life</td>
<td>5.1 before the training</td>
<td>6.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>after the training</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The obtained data for the PIL test were also interpreted within the framework of new conceptualization of the technique. The particular technique allows to study not only the meaningfulness indicators, but also to determine the time locus of the fixation of the
conceptual reality. The variant proposed by us allows to identify eight types of the actual meaning state depending on the level of the meaningfulness of the past, present and future.

The first type of the actual meaning state is characterized by low indicators of the meaningfulness of the past, present and future. The participants experiencing this type of condition (17%) were characterized by dissatisfaction with the life period already lived, low meaningfulness of their lives at present. They experienced lack of goals for the future and, consequently, discrete perception of their lives in general. Personal meanings, in such a case, were devoid of purpose and time perspective. In addition, they demonstrated disbelief in their ability to control events of their own life, fatalism. They believed that a human life is beyond conscious control, freedom of choice is illusory, and there is no sense in making plans for the future. The main protective mechanisms were projection, denial, and rejection of their own intentions expressed in a depressed mood.

The second type is distinguished by low indicators of the meaningfulness of the present and future, and high meaningfulness of the past (5% of participants). This type of the actual meaning state characterizes a person being dissatisfied with the process of life, seeing no prospects in life, having everything in the past. As well as in the first type, the external general locus of behavior control was demonstrated. Such condition is characterized by the tendency to isolation in one’s own world, aloofness in contacts with the outside world, pessimism, reflection, passivity in decision-making. The protective mechanism was the rejection of self-realization and strengthening of the control of consciousness.

The third type represents a condition with high meaningfulness of the present and low indicators of the meaningfulness of the past and future (11% of the participants). This condition characterizes a man as a hedonist living for today, having no goals and dissatisfied with his past. We can say that his personal meanings are respondent, situational and defensive. The indicators of the locus of inner control over oneself and life are the same as with the class mentioned above. Alongside with this, there is emotional instability, proneness to affective reactions, conformity towards authorities and disregard for the opinion of others. The prevailing protective mechanisms are projection, denial and rejection of one’s own intentions. Besides, there is internal restraint with external sociability, avoidance of deep and emotional contacts with people, i.e. the inability to subject-subject communication.
The fourth type of the actual meaning state is characterized by high indicators of the meaningfulness of the past and present, and low meaningfulness of the future (33% of the participants). Such condition is characteristic of people living for today and yesterday. It is possible to say that the system of personal meanings, in this case, is aimed at living. For this condition the average indicators of the locus of control over oneself and life are observed. However, low meaningfulness of life goals orientates the system of personal meanings towards the adaptive forms of interaction with the objective reality. The forms are manifested in inflated self-esteem, a high degree of aspirations and, at the same time, in a need to be involved in the interests of the group, optimism and bright emotional expression with some shallowness of emotions and lack of discipline. They are also manifested in the desire to deny existing problems, to streamline and displace the events of concern.

The fifth type comprises conditions of explicit meaningfulness of goals and low indicators of the meaningfulness of the present and past (not identified among the participants of the training). This class characterizes a person as a schemer whose plans do not have real support in the present and are not backed by the personal responsibility for their implementation. The orientation of the meaning locus towards goals performs, in this case, the function of protection from real problems. The protection is often performed by withdrawing into the illusory compensatory reality, along with rationalizing phenomena of the objective reality and acting out in a blaming type, i.e. by attributing suspicion, misunderstanding and hostility to others. For this condition the low indicators of the life control locus and the average indicators of the I (Ego) control are observed.

The sixth type of the actual meaning state (not identified among the participants of the training) is characterized by dissatisfaction with one’s life in the present (low meaningfulness of this life process). In this case the personal meanings are directed towards the past experience (high meaningfulness of the past) and focused on the future (high meaningfulness of the future). This situation can be described as the desire to leave the unfavourable environment, which is confirmed by the steady average indicators of the control loci – I (Ego) and life. Such condition displays certain ostentation and affectivity of behavior, and low sensitivity to oneself. However, the duration of this state can lead to increasing frustration tension with all the ensuing consequences.
meaningfulness of the present (type 3), which undoubtedly speaks for the positive tendency towards comprehending themselves as subjects of life.

Table 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of the state</th>
<th>Before the training</th>
<th>After the training</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conclusion

Our research demonstrates practical applicability of the proposed educational training model and allows interpreting the content of the psychological mechanism. This mechanism determines the dynamics of the actual meaning states during the training, as the amplification and expansion of the applicability range of personal constructs serving as means of reality evaluation and resulting in comprehension and expansion of one’s subjective reality boundaries.

Comprehending the meaning of the future professional activity as life goals in the context of personal self-determination allows students to distinctly identify themselves as its subject. Internalizing acquired knowledge and skills, experiencing them as values on a personal level of the system of personal meanings expand the applicability range of personal constructs in regard to personal identity. This make them more flexible in the context of life prospects, which is indicative of the formation of a professional vision of the world. The subjective comprehension of the personal experience in the context of identifying life prospects gives life a sense of meaning. It is associated with comprehending responsibility for the goals, process and results of one’s activities. The identification of “I (Ego)-image” in different time aspects of the subjective reality causes manifestation of the participants’ high level of the internality. It also causes positive attitude towards oneself and others, lack
of frustration tension, openness to new experiences. And it generalizes in manifestation of personal abilities such as authenticity, intentionality, empathy. As indicators of personal growth, acquiring the status of professionally significant qualities, these abilities define personal and, therefore, professional competence of future specialists in deontology.

The actualization of personal meanings in conditions of the training education promotes the internalization of the knowledge acquired during the training. The internalization of the knowledge allows to comprehend the knowledge and skills and to convert them into the category of personal qualities. The rise of the indicators of self-identification, the amplification of the personal construct system, the internalization of values, and structuring them into a system of life-meaningful orientations speak for the personal growth. The participants of the training education are sure to overcome the normative crisis of professional development. This confirms the importance of creating special conditions for training professionals in the educational process in higher school. This certainly designates the problem of the form of giving and acquiring knowledge that should be personally experienced and comprehended by students.

References


