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**AUTOBIOGRAPHIC NARRATION AS A RESOURCE OF COPING  
WITH THE EXPERIENCE OF UNCERTAINTY**

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**Abstract**

Within the framework of the existential-narrative approach being developed by the author, the phenomenon of uncertainty is considered as an essential and inalienable characteristic of the life of a contemporary person and as a fundamental condition for gaining new experience. The focuses of the analysis were: 1) the psychological consequences of a person's inability to stay in uncertainty for a long time, leading to the emergence of metapathologies; 2) the possibilities of using autobiographical narration as one of the available ways of coping with this experience. The emergence of a semantic gap between the requirements of the present situation and the past experience available to a person was argued as a possible psychosemantic mechanism that prevents the individual overcoming of uncertainty. A proven set of therapeutic techniques is proposed for the recovery of semantic connections to cope with uncertainty based on the revision of personal biographical episodes: "hidden resource capacity", "semantic inversion", "prolongation", "alternatives", "heroization", "focus shift", "scaling", "potentiation", "hints", "destruction of stereotypes".

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## 1. Introduction

In modern science, the concept of uncertainty (Rudnev, 2018) is used very widely, being a popular research subject for over a century along with the concepts of risk, modeling, fortuity, probability, spontaneity (Dorozhkin & Sokolova, 2015). All of them are considered as essential characteristics of modern life and person's knowledge of himself and the world. Uncertainty is not so much an epistemological as an ontological characteristic of reality; it is connected not with a lack of information or a limited understanding of something by a person, but with the fact that, being a fundamental principle of the world order, it is subject only to partial, limited knowledge. The complexity of scientific reflection on the content of uncertainty is also indicated by the fact that there is still no generally accepted definition of it, therefore, at the risk of mixing uncertainty with randomness and risk; one has to confine oneself to its broad understanding as *an unpredictable problematization of the future* (Diev, 2011). Distinguishing between adjacent categories of uncertainty and unrecognizability, it is customary to say that uncertainty is more closely related to the concepts of fortuitousness and probability (Sapogova, 2017).

Initially formulated in philosophy and quantum physics, the concept of uncertainty quickly penetrated into other spheres of knowledge (Diev, 2011), and in the 90s of the XX century in the humanities there was almost a “turn to uncertainty”, which caused a whole wave of studies. In modern existential psychology, uncertainty is viewed as an integral characteristic of human life, as a natural way for the subject to gain experience (Kornilova et al., 2010) and as a condition for his freedom and creativity.

## 2. Problem Statement

Modern man has a hard time in the conditions of objective stochasticity of reality: the already difficult world every year becomes even more complicated both in terms of conditions of existence and from the side of mastered technologies. And, in turn, it requires constant complication from a person, leading him away from traditional unambiguous and stable pictures of the world (Csikszentmihalyi, 2006). And if the younger generations more adequately and faster adapt to the uncertainty of existence (Bogacheva & Sivak, 2019; Harris, 2017; Radaev, 2019; Soldatova et al., 2018; Tvenzhdz, 2018), then modern adults and the elderly people often experience states of inability to overcome uncertainty and are forced to look for ways to compensate for them. This was especially noticeable in the period of the “rakish nineties” with their radical change in meanings, values and goals, but it is no less sharply reflected in 2020-2021 in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Not surprisingly, a large number of current requests to consulting psychologists and psychotherapists have been associated with overcoming uncertainty, requiring an analysis of the content and effectiveness of ways to cope with it. This analysis has made it possible to discover previously unused personal resources of a person, in particular, the possibilities of autobiographical narration.

## 3. Research Questions

As a part of the movement of understanding the human existence in the world from rigid determination to paradigms of uncertainty, unpredictability and randomness, there are questions of defining

attitudes towards them and determining ways of being that are equally comfortable both for understandable and deterministic situations and for situations of “challenges of uncertainty”. Moreover, existence under conditions of uncertainty opens up new horizons for human development, where the subject can realize any project of himself, and at certain moments of his life choose the possibility to become different and be plural (Leontiev, 2015).

The “wisdom of uncertainty” (Urmantsev, 2008, p. 114) is that it creates a space of potential freedom for a person and the prospects for finding unique trajectories of existence that are impossible if we rely on completely deterministic models of the world. A person himself has *to redefine uncertainty* and thereby self-determine by the acquired new meanings. Willingness to self-redefine uncertainty and tolerance to it are the conditions for experiencing psychological well-being, for the formation of resistance to stress, for the development of assertiveness and the feeling of being “alive”, as well as a criterion of personal maturity.

Accepting the “challenges of uncertainty” and responding to them with his own activity, a person, of course, develops. But what happens if he does not cope or it requires overstrain? Can the subject discover resources for coping with uncertainty in his own mind or practice? And is it possible at all to exist “chronically” in uncertainty, not having or not creating “islands of stability” for oneself?

Existence in uncertainty is fraught with the emergence of more complex internal experiences than those that are born in conditions of “negative clarity”. They are due to: 1) the impossibility or inability to quickly adapt to constantly changing living conditions, the absence of any naturally guaranteed stability; 2) subjectively perceived acceleration of the pace of life (“constant race”), the absence of time gaps in order to “stop and look around”; 3) the experience of incompleteness, semantic fragmentation of one's own life path, etc.

Sokolova (2015) has described five types of experiencing uncertainty:

- 1) an all-consuming negative affect, overwhelming anxiety;
- 2) negative emotional states (ambivalence, polysemy, inconsistency, confusion, etc.);
- 3) intolerance to uncertainty, lack of access to the internal resources of the oneself, giving rise to dependence on the social environment, conformism, submission to authority, leveling the intentions of one's own I;
- 4) manic projection, personal transgression and chaos, narcissism, lack of restraining norms and rules;
- 5) experiences colored with a positive emotional tone (curiosity, search and meaning-making activity, fantasy play, etc.) and leading to creative and deliberate completion of the situation of uncertainty (pp. 45-46).

Thus, uncertainty is rarely experienced positively. For the most part, it gives rise to a feeling of life's instability, worry, fears, leads to stress, crises and depression. This is the origin of the psychotherapeutic task in relation to coping with uncertainty: increasing the level of tolerance of the anxiety, which inhibits a person's own meaning-making activity.

People, especially the older generation, who are accustomed to living in an artificially modeled certainty, often find themselves unable to accept the very fact of “the impracticability of the desire for certainty and complete meaningfulness”. They are not ready to realize the obligation of their response to

uncertainty and to discover, as A. Camus said, “the opportunity to be satisfied with the unknown” (Urmantsev, 2008, p. 114). That is why many of them avoid the “choice of the unknown”, thereby stopping self-development and personal growth.

As a result, there arise the prerequisites for the emergence of the states that A. Maslow called *metapathologies*: these are massive disorders of personal development that arise in modern societies as a result of *the deprivation of the values of being*, i.e., B-values (Maslow, 1999, pp. 301-304). The examples of metapathologies he mentioned coincide with the symptoms of avoidance of uncertainty and include, among other things, such characteristics as: disintegration, insufficiency of the self, feeling self-anonymous, unwillingness to achieve anything on our own, total selfishness and nihilism, shifting responsibility for one's well-being to others, etc.

B-values are not only an understanding of what is good, truth, self-sufficiency, beauty, etc., but also a person's ability to real, genuine being, awareness of his own human nature and development potentials capable of supporting his existence in a continuing uncertainty. In the existential perspective, their deprivation leads to the formation of a non-self-sufficient lifestyle, the disappearance of the experiences of “metahedonism”. This involves experience of joy, happiness and pleasure from their own intellectual and professional breakthroughs, personal overcomings, the experience of self-actualization, the effects of assertiveness, etc. There is the closure of the semantic horizon and, ultimately as a result, the loss of paths to self-development. Moreover, in these cases a person is “ready to do anything to avoid setting himself in motion or questioning himself” (Mamardashvili, 1992, p. 112).

Each generation and, probably, each age has its own variations of metapathologies and a threshold level of risk of their occurrence, but the following is common: becoming a stable state, metapathologies invalidate the personality, closing the sources of being for it in relations with the world, with other people, with oneself (Ivanchenko, 2008). Metapathologies lead a person into existential dead ends, in which a subject is alienated from his own inner world and from other people, knowing and experiencing neither his own authenticity, nor genuine togetherness, nor a sense of the “true path” in life. In the space of metapathology, “distortions spread in all directions, for example, to self-deprecation, and to narcissistic egomania; and to infantile irresponsible gullibility, and to deep mistrust and unbelief. This also includes the throwing of a disintegrated personality, entangled in the contradictions of his life world, and the rejection of growth, from the “blooming complexity” of being, the reduction of life to the most necessary things” (Ivanchenko, 2008, p. 115).

That is why not only professional psychotherapeutic assistance and the search for technologies to reduce fear of uncertainty, but also the activation of a person's own semantic resources, capable of neutralizing and even compensating for negative experiences, become relevant. Of course, a person may simply not respond to the challenges of uncertainty, demonstrating escapism from contemporary realities and social practices that require self-change, or choose non-constructive behavior for this (alcoholism, “full immersion in everyday life”, etc.), but more often, trying to avoid traumatic experiences and stagnation, he is looking for affordable ways to cope with internal trouble.

One of them is found when the subject turns to the analysis of his own biography.

#### 4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the article was to consider the psychological consequences of experiencing uncertainty and the possibilities of autobiographical narration as a resource for coping with them.

#### 5. Research Methods

The study used the method of biographical analysis (Logunova, 2016), elements of content analysis (Almaev & Malkova, 2006), narrative analysis (Kachanov, 2020; Leontovich, 2011) and Dasein-analysis (Letunovskij, 2003). With their help, 68 autobiographical stories of 40 adult clients (45-66 years old) were studied, in whose consultative requests and/or responses the problems of experiencing uncertainty were formulated directly or indirectly. “Time is passing too fast for me, I cannot keep up with progress, I feel like an anachronism”, “Life ceases to be «for me», it is for young people, much in it becomes incomprehensible and unnecessary to me”, “The need to constantly change makes me panic”. There are also the following answers: “I get sick when I need to make important decisions quickly”, “When something incomprehensible or unaccustomed happens, I get lost”, “The need to make a choice scares me”, etc.).

Materials were collected from 2014 to 2021 in the author's counseling in the context of discussing clients' existential problems. As homework assignments, they were asked to write down from 1 to 3 autobiographical stories that best illustrated the situation of their encounter with uncertainty and their usual actions in it. These stories were a continuation of unfinished statements: “Uncertainty for me is ...” and/or “In situations of uncertainty, I usually ...” (Butenko, 2008).

Based on the analysis of biographical narratives, the main leitmotif of experiences associated with uncertainty was identified - *the justification* of one's inactivity and unwillingness to resist existential entropy. After that, based on the Jungian technique of active imagination (Jung, 2020), a number of therapeutic exercises were developed and tested for working with personal history in order to find resources in their own lives to cope with uncertainty and stimulate clients' own activity.

#### 6. Findings

The analysis of biographical stories made it possible to detect the main motive for coping with uncertainty, which is realized by the majority of clients – the justification and explanation of their escape from it. This can be illustrated by the following fragments of their statements. “Nobody taught us this, and at a critical moment I was confused, and precious time was lost”, “How could we think that life would change so much; we are accustomed to the fact that everything always happens the same”, “I never knew how to adapt to life like others, so I got confused when my usual life was disrupted due to her illness”. The answers involved: “In my life there was simply never a place for such events; I thought my parents would always be with me”, “I was not ready for this, so I dropped everything, let it go with the flow”, “I didn't know what to do when everything suddenly collapsed, so I dropped everything and left”. And there was “I am not able to adapt to all these modern things, and why do I need it – I don't need much, I live a very closed life”, “I am a simple person, I don't need all these changes, no one expects anything from me, I will

live like that”, “I did not expect that my husband would die so early and I would be left alone with the children”, etc.

The study of autobiographical texts made it possible to come to an understanding and formulation of a general mechanism that prevents coping with uncertainty (it also characterizes life crises): *when a person faces uncertainty, a semantic gap arises between the requirement of the present situation and past experience*. In practice, a person stops to see and/or construct analogies between present and past experience. The existing experience (often under the pressure of negative emotions, cognitive panic) is considered insufficient for seemingly new or unfamiliar situations. But in everyday reality, no situation is *completely unfamiliar* and, accordingly, *completely uncertain*: when decomposing it into its constituent elements, we can always find episodes that echo the current situation, and *redefine* them in accordance with new conditions. An analogy is a powerful resource, but not always used by the person himself, for completing the definition of the indefinite.

The situation of facing uncertainty can turn into a life crisis when it comes to a young person who lacks experience as such. But when we are talking about an adult person, its semantic connections, even in acute cases, can be modeled using the technique of active imagination and joint interpretation. Both techniques make it possible to redefine uncertain situations using contexts borrowed from other circumstances and subject areas familiar to the client.

The semantic gap can be restored and/or created by specially rebuilt, differently interpreted past experience. In these cases, the respondent begins to see and discern in it aspects that were indirectly present in other difficult situations, but were not “highlighted”, were not taken into account and were not used for coping. Fragments of experience unnoticed earlier become central, system-forming for a new situation, and are used as a kind of “tools” for coping with the current uncertainty. Interpretation, presenting the situation from a different angle of view, makes the latent experience of a person convex, explicit, accentuated and *forms new semantic connections*. Designing this “artificial experience” in counseling, we relied on the idea of Epstein (2001) that life consists not only of what actually happened in it, but also of what is potentially possible (part of the experience is laid as a potential and is brought into the field of awareness in situations of uncertainty).

The psychotherapeutic work of dealing with uncertainty can lean on this potentially present but previously unnoticed and unused experience by the client. A step-by-step analysis of the episodes of encountering uncertainty with the client made it possible to concretize the use of this amplified, “potentiating” experience both to achieve a therapeutic effect and to create the person's mood (motivation) to cope with uncertainty. Summarizing the therapeutic experience, we were able to describe several techniques for working with autobiographical narration, which helps one to reduce the experience of “overwhelming uncertainty”.

1. “Hidden resource”: the point of using this technique was to find episodes in the client's experience that he described by the expression: “Out of despair, I did this, and I succeeded”. Emphasizing their emotional re-living allowed to identify “potentially working” ways of coping with uncertainty, which the client did not yet consider as such. Together with the client, we found such a key episode in the biography, and, amplifying its content from a different angle of interpretation, turned it into a resource for coping. The

slogan that accompanied the work: “In fact, you know how to cope with a hopeless situation. Trust your own experience!”.

2. “Semantic inversion”: often the client believes that he is not able to cope with uncertainty, because he lacks experience, education, willpower, etc. The essence of the technique, formulated on the basis of the techniques of cognitive therapy (Beck, 2006), is to show the client that the seeming lack of resources can turn out to be an advantage if he changes the formulation of the problem. Then he will not have to desperately search for a solution in the “library” of familiar ways and, not finding them, “feed” his own fears; he will awaken his own creativity and look for a new way to cope with difficulties. Mentally turning the situation upside down, he attunes himself to a change in his attitude to uncertainty: he begins to treat it as a self-test. This allows him to reduce emotional stress. For example, “I’m *afraid* I’m not going to cope, so I don’t solve the problem” can be flipped like this: “I *solve* a problem when I am sure I will get over it”. Another example: “I am *afraid* of the prospects for change, so I do not make decisions” to “I *make decisions* if I can calculate the prospects”. This technique helps to stimulate the client's activity.

3. “Prolongation”: using the technique of active imagination (Jung, 2020), we suggested that the client return to a biographical situation. There he could not cope with uncertainty, and “live” in it for some more time, looking for previously unnoticed nuances (attention and support of relatives, lack of loneliness and being left to oneself, the need to help another person, curiosity, etc.).

4. “Alternatives”: we asked the client to take the position of an outside advisor who would look for opportunities to cope with the situation of uncertainty, as if it were not he, but someone else who got into it. We asked him questions: how could the other person cope with the uncertainty; and if you yourself were a little different (in what way?), you could cope; which of the proposed alternatives can be applied to yourself, etc.? The inclusion of fragments of alternative biographies (Avanesyan, 2018) with different versions of oneself (Avanesyan, 2018; Kostenko, 2016; Markus & Nurius, 1986; Sapogova, 2003; Strahan & Wilson, 2014) proved to be a useful resource for coping with uncertainty. An alternative autobiography has become a creative testing ground for modeling situations of overcoming it (“imagine that you are several years younger; imagine that you have a different profession; imagine that the well-being of loved ones depends on your behavior”, etc.) and at the same time a therapeutic tool reducing discomfort (Sapogova, 2003, 2017). This technique is used to transfer the potentially possible into the real life of the client (Bitov, 1999; Epstein, 2001; Tul'chinskij, 2001).

An autobiographical text, in contrast to the life flowing from the past to the future, can be “torn” at any place of its determinism. And new episodes can be inserted into the gaps explaining the current state of a person (indicating missed opportunities, committed mistakes, an unsuccessful life strategy imposed from the outside, the “hand of fate”, etc.), or simply invented for the purpose of self-therapy (an indication of extraordinary luck that changed life, looking for oneself, gaining an unusual experience, etc.).

5. “Heroization”: the essence of the technique consists in semantic “enlargement”, supplementing the meaning and significance of an insignificant episode of the client’s coping with a difficulty, crisis, stress; it “lifts” to the level of an individual feat. This helps the client to form the “courage to be” and some important attitudes: “you are capable of overcoming”, “you are stronger than you seem”, “you have sufficient and varied experience”, “many people believe in your capabilities”, “you are an example for other people”, etc.

6. “Focus shift”: on small cards (5-8), we asked the client to write characteristics of a discussed specific uncertain situation that he did not think he was able to cope with. In fact, these were his answers to the question: “Why do I think that I cannot cope with this situation?”. Then the client himself ranked them according to the degree of individual importance. By consistently discussing and “removing” these reasons (formulating arguments in favor of the belief that he can still deal with it), we determined the client's constructive ways of coping with most of them. In the end, the strongest “irresistible factors” were identified, which, as a rule, were immersed in the personality of the client. Their discussion using personal stories opened up prospects for subsequent counseling and therapeutic work.

7. “Scaling”: in this technique, considering a specific biographical episode, we discussed the scale of the influence of the client's actions in it on a wide life perspective from the point of view of his own “wants” in relation to himself, his family, relatives, colleagues, professional or social communities, fellow countrymen, his city, country, etc.: “For whom is it important that you cope with the situation?”, “Who else needs you to cope with the choice?”. Here, in fact, meaning-making activity is carried out, concentrating around the fundamental existential question: “Why do I do what I do?” (“Why should I cope with this now?”, “What future do I look forward to when making my choice?”, “For what/who am I ready to overcome everything?”, “What will change in my life and the lives of people important to me if/when I overcome or do not overcome this situation?”). We appealed to Frankl's (1990) thesis: if there is “for whom or what”, a person can endure any “how”.

8. “Potentiation”: basing on the biographical story, we asked the client to imagine such conditions of a situation of uncertainty that he could potentially cope with, and write them down (“I can easily cope with the situation ... if ...”, “I can make a decisive choice in a situation ...”). In fact, we are talking about the circumstances in the presence of which the client can overcome uncertainty, and about the transformation of his own “insurmountable” circumstances into “potentially surmountable”.

9. “Hints”: while discussing a specific episode of the biography, we asked the client to model how significant people (father, mother, teacher, mentor, coach, friend, etc.) would act in this situation, what characteristics helped them in this.

10. “Breaking stereotypes”: here V. Frankl's paradoxical intention (“Why not...”) was used to overcome the client's fear of himself and the lack of experience and resources to cope with uncertainty.

The presented cluster of techniques contributes to: 1) the restoration of the affective balance of the personality due to the saturation of situations of falling into uncertainty with positive emotions (curiosity, search and meaning-making activity, fantasy, etc.); 2) rethinking (new semantization) of personal resources available in past experience; 3) building new semantic connections between the client's past and present; 4) creative meaningful redefinition of situations of uncertainty through creative biographical narration.

## 7. Conclusion

Uncertainty, understood as an unpredictable individual problematization of the future, is an integral characteristic of the life of a modern person.

For the most part, a collision with situations of uncertainty gives rise to negative experiences in a person, but in fact, existence in conditions of uncertainty opens up new horizons for his development, where he can realize any project of himself.

Existence in conditions of uncertainty is fraught for a person with the appearance of more complex internal emotions than those that are born in conditions of “negative clarity”, in particular, with the appearance of metapathologies.

It is more difficult for adults and elderly people, in comparison with young people, to redefine uncertainty themselves and thereby self-determine by the acquired new semantics. This is due to the inability, when faced with uncertainty, to overcome the semantic gap between the requirement of the present situation and past experience (subjectively, they differ greatly for them).

Analysis of the autobiographical stories shows that adult respondents usually actualize the mechanism of self-justification, not seeking ways to cope with uncertainty, but using a complex of existential-narrative techniques (“hidden resource”, “semantic inversion”, “prolongation”, “alternatives”, “heroization”, “focus shift”, “scaling”, “potentiation”, “hints”, “destruction of stereotypes”) helps to expand opportunities for this and restore semantic connections between past experience and the requirement of current situations.

The use of autobiographical narration as a resource for coping with feelings of uncertainty is achieved by restoring the affective balance of the personality, new semantization of past experience, building new semantic connections between the past and present of a person, and due to this creative redefinition of situations of uncertainty.

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