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Psychology and the Current Russian-Ukrainian Crisis

The psychological components of the current Russian-Ukrainian crisis include mutual opposition regarding the interpretation of particular historical events, rejection of the other side's current policies, inadequate interaction between the two sides in the linguistic context, and so on. The author's hypothesis presumes that family-centered interpretations of the current Russian-Ukrainian crisis can improve the psychological understanding of the crisis. The article reports on the investigation of psychological family factors that structure the Russian-Ukrainian crisis from both sides. The theoretical and historical foundations of the author's ideas are discussed, along with current writings on the subject. Special attention is paid to analyzing the author's experience participating in the Kyiv Glebivka seminar, 22–24 May 2015.

Keywords: psychology, crisis psychological family factors.

Психологічні компоненти сучасної російсько-української кризи включають в себе: взаємне протистояння в інтерпретації тих чи інших історичних подій; відмову підтримувати поточну політику протилежної сторони; недостатню взаємодію сторін у мовному контексті і т. д. Автор висуває гіпотезу про те, що сімейно центровані інтерпретації сучасної російсько-української кризи можуть поліпшити її психологічне розуміння. Стаття презентує попередні результати дослідження сімейно-психологічних факторів, які структурують поточну російсько-українську кризу з обох сторін. Обговорюються теоретичні та історичні передумови авторських ідей і сучасні публікації з цієї теми. Особлива увага приділяється аналізу досвіду автора, здобутого під час особистої участі у конференції випускників Інституту Кеннана, що проходила в Києві 22–24 травня 2015 року.

Ключові слова: психологія, криза, сімейно центровані інтерпретації.

My article consists of two aspects that are highly interconnected. The first one has to do with the theoretical and methodological background of psychological work in the Russian-Ukrainian crisis, the second one with the real (though sometimes very preliminary) results of this work.

With respect to theory, I suggest that psychology's focus on what is important for individuals and groups can, in principle, take us very close to policies and politics. In the other words, psychology can get very near policy simply because it can articulate what is really important for ordinary people. Contemporary psychology, however, may not be ready to play such a socially responsible role, as its methodology may be based too much on laboratory science to be of relevance to the life of ordinary citizens – laypersons.

Furthermore, the many areas of disagreement that exist among modern psychologists make it difficult for them to apply their results to developing policies. For these reasons, crises such as the current Russian-Ukrainian one pose both a real challenge and an opportunity to modern psychological theory, research, and practice, and not only in Russia and Ukraine.¹

With respect to results, my practice and research show that many Russian-Ukrainian families, not only in Ukraine and in Russia but also in other countries

¹ Shapiro A. The Psychological Contradictions in the Modern Russian-Ukrainian Conflict: How Can Contemporary Psychology Help? – Kennan Institute, May 21, 2014. – Available: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/the-psychological-contradictions-the-modern-russian-ukrainian-conflict-how-can-contemporary>. Discussion of Alexander Shapiro's "The Psychological Contradictions in the Modern Russian-Ukrainian Conflict: How Can Contemporary Psychology Help? – Available: <https://www.facebook.com/alexander.shapiro.393>.

the world over, are in a state of acute psychological crisis directly related to the sociopolitical crisis between the two countries. Russia and Ukraine are not just political units; they are also people and their families. How can theories and practices of family therapy provide insight into some possible ways of understanding and responding to this complex situation? There are many divorces and instances of psychological distancing not only between husbands and wives, in-law relatives, but also among siblings, and even between parents and their children, among very close friends. Historical events and the effects of propaganda are refracted through the family context. The psychological problems of Russian-Ukrainian families vary with location (i. e., they differ for Ukrainians in Ukraine, Russian-identified residents of Ukraine, and Ukrainian-identified residents of Russia), and the identity issue is central here.

The family crisis situation can also serve as a good metaphor for sociopolitical conflicts (every family can be in crisis sometimes and this is normal). That is why I look at the psychology of modern Russian-Ukrainian relations and conflicts within the context of the “family crisis” concept. Family therapy teaches us how to understand and tolerate differences. Even within a family, people often live in different worlds and do not understand one another. Tension and conflicts are possible within a family context, as well as other types of interactions, such as acceptance, care, and support, that help individuals tolerate conflict and tension as existential realities and not fear them. This leads to “win-win” (not “win-lose”) approaches to resolving conflicts and realizing the positive potential every family has, as well as operationalizing such concepts as reconciliation, resilience, and tolerance.

Applying the psychological understanding to human conflict, whether within families or nations, can assist in reaching the ultimate value of peace. I am thinking mainly of three approaches to contemporary psychology: humanistic psychology, positive psychology and family therapy. These approaches have their peculiarities, and sometimes contradict one other, but I have found it possible to incorporate the methodology of all of them into the concept of “positive family” and in this special “light” I can see some essential commonality between humanistic psychology, positive psychology, and family therapy (all three approaches are human-oriented) and this can be particularly helpful for solving crisis situations and conflicts of different kinds, including the international ones, in seeking peace between big social groups and nations.

Humanistic psychology has its origins in the 1950s, when it occurred in reaction to both behaviorism and psychoanalysis, as a “third force” concerned with the human dimension of psychology. There are some clear principles of humanistic psychology: human beings cannot be reduced to components; they have a unique human context, they make choices, have responsibilities; and they are intentional, seeking meaning, value, and creativity. Positive psychology is a “new science of strength and resilience,” as its founder, Martin Seligman, described it. Positive psychology aims to build human strength by drawing on the reservoir of virtues: courage, optimism, hope, honesty, perseverance, resilience, rationality, insight, realism, capacity for pleasure, ability to put troubles into perspective. Positive psychology’s values include a pleasant life, a life of engagement, affiliation, a sense of well-being, and purpose from being part of something larger and more enduring than themselves, such as nature, social groups, or traditions. Even in the United States, there are evident contradictions between positive psychology and humanistic psychology, and between the values of each. For instance, humanistic psychology and its values are criticized from the point of view of positive psychology. Some elements of this critique include the complaint that humanistic psychology studies mainly what is bad in human life and in relations between people – in other words, that it concentrates on human weaknesses, with excessive attention given to such phenomena as “illness,” “distress,” or “victimhood”. Finally, humanistic psychology is criticized for concentrating too much on “ego” and on religious cults, and for paying insufficient attention to community functioning and mainstream religion. On the other hand, there is ample criticism of positive psychology and its values from the point of view of humanistic psychology, namely, that positive psychology uses scientific terminology without being truly scientific, that it considers all personal problems to be projections of an individual’s negativity and failure to project positive images, that it represents populism and victim blaming; that it emphasizes only the positive aspects of serious illnesses such as cancer, and that it applies only to those nations that (according to Seligman) are “rich and are not in civil crisis or a condition of war.”

Despite the popularity of the term “positive” – the common main concept and value of humanistic psychology, positive psychology and family therapy – in the framework of modern humanitarian knowledge, mass consciousness, and social practice, it is not well developed in the theoretical-psychological sense. However, being positive does not necessarily mean

being “happy” or not paying attention to the negative sides of human existence. Rather, being positive in the deepest sense means being “real,” dealing with all the aspects of a given situation, reconciling several different subcultures into one cultural unit. The modern world teams with the most varied, sometimes conflicting, cultural-normative orientations, including some that have never before existed. People work, rest, become ill, communicate, and have fantasies not only in different parts of the world but also each in his or her own way – one model of individual behavior being no better and no worse than others; diversity is evident in each and every social body, from the state and the workplace down to, most especially, the family. In interpersonal relations, even in family, we are often wary of the unfamiliar customs, values, and behavioral patterns of those around us, and this wariness prevents us from developing a positive, accepting, and supportive attitude toward others.

The idea of “positive family” is based on the analysis of theoretical work and practices of prominent humanistic psychologists, positive psychologists and family therapists, as well as on values that are widely found in classical literature, which provides examples of the positive meanings of family and childhood, especially in children’s literature. The concept includes (1) the idea of family resilience (the family’s ability to withstand external and internal risks by using the psychological resources of its members, as well as of the family as a whole; these resources include specific value systems, organizational models, and communication processes); (2) the idea of “positive tolerance” (understood as the moral and psychological climate in the family, dominated by supportive attitudes, acceptance, and respect for the values and meanings of all its members; it stands in contrast to the idea of “negative tolerance,” which is characterized by psychological defenses and facades that allow a person merely to “tolerate” others while holding back hidden, repressed aggression as well as unspoken disapproval); (3) the idea of “personal experience” I take from Carl Whitaker’s theoretical work and practice, but I am also aware that it needs to be developed to embrace such fields as philosophy, psychology, and cultural anthropology.¹ The role of personal experience is very important in the context of the preliminary results of my study, including reflect-

ing on the problem of the links between authorities and psychologists in the context of Russian-Ukrainian crisis, working with families and individuals, running psychological groups, and the like. In this sense, analyzing my personal experience is not only part of the methodology of my work but also a result of it.

In this theoretical light the main psychological components of the current Russian-Ukrainian crisis are the following: mutual opposition regarding the interpretation of particular historical events, misunderstanding and rejection of the main positive and negative points of each side’s current developments by the other side, a lack of adequate psychological interaction between the two sides in the linguistic context as a means of developing mutual understanding, and lack of unity on each side at all levels of life – social, cultural, and so on – including understanding the real purpose of each side in this crisis. That is why my study focuses on the hypothesis that understanding the basic psychological processes, mechanisms, and structures of family life can, with certain restrictions, help us understand the crisis and suggest policy measures directed at alleviating the suffering of individuals, families, and the different ethnic or sociopolitical groups involved in it.²

One aspect of the modern Russian-Ukrainian crisis that has become particularly meaningful for me is the problem of “politeness” (a positive psychology value) versus “honesty” (a humanistic psychology value) in the behavior of “family members” toward each other. This is vividly illustrated by Ukrainian and Russian attitudes, with “honesty” dominated by aggression and “politeness” bordering on a lie. It is important to note here that in private life as well as in politics, people can become stuck in the humanistic (“honesty”) or in the positive (“politeness”) approaches of looking for solutions. Perhaps awareness of these two modes or values in approaching psychological and social problems would prevent people from focusing too much on one set of things to the neglect of the others. Perhaps developing the skill of switching back and forth between “politeness” and “honesty” would lead to greater health and effectiveness of individuals, families, and society.

With respect to the issue of language in the Russian-Ukrainian crisis, the psychological research findings are often very paradoxical. For example, it is

¹ Витакер К. Танцы с семьей [C. Whitaker, Dances with the family]. Пер. с англ. – М.: Класс, 1995. Shapiro A. The Theme of the Family in Contemporary Society and Positive Family Psychology. / Family Therapy Around the World: A Festschrift for Florence Kaslow (Ed.: William Nichols) – Haworth Press, 2005. – Inc. Pp. 19–38. Мінаков М. А. Історія поняття досвіду. [A. Minakov, History of the Concept of Experience]. – К.: Парапан, 2007. – 380 с.

² Shapiro A. The main psychological contradiction in the modern Russian-Ukrainian Conflict / READER 23rd Inter Working Meeting, St. Polten, Austria May 28th – June 1st, 2014. – Pp. 36–38. Shapiro A. Myself and Ukraine / Understanding and Counteracting the Negative effects of Globalization in our communities. Systems In transitions Real 16th International Working meeting, 6–10 June, 2007. – Sopron, Hungary: Reader “Mosaic”. – Pp. 27–29.

more important to be understood than to speak correctly, but not as important to be understood as to be accepted as a human being. The system of talking in which “everybody speaks his or her own language” is comfortable, but this style of conversation closes off opportunities for improving in a particular language to those who already know it passively. Bilingualism is a good thing, of course. However, developing it requires patience and attention to many aspects of social interactions and the family connections of its subjects. Furthermore two (or more) languages cannot be acquired simultaneously; rather, learning them requires a long process and a community’s high valuing of foreign languages. In this regard, an important comparison can be drawn with the experience of the United States with the Spanish language and of Russia with the Ukrainian language. Equality does not exist between the Ukrainian and Russian languages in Ukraine, in Russia, or even in the international community; Russian has always been the “big brother.” That is why we can say that the essence of the issue of using languages in given community is the need for equality between the sides of communication. For instance, if two people, speakers of Ukrainian and Russian, were to converse with one another, they would speak Russian – unlike Scandinavians or Slavs in central Europe, who would speak their own language!

At the Kennan alumni conference, held in Kyiv in May 2015, I spoke English and this article is also written in English. In doing so I related equally to Russian and Ukrainian participants, a stance I have also tried to take as a professional psychologist. During the seminar I asked people several times why Ukrainian colleagues spoke in Russian and Russians did not speak in English. The answer was that that was the easiest way to communicate. Of course, it was a very understandable point of view from the cognitively centered aspect, but from the emotionally centered one ... I doubt it! It was easy for me to be really neutral at the personal level as well as the professional level, in particular since I know Ukrainian well enough. Using Russian is simpler in both societies in many fields: in business, in international relations, in professional and scientific networking, and so forth. But I believe that the Ukrainian language can be important not only within Ukraine but also for other countries, in particular Russia.

The concerts of the Ukrainian rock group *Okean Elzy* in Moscow and in other Russian cities can serve as an example. Its audiences (by the way, the group gathered stadiums) sang in good Ukrainian, together with the rock musicians! And here I want to mention

some criticism of the thesis I’ve just laid out. People around the world learn popular songs and enjoy rock groups in different languages, particularly English, without having much competence in speaking that language. But *Okean Elzy* is not just a rock group, it is also part of the modern intellectual culture of Ukraine; in Russia there are also musicians who are very intellectual and liberally oriented at the same time, such as Makarevich, Shevchuk, Nikitins – all of whom now carry the symbolic meaning of the same “Maidan culture” and “Maidan art”.¹

In concluding remarks it should be noted that the Soviet legacy has not yet been completely overcome in the post-Soviet space, but, unlike Russia, Ukraine has been actively involved in this process in the past 25 years. Russia should take Ukraine’s experience into account, including the psychological aspects. Certainly, traumas at the individual level were on each side, but in the last 25 years the Ukrainian society was much more active than the Russian one in pursuing the de-Sovietization policies. The experience in fighting totalitarianism can be, in my opinion, helpful to Russia.

I believe that the family theme is universal for humankind. That is why I assume that a family-centered idea of “positive family” can be a good metaphor to describe the relationship between countries. Psychology has an important role to play when we consider the human consequences of the Russian-Ukrainian crisis and any future peace process. I suggest that everything happening around the Russian-Ukrainian crisis needs participation of psychologists. Having peace as a goal for psychological work means that it is necessary to take into account the different aspects of reality in any given situation, which may at times be contradictory. Whether internally or at the level of society, this is not easy to do! That is why psychologists who orient their work to serving authorities inevitably are drawn toward war and confrontation. I felt the same tension earlier in my experiences in Ukraine and in Russia when dealing with local psychologists involved professionally in the current crisis.

The issue of priorities is very relevant here. What should psychologists do to help develop society versus just developing their particular field? Psychologists’ civil and professional identities at this point may come into conflict, as the majority of people, psychologists including, simply want to live their lives and sometimes are unwilling to engage with

¹ Moussienko N. The Art of Revolution: Creativity and Euro-maidan // *Wilson Quarterly*. – November 2014. <http://wilsonquarterly.com/stories/art-revolution-creativity-and-euro-maidan/>.

current policies, global or local. In this framework religion should meet modern social, cultural, and psychological challenges. In Russia, religion sometimes meets no challenges at all, but in Ukraine the situation is very different, because in Ukraine there are many religions, all equal to one other, yet differing in their psychological essence of confession. The general attitudes toward religion in Russia and Ukraine were roughly the same at the time of perestroika. Now they are completely different, with the main point of difference being the diversity and plurality of the religious experiences as practiced in Ukraine, on the one hand, and the monolithic approach dominant in today's Russia on the other.

Relations between people and the government are problematic both for Russia and for Ukraine. As has been argued by Matthew Rojansky and Mikhail Minakov, "many Ukrainians ... adopt a deeply polarized worldview, in which constructive criticism, dissenting views, and even observable facts are rejected out of hand if they are seen as harmful to Ukraine. This phenomenon might be termed the new Ukrainian exceptionalism, and it is worrisome because it threatens the very democratic values of Ukrainians."¹ In this connection I assume some closeness exists between the two concepts, exceptionalism and patriotism, as the common trends in these two countries (societies), and that it is somehow connected with their common past (including the Soviet one).

I would argue that world politics, including history and current states of Russian-Ukrainian and

US-Russian relation, should be looked at in the family-centered psychological light. My policy suggestions would then include the following: (1) implementing a mutual cultural-historical and linguistic education; (2) developing psychological (mainly family-psychological) help for resolving the identity issue for children in both countries and for the study of second and subsequent languages; (3) creating projects to support minorities in different contexts – cultural-historically, linguistically, and so forth; (4) mounting psychological support for Russia and Ukraine to participate jointly in megaprojects for humanity (those concerned with global warming, life longevity, etc.); (5) growing professional networks for helping families and children during the current crisis²; (6) finding further ways for Russian, American, and Ukrainian psychologists to contribute to resolving the crisis itself; and (7) helping to overcome, in both Russia and Ukraine, negative attitudes toward the United States, and vice versa.

And finally, let me conclude by mentioning the phrase that struck me most at the Kennan alumni conference in Kyiv. It was expressed at the last moment, as I was coming out of my cottage house and ran into someone who was my neighbor – we had had many good discussions during conference not knowing we were neighbors at the same cottage. When I pointed this out to my colleague, he responded that good neighbors do not notice the presence of each other. A very symbolic response, if we are speaking about the Russian-Ukrainian crisis!

¹ Rojansky M. and Minakov M. The New Ukrainian Exceptionalism // *Yale Global*. – June 23, 2015. <http://yale-global.yale.edu/content/new-ukrainian-exceptionalism>.

² For many of these items I have some specific proposals, such as the organization of International Congresses on family psychology and family therapy. For more than 20 years I closely associated with International Family Therapy Association (IFTA – elected Board member 1997–2003) and International Family Psychology Academy (IFPA – country Representative). Both organizations regularly hold their Congresses (IFTA – once a year, IFPA – once every four years) and at each Congress they are focusing on professionals and on the general public in local parts of the world. Now in Ukraine there are real conditions for organizing such events as the Ukrainian society is seriously oriented at the present towards the fight against corruption, the existence of the latter was the main obstacle for organizing these events in Russia and Ukraine earlier.