ADOLESCENT'S ATTITUDE TO FOSTER OR ADOPTED CHILDREN

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Abstract

The way how sibling relationships are formed in foster and adapting families (next – "foster") seems to be an important issue for study. Among other things, sibling relationships play an important role in the formation of personality and persist throughout life longer than other close relationships. We studied through theoretical and qualitative methods the aspects of the relationship of biological adolescent children to their foster siblings, as well as to the adoption situation in general and to the phenomenon of orphanhood. First, 61 adolescents from 12 to 18 years old (M=15) gave their free associations to the concept of "adopted child" and definitions of the concept. We analyzed the obtained associations with the method of prototypical analysis by P. Vergès; the definitions were analyzed by the method of phenomenological content analysis. Next, 11 semi-structured interviews were conducted about the adolescent's experience of living in a family with a foster child. Additionally, the modified Sachs-Levi "Incomplete Sentences" technique was used with following phenomenological content analysis. We also used a modified version of the self-assessment method by Dembo-Rubinstein and the "Family Sociogram" method by Eidemiller. We have found that adolescents' social ideas about the concept of "foster child" vary depending on their experience of living in a foster family. The representations of the biological children from foster families were more objective, detailed, and associated with real facts and feelings. These ideas are somewhat more emotionally charged; they combine both positive and negative emotions. Teenagers from foster families better understand both the characteristics of foster children, the circumstances of their lives, and their parents' motives for fostering or adopting a child into the family, as well as the responsibilities of foster families. The attitudes of biological children - adolescents towards foster siblings are generally friendly, but ambivalent. Biological children - adolescents from foster families associate their negative experiences with foster children with unrealistic expectations due to lack of information, as well as with limited personal space and the inability to discuss their experiences regarding changes in the family openly. Adolescents in a foster families experienced some changes in their family structure, for example, they perceive their parents as having become closer to their foster child and pushing their biological child to the periphery of their family system. The results of the study allow us to develop special therapeutic techniques to help foster families.

Keywords: Adolescent, foster family, adopting family, social representations, foster child.

1. Introduction

For child's successful adaptation in the family, it is important to ensure the functional and structural reorganization of the substitute family, the development of the child's interaction with all family members (Oslon, 2006; Shulga & Antipina, 2018). A significant predominance of researchers' attention to child-parent relationships, compared to sibling relationships, is noted among studies of various family factors in the children adoption.

Sibling relationships are one of the most important connections that people maintain throughout their lives (Allan, 1979). Siblings can provide adolescents with significant support, training for responsibility and caring skills developing, can be figures of long-term attachment (Dunn, 2007). But in a foster family, the presence of a natural child can create additional difficulties in the foster child adaptation. Some studies show that rates of repeated child abandonment are higher in families that already have natural or adopted children (Wedge & Mantel, 1991). In turn, natural children are caught in a dilemma between the significance of the very fact of adoption and caring for a foster child, and a strong sense of injustice towards themselves (Thompson & McPherson, 2011; Rushton et al., 2001).

2. Objectives

This study was aimed to identify the specifics the attitude of natural-born adolescents from foster families towards foster children in comparison with adolescents who do not have experience of living together with an adopted child. It is important to clarify that in Russian society, the differences between foster families and adoption are clearly visible at the administrative level, but at the level of everyday ideas, many people poorly distinguish between these concepts. Therefore, we considered it appropriate to explore ideas about these two types of families together.

We hypothesized that the attitude about foster children of the adolescents from families without experience of adoption are more anxious, reflecting social fears and expectations; and the attitude of the adolescents from families with experience of adoption are more realistic and emotionally neutral.

The following research questions were also formulated: 1) What emotions do adolescents feel from foster families experience to foster children?; 2) How do they feel in facing the reality of orphanhood?; 3) How do they feel in adoption situations?

3. Methods

The research consists of two main stages. To collect initial empirical data, we used the following **methods**: free associations to the concept of "adopted child" and definitions of the concept. We analyzed the obtained associations with the method of prototypical analysis by P. Vergès; the definitions were analyzed by the method of phenomenological content analysis.

At the first stage, 61 adolescents from 12 to 18 years old (M=15) participated in the survey. The first group included 24 adolescents from 12 to 18 years old, natural children from substitute families (foster and adoption). The second group consisted of 37 adolescents from 12 to 18 years old from families who had no experience of adoption. Both groups were balanced for gender.

Next, 11 semi-structured interviews were conducted about the adolescent's experience of living in a family with a foster child. Additionally, the modified Sachs-Levi "Incomplete Sentences" technique was used with following phenomenological content analysis. We also used a modified version of the self-assessment method by Dembo-Rubinstein and the "Family Sociogram" method by Eidemiller.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. The content and structure of adolescents' attitude to the concept of "foster/ adopted child"

The concept of *beloved/love* occurred to be common to both groups of adolescents in the core zone of attitudes. The concept of *compassion* became specific for the core attitudes of adolescents from families without experience of foster care. Most likely, this points to contemporary discourse, a broad social movement in support of adoption, and a large amount of related information in the media. Among the core concepts of adolescents from foster families there are on the one hand, *difficulties*, and on the other, a *positive acquisition, for example, friendship*. This feature may indicate that adolescents from foster families rely on stereotypes characteristic of their community (foster parents' schools, special groups for natural children from foster families, family environment). It is important that difficulties are not kept quiet, which suggests that they are generally perceived as surmountable and not so critical as to outweigh the benefits.

In the first peripheral area of associations (high-frequency opinion of minority), the common concept was *parents/ mom/ dad/* In a group of adolescents from foster families, specific associations were: *small, toys, joy, sick, illness*. In the group of adolescents from families without foster children, the following concepts prevailed: *orphan, guardianship, child, new friend, not relative*. That is, in the group of adolescents from foster families there is a focus on the real situation of living together with a foster child, while in adolescents from families without fostering experience, the associations are mainly related to the specificity of foster children, their distinctive features, and facts from their lives.

In the second peripheral area (low-frequency opinion of majority), which is usually associated with the personal opinion of respondents, the concept of *brother / sister* was the common elements. For adolescents from families without fostering experience, the concepts of *orphanage, child without parents, parents have died* indicate internal experiences associated with the situation of orphanhood itself, the fear of losing parents and loneliness, then for natural children from foster families more often concepts are: *desire to help, annoying, infuriates*. These are associations that express a real personal attitude towards a foster child. It is ambivalent and, on the one hand, it is a sincere involvement in their families' aims, and on the other hand, recognition of their own negative feelings to a foster child.

In the third peripheral region (low-frequency opinion of minority), there were the emotions experienced by respondents in both groups. In the group of adolescents from foster families, the association expressed were rather *neutral or positive*. The adolescents from families without fostering experience expresses ambivalent emotions, on the one hand indicating the *possibility of a favorable development of events*, on the other - *sadness and fear of loneliness.*

The absence of emotionally charged associations in areas of adolescents' personal opinions suggests a deliberate emotional detachment from this topic. This assumption is also confirmed by the fact that all emotionally charged reactions turned out to be on the very periphery of the attitudes structure, i.e. are mentioned rarely and in the very last turn. And among them the emotions of sadness and loneliness predominate. Apparently, these are the emotions evoked by the topic of orphanhood among teenagers who are not familiar with fostering situation personally. The associations reflecting the personal opinion of adolescents from foster families are more specific, describe real life situations, they generally contain more different emotions, including ambivalent ones. This allows us to assert that natural adolescents in foster families are strongly involved in the fostering situations, they comprehend it, integrate it into the system of their own values and motives, and experience it emotionally. This shows the importance of the active involvement of natural children in the system of social and psychological support for foster families.

The content analysis of the definitions of the concept "foster / adopted child" given by the respondents next differences were revealed. In the group of adolescents from foster families, more semantic categories were identified (39) than in the group without fostering experience (29). As a result of group discussion and expert assessments all identified categories were grouped into 8 meta-categories: general idea of a foster/ adopted child, a child deprived of parents; the emergence of a new family; expectations and responsibility of the foster family, the reasons why the child was left without parental care, the reasons why the foster families take the child, feelings to the foster child, hopes. The lists of meta-categories in these 2 groups were the same, the frequency of their occurrence is also approximately the same, the differences lie only in their semantic content.

In their representations the foster child himself, respondents from both groups mention the "*foreignness*" of the adopted child, but in the group of adolescents from families without fostering experience, this theme was mentioned much more often. In both groups adolescents most often mentioned that a foster child *left without parental care* and was *accepted into a new family*, but in the group of adolescents from foster families, the theme of a new family was mentioned more often, and in the group of adolescents without fostering experience, the theme of absence of parents was heard usually. In the group of natural-born adolescents from foster families, *responsibility of the family* and rather *objective expectations from the foster child* were mentioned more often, and in the group of adolescents without fostering experience, the theme of *obligation* was more often manifested. When it comes to the *reasons why a child was left without care*, there were greater awareness among adolescents from foster families. They express a *greater number of reasons for the loss of parents*, while most statements by respondents from families without fostering experience were limited to the abstract "*circumstances.*" Among *the reasons why foster families take in a child*, the statements of adolescents from families without fostering experience mentioned the theme of *the general mutual need of the child and the family for each other* more often. In contrast, teenagers from foster families were more oriented towards the motives of their parents and give *more specific and varied reasons* (*they want to help, they cannot have their own children, they were waiting...*). When talking about their *emotional attitude towards a foster child*, both groups talk about *support*, but in the group of adolescents from foster families, the ideas of *sympathy* and *care* were more often heard. *Positive hopes* were more often mentioned by adolescents without fostering experience, but these hopes were more abstract (*a good future, a new home*); adolescents from foster families talk more specifically about the *next stages of the foster child's life.*

Thus, we see that the content of the representations of adolescents from families without fostering experience mostly reflect a certain public opinion on this issue, as well as the expression of some anxiety regarding a possible collision with the situation of orphanhood. The content of the representations of natural children from foster families, mostly are filled with elements of personal experience. They are less emotional colored, but have more texture, details, fewer social stereotypes, more content related to what the family is experiencing. Apparently, adolescents from foster families are more informed by their parents about what to expect when a foster child appears in the family, and about what function the family performs in relation to this child. Adolescents from families without fostering experience seem to be guided by social discourse regarding foster children, by information that is broadcast through the media and social networks.

4.2 Emotional attitude of natural children to foster | adopted siblings, the situation of adoption and the phenomenon of orphanhood

At the second stage of the study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 adolescents (5 girls and 6 boys) from 12 to 18 years old (M=15), who are natural children in foster care families. The saturation of the sample was ensured by the variability of the cities of residence, the number of adopted children in the family, the length of time living with the adopted child varied from 3 to 11 years (M = 3.9). Analysis of the interviews using the grounded theory method allowed us to draw the following conclusions.

The emotions that natural children feel to the foster children are quite intense and varied. Trusting to their parents, being initially "in the know," they calmly perceive the information that a foster child will appear in the family, sometimes with interest and positive expectations. But when faced personally with what adoptive brothers and sisters can be like, the range of experiences expands and includes both irritation, alienation, and sympathy, the desire to participate, to establish contact. And at this moment, it becomes important to be able to discuss it openly with parents or specialists/

Limited information about what they will face contributes to the formation of unrealistic expectations and feelings of helplessness in situations where reality does not meet expectations. Negative emotions are often associated with a adolescent's lack of personal space, with an increase in emotional distance from the parents, and with the inability to express to them feelings associated with the arrival of a new family member.

The attitude of natural children **towards idea of adoption** is generally pragmatic. Despite the fact that they perceive the adoption of a child into a family as an undoubtedly good deed, they understand that foster parents may have personal motives (inability to have children, filling an inner emptiness). From their own experience, they know that raising a foster child requires a lot of time, effort, stability and financial costs, and is fraught with serious changes in the family. Almost all of them accept the possibility of adoption as a good way to have children, but they doubt if "they will be parents in principle?", because they understand how much effort, responsibility and dedication it requires.

The experience of facing the reality of orphanhood, despite the associated sense of fear, turns out to be a resource for natural children. Thanks to it, they learn to be attentive and tolerant of differences between people. It encourages greater empathy, understanding and acceptance of the characteristics of others. Exposure to the traumatic experiences of other children influences how they evaluate their own lives, expands boundaries, and develops skills of patience and self-control, which respondents themselves consider important for themselves.

The data from projective techniques also confirm the results of the previous stages of the study and, in general, are consistent with each other. Unfortunately, the text size limitation does not allow us to present them in detail. In addition to what was discussed above, these data show differences in the perceptions of adolescents from foster families about the status of their mother and father. In general, in their perception, parents are closer to their foster sibling than to them. Adolescents in this situation see themselves as relegated to the periphery of the family structure. But, apparently, they consider it natural for a mother to be immersed in caring for a new family member. As we know from other methods, adolescents understand their mother's motives and assume her values. Apparently, this is why the image of the mother, despite the emotional distance from her, remains positive, colored with bright, sthenic emotions. Perhaps, like in situation where a new natural child appears in the family, the eldest/earlier child pays attention to the father, expecting help and support from him in a situation where the mother cannot give him as much attention as before. But, for some reason, fathers in foster families do not perform this function and do not provide their natural child with sufficient support, which apparently explains the range of negative emotions toward father. These data pose the task of a more detailed study of the distribution of roles (including those related to the regulation of the emotional climate) in foster families, studying the specifics of changes in the family structure associated with the appearance of a foster child.

5. Conclusions

1. Social attitudes of adolescents to the concept of "adopted child" vary depending on their experience of living in a foster family. The attitudes of natural children from adoptive families are more objective, detailed, and associated with real facts and feelings. These attitudes are more emotionally charged; they combine both positive and negative emotions. The attitudes of adolescents from families without adoption experience are drier, more detached, containing well-known facts, negative feelings associated with the phenomenon of orphanhood (loneliness, rejection, the possibility of being left without loved ones) are increasingly pushed to the periphery of the attitudes structure.

2. Adolescents from foster families better understand both the characteristics of adopted children, the circumstances of their lives, and the motives of their parents to take a foster child into the family, as well as the tasks and responsibilities of the foster family. Their attitudes to an adopted child reflect their acceptance of both adopted children with their characteristics and adoption situations in general.

3. The attitude of natural children – adolescents to foster ones is generally friendly, but ambivalent, along with recognition of significance of caring for orphans, they experience complex, ambivalent feelings towards foster siblings and the general situation. Their experience contains both gains and losses, conflicts, feelings of loneliness, and distance from parents. The range of experiences varies from irritation, alienation to sympathy, care, and the desire to establish contact.

4. Natural children - adolescents from foster families associate their negative feelings to foster children with unrealistic expectations due to lack of information, as well as with limited personal space and the inability to discuss their experiences regarding changes taking place in the family openly.

5. Adolescents who are natural children perceive the experience of close acquaintance with the phenomenon of orphanhood as a resource, despite the actualizing fears of loss of loved ones and loneliness. Thanks to this, they have the opportunity to expand their understanding of the world, develop important skills of responsibility, tolerance of differences, patience and acceptance.

6. The adolescent's attitude to the possibility of a child adoption in the future is contradictory. On the one hand, this becomes a normal form of parenthood for them, on the other hand, understanding how much resources this requires from parents makes them think about giving up parenthood in the future in principle.

7. Adolescents in a foster family experience changes in the family structure; they see their parents as having become closer to the foster child and pushing the natural child to the periphery of the family system. But the emotional attitude to parents differs: while experiencing positive emotions towards the mother, the adolescent in this situation more often experiences negative emotions towards the father.

Based on the results obtained, in practical work with foster families, it seems important to pay attention to the family structure: to provide all children with a fairly comfortable personal space, pay special attention to ensuring a stable connection with parents for the natural child; find ways for the father to compensate the lack of attention to the natural child from the mother during particularly stressful periods of a new family member adaptation.

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