

Adolescent Crisis and the Problem of Role Identity

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The article touches upon the problem of role identity in the context of adolescence. In the framework of the research role identity is perceived as socio-personality and socio-cognitive construct, in which personality, cognitive and social components are integrated and mediated, thus the study of role identity in adolescence gives the opportunity to trace the profound connection between transformations which occur within personality and the changes that take place in the teenager's social situation of development. The idea is put forward that teenagers' role identity is characterized by the presence of inner role conflict which represents the contradiction between the teenager's imaginary and actual role behavior. Inner role conflict illustrates the complex relationship between the real and the ideal form, depicted by L. S. Vygotsky. It is argued that inner role conflict underlies adolescent crisis and that the problem of solving the conflict can contribute to the overcoming of the crisis itself. The conception is illustrated by the results of a pilot study that was carried out in three different schools in Moscow, Russia, among one approximately one hundred teenagers.

Keywords: age crisis, adolescence, role identity, inner role conflict, psychological role, social role, position.

The notion of age crisis appears one of the most essential though controversial in the history of psychology. One of the first definitions of this concept was given by a Russian scholar P.P. Blonsky who pointed out that child's development goes on continuously only for a limited period of time which is followed by a qualitative leap in development — that is, crisis [3]. In his turn L. S. Vygotsky defined age crisis as an integral change of a child's personality which occurs regularly at junction of stable periods. L. S. Vygotsky regarded crisis as a special period of transformation of the social situation of development, when the neof ormation of the previous period destroys the existing social situation of development and incites the emergence of a new one [19]. In general the representatives of the Russian cultural-historical approach have not depicted the change in a linear way, which is quantitative in nature, but have rather stressed its qualitative character. The same is true for the theories of E. Erikson, P. Blos, L. Kohlberg, J. Loevinger, R. Kegan and some other developmental models which focus on the qualitative aspect of the emerging transformation.

However the stumbling block in understanding the nature of crisis is connected with the question whether or not crisis should be perceived as a norm of ontogenesis. D. B. Elkonin is among those who give a positive answer. A. N. Leontiev, on the contrary, claims that crisis should

not be regarded as a necessary symptom of transition from one stable period to another. For him crisis does not at all represent an inevitable concomitant of psychic development. In his opinion fundamental changes, leaps, not crisis, are unavoidable. Crisis on the contrary indicates that the qualitative leap did not occur on time [12]. L. S. Vygotsky seems to give the most exhaustive answer as he points out the double nature of crisis. On the one hand he claims that crisis is not only a norm of ontogenesis, but also the principle mechanism of development which is responsible for the transition to new levels. On the other hand he indicates the negative aspect of the crisis which is connected with the decay of old functions and has a powerful influence on the process of personality's development. Thus though L. S. Vygotsky regards age crisis as a natural constituent of human life, he does not perceive it as an automatic transition to a higher level of development [19].

This point of view is shared by the majority of modern scholars who carry out research in the framework of cultural-historical tradition (K. N. Polivanova, A. M. Prikhozhan, F. E. Vasilyuk, N. A. Konovalova). These scholars argue that the transition will only be successful when the subject has the adequate tools to cope with the difficulties of the critical period. Since the tools are of socio-cultural origin the success of the transition depends greatly on the subject's social environment, and

to be more precise, on the capacity of families and institutions to provide the subject with these tools. This position may be backed by the words of E. Erikson, who says that «each successive stage and crisis has a special relation to one of the basic elements of society and this for the simple reason that the human life cycle and man's institutions have evolved together» [5, p. 250].

As the 21st century brings new challenges, the social system often fails to elaborate the adequate tools and to transfer them timely. This task is extremely important regarding the system of modern schools which represent the basic social institution worldwide. Unfortunately in many cases school education is still perceived exclusively as a means for transferring knowledge, skills and habits, not cultural tools, which means that children have to seek for them on their own outside the classroom. This problem becomes crucial in the context of adolescent crisis which turns out to be one of the most difficult periods in human life. The lack of adequate cultural tools often results in teenagers' failure to integrate into the adult world which has most dramatic consequences for their future life and, therefore, for the society in general. Thus, scholars dealing with educational psychology (N. A. Konovalova, O. V. Minovskaya, K. N. Polivanova), stress the need of reorganizing the schooling system so that it could meet the challenges of the critical periods and especially of the teenage.

Apparently, in order to create means which could be adequate for this particular period, it is necessary to realize what do we actually know about teenage crisis. And at this point a new problem comes to the fore: though adolescence belongs to one of the most popular fields of psychological studies we still do not have enough knowledge about this phenomenon. Therefore a wide range of questions arises: what does the structure of adolescent crisis look like? Which psychological mechanism determines fundamental peculiarities of adolescent crisis? And finally, is it possible to indicate any psychological phenomenon that could be accepted as the conditional unit of the crisis? Our research gives the opportunity to draw some conclusions on the matter.

While talking about the structure of age crisis it is necessary to consider the relationship between three principle notions which are widely used by scholars who deal with critical periods. These notions are «(inner) contradiction», «(inner) conflict» and «crisis». Since it is quite difficult to draw the line between these phenomena very often the concepts are used interchangeably, which results in extreme terminological confusion. Together with V. P. Galitsky, E. S. Kalmikova, O. V. Kuz'menkova, L. M. Mitina, K. F. Fedenko and some other researchers we regard contradiction as one of the lowest stages of inner tension which is usually

present in the psychic life of any subject. When a contradiction achieves its peak it evolves into an inner conflict. Conflict in its turn is usually perceived as a concomitant of the crisis, its indicator (T. V. Dragunova, K. N. Polivanova, A. M. Prikhozhan). However, sharing the point of view of E. Erikson we consider that inner conflict is not only a concomitant of the crisis, but one of the main reasons for its emergence. Exactly as inner conflict evolves from a contradiction, crisis emerges on the basis of a long-lasting inner conflict (or numerous conflicts which is more often). Schematically this succession may be presented as follows. See fig. 1.

On the scheme crisis indicates the border between the norm of ontogenesis and the beginning of a pathological deviation. Apparently the frontiers between the discussed psychological phenomena are very flexible and, as A. Y. Antsupov and A. I. Shipilov put it, the enumerated types of intrapersonal difficulties do not exist in an isolated way — usually they sort of mingle together creating layers of different depth [2]. However this differentiation throws light on the structure of age crisis and gives the opportunity to identify its conditional unit — that is, inner conflict. We assume that inner conflict plays an important role in the emergence of adolescent crisis. Thus a detailed study of the peculiarities of inner conflicts in adolescence may help to create effective means of overcoming teenage crisis.

Though numerous scholars argue that inner conflicts have an important impact on the process of personality's development (E. A. Donchenko, V. S. Merlin, T. M. Titarenko, A. V. Sivzova, N. A. Konovalova), the analysis of psychological literature demonstrates that there has been very little research connected with the problem of inner conflicts in adolescence. A. P. Novgorodtseva is among those few scholars who make the attempt of classifying numerous inner conflicts of adolescence. She denotes the following types of inner conflicts: conflict of trust to the world, conflict of discrepant needs, conflict of ambiguous feelings, conflict of «I-conception» and conflict in the development of psycho-sexual function [14, p. 45–49]. However we consider that this classification does not take into account one of the most important inner conflicts of adolescence — role conflict, which surely emerges by the transition to a fundamentally new system of relationships with the surrounding world. Inner role conflict is closely connected with the formation of a subject's role identity and on this issue we are to focus on the following pages.

Role constituent as the structural component of identity has been studied by many researchers (P. J. Burke, P. L. Callero, R. Conger, N. V. Dmitrieva, E. Erikson, P. P. Gornostai, C. Gordon, J. Habermas, F. Kechele, Z. P. Korolenko, K. V. Korostelina, D. Levita, F. Lorenz,



Fig. 1. Scheme of the evolution of intrapersonal difficulties

A. S. Macke, L. Matthews, G. H. Mead, S. Stryker, Serpe, K. Wickrama), however a generally accepted definition of the concept has not yet been elaborated. In some works role identity is perceived as a constituent part of self, which represents a collection of identities (P. J. Burke, S. Stryker, Serpe). In other works the notion of role identity implies a subject's perception and experience of a particular role that is conditioned by the subject's integration into different social groups (C. Gordon, K. V. Korostelina). In the works of P. P. Gornostai role identity is studied together with such determinants of role behavior as role consciousness and role «I-conception». Surprisingly there are very few works entirely devoted to the study of role identity in the context of teenage.

E. Erikson was one of the first scholars who pointed out that role identity is very important for the process of personality formation in adolescence. He perceived role identity as an important constituent of the feeling of identity and claimed that it has its roots in the child's «anticipation of roles». For Erikson, who argued that critical periods of development always involve a bipolar conflict, the two poles of adolescence are presented by identity versus role confusion when the young person is faced with the psychosocial dilemma of finding the balance between earlier childhood identification and self-positioning in the system of social roles. Apparently this conflict does not emerge from nowhere. It is preceded by the four earlier stages of identity development described by Erikson, but at this point the conflict achieves its peak [6]. In fact Erikson was the first to point out that adolescent crisis is to a large extent due to role confusion – in other terms, to numerous contradictions within the system of teenager's roles.

According to P. P. Gornostai age crisis is always accompanied by the change of a subject's roles, that is, by the decay of old and the emergence of new ones. In this context role conflicts occur, marking personality's role development which is one of the key elements of a subject's socialization throughout his/her lifetime [7]. However, sharing the opinion of P. P. Gornostai we stick to a broader understanding of the concept of «role» whose meaning is often reduced exclusively to the socially set forms of behavior and interaction. The researcher prefers to operate the notion of life role, or psychological role, whose peculiarity «in contrast with the majority of social roles consists in a relatively deep involvement in the process of human existence. Life roles are closely connected with the profound structure of the personality and as a matter of fact represent one of the forms of its existence» [8, p. 45]. Therefore it is necessary to underline that exactly as identity develops out of both individual and social processes [1], role development is determined both by individual factors as well as by the subject's socio-cultural context. We assume that this is at junction of these layers that the main inner conflict of adolescence emerges.

Adolescence represents a period of childhood when role development has the swiftest and also the most dramatic character, as far as the main challenge of this age is to accomplish the transition to a different social group –

the group of adults. But since role development is to a large extent influenced by individuality, the process of socialization does not imply a mechanic acquiring of a particular set of social roles and functions, but presupposes a profound reexamination and reconstruction of the whole system of a subject's life roles. This complex process involves all the spheres of teenagers' vital activity and results in a formation of a drastically new system of relationships with the surrounding world. The question is: what is the mechanism that provokes the emergence of the inner role conflict in the process of this transition? On the one hand we could assume that certain subjective «perezhivanie» accompanies the process of acceptance of new roles and patterns of role behavior that are unfamiliar to the teenager. For example he or she tries being a worker, a team leader etc. Indeed any transition to new forms of role interaction inevitably affects personality and may result in various inner contradictions. However, numerous research works devoted to the problem of role conflicts demonstrate that they have deeper roots, which means that acquaintance with unfamiliar roles can not be perceived as the only reason for their emergence. In our research we assume that contradictions between adolescents' roles and positions are at the origin of the inner role conflict. Before we discuss this phenomenon in a more detailed way it is necessary to explain what we mean by the notions «role» and «position». The term «position» implies the subject's (in our case – the teenager's) ideal perception of his/her role behavior and of the roles he or she performs in life. This perception is based upon the subject's role «I-conception» and is closely connected with his/her role identity. As we have already mentioned, the term «role» in our research is perceived in its broader sense, meaning life role or psychological role. Life roles involve the whole spectrum of the subject's social roles.

Though the individual starts getting acquainted with various roles from early childhood, it is during adolescence that a child's disconnected and often inadequate ideas about roles and their systems are shaped into an integral picture. This process is accompanied by the child's active inclusion into the system of social relationships. As A. A. Rean puts it, the teenager is faced with the problem «of integrating everything he knows about himself as a pupil, son, sportsman, friend, scout etc. He has to unify all these roles into a whole, comprehend them, link them with the past and project onto the future» [16, p. 104]. This complex process is on the one hand influenced by external factors (the impact of society), and on the other hand is determined by the inner logic of a concrete personality's formation. As the process unfolds, the teenager is faced with numerous discrepancies. The main discrepancy is found on the border between the teenager's ideal perception of himself and his possibilities, and the role (roles) set by the framework of his objective social situation (e.g. «I am already grown-up» – «I am treated as a child», «I am self-reliant» – «I depend on my parents» etc). Thus, this discrepancy can be interpreted as a contradiction between subjective and objective, imaginary and actual-

ly existing. The contradiction may be schematically presented as follows:

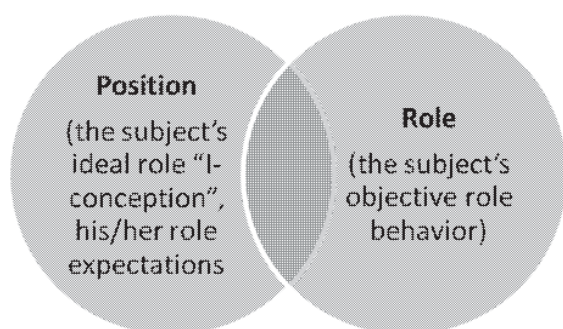


Fig. 2. Conventional scheme representing the contradiction between position and role in adolescent's social situation of development

The area of intersection on the scheme indicates the possible coincidence of the subject's ideal perception and those roles that he or she performs in reality. The wider this area is, the lower the chances are that the inner role conflict emerges and vice versa. It is at junction of such contradictions that inner role conflict emerges, which under certain circumstances may lead to a crisis.

As a matter of fact a similar point of view is expressed by S. Stryker and A. S. Macke who argue, that the contradiction between the role «I-conception» and role expectations represents one of the main sources of role conflicts [17]. This conception also has much in common with the ideas of K. N. Polivanova, who claims that a change in a child's perception of the environment occurs at the moment of transition when the child discovers the «ideal form of development». The theorist points out that the whole logic of the course of the crisis is determined by the dynamics of the metamorphoses of real and ideal forms, till the moment when a certain balance is found [15]. In the context of role development the ideal form may be perceived as the subject's ideal perception of his role behavior («position»), while the spectrum of actual roles may be interpreted as the real form.

With the beginning of teenage, as the child starts to face more and more discrepancies between reality and his subjective perception of the world the area of intersection between real and ideal starts to converge. We believe that the peak of adolescent crisis coincides with the moment when the gap between teenager's role expectations (positions) and his/her actual role behavior achieves its highest point. Thus we assume that role identity represents an integral characteristic of the teenager's social situation of development which reflects the complex interaction between objective and subjective, real and ideal, social and individual. From our point of view in the context of adolescence role identity may be perceived as socio-personality and socio-cognitive construct, in which personality, cognitive and social components are integrated and mediated. Therefore a deeper study of role identity in adolescence may give the opportunity to trace the profound connection between transformations which occur within personali-

ty and the changes that take place in the teenager's social situation of development. In order to confirm this hypothesis we carried out a pilot study.

One hundred and six teenagers aged from 15 to 16 took part in the study. All of them were students of the 10th form of three Moscow schools: State Gymnasium № 1529, State Centre of Education № 2030 and Moscow Secondary Comprehensive School № 292. As psychodiagnostic methods the following questionnaires were used: «Questionnaire of Role Competence» and «Questionnaire of Role Conflict Locus» by P. P. Gornostai, «Q-Sort Method Test» by B. Stephensen, «Modified Questionnaire for Identification of Adolescent Accentuation Types» by A. Lichko, «Scale of Personality's Anxiety» by A. M. Prikhozhan. For data processing various methods of applied statistics were used, including correlation, regression and discriminant analysis, principal component analysis and the analysis of contingency tables.

The study revealed many interesting facts about the peculiarities of role identity in adolescence. For example it was proved that constituent elements of role identity are closely connected to different personality characteristics, such as the type of accentuation, number of inner conflicts and level of anxiety. At the same time the study revealed that the formation of role identity and the relation between its components depends greatly on the environment of the teenager and is to a large extent determined by social factors. Thus by this moment we dispose of a wide range of evidence that role identity may be perceived as an integral characteristic of the teenager's social situation of development, since it actually reflects the connection between social and individual in the process of the formation of adolescent personality. However in this article we can only focus on one aspect of the study aimed at finding evidence to the fact, that role identity of adolescents aged 15–16 is characterized by the presence of the inner role conflict.

As a matter of fact modern psychology has very few methods designed for the diagnostics of the inner role conflict. The majority of the existing questionnaires are aimed at the analysis of various external role conflicts, e.g. conflicts in organizations (The Role Conflict Scale, Rizzo et al, 1970; The Role-Ambiguity General Questionnaire, Peiro et al, 1987a; The Role Conflict Questionnaire, Peiro et al, 1987b) or different gender role conflicts (Gender Role Conflict Scale, O'Neil et al, 1986). Since none of these methods met the goals of our research, in our study we used the «Questionnaire of Role Conflict Locus» by P. P. Gornostai and «Q-Sort Method Test» by B. Stephensen.

The «Questionnaire of Role Conflict Locus» allows measuring an important parameter of role identity that P. P. Gornostai calls role conflict locus. The theorist perceives this phenomenon as a construct, which determines the subject's inclination to choose one of the possible strategies of behavior in a situation of role conflict: external or internal, in other words to prefer internal or external role conflict when certain difficulties or contradictions occur. It is on the notion of role conflict locus that P. P. Gornostai builds his role conception of per-

sonality, according to which «the main tendency (and also the motive power of behavior) is the subject's endeavour to minimize role conflict, which emerges in the process of role socialization, and at the same time to satisfy at most the personal needs of role development». The author argues that external and internal role conflicts provoke different degrees of subjective tension in any particular individual. Thus in a situation of role conflict some people are guided by their own inner sets and values and follow internal strategies of behavior (which results in external role conflict with the surroundings), others are oriented towards the system of external values (which results in the emergence of inner role conflict). It is the role conflict locus that determines the difference in the stable strategies of role behavior [9].

In the framework of our research it was important to find out what is the main tendency of role behavior in adolescence. According to the data a considerable number of interrogated teenagers – 52 % – were diagnosed with interim role conflict locus. Under the Pearson chi-square criterion the hypothesis of normal distribution of parameters under the role conflict locus is denied with a high degree of probability ($\chi^2 = 17,2; df = 2; p = 0,0002$). Therefore, if taking into consideration the nature of the empirical distribution, we can make a conclusion about a significant domination of the interim role conflict locus among teenagers.

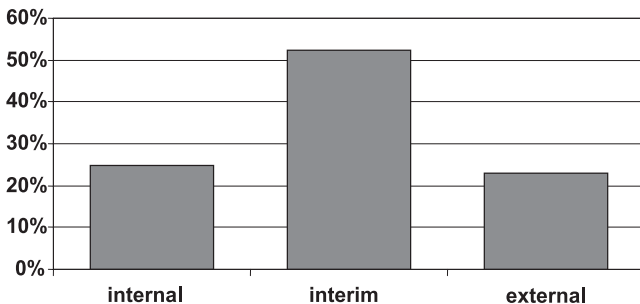


Fig. 3. Histogram of the distribution of indices on the scale of role conflict locus (internal – 25 %, interim – 52 %, external – 23 %)

This fact is substantial for our research since it allows to draw some important conclusions. Thus, the data shows that role identity of teenagers aged 15–16 years is still in the process of its formation. Interim role conflict locus clearly demonstrates that the teenager faces the problem of choosing the strategy of his role behavior: he can either rely on his own system of values and adjust his social roles to them, or, on the contrary, be guided by the social role expectations and infringe upon his own values. As a matter of fact the subject is faced with the problem of choice between social and individual throughout his lifetime. However it is during adolescence that this problem acquires a really dramatic character since at this age the child for the first time becomes actively involved in the system of social interactions. This challenge of choosing the strategy of role behavior at teenage takes the form of inner role conflict,

which we perceive as one of the main preconditions for the emergence of adolescent crisis.

To confirm this assumption and to find more evidence that teenagers actually suffer from inner role conflict we used «Q-Sort Method Test» by B. Stephensen. Though this method was not designed for a targeted study of the inner role conflict, it allows investigating six principle tendencies of the subject's behavior in a real group: dependence, independence, commutability, incommutability, acceptance of «struggle» and avoidance of «struggle». The aggregate of these tendencies illustrates the peculiarities of the subject's actual role behavior. Under the tendency «acceptance of struggle» B. Stephensen understands the subject's aspiration for active participation in social life and acquisition of a more significant status in the system of interpersonal relationships. On the contrary the tendency «avoidance of struggle» indicates the subject's desire to avoid interaction and to remain neutral in group arguments and conflicts. B. Stephensen regards commutability as a sign of readiness to get in contact and to be emotionally involved in the communication with the others. Incommutability stands for the opposite tendency of avoiding contact both in a concrete group and out of it. The pair dependence-independence is the key to our research. According to B. Stephensen the tendency for dependence shows itself in the subject's inner desire to accept group standards and values (social and ethical), while the tendency for independence presupposes that the subject is guided by his own norms, values and attitudes [13]. As a matter of fact though operating different terms B. Stephensen is talking about the same two tendencies of role behavior as P. P. Gornostai – orientation on one's own role «I-conception» or orientation on the role expectations of the society. Moreover B. Stephensen claims that if at a certain moment these two tendencies turn out to be equally expressed in the subject, they become a source of inner conflict – which in terms of our research is called inner role conflict. Therefore though B. Stephensen uses different terminology, his method allows diagnosing whether the subject is in the state of inner role conflict or not.

The study that we carried out among teenagers revealed that 64 % of the interrogated participants suffer from at least one inner conflict out of the three possible oppositions, which testifies that the representatives of this age group have a relatively high level of inner tension. However the essential fact for our research is that 39% of them suffer from the conflict between the tendency to dependence and the tendency to independence, in other words the conflict between role «I-conception» and social role expectations, that is, the inner role conflict.

Therefore, the study has confirmed, that inner role conflict is inherent in adolescence and that the problem of choosing the individual strategy of role behavior represents one of the key challenges of the teenage. Further study of adolescent role identity and inner role conflict may throw more light on the problem of adolescent crisis and the means of its overcoming.

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Подростковый кризис и проблема ролевой идентичности

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В статье рассматривается проблема ролевой идентичности в контексте подросткового возраста. В рамках данного исследования ролевая идентичность выступает как социально-личностное и социо-когнитивное образование, в котором личностные, когнитивные и социальные компоненты интегрированы и опосредованы. Таким образом, исследование ролевой идентичности в подростковом возрасте позволяет проследить глубинную связь между личностными трансформациями и теми изменениями, которые происходят в социальной ситуации развития подростка. В статье выдвигается предположение, что ролевая идентичность подростков характеризуется наличием внутреннего ролевого конфликта, возникающего из-за противоречия между воображаемым и действительным ролевым поведением подростка. Внутренний ролевой конфликт отражает сложную взаимосвязь между реальной и идеальной формой, описанную Л. С. Выготским. В статье утверждается, что ролевой конфликт лежит в основе подросткового кризиса и что разрешение этого конфликта может способствовать преодолению кризиса. Это утверждение подкрепляется данными пилотного исследования, проведенного в трех различных школах Москвы, в котором приняли участие около ста подростков.

Ключевые слова: возрастной кризис, подростковый возраст, ролевая идентичность, внутренний ролевой конфликт, психологическая роль, социальная роль, позиция.