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Assessment of clients and their problem situations by young psychologists-consultants

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Abstract

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On the basis of example "32 young psychologists-consultants", who had been studying at Psychological Center of St. Petersburg State University, the article considers assessment of the client and the problem situation by the following parameters: personality characteristics of the client, type and complexity of the problem situation, level of functioning the of the client (sufficient/insufficient) for solving his problem. The article analysis of the connection between assessment and peculiarities of personality of young consultants: their self-concept, empathy, affections, self-control, self-satisfaction in different spheres of life etc. It shows that young psychologists-consultants assess the clients by mediation of self-concept, extraversion-introversion, dominance, and anxiety.

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Keywords: Psychological counselling, personality traits of young psychologists-consultants, assessment of the client.

1. Introduction

Psychological counselling is very popular direction of psychological support in modern Russia. As far back as a decade ago, credibility of professional psychologists was low; at present people do not negatively treat the suggestion to visit psychologists.

This field of psychological practice attracts, among others, young psychologists. Increase of demand for studying leads to generation of additional educational programs, oriented on profound studying of the process contents of psychological counselling and training of the basic professional skills in this field.

At present, the educational plans include (depending on educational program) the following number of studies on psychological counselling: 128 to 400 hours of class studies and the same number of individual studies. With this, theoretical and methodic education of future psychologists makes the major part of the program. Additionally, at Psychological Center of St. Petersburg State University



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students, who are interested in practice of psychological counselling, may join (in form of facultative studies) tutorial groups (16 academic hours), and after successful certification gain the experience as co-consultants (8 to 10 1-hour meetings). Co-consultants also have the opportunity to work in supervisory methodic groups and in Balint group during 1 semester.

The three years of experience in additional education showed that among difficulties, which face specialists, who start practice of psychological counselling, diagnostic assessment of the client and determination of the gist of his problem situation takes special place. It was found that for young specialists this assessment is in a greater degree mediated by their personality traits, which may distort it or, on the contrary, enhance efficiency of the process of counselling.

2. Problem Statement

It is mentioned in many researches (Ivey, Ivey, Simek-Downing 1987, Kottler, 2002, Kočiūnas, 1999, Shostrom, Brammer 2002 and others) that understanding of the client is one of the major tasks of the consultant in the process of counselling. The result of comprehension of the client's problem influences development of the client-therapist alliance and selection of counselling techniques and level of the consultant's intervention. The integral part of this process is assessment of the client and his problem situation.

We comprehend assessment of the client as systematic and standard observations, performed by the specialist, with further creation of generalized concept of the client and his problem situation at three levels: cognitive, emotional and behavioral (Kottler, 2002), including: 1) assessment of his personality characteristics, 2) assessment of severity of his problem and 3) assessment of how global (globally complex) is situation of the client, including assessment of complexity of the case and functional level of the client (Herskovitz–Kelner, 1997).

According to Gauron & Dickinson (Gauron, & Dickinson, 1966, 1969), for some therapists the first thirty seconds are enough for making sufficiently precise impression of the client; and according to Sandifer, Horden, Timbury, and Green (Sandifer, Horden, Timbury, & Green, 1968), formation of preliminary psychological diagnosis takes the first three minutes of cooperation with the client. They explain such quick assessment by the discomfort from feeling of uncertainty. After making the first impression, the consultants feel relief and reduction of stress.

Still, there is a lack of comprehensive data on the behavior of psychological assessment process, which psychological structures of the consultant – cognitive, emotional, or personal – are involved and how they are interrelated. We have only found the research by N. Herskovitz–Kelner (Herskovitz–Kelner, 1997), devoted to the study of influence of emotional state of the psychologist on assessment of the client and his problem situation.

As long as modern researches of the efficiency of therapy process primarily demonstrate value of personality of the therapist (Miller, Hubble, Chow & Seidel, 2013, Bachelor & Horvath, 1999) and only secondarily – her possession of different techniques, we may affirm that assessment of the client and his problem situation is also connected to personality characteristics of the consultant.

We believe that this influence will be especially expressed among young specialists, as professionals with long-term practice of psychological counselling will mainly base such assessment on the gained experience.

3. Research Questions

How do young psychologists-consultants assess clients and their problem situations? Is there a connection between peculiarities of personality of young psychologists-consultants and assessment of the clients and their problem situations? Which characteristics of personality have major influence on the result of assessment?

4. Purpose of the Study

To elicit and describe peculiarities of assessment of the clients and their problem situations by young consultants. Additional purposes:

- to study characteristics of personality of young consultants that mediate professional assessment of the client;
- to analyze connection between peculiarities of personality of young consultants and assessment of the clients and their problem situations;
- to describe characteristics of personality of the consultant, which obstruct/enhance understanding of the client.

5. Research Methods

5.1. Participants

32 persons took part in the research. Including 26 girls and 6 young men. Average age is 23 years old. All participants were young psychologists-consultants. As young psychologists-consultants in this research acted persons with a degree in psychology – postgraduates and masters, as well as students of graduating class, who have completed the additional educational program “Tutoring group on psychological counselling” at Psychological Center of St. Petersburg State University and possess basic experience of psychological counselling and plan to work in this professional field in future. The participants underwent training and practice in 2013 – 2014. They have experience of counselling practice up to 6 months.

5.2. Research Methods and Instruments

The main methods of the research were testing, interview, and content analysis. For quantitative analysis of the obtained data, the following methods of mathematic statistic (SPSS.20) were used: analysis of primary statistics, correlation analysis.

A) Study of personality traits of young psychologists-consultants was performed with use of the following diagnostic instruments:

- Self-concept Questionnaire by V. Stolin and S. Pantilejev (Bodalev, Karlinskaya, Pantilejev, Stolin, 1988);

- Five Factor Personality Test by R. McCrae and P. Costa (Khromov, 2000);

- Diagnostics of Level of Empathic Abilities by V. Boyko (Raygorodskiy, 2001);

- Health-Activity-Mood (HAM) Questionnaire (R. McCrae, & P. Costa, 1992).

These methods allow to analyze such parameters of personality as presence of positive/negative self-concept, level of empathy, extraversion-introversion, affection-apartness, self-control-impulsion, emotional stability/emotional instability, expressiveness-practicality. As well as to assess actual emotional state.

B) To study peculiarities of assessment of the client and his problem situation we used the following:

- Video clips of real psychological counselling sessions, where the client asks for help of the psychologist-consultant. The clip lasted for three minutes. The video clips show beginning of the counselling session, when the client speaks about his problems. The consultant is not clearly seen at the screen at that moment. All video clips were found in the Internet, in open free access. Each clip had a link to the personal website of the psychologist, who posted these records as an advertisement of his services. Totally, we used three video clips with participation of two women and one man. The records were specially selected so that the showed problem situation of the client was at most uncertain.

- Assessment of the client and his problem situation form, developed on the basis of the form by Nora Herskovitz–Kelner (Herskovitz–Kelner, 1997). The questions of the form are aimed to determine attitude of the psychologist-consultant to the personality of the client and to the problem of the client. The consultant was asked to:

- characterise the client,

- describe feelings that he causes,

- match the problem of the client with the available problem zones,

- select the type of psychological counselling most suitable for this client and what time will the therapy take, assess strength of the client and complexity of his problem.

5.3. Procedure

The procedure of the research consisted of two stages. At the first stage of the research, in order to study peculiarities of personality of young psychologists-consultants, the participants filled in psychological questionnaires, listed above. We also asked respondents to assess satisfaction in different spheres of their life (family, studies, career, and personal life). The first stage took 40 minutes at average. At the second stage, young psychologists-consultants viewed video clips, which showed fragments of speeches of the clients, looking for psychological help. Each participant was asked to view, one by one, three video clips. Each clip could be viewed only once. After viewing the video clips, the respondent was asked to fill in the form of assessment of the client and his problem situation.

6. Findings

Analysis of the findings included the following sections:

- Description of personality peculiarities of young psychologists-consultants, participating in the research;
- Assessment of the clients and their problem situations;
- Determination of connections between personality peculiarities of the consultants and their assessments of problem situation of a client.

Peculiarities of personality of young psychologists-consultants.

Analysis of the data, obtained using psychological diagnostic methods, showed that all participants have average or above average points at almost all scales (autosympathy, self-respect, self-interest, self-acceptance, self-consistency and self-understanding), which reflect level of self-concept. The highest scores were obtained at “Global self-concept” (M = 82, σ = 24) and “Self-interest” (M = 84, σ = 22) scales.

By Five Factor Personality Test high points were obtained at the following scales: “Expressiveness” (M = 58, σ = 6), “Affection” (M = 56.9, σ =5.2) and “Self-control” (M = 56.1, σ = 6.1). And at the following primary factors: “Cooperation” (M = 11.9, σ =1.7), “Respect to others” (M = 11.8, σ = 2), “Assertiveness” (M = 11.8, σ =1.7), “Reliability” (M = 12.1, σ =1.8), “Inquisitiveness” (M = 12.8, σ = 1.8), “Artistry” (M = 11.9, σ = 1.9), “Sensitivity” (M = 12.5, σ = 1.7).(Table 1).

Table 1. Average values of factors of Five Factor Questionnaire for young psychologists-consultants.

Factors	Average values (points)	Average deviation
1. Extraversion - introversion	46.7	6.9
1.1. Activity – inactivity	9.4	2.1
1.2. Dominance - dependence	10	1.8
1.3. Sociability – unsociability	9.6	2.2
1.4. Search for – avoidance of impressions	7.9	1.2
1.5. Demonstration – avoidance of guilt	9.7	1.4
2. Affection – apartness	56.9	5.2
2.1. Warmth – indifference	11.6	1.7
2.2. Cooperation – rivalry	11.9	1.7
2.3. Credulity – suspiciousness	10	1.9
2.4. Understanding – misunderstanding	11.5	2.1
2.5. Respect to others – self-respect	11.8	2
3. Self-control - impulsion	56.1	6.1
3.1. Accuracy – lack of accuracy	9.2	1.9
3.2. Assertiveness – lack of assertiveness	11.8	1.7
3.3. Reliability – lack of reliability	12.1	1.8
3.4. Self-control of behavior - impulsion	11.4	2.3

3.5. Foresight - carelessness	11.2	2.1
4. Emotional instability – emotional stability	53.3	5.7
4.1. Anxiety – unconcern	11	2.3
4.2. Tension – easiness	9.2	1.4
4.3. Depression – emotional comfort	11.8	1.9
4.4. Self-criticism – self-sufficiency	10.5	2.1
4.5 Emotional instability – emotional stability	10.6	1.9
5. Expressiveness – practicality	58	6
5.1. Curiosity – conservatism	10.7	2.1
5.2. Inquisitiveness – realism	12.8	1.8
5.3. Artistry – lack of artistry	11.9	1.9
5.4. Sensitivity – insensitivity	12.5	1.7
5.5. Flexibility – rigidity	10.5	1.2

Upon results of diagnostics of the empathic abilities (the questionnaire by V. Boyko), we obtained points above average level at all scales of the questionnaire. Integrated factor of empathy also has above the average value ($M = 28$, $\sigma=2.6$).

Additionally we studied self-satisfaction in various spheres of life (Table 2). The respondents evaluated the degree of satisfaction at 0 to 5 scale. The obtained results demonstrate that young psychologists-consultants are more satisfied with relationships in their parent families ($M = 4.1$, $\sigma=0.7$) and relationships with friends ($M = 3.9$, $\sigma=0.8$). They are least satisfied with their career ($M = 2.9$, $\sigma=0.9$), studies ($M = 3.1$, $\sigma=1$) and personal life ($M = 3.1$, $\sigma=1$).

Table 2. The average values of satisfaction in various spheres of life for young psychologists-consultants.

Sphere of life	Average value of satisfaction	Average deviation
Studies	3.1	1
Career	2.9	0.9
Health	3.6	0.6
Family	4.1	0.7
Friends	3.9	0.8
Personal life	3.1	1

Peculiarities of assessment of the client and his problem situation by young psychologists-consultants.

Analysis of descriptions of the clients, obtained from young psychologists-consultants, showed the following. Psychologists-consultants mostly described the clients as sincere, upset, open, frightened, and cautious. They rarely selected such traits as attractive, aggressive, assertive, and masculine (Figure 1).

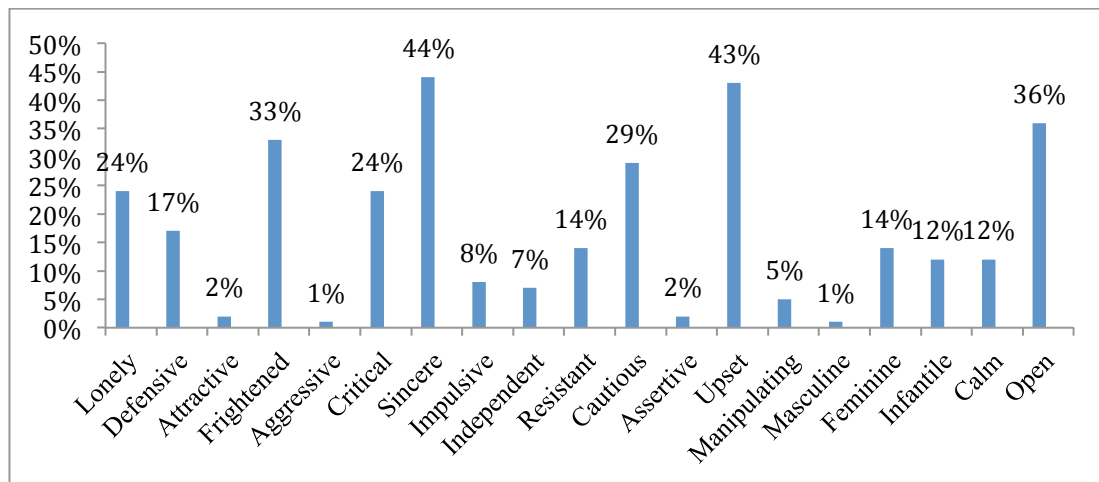


Fig. 1. Assessment of the clients by young psychologists-consultants.

All participants of the research described problem situations of all three clients as difficulties in relations, in establishing of intimacy, and in emotional sphere.

Most of participants assessed problems of the clients as not very serious ($M = 3.2$, Max 5) and decided that the clients have enough strength to manage them ($M = 4$, Max 5).

76% of young psychologists-consultants decided that once-a-week meetings during 3 to 6 months would be enough to solve problems of the women-clients. For the man-client assessment of frequency of meetings for counselling was slightly different. In this case, the consultants considered it useful to appoint two meetings a week during the same period.

Analysis of emotions and feelings, which the clients caused in young psychologists-consultants, showed that they mostly reflexed compassion (69%), interest (61%) in relation to the clients and practically did not feel wrath, disgust and fear (Figure 2).

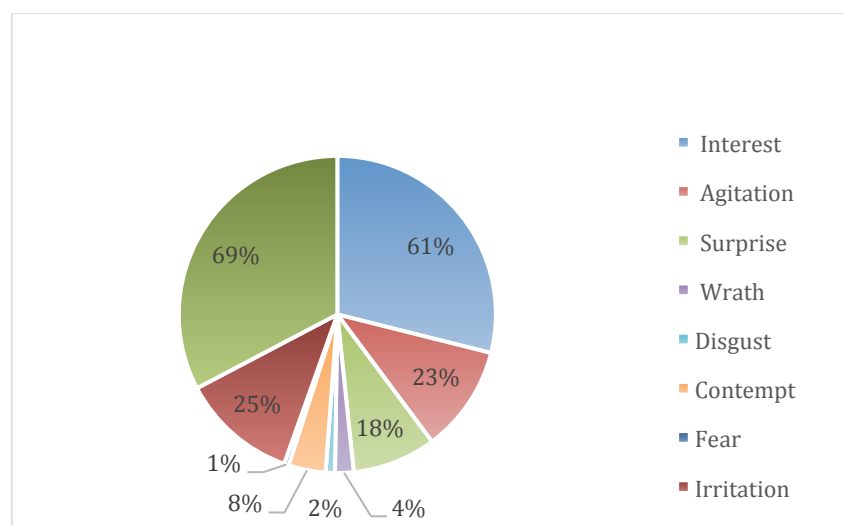


Fig. 2. Feelings of young psychologists-consultants in relation to the clients.

Connection between personality characteristics of young psychologists-consultants and assessment of the client and his problem situation.

Performing correlation analysis, we found significant connections between personality peculiarities of young consultants and assessment of the clients and their problem situations. (Figure 3). Level of self-concept correlates positively with assessment of the client as open ($r=0.36$ at $p \leq 0.05$) and interesting ($r=0.53$ at $p \leq 0.01$), but correlates negatively with assessment of the client as resistant to counselling process ($r=-0.45$ at $p \leq 0.01$) and such feelings as contempt ($r=-0.57$ at $p \leq 0.01$) and irritation ($r=-0.53$ at $p \leq 0.01$).

“Extraversion – Introversion” factor is positively connected to the interest to the client ($r=0.37$ at $p \leq 0.05$), assessment of the client as sincere ($r=0.44$ at $p \leq 0.05$) and negatively connected to perception of the client as resistant ($r=0.43$ at $p \leq 0.05$).

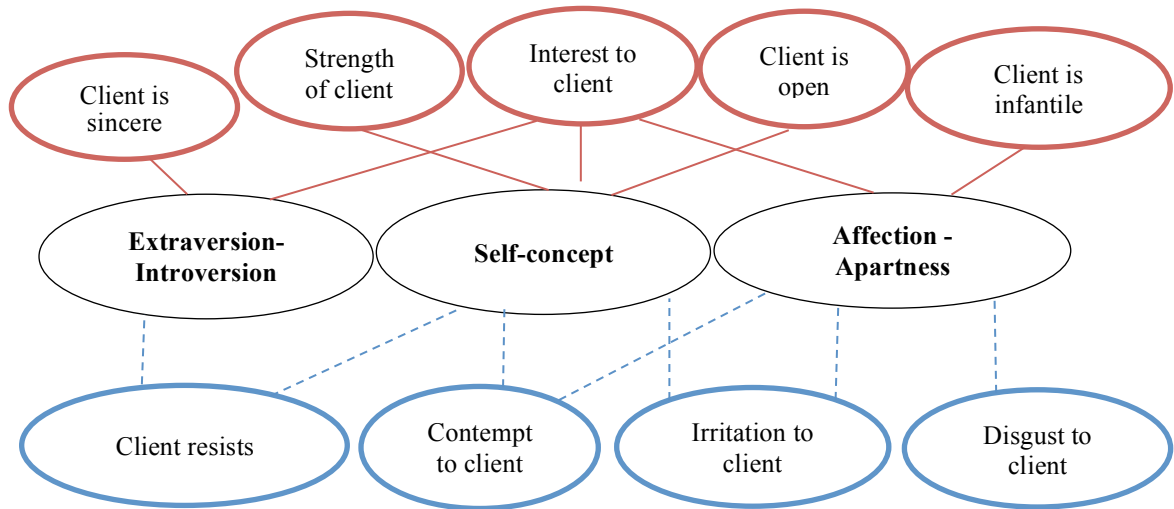


Fig. 3. Connections between personality characteristics of young psychologists-consultants and assessment of the clients.

“Affection-Apartness” factor is positively connected to assessment of the client as infantile ($r=0.50$ at $p \leq 0.01$) and is negatively connected to the feeling of contempt ($r=-0.57$ at $p \leq 0.01$), irritation ($r=-0.56$ at $p \leq 0.01$) and disgust to the client ($r=-0.36$ at $p \leq 0.05$).

Primary “Dominance” factor is positively connected to assessment of strength of the client ($r=0.47$ at $p \leq 0.01$) and is negatively connected to assessment of seriousness of problem of the client ($r=-0.41$ at $p \leq 0.05$); primary “Anxiety” factor, on the contrary, is positively connected to assessment of seriousness of problem of the client ($r=0.38$) and is negatively connected to assessment of strength of the client ($r=-0.36$ at $p \leq 0.05$).

Empathy is positively connected to feelings of interest to the client ($r=0.42$ at $p \leq 0.05$), agitation ($r=0.43$ at $p \leq 0.05$), and compassion ($r=0.41$ at $p \leq 0.05$).

7. Discussion

In our days, psychological counselling still remains one of the most difficult to approach spheres in the part of evidence-based researches and obtaining valid and reliable empiric data. For example, the leading Russian journals on psychotherapy and psychological counselling “Moscow Journal of Psychotherapy” and “Counselling Psychology and Psychotherapy” mostly publish articles of

descriptive or discussion character. Evidently, it can be explained by the very process of “client - psychologist” cooperation, its unique phenomenology that is very hard to be operationalized (Duncan, Miller, Wampold & Hubble, 2010, Wampold, 2001). The available researches are majorly focused on either studying of efficiency of various therapeutic techniques and methods (Barlow, 2004, Chambless & Hollon, 1998) or researching of personality of the client. Personality of psychologist-consultant (psychotherapist) rarely becomes a subject of psychological research; especially regarding the question of how its characteristics determine perception and diagnostic assessment of the client (Shostrom, 2002, Beutler, Malik, Alimohamed, Harwood, Talebi, Noble & Wong, 2004, Orlinsky, Ronnestad, 2005, Kim, Wampold, & Bolt, 2006). Researches of personality of the psychotherapist are mainly based on assessment of his efficiency and performance (Anderson, Ogles, Patterson, Lambert, & Vermeersch, 2009).

Such situation complicates, to some degree, possibility to compare findings with other researches of the similar subject.

Findings of our research demonstrated that young psychologists-consultants, participating in the research, are characterised by positive self-concept. They are oriented on communication with surrounding people, tend to cooperate with them, have high self-control, developed empathic abilities, assertive and reliable in their activities, inquisitive and open to new experience. They are also expressive and emotional, have tendency for anxiety and depression. The obtained findings correlate with the research of N. Gorobets (2008), who compared psychotherapists-psychologists and medical psychotherapists. She found that psychotherapists-psychologists are sympathetic to other people, tolerant, persistent in achieving of goals, communicative, have interest to external events, and responsible. At the same time, they have low tolerance to frustration, susceptibility to feelings, and tendency for instability of mood. They tend to take dependent position, take the blame on themselves, and be anxious about their possible mistakes.

Radeke & Mahoney (2000), who compared psychotherapists and psychologists-researchers, elicited that psychotherapists are more depressive, anxious and are easier devastated emotionally than the researchers are. Based on these data they made a conclusion (and we are prone to agree with it) that selection of specialization in the professional field – psychologist-researcher or psychotherapist – is partly defined by personality traits.

Multidirectional level of satisfaction with basic spheres of life, showing that young consultants are satisfied with relationships in families and with friends and are not satisfied with personal life, studying and career, may partially signify unfinished personality development process. Young psychologists in Russia start their career at the age of 22-23. In this period development of personal identity partially intersects with professional development. Some processes, such as autonomy, affiliation to the group, social identification, have already completed. While processes of self-discovery and search for place in the world continue actively. Based on this fact, there is a limitation for starting psychological counselling practice in some countries – 30 years old. Personal maturity is an important factor of success in profession of psychologist-consultant.

Professional immaturity of the participants of our research has revealed itself in assessment of the clients. All three clients were assessed as upset, frightened, cautious, sincere, and open. On the one

hand, it may be demonstration of a tendency for compassion, which means developed empathic abilities. On the other hand, it may be a reflection of a fact that at initial stage of professional career images of the clients are hardly distinguished and are perceived in accordance with expectations and settings. The core of assessment is a generalized image of a client, who is cautious, frightened, upset and expects help.

Young psychologists-consultants rarely made such assessments of the clients as have difficulties with experiencing age crises, difficulties in sexual sphere and problems with sex role behavior. We assume that young consultants feel anxiety regarding these topics and activate mechanisms of protection. Besides, identification of two types of problem situations – regarding difficulties with communication in the emotional sphere and in establishing of intimacy – for all three clients may reflect projection of participants themselves, who have mentioned dissatisfaction with personal life and have high level of emotional instability and anxiety.

It is important to mention the elicited difference in assessment of frequency and length of meetings with the clients. Meaning, increased number of appointed meetings for the man-client (client number two) in comparison to the women-clients (clients number one and three). The client number two is a young man, who speaks of the problem with a girl. Major part of young psychologists, taking part in the research, are young girls (26F/6M), who are not satisfied with their personal relations. Therefore, there is possibly an unconscious desire to meet the man-client more frequently, for the purpose, among other, of solving their problems in this field. The obtained data correlate with the ideas that visit of each new patient activates fantasies, deriving from needs of the therapist. When some of these needs are not satisfied significantly, he may have fantasies about the client as an object, who may possibly satisfy them. In situations, when power of these needs and fantasies, caused by their activation, are not conscious, they have subjective influence on conscious notions of the client, on forecast regarding the therapy, selection of the strategy and tactics of work with this client and on psychotherapeutic alliance (Merton, 1954, Popova, 2009).

The most frequently young psychologists-consultants mentioned that they feel interest and compassion towards the clients, which correlates with high empathic level of participants of the research. We have also elicited the group of emotions and feelings, which were not selected or were rarely selected by the psychologists-consultants: wrath, disgust, fear, shame, guilt. These feelings lead to discomfort, they are hard to be realized, and they are often suppressed or isolated from mind by mechanisms of protection. It can be supposed that the process of more deep realization of own feelings relates to professional growth and training of skills, including reflection of spectrum of your feelings towards the client. It is quite narrow in the beginning.

Analysis of connections between personality traits and assessment of the clients has demonstrated that young psychologists with positive self-concept perceive the clients as open, feel interest for them and do not feel contempt and irritation. High level of extraversion of the young consultant relates to assessment of the client as open and sincere and high level of introversion relates to his assessment as resistant to the process.

Such characteristics of personality of young consultants as independence, self-dependence, detachment, and apartness from others relate to assessment of the clients as infantile and such feelings

to their clients as contempt, irritation and disgust. Actually, it makes “independence” pair, where the consultant, subjectively feeling himself independent, assesses his clients as dependent and feels disgust towards them. It is entirely possible that the elicited connection reflects availability of projective identification, when the client is perceived as the rejected part of the therapist himself. These data indirectly confirm the researches of personality characteristics by the therapists Ackerman & Hilsenroth (2003), who showed that detachment, roughness, criticality negatively contribute to development of the alliance.

Dominance and need for power of young consultants relate to assessment of the problem of the client as simple, and level of functioning of the client as sufficient for solving his problem. On the contrary, anxiety of the consultants positively correlates with assessment of the problem of the client as globally complex to be solved, and level of functioning of the client as insufficient for overcoming the available hardships.

In both cases we speak of assessment of the client and his problem situation with regard to either underestimation or overestimation of the complexity. In the second case, we can assume direct projection of anxiety of the young consultant towards the client. But the case of dominance and need for power demands additional researches, as it does not fit the idea that powerful therapist-“parent” will provoke dependence in the client for confirmation of his own significance (Konovalova, 2006).

In summary of the discussion, we can say that personal projections, including the traits, which are rejected by the consultant in his own personality, predominate in assessment of the client and his problem situation by young psychologists-consultants. This shall be taken into consideration in development of the model for education and advancement of specialists in the field of counselling and psychotherapy.

8. Conclusions

1. In assessment of the clients and their problem situations the young psychologists-consultants mostly:

- assessed the clients in such categories as: “upset”, “frightened”, “cautious”, “sincere”, “open” and avoided such assessment categories as “attractive – unattractive” and “aggressive”;
- ascribed to them problems, related to maintaining and establishing good long-term trust relationship and difficulties in emotional sphere, which actually reflect own difficulties of young psychologists-consultants;
- in relation to the clients and their problem situations felt such feelings as compassion and interest and almost never mentioned to feel wrath, disgust, fear, shame and guilt.

2. Personality characteristics of the young psychologists-consultants relate to assessment of the clients and their problem situations in the following way:

- the consultants with positive self-concept tend to assess the clients as open, interesting, and having enough resources to manage the problem.
- “Extraversion-Introversion” factor is connected to how young psychologists-consultants will perceive the clients: as sincere or resistant;

- the young consultants with high level of apartness from surrounding people have tendency to assess their clients as infantile and feel irritation and contempt to them;

- the young consultants, who have need for dominance and power, tend to believe that problem of the client is not serious; on the contrary, the consultants with high level of anxiety assess problem of the client as extremely complex to be solved.

3. Lack of self-satisfaction in personal relations sphere may lead to unconscious desire of the young consultant to increase frequency of counselling sessions in a week with the client of the opposite sex.

9. The further directions of research

The findings of our research help to advance in understanding of complex process of assessment of the client by the therapist and generation of constructive alliance in psychological counselling. At the same time, we shall mention that they are based on selection of young consultants, who study exactly in Saint-Petersburg State University. This limitation orient us on conduction of further researches among future psychologists-consultants from the other educational institutions.

The obtained data additionally emphasize high degree of integration of personal and professional (knowledge of theory and practical skills), as well as necessity to increase period of education, devoted to development of more profound understanding of influence of own peculiarities of personality on the process. In this case, we do not mean development of personality traits that enhance creation of effective alliance or self-discovery of the consultant. We mean formation of knowledge about projective mechanisms, which appear in the course of counselling, and how personality arrangement of the therapist may influence perception of the client, his assessment and assessment of his problem situation.

Further, it would be useful to understand at which professional stage personality characteristics and projections reduce their influence and give place for professional assessment, based on experience and knowledge. How does it happen? Is it related to increase of efficiency of the process? Which training strategies may enhance development of assessment of the client without “intrusions” of projections?

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