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**Psychology of subculture: Phenomenology and Contemporary
Tendencies of Development**

**AUTOBIOGRAPHIC TEXT AS AN ELEMENT OF A PERSONAL
SUBCULTURE**

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Abstract

Within the framework of the existential-narrative approach developed by the author, the phenomenon of autobiography (personal story) is considered in the semantic sequence “culture — subculture — personal subculture”, for which the concept of personal subculture is introduced and its psychological content is theoretically described. The thesis is argued that autobiography is a textual identification of the person and one’s life path, in which the current life experience is transformed into an existential experience and narrated. The author’s idea is substantiated that the autobiographical text is simultaneously a cultural, textual and existential phenomenon. Its narrative designing is presented as a kind of self-directed meta-activity, as a special (hermeneutic) mode of consciousness functioning connected with the understanding, interpretation and semantic amplification of life events based on cultural precedents assimilated from socialization and enculturation. The author describes the psychological mechanism of transforming a real life circumstance first into events of consciousness, and then into a text event during the presentation of an autobiography. This paper presents the functions of autobiography (functions of potentiation, verification, self-certification, emotional identification and positive functions) and some structural elements of the person’s semantic thesaurus (biographems, autographems, among which are highlighted dominant, precedent, unique and alternative ones, and mythologems), reflecting its originality.

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1. Introduction

From time to time, every person has to talk about himself and his life, not just creating a narration, but building up oneself as a distinctive semantic system that meets his current needs and circumstances in a historical, social and cultural chronotope. Being a textual identification of one's life path, which is deeply private in nature, the autobiography is also a cultural artifact, fitting into the system "culture — subculture — subjective culture".

1.1. Culture, subculture, subjective (personal) subculture

The shortest and most capacious definition of culture was proposed by Herskovits (1948): *culture* is everything that is not nature but created by humanity as the objectification and operationalization of its developing needs and embodied in artifacts. As a multidimensional abstract concept, culture describes material and socio-psychological phenomena, individual behavior, organized activity of people, etc. As a mental phenomenon, it appears as a set of habitually used attitudes and cognitive schemes, modes of behavior assimilated in primary socialization and individually structured and amplified in the secondary enculturation.

The thesis that a person lives and is shaped as a peculiar subject in the social practices of contemporary culture has long been accepted and substantively argued in the humanities, and the idea of plurality of cultures gave rise to a variety of studies (Kostyaev, 2014; Lagutina, 2013; Otstavnova, 2006; Romakh, 2013; Vazhinsky, 2010). *Subcultures* as components of a large culture unite the content, forms and groups of possessors of partial systems of behavior, values, language, attitudes, etc.

The set of methods and content of socialization, forms of reflection of the elements of a large culture in the individual consciousness constructs a subjective (individual, personal) subculture of a person as a coeval of the present generation, a contemporary of a certain era, a witness of specific historical events, a participant in various social and cultural practices of a given historical and cultural chronotope. As a person grows older, it increasingly determines how the subject categorizes social objects, which links between categories he highlights, which norms, roles and values the person is ready to recognize as own, etc.

1.2. Personal Subculture Content

The content of the personal subculture, which is fixed in the phenomenon of the subject's inner world (life world) involves the gradual filling of the following components (Sapogova, 2013, 2017):

- its own quasi-language system (a set of specific concepts for individually significant areas of reality and their peripheral semantic fields);
- complexes of microcultural preferences (ethical, aesthetic, intellectual, etc.) that form particular areas of more intensive interaction with reality and the sphere of self-development;
- a selected set of strategems, behavior models and life orientations that correspond to the person's unique original existential experience;
- personal stylistics of social and autocommunicational interaction ("life style", habitus, discursive strategies, ways and tactics of self-development, steady speech patterns and behavioral patterns, referent models of self-presentation), design of appearance, a set of identification reference points (non-verbal communication, mode of translation of the desired self-images to others in social gaming practices);

- a set of ideas and fantasies about reality and about one's place in the world: subjective ontology, individual “markup” of reality (cognitive and emotional), “cosmogony”, collection of mythologems, personal areas of funny and scary;
- favorite social practices, selected areas of personal activity as a reflection of the dichotomy “mine or not mine”;
- life philosophy, a system of life principles, moral standards and guidelines, legal and civic identity, life mode and individual existential logic as an answer for the personally posed question “why am I doing what I'm doing”;
- a symbol of faith, expectations for oneself and reality, individual narrative schemes, self-myths;
- a set of common and individual sociocultural life competences: parental, civil, professional, general, ethnocultural, etc.

1.3. The textual nature of cultural artefacts

In recent decades, the theses on the textual nature of cultural artefacts, originally formulated in a narrative approach, have been actively included in psychology. Thus, cultural artefacts of all levels within its framework are considered as narrative structures (texts), carriers of human meanings, attitudes and values, which a developing person joins in the process of enculturation. It also supposes that the inner world, life strategies and relationships between people are determined by culturally fixed stories of different types accepted in primary socialization through the exteriorization of concepts of precedent texts of a large culture (for example, Bible narrative) or stories specially created by adults for children of all ages. The main concepts, characters and plots of these stories are then used as tools for understanding, structuring and consolidating experience, forming the semantic basis for consciousness.

Cultural texts accessible to every developing subject are an inexhaustible semiotic resource for identification and self-presentation, and the measure of the subject's subsequent socialization is associated with one's linguistic and narrative competences.

First, this resource is formed by “classical” literary texts that have been widely used in macroculture for a long time (fairy tales and plots of an ethnic folklore, religious texts, etc.). They are absorbed in the primary socialization under the influence of micro- (family and children's yard or school subculture) and macrosocial (educational programs, popular discourses, media, etc.) environments.

For age, professional, gender and other subcultures, texts selected by their carriers from a large culture or specially created within their framework are of great importance.

For a psychologist, texts that are neither frequent nor propagated in chronotope and culture, but personally selected by a person (most often in secondary socialization) for himself are of the greatest interest, because they objectify only his own meanings and experiences.

2. Problem Statement

Being told or recorded, the *autobiographical narrative* can be comprehended as a cultural artifact, as a result of the ordering, interpretation and translation of individual experience, personal meanings and values into a macroculture. If all this turns out to be significant for many people, we can speak about the

increment of culture by a person, and then the autobiographical text becomes simultaneously *a cultural, textual, and existential phenomenon*.

3. Research Questions

The following questions were posed, theoretically substantiated, and empirically confirmed:

- why autobiography can be considered as an existential phenomenon and how are life incidents transformed first into consciousness events, and then into text events?
- how and why, composing an autobiographical narrative, a person is self-determined by his own meanings and creates himself as a peculiar semantic system?
- how does autobiography become an element of a personal subculture?
- why does a person create and tell autobiographical stories?
- what functions does the autobiography perform for the subject?
- what semantic constructions of consciousness fix life and existential experience and determine the content of an autobiographical text?

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this paper within the framework of the author's existential-narrative approach is the theoretical substantiation of the nature of the autobiographical narrative as an existential phenomenon and an element of the *personal subculture*.

5. Research Methods

The study is based on the author's existential-narrative analysis of 80 autobiographical stories of adult respondents (40 men and 40 women, between 45 and 60 years old) collected in counseling in 2000-2018.

6. Findings

Analyzing the collected cluster of autobiographical stories, we made a number of theoretical generalizations.

6.1. Autobiographical narrative can be considered an existential phenomenon

From the socio-cultural resource, the subject, as he grows up, creates his own internal identificational "canon" (concepts, plots, behavior patterns, etc.). Constructing an autobiographical text that gradually covers an increasingly long life span is a necessary tool for self-comprehension: it deals every time with the "ultimate completeness" of a certain life span conceived as finished against the background of a lasting life, and this is the main condition for sense formation.

Constructing an autonarrative, a person creates "rich descriptions" (Girts, 2004) or semantic amplifications around some events, actions and experiences, due to his current view of already accomplished life episodes. These amplifications consist of new, additional or alternative meanings, which

up to this moment they did not contain. For example, slipping on a banana peel and falling, a person in his narrative can present it as “a ridiculous incident”, but also “a punishment for something”, “an accident that saved him from misfortune” and even “a fateful meeting”. Moreover, later, an event with its “rich description” can be transformed into a symbolic representation of a number of other events and even in general all the events in the subject’s life.

Each present-day event creates a “coherent wave” that forces a person to rethink past events and differently determine the future time space that “requires” the occurrence of events internally associated with this new life episode. Being verbalized, the autobiography is transformed into *textual identification of the life path*.

6.2. Autobiographical text is the objectification of an internal human need to exteriorize personal experience

Autobiography is one of the very common communicative practices in which a person has a special internal need, which Mamardashvili and Pyatigorsky (1971) called the *mental necessity of self-speaking*. It derives from the sociocultural essence of humanity, including the aspiration to make personal experience sought after by others.

The construction of an autonarrative may begin with the first flashes of self-awareness, but of the multitude of actions performed and incidents endured in reality, only a few are recorded in the autobiography. Adler (1932) developing a technique for analyzing early childhood memories, considered such events as starting points for understanding how a person is self-determined by his own meanings.

6.3. Autobiography is an element of the personal subculture

If a macroculture retains meaningful human experience, their signification, and subcultures hold meanings that are important for different human communities, then the personality subculture allows fixing meanings found by an individual in an individual life-experience. Personal narratives objectify and consolidate in verbal constructions a unique experience that, without being fixed, would easily disappear, drowning in the stream of everyday occurrences.

As an element of a personal subculture, the creation of an autobiographical text appears from several angles:

- as a kind of *self-directed meta-activity*, as a special (hermeneutic) mode of consciousness functioning connected with the understanding, interpretation and semantic amplification of life events based on cultural precedents assimilated from socialization and enculturation;
- as a summation of intermediate results of *individuation*, occurring in the consciousness;
- as a process of not just systematization of life episodes, but as life-creating, in which *new subjective semantic units and syntagmas* are created, reflecting a person’s attitudes to his own life and life in general: “subject and author of his own life”;
- as a form of “self-care”, a self-directed “technique of own self”, “production of own subjectivity”, aimed at becoming the kind of person that one would like to be (Foucault, 1998; Ivanchenko, 2009).

6.4. Designing and reconstructing an autobiographical text helps to transform life experience into existential experience and present it to the outside

Auto-narration performs a number of functions for an individual:

- *the function of potentiation*, which facilitates finding and updating the internal content for further personal development;
- *the verifying function*: a positive experience of the semantic fullness of some life-spans provides to the person a subjective feeling of the “right path”;
- *self-certification function*: the completed hermeneutic work helps to stabilize the self-image and accept oneself “as is”. Because in this work a person has to use some external evaluative categories, the construction of the biography takes the form of self-discourse. One side of this internal self-dialogue is the personal position (“the self-side”), and the other side is the social-performative side (“the society-side”). This dichotomy satisfies the adult need to become not just some kind of subject (abstract subject), but a subject of some inner ideology of the author as a result of the realization of some personal existential project, conforming to some “self-referring images” (“a cool pro”, “a just father”, “the last Don Quixote”, etc.);
- *improving function*: even those life-fragments that a person evaluates as dysfunctional and insufficient, are subjected to secondary, etc. semantic amplifications so that the subject might explain to himself why they were lived by him that way and not otherwise. And then the episodes that the person was ashamed of, nor alienated from the experience, but become the material for understanding and working out non-identity to oneself, opening in it uniqueness, and at the same time recognition of own imperfection, necessity of self-changes and etc.;
- *emotionally-identifying function*: autobiographical texts allow an individual to repeatedly experience and keep in mind everything that the subject identifies with himself, his “present moments of the past”. Often this important content exists only at the level of disappearing emotional experience, and then some “objective correlates” help the person to hold them down (photos from a personal or family album, things from a personal reliquary), words and texts from a family microculture). A person often strives to fasten these moments out and preserve them as “memorable signs” (“symbols of himself”).

6.5. Autobiography as an artefact of a personal subculture is a special semantic system

When a subject constructs an autobiographical story, the facts and specifics of a real *life event* (“Who? – What? – Where? – When?”) transform into an *event of consciousness* (“What does this mean for me...?”), and later, if necessary, into an *event of text* (“Could this mean something for someone other than me...?”). *Narration legitimizes some events* and even gives invented events if not ontological, then at least mental and narrative status.

The reflective transformation of a meaningful life event into a text event combines three hermeneutic processes — *explanation, understanding, and interpretation*. And then, through the analysis of the autobiographical texts, the psychologist can understand the *life-meaning reality and the semantic thesaurus* of the person. The semantic thesaurus is a kind of “existential vocabulary”, a personal catalog of sense-expression units. Psychosemantic units of the biographical thesaurus is combined into the sequence “*biographems – autographems – mythologems*”, corresponding to the sociocultural series “meanings – senses – symbols”.

Biographems are imaginative-semantic constructions of consciousness, fixing the direct life-experience of the subject, reflecting his interaction with a certain number of cases and incidents. In fact, these are experienced and semantized cases, of which the person was a participant or witness. Biographems transform socially developed meanings into an acceptable and understandable form for the individual, mixing it with the “Self-conception” and accumulated experience.

If biographems are focused on the meanings *attributed by society to certain life-spans*, then *autographems* are related to personal senses, to human partiality. Autographems are units for describing and storing the existential experience of a subject, that is, those life events that a person has transformed into events of consciousness. We have distinguished dominant, unique, precedent, and alternative autographems.

The *dominant autographems* outline the subject’s “due-meaningful” area of relevance to its contemporary cultural chronotope. *Precedent autographems* are assimilated through acquaintance with the semiotic macro- and microcultural resources and outline the circle of “selectively significant” for the person. We are talking about folklore and literary plots, characters, archetypes, which define for the individual consciousness typical strategies of behavior and self-understanding. *Unique autographems* are the narrative micro-plots of the external or internal life of the subject, fixing the most “strong” points of individual experience. Consciousness focused on these events, distinguishing them from a succession of others, amplifying their meanings and making *key episodes of self-determination* (“without this I would not be me”). They outline the area of “personally meaningful” and encourage reflection and “collecting” grains of a unique, original experience, forming a personal subculture.

Alternative autographems are narrative events that could potentially occur in a person’s life. These are borrowed from books, other people’s biographies and invented inserts, dreams, fantasy episodes. It is an area of “probabilistically (possibly) meaningful”, constituting the most creative part of the autobiography.

The purpose of *personal mythologems* is the consolidation of generalized clusters of *existential experience* in personal *symbolic self-images and self-concepts*. Such units are formed in order to impart super-significance to some individual life episodes, making them “incarnation” not just of some significant events for a person, but also of the whole life, the whole person as an integrity (“I am my own symbol”). Individual mythologems are usually formed by imposing familiar and preferred cultural images on self-understanding. The result of this imposition is the formation of the *imaginative-cognitive matrix of the meaningful life space of the subject*, within whose boundaries his whole life and personality “fits” (“who am I, for what and how I live”).

7. Conclusion

- 7.1. A personal subculture is a set of tools and content of socialization, forms of reflection of elements of a macroculture in the individual consciousness.
- 7.2. An autobiography is the textual identification of life and as such becomes a microcultural artefact.

- 7.3. The autobiographical text is an existential phenomenon, since for the subject it is a means of self-comprehension, transforming life-events into events of consciousness and text. Designing an autobiography helps a person to self-determine his own meanings.
- 7.4. Composing a biographical narrative performs a number of functions for an individual (functions of potentiation, verification, self-certification, emotionally-identifying and positive).
- 7.5. By composing a biography, a person builds himself as a distinctive semantic system.
- 7.6. Biographical text contains different semantic units: biographemes, autographemes (among which are highlighted dominant, precedent, unique and alternative autographemes), mythologemes.

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