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## Sociotherapy Helpfulness Research among Children and Adolescents

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### Abstract

The article presents results of sociotherapy helpfulness research among adolescents experiencing existential frustration. Helpfulness is understood to mean an evidence-based approach which suggests that adolescents' reflexive reports are valid data to be analyzed. The issue of providing sociotherapy to children and adolescents experiencing existential frustration is accentuated by the fact that they need to experience not only the authenticity of boundaries, values, intentions, and capabilities, but also to experience the authenticity of authenticity itself. In sociotherapeutic practices children and adolescents are engaged in joint activities, which are, to a large extent, artificial, and built on symbolic values. Therefore, it is important to be guided not only by goals, means, and regulations, but also by evidence-based helpfulness. As a result of phenomenological analysis of reflexive texts written by adolescents at the end of a six-month sociotherapeutic program the main themes and meanings of the experience of identification and authentication were singled out.

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### 1. Introduction

The article presents the results of sociotherapy helpfulness research among adolescents. The understanding of helpfulness based on the opinion of the authors (psychotherapists, teachers, psychologists), is complemented with

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the understanding of evidence-based helpfulness by assuming that adolescents' reflexive reports are valid data to analyze the meanings and trends of helpfulness in sociotherapeutic practices.

The adolescents participating in the sociotherapeutic group may be described as experiencing strong existential frustration. When they called for help they said that they did not see any meaning in their life, they did not believe in the effectiveness of their efforts, and they did not know how to be in relationships with their parents.

As criteria for interpreting sociotherapeutic experience we chose the existential frustration of identity and the existential frustration of authenticity. The existential frustration of identity in sociotherapeutic experience is overcome by an experience of wonder and awe. In the phenomenological analysis of the reflexive reports by the adolescents we revealed helpful effects and we composed a list of core themes. The existential frustration of authenticity is overcome by an experience of obviousness, evidence, and confirmation. We listed core meanings of helpful effects of the experiences of authentication that were revealed in the reflexive reports.

Presently (this is especially true for education, pedagogy, psychology, and psychotherapy) the risks of alienation are revealed as identification problems, i.e. the loss of self, loss of one's own world, and non-identification with the world. The risks of illusiveness or non-authenticity are revealed as authentication problems (i.e. being convincing and authentic) of a person's existence. These risks and problems are specifically relevant in childhood and adolescence. The risks of alienation are exacerbated by high technologies and mediating human presence in the world. Technology not only makes life and human labor easier, it also confuses people and requires efforts on their part to return to the fundamentals of life.

The identification and authentication problems are important not only for everyday life but also for professional relationships. For example, they are applicable to education, training, and psychotherapy practices. It is possible to create interfaces which mediate the relationship between a person and the current world anywhere starting with oneself and finishing with a major conflict. In this context educational, developmental, and rehabilitation activities as well as therapy helpfulness research projects gain significant relevance.

In this article we present therapy helpfulness research results based on working experience from the autonomous non-profit association "Family", located in Kemerovo, to the east of Novosibirsk in south central Russia. This organization has performed sociotherapeutic programs with children and adolescents for 15 years. The head of the association and the programs is T.N. Karpunkina, the first co-author of this article. Her working experience is presented in a number of publications [1, 2, 3].

## **2. Methods and materials**

The methodological basis of the therapy helpfulness research rests on the findings presented by Rice and Greenberg [4, 5], Timulak [6, 7], Elliott [8], Cooper and McLeod [9]. The main principle of this type of research consists in the hypothesis that a client's preferences and evaluations are valid data to prove therapy helpfulness and effectiveness. The materials analyzed are the texts that were written as reflexive opinions and the answers that were gathered during structured and semi-structured interviews. The important advantage of the helpfulness research, or significant events research [8], lies in the fact that actual subjective experience provides analytic data that are not affected by the experience and perception of therapists, counselors or observers. In these studies there is no need to enlist or adapt clients' experiences to certain categories, which are often used in quantitative measures [7].

This article discusses the material gathered over a fairly long period of time. The material to be analyzed includes reflexive reports written by adolescents participating in sociotherapeutic activities. In the 15 years of the association's existence over two thousand children and adolescents have taken part in sociotherapeutic programs but in the past few years several dozen texts have been written by adolescents and then analyzed for the helpfulness research. This article presents the results of a phenomenological analysis of 20 reflexive texts written upon completion of a six-month therapeutic program.

We accumulated a large volume of reflexive texts that is why the analysis was performed in several stages:

1. Reading the texts, understanding them, and selecting some of them for more detailed phenomenological analysis.
2. Selecting texts that reflect possibly the most extensive repertoire of meanings of experience and points of view.
3. At the second stage the texts were analyzed individually to extract meanings and themes.
4. The meanings and themes extracted were interpreted in the context of the problematics of identity and authentication events.
5. The formulated meanings of identity and authentication experiences were integrated into a general list and each generalized meaning was attributed with some numerical value (weighted in a descending order) expressing the frequency and intensity of their occurrence in the texts.

### 3. Results

The themes reflected by the adolescents at the end of the six-month sociotherapeutic program are presented in Table 1. Meanings reflected by the adolescents at the end of six-month sociotherapeutic program are presented in Table 2.

Table 1. Core themes reflected by the adolescents.

Theme	Examples of participants' responses	Descriptions and comments
<b>Growth and development</b>	"I used to be worse than I am now." "I learned how to be a changed person." "I've grown more confident of myself." "I have gained many new experiences."	In the sociotherapeutic work an adolescent observes irreversible personality changes, development, and growing-up.
<b>Guilt and acceptance of imperfections</b>	"I have not performed the task." "I was embarrassed." "I did not cope with the responsibility entrusted in me." "I was insecure, distrustful, and afraid to make a bad impression."	The participants were aware that the success of a team/society depended on the activity and involvement of each participant/individual. In case of an error, failure, nonperformance, or inability to cope with difficulties the adolescents could feel their real guilt and tried to redeem it.
<b>Responsibility</b>	"I had to think of others." "I learned to be responsible for my work." "I learned to take responsibility." "I paid for my mistakes." "I was responsible for a person." "We were all responsible for our work."	The participants tried to understand the implications of responsibility and learned how to provide independent answers to the questions, challenges and calls that life and the project (society) posed before them.
<b>Teamwork (Being together with others)</b>	"I have found reliable friends." "I learned to understand others." "The team coped with its tasks." "There was a lot of teamwork."	The ability to be part of, and to work in a team and together with others is a key to the sociotherapeutic process involving adolescents. The participants built relationships, learned to be together, work together, solve problems and cope with difficulties together.
<b>Risk to choose and a chance to improve one's own life</b>	"We had to make a choice." "I got a chance to improve myself." "I decided myself if I should risk or not." "I started my own journey that changed my life."	Being together with others and feeling support from the group helped the participants to make their own choices and to change their lives for the better.
<b>Self-identification</b>	"I learned to understand myself." "I tried to be a leader." "I have never believed in myself." "I worked in the project with my own role." "My opinion may	The participants became aware of the opportunity to be strong, brave, and decisive; they began to understand

	be important.”	themselves better, to trust themselves, to prove themselves.
<b>New experience</b>	“I learn how to work with children.” “I have gone through and experienced many things.” “We had to do a lot of things.” “I learned to overcome difficulties and challenges.”	The participants defined new experiences as very significant and important for their project (performance) and personal changes.
<b>Joy and events</b>	“The holiday made us all friends.” “We could not be without fun and humor.”	The participants mentioned the theme of joy when they were in the process of organizing holiday events for themselves and for other children; where they were engaged in overcoming difficulties with humor and joy at being able to create something together.
<b>Gratefulness</b>	“I want to say ‘thank you’ to my friends, my parents, to those who supported me, and to my therapists.”	Participants generously shared their gratitude to each other and their therapists.

Table 2. Core meanings reflected by the adolescents.

Meaning	Description and interpretation
<b>Egocentric and weak position in relation to the world</b>	Fear of something real and possible. Pathological obsession with self-identification (“I was thinking only about myself”).
<b>Acceptance of one’s guilt and motivation to work</b>	The importance of experiencing the feeling of embarrassment. Significance of the experience of performing one’s task. Tiredness due to one’s poor performance and happiness (satisfaction) owing to successful achievements.
<b>Responsibility</b>	Responsibility for task (work) performance, control, ability to focus one’s attention on the main thing, support, and mastery. Paying the price for one’s mistakes affecting the whole endeavour by correcting them with the team (society). Recognition of one’s guilt and willingness to redeem it. Attention to the opinions of others. Fear for the safety of another person. Taking responsibility for the other person. Understanding one’s own mistakes. Experience of sharing responsibility with all the team members. Satisfaction of completing something great. Overcoming obstacles. Understanding what stands behind the price you pay for your mistakes and poor performance.
<b>Teamwork (Being together with others)</b>	A team’s (social) choice, effort, and support. Gratefulness to the team and the therapist. Gaining and mastering the ability to be with other children (people). Gaining energy in the process of collective work and creation. Laughter as a remedy and a unifying force. Teambuilding through doing some exercises and understanding their implications. Experience of working in a team: overcoming difficulties, co-creation, and friendship. Feeling oneself as a part of the project: finding one’s place (role) in it. Finding happiness in performing ones’ work and being responsible for it. Satisfaction derived from working on something worthwhile. Appreciation for support, assistance, and shared responsibility.
<b>Freedom</b>	The opportunity to be in charge (a leader), to take the initiative, and to control. The opportunity to be a responsible grown-up while working with children (others).
<b>Challenges</b>	Losses, overcoming stiffness and insecurities by attempting to talk about oneself. Their activities with children at orphanages. The opportunity to see and to hear another person by performing a group exercise. Admitting and understanding one’s own mistakes. Reflection on the subject of making mistakes and the willingness to take risks. Ease in acting when repeating a role multiple times.

#### 4. Conclusion

The main research hypothesis of sociotherapy is one about therapeutic significance of the experience of authenticity. The problem of sociotherapy with adolescents suffering from existential frustration is accentuated by the fact that they need to experience not only the authenticity of boundaries, values, intentions, and capabilities, but also to experience the authenticity of authenticity itself. In sociotherapeutic practices adolescents are engaged in joint activities, which are to a large extent artificial, and built on symbolic values. Therefore, it is important to be guided not only by goals, means, and regulations, but also by evidence-based helpfulness.

This study clarifies helpful aspects of developing and implementing sociotherapeutic programs. Our findings confirm the usefulness of the following themes: 1. Growth and development; 2. Guilt and acceptance of imperfections; 3. Responsibility; 4. Teamwork (Being together with others); 5. Risks of choices and a chance to improve one's own life; 6. Self-identification; 7. New experience; 8. Fun and events; and 9. Gratefulness.

The meanings of helpful experience as confirmed by our findings are the following: 1. Egocentric and weak position in relation to the world; 2. Acceptance of one's guilt and motivation to work; 3. Responsibility; 4. Teamwork (Being together with others); 5. Freedom; and 6. Challenges.

We recommend the use of themes expressing helpfulness of sociotherapeutic experience as a meaningful framework in designing and organizing programs, i.e. creativity, experience and identification. Helpful therapeutic meanings are recommended for use in organizing reflexive, analytical, and therapeutic practices, i.e. experience of authentication.

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