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PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES OF “SHOCK THERAPY”
IN RUSSIA IN THE 1990S

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Abstract

At the end of the 20th century, one of the powers, the Soviet Union, collapsed. An intensive transformation of the political, social, and economic structure of society began. The reforms were intensive in the spirit of “shock therapy”. The purpose of the article is to identify whether there is a connection between subjective assessments of the intensity of negative psychosocial factors in the 1990s and violations of the socio-psychological adaptation of the individual at present. Among the psychosocial factors that operated in the 1990s, were included physical danger to life and health, the level of family income, as well as self-assessment of the dominant emotional state. Among the violations of socio-psychological adaptation in the present, were attributed to the state of anxiety and depression, and uncertainty about the future. The study involved 280 respondents from 39 to 76 years old. The “Anxiety and depression” method, as well as the direct scaling technique, were used. Statistically significant correlations were found between the assessments of the intensity of negative psychosocial factors in the 1990s and the severity of anxiety and depression, and uncertainty about the future among respondents at present. The strongest connections with indicators of socio-psychological adaptation were found in the indicator “self-assessment of the dominant emotional state”, that is, the strength of the respondents' subjective experiences in the 1990s. The article shows that intensive social changes in the spirit of “shock therapy” cause mental traumatization of people and have delayed psychological consequences.

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1. Introduction

At the end of the 20th century, one of the great powers, the Soviet Union, collapsed. An intensive transformation of the political, social, and economic structure of society began; the changes were intense in the spirit of “shock therapy” A significant part of the population found itself in a difficult life situation, having lost their jobs, and social status, and monetary savings. Many people have lost their loved ones due to rampant crime, wars, and unfolding on the territory of the former USSR. The social and historical impact of these events began to be studied in the second half of the 1990s and at the beginning of the 21st century; socio-psychological consequences are still poorly understood. The article explores the psychological consequences of the reforms of the 1990s in Russia.

2. Problem Statement

The history of studying the political and economic reforms of the 1990s in Russia is not so extensive. The first results of the reforms began to be summed up already in the mid-1990s. Thus, Radygin (1994) believed that the speed and intensity of the reforms carried out by the government were explained by the need to “block intensive spontaneous privatization”, as well as the need to “promptly form a new mass social stratum not interested in communist revenge” (p. 114).

Some scientific papers were published in Russia in 2011–2015, which was associated with the 20th anniversary of the start of intensive reform. In the works of that time, it was noted that during the reforms of the 1990s, many destructive social processes took place: the criminal privatization, interethnic conflicts, the deindustrialization of society, a deterioration in the standard of living of the population of Russia, a decrease in the quality of education and healthcare, and a decline in the moral foundations of society (Grigoriev, 2015; Simonyan, 2011). Bersenev (2017), having studied the memoirs and speeches of the “apologists for accelerated privatization”, concluded that they “set themselves mainly goals and objectives of a political nature”, paying much less attention to the consequences of radical reform for the population.

Foreign historiography also adheres to the thesis that it was the political factor that became the primary determinant of economic transformations in Russia. As Yakupova (2016), who studied historiography on this issue in the United States, notes, most American sociologists (Roland, Supyan, Sachs, Pipes) criminalization of society, low incomes of the majority of the population, reforms could not be carried out by economic means, their positive results are the emergence of private property and the development of a market economy. As for the negative consequences for the population, in the opinion of these experts, they are inevitable in such cases. However, some American researchers (Stiglitz, Gregory) believe that the reforms could be carried out along the institutional evolutionary path (Yakupova, 2016).

A little-studied aspect in the study of the reforms of the 1990s. is the study of their socio-psychological consequences. Sociological studies carried out in recent years show that in the mass assessments of Russians, the period of the 1990s appears as a series of ill-conceived radical measures that led to a drop in the standard of living of Russians and threw the country back many years in its development (Gorshkov, 2011). According to Velichkovsky (2005), Shafirkin, and Shtemberg (2013), the impact of factors such as impoverishment of the population, limited access to health services, distortion of

social relations, as well as feelings of despair, and social injustice had a very negative impact on psycho-emotional stability of a significant part of Russians, increasing the rate of aging and reducing the total amount of compensatory reserves of the body. This led to a sharp reduction in human life expectancy (Shafirkin & Shtemberg, 2013; Velichkovsky, 2005). At the beginning of the 21st century, an increase in the mass anxiety of Russians, the incidence of depressive and anxiety disorders, drug addiction, alcoholism, and suicides were noted (Meller-Leimküller, 2004; Tikhonova, 2003).

In studies carried out in various countries, there are also data showing that after a turning point in history, a large proportion of people develop difficulties in socio-psychological adaptation. This applies to military and social conflicts, technological disasters, and civil wars (Deng et al., 2018; McIntyre & Ventura, 2003; Zhou et al., 2018). It was found that intense economic downturns, the state, or the threat of unemployment significantly affect the self-assessment of the subjective well-being and health of people (Emelyanov, 2012; Reeskens & Vandecasteele, 2017).

All this allows concluding that social cataclysms and intensive changes often lead to grave violations of the socio-psychological adaptation of people. By socio-psychological adaptation, we understand the continuous adjustment process of an individual to the changing conditions of the social environment. Violations of socio-psychological adaptation can be expressed in increased anxiety, depressive tendencies, changes in social interaction, difficulties in self-realization, and self-destructive behavior.

The data available in the scientific literature on the increase in the number of violations of socio-psychological adaptation after social cataclysms and intensive changes can be considered as the result of the mental traumatization of a part of the population. The very concept of “psychic trauma” was introduced in 1892 by Z. Freud, who characterized it as the result of any event that causes an excruciating feeling of horror, fear, or mental pain, after which the traumatic imprint manifests itself as a violation of mental health after a considerable time after the initial event (Freud & Breuer, 2005).

Thousands of people can be injured in a single event. The works of Reshetnikov (2018), Enikolopov and Mkrtehan (2010) provide data on “mass mental traumas”, which are often replicated by the media. Pukhovskiy (2000) believed that at some point in history, almost the entire nation may find itself in the epicenter of an emergency in which a real threat to life and well-being arises, which is a traumatic factor potentially threatening the psyche. Such traumatic situations may include, for example, civil wars and mass repressions. At the same time, interpersonal “agreement on the meanings” of psychotraumatic factors arises among the people, that is, a collective mental trauma occurs, and the reference group that shares traumatic experiences can reach national proportions (Pukhovskiy, 2000).

It can be assumed that the period of “shock therapy” in Russia in the 1990s also became an emergency that led to the mental traumatization of part of the population, the consequences of which are still manifested in violations of socio-psychological adaptation.

3. Research Questions

The study was conducted in November 2020. It involved 280 respondents, aged 39 to 76; 58.9 % of them were women. In the 1990s, 20 % of the respondents had higher education (at present, 68.9 %).

Most of the respondents now live in the Chelyabinsk region (96.8 %). In the 1990s, 87.8 % of respondents lived in the Chelyabinsk region.

During the study, the following tasks were performed:

- i. To identify the level of anxiety and depression among respondents as an indicator of violations of socio-psychological adaptation at present.
- ii. To determine the intensity of negative psychosocial factors affecting the respondents in the 1990s.
- iii. To make a connection between the intensity of negative psychosocial factors in the 1990s and violations of socio-psychological adaptation presently.

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the article is to study the extent to which the intensity of negative psychosocial factors affecting people in the 1990s is associated with violations of their socio-psychological adaptation in the present.

Among the negative psychosocial factors that operated in the 1990s, included physical danger to life and health, falling incomes and living standards, as well as experiencing grave emotional states. The first two of these factors are external to the individual. The third factor is an internal one, but is extremely important, since the trauma itself, as noted above, is the result of precisely painful experiences.

Among the violations of socio-psychological adaptation in the present include states of anxiety and depression, and uncertainty about the future.

5. Research Methods

The “Anxiety and Depression” method (Yakhin, Mendelevich), as well as a questionnaire compiled for the study, were used. The questionnaire included questions about the income and standard of living of respondents in the 1990s, their dominant emotional state at that time, how they relate to this period in their lives today, and how confident they are in the future.

Since it is now impossible to collect and objectively compare objective data on incomes and living standards during that period of an enduring socio-economic crisis, the subjective estimates of these variables were evaluated using the direct scaling technique. In the same way, using the direct scaling technique, the dominant emotional state in the 1990s and confidence in the future at present were retrospectively assessed. Correlation analysis was applied to process the results.

6. Findings

The results of the study show that 37.1% of the respondents had violations of social and psychological adaptation. These respondents included those who had either anxiety, depression, or both. Correlation analysis showed that there are statistically significant relationships ($p < 0.05$) between some indicators of socio-psychological adaptation of respondents in the present and their assessments of negative psychosocial factors in the 1990s (Table 01).

The data presented in Table 1 show that the assessment of physical danger in this sample does not have statistically significant relationships with indicators of socio-psychological adaptation in the present. The assessment of family income has weak links with indicators of anxiety, depression, and a medium-strength relationship with an indicator of confidence in the future. As for the self-assessment of the emotional state, it has medium strength links with indicators of anxiety and confidence in the future.

Thus, the intensity of negative psychosocial factors in the 1990s correlates with indicators of anxiety and depression, that is, it is associated with impaired social and psychological adaptation in the present.

Table 1. Statistically significant correlation coefficients between indicators of adaptation and assessments of negative psychosocial factors in the 1990s

Indicators of socio-psychological adaptation	Assessments of negative psychosocial factors in the 1990s		
	Physical danger assessment	Family income assessment	Self-assessment of emotional state
Anxiety	–	–0.229	–0.414
Depression	–	–0.217	–
Confidence in the future	–	0.431	0.452

As regards the standard of living of the respondents at present, 91.4 % note that at present they can afford to satisfy most basic needs. Among the desires that could not be fulfilled were the opportunity to travel, especially abroad (42.1 %), to have more rest (14.6 %), to receive treatment (11.4 %), to buy a car (11.4 %), and to improve housing (2.9 %). It can also be noted that in the group of respondents with disorders of socio-psychological adaptation, a higher proportion of those who can currently afford to satisfy all material needs was revealed, compared with the group with a normal psychological status (30.8 % versus 13.6 %).

Some individual responses to negative psychosocial factors have been identified. If we compare respondents with disorders of socio-psychological adaptation and respondents with a normal psychological status, then in the first group there is a higher proportion of women (76.9 and 47.7 %, respectively), people who had higher education in the 1990s (53.8 and 40.9 %, respectively). In addition, in the group of respondents with disorders of social and psychological adaptation, the average age is higher (59.6 years and 44.3 years, respectively).

7. Conclusion

The results show that turning points in history, and intense social changes have psychological consequences expressed even decades later. A significant proportion of people are mentally traumatized. Psychic trauma as a result of fixation on severe negative experiences has a delayed effect and causes disturbances in socio-psychological adaptation many years after traumatic events.

The article reveals statistically significant correlations between the intensity of negative psychosocial factors in the 1990s and the severity of anxiety and depression in the present. A manifestation of anxiety is uncertainty about the future and the fears associated with it. Note that these

fears are not based on the current standard of living: most of the respondents who experience them have a sufficient level of well-being at present.

The self-assessment of the emotional state that dominated in the 1990s is most strongly associated with indicators of anxiety and uncertainty about the future; correlations reach medium strength. This is quite understandable: mental traumatization is related not to the objective characteristics of events, but to the grave feelings that a person experiences.

As for other traumatic factors, then, contrary to expectations, statistically connections between indicators of socio-psychological adaptation were found not with an assessment of the physical danger, but with an assessment of the level of family income in the 1990s. This suggests that the main traumatic factor in the Chelyabinsk region was precisely the fall in the standard of living of the population. In other regions of Russia, the links between the physical hazard factor and indicators of adaptation disorders may be higher.

The data obtained as a result of the study show that traumatic factors act differently on people depending on individual characteristics. The development of traumatic response is expectedly influenced by gender, age, and level of education. Separately, the fact of a more pronounced response of women to stress factors can be noted: In an emergency, they more often develop anxiety and depression, fears and hypochondriacal reactions, and psychosomatic illnesses (Zivotofsky & Voslowsky, 2005).

The effect of age is also expected. It was the people, now in their 60s, who took the brunt of the “shock therapy” in the 1990s, since they already had status and savings that could be lost. On the other hand, they no longer had the adaptability that young people had just entered adulthood in the 1990s.

Also, during the period of “shock therapy”, it was people with higher education who more often lost their social status and the opportunity to work in their specialty. In addition, they had a higher level of ambition and expected to achieve higher achievements than they often managed to do in the 1990s.

This paper has clearly shown that a significant part of Russians has developed states of anxiety and depression, such respondents accounted for 37.1 %. Reliable correlations between indicators of socio-psychological adaptation and negative psychosocial factors of the 1990s show that the mental state of a part of the Russian population is to a certain extent associated with the traumatic impressions of those years. This largely explains the phenomena of social pessimism and distrust of the government in Russia at present.

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