

PSYRGGU 2020

Psychology of Personality: Real and Virtual Context

RECONSTRUCTING DYNAMICS AND HISTORY OF A CHILD'S SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS DEVELOPMENT: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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Abstract

The article presents the application of Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogical methodology to the analysis of a child's story. The study demonstrates that infantile speech is a fundamental constructive basis for a child's self-awareness and that it is as dialogical as a child's self-awareness. A unit of analysis here is a child's utterance, which is a relatively completed act of consciousness though. When approached so, a child's story can be analyzed as an expression of consciousness' structures that are historically interconnected, hierarchically organized and dynamically saturated. Moreover, those structures are integrated into inner dialogues, and the inner dialogues are in their turn social dialogues with a child's environment incorporated into his/her personal history. When seen this way, a child's story not only represents actual structures of a child's self-awareness, but also opens up a history of consciousness development in it. Speech dialogical character corresponds here to consciousness dialogical character. Dialogical phenomenology and analytics of text study, developed by Mikhail Bakhtin, follows this understanding of consciousness and speech. The article presents its further development and possibilities for its application in development psychology and child clinical psychology. The elaboration of this methodology opens new possibilities of verifying the data obtained in the practice of depth psychotherapy, but as empirically gauged, i.e. as better-formulated and objective results of analysis.

2357-1330 © 2020 Published by European Publisher.

Keywords: Dialogical phenomenology, infantile speech and story, inner dialogue, phenomenological method, self-consciousness,



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1. Introduction

Traditionally, development and particularly, the development of a child's personality, is studied from a researcher's "external" position. Research of the inner side of development (from the side of the child) is rather complex and still remains insufficiently grounded. However, it is important to accomplish this particular task if we want to shift from "variable-oriented" psychology to "human-oriented" psychology. Moving in this direction presupposes focusing on the inner component of human development (Mey, 2000), analyzing the experience (Martsinkovskaya, 2009), studying the development of a relationship I-the Other, inner dialogues of self-consciousness, dynamics of identification (Burlakova, 2011; Burlakova & Oleshkevich, 2001). The "inner side" of human development requires comprehension in the first place. Thus, a different research perspective and methodology are required.

In order to accomplish this task, contemporary psychology increasingly frequently turns to qualitative methods, which are of interest to the Russian science as well (Busygina, 2013; Khoroshilov & Balashova, 2018; etc.). The adherents of qualitative approach actively problematize deductive-nomological positivist scientific discourse, which is frequently used in the studies on mental health and pathology, clinical psychology, etc. (Burlakova & Oleshkevich, 2012; Holmogorova, 2014; Rohleder & Lyons, 2015; Sokolova, 2015).

One of the basic qualitative methods is the phenomenological method and its varieties. Latest guidelines for qualitative research in clinical psychology demonstrate that this method grows in popularity now (Rohleder & Lyons, 2015). At the same time, there is no end to the discussions about what exactly the phenomenological method is (Burlakova & Oleshkevich, 2017; Finlay, 2009; Gendlin, 1977; Larkin, 2015). Phenomenological research rests on immersion into the living matter of the text. In our opinion, this process requires a serious training of a researcher and should be approached as an objective psychological procedure, which is very difficult to reflect upon, describe and, moreover, standardize.

2. Problem Statement

Examination of the child's self-consciousness based on analysis of children's stories produced with the help of CAT (Burlakova, 2011; Burlakova & Oleshkevich, 2001), accentuates all other problems the researcher encounters while constructing this kind of study: the child and the grown-up are differentiated by experience, language, interests, structures of self-consciousness, etc. The task is to close these gaps, to move towards understanding directly the child's experience, towards restoring the inner structures, which initiate relevant feelings.

This study should be considered phenomenological, basing on the immersion into the living matter of the text. In our opinion, this process should be approached as a clearly defined, objective psychological procedure despite the difficulties in describing it. For now, it is sufficient to set certain principles and orientations serving as a basis for our study.

3. Research Questions

Our proposition is that human consciousness has the semiotic nature and forms in the sphere of social dialogues (Bakhtin, 1986). Thus, individual speech, in our case – a child's story, carries complete

information about his/her self-consciousness structure, story folded up within this structure and the hierarchy of consciousness structures. As we were interested in the veracity of this kind of analytical work, its precision and sensitivity, we chose first to conduct research separately. One of the authors of the article conducted a traditional psychological observation and examination of a child — a girl aged 6 years 10 months — including the family context, while another author studied a text of one of the girl's stories acquired via Child Apperception Test (CAT), without any prior information about the child. The preliminary results of the analysis were captured and then compared and discussed.

4. Purpose of the Study

The article explicates how the authors reconstructed dynamics and history of a child's personality development through his/her story and how one can assess the veracity of the results of the undertaken phenomenological study.

5. Research Methods

Let us discuss the method the first author applied to the child's story. The child's speech connected to CAT pictures was regarded as a consistent stream of associations, as multiple micro-stories within a single story. Consequently, singling them out and considering them allows a further shift towards establishing associative ties between them and towards comprehending and explaining their character. Thus, children's stories are not monolithic and self-contained units, but rather multitudes of micro-stories with complex ties between them.

In order to analyze and comprehend each of the micro-stories it is proposed to comply with certain principles. First, it is necessary to *live through* the story, to immerse into its verbal matter, to feel the resonance in one's own consciousness with the child's words, wherefore a micro-story is rendered in one's own words with an inner question for the researcher: "Who could have said that?", "Who says that?" Putting oneself into the speaker's shoes, as well as reflecting on one's own feelings is the main task of this stage of work. Thanks to such an immersion during the production of a child's story one reflexively grabs and fixates rational ("imprinted" according to D. Rapoport) contents and inclusions of spontaneous consciousness.

This stage of analysis is in fact a particular kind of listening attentively to the story. It allows *singling out clearly all the voices* in it, which reflect the specifics of the *inner dialogue*. While consistently living through the story, the researcher begins to have an increasingly clear phenomenal distinction of the *narrator's position* ("author's", *framing position* according to Bakhtin) and the positions of the characters and objects, as well as the narrator's attitude to the emerging positions. Then it is necessary to move on to the *plotline of the story*, which we understand as an *objectified dialogue*, by singling out the most significant oppositions and their hierarchical structure. On the last stage, it is necessary to establish *associative ties* between the micro-stories.

The other author independently used the method of observing the child at the kindergarten, while communicating with her mother, the data of psychological anamnesis, as well as the methods of traditional psychological diagnostics ("the family drawing test").

6. Findings

A story describing the first CAT picture is taken as an example. The picture shows three chickens sitting at the table, a hen is in the background. The author is a girl aged 6 years 10 months.

The text of her story: *“Once upon a time...there were some chickens. They had a daughter. And suddenly they got hungry. They had porridge and the daughter said: I want to go for a walk! They let her go for a walk. In the garden there was a scary dog. Dad looked out of the window and went outside with a stick... He helped his daughter, the daughter went for a walk, and he stopped the dog, so she could go far away... (a long pause) She sees that there is a dog with its owner, and she would like to go for a walk with Mum or Dad, too. She went home and asked her Daddy. Daddy didn't want to. She asked her Mum — Mum was busy. She gave up on them and went for a walk by herself”.*

First micro-story: *“Once upon a time... there were some chickens. They had one daughter.”* Listening attentively to the story, one can discover that the clarification “one” is an inclusion of spontaneous consciousness against the backdrop of a rational construction and reflects the child’s specific inner experience framed by the outside (“adult”) narrator’s position.

Second micro-story: *“And suddenly they got hungry”.* This utterance also includes two positions – the exterior, the author’s one, and the inner, spontaneous one. The exterior position is presented by the beginning of the phrase “and suddenly they...”, referring to the intermittence of time, which is not typically felt from inside. The pronoun “they” also points at the outside position: hunger cannot be felt from inside by a group of people, it is “given” to a single person. At the same time, the ending of the phrase (“they got hungry”) shows a weak sensation of one’s difference from the others.

One can say that there is identification in this utterance by assuming the inner phenomenological position. For instance, the word “suddenly” is quite typical of infantile consciousness reflecting a child’s fresh and observant eye. Thus, one can discuss the same utterance at least from two different positions.

After listening attentively to this utterance and reflecting on this experience, one can say that it belongs to an independent person engaged in various activities, for whom addressing the feelings happens only in case of their intensive awakening. It can be a sign of a certain level of displacement as well as a characteristic of a certain passivity of the child’s experience (in Russian, the girl used the form “them” which also has a passive meaning).

Third micro-story: *“they had porridge”.* This utterance sounds matter-of-factly and shows that satiation is not a problem (“got hungry – was fed”). From the child’s inner experience, it is a common, habitual process. In addition, the girl is speaking about herself and her experience, but as if she is speaking of someone else, assessing the animals from the perspective of her own experience. Thus, there is self-projection on another character coupled with simultaneous assessment, which is in fact an adult’s assessment. Then the child speaks of her own experience from the point of view of an adult with whom she identifies herself.

Besides a narrator’s personal experience, an utterance always has an author’s assessing position which can be expressed to a greater or smaller degree (there may be practically no difference between the author and his character), or characters can serve as conductors of the author’s ideas without “an independent life of their own” (for example, in a moral novel by Leo Tolstoy). From this perspective, stories can vary significantly for different ages.

Fourth micro-story: “*And the daughter said: “I want to go for a walk”. They let her go for a walk”*”. The phrase before the direct speech sounds from an exterior “adult position” (“the daughter said”), while “I want” – on the contrary, from an inner standpoint. The exterior position enters consciousness through various identifications with it. The exterior framing phrase: “They let her go for a walk” sounds from the inside as permission “All right, go!” So, one can notice the shifts from inside outside and back, a peculiar shuttle movement. From the inside the phrase “I want” corresponds to a potential ban and permission and may point to a conflict “I want – you mustn’t!” One can always see *a specific dialogue between the author’s position*, where a child often borrows the image of this or that adult, and *the character’s position*. This dialogue is *a projection of the inner dialogue in the child’s self-consciousness into the story* and points to the dynamics of its functioning. One phrase of the dialogue automatically points at potential opponents with whom an argument occurs. In this connection, it is important to consider the modality of the utterance. For example, “letting walk” is an opposite of “keeping leashed” (thus, it is not accidental that the image of a dog appears later).

Fifth micro-story: “*There in the garden was a scary dog. Daddy looked out of the window and went outside with a stick.*” When we deal with a plot, it should be considered an objectified dialogue, i.e. a dialogue that turned into a systematic action and interaction. In this particular case, the plot is vividly expressed and its analysis requires identifying oppositional characters (“scary dog – daddy”) between whom the conflict occurs. Let us point out, that, as a rule, being objectified in the text, the oppositions are not recognized by the subject of the utterance, thus, becoming a solid logical structure, which, according to some authors (Levi-Strauss etc.), reflects one of the deepest layers of the text. In this sense, *oppositions* are *stable criteria for diagnosing self-consciousness*.

So, the girl seems to be absent from the situation, which can point at a hidden conflict, while the story itself is structured to show her father who clears the way for her. If we turn to the previous micro-story 4, we can notice a gap in the narration. If it is reconstructed, it is possible to see the following chain of associations: “I want to walk” – anticipation of danger – description of another picture where the protector’s role is given to the father. So, the skip is connected to anxiety and necessity to protect oneself. This protection is construed via manipulating the father’s figure by letting him step in front. Handling the father’s figure freely implies that it is ideal in the child’s perception. This attitude can be seen as the deepening and further unfolding of the phrase “I want and I am allowed” which turns into a conflict “I want and I am afraid”. In order to resolve the conflict a mediator link is introduced (“father”) that helps avoid the conflict or resolve it.

Discussing the text from the semiotic perspective (within the framework of the oppositions), it is necessary to assume the missing link nestled in the subsequent utterance: the father saw – and by his own initiative went to shoo away the dog, anticipating the danger – the child is not asking for help. Thus, in the child’s perception the father, on the one hand, is a natural figure (“He is just as he is. And that’s it”), while on the other hand, there is specific identification with the father, his perception as a protector. But this identification is to a great degree conditional, the father’s image is rather a tool of defence.

Sixth micro-story: “*He helped his daughter, the daughter went for a walk, and he stopped the dog, so she could go far away... (a long pause).*” The phrase “he helped his daughter” is spoken from the exterior position framing the two characters (father and daughter). This author’s position also forms the plotline

“the father helped the daughter, protected her.” The transfer to the phenomenological position discovers the girl’s passive function (“she is protected by her father”), which emphasizes the father’s active and busy role, though complicated by his objectification and instrumentality.

The author’s position is connected to a somewhat fixed identification with a feeling that “it should be like that”. Such an obligation in the child’s position and utterances indicates the depiction of a desired outcome: “I want but in fact it is not so”. The wish to be protected and safe, to have a reliable shoulder is aggravated by a real feeling of inner vulnerability and helplessness. As a rule, in case of “normal” relations with the family the child does not have a desire to specifically accentuate someone’s function (here: protection). Idealizing the father’s figure indicates a situation of frustration, of a possible loss (the oriole of idealism actually covers what is in fact being lost).

In this case, the author’s position is related to forming the protective reaction of idealizing the father’s image. Then rationality and “rightness” of the girl’s behaviour, which the second researcher will speak about, become easily explicable. In fact, the existence of “father part” in the child’s perception makes a walk of her other, more spontaneous, component possible. Some replacement is necessary for the action to happen: “He stopped the dog, so she could go far away” – at the same time the dog still exists, thus there must be a person who stops it. Then, when one part of the personality goes for a walk, the other part (father’s) stays behind. There is a boundary that should not be crossed and is guarded by the father. Thus, the father’s role is associated with control, regulation, coordination. The words “far away” also point at this zone of conflict in the context of the girl’s walk and stopping the dog. It can signify considerable replacement of anxiety and predisposition towards compulsive actions of protective character.

On the other hand, the author’s position reflects the structure of the story as “beneficial for the child”, as it is important to have the father who stands and stops the dog to let the daughter walk. It shows an evident inclination to have her father always around, so that he drives away something scary and unpleasant. By virtue of the reproduced character of the father’s function, the relevant identification exists in the child’s perception and projects into the story. Thus, it is possible to say that identification with the image driving away the scary and the threatening is intrinsic for this child’s perception. The following long pause is characteristic. When the child enters the plot he/she has constructed and automatically builds its finale, he/she opens up new deeper areas of conflict. It can be said that conjecturing the plotline stimulates a new act of awareness that initiates a new plot, which is a specific exposure of the previous one.

Seventh micro-story: “*She sees that there is a dog with its owner, and she would like to go for a walk with Mum or Dad, too.*” In this micro-story, two characters (the dog and its master), previously on antagonistic terms, are now bonded and supportive of each other. The girl’s position is connected with observing this scene and wishing to go for a walk with someone too. Thus, we can speak about a hierarchy of positions: 1) connected with the master walking his dog; 2) with observing, seeing; 3) the author’s position close to the girl’s one, from which the significance of a joint walk is perceived. The phrasal element “would like” is close to direct speech, though it is simultaneously rooted in the author’s position and indicates the closure of the previous situation, as a result of which there is the understanding that “it is desirable to have someone near – father or mother”. If previously her father shooed the dog away and the girl could walk on a “clean” secluded territory, now walking alone and seeing the joint walk satisfying both – the dog and its master – gives rise to a wish for jointness, being near, not being satisfied with a mere

presence of a significant adult as an ideal image. There is also a certain perception of specific “unreality” of the father, and the awareness of abandonment arises.

Thus, if the situations are placed consequently, then

- 1) the situation is defined by the dog’s presence and the girl’s fear;
- 2) situation – the situation of disjointedness – the obstacle is separated, moved aside, the “boundary” is guarded and expanded by the father;
- 3) situation – the girl is walking alone;
- 4) situation – the situation of “unity” – the master and the dog are close, together – the “yearning” for the unity arises;
- 5) situation – the girl goes for a walk by herself – perceived through observing the master walking his dog and in contrast to it.

Thus, the identified situations can be seen as confronting each other, oppositional and reproducing *the history of the child’s development*.

Eighth micro-story is the resolution of the previous conflict, at the same time the realization of its existence and returning to its origin: “She went home and called her Daddy. Daddy didn’t want to. She called her Mum - Mum was busy”. The sudden understanding of the desired situation (“be together”) defines the subsequent plot. First, she goes to her father who initially drove the dog away himself, without her request, but who now answers negatively (“does not want to”). The father is absent from the situation “here and now” (natural behaviour), he is not willing or able to be on the same level of spontaneous functioning as the child (obviously, from the child’s point of view he wants something else). The father can only help with what he thinks necessary – to protect, to perform adult functions, but from the girl’s position he does not want just “to be near”, to maintain direct contact, or he can’t do it for unclear reasons.

Later, internally expecting the mother’s refusal, the girl goes to her. The mother has no time for walks; she is busy doing something else.

There is obvious distancing from the family affairs (“They have their own things to do, I have my own”), as well as a lack of understanding of another person – children often say “does not want” when another person’s sources of actions are not clear while the child’s own wish is acute. The latter is also evident from the choice of the verb “called” (very “simple”, authoritarian) in contrast to a more respectful one (“asked” or “suggested”).

Ninth micro-story: “She gave up on them and went for a walk by herself.” (In Russian the girl used a much more emphatically charged and fruity phrase which can be literally translated as “she spat on them” and which is closer to “she didn’t give a damn”.) This language conveys a whole range of feelings from complacency to internal distancing oneself with elements of anger (“Why are you all busy”). It is also a gesture of despair and a change of one’s orientation when reliance on oneself becomes an important new quality. Forced independence out of necessity (“I will do the same thing but without you”) in contrast to the reaction of emancipation in a total symbiotic situation reflects the formation of a “little adult”. Here the phrase “she gave up on them” is closer to the author’s position, which is the child’s inner position as well. Thus, the author’s position, which shifted throughout the identified micro-stories, is approaching the position of an adult who decided to act in a certain way under the circumstances. It is important that it is

the inner position existing in the child's perception. However, it is connected to a number of neurotic symptoms (rigidity, compulsion, anxiety, etc).

Thus, it is obvious how the child's history, the mechanism that led to forming a personality structure of a "little adult" type, successively unfolds throughout the micro-stories. This unfolding occurs via the story when one plotline reaches its limit stimulating a new act of awareness and producing a new plotline connected with a deeper level of awareness, and so on. In other words, this story reproduces a hierarchy of *consciousness conflict structures* through a chain of problem situations. It often happens that in the chain of stories there occurs a systematic deepening of the conflict, a movement towards its hidden layers. In our case, the story specifically reproduces the child's development history: *from end to beginning*. The chain of micro-stories also demonstrates the movement from *superficial consciousness structures to in-depth ones*, from "covering" (protective) memories to more spontaneous. And finally, this story has a therapeutic function, as gradually *dynamics, history and hierarchy of the child's self-consciousness formation* unfold through it. Being aware of this one can give grounds to organize such stories specifically *for therapeutic purposes* and subsequent "targeted" work with them.

The analysis of the data from observing the child's behaviour, her personal story and family situation conducted independently by the second author showed the following.

It turned out that due to certain circumstances the girl experienced early frustration in emotional ties (her father's death when she was 5.5 years old). For various reasons her mother could not compensate this loss, contacting with the child mostly on the rational adult level and actively transmitting to the girl the responsibility for her behaviour. While communicating with her, the girl kept her hands over her head for a long time as if covering herself from her mother's excessively strict and hypercritical look. Only after a psychologist's substantial support and approval, was she able to speak with extreme shyness. According to the mother, the girl's father was often ill before he passed away, but unlike his wife, who bore the burden of providing for the family, he gave his time to the children (the girl has an elder brother), taught them a lot.

The data of prolonged observation of the girl in a children's group allow speaking of marked rightness, an aspiration to maximally meet the adults' demands and follow them pedantically. Therefore, she was "comfortable" for the teachers, "there were no problems with her", and they could leave her for a short time in their absence to supervise the others. As for the children, they shied away from her timidly but listened to her. For them she was "too grown-up" and due to that partly alien; she practically lacked spontaneity, a free uninhibited manner of behaviour even when the latter was encouraged by the adults. However, despite the outward rightness the girl suffered from "scary dreams" where the main plot was falling into a deep black hole with a monster gene that could "scare to death", which reflects deep insecurity and inner instability. That is why the child fell asleep with difficulty in mortal fear. The mother did not even guess about the daughter's fears, because she had to go to sleep all by herself without "unnecessary talks".

The family drawing the girl made about the time the projective CAT stories were obtained (analyzed by the other author) showed the girl being grown-up and independent and her two-year-older brother looking younger than she. In this drawing, the brother is much shorter than the author of the picture. The girl calls him "my younger brother" (which reflects the common trend expressed by the mother: "It is the

boy who frequently behaves as a little one – he cries and screams, but the daughter is much more serious”). In the same picture after the brother’s figure, the girl drew her mother and then her father after commenting: “May I, if dad died, still draw him too?”, and then “He always wore a T-shirt, I’ll draw him and his shoes too”). The actualization of the father’s image a year after his death is to a great extent connected with compensation and filling an obvious emptiness and loss (first of all with rational, approved content), with the desire to preserve everything “as always” (even the T-shirt), intact. Earlier, only a month after the father’s death, the girl did not include him in the family picture, drawing herself, her brother and mother sort of hovering, disunited and separated, as at that time the trace of loss is obvious and irreplaceable. Only with a passage of time, there appears a rational image, covering up the bare emptiness, helping alleviate the loss, explain it, but at the same time hiding something significant. In this respect, such traits as rigidity, strictly following the rules and norms, become more pronounced in the girl’s behaviour, bordering on compulsiveness.

7. Conclusion

It can be concluded that the analysis of CAT stories and the analysis of the family situation, including observations and other methods, conducted by the authors simultaneously and independently of one another, show that the analysis of the story from phenomenological positions is veritable.

As it can be seen from the given example of analysis, even a single child’s story can contain the structure of his/her consciousness with all its complexities and difficulties. It is connected with the fact that *the child’s personality history is preserved in the language, which contains the folded structure of interactions with significant others standing behind him*. Our language has memory and the task is to trust the language and follow it. Then these threads can lead us to the child’s inner experience, to the understanding of the mechanisms of his inner life. A person’s inner life also develops according to the laws of language. The dynamics of our consciousness is the dynamics of folded interactions, which are in fact speech structures, and ways of their functioning objectified in consciousness. We cannot consciously control these deep layers of our inner communication, that is why they can become a topic of objective study. It is especially noticeable on the material of children’s stories, each of them being a stimulus for the next one. A child’s story is a personally meaningful stream of associations revealing the child’s consciousness structure, its inner dynamics, mechanisms of its formation and function. In this respect, children’s stories resemble free associations in psychoanalysis. It is connected with a weak reflexive apparatus of children. If the projective experiment is organized properly, we acquire a really free, as far as it is objectively possible, *child’s speech flow, and analysis helps crystallize the history of his/her consciousness, the mechanisms of its function and reproduction*.

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