

Consistency of personal identity as a resource of pedagogical prevention of adolescents' radicalization

Coherencia de la identidad personal como recurso de prevención pedagógica de la radicalización de los adolescents

Authors

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Abstract

The article discusses the problem of countering the radicalization of adolescents. It is assumed that adolescents are a social group that is subject to radical influence. This paper emphasizes the growing tendency to involve adolescents and young men in extremist and terrorist acts. Modern theoretical concepts of radicalization are considered and their specific nature is determined. It is noted that all concepts take into account the role of disturbed or difficult social relationships as a latent factor of radicalization. Based on this, the assumption about the influence of personal identity on radicalization is put and developed as a way of reconstructing identity. The authors in this work considered the theoretical concepts of identity and showed the role of consistency as a characteristic of the state of identity. A hypothesis is formulated about the influence of the level of identity consistency on the susceptibility to radical beliefs. The paper describes the purpose, methods, and procedure of an empirical study of the influence of identity certainty in adolescents on the acceptance of radical beliefs. The method of collecting information is a standardized self-report, implemented in the form of two questionnaires. The study sample consists of 302 adolescents aged 12 to 15 years, 45 % of them are male. The influence of the "identity consistency" variable on the "level of radicalization" variable was evaluated. The study used the one-way ANOVA method. The results show that a low level of identity consistency is accompanied by a high level of acceptance of radical ideas. The article discusses the significance of the revealed facts from the theoretical and methodological perspectives, as well as the possibilities of using them in the prevention of radicalization of



adolescents. It is shown that educational environment should allow adolescents to reconstruct their own identity. To this end, the educational community should be sensitive to problems and difficulties in the formation of personal identity. It is noted that the methodological result of the study is an empirical confirmation of the possibility of studying the identity of adolescents in assessing the problems of social interaction.

Keywords: radicalization, identity, adolescence, behavior prevention, extremism.

Resumen

El artículo aborda el problema de contrarrestar la radicalización de los adolescentes. Se asume que los adolescentes son un grupo social que está sujeto a una influencia radical. Este artículo enfatiza la creciente tendencia a involucrar a adolescentes y hombres jóvenes en actos extremistas y terroristas. Se consideran conceptos teóricos modernos de radicalización y se determina su especificidad. Se observa que todos los conceptos tienen en cuenta el papel de las relaciones sociales perturbadas o difíciles como factor latente de radicalización. A partir de esto, se plantea y desarrolla el supuesto sobre la influencia de la identidad personal en la radicalización como una forma de reconstruir la identidad. Los autores de este trabajo consideraron los conceptos teóricos de identidad y mostraron el papel de la consistencia como característica del estado de identidad. Se formula una hipótesis sobre la influencia del nivel de consistencia identitaria sobre la susceptibilidad a creencias radicales. El artículo describe el propósito, los métodos y el procedimiento de un estudio empírico de la influencia de la certeza de la identidad en los adolescentes sobre la aceptación de creencias radicales. El método de recopilación de información es un autoinforme estandarizado, implementado en forma de dos cuestionarios. La muestra del estudio está formada por 302 adolescentes de 12 a 15 años, el 45% de ellos son hombres. Se evaluó la influencia de la variable “consistencia de identidad” sobre la variable “nivel de radicalización”. El estudio utilizó el método ANOVA de una vía. Los resultados muestran que un bajo nivel de consistencia identitaria va acompañado de un alto nivel de aceptación de ideas radicales. El artículo discute la trascendencia de los hechos revelados desde las perspectivas teórica y metodológica, así como las posibilidades de utilizarlos en la prevención de la radicalización de los adolescentes. Se demuestra que el entorno educativo debe permitir a los adolescentes reconstruir su propia identidad. Para ello, la comunidad educativa debe ser sensible a los problemas y dificultades en la formación de la identidad personal. Se observa que el resultado metodológico del estudio es una confirmación empírica de la posibilidad de estudiar la identidad de los adolescentes en la evaluación de los problemas de interacción social.

Palabras clave: radicalización, identidad, adolescencia, prevención de conductas, extremismo.

Introduction

The social significance of countering the radicalization of adolescents determines the relevance of the research on the mechanism of formation of extremist attitudes. The development of technical means of communication expands the possibilities of interaction between extremist groups and young people, up to the creation of virtual extremist communities that unite young people in a number of countries. As a result, the spread of destructive behaviors among adolescents and young people is increasing (Melnikova, 2020). Due to this, episodes of school terror are becoming more frequent, the number of radical groups of religious and political types, along with Internet movements promoting self-harming behavior (anorexia, bulimia, self-harm) is growing as well (Borum & Patterson 2019). In recent years, the possibilities of countering such influence have become the subject of attention not only of specialists in the field of law enforcement and school education, but also of researchers. For the educational community, studies describing the process of radicalization of adolescents and

revealing the possibilities of countering it are of paramount importance.

Radicalization is the process of forming beliefs about the appropriateness of violence (Wilner & Dubouloz, 2011). It can be stated that preventing the radicalization of adolescents is a key task of a society interested in stability and development.

The article examines the socio-psychological causes of radicalization that arise from the interaction of adolescents with the social environment. The authors focus on the consequences of social interaction, suggesting that the educational community can manage the educational environment in such a way as to reduce the radicalization of adolescents.

Thus, the basic assumption of this study is the idea that the growth of radicalization occurs in the context of violations of social interaction. Since their measurement requires a complex research apparatus and long-term surveys, the problems of social interaction can be expressed by studying the identity of the subject. Accordingly, the study of adolescent identity can be useful for assessing the



level of radicalization, but this hypothesis needs to be empirically tested. This article is devoted to its theoretical justification and empirical testing.

Literature Review

The basic concept for this work is the perception of adolescents about their own identity – personal identity. From a socio-cognitive perspective, personal identity is the result of adolescent's cognitive efforts to build a self-image (Berzonsky, 2008). The role of identity is to represent the integrity and uniqueness of the self-image. The essential characteristics of identity are the idea of the stability and inalterability of the "I" in relation to oneself and other people. In this regard, a number of researchers suggest that a person has a need for a clear and definite identity, so they make a determined effort to clarify and concretize it (Berzonsky, Branje, & Meeus, 2007).

However, the perception of identity is not stable or permanent (Luyckx et al., 2006). That is, having appeared once in a more or less successful form, it does not remain like this for the entire life. Identity instability is caused by the fact that the subject is constantly looking for new ways of self-realization, in addition, s/he is under the influence of close people and life circumstances. This image of identity is characteristic of the concept of J. E. Marcia (1966). According to it, identity is formed in childhood, adolescence and youth, changing from diffuse (blurred) to acquired one (integral, stable). Diffuse identity in their perception makes social interaction more difficult, while the acquired one, on the contrary, contributes to its facilitation. Adolescence is characterized by an active formation of personal identity, which is expressed in a change in self-attitude, awareness of oneself as a performer of various social roles, the owner of various social statuses.

Indeed, in order to understand themselves and construct their own identity, adolescents often undertake fundamental reconstructions of their own lives – they break off old relationships and start new ones, change their lifestyle and values. Often along with these actions adolescents are attracted to radical ideas, join extremist and criminal communities. The explanation of this behavior is virtually absent in the concepts that reveal the processes of identity formation. However, the role of identity is considered in socio-psychological concepts of radicalization that explain its development by problems of social interaction.

Socio-psychological prerequisites for radicalization

The causes for radicalization are described in the form of two groups: a) explaining radical behavior by the inability to meet the needs of society, and b) the desire of the subject to build their own identity. The first group explains radicalization as the adolescents' problems in meeting personal and social needs. Researchers rely on assumptions about people's willingness to take drastic actions to solve life difficulties that block access to satisfaction of their needs (Schmid, 2013).

Certainly, this direction covers a fairly wide area of needs, but radical ideologies are characterized by focusing on the most basic and deprived needs. These include personal and group security, social justice, and recognition (Kruglanski et al., 2014). Thus, the study of biographies of extremists and terrorists shows that people who show interest in radical and extremist ideas have problems with social integration. For example, it is noted that radicalization is based on a sense of dissatisfaction with life, society, and the socio-economic situation (Sageman 2008). It should be recognized that radical behavior is determined not only by the idea of the possibilities of satisfying a need, but also by personality traits that enhance the effect of deprivation or frustration (Pratsetal, 2018).

The second direction of explaining the causes for adolescents' radicalization emphasizes the need for the subject to build a clear and consistent identity. The means of construction is the adoption by an adolescent of a radical idea that prescribes confrontation with certain people, social groups, or society as a whole.

This direction of research examines hypotheses about the "lone wolf" oppositional identity based on the idea of opposing oneself to society; participants of social groups united by the desire to protect themselves from other groups or society (Sestoft, Hansen & Christensen, 2017). For example, radicalization can be caused by an inter-group conflict in which an adolescent is a member of a group that is criticized by other groups (Haslam, 2016). Reicher holds a similar opinion, showing that group members can purposefully form attitudes of hatred and hostility towards other social groups (Reicher et al., 2008). A study (Swann et al., 2009) found similar results showing that individuals who identified themselves with the group were more likely to approve of the group's extreme behavior than those whose social identity was less intense.

In general, comparing these approaches, the heuristics of the second direction to explain the radicalization of adolescents on several grounds should be noted. First, the inability to meet the



needs of adolescents does not always determine the adoption of a radical ideology. Oftentimes, the reaction to frustration is socially positive behaviors (perseverance and development), and only in rare cases it is expressed through interpersonal aggression or deviant behavior.

Second, the way of presentation of radical ideas calls for maintaining identity. For example, by using violence to defend one's own beliefs, values, or religion, or by spreading myths about the hostility of social groups or movements. Considering it necessary to assess the role of personal identity in the formation of radical beliefs, the authors of this work consider the parameters most closely related to the predisposition to radical beliefs.

Consistency as a key property of identity

Considering personal identity as a variety of representation of an individual about oneself, a number of researchers take into account the characteristics of identity that express the relationship between different representations.

Within the framework of the socio-cognitive approach, consistency of self-image is a key feature that characterizes the state of the formed identity. These propositions have received empirical support in various concepts of identity. In particular, E. T. Higgins, developing self-concept discrepancy theory, noted that the inconsistency of self-image is inherent in individuals with high anxiety and low self-esteem (Higgins, Klein & Strauman, 1985). The connection between the consistency of representations and the difficulties of self-perception and self-description was studied by W. K. Campbell. He found that instability, inaccuracy of self-representation is inherent in persons with unclear identity (Campbell et al., 2007).

Separating these positions, the authors of this work consider the characteristics of consistency as a representative of the identity of the individual. What manifestations of consistency reveal the identity construction? Consistency characterizes subject's confidence that their decisions and actions are consistent with each other and non-contradictory. Low consistency (mismatch) is manifested in the belief that actions and decisions do not correspond to each other, are contradictory, ambiguous and confusing. In addition to identity, measuring the perception of consistency involves evaluating the effectiveness of actions and interactions with others. High consistency of identity indicates successful social integration. In turn, inconsistency indicates conflicts and contradictions in interaction with others. Assuming that the level of consistency will characterize the state of personal identity of

adolescents, this study involves an empirical study that tests the key hypothesis of the work – the connection between personal identity and adherence to radical beliefs.

Purpose of the Study

The aim of the study is to test the connection between the level of identity consistency and approval of radical ideas.

The research hypothesis suggests that identity consistency reduces the level of adolescents' approval of radical ideas.

Research Methods

The survey was chosen as the **study method** in this work. Two specially designed questionnaires were used as data collection tools.

1. Questionnaire describing the idea of identity consistency. It consisted of 8 statements with a Likert scale, such as, for example: "My actions in relationships with others are consistent," "In relationships with others, my promises do not contradict each other," and so forth. The evaluation of item consistency showed satisfactory results ($n=302$, α -Cronbach=76, inter-item corr.=77), thus the statements were summarized in a single indicator "identity consistency." The distribution parameters of this indicator were calculated taking into account the standardization of its values ($Mz=0.61$, $SDz=2.16$, normal distribution Shapiro-Wilkp<0.01).

2. Questionnaire for the analysis of radical attitudes of an individual (Zlokazov, 2014). The questionnaire includes 12 items, and responses are recorded using the "Likert" scale. To assess radicalization, four types of statements are used that represent fanatical, nationalistic, and xenophobic attitudes.

For statistical processing, the total indicator of agreement with beliefs was calculated. It reflected the overall level of radicalization. The distribution parameters of this indicator are calculated taking into account the standardization of its values ($Mz=0.53$, $SDz=1.1$, normal distribution Shapiro-Wilkp<0.01).

The study used the values of the total indicator included in the Q1 (0-25 % of the distribution) and Q4 (75-100 %) quartiles of the distribution. The quartile method was chosen to maximize the values of radicalization. The final groups were: Q1=47 people, Q4=49 people.

Methods of interpretation. The results of the study were processed using the free distributed program JASP 0.11.1 (JASPTeam, 2020).



Interpretation was carried out by calculating measures of the central tendency, and the effects of influence were evaluated by one-factor analysis of variance (one-way ANOVA).

Organization of study. The study was conducted in the Russian Federation, in Yekaterinburg, Vladivostok. The study sample was collected in schools. The study surveyed 302 people aged 12 to 15 years ($M=13.2$ years; $SD=3.13$), 45 % of the respondents were male.

Results

A statistically significant effect of identity consistency on approval of radical beliefs was found. It was found that a low level of identity consistency is inherent in adolescents who share radical ideas ($F_{(1,95)}=3.14$, $p=0.05$, $\varepsilon^2=0.06$, the variance is homogeneous, power (at $\alpha=0.05$)=0.62).

It should be noted that the results of statistical evaluation of the hypothesis need further clarification. First, the power of the results is average ($\varepsilon^2=0.06$), and our results should be tested on larger samples (Albers & Lakens 2018). Second, the average values of radicalization were not high enough, which in samples with a high level of radicalization can lead to more significant statistical estimates.

However, the results obtained correspond to the intent of the empirical study. It was aimed at explaining the socio-psychological reasons for the radicalization of adolescents. As a reason for radicalization, the authors of this study consider violations of the interaction of an adolescent with the social environment, which leads to difficulties in constructing personal identity and, as a result, preference for radical ideas and communities that offer them.

Assuming that the inconsistency of identity affects the radicalization of adolescents, a statistical test of this hypothesis was organized and conducted. The results confirmed the hypothesis and gave grounds for discussing the possibilities of applying these findings to the organization of the educational environment and prevention of radicalization of students.

Analyzing the specifics of radicalization, it should be emphasized that adolescents are an attractive social group for radical communities. The explanation for this is seen, first, in their social activity, prompted by a sincere desire to benefit the family and society, to realize themselves and be popular with their peers. Secondly, in the desire to form communities, so that adolescents are united in

easily manageable groups. Third, due to their age-related development, adolescents tend to be oppositional towards adults, striving to oppose themselves to others. Together, all these features determine the prerequisites of adolescents to radical behavior, and through manipulation it is easy to encourage them to anti-social and illegal actions (Doosjeetal, 2016).

Our results are supported by empirical studies of the causes of adolescent radicalization. For example, the conclusions that radical communities attract adolescents with an unformed identity who consider the attitude of others to be unfair (Oppetitetal, 2019). Undoubtedly, the role of identity should not be exaggerated; it should be considered along with other personal and social factors, in the general context of the causes of radicalization (Bouzar & Laurent, 2019).

We believe that radicalization has a compensating effect on adolescents. In other words, by joining a radical community, they seek to change the system of relationships with the social environment. In turn, radical communities allow an adolescent to count on the support of members of this community, to acquire a new, higher social status than that available in a group of peers (Ellemers, Spears & Doosje, 2002).

Another factor that explains the popularity of groups that practice radical ideology is their concept of social space, which promotes hedonism and violence. By joining such a group, an adolescent increases own self-esteem by adopting new norms and values that tend to devalue traditional ones or, on the contrary, position radicalism as more significant for society. Therefore, it is possible to assume that more susceptible to radical ideas are the adolescents with decreased self-esteem, whereas the opportunities to increase it are difficult. Being an easy and simple alternative to raising the status, it meets the needs of adolescents from families with reduced circumstances, opening up the possibility of non-material superiority over their peers.

Considering the role of personal identity for the prevention of adolescent radicalization, two obvious areas of application of the results obtained should be highlighted – diagnostic and correctional ones.

The diagnostic possibilities of using identity indicators to measure the risk of radicalization have already been discussed in the scientific literature. The obtained results show that identity consistency can be used to measure the risk of adolescent radicalization. Moreover, this study shows the productivity of addressing the personal rather than



social identity of adolescents in the study of radicalization.

The second area of prevention of adolescents radicalization is the transformation of the educational environment to increase its sensitivity to adolescents experiencing problems in self-identification, building personal identity.

It is reasonable to provide an opportunity to reconstruct the identity for those adolescents who, for some reason, have difficulties interacting with their peers, have been excluded or rejected by the school or street community. Such an initiative corresponds to the factors of countering the radicalization of adolescents (Löseletal, 2018), but also expands them, since it assumes a more active position of teachers and psychologists of the school.

Conclusion

The study revealed the influence of identity inconsistency in adolescents on the formation of radical beliefs. Thus, the theoretical assumption about the influence of violations in the formation of identity on the preference for radical ideas, the development of radical behaviors, including vandal-destructive ones, was confirmed.

The main methodological result was an understanding of the possibility of predicting the radicalization of adolescents by measuring identity consistency. From a psycho-correctional perspective, the results can be used to reduce the level of radicalization by changing adolescents' perceptions of personal identity.

Finally, the results show the possibilities and prospects for using personal identity to prevent the radicalization of adolescents.

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