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Psychology of Personality: Real and Virtual Context

COPING WITH DIFFICULT LIFE SITUATION BY UNEMPLOYED RUSSIANS: ANALYSIS OF DIFFERENT CONTEXTS

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Abstract

This article features comparative analysis of social representations about coping with job loss situation within the unemployed group through matching answers on questionnaire questions (real context) and judgements of people who have lost their job, on specialised sites and forums (virtual context). It has been supposed that different facets of symbolic coping manifest in different discursive contexts (real and virtual) - through dominance of various components of social representations. The sample of this questionnaire-based research has been comprised of 541 individuals. The scale questionnaire has been used, that contained 35 statements about various means of coping with job loss situation. The questionnaire data has been processed according to method by J.C. Abric which brings out the structure of a social representation. The questionnaire has also contained a series of socio-demographic type of questions. The volume of internet-based content of dedicated groups equals to 26000 characters. Results prove that real and virtual contexts for assessing situation actualise different structural components of a social representation. In the questionnaire, respondents comprehend rational means of coping with difficult situation (cognitive mastery of a problem), search for means to find job at all costs without demonstrating pessimism. In contrast, the internet discourse is characterised by emotional load, spilling out anxiety, irritation, desperation, and other negative feelings. Future forecasts look equally negative. Conclusion drawn is that in the middle of hard life situation, internet has a function of canalising affect. Possibly, people are open about their feelings hoping to get emotional response and support.

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Keywords: Canalisation of affect, collective symbolic coping, real context, social representations, virtual context.



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1. Introduction

In recent times, studying collective phenomena acting as factors of coping for professional population groups is becoming increasingly relevant. Formation of social sentiments, collective feelings, representations about such a problematic social phenomenon as unemployment (Demin et al., 2018; Extremera & Rey, 2016; Gusev, 2017; Emelyanova et al., 2018; Novikova & Shuvanov, 2016; Tarasov, 2016; Willemsethe, 2015) occurs with involvement of a number of factors. Among them, an important place is taken by various discourse types - interpersonal, expert, interrogative, public - including internet discourse.

2. Problem Statement

Overcoming mental dissonance, groups employ mechanism of collective symbolic coping. Within the social representations concept by Moscovici (1976, 2000), this notion has been elaborated by Wagner who considered discourse in community as one of the means of collective coping. He wrote that understanding social object by community for (developing) correct conduct and communication is achieved through discursive elaboration of a meaning system, that is through symbolic coping (Wagner, 1998; Wagner et al., 2000).

Collective coping not only exists in the discourse form essential for overcoming some group issues. Generally, it acts as primary mechanism for stabilising social conduct in difficult situations, extreme conditions, in group encountering real problems etc. Detecting strategies and patterns of occurrence and course of collective coping in conditions of social or group turbulence is a promising trend for research in modern social psychology. The concept of collective symbolic coping developed by Wagner has been successfully employed by him and his followers for analysing mechanism of mental familiarisation with disturbing social phenomena used by public (Wagner, 1998; Wagner et al., 2000; Wagner et al., 2002). Collective symbolic coping within the context of the problem which is being researched, consists of interpretations of quitting from difficult life situation (loss of job). The scientific challenge lies in inconsistency of symbolic coping contents for given social group, which manifests itself differently in different types of discourses (in real and virtual contexts).

3. Research Questions

This research suggests studying collective symbolic coping - as a mechanism for coping with difficult life situation on a mental level - through juxtaposing respondents' answers on questionnaire questions and discourse in internet forums. We propose to develop methodologically Wagner's (1998) idea that "constructing of a social object is achieved through discursive elaboration of meanings system, that is through symbolic coping" (p. 307).

One of the contemporary directions for studying economic consciousness is analysis of social representations in economics (Stark & Kirchler, 2016). We will rely on structure of a social representation elaborated by Moscovici (1976). It is assumed that cognitive components of a social representation present primarily in deliberate (reflected) answers of respondents on questionnaire questions (real context). Emotional components (spontaneous reactions on a situation) are more detectable in internet discourse

(virtual context), where communication is knowingly anonymous, and users do not always restrict themselves with self-control.

4. Purpose of the Study

Purpose of the study - is to perform comparative analysis of social representations about coping with job loss situation in a group of unemployed people, through juxtaposing answers on questionnaire questions (real context) and assessments by people who lost their jobs, presented on specialised (web)sites and forums (virtual context). This purpose has been specified in the following research tasks:

- detect and describe contents of social representations, held by the unemployed, about situation of coping with job loss situation, in a questionnaire-based study (in real context);
- analyse contents of statements by the unemployed presented in specialised forums (in virtual context);
- perform comparative analysis of contents of two types of discourse about coping with job loss situation.

5. Research Methods

5.1. Questioning Technique

The first research method has been the author's questionnaire, which has contained 35 statements, about various means for coping with job loss situation. Respondents have been offered to assess on a 5-point scale the judgements previously collected from internet specialised groups' material. Data have been processed using Abric's method (Abric, 2003; Moliner & Abric, 2015). Calculation of the coefficient of positive answers TCP (on 5-point scale) has been performed for each judgement from the list. Calculation of the coefficient of positive answers has enabled detecting those judgements with which respondents agree most. These elements belong to nuclear part of social representations about job loss situation and allow making judgements about means of mental coping (collective symbolic coping, according to W. Wagner). Questioning has revealed respondents' socio-demographic characteristics (sex, age, educational status, income level, unemployed status duration, employment sphere, and job experience before dismissal etc.). The data obtained were subject to statistic processing using SPSS 22.0 software packages.

5.2. The method of netnographical analysis of online forums

Data research from specialised forums discussing issues of unemployment and employment has been carried out within netnographic methodology (Rozhdestvenskaya et al., 2016) using content-analysis method. Netnography is specific due to particular qualities of respondents sample, random and anonymous, yet possessing advantages of spontaneity, looseness and emotionality in the statements. Netnographic approach has enabled analysing set of various cognitive, emotional and behaviour strategies, which are being used by individuals in stressful situation of job loss. During this research stage, altogether seven discussion threads from various forums have been analysed. Specific forums have been selected according to criterion of presence of detailed discussion of coping strategies in job loss condition. The analysed content volume has amounted to 26,000 characters. All analysis units concerning people's feelings about

job loss situation have been coded in three categories: emotions, attitude to the situation and actions. Additionally, within each category, two to fourteen subcategories have been isolated, depending on quantity and diversity of the statements presented. Quantification of occurrence frequency for single elements has not been included in the research tasks. Authors were looking for wide circle of judgements concerning coping with life situation of job loss.

5.3. Study Sample

The unemployed (total sample volume 541 individuals) residing in the Central (Moscow and Moscow region) and Volga region (Nizhniy Novgorod and Nizhniy Novgorod region) of the country, have taken part in the questionnaire survey. The sample has included unemployed individuals of socioeconomic professions whose occupation had included provision of services in household, education and medicine. Gender sample distribution: 44% males, 56% females. Age groups have been represented in the following way: 30% - 25-35 years old; 30% - 36-45 years old; 40% - 46-60 years old. 69% of respondents have been officially married. Most respondents have had higher (57.7%) and specialised secondary (37.7%) education, all the rest study participants (4.6%) - general secondary education. As for duration of unemployment, the respondents group has been represented with individuals who had lost their job: less than half a year - 60%, half a year - year - 17%, one year - three years - 11%, remaining 12% of participants had stayed in the status of unemployed for more than three years. That is, most respondents have had a brief experience of unemployment. This group was of particular interest due to its ability to demonstrate more diverse means for mental coping with job loss situation compared to individuals in a situation of “protracted” unemployment. However, it should be taken into account, that satisfaction level for activity, prior to unemployment, was fairly high (60% of the sample have marked 6-7 points on a 7-point scale). At the same time, over half of the study participants have stated as a reason for dismissal enterprise/organisation closure or staff downsizing - that is they have been forced unemployed.

6. Findings

6.1. Analysis of Nucleus contents of social representations about coping with job loss situation in real context

The structure of social representations about job loss situation (first series of the research) has been identified via author’s scale questionnaire (35 statements), processed according to Abric’s (2003) formula for calculating coefficient of positive answers - TCP (Taux categorique positif).

$$TCP_{(i)} = \frac{n(4)+n(5)}{N}$$

where n(4) - number of “significant degree” responses, n(5) - number of “very significant degree” responses, N - responses total number.

In the SR nucleus included were the elements (unemployed (individuals’) judgements) with TCP coefficient greater than or equal to 59 (see table 01).

Table 01. Nucleus contents of a social representation about job loss situation in a group of unemployed Russians

Judgements belonging to nucleus	TCP
1. I don't get depressed or low spirits, you never know what you can do until you try (my eyes are afraid - my hands are doing)	75
2. Set up for persistent job search	77
3. Will turn to ex-colleagues for recommendations	61
4. Looking for different work options, visiting organisations, mobilising all contacts	61
5. Trying to find just anything close to my education and experience	70
6. Trying more economical lifestyle, reducing my spending	66
7. Will register on the labor exchange	68

Note: The coefficients presented have been obtained through TCP (Taux cate Pgorique positif) calculation according to Abric's (2003) formula.

Density of the target SR nucleus has been identified by internal consistency of the nuclear elements defining contents of collective symbolic coping. For this purpose, a correlation analysis with Spearman's criterion has been applied (with $p < 0.05$). Analysis results have demonstrated that all nuclear judgements are closely related with each other (see table 02).

Table 02. Relations of nuclear elements of social representations about job loss

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. I don't get depressed or low spirits, you never know what you can do until you try (my eyes are afraid - my hands are doing)	-	0,567	0,173	0,317	0,233	0,147	0,27
2. Set up for persistent job search	0,567	-	0,285	0,441	0,304	0,239	0,285
3. Will turn to ex-colleagues for recommendations	0,173	0,285	-	0,474	0,313	0,201	0,222
4. Trying to find just anything close to my education and experience	0,317	0,441	0,474	-	0,335	0,210	0,283
5. Trying more economical lifestyle, reducing my spending	0,233	0,304	0,313	0,335	-	0,196	0,275
6. Looking for different work options, visiting organisations, mobilising all contacts	0,147	0,239	0,201	0,210	0,196	-	0,279
7. Will register on the labor exchange	0,270	0,285	0,222	0,283	0,275	0,279	-

Note: In columns, digits signify the judgements listed in the first column. All correlations are significant on the 0,01 level (two-sided).

Such nucleus density indicates consistency of coping strategies selected by respondents typical for individuals of various ages and various duration of unemployment. Confirming the latter has been the lack of connections for nuclear elements with indicator of unemployed status duration. The exception has been only one judgment - "trying more economical lifestyle. Reducing my spending" ($r=0,100$; $p=0,035$). The longer the unemployed experience, the more often they turn to this particular coping method. Equally important, in terms of preference for these or other means of coping with difficult life situation, have been family factors (official marriage and having children). Thus, an active job search, based on the social ties of the unemployed "looking for different work options, visiting organisations, mobilising all contacts", is associated with both having a family ($r=0,079$; $p=0,097$) and the number of children in a family ($r=0,115$; $p=0,015$). Apparently, responsibility for family and children activates job search.

6.2. Analysis of the unemployed coping means in internet forums: results of netnographic analysis

For juxtaposing two types of public discourse, the second series of the study have been conducted using content analysis method for forums where the problems of unemployment and employment have been discussed. The topics of discussion at such forums are built around issues of job search. Forum users examine reasons for being out of work for a long time, seek to work out an action plan for successful employment, share their feelings and details of their personal situation. These internet resources are not strictly moderated, any forum member can freely express an opinion on any issue (the only taboo is the use of profanity). Thus, analysing free discussions in internet enables getting a set of cognitive, emotional and conduct strategies used by humans in stressful situation of job loss. All analysis units concerning feelings about job loss situation have been coded into categories: "emotions", "interpretation of the unemployment situation" and "actions".

Within "emotions" category two subcategories have been isolated: negative and positive emotions. There is a quantitative preponderance of statements towards negative. First comes fear, that has a different degree of severity ranging from anxiety to panic. The result of fear is often procrastination, putting off important decisions. One popular behaviour strategy in the situation becomes lower requirements for vacancies and the employer. Forum users also experience resentment and anger (mostly concerning employers); unsuccessful struggle causes fatigue. Positive emotions are fairly rare. Only a small number of forum users have demonstrated hope, optimism, willingness to work, and confidence in their strength.

Within the second category, "interpretation of the situation", three subcategories have been isolated. Assessments of general economic situation in the country, complaints about both general lack of work places and well paid vacancies, occur inside "work absence statement" subcategory. Inside the "discussion about qualification" subcategory, study participants touch upon two topics: 1) inability to get a job without experience in the relevant field; 2) inability for applicants with a good education and experience to secure jobs that do not require high qualifications.

In the subcategory "situation on the eve of dismissal" forum users discuss injustice at work, and also complain of psychological fatigue from work. Some participants share an opinion that work that does not bring pleasure is the norm to be reconciled with. There is only a negative connotation in the subcategory "forecast for the future": applicants approaching their 40-s (40-45), expect reduced chances of employment.

In the “action” category, forum participants discuss issues of concern to them just in order to find a solution. The following activities prevail: the use of relationships (most often established during study, in professional communities, including the virtual ones); applying for any job, so as not to sit idle (synonyms for “any job” are most often the vacancies of a cleaning lady and a salesman, less often - a call centre operator); persistent search for suitable vacancy; retraining, advanced training; starting your own business, freelance, including turning a hobby into making money, moving to another city with more vacancies. Clearly, the prevailing search strategies allow downshifting, consent to any job, or dreams of a radical change in occupation or place of residence.

6.3. Comparative analysis

When comparing the results of a questionnaire survey and analysis of specialized forums, the difference in modality of perception of the situation attracts attention. In the survey, respondents emphasise rational ways of coping with job loss (cognitive mastery of the problem), means of finding work at all costs. At the same time, there are no negative connotations in the nucleus of the representation. On the contrary, the statements: “I don’t get depressed or low spirits, my eyes are afraid - my hands are doing” and “(I am) Set up for persistent job search”, get the highest coefficients, 75 and 77, respectively.

As for the results of the forums analysis, users demonstrate a predominance of negative moods (fear, despair, confusion). In the subcategory "forecast for the future", only a negative connotation occurs: applicants approaching 40-45 (years) mark, expect reduced chances for employment. Cognitive exploration of the problem (with a few exceptions) boils down to agreeing to any job, downshifting or not-so-realistic plans to “retreat somewhere”. In internet content, some attempts to provide emotional support occur, desire to share their experience and give useful advice.

7. Conclusion

According to the results obtained, real and virtual contexts actualise different structural components of a social representation. In the context of a direct survey, respondents do not emphasise their negative emotions, but, on the contrary, claim that they are not amenable to them. They declare quite rational and productive intentions to overcome the difficulties that have arisen. At the same time, internet discourse is characterised by emotional charge, spilling out anxiety, irritation, despair and other negative feelings. Forecasts for the future also look negative. Apparently, internet serves as a means to channel an affect formed in the situation of unemployment. Possibly, people openly talk about their feelings in the hope of receiving an emotional response and support. Meanwhile, the emotional tension of discourse in the virtual space indicates that people who have lost their jobs need additional support from society and the state

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