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Psychology of Personality: Real and Virtual Context

ADULTHOOD CRISES: EXPERIENCE, COPING, RESOURCE OF PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

The author presents some results of comparative theoretical study of the midlife crisis and the crisis of aging. From the standpoint of the existential paradigm the difference in the meanings, potentials and resources of their overcoming is shown: 1) the midlife crisis is experienced in the phase of all psychic fullness of subject; the crisis of aging – on the wave of extinction of physical and psychological possibilities; 2) the midlife crisis is perceived as a transition from a primary socialization to a self-induced secondary inculturation; the aging crisis is a transition from a potentially open horizon of life events to its deliberate limitation; 3) the center of the midlife crisis is the process of individuation; the center of the crisis of aging is the acceptance of one's life as held and only possible; 4) a common feature of both crises is the experience of a disidentification, but in the midlife crisis it is used for modeling the future "Me-otherwise", and in the aging crisis – for the acception of "Me-as-is"; 5) all transformations of the midlife crisis are directed to the potential future, outside; transformations of the aging crisis turn the subject to past and his own inner world.

1. Introduction

Adulthood has two age crises (midlife crisis and crisis of aging), the psychological content of which often does not differ. Compared to childhood crises, for explaining of which a stable methodology has been worked out (in particular, they are explained by the cultural-historical theory of L.S. Vygotsky), the studies of adulthood crises are mainly descriptive or symptomatic (Anurov, 2018; Huhlaeva, 2009; Kosyakova, 2007; Krasnova & Liders, 2003; Livekhud, 2012; Malkina-Pyh, 2005; Polivanova, 2000; Rajgorodskij, 2003, 2004). Most of adulthood crisis studies were carried out within the framework of the Jungian approach (Hollis, 2013; Jomans, 1997; Konvy, 2011; Sheehy, 1999; Stain, 2009; Styuart-Gamil'ton, 2010; Sharp, 2006) or on the basis of the works of E. Erikson and D.J. Levinson, who connected them with the ability to cope with the life-tasks set by society (as cited in Caspi et al., 2005; Dollinger, 2003; Erikson, 2000; Marcia, 2002). We hypothesized that the nature of adult crises does not boil down to age-related symptoms, and they should be considered as integral existential phenomena. We substantiated this idea within the framework of the author's existential-narrative approach and confirmed it practically using client histories of the psychological counseling.

2. Problem Statement

Despite the fact that understanding the essence of both crises is important for modern counseling and psychotherapy, for understanding and explaining the features of personal development in adulthood, there are currently very few special studies of the internal nature and psychological mechanisms of their occurrence, experience, and overcoming (Soldatova, 2007). One of the reasons for this is the lack of a relevant methodology for studying the universal patterns of development in adulthood (Sapogova, 2013). We proved the possibility of using the existential-psychological approach in studies of personal development in adulthood, and also performed a comparative analysis of the causes and triggers of both crises, based on descriptions of the experiences of adult crises in autobiographical narratives collected in psychological counseling. This made it possible to demonstrate their similarities and differences using a single explanatory principle.

3. Research Questions

We have set and theoretically substantiated the answers to the following questions: what exactly in the natural course of human life can stimulate the occurrence of midlife crisis and crisis of aging; what new personal characteristics appear in adulthood crises and how are they related to the subsequent development of a person; how a person experiences crises in value, semantic, and emotional plans and how he overcomes them.

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of our study was theoretical modeling, explanation and comparative analysis of the content of the midlife crisis and the aging crisis based on the existential-psychological approach. We also described the psychological resources available to an adult to overcome the crisis, further development and

personal growth. In addition, we have constructed a basic scheme of areas of psychotherapy that contribute to coping with both crises.

5.   Research Methods

The study is based on the author's existential-psychological analysis of data from the psychological counseling sessions of 30 men and 30 women aged 35–40 years (2000-2020), 30 men and 30 women aged 60–65 years (2000–2020), whose requests revealed symptoms of a midlife crisis and aging crisis. Some elements of content analysis of advisory transcripts were also used**.**

6.   Findings

6.1. Symptoms of a midlife crisis

Usually, the psychological content of a midlife crisis is associated with the ordering and reassessment of acquired experience at an age distance of 30 to 45 years, accompanied by a whole range of negative reflections and feelings. The following symptoms are traditionally described:

- anxiety about an individual future, worries about a declining level of health; the subjective emotional–cognitive experience of a seeming internal stagnation, due to the fact that the main social tasks (professionalization, job, career, family, children, etc.) are usually already solved;
- depreciating reassessment and rethinking of the achieved results (in the profession, in the career, in personal and family life, etc.) from the standpoint of the need to "effectively spend the remaining life time";
- devaluation of previously significant close relationships, life goals and values;
- a tendency toward spiritual quest, the search for other meanings of existence, associated with the awareness of the variable, probabilistic-potential nature of own life;
- fear, awe and anxiety before the passing away of elderly parents;
- awareness of one's own mortal nature.

6.2. Positive resources of the midlife crisis

Because of the concentration on the symptoms of a midlife crisis, its positive resources and points for personal development are often not noticed and even denied. The existential approach allows us to understand the meanings and mechanisms of this crisis, based on the context of the whole life of a person (Sapogova, 2013). An analysis of the consultation cases suggested that:

- a midlife crisis starts at that phase of development, when a person possesses all the fullness of his mental abilities, has at his disposal a maximum of mental resources and has sufficient vital energy to overcome failures and achieve goals that have not yet been achieved, but are already probabilistically represented in consciousness;
- an adult is fully aware of the fact that he has more than enough time resources to realize the intention and ability to dispose of life differently than in the previous stages;
- life experience and existential experience are accumulated and summarized to 30–40 years (Sapogova, 2013), and an adult, regardless of the characteristics of his life and personality,

gradually begins to join generations, whose creative, professional and social activities determine current trends in social development and is its actual human resource;

- at the age distance of 30-45 a person, whether he accepts it or denies it, moves into the cohort of "elders" ("mentors", "teachers", "authorities", etc.) whose task is to preserve and strengthen cultural and social traditions and rituals; this builds conservative mental attitudes and provokes the desire not to change either himself or his environment;

- when 30-40 years old, a person usually has an extensive reflection that contributes to a more holistic, objective and critical self-perception: the youthful aspirations to demonstrate his self to everyone, to compete with others and to center only on self achievements and victories disappear, and a person begins to think more about his own authenticity, life purposes and senses of existence;

- by the age of 30-40 a person is gradually freed from the limitations and conventions of primary socialization, becomes self-deterministic;

- together with the awareness of softening of external control, since society relies on a person's ability to self-regulate, the necessity and possibility of free choice manifests itself in a crisis.

6.3. Existential-psychological mechanism of midlife crisis

We propose to approach the midlife crisis as a *normative transition from primary to secondary socialization.* Its necessity is due to the fact that the resources of primary socialization have been exhausted (since the individual has already solved basic social tasks) and *its impact is reduced,* and the functioning of secondary socialization *must be initiated by the person himself,* and not by external social agents and circumstances, as it has been until now.

Coping with the crisis, a person should move on to some "self-coercion", cultivating the "experience of oneself" and the search for one's own ways of development. Thus, in a midlife crisis, the gradual replacement of identifications by individuation processes occurs.

The processes of primary socialization are intended for basic identification of a subject with ethnocultural (values, meanings, etc.) and with social – normative (roles, norms, rules, etc.) experience of the society in which he was born and lives. Secondary socialization is aimed at the future individuation and the subsequent possibility of incrementing the general social experience at the expense of the individual subject's experience of life, creativity, self-realization. In contrast to the primary socialization, secondary socialization does not imply rigid and mandatory identification with the existing samples, it is of a potential-probabilistic, creative nature. It potentiates the freedom of self-development and the ability to build a new authenticity.

As soon as the primary identifications are summarized and completed, the person gradually begins to "outgrow" himself: he begins to hear and respond to the "call of personal growth" born in the processes of existential reflection. The events of a precedent life (meeting people, experiencing certain circumstances, interpersonal collisions, losses, intuitive insights, etc.) reveal in each person those worlds that he could not even suspect before colliding with them. And if, before the crisis, his existential reference point was the imperative of building sociocultural similarities with the people around him, now one is objectively faced with the necessity to separate oneself from the common, to recognize one's authenticity, to emphasize one's uniqueness.

Thus, at the crisis stage, a person is objectively imputed to *self-disidentification* ("Me-as-is"), reorienting to finding and creating in oneself something new, original, different from sociotypical ("Me-otherwise"), after which a new integrity (reintegration) may arise as a result of the self-project of "Me"-realization. Self-disidentification as a prerequisite for the transition to the processes of secondary socialization and individuation allows an adult to realize that his personality is really "his" (genuine, gained by himself through the application of own life-efforts), and what is "not his" and needs review and reassessment.

6.4. Coping with a midlife crisis

Having verified that "I am," a person becomes able to understand "what exactly I am," and this awareness determines the path to maturity. The older a person becomes, the stronger his need to find "his", "genuine", individual, unique self, invent and design "being–for–himself".

The results of disidentification in a midlife crisis are: reinterpretation of the achievements of previous lifespans, new design of "Me-as-is", a qualitatively new awareness of the "necessity of me" (Mamardashvili, 1996), new demand for one's own experience. Self-determination on the basis of self-trust, a tendency to find grounds for further development only in oneself, an awareness of freedom to be what a person wants and maybe there are new characteristics of an adulthood.

Becoming an individual, original ("just that") means to realize your own idea of yourself, so it is not by chance that the midlife crisis is also associated with the personal search for spiritual truths, new values, meanings of existence, and life models.

Everything that is said does not mean that everything that has been achieved by a person is devalued in a midlife crisis. On the contrary: the more an individual achieved in the social, professional and personal spheres, the stronger the likelihood of entering the crisis, because it is the level of autonomy and independence that signals the exhaustion of the primary socialization and the need to build new self-models and new life strategies.

The aspiration to achieve and realize "fullness of oneself" can be considered one of the new characteristics of adult self-consciousness, born in the midlife crisis and preparing the subject to realize author's project of himself. Before the midlife crisis, the subject was faced with the task of "collecting" fragments of self-identification, but now he must "unite" himself as a whole on the basis of the acquired experience. This new task provokes a crisis: in order to change, a person must realize the accumulated experience and imagine himself entirely in all the characteristics that are possible for him, but which he does not yet see (Mamardashvili, 1996).

The transition from "Me-as-is" (constructed according to the models of primary socialization) to "Me-otherwise" (to the hypothetical "life-fullness") and, therefore, overcoming the midlife crisis can be carried out in five possible directions:

- from the well-known ways of "resource" life to the life-creativity;
- from mandatory adherence to social standards to free self-positioning and self-determination;
- from the execution of parental life scenarios to the realization of the author's life design;
- from social and role "openness" to the search for existential authenticity, personal meanings, values and missions;

- from social "possessiveness" to social "investment".

Thus, the midlife crisis consists in *the transition from internalized identifications to self-initiated individuation,* after which a person gets the possibility of "being himself, which correlates with himself" (Längle, 2017, p. 150). And if, before the midlife crisis, a person was *growing up* and *an adult,* then, having mastered it, he becomes *mature.*

6.5. The existential-psychological content of the crisis of aging

The crisis of aging (old age's crisis) is a transition from ending maturity to old age, when a person's entire life-meaning perspective becomes available to a person, in which the internal contradictions of ontogenesis overlap with the accumulating contradictions of the individual life path. Its content is determined by the following points:

- for 60-65-year-olds, society almost does not put forward new specific tasks that are obligatory or desirable for solving; the activity and mental abilities of an elderly person stop being demanded; the person himself is firmly identified with the key life models of his chronotope;

- an aging person has to look for resources to continue life not so much in the requirements of society as *in himself,* that is, to solve the problem not so much of adapting to the new realities of life as of integrating his experience: it's about *finding the symbolic and existential content of one's own being,* finding one's place in the universe, etc.;

- psychologically, a person is *increasingly alienated from external reality and deepens into an internal reality;* remaining "alone with himself", only he decides whether he will change, open up, self-present to the world and interact with it;

- an aging person ceases to prove something to his surroundings, and he no longer needs to look for external evidence of his value, to compare his achievements with others. Internally, he becomes *more autonomous from social assessment,* and from the outside, nothing can encourage him to initiate new and challenging life ways;

- the aging crisis is triggered by the tormenting necessity to assume *a special existential obligation of person's own free will:* to decide whether "to be a beginning, continuation or endof social reality, which is self-organizing, and therefore becoming, not just existing" (Luk'yanov, 2009, p. 8);

- the death of parents, relatives and peers makes the person aware not only of increasing *responsibility for himself,* but also of the approaching reality of his own mortality; although the death of parents in most cases does not become a fatal event for an elderly person, it stimulates a retrospective revision of one's own life in comparison with the completeness of the life of a loved one, which is demonstrated by death (any completeness, finiteness is an impetus to the meaning's generation); farewell to the dead opens up to the person's own *existential perspective;*

- the aging crisis is closely related with feelings of *self-alienation, disassociation with oneself:* a person mentally withdraws himself from the meaningful contexts of current life and throws into circumstances that have not yet occurred, but already presented in consciousness ("job, children, grandchildren ... *without me*");

- the crisis is also characterized by situational "stumbling about life" ("I don't know this ...", "I can't do it that way"), an increase in experiences of existential loneliness, the appearance in the mind of the questions "why?", "is it necessary?" with implicit answers "no need", "I do not have time", "late"; all these are evidences of the beginning change of scaling in perception of oneself and one's own life against the background of continuing reality.

6.6. Existential-psychological mechanism of the crisis of aging

Although many people are confused by crisis symptoms, they have a positive aspect: all of them are signs of universalization, of gradual merging in the subject of the former separation, opposition "Me and Universe", awareness of oneself as *necessary part of universum.* At such moments, the progress of one's own life requires more activity, one's own efforts in creating future life opportunities. The crisis of aging includes *mental experimentation* for finding a new life distinctness.

In this process, there is also *a need to delineate the individual life horizon* and establish a "half-open" (probabilistic-potential) life framework. In the crisis of aging, a person "discovers" that with all the multiplicity of life options *some intentions and projects cannot be realized in principle*. And if until then he lived, believing that the fullness of self-embodiment is achievable, then in a crisis a person temporarily ceases to understand how and for what to live further if life itself does not lead to this fullness, and its modes are not obligatory for anyone. Only the person here, now and always determines which of the possible options available in life will be selected.

This awareness is the key moment of the crisis: an aging person is compelled to accept as inevitable that his life, with all its possibilities, will stay anyway ever unfinished. This is due not to the lack of time or past miscalculations, but to the objective reality of human existence as such: opportunities appear as life goes on.

Awareness of the fundamental incompleteness of life is not tragic, since its downside is the understanding of the endless life openness into the potentially possible: as long as the person is alive, he can start and try. This experience stimulates the processes of meaning generation and gives rise to a kind of bravery, a new life impulse, removing the past caution and repeatedly reinforcing the "life courage". An emotionally traumatic factor is the understanding that the possibility of self-embodiment will not open even in the future. But to cope with it, a person must realize that the desired fullness of the current moments of life *can and must be initiated by him.*

Thus, the crisis of aging is a transition from a potentially open horizon of life to its conscious limitation and awareness of one's own completion.

6.7. Coping with the aging crisis

Coping with the aging crisis includes:
- understanding one's life as being completed and demanding summing up;
- accepting the embodied meanings of own existence as the true and only possible both "there and then", and "here and now";
- awareness of oneself and one's life as a value; even if negative experiences overwhelmed an individual, turning to the past, he may find some self-acquittals;

▪ obtainment of the freedom to be and stay exactly the self on the path to universalization, the merging of "Me" and "Universe".

In an aging crisis, a person compares his present not so much with future goals and projects, calculating risks and experiencing a managerial attitude towards life (as it was in previous ages), as with the past, and begins to build new causal relationships. He gets the opportunity to experiment with the past through the prism of the present, adjusted for the fundamental incompleteness of self-fulfillment in the future. In a crisis, a person amplifies the meanings of experienced life events, taking into account the already known consequences of different time distances.

And if youth can be correlated with the existential "readiness / courage *to become*" (in potency - everything that a person wants and can), adulthood - with "readiness / courage *to be*" (to live the way it has become, or to change, to be again) then subsequent ages - with "readiness / courage *to understand*" (to accept why the individual did exactly what he did).

7. Conclusion

The midlife crisis is the transition from a preassigned primary socialization-inculturation to a self-initiated secondary socialization-inculturation. The crisis of aging is a transition from a potentially open horizon of life events to its conscious limitation. Individuation replacing early identifications forms the core of the midlife crisis. The focus of a crisis of aging is the acceptance of one's life as held, the only possible and finalized in all existential completeness available for the given person. Common to both crises is the experience of disidentification ofa subject with himself, which is used in the midlife crisis to model the future "Me-otherwise", and in the aging crisis – for the acceptance of "Me-as-is".

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