INFLUENCE OF VERBAL AND VISUAL-IMAGE MEANS ON DECENTRATION IN A CONFLICT OF PARTICIPANTS OF ROMANTIC COUPLES IN A CONSULTATION PROCESS

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to investigate specific distinctions between the effects of the methods based on the use of visual-image or verbal means in psychological consultation. We examined the differences in the impact of these kinds of means on the emotional and cognitive decenteration among 30 romantic Russian couples aged 20-25 years. During the consultation each partner was asked to try to look at a specific conflict from the position of their partner. Verbal means were suggested as a way of modifying one’s own position for one half of couples, and visual means have been proposed for the other half. Four methods were used: description of a conflict situation, test of egocentric associations - EAT test (Pashukova, 1991); experiment; pre- and post-experimental conversation. The results show that the visual image means help strengthen the emotional and decentered position of a participant in the conflict to a greater extent than the verbal means, as well as significantly reduce cognitive decenteration. In contrast, verbal methods help enhance cognitive decentered position of a participant in the conflict to a greater extent than the visual-image means, but have little effect on the emotional decenteration.

Keywords: conflict, couples in romantic relationship, emotional decenteration, cognitive decenteration, visual-image means, verbal means, situational egocentrism

Relevance

Romance in adolescence is a crucial experience, lying down in the core of the forthcoming marriage. There is no reason to believe that a romantic relationship is a zone free

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of conflicts. Last ones are complicated critical communication situations which have high developmental potential. Despite the positive effects of a close relationship on our mental health and well-being, a conflict inevitably occurs regularly in most intimate relationships (Brehm et al., 2002). Moreover, overcoming the conflict leads to the development of communication and building a more mature relationship (Skutina, 2012; Appel, & Shulman, 2015). Conversely, the tendency to overlook and downplay the disagreement, even in combination with an elevated romantic attraction leads to shorter relationships (Collins et al., 2009; Haet et al., 2013).

Health of a relationship is determined not by the absence of contradictions and conflicts, but the ability of a couple to resolve conflicts constructively before they escalate to the level of controversy. According to a respectable Russian conflict researcher N.V. Grishina (Gryshina, 2015) conflict can always be resolved, except when the participants do not want to. However, in addition to the desire the participants must have certain resources to resolve the conflict. One of the most important is the ability to take a decentered position in the conflict, expressing the orientation to a partner in communication, taking the partner’s opinions, attitudes and feelings into consideration, not just their own. That is the basis of a dialogue.

We aimed to compare the visual-image and verbal means of psychological help to a couple in conflict resolution, namely strengthening partners’ orientation on each other, i.e, decenteration.

**State of the problem**

Decentration as the mechanism consisting in ability to change of the point of view, a way of action with taking into account points of view different from one’s own, is an important quality for conflicts resolution. Lack of decenteration, according to many researchers (Pashukova, 2001; Kavun 2012; Skorohodko, 2013 and others), has a negative effect on the efficiency of communication. T. I. Pashukova introduces the idea of the balance mechanism of centration-decenteration. She sees its target function in a possibility of ensuring reversible changes of the personality, i.e. in a possibility of the movement from egocentrism to decentration and vice versa. An increase of situational egocentrism in conflict interactions with other people is noted as a characteristic of interpersonal conflict (Pashukova, 2001; Skutina, 2012). As the
result conflicting parties are inclined to allocate each other with traits increasing hostility and preventing the establishment of a dialogue and mutual understanding between them.

In the present a few different types of decentration, for example, emotional and cognitive decentration, are distinguished. Each of them has an important and at the same time specific meaning in interpersonal relationships. Cognitive decentration is shown in the accounting of the interlocutor’s opinion, the desire to convey information to them, to be understood and to understand the content they are trying to convey (Globa, 2007). According to G.M. Breslav, emotional decentration is understood as an ability of an individual to perceive and consider desires and interests of other people in individual’s behavior. Emotional decentration provides the ability to look at a situation not only through a prism of the individual’s own experiences and mood, but also from the perspective of the other, sensitivity to the perception of the emotional state of another person (Breslav, 1990). T. I. Pashukova shares V. V. Stolin’s ideas of the existence of cognitive and emotional components in the structure of consciousness of an individual. Given that emotions are a primary form of reflection of a personal meaning, emotional decentration provides orientation in the meanings and the relations of a partner expressed directly, whether cognitive kind provides the attitude to accept and consider information contradicting one’s own experience. Decentration requires an understanding of what a partner is guided by in communication, not only a rational interpretation of the motives of their actions, but also the emotional empathy to what they feel. In the relationship decentration can manifest itself in the understanding of the motives, interests, goals, feelings of another person, the ability to perceive and take their position. This makes it possible to create a solid platform for the development of the relationship, conflict resolution and a guarantee of mutual understanding between the partners.

According to Pashukova, increasing decentration in adults is possible in client-centered forms of therapy and individual counseling. Practical psychology provides a wide choice of ways to impact on a decentration of a person. How to understand what is suitable more for strengthening a cognitive decentration of the client and what for emotional? As the analysis of literature shows (Veraksa, 2012; Potanina, 2014, etc.), verbal means are effective in situations of certainty, concreteness of meanings and they imply the work of the thought
directed to the problem’s resolution. At the same time visual-image means are used in uncertain situations with a polysemy of interpretations and meanings, allowing connecting imagination and promoting accommodation of a problem. On this basis the following hypotheses have been put for the empirical test:

1) Visual-image means promote strengthening of the emotional decentration of the participant in the conflict more than verbal means, namely: taking into account meanings and interests of the partner, their experiences, feelings, attitude to a situation.

2) Verbal means promote strengthening of the cognitive decentration of the participant in the conflict more than visual-image means, namely: the account of intentions, plans, motives of the partner and their options of development of the conflict is more whole.

**Materials and Methods**

Participants: 20 pairs, age 20-25 years old in romantic relationships lasting more than one year, with the actual conflict and the desire to get a psychologist’s help in its resolution were the participants in the study. The research was conducted in 2014-16 according to the following plan.

Procedure and Measures. Each pair of participants was asked to choose a specific conflict situation that was relevant to them at the moment. Each of them described the situation in writing, then the respondents took the egocentric associations’ test (Pashukova, 1991), which gives an indication of the level of egocentric orientation of a person and has 40 unfinished sentences which should be continued to get a complete idea. The participants were asked to finish the proposed unfinished sentences about the selected conflict. In the process of counseling the technique “change of a position” was used with one group (50% of the couples) with a visual-image means: each of the partners was offered to make a drawing “Our conflict through my partner’s eyes”. Indirect verbal means were offered to the participants of the other group (50% of the couples), “verbal” interaction with a change of position: turning the tables with a partner and discussing the situation of their role. We have used the content analysis of texts of the description of a conflict situation of the participants before and after the consultation, answers of the respondents according to the egocentric associations’ test and the data of post-experimental and preliminary conversations. The significance of the obtained differences was checked by means of the Wilcoxon signed-rank test.
Results and their discussion

The described methods were used in all the sample (60 respondents). By means of the content analysis we determined the frequency of occurrence of phenomena of emotional and cognitive egocentric/decentered positions in the statements of the participants before consultation. Then we compared the severity of the happened changes in the group of couples which have undergone consultations “with drawing” and “with talking”.

After working with visual image means indicators of emotional decentration increased from 8% to 26% - 18% of the total number of sentences, which is almost 3 times more than the original performance, the results of egocentric associations’ test. Indicators of emotional egocentric position thus decreased by 60% to 48% - 12%. That is 1/5 less than before the exposure to the visual-image means by the results of egocentric associations’ test (they are in the zone of a statistical tendency by the Wilcoxon signed-rank test) and 42% to 24% - 18%, i.e. almost 2 times as a result of the analysis pre- and postexperimental conversations, which is statistically significant. For example, the phrases indicating own personal meanings initially appeared in one of couples more: “I love her”, “I am less drawn to her”, “I am afraid of breaking up with her”. After work with a drawing there were phrases focused on another person: “She worries a lot”, “I don’t want her to cry”, “she calmed down”.

When using verbal means indicators of cognitive decentration increased from 12 to 21% - 9% of the total number of sentences, which is almost 2 times more than the original performance of the results of egocentric associations’ test (in the zone of a statistical tendency by results of the Wilcoxon signed-rank test). Indicators of cognitive egocentric position have decreased significantly from 27 to 8% – by 19% which is nearly 3 times less than initial indicators by results of the analysis of preliminary and post-experimental conversations. For example, one of the partner’s share of the phrases identifying her own opinion was 50% of the total number of sentences prior to the consultation: “I need everything to go according to plan”, “I want a family with him”, “I’m talking to you so you’d react somehow”. After working with a verbal change of position the share of these statements has decreased to 16%.

However, by results of processing the technique of describing the situation, despite changes of a cognitive egocentric position from 29% to 18% from the total number of
statements and change of a cognitive decentration from 22 to 32%, this data were not statistically significant.

In addition, the analysis showed that working with the visual-image means also leads to a decrease of the egocentric position and increase in decentration, but to a lesser extent than when working with verbal means. Verbal means, in turn, influence on decrease of the emotional egocentric position, but also decrease of decentration (on average by 3% at initial rates of about 12%). That can mean that the effect of visual-image means gives ampler opportunities to increase decentration, both in emotional, and in cognitive aspects. Thus, both hypotheses have found the empirical confirmation.

**Conclusion**

The conducted empirical research allows us formulate the following conclusions.

The use of visual-image means for the organization of change of the positions of the participants of the conflict (in this research it is the drawing “Our conflict through my partner’s eyes”) promotes a greater strengthening of the emotional decentration of the conflict participant than when using verbal means. In particular, they help look at a situation through a prism of the experiences, moods of the partner, increase keenness to perception of the partner’s emotional state, their meanings and interests, the attitude to the situation.

The use of verbal means helps to enhance cognitive decentration of the conflict participant to a greater extent than the visual-image means. In particular, they take into account the partner’s intentions, plans, motives, options of development of the conflict.

Besides, consultation with making a drawing, unlike exclusively verbal consultation, leads to more complex results: it has a significant impact on both emotional decentration, through the use of visual-image ways of self-expression and claiming their own experiences, and cognitive decentration.

**References**


