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### Psychology of Personality: Real and Virtual Context

# THE TIME LINE TECHNIQUE IN COUNSELING THE ADOPTIVE FAMILIES

Ekaterina B. Zhuykova (a)\*, Leonora S. Pechnikova (b), Andrey L. Ryzhov (b)  
\*Corresponding author

(a) Psychological Institute of the Russian Academy of Education, 125009, 9-4 Mokhovaya ul., Moscow, Russian Federation, e.b.zhuykova@gmail.com

(b) Faculty of Psychology, Lomonosov Moscow State University, Moscow, Russian Federation

### *Abstract*

The use of time perspective paradigm in research allows studying how the experiences of past events influence decision-making. The understanding of how the decision to adopt a child is formed is important for studying the parental expectations from interactions with the child, what may be used to predict disillusionment and a placement failure. The family therapy aims at helping to cope with disillusionment and to readjust the expectations. The Time Line technique for family therapy, introduced by Stanton, was adapted for formulating hypotheses and targets for family counselling with adoptive families by asking the parents to indicate the events they think were related to the decision to adopt a child.. The article describes the results of 19 case studies using the suggested method. The events indicated by the parents were further classified into six groups: (1) related to losses and mourning; (2) events of the stressful nature, (3) parents' own deprivation experiences, (4) experiences of developing close relationships; (5) experiences of opening the new opportunities; (6) confrontations with an externalized deprivation experience. The article describes the method of qualitative analysis of Time Line data and how the psychotherapeutic hypotheses may be drawn from it. An illustrative case analysis is given.

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**Keywords:** Adoption, adoptive families, family therapy, life events, Time Line.



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## 1. Introduction

From the mid 20th century the scholars interested in psychological time, autobiographical memory and psychology of life span development emphasize the uneven magnitude and unequal importance of subjective perception of past, actual and future events (Golovaha & Kronik, 1984).

There are various approaches to the problem of time perspective, from bergsonian or phenomenological conceptions of intuitive time as a basic form of subjective experience and the idea of 'biological clocks', to the constructivist and narrative understandings, suggesting the subjective apprehension of time is a construction, a result of individual efforts to organize and give meaning to the facts of life. The way the events are related to each other, how the perceiving of actual situations is coloured by past experiences, and how our anticipations and expectations are formed are important aspects of understanding the subjective representation of time (Block, 1990). For example, Brockmeier (2000) identifies six distinct models of narrative time.

Psychological time is not only a specific area of study, it also play an important role in a specific research paradigm, where the decision making, formation of identity, impact of critical or extraordinary events, misperceptions are studied in a temporal perspective. Nuttin (2004) indicated that the time perspective influences the behavior in another, alternative way, than the learning and semantic memory.

The decision to adopt a child is one of the crucial live events, that conditions the growth and the changes of family system. The way this event is linked to the past experiences and their interpretations affects the expectations of future. In the adoptive family context it can be said that the choice of particular events that, in parents' view, where leading to adoption of a child, may provide useful insights on the meaning assigned to his arrival, on expectations and projective distortions of representations of future, on the formation of the image of the family being together with the adopted child. In other words, the particular manner of interpretation of the events, related to the decision of child's adoption sheds light on expectations from the child, on motivation to adopt, while those expectations play further influence on attitudes towards a child, especially, in the adaptation stage. Discrepancies between reality and expectations, between constructions about the future and actual interactions with the child form an arena for disillusionment and dissipation of emotional contact in parent-child relationships (Ryzhov et al., 2018; Zhuykova & Pechnikova, 2014). Thus, the congruency and relatedness of the different events from the time perspective and other characteristics of the psychological temporality may serve as a foundation for revealing the areas and purposes of the psychological help to the family. The analysis of the links between the adoptive family history and their decision to adopt a child is of interest both in an investigative context of studying the expectations of the parent-child interactions and in a more practically oriented context of planning the psychological family counseling and psychotherapy.

## 2. Problem Statement

Given the importance to take into account how the parents had conceived the idea of adopting a child in terms of their past experiences and attributed causal and other links with the life events, a counseling family psychologist would benefit from possessing an appropriate method. Since the purposes of its use are rather exploratory, the possibility of obtaining qualitative data is preferred. There is a number of somewhat

similar instruments in the study of psychological time, that may be used, for example, the autobiographical interview, early recollections, life events checking lists, event history calendars, Nuttin's temporal scale for Motivational Induction Method, some neuropsychological tools, and etc. (see Balashova, 2017; Golovaha & Kronik, 1984; Nuttin, 2004; Nurkova, 2000). One of them is the Time Line technique, or Life Line (those titles are used sometimes interchangeable, sometimes to describe different methods), an easy procedure, consisting of allocating the past, actual and, if needed, future events on the horizontal line, representing the linear time perspective. The method is used in very different contexts, like facilitating the recall of difficult events to remember, study of identity and etc. For the uses in family counseling it was described by Stanton (1992), as a tool for organizing a large array of information that a family therapist receives when examining the family history. Time Line is a relatively easy both in procedural moments and in analysis and may be used to advance hypotheses about the causes of the family crises. As Friedman and Krauker (1992) point, this way of organizing information allows the psychologist to "see" a larger amount of events of family history, is more effective in revealing family patterns and links between events, that a more traditional way of protocolling, with the use of memos (the later is more useful for tracing the emotional experiences surrounding the family events).

Stanton suggested a number of uses of the method, aiming at the family dynamics and transgenerational patterns. He proposed to combine it with the use of therapeutic question "Why now?", in order to understand why the family fell in crisis and decided to seek help. We believe that a similar question may be used as a basis for working with the adoptive family: why the family decides to adopt a child right now? What events influenced this decision? How the past experiences are projected onto the expectations of future? This question is intended to link current experiences with the past events, to demonstrate how the patterns of events evolve, and to help the family to distance from the events, leading to problems. Of equal importance for Stanton was the to analyze the preferred by family future events in their links with past and actual experiences, what may be in the restructuring process in the course of psychological help.

### **3. Research Questions**

By means of the qualitative analysis of the patterns of live events related to the decision to adopt a child in a modified Time Line technique protocols we addressed the following questions:

- What types of life events do the parents relate to their decision of adopting a child? What qualities of those events are important?
- How those events are linked by causal, similarity, semantic, and etc. relationships into the patterns? Why the family decides to take the child at a particular moment of their family history?
- What hypotheses and tasks for psychotherapeutic work can be formulated on the grounds of examining the patterns of life events? How they reveal the important characteristics of parental motivation and expectations?

### **4. Purpose of the Study**

This article represents the first attempt to point out, describe and classify the life events that the adoptive parents relate to their decision to adopt a child. It is a necessary step for a further development of

the modified Time Line technique both as a practical tool and a research method in the context of family counseling of adoptive parents. The main purpose was the exploration of the possibilities of the method in formulating hypotheses and targets of family therapy, emphasizing the work with expectations of parents from the child and their role in distorting parent-child relationships.

## 5. Research Methods

The study design is the analysis and generalization of 19 case studies using the Time Line technique in the course of family counseling, led by one of the authors (E.B. Zhuykova).

### 5.1. Participants

From 19 families that took part in the research, 10 were seeking for a supportive family counseling in the supportive format, while 9 families had their adopted children referred to the psychiatric stationary (G.E. Sukhareva Scientific and Practical Centre of Mental Health of Children and Adolescents) for various reasons. All the children were placed in the adoptive family for more than 1 year, the age ranged from 5 to 16 years old. The families included either those satisfied with their marital and parent-child relationships, and those that were not. Four families were assessed by custody services as having a high risk of adoption failure.

### 5.2. Procedure

The modification of the Time Line technique for family therapy proposed by Stanton (1992) was used. We focused on the patterns of events related to the adoption and the expectations from the child. The horizontal line with tick marks representing years and months (if necessary) is being drawn. The parents indicate with marks on this line the most important events of their life cycle (like “my brother was born”, “I met my wife”). It is important that those events should be the parents’ spontaneous choice.

After this we introduce the other instruction: “Please, look at the events that are marked. Please single out those of them, that, in your view, had an impact on your decision to take care of the adoptive child. You can indicate some new events, if needed”.

The analysis of the Time Line qualitative data is guided by the following topics and questions, intended to gather a new information for counseling and psychotherapy:

- What events are most significant for the family, and whether those events include the ones related to the family formation, birth and adoption of the children? Whether the parents concentrate on their personal, familial or social events? The content of the singled out events reveals the values, that define the current view of own life. The predominant motional valence of the events also provides an important information about the perception of the family live and the mood of the interviewed. The diversity of events is important for assessing the maturity and flexibility.
- What is the way the task was performed? The formal approach to the choice of the events, inability to draw the link between them, needs also to be noted as a possible indicator of emotional indifference, or a lack of awareness and reflective thinking, or a sign of resistance. Circumstantiality, fixation and repetition of the analogous events, attempt to find the possible links to them in past and in future may reveal their high importance, sinking in this kind of

problem, difficulties with self-control and with delineation of boundaries. An excess in causal linking may reveal the presence of stereotypic or overvalued ideas.

- What sequences do the events form? At the first place the proximal events to the actual moment of time are analyzed, as indicative of the current state, crises, stresses, life cycle stage and the tasks the family confronts. The intensity of the different periods of time perspective is investigated next.
- What events are chosen when the second instruction (adoption related events) is given? Those are analyzed as closely related to the expectations from the supposed changes, as well as revealing the systemic and dynamic aspects of motivation to adopt a child (stability, flexibility and richness of motives). The hypotheses derived from the analysis of the events related to the second instruction are described in detail in the findings section of this article.

In this article we addressed more specifically this last aspect of analysis. To do it the following steps were made:

- The events that were linked by the parents to the decision to adopt were wrote out and assorted to different groups using an inspection method by the authors of this article.
- Next, the number of events, their placing at the Time Line against the actual moment were assessed.
- The individual cases were examined as to the diversity of the categories of events chosen.
- The other qualitative data (commentaries, exact description of events, and etc.) was employed to synthesize the observations and to pull forward the hypotheses for counseling intervention in each case.

## 6. Findings

### 6.1. Summary of the analysis of 19 cases

An average number of events that were indicated by parents as related to the decision to adopt was 2.7, ranging from 1 to 5.

The analysis and comparison of the events, specified by parents as being related to the decision to adopt, allowed allocating total of them into six different groupings (the complete list of events with their allocation in groups is presented in Table 1):

1. Experiences, related to loss and mourning: deaths, interruptions of pregnancy and infertility, separation from biological children and etc.
2. Experiences of a stressful nature: divorce, severe illnesses (including mental disorders, such as depression), abuse, emergency situations, being close to death, financial difficulties, marital problems, adultery.
3. Parent's own deprivation experiences in childhood: being raised without parents, having an emotionally frigid mother, divorce of parents, being raised by changing relatives-caregivers, lack of the stable experiences of a close relationships with an adult.
4. Attempts to form close relationships: wedding, meeting with a partner, developing close relationships, birth of biological children.

5. Events opening the new opportunities: gaining positive experiences of raising children, graduation, improvements in quality of life, financial state, acquisition of a concrete parenting skill.
6. The situations of confronting an externalized (encountered in others) deprivation experience, situations of help and charity: meeting deprived children or children, that had experienced losses, volunteering, getting information about children in need in mass media or social networks.

The most frequently mentioned were the various stressful events (see Table 2). But it should be noted that, taking into account that our sample is not representative, all categories were present in a non-singular manner. Most parents (n=14) used two different categories, with three parents using only one category (two of them choosing only one event), and two parents using three categories. A preliminary inspection of the cases suggests that the choice of, roughly speaking, negative categories of events (1-3) and the positive ones (4-6) was not affected by the apparent dysfunctionality of the family: being it in crisis, or being satisfied with the relationships and having no complains from social workers.

**Table 01.** List of events linked by the parents to their decision to adopt a child

Case	Events related to adoption	Group
A	• parents divorced	2
	• alienation from mother (suspicions she wasn't really a mother)	3
	• stepfather appears	2
	• thoughts that she will never have children	3
	• relationship difficulties in the second marriage	2
B	• death of grandfather	1
	• became unloved, lived in a border school	3
	• were visiting the orphanage, played with small children	6
	• got pregnant, lost a child	1
	• was working in a summer camp, met a fostered girl	6
C	• disability diagnosis of child, aborted the second pregnancy	1
	• mother-in-law died	2
D	• was living away from parent until school	3
	• mother's rejection	3
	• the beloved grandmother died	1
	• was looking the tv about orphanage	6
E	• married, acknowledged i wanted a child	4
	• doctors said i couldn't survive the pregnancy	1
F	• liked to play with small children	5
	• joint living with grandmother	3
G	• birth of the second child	4
	• birth of the third child	4
	• moving to new apartment	5
	• started working	5
	• move to other city	5
H	• learned my terrible diagnosis	2
	• depression	2
I	• we brought a big apartment in moscow	5
	• i joined the volunteers in tver's orphanage	6
K	• were visiting with others the orphanage on behalf of our organization	6
L	• we moved, were lacking money, difficulties in renting apartment	2
M	• had a call from cousin, she said there is a child in need of parents	6
	• husband had an accident	2
N	• marriage, loved to be married	4
	• doctors couldn't help to conceive	1
O	• was thinking about orphans when was a girl	6

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>my dog disappeared, my rabbit was slain (at 10 y.o.)</li> <li>were talking about adopted children with my husband</li> <li>met girls without parents in a hospital</li> </ul>	1 6 6
P	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>distanced from my son, non-realised expectations</li> <li>had problems with authorities, was left in peace, realised i had to do something good</li> </ul>	1 2
R	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>university studies in preschool education</li> <li>was raising a godson</li> <li>marriage</li> </ul>	5 5 4
S	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>many ugly situations in this period</li> <li>live in orphanage</li> </ul>	2 3
T	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>entrance in university</li> <li>death of a grandmother</li> <li>unsuccessful ivf</li> <li>moved to a rented apartment</li> </ul>	5 2 2 5
U	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>entrance in university</li> <li>death of grandmother</li> </ul>	5 2

With minor exceptions the parents don't evaluate these life events in a clear-cut manner, as only negative or positive ones. The events are rather described as crucial and existential ones, those that produced a change of the life direction and shaped the attitudes towards self, close people (children, partners), people as a whole, anticipated future ("it will never happen again", "my life was and always will this way").

**Table 02.** Distribution of events by categories

Groupings of events	Number of cases where present (N=19)	Ratio (percentage) to the total number of adoption related events in the sample
stressful (2)	9	21.1%
related to loss and mourning (1)	7	19.2%
opening of the new opportunities (5)	6	19.2%
situations of confronting an externalized deprivation experience (6)	6	17.3%
parents' own deprivation experiences in childhood (3)	5	13.4%
attempts to form close relationships (4)	4	9.6%

The further qualitative analysis of individual Time Line's protocols was based on the investigation of the number of events selected, their temporal distance, variety and belonging to one of the six groupings. It allowed formulating the following guiding lines for psychotherapeutic hypothesis and targets:

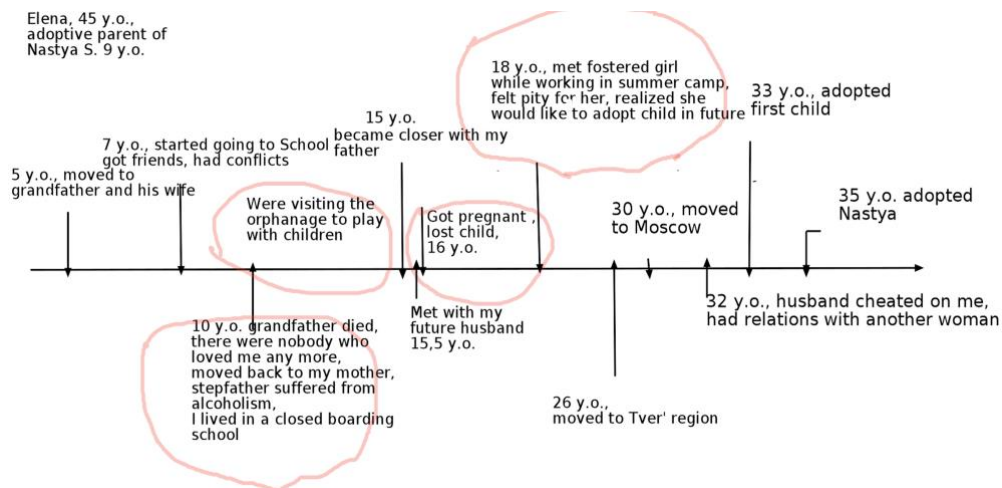
- The hypothesis of stability vs. inconstancy, impulsivity in the motivational factor of the decision of adopting the child. Stability was suggested when several related to the adoption events were separated in time, while impulsivity was suggested when there were only 1-2 events, closely timed to the adoption.
- The hypothesis of flexibility vs. rigidity of motivation to adopt a child. The selected events in the first case are linked to their developments and resolutions, have their continuation and development, the commitment to the idea of adopting a child remains even when the issues that

had aroused it were solved. In the second case the issues are still actual or doesn't appear in the Time Line, but are mentioned elsewhere in the interview.

- The hypothesis about richness (different sources) of motivation vs. its paucity. This is deduced from the fact the events indicated were belonging to different groupings or to the one only.
- The hypothesis of awareness and reflexivity in decision making vs. unconscious determination. In the first case the non-formal description and causal linking of the events is expected, while in the second case the formal description, inability to draw the relationships of events, or even just indicate the events related to the adoption.

## 6.2. An illustrative case analysis

Nastya, a 9 y.o. girl, was referred to psychiatric stationary by her adoptive parents due to conduct disorder, sexualized behavior and supposed difficulties in maintaining attachment relationships. The family therapy sessions were performed in this context. The family was composed of mother, 5 adoptive children and 3 biological children, with other older biological children living separately. At that point the adoptive father became estranged from the family, as they had had a string of conflicts right before hospitalization and the custody workers had expressed some doubts about the possible misbehavior of the father (physical and emotional abuse). The mother didn't take the situation seriously enough; she believed that "the girl was at good terms with husband, those were just minor difficulties", and "they would possible adopt another child".



**Figure 01.** Elena's Time Line

The Time Line (Figure 1) was given at an individual session with the mother, Elena. Elena gave a detailed report of different preceding the adoption events of her life. When asked to choose the events that had been related to the adoption decision, she selected ones concerning her deprivation experiences (being raised in a closed border school, being unloved), concerning losses (the death of a close and significant adult, her grandfather), and concerning externalized deprivation situations (visiting orphanage, meeting children in the process of termination of parental care). Those events are spread in a more than 20-years period, what allows suggesting that the motivation to be an adoptive parent is not only overly important,



and emerged in the childhood period, but is also a mean to master her own feelings of abandonment and uselessness. The wish to adopt a child is not altered by the transitions between periods of discomfort and stability. The decision to take the first child was made following the familial crisis and husband's cheating (described as betrayal and abandonment). This may point at a rigidity of motivation, inability to revise the plans and intentions, in periods of tension in the family system. The current situation is quite similar. Despite of the daughter's hospitalization, estrangement from the husband and problems with custody, she states again her desire to adopt a child. The events belong to three groupings: own deprivation experiences from the past, losses of the significant people, and confrontations with externalized deprivation situations. Considering the rigidity of motivation, this fact not only suggests the richness of motivational sources, but rather its excessive nature. The signs of a good capacity of reflexive thinking (the events are described in detail, Elena produces a well developed narrative about her personal and family history) are coupled with difficulties to acknowledge the relationship of those experiences to the sustained inclination to adopt a child. While she accepts that those experiences form a basis for the possibility to help children, she ignores her own need to work out those traumatic experiences. In other terms, there is a pattern "the more pain, the more important is to help the children". In this case Time Line allows defining the hypotheses about excessive and rigid motivation and low awareness of the relations between life events and desire to adopt a child, while at the same time a developed reflection of her life in general, the absence of the difficulties to deliberately control her intentions to adopt a child. The family therapy may be directed at an elaboration of coping skills with family crises (apart from intake of a new children), awareness of the real motives that lie behind her desires to adopt a child, at the development of the care for herself in difficult situations and of the ability to realistically control her intentions to take a child, considering the actual circumstances. The Time Line may be further used with Elena as therapeutic device as well: the attempts to widen the account of alternative experiences (of closeness, of her own usefulness and tenderness) may help forming more stable and positive images of the past and the future.

## **7. Conclusion**

The use of Time Line technique in the family history examination doesn't just allow organizing information on the first stages of family therapy, but also helps to analyze the temporal patterns of events related to the decision to adopt a child and to put forward the hypotheses about the particularities of parental motivation. In turn, those hypotheses may serve as reference points for psychotherapeutic interventions, aimed at the development of flexibility, stability and diversity of the motives underlying the adoption. Such a work of retelling personal story and of restructuring the experience has a goal of diminishing the tension surrounding the parent-child relationships and of rethinking the expectations of the adopted child. We suggest to supplement it with other qualitative methods capable of revealing the parental expectations, such as repertory grids (Pechnikova et al., 2019). In context of scientific research the proximate objectives of study may include the analysis of specific patterns of links between the life events, encountered in the families with crisis or with a high risk of the adoption failure.

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