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Dynamics of psychology students' "image of a psychologist" conception during education

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Abstract

The purpose of the presented study was to investigate how the content of the media images of psychologists is reflected on the psychology students' self-consciousness and how the "image of a psychologist" changes its content during education. We compared the "image of a psychologist" of university entrants and students of various years of psychological education. The study involved 62 university entrants and 92 students of the first, third and fifth years of psychology education. The "image of a psychologist" portrait characteristics were evaluated by T. Leary's "Interpersonal diagnosis of personality" instrument modified by L. Sobchik. The "image of a psychologist" positioning in entrants' and students' professional identity was investigated by the "multiple identifications" method. The dynamics of the "image of a psychologist" conceptions were explored by the age-slicing method. The results of the study showed that entrants of psychology education had a positive but mythicized "image of a psychologist". During education the "image of a psychologist" in students' self-consciousness transformed: it became authentic, true to life, with normal and variant portrait features, as a professional self-identification image. Also during education the "image of a psychologist" lost features of a mentor or guardian and became a real life guide.

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1. Introduction

Understanding of psychological assistance essence and an adequate perception of the "image of a psychologist" should promote successful counselling. Also the content of the "image of a psychologist" in psychology students' self-consciousness is very important for the development of their professional identity. Initially the image of a

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psychologist became the object of study in J. Nunnally & J. M. Kittross's research in 1958 (Nunnally, & Kittross, 1958). They found that more than half of the respondents ranking such professions as doctors, engineers, chemists, psychologists and psychiatrists in order of importance for society and scientific contribution gave the last place to psychologists. In W. Smith's research significant differences were discovered between the image of a psychologist and the image of a scientist which students had (Smith, & Erb, 1986). The image of the psychologist was described through the following characteristics: perceptive, caring, considerate, understanding, sincere, attractive. In turn, the scientist was seen as resourceful, highly intelligent and thorough. Studies showed that the image of the psychologist due to many factors had a complex and changeable content. K. Szybinska, D. Mroczkowska & Z. Toeplitz identified gender and age differences in perception of both positive and negative traits of the "image of a psychologist" by non-psychologists (Szybinska, Mroczkowska, & Toeplitz, 2004). In perspective of gender approach in analysis of the "image of a psychologist" S. Schneider, J. Ellis & R. Johnson found that respondents more positively evaluated female psychologists unlike male psychologists. At the same time the image of a male psychologist was closer to the image of the scientist (Schneider, Ellis, & Johnson, 1979).

Studying the influence of the media on social consciousness L. Schneider showed that the perception of a psychologist was determined by persons' communication as well as through the media (Schneider, 1990). For most people the representation of psychologists, their personal qualities and work is largely based on the experience gained from the media: TV movies, serials, talk shows, films. The mass media often create in mass consciousness distorted images of psychologists as unsuccessful persons, or psychologists who easily give the solution to all problems, either a blending image of a psychologist with images of a psychic, an astrologer, etc. In movies one can often find the image of a psychologist as some kind of misfit.

The demonstration of a psychologist's positive image in the TV show in limited time creates a simplified scheme of counselling as "issue-ready answer" in the viewer's consciousness. This creates the "image of a psychologist" as a person who knows an easy solution to all the problems. Also an inadequate representation of psychologists and their work is produced by movies that demonstrate relationship of psychologists with esoteric phenomena, and due to this the image of a psychologist is blurred and mixed with the image of a shaman. As a result the image of a psychologist in people's mind is pretty distorted that causes difficulties of the psychologist's practical work with clients, as well as the problems with students' professional identity formation while getting psychological education. During their practical education psychology students face everyday psychologist's practice full of complexity and routine, devoid of fast and complete solutions. In Russia, like other countries (de Paolis, Lorenzi-Cioldi, & Pombeni, 1983; Allen, 1960), the work of a psychologist is poorly paid; it often has a lot of vague requirements and expectations, both from administrations and clients. A number of students in the learning process are disappointed in the choice of their profession.

However, the content of the image of a psychologist in the public mind is constantly changing. In the study conducted in Argentina a low level of professional prestige of psychologists was found (Horas, De Barbenza, De Mikusinski, Montoya, & de Pantano, 1977). Later was showed that the representation of psychologists in Argentina between 1974 and 1993 was positively modified (de Uhlandt, Rovella & De Barbenza, 1997).

In order to determine how the content of the media images of psychologists is reflected on the content of psychology students' self-consciousness, we have compared the "image of a psychologist" of university entrants and students of various years of psychological education.

2. Methods

The study involved 62 university entrants and 92 students of first (n=28), third (n=27) and fifth (n=37) years of psychology education (most of respondents were girls). The "Image of a psychologist" portrait characteristics were evaluated by "Interpersonal diagnosis of personality" instrument (Leary, 1957) modified by L.Sobchik (Sobchik, 1990).

The "Image of a psychologist" positioning in the professional identity of entrants and students was investigated by "multiple identifications" method of V. Petrenko (Petrenko, 1997). The diagnostic instrument included the images:

- "I am in present"
- "I am in the future profession"

- “My parents”
- “A refined person”
- “A good psychologist”
- “A rich person”
- “My favourite teacher”
- “A successful businessman”
- “A happy woman”,
- “An established man”.

The identification of the images was determined by the correlation analysis. A positive correlation coefficient showed the identification of the images in respondents’ consciousness, a negative correlation coefficient showed images’ opposition.

The “image of a psychologist” conceptions dynamics were explored by the age-slicing method. Thus, the selected methods and techniques allowed to assess the image of a psychologist in different perspectives: we estimated the portrait traits of the “psychologist”, semantic closeness of the “psychologist’s image in relation to other socially important images and to Self-image in professional respective.

3. Results and Discussion

The results of personality traits evaluation of the “image of a psychologist” obtained by using T. Leary’s scales “Interpersonal diagnosis of personality” for entrants and students of various years of psychology education are presented in Table 1. As it is shown in Table 1 entrants’ “image of a psychologist” differs from students’ “image of a psychologist”. Entrants of psychology education have positive, but mythicized “image of a psychologist”, where the psychologist has accentuation of altruism and cooperation features with no negative qualities and is able to solve any problem. During education the “image of a psychologist” in students’ self-consciousness is transforming: it becomes authentic, corresponding to life, with normal and variant portrait features, as a professional self-identification image.

Table 1. Average grades of the “image of a psychologist” characteristics in reflection of various groups of respondents (Grades higher than 8 show accentuation of features discovered by relevant octant)

Octants names by the T. Leary’s “Interpersonal diagnosis of personality”	University entrants	Psychology students of first year	Psychology students of third year	Psychology students of fifth year
Authoritarian	8.66	8.82	5.96	4.38
Independent-dominating	7.15	6.7	3.74	3.81
Aggressive	6.73	5.9	2.67	2.84
Incredulous-skeptical	6.26	5.4	2.56	2.41
Humbly-shy	6.43	6.25	2.63	2.14
Dependent	7.74	7.5	5.00	4.35
Inclined to cooperation	9.7	9.1	8.33	6.16
Altruistic	10.6	9.1	8.74	6.27

The application of “multiple identifications” method discovered that entrants identified “A good psychologist” image with images of “My parents” ($r = 0,8$), “My favourite teacher” ($r = 0,8$), “A refined person” ($r = 0,8$), “A happy woman” ($r = 0,75$). It can be explained by the influence of school experience and by the perception of a school psychologist who often performs in school not only the work of a psychologist but also a teacher, an organizer, an educator, and usually this is a woman. Also the image of a psychologist was identified with “A successful businessman” image ($r = 0,7$) and was close to the receptions of “An established man” ($r = 0,47$) and “A rich person” ($r = 0,46$) images. In general, the image of a “psychologist” was poorly differentiated in entrants’ self-consciousness and was not identified with Self-images (“I am in present” and “I am in the future profession”).

Among students studying psychology there were discovered the following tendencies: the image “I am in the future profession” was blurring and unclear for students of all years of education. They identified themselves in future with all images equally. Also they had some disagreement between “I am in present” and “I am in the future profession” images and they opposed the “I am in present” image with images of such semantic category as material wellbeing (“A successful businessman” and “A rich person”).

Students of the first year of psychology education had a very close identity of “A good psychologist” image with images of “A refined person” ($r = 0,8$), “I am in the future profession” ($r = 0,8$), “An established man” ($r = 0,7$), “My favourite teacher” ($r = 0,7$), “A rich person” ($r = 0,7$). “A good psychologist” image was identified with images “My parents” ($r = 0,5$), “A happy woman” ($r = 0,4$), “A successful businessman” ($r = 0,4$) to a lesser extent and was opposed to “I am in present” image. It showed that in conciseness of first year psychology education students the “Good psychologist” image was associated with the characteristics of a successful and promoting personality which occupies the dominant position. A weak correlation between images of the “Good psychologist” and “My parents” demonstrated the cancellation of the perception of psychologist as “worldly sage” and understanding the psychologist as a professional that requires special education and theoretical knowledge. It should also be noted that the image of the psychologist in the minds of the students was masculine as indicated by the strong connection with the image of “An established man” and a weaker connection with the image of “A happy woman”. Contrasting images of the “Good psychologist” and “I am in present” means that students have no illusory views about their own preparedness for professional psychological activities.

The third-year psychology students had clearer differentiation of images according to their future profession. The “I am in the future profession” image for the third-year students was identified with images of “My favourite teacher” ($r = 0,7$) and “A good psychologist” ($r = 0,8$). This is probably due to the tendency of students to identify themselves with University professors. The “Good psychologist” image was strongly identified with images of “A refined person” ($r = 0,8$), “A rich person” ($r = 0,6$), “My favourite teacher” ($r = 0,5$), “An established man” ($r = 0,5$), “A successful businessman” ($r = 0,5$) and was weaker identified with “My parents” ($r = 0,3$) image. At the same time “A good psychologist” image was opposed to images of “A happy woman” ($r = - 0,3$) and “I am in present” ($r = - 0,5$). In this way third-year psychology students evaluated the image of a psychologist like the image of professional self-evolution with critical perception of their current level as a psychologist.

Some features which were discovered for third-year students were retained by first-year students – the image of a psychologist was depicted by the following characteristics: intelligent, masculine, wealthy and successful. These characteristics correspond rather to a showman or businessman. Psychology students of the third year had not identified Self-image with the image of the psychologist either, but they identified their future professional activities with the image of a good psychologist.

The fifth-year psychology students demonstrated a clearer differentiation in the perception of presented images. They identified the image of “A good psychologist” with the image of “A refined person” ($r = 0,75$) and contrasted it with the images of “My parents” ($r = - 0,1$) and “A happy woman” ($r = - 0,3$). There was a weak correlation with the “I am in present” image ($r = 0,1$) and with “I am in the future profession” image ($r = 0,3$). It shows that fifth-year psychology students have the perception of “psychologist” as a real person with different and very individual characteristics. The image of “A good psychologist” was also weaker identified with the images of “My favourite teacher” ($r = 0,46$), “A successful businessman” ($r = 0,5$), “A rich person” ($r = 0,4$) and “An established man” ($r = 0,3$) in comparison with other psychology students.

In the entrants’ consciousness the image of a psychologist was poorly differentiated from well-known childhood images of school teachers and parents. In their view a psychologist is an intelligent person occupying dominant status, quite rich and successful, having a lot of positive qualities developed to the highest degree. It means that entrants perceive the psychologist as an ideal person who does not make mistakes, knows everything; this indicates the absence of adequacy in the perception of the image of the psychologist. These results can be explained by the lack of awareness about the work of the psychologist characteristic for schoolchildren, as well as the influence of the media. In entrants’ view there were no gender differences in the perception of the image of the psychologist who is equally associated both with female and male images. The strong association of a “Good psychologist” image with “I’m in the future profession” in entrants’ self-consciousness confirmed that this image was the enticing prospect of one’s own life.

In gender dimension the image of a psychologist in students' self-consciousness was mostly masculine. The tendency to identify a "psychologist" with male images on the fifth year of education was weaker but the stronger was the contraposition to a female image. Since the study involved mainly girls, perhaps these results say about reducing the value of gender characteristics of the image of psychologist during psychology education. Also during education the "image of a psychologist" loses features of mentor or guardian and is becoming a real life guide.

4. Conclusion

The results of the study show that psychology students' disappointment of the chosen profession and complexity of professional identity arise due to the inadequate, imposed by the media understanding of the psychologist's image that entrants usually have while choosing psychology education. In this case, it can be recommended to develop active learning practice system of psychological work for those scholars who are interested in the profession of a psychologist, for example, on the basis of the volunteer movement.

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