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A Theoretical Formation of Emotional Intelligence in Terms of Childhood Trauma and Altered Self-Capacities among Adolescents

The aim of this paper is twofold. Firstly, it aims to provide a brief review of literature pertaining to the relationship between psychological well-being and emotional intelligence among adolescents. Secondly, it aims to point out the gap in research looking at the link between EI and childhood trauma and to formulate a theoretical model for understanding the foregoing relationship. The theoretical postulate is integrated with theories from trauma and EI literature. In brief, it postulates that the experience of childhood trauma would have a significant impact on the development of traumatized self among these adolescents. This traumatized self is characterized by altered self-capacities of which interpersonal conflicts or difficulties with oneself and others are part.

Key words: Emotional intelligence, adolescents, childhood trauma, integrative theoretical model, altered self-capacities.

Introduction

Formation and development of emotional intelligence among children and adolescents is an important component in establishing qualitatively adaptive personality in living conditions of modern life. The importance and actuality of existence of emotional intelligence (EI) in adolescents – as the ability to control one's own emotions and emotions of others – is generally known [1]. Due to the fact that the age of adolescence is characterized by processes of rapid physiological development and formation of the personality the resulting emotional and behavioural instability may contribute to formation of certain behavioural strategies for the future adult life. The system of values which is formed basing on the available experience of the adolescent can also be of influence to intellectual, psychophysiological and emotional components of his personality during the processes of life activity.

Theoretical conceptualization of the EI problem is based upon one of the idea about individual differences of abilities to reflect and regulate emotions in accordance with the theory of emotional regulation by J. Gross [1,2]. According to this theory, the

model of the process of emotional regulation is conceptual structure intending that different forms of emotional regulation have differing consequential effects. Thus, according to J. Gross (1998), there are various existing strategies of emotional regulation such as reappraisal and rethinking of one's own emotions (reappraise), which takes place relatively early in the process of emotions' generation and consists of such alteration (change) of way of perceiving of some originating situation to reduce its emotional repercussion. The second one, suppression (suppress), takes place later on in the emotion – generating process and consists of retardation of characteristic features of externally directed internal sensations. Results of experimental researches evidence that the reappraisal strategy of emotional regulation is frequently more effective than emotions' suppression mechanisms.

It must be noted that the conceptions of EI which formed as a result of foreign research studies appeared to be fairly close in their basic conceptualization to the conceptions of soviet psychologists. In the second half of twentieth century the soviet psychology began to develop new trend for the his-

tory of psychology, concerning the research study of ideation as a cognitive process which is proven to be initially under determining influence of emotions (Tikhomirov, 1969, 1984) [3]. These research studies were based on the principle of 'cohesion of affect and intellect' formulated by L.S. Vygotsky in thirties of overpast age (Vygotski, 1992) [4]. The main particularity of these research studies was that the study of the mutual determination of affective and intellectual processes was carried out in the basis of system-wide approach principles. The system – forming factor during that was the cognitive activity of the human which synthesizes all psychical processes and directs them into solving the arising tasks. Psychological conception of the activity developed by A.N. Leontyev allows us to regard all psychical processes as the structural components (subsystems) of cognitive activity (Leontyev, 1975) [5]. That is to say, each cognitive psychical process may be represented in form of separate activity.

Under the guidance of O.K. Tikhomirov there were obtained experimental data concerning the psychological structure and mechanisms of the human's ideational activity which allowed to investigate the problem of mutual determination of ideational and emotional processes (affect and intellect) thoroughly (Tikhomirov, 1984, Vassilyev et al, 1980, Jakupov, 1992) [6,7]. Of utmost importance to our present work are the results of research studies of emotions' regulative functions. "Intellectual emotions', which allow us to monitor the ideational process in general using the psychophysiological correlates of emotions, were experimentally revealed and indentified. This gives us the opportunity to control the ideational activity on the basis of formation and development of intellectual emotions in the educative process (Jakupov, 2012) [7,8].

The reviewed facts result in the idea that alongside with the similarity of the starting positions and in relation to the empirical indicators of research studies between the soviet and foreign works in the field of research of problems of interconnection of intellect and affect there are diversities discovered. They are sufficiently well monitored during the process of comparison of application – oriented aspects of research studies in connection with the attempts of modeling the processes of control of emotions (affect) by the means of intellectual mechanisms as in the EI conceptions, and of research studies modeling the processes of control of ideation (intellect) by the means of emotional mechanisms as in the conceptions of ideational activity (IA).

Theoretical background of childhood trauma

There are few proposed theories that attempt to explain the long-term impact of childhood trauma and childhood psychological maltreatment; however, theories have been proposed explaining the long-term impact of childhood trauma in general. McCann and Pearlman (1990) offer a theory of the self that is formulated around the experience of trauma and utilizes a constructivist framework. They define the self as "the individual's sense of himself or herself as a knowing, sensing entity, complete with capacities to regulate self-esteem and ego resources to negotiate relationships with others (p.6)." Their Constructivist Self Development (CSD) theory postulates capacities such as the ability to tolerate strong affect and to calm oneself in times of distress are vital for the regulation of self-esteem and the cohesion of a self-identity. Ego resources such as empathy, willpower, and the ability to establish healthy boundaries are crucial for the regulation of interpersonal relatedness. The authors posit traumatic events, especially during childhood, can adversely influence the development of these self-capacities and ego resources and result in difficulties with self-esteem, sense of identity, and interpersonal relationships.

Briere (1996a) has expanded on the CSD theory in what he calls the Self-Trauma Theory. This theory is an attempt to integrate cognitive, behavioral, and psychodynamic theories into an integrative framework that explains one's ability to cope with childhood trauma. The model proposes that emotional reactions to Childhood trauma-related stimuli are classically conditioned and that trauma-related memories can trigger the activation of these conditioned emotional responses (Briere, 2002). These functions, or self-capacities, when appropriately developed, allow an individual to cope effectively with emotional distress without resorting to maladaptive coping mechanisms or a loss of autonomy. When traumatic childhood events result in the altered development of these self-capacities, the adult survivor may not be able to cope internally with stressful situations effectively and is more likely to resort to tension-reducing behaviors such as substance use, aggression, and self-injurious behavior or ideation.

Contemporary researchers have focused on various aspects of the self that can be subsumed under the heading of identity as defined by Self-Trauma Theory. For example, clinical researchers frequently measure constructs such as self-esteem, self-worth, and self-depreciation. A number of objective scales

have been developed to measure these constructs and are frequently used in the research literature.

Affect Regulation. The type of self-capacity, affect regulation, is the one to which Briere (1996) gives the most import. He defines affect regulation as “the individual’s ability to engage in internal activities that in some way allow him or her to reduce or change painful emotionality... [and] the individual’s relative ability to experience sustained negative affects without having to resort to external activities... or avoidance” (p. 66). In this manner affect regulation is a capacity that both modulates and tolerates affect. Appropriate affect regulation skills then entail the ability to tolerate negative affect and find appropriate ways to self-soothe (Briere, 1992).

Like identity and interpersonal relatedness, affect regulation as a construct has its beginnings in psychodynamic theory, where it was considered a faculty of the ego. Also like identity and interpersonal relatedness, the definition and assessment of affect regulation has changed with time. Current conceptualizations of affect regulation include the presence or absence of emotionality, taken as evidence of dysfunctional affect regulation skills, and the coping skills one employs when faced with stress.

Development of Self-Capacities. In stating that altered self-capacities in adulthood may result from adverse childhood experiences, it becomes important to provide a theoretical basis for this hypothesis. In developing the Self-Trauma model, Briere (1996b) borrowed heavily from the attachment theory of John Bowlby to explain typical and atypical development of self-capacities. Bowlby (1969/1982) proposed that a child has an innate drive to seek out a parental figure who will provide nurturance and security. Through interactions with this attachment figure, Bowlby (1973) believed, the child would develop schemas or cognitive frameworks for understanding the self, others, and appropriate forms of interpersonal relationships. These schemas form the foundation of the child’s burgeoning personality and dictate the child’s course of action in the future.

The appropriate attachment figure serves as a role model and responds appropriately to the needs of the child. If a child has an appropriate attachment figure in his or her life, the child will develop a secure attachment style (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). This appropriate caregiver will respond sensitively to the child’s needs as well as mirror the child’s behavior and emotional responses. As a result, the child will be able to observe how the other

person sees him or her and will begin to internalize this image of the self. In the process the child will internalize a schema of other people and the affect regulation strategies that were useful in soothing (Holmes, 2000). The securely attached child will develop a sense of self marked by confidence and esteem, a belief that others are trustworthy, and appropriate mechanisms of emotional regulation (Sroufe, Schork, Frosso, Lawroski, & LaFreniere, 1984).

However, some children do not develop a secure attachment. An emotionally unresponsive or punishing attachment relationship would be expected to result in the child’s development of dysfunctional schemas of self and others, and ineffective affect regulation skills. An insecure attachment style known as a *disorganized* or *disoriented* attachment has been found to be the most prevalent style among physically or psychologically abused children (Lyons-Ruth, Connell, Grunebaum, & Botein, 1990; Lyons-Ruth & Jacobvitz, 1999). This attachment style is associated with behavioral disorganization, fear, and anxiety (Teti & Gelfand, 1997) as well as difficulties in social competence (Wartner, Grossman, Fremmer-Bombik, & Suess, 1994) and behavioral problems such as aggression (Solomon, George, & DeJong, 1995). Bowlby (1973) theorized attachment difficulties in childhood would predispose the individual to psychopathology in later life. Studies have linked a disorganized attachment style to problems in adulthood such as suicidal ideation and attempts (Adam, Pierce, Holland, Desmond, & Gunnar, 1996), anxiety (Goldberg, 2000), and criminal behavior and antisocial personality features (Rosenstein & Horowitz, 1996). Although this research appears to suggest experiences such as physical or psychological maltreatment in childhood may predispose one to adult emotional problems, Holmes (2000) warns that a disorganized attachment style is the precursor to personality development and not a direct causal factor in adult emotional difficulties.

Briere’s (1996b) contention is negative childhood experiences result in the altered development of self-capacities in a fashion described by attachment theory. These altered self-capacities result in an adult who is unable to self-soothe and must resort to tension-reducing behaviors such as substance use, aggression, and self-injurious behavior or thoughts to regulate affect. The Self-Trauma model proposes that more profound traumatic experiences (i.e., more chronic, more severe, closer relationship to perpetrator) will result in greater alterations of these self-capacities and, correspondingly, greater reli-

ance on dysfunctional tension-reducing behaviors in adulthood (Briere, 2002). In summary, Self-Trauma Theory proposes children develop a sense of identity, styles of interpersonal relatedness, and affect regulation skills as a result of their attachment relationships. For the child with a “good enough” attachment relationship, these self-capacities will develop appropriately and the child will possess the means to cope effectively with stressful situations later in life. The child who experiences attachment relationships marked by trauma, especially if the trauma was repeated or severe, will develop alterations in these self-capacities that will increase the risk of resorting to the use of tension-reducing behaviors when confronted with trauma-related distress in adulthood.

Conclusions

It is important to note that since person experienced any childhood trauma it has an impact to so called self capacity of the person. Specifically, the self-capacities of interpersonal relatedness, identity, and affect regulation could be as mediators of the impact of child maltreatment on different tension-reducing behaviors in adulthood: substance use, aggression, and suicidality.

Individual differences of emotional intelligence are associated with the abilities of affect regulation in terms of altered self-capacities which develops among adolescents. Most of the researches on Emotional Intelligence confirms out assumption that the ‘resumption, rethinking of emotions’ strategy mostly involves cognitive regulation expressed in activation of ‘cognitive rhythms’ in regulating the emotions. Thus, Emotional Intelligence as alter self-capacity could be a mediator between Childhood trauma and social adaptation, coping behav-

ior, social activity and life style among adolescents, and it is the issue to further scientific researches.

Some of the scientific evidences about relationship between trauma and EI, could be as follows:

- First of all EI negatively predicted self-reported traumatic stress and mental health symptoms for firefighters (Wagner & Martin, 2012).

- High EI could buffer against the negative impact of social constraints (Schmidt & Andrykowski, 2004).

- Traumatized depressed participants exhibited lower EI because of reductions in strategic EI ability, as well as lower levels of social support

- EI and social support were significantly correlated.

- EI may be a novel intervention to prevent and treat major depressive disorder (Kwako et al, 2011).

- EI and social support are protective factors against major depression (Rode, 2011).

- Participants with high EI report fewer psychological symptoms relating to the traumatic experiences of victims of different kinds.

With due consideration of findings there were designed diagnostic questionnaires which allow to determine the nature of childhood trauma more specifically, and to perform task consulting and correction for adolescents in need of psychological assistance on that basis. So theoretical analysis allows us to conclude that EI has straight relation to childhood trauma, which is shown in the results of researches in this area. Results of correctional performance testify that our assumptions concerning the superior effectiveness of application studies, which are based upon the synthesis of conceptual statements of soviet and foreign authors, are obtaining empirical validation.

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