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FUNCTION OF THE DREAM IN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVES OF ADOLESCENTS

Abstract

Adolescence is a time of continuity and change. Processes of identity organization are reflected in construction of an Autobiographical narrative with distinct features of a Life Story (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). Adolescents acquire mastery in keeping a coherent view for themselves and in integrating past, present and future dimensions of their personal time. The present work is aimed at revealing the function and place of the Dream (Levinson et al., 1978) in adolescents' life narratives. Semi-structured interviews were conducted using the method of Habermas and de Silveira (2008). Two theoretically derived functions of the Dream (defensive and motivational) were formulated and operationalized in rating criteria. A sample consists of 48 adolescents, age 15-19 ($M=16.41, SD=1.08$). Defense mechanisms and mentalization were assessed using Bulgarian versions of Defense Style Questionnaire and Reflective Functioning Questionnaire (Hancheva, 2010, 2017). Interviews with 28 participants were transcribed verbatim, analyzed and rated for causal and thematic coherence. Contents and function of the Dream were coded by two independent researchers. Correlations were found between causal coherence and motivational function of the Dream ($r=.379, p <.05$) and a tendency for negative connection to defensive function. There were no significant differences in results of boys and girls, but life events like parental divorce and domestic violence resulted in tendency for defensive hypermentalization and lower thematic coherence.

Key words: life narrative, dream, defense mechanisms, mentalization

Introduction

Adolescence is the period of a person's life between childhood and adulthood. It is an intense time of many changes and opportunities. Adolescents need to adapt to physiological, cognitive, psychological, and social changes. There is a necessity of having the skills to integrate the new acquisitions within the existing structure of the Self. According to developmental theories of Erik Erikson (1968), Daniel

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Levinson (Levinson, Darrow, Klein, & Levinson, 1978) and Charlotte Buchler (Buchler, & Massarik, 1968) the main task of adolescents is to acquire mastery in keeping a coherent view of themselves by integrating past, present and future dimensions of individual life time. Dan McAdams (1996) believes that when dealing with this complicated task adolescents start to create a story in which they narrate important events in accordance with their values, conscious and unconscious believes. These life stories help young people to create a better understanding of themselves and to present a desirable image in front of others. Habermas and his colleagues (Habermas, Ehlert-Lerche, & de Silveira, 2009) invented a methodology to reveal the process of integration of different experiences into a coherent story. Habermas and de Silvera (2008) formulate four different aspects of the global coherence in every story – causal, temporal, thematic and cultural. In the present study only indicators for causal and for thematic coherence are used. Causal coherence refers to “how actions and changes in personality are caused and motivated by biographical experience” (Habermas & de Silvera, 2008, p. 709). Thematic coherence refers to the listener’s “orientation as to which are the dominant thematic strands in the life. Dominant themes create coherence through repetition of and variation on the same theme again and again” (Habermas & de Silvera, 2008, p.710). Achievement of coherence in the narrative presupposes certain level of cognitive and self-reflection (mentalization) skills. Mentalization is the act of hypothetical, imaginative (mostly preconscious) mental activity for interpretation of human behaviors and experiences (including one’s own) in terms of intentional mental states (e.g. needs, desires, feelings, beliefs, goals, purposes, and reasons) (Fonagy, Gergely, Jurist, & Target, 2002).

The main research interest is to reveal the interconnectedness of conscious (memories, causal reasoning) and preconscious (defense mechanisms, Dream) processes in construction of personal future projects and integration of future dimension into present life narrative. Personal Dream is a concept introduced by Levinson and col. (1978) and defined as “a vague sense of self in the adult world, of the kind of life one wants to lead as an adult. It has the quality of a vision, an imagined possibility that generates excitement and vitality” (p. 91). It was theoretically derived that Dreams may have two functions - motivational and/or defensive. The motivational function is related more to goal construction and goals are viewed as motivating forces giving certain energy and direction to personal acts. Defensive function is a form of compensation and it is related to the use of defensive mechanisms (such as autistic fantasy), as described in psychoanalytic literature (Freud, 1937). Defensive mechanisms are unconscious psychological strategies that reduce anxiety arising from unacceptable or potentially harmful stimuli. To explore defensive mechanisms in their relation of the Dream we used later conceptualizations of Anna Freud’s distinction of defences - mature, immature and neurotic (Bond, 1986).

The purpose of the present study is to reveal factors (socio-demographic and early experiences), processes, and mechanisms of identity construction as defined in psychodynamic literature.

First, we explore the thematic contents of the Dream and its correspondence to the age-related developmental tasks. The formation of the Dream as a projection of oneself in the future is an essential process of the anticipatory socialization and self-regulation of personal development. Additionally, motivational versus defensive function of the Dream are examined as dynamic aspects in the preconscious and unconscious process of identity formation.

Second, we assess qualities of life narrative (namely causal and thematic coherence) as indirect markers of identity consolidation.

Finally, in order to shed light on self-regulatory mechanisms (as the core of adaptive functioning) we measure: 1) the levels of defense strategies (neurotic, immature, and mature), 2) capacity for social-relational and self-reflection (mentalization).

Our first hypothesis is that the thematic contents of life narrative and the Dream should reflect important age-related tasks as significant personal relations and vocational aspirations.

Hypothesis 2: Causal coherence of adolescents' stories will correlate: a) positively with the motivational function of the Dream, b) negatively with the defensive function of the Dream, and c) positively with mature defenses.

Hypothesis 3: Thematic coherence will correlate positively with: a) mature defense mechanisms, b) motivational function of the Dream, and c) high mentalizing capacity (balanced towards certainty).

Hypothesis 4: It is expected that socio-demographics and challenging experiences (parental divorce, violence, loss etc.) affect: a) causal and thematic coherence of life narrative, b) levels of mentalization, and c) defensive functioning.

Method

Sample

The total number of participants in the study is 48. They are students from a high-school in Sofia, Bulgaria, aged 15-19 ($M=16.41$, $SD=1.08$). Girls are 62.5 % of the sample.

Procedure

The study was conducted in two stages. In the first stage all 48 students completed two self-report questionnaires. Additionally, information about socio-demographics and adverse/traumatic experience was gathered. In the second stage, all participants were invited for an individual semi-structured interview (Habermas methodology see above), and 28 of them responded. Adolescents had some difficulties in pointing out seven important events. Some of them (54%) tried to negotiate the number of events. However, everyone managed to conclude the task. The most popular strategy (50%) to start the life narrative is speaking about the first thing which was written on the cards. Only 20% of

adolescent started with introducing their names. There is a small percent (14%) of students who constructed a beginning sentence which gave a general idea of what their lives were (“My life is very interesting indeed. I had many obstacles in it and this taught me to be stronger and to not give up whatever happens.”). Putting an end to the life story was also difficult for the study participants. In most of the cases, they said something about the last important event and added phrase like “And that is it”. Only two students used some common wisdom or moral as ending of the story (“It’s just that life is way too beautiful, and we should not be mad at it, even though that there are some awful things that happen. We should get back on our feet and keep going”).

Instruments

The Bulgarian adaptations of the Defense Style Questionnaire (DSQ, Hancheva, 2010) and the Reflective Functioning Questionnaire (Fonagy et al., 2016) were used. The Bulgarian version of DSQ contains three factor structure – mature ($\alpha=0.61$), neurotic ($\alpha=0.57$) and immature ($\alpha=0.71$) defenses. Bulgarian version of RFQ follows the original two-dimensional structure: RFQ-C ($\alpha=0.57$) – reflecting the certainty in perceptions of mental states (both observed and experienced), and RFQ-U ($\alpha=0.71$) – the uncertainty of one’s own perceptions of mental life.

The interview takes place in two parts. The first involves completing the task of pointing out seven most important life events (Habermas & de Silvera, 2008). The participants are instructed to think about seven important events that had happened to them and to write them down. Then they have to arrange the events in chronological order and tell a story about who they are by including these seven important events. Their stories are transcribed verbatim, analyzed and rated by two independent raters (first and second author) for causal and thematic coherence.

To assess causal and thematic coherence we use the indicators of coherence provided by Habermas and de Silvera (Habermas & de Silvera, 2008). Then we created an additional rating system from 0 to 3 to evaluate how complex and representative every preposition for thematic and causal coherence was (see table 1).

Table 1
The rating system for coherent and thematic coherence

| Value | Criterion | Example |
|-------------------------|------------------------------------|---|
| Causal coherence | | |
| 0 | there is no causal connection | - |
| 1 | there is general causal connection | “Hm.. they help me to grow and to become who I am now.” |

| | | |
|---|--|---|
| 2 | there are causal connections and reflections | "But now I think that .. I won't... I mean I learned my lesson and now I can think about things better and I know what I am doing.. I wasn't like that before. Back then I thought after I had already done something." |
| 3 | there are causal connections, moving forces, developmental aspects | "My parents got divorced. I guess this was the worst, because I was a young kid and I didn't accept the situation very well. I felt bad and in that time a lot of things changed in my life" |

Thematic coherence

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 0 | there is no connection | |
| 1 | there are implicit connections | "I thought that he was like me, that he is good and he won't do anything to hurt me." |
| 2 | there are some connections with some level of probability | "And I came back here (in the school). May be this was one of the good things, because most of the teachers already knew me, my sister studied here also." |
| 3 | there are many connections with some level of probability | "All of a sudden it turned out that he and his friends were making fun of me. He was showing our private chats to his friends. I think that this experience made me incredulous. Until today it is hard for me to open up about my feelings and trust to someone, especially if it is a boy." |

The second part of the interview was focused on the content and origin of adolescents' Dream. Participants were asked questions like: "What do you dream about?" "How long have you dreamt about it?" "Was there something or someone who influenced your Dreams?" "Have you done anything to achieve your Dream?"

In order to differentiate the function of the Dream in personal life narrative a content analysis scheme has been developed, consisting of two broad coding categories – motivational and defensive function. Two independent coders rated each Dream for motivational/defensive function on a 4-point scale (0 – no formulation to 3 – elaborated statement) (see table 2).

Table 2
Rating system for motivational and defensive function of the dreams

| Values | Criterion | Example |
|---|--|---|
| Motivational function of the dream | | |
| 0 | no dream | - |
| 1 | general idea of a dream | „ I want to have a normal life.“ |
| 2 | a specific dream | „ Yes, I have. I was thinking many times about this. I want to have my own club.“ |
| 3 | a specific dream and actions taken toward achieving it | „ when I was around 4-5 grade a dream was created. I am still following the same dream and I have not given up on it.... yes I am doing some things.“ |
| Defensive function of the dream | | |
| 0 | no defensive function | „Yes, I have. I was thinking many times about this. I want to have my own club.“ |

| | | |
|---|--|---|
| 1 | there is a defensive function and its connected with experience of some relative | „I want to work in the field of social work... actually my sister has this education, but she didn't continue to develop. And maybe I want to become what she wanted to be“ |
| 2 | there is a defensive function which is connected with own experience | „One day I want to have lots of money, and when I enter a shop, and this is really my dream, I want to just take whatever I want without looking for its price tag... once I was with my friend in a shop. We were about to buy something together and we had to gather all that we had together to buy it and then I started to think about this dream...“ |
| 3 | there is a defensive function and its connected with traumatic experience | „For love, nothing else. Actually, the absence of my parents, it's absence of love...“ |

Results

A number of statistical procedures for data processing are performed in order to test the set hypotheses.

A content analysis is performed in order to extract quantitative data from the interview. The content analysis of life narratives of the participants reveals several common topics. The most important events for them are relationships with their friends (for 75% from the sample), with their parents (71%), with their intimate partners (36%), with other relatives (32%), and with siblings (28%). Half of them (54%) included a story about school. Hobbies are important also for 50% of them. Large percent of them (43%) said that an important event is the loss of someone. Part of adolescents (10%) described experiences with religion and another part (10%) with having a pet (see figure 1).

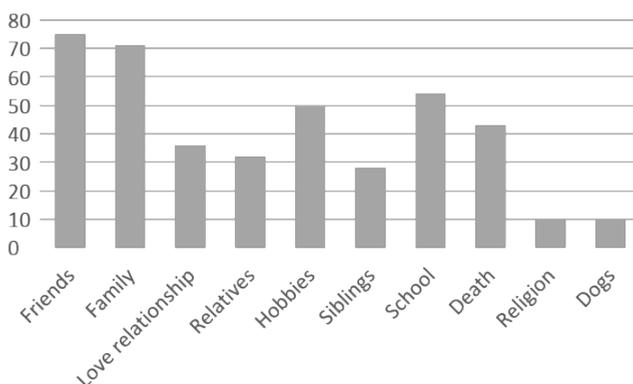


Figure 1. Frequency of life narrative topics (in %)

The content analysis of adolescent Dreams elicit ten thematic categories: *Future occupation, Education, Love status, Specific interest, General idea, Abroad,*

Relatives, Independence, Material status, Travelling (see figure 2). *Future occupation* (35%) and *Education* (23%) had the largest relative shares. Some of the answers classified in the *Future occupations* category are answers like: "I want to be teacher", "policeman", "to have my own business", but also answers like: "I want to have a good job". For the *Education* category there are more specific answers like "I want to study psychology", "I want to study about Japanese culture in Japan", and less specific ones like "I want to finish school", "I want to study at university". Ten percent of the Dreams are in the *Romantic status* category (e.g. "I want to be with my girlfriend", "I want to be alone, not in a relationship"). The *General ideas* category has a small share - around 6%. The answers in it sound like: "I want "normal life", "to be happy", "to be chill", "not losing hope". In the *Specific interest* category, (6%) there are diverse responses, from: "I want to have others like me who will understand me, this can happen in YouTube, so I want to be successful in it", "realization of my poems", to "my parents to buy me a cavalier (dog)". Another category with a small share (5%) is the *Abroad* category. Some statements include negative formulations "I don't want to live here (Bulgaria)", others – concrete locations "I may start learning German and I will go to Germany". There are responses like "I want everyone around me to be in good health", "I want to separate myself from my relatives". These responses are 5 % of the total 82 formulations of Dreams and are referred as *Relatives*. Only 4 % of the Dreams are about material things (*Material status*) like "money, house", "lots of money, so I can buy without looking for price tags in the shops". Another 4 % are about *Independence* (e.g. "to be free", " to do whatever I want instead of what I was told to do"). The category with the smallest share (2%) is *Travelling* (e.g. "I want to travel the world", "I want to go to Russia").

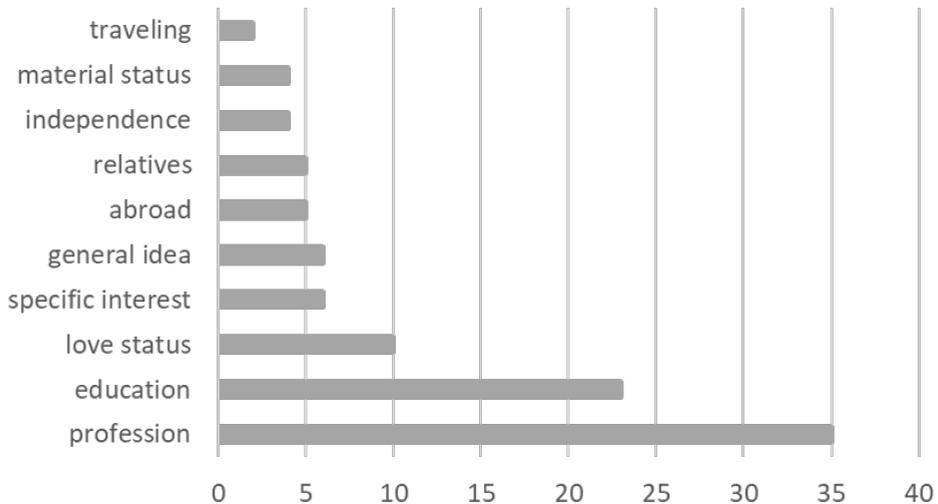


Figure 2. *Thematic categories of adolescents' Dreams (in %)*

The Dreams of the participants are coded and quantified by assessing the two factors defensive function of the Dream (DFD) and motivational function of

the Dream (MFD) on a 4-point scale (0-3). The largest number of participants (20) are assessed with a high degree of MFD and a low degree of DFD. The next largest group is that of participants who have a high degree of MFD and a high degree of DFD. Their number is 7. The Dream of one participant received low marks on the MFD scale and high on the DFD scale. There is no participant that has low scores on both scales (see Table 1).

Table 1
Distribution on motivational and defensive function of the Dream

| | |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| high MFD low DFD (20) | high MFD high DFD (7) |
| low MFD low DFD (0) | low MFD high DFD (1) |

There are also some additional findings about adolescents' Dreams. One third of the participants shared that they are inspired to dream by something, which they had seen in the media (mostly movies and interviews with celebrities on YouTube). Some of them (57%) shared that they had support from the members of their families and friends in elaborating their Dream. Almost half of them (46%) remembered a particular moment when they have started to formulate their Dreams. Some of them claimed to have had their Dreams since they were 10 years old (38%), the rest 62% reported to have formulated their Dreams after the age of 13. It is interesting that 32% of participants know exactly what is needed in order to fulfill their Dream (e.g. "I have been waiting so long, I just need to wait a couple of months").

A correlation analysis (Spearman method) for causal coherence, thematic coherence, neurotic defenses, immature defenses, mature defenses, motivational function of the Dream, defensive function of the Dream, mentalization level is performed (see table 3).

Positive significant correlation between causal and thematic coherence was found ($r = 0.487$, $p < 0.01$). A moderate positive correlation is found between causal coherence and motivational function of the Dream ($r = 0.379$, $p < 0.05$). There is no statistically significant correlation between causal coherence and defensive function of the Dream ($r = -0.081$, $p = 0.68$). The correlation between causal coherence and mature defenses is positive, but not significant ($r=0.382$, $p=0.113$).

There is no statistically significant correlation between thematic coherence and mature defense mechanisms ($r = -0.072$, $p = 0.768$), and between thematic coherence and the motivational function of the Dream ($r=-0,055$, $p=0,783$). The correlation between thematic coherence and certainty scale of mentalization is negative and significant ($r = -0,386$, $p = 0,05$).

Table 3
Correlational matrix

| | CC | TC | MD | ND | ID | DFD | MFD | SM | UM |
|---|-----|--------------------|------------------|-----------------------|------------------|------------------|---------------------|------------------|-----------------------|
| Causal coherence (CC) | r=1 | r=,487** p=,009 | r=,375 p=,113 | r=,382 p=,088 | r=,027 p=,917 | r=,081 p=,680 | r=0,379* p=0,046 | r=,186 p=,363 | r=,161 p=,431 |
| Thematic coherence (TC) | | r=1,000 | r=,072 p=,768 | r=,175 p=,449 | r=,158 p=,545 | r=,287 p=,138 | r=,055 p=,783 | r=,386 p=,051 | r=,201 p=,324 |
| Mature defenses (MD) | | | r=1,000 | r = ,554** p=0,001 | r=,186 p=,333 | r=,263 p=,277 | r=,179 p=,462 | r=,327 p=,055 | r=,182 p=,312 |
| Neurotic defenses (ND) | | | | r=1,000 | r=,208 p=,298 | r=,082 p=,725 | r=,195 p=,396 | r=,342 p=,038 | r=,174 p=,309 |
| Immature defenses (ID) | | | | | r=1,000 | r=,195 p=,452 | r=,277 p=,282 | r=,259 p=,168 | r=,074 p=,708 |
| Defensive function of Dream (DFD) | | | | | | r=1,000 | r=,345 p=,072 | r=,134 p=,513 | r=,275 p=,174 |
| Motivational function of Dream (MFD) | | | | | | | r=1,000 | r=,225 p=,269 | r=,022 p=,914 |
| Certain mentalization (SM) | | | | | | | | r=1,000 | r = -,515** p=,000 |
| Uncertain mentalization (UM) | | | | | | | | | r=1,000 |

A t-test for independent samples is performed to check whether gender would affect the results of any of the variables - causal and thematic coherence,

defensive and motivational function of the Dream, mature, immature and neurotic defenses. The null hypothesis for all variables is confirmed, except for the mature defense mechanisms ($t(34) = -3,127, p = 0,004$). Boys have statistically significant higher scores on this variable ($X = 6.48, SD = 0.90$) than girls ($X = 5.25, SD = 1.27$).

ANOVA one-factor analyzes are performed to check the impact of challenging experiences (parental divorce, violence or loss of loved ones) on narrative coherence, on level of mentalization, and defensive functions. Many of the participants (61%) reported that they had experienced loss of a relative or a friend, one third of them are children of divorced parents, and 27.1% had experienced or observed violence. Participants who have experienced parental divorce have statistically significantly higher scores ($X = 1.10, SD = 0.79$) on the certainty scale of mentalization than those of intact families ($X = 0.60, SD = 0.48$), $F(1,40) = 6.553, p = 0.014$. The impact of other events is not statistically significant on any other variable in the present study.

Discussion

The focus of the study is on the qualities of life narrative and the Dream content & function in the process of identity construction and mature functioning in the face of normative and non-normative challenges. The results confirm the main hypothesis that age-appropriate tasks are predominant and importance of significant others is present in past, present and future accounts. Afforistically formulated measure of mental health and maturity in psychoanalytic literature – “to love and to work” – has been derived from personal narratives of adolescents (Erikson, 1963).

The fact that 28 participants have formulated a total of 82 Personal Dreams reveals that the processing of dreaming is highly relevant to them. In according to Levinson’s description for this sample the Dream has more motivational than defensive function. It is in high relevance to their current activities and it is inspired by socializing agents in their cultural context (e.g. social media influencers and adult role models). In the present study Personal Dreams of Bulgarian adolescents are divided into ten categories. The categories with the largest relative share concern their education and professional realization. These particular findings are in accord with Levinson’s and colleagues’ conceptualization of the transition to adulthood (Levinson et al., 1978). The choices of career and education are key components of the emerging life structure. The components perform an important function of bridging personal aspirations and normative cultural conceptions of “successful” adulthood. Similar results come from earlier study on Bulgarian emerging adults (21-24 years) (Hristova, 2002). In Hristova’s research the interest in the occupational self-determination, immediate and long-term educational tasks, and cognitive mastery keep stable and central position in motivational hierarchy of future time perspective, regardless of historical and societal changes. Our results confirm the

importance of Personal Dream in self-regulation and identity construction. The Dream keeps both the main content (education, vocation, relations) and function (motivational) in subsequent generations of adolescents. We could conclude that development from adolescence to adulthood includes inevitably interaction of individual strivings with societal standards. Cultural prototypes and paths to adulthood, despite of their pluralism, keep the same core of values – “to love and to work”.

Overall, the results show that participants are able to create a life story that includes moments from their past, present and desired future. Most of them are capable of constructing and presenting life narratives with a good structure, but in most of the stories, this structure is still rudimental. This reflects the expected qualities of the narrative representative for certain level of identity formation, which has already begun, but is still far from completion. However, their enthusiastic sharing of experiences, openness and willingness to participate reveal other age-specific processes and needs. The Effect of auditorium and Personal fable (Elkind & Bowen, 1979) is representative of a need for a social mirroring, a considered listener – someone confirming their perception and construction of themselves.

The second hypothesis is partially confirmed. The ability to make causal inferences in construction of life narrative is connected to the goal-oriented quality of the Dream (thus supporting hypothesis 2a). Causal coherence tends to be associated with the use of more mature defense mechanisms, providing evidence for developmental advances in cognitive and emotional functioning (hypothesis 2c). Defensive functioning of the Dream is rarely independently identified in the answers of the participants (only in one) and is not statistically related to the causal coherence.

Thematic coherence is reflecting main topics in life which are supposed to be highly personalized and unique. The lack of correlation between thematic coherence and both mature defense mechanisms and motivational function of the Dream (hypotheses 3a/b) might be explained by the turbulence of adolescence period. Strivings for diverse experiences and oftentimes – testing of limits, are incongruent with focus on reduced number of themes. Higher thematic coherence is associated with lower levels of certainty in one’s reflective capacity (mentalization). The result is in contradiction with hypothesis 3c, further theoretical conceptualization and research of the process of mentalization is needed.

In regard of the fourth hypothesis, there are no greater diversity in socio-demographic variables. All participants are the same age, live in the capital city, study in the same public school and are of a similar socio-economic background. Theoretically based gender differences are expected in the process of construction of life narrative but in-group variances are also huge, especially in smaller samples. A statistically significant difference is found between boys and girls in their scores on mature defense mechanisms. These results might be explained by the fact that boys endure more social pressure to be efficient and they internalize these

expectations. Another possible explanation might be related to methodology – the defense mechanisms are unconscious strategies but when measured with self-report instruments there is a tendency the results to be biased towards social desirability.

Children of divorced parents demonstrate elevated levels of certainty in mentalization. Certainty in mentalization is usually considered an adaptive characteristic but only when appropriately balanced with understanding of opacity of mental states – e.g reasonable levels of doubts. When certainty is overemphasized it is a marker of desadaptive tendency of highly sophisticated reasoning with no relevance to the applied strategies of adaptation. One possible explanation of the abovementioned result is connected to this peculiarity – named hypermentalization (Fonagy et al., 2002). Parental divorce as a potentially traumatic and challenging experience provokes a need to control or at least create a plausible understanding of the situation. In this context, development of intellectualized explanations (high certainty in mentalization) might alleviate anxiety but does not serve the purpose of engagement in reality.

them to create explanations for themselves which help them cope with stress and restore calm. This scale, however, measures hypermentalization, which suggests that this approach is not effective.

Conclusion

The study design combines qualitative and quantitative methods, providing opportunity for an in-depth understanding of psychological processes with preconscious nature and thus revealing the function of personal meaning construction in identity formation and its future projections in the Dream. The prevailing contents of the Dream reflect the anticipatory positioning in the adult world. Education and occupational domains are perceived as a “high-way” for achievement of desired socially approved adult status and recognition. Significant others and human bonds are a salient topic pointing out the relational nature of human identity.

Limitations of the study include the cross-sectional design, and the small sample size. A bigger sample and more socio-demographically diverse participants are needed. Further development of the adapted instruments and longitudinal design are to be planned.

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