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Structural and Content Characteristics of Students' Social Representations of Psychological Help

Albina A. Nesterova¹ , Mikhail A. Esipov² 

^{1, 2} Moscow Region State University, Mytishchi, Russian Federation

✉ anesterova77@rambler.ru

Abstract

Introduction. The relevance of current research is determined by the need of the population to resolve their problems and at the same time by existing prejudices and low awareness about the possibilities of psychological help. The research was based on S. Moscovici's concept of social representations; using structural approach, we were the first to identify structural and content characteristics of students' representations of psychological help. **Methods.** The study sample was composed of 498 students of Moscow universities (17–25 years old) and 50 respondents of early adulthood and middle age (33–55 years old). The attitude towards psychological help was analyzed using an original questionnaire; the level of readiness to receive help from a psychologist was determined using the questionnaire 'Attitudes Toward Seeking Professional Psychological Help Scale' (E. H. Fischer, A. Farina), adapted for the Russian sample. To systematize the data, we used content analysis, Vergès' prototypical analysis, and methods of mathematical statistics. **Results.** The core of psychological help representations contains such associations as 'help', 'support', 'conversation', 'salvation'; the periphery includes constructs like 'understanding', 'advice', 'psychologist', and 'treatment/therapy' (first periphery), as well as 'way out', 'deceit', 'problem solution', and 'relief' (second periphery). Content analysis allowed to aggregate the content of the core and the periphery into four groups: 'relief of the condition', 'problems', 'support', and 'interaction'. **Discussion.** The level of readiness to seek psychological assistance is significantly higher for young women than for young men, and in general, women regardless of their age have greater trust in such help. Students are less focused on seeking professional support compared to older adults. The most important criteria in the choice of a psychologist are the methods that he or she uses, work experience, and age. **Conclusions.** Students' positive representations of psychological help are primarily manifested in the ability to receive support and relieve their emotional state. Increasing the level of trust in psychologists among the population will facilitate maintenance of psychological well-being and full integration of young people into the system of providing psychological help.

Keywords

psychological help, social representations, attitudes, prototypical analysis, students, structural approach, representation core, representation periphery, attitude to psychologists, social constructionism

Highlights

- ▶ The core and the periphery of young people's social representations are explained by the specifics of young age and the experience of communicating with psychologists; they include such constructs as 'support', 'problems', 'interaction', and 'relief of the condition'.
- ▶ Compared to adults, university students have lower awareness of psychological help opportunities and are less likely to seek assistance in problematic situations.
- ▶ For young people, the reason for seeking psychological help can be the need to receive support and understand themselves better, whereas adults are motivated by the need to get a particular advice and learn.

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Introduction

Present-day reality shows how much the humanity needs to promote psychological help to the population and develop the mechanisms of professional support to those who struggle with various crises, adversities, and problems. At the same time, it should be noted that the demand for psychological help among the population largely depends on the expectations of potential clients, their trust/mistrust in psychologists, their attitudes and ideas about what psychology is, what psychologists do, and situations when one should seek help. This issue is especially acute when it comes to the young generation, who have not yet accumulated sufficient store of practical wisdom to resolve certain psychological problems and have not fully recognized their own resources for coping with difficulties (Kuznetsova & Kryukov, 2012).

It can be noted that on a global scale, there are not many country-specific studies on the demand for psychological help among representatives of different social groups. Nevertheless, psychological services of many countries are concerned about this issue, since the number of specialists in this field increases and so does the amount and variety of psychological services (Aguirre Velasco, Cruz, Billings, Jimenez, & Rowe, 2020; Xu et al., 2018). For example, a study performed in the UK in 1990s demonstrated that only 16 % of respondents would seek psychological help in case they encountered a serious problem or an emotional breakdown (Barker, Pistrang, Shapiro, & Shaw, 1990). Similar results were obtained in Germany, Brazil, South Africa, Greece, Australia, China, and the USA (Divin, Harper, Curran, Corry, & Leavey, 2018; Fukuda et al., 2016; Nohr, Ruiz, Sandoval Ferrer, & Buhlmann, 2021; Rowe et al., 2014; Yee, Ceballos, & Diaz, 2020). In these studies, no more than 20 % of respondents indicated their readiness to see a psychologist. And those are only social attitudes – in practice, when it comes to real actions, the readiness to use professional psychological services is demonstrated by less than 10 %.

Russian studies also provide some data about the attitudes of population to psychological help. In her thesis research, Makarova (2009) analyzed the specifics of psychological counseling representations among different social groups. The majority of respondents had not developed the need for seeking professional psychological assistance, instead they preferred the help of their parents and friends, who had their complete trust.

It is possible to single out three different approaches in psychological theories that explain this cautious type of behavior regarding psychological help. Within the scope of *the first approach*, researchers have created attitude measurement scales, which allow to identify a number of factors that can affect the decision to seek psychological help: 1) recognition of importance and usefulness of such help; 2) no fear of possible stigmatization as a result of such appeal; 3) trust in psychologists; 4) openness in interpersonal relations (Kushner & Sher, 1991). This approach addresses such phenomena as 'the fear of therapy' and stigmatization, which can result from seeking psychological help (Pattyn, Verhaeghe, Sercu, & Bracke, 2014). Studies of this type prove that people who ask for psychological assistance are often stigmatized and labelled as 'unable to cope with their problems on their own'. The weakness of this approach is in the fact that is well-known from numerous studies – attitudes of an individual and his (or her) actual behavior often contradict one another (Lapierre paradox). Therefore, this approach does not describe deep-lying reasons of readiness to see a psychologist, neither does it address a wider range of variables that are simply ignored in these scales.

The second approach is more focused on getting trivial and 'naive representations' of psychological help. In foreign psychology, this approach is called 'lay theories' (Haslam, 2003), while in Russian psychology the studies focus on 'naive and everyday representations' (Thostov & Nelyubina, 2008; Ulybin & Pelevin, 2010). Within the scope of this method, researchers compare different representations about the content and types of psychological help among the members of different groups: professional psychologists, students, future psychologists, and people who only vaguely understand the specifics and content of such assistance. Interestingly, comparing professional opinions with the conceptions of people who are not professional psychologists, researchers obtain a lot of similar statements, often mythological ones, which are rather intuitive and distorted than corresponding to reality.

Finally, *the third approach* originated from social constructionism. Social constructionists argue that individuals actively construct their social world based on their own experience and beliefs, but do it in such a way that these constructs have maximum meaning and serve the goals and values of an individual (Nesterova & Suslova, 2015). Different social groups share certain concepts and beliefs called 'social representations', which are subsequently used to understand the social world and to form attitudes (Potter, 1996). Hence, attitudes of individuals are based on social beliefs, constructed by particular social groups in a certain historical period. Therefore, in our opinion, it is much more productive to study social representations in the discourse of those groups that we as researchers are interested in.

The theory of social representations addresses the formation process of social knowledge and its products (Belinskaya, 2017; Bovina, 2010; Bovina, Dvoryanchikov, & Yakushenko, 2018; Emel'yanova, 2018; Abric, 2001; Moscovici, 2000; Moliner & Bovina, 2020; Rochira, Salvatore, Veltri, Redd, & Lancia, 2020; Vuillot, Mathevet, & Sirami, 2020; Wagner, 2020). Formation of social knowledge is a process by means of which individuals create relatively stable representations of important social objects and significant events that constitute their reality. The products of social cognition

represent formed structures of knowledge that allow to classify people and objects, compare and explain their behavior, as well as objectify them as a part of one's social reality (Moscovici, 2000). Social representations play an important role in human lives: they allow to transform an object that is perceived as peculiar into something that seems comprehensible, associable with other images, concepts, and familiar ideas.

Structural approach that we used in this study defines social representations as organized systems comprised of two components – structure and content (Abric, 2001). *Content* is the information shared about a certain social object by a social group. *Structure* organizes this content into a consistent form. The structure contains the core and the periphery (Moscovici, 2000; Emel'yanova, 2016). *The core* includes the most stable information shared by the individuals and determines the general meaning of a social representation. *The periphery* is a more variable part of the representation, which passes through the filters of social context, interpersonal communication, specific characteristics of group members, and differences between various groups. Different periphery configurations complement and support the general meaning conveyed by the core, but at the same time integrate it with specific context, experience, and subjective opinions of various individuals.

Methods

The research material includes quantitative and qualitative data obtained from bachelor and master students of Moscow universities that major in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) and Humanities (excluding Psychology). The sample is comprised of 498 young people between 17 and 25 years old, 55.3 % of them male and 44.7 % female. In addition to them, respondents of early adulthood and middle age (33–55 years old) took part in the study as a control group for comparison.

The purpose of this paper was to study how modern young people see psychological help, how ready they are to use the services of psychologists, and what expectations lie behind this readiness. In this research, we used a productive methodology of social constructionism and S. Moscovici's theory of social representations (Moscovici, 2000).

The research methods included authors' original questionnaire aimed at analyzing different issues regarding psychological help and the experience of receiving it. We also used the questionnaire *Attitudes Toward Seeking Professional Psychological Help Scale* (Fischer & Farina, 1995), adapted for the Russian sample, the purpose of which was to assess the level of readiness to seek psychological help. The information about this questionnaire and its validation is described in a number of publications (Esipov, 2020; Shapovalov & Korpachnikov, 2019; Yel'paze & Ceyhan, 2019).

Social representations of psychological help were systematized using the methods of content analysis and Vergès' prototypical analysis (Vergès' matrix). Analysis of obtained data was performed using the methods of mathematical statistics (Fisher angle transformation, Student's and Mann–Whitney tests of statistical significance, clustering method) in the Statistica 10.0 software package.

Results

Analysis of respondents' readiness to seek psychological help in case of problems showed that for young women the indicator was significantly higher than for young men (43.39 % against 26.92 %, $p < 0.01$). If we consider the sample as a whole, it can be noted that the share of young men who were not ready to seek psychological help was twice as high as the same value for

young women (32.69 % and 15.36 %, respectively, $p < 0.01$). The option 'not sure how I would act' was chosen by approximately the same number of young men and women (Fig. 1).

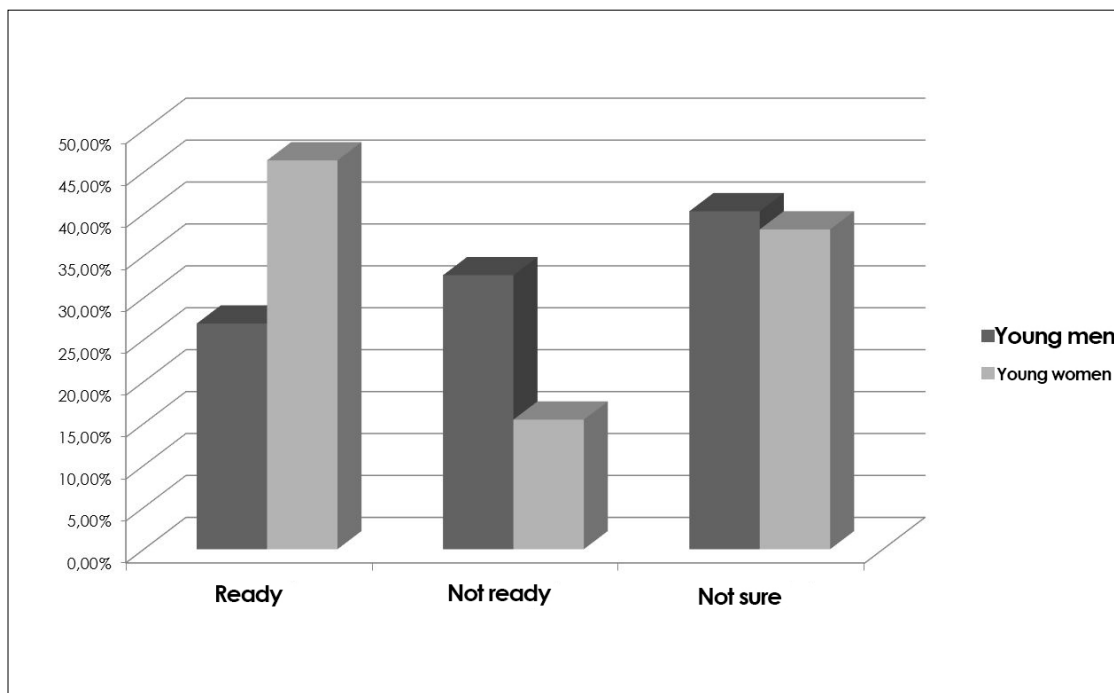


Figure 1. Students' readiness to seek psychological help

In the past, 26.5 % of young women and 11.4 % of young men had already sought psychological help. Help-seeking experience exerted statistically significant influence on the readiness to see a psychologist again and the level of trust in psychological help ($r = 0.366$, $p < 0.01$). In the group of adults, the percentage was higher: 53.58 % of women and 37.5 % of men had sought psychological help earlier (statistically significant difference at $p < 0.01$).

Having compared the level of trust in psychological help, we observed almost identical relatively high scores for female respondents (regardless of age), whereas in the group of adult men the average score was higher than in the group of young men (6.75 against 5.16). In general, the level of trust in psychological help was higher for women than for men ($p < 0.01$).

The students who took part in the study were asked to choose one or several main goals of seeking psychological help (Fig. 2). Among young respondents, the most frequently chosen options included: (a) 'get a qualified advice on how to act in a given situation' (53.16 %); (b) 'get one's thoughts sorted' (52.33 %); (c) 'learn new patterns of behavior to be able to cope with future difficulties on one's own' (50.0 %); (d) 'receive support from a non-biased party and find the strength to change the situation' (49.37 %); (e) 'step back from the situation and decide what to do next' (48.1 %).

Among the most popular goals chosen by adult respondents, we distinguished the following two: 'learn new patterns of behavior to be able to cope with future difficulties on one's own' (74.0 %) and 'get a qualified advice on how to act in a given situation' (62.0 %).

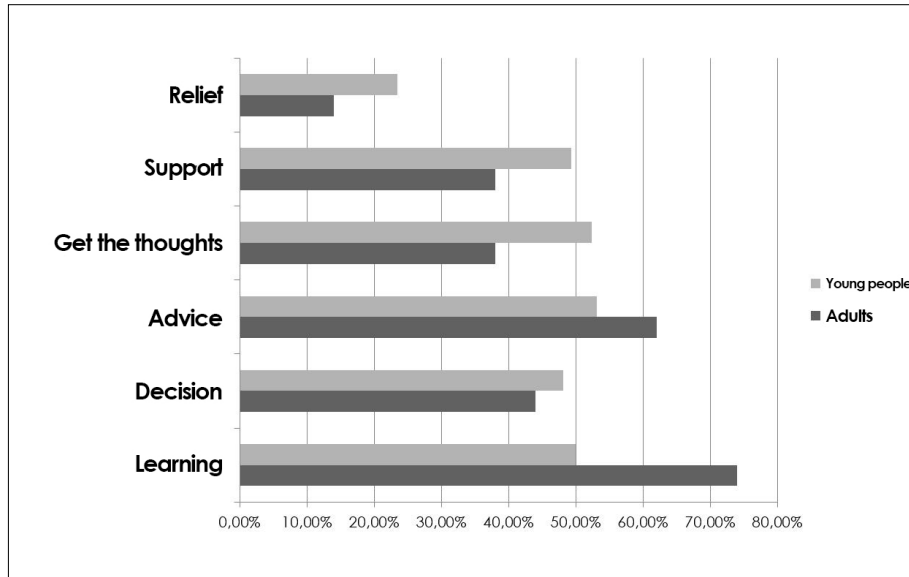


Figure 2. The main goals of seeking psychological help

Respondents were asked to identify the most important criteria, based on which they would choose a psychologist if they needed one; the question had multiple-choice options. The overwhelming majority of respondents specified specialization of the psychologist and the methods that he or she uses (71.91 % of young men and 82.61 % of young women, $p < 0.05$), as well as relevant work experience (65.17 % of young men and 82.61 % of young women, $p < 0.01$). Age, gender and appearance turned out to be less significant factors in choosing a psychologist (Fig. 3).

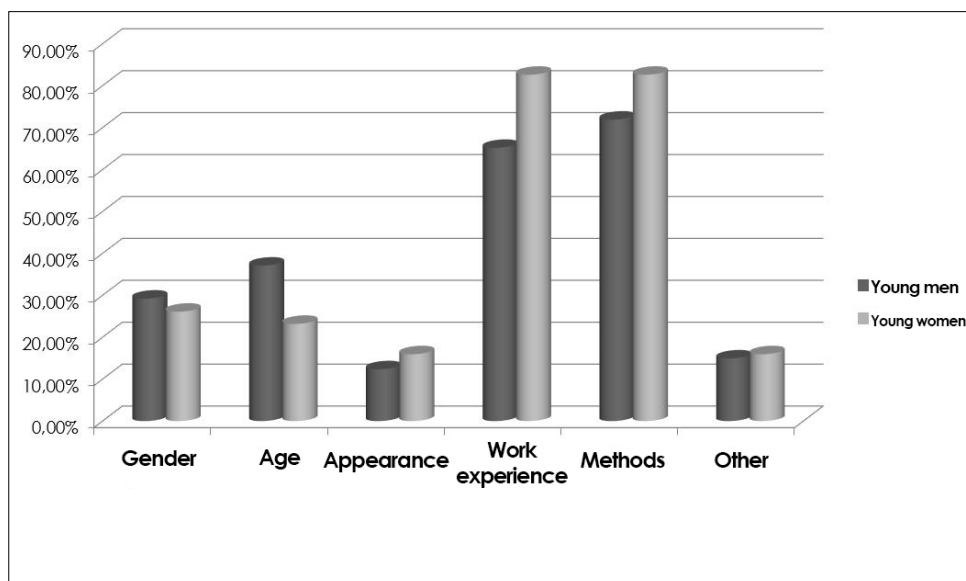


Figure 3. Criteria for choosing a psychologist

The majority of young people (62.92 % of young men and 60.87 % of young women) answered that for them gender of the psychologist was of no importance. Other respondents preferred a male specialist – chosen by 20.22 % of young men and 20.87 % of young women, he was slightly ahead of the female psychologist, selected by 16.86 % of young men and 18.84 % of young women.

When answering a multiple-choice question about preferable age of the help-providing specialist, the majority of respondents (67.42 % of young men and 79.71 % of young women) specified an interval between 26 and 40 years old. The second distant option was a more mature specialist (41–55 years old), selected by 31.46 % of young men and 26.09 % of young women. The least desirable options for respondents of both genders were psychologists younger than 25 and older than 55 years old. Older psychologists were chosen by 7.86 % of young men and only 4.35 % of young women; 7.86 % of male respondents and only 2.90 % of female ones were ready to see a young specialist (Fig. 4).

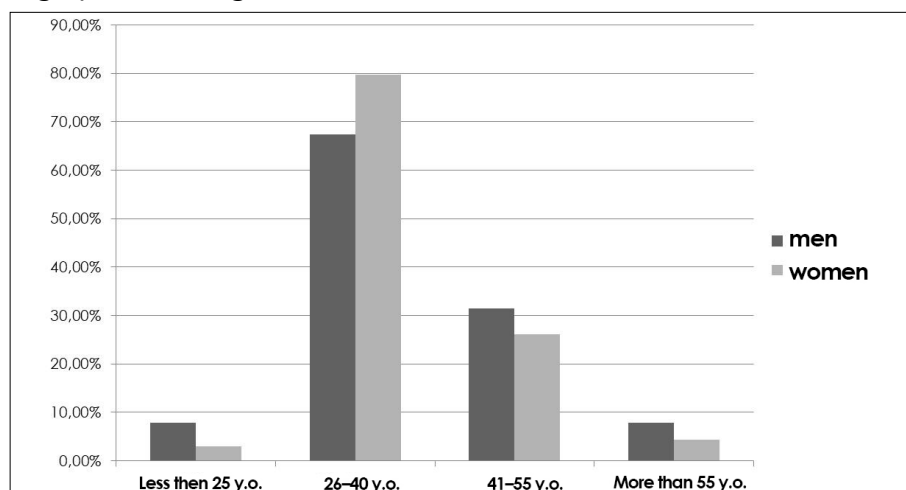


Figure 4. Preferable age of the psychologist

Statistical analysis of obtained differences in the groups 'adults/young people' and 'young men/young women' showed that their significance could be trusted. According to the nonparametric Mann–Whitney test, statistically significant differences between adult and young respondents were obtained on the scales of 'trust in psychological help' ($U = 6219$, $p < 0.01$), 'recognition of the need to have a psychological service at the university' ($U = 5183$, $p < 0.01$), and 'probability of seeking psychological help in the future' ($U = 6588$, $p < 0.05$). All these indicators were significantly higher in the group of adult respondents. It can also be stated that adults due to their greater life experience were more likely to have already sought psychological help by the moment of our study ($U = 5716$, $p < 0.01$). Notably, adults mostly regarded a psychologist as an 'expert' ($U = 6468$, $p < 0.01$), whereas young people considered the specialist more of a 'mentor' ($U = 6606$, $p < 0.01$). As for the goals of seeking psychological help, the only statistically significant differences were observed in the goals 'learning' ($U = 6004$, $p < 0.01$) (this motivation was more typical for adults) and 'get one's thoughts sorted' ($U = 6752$, $p < 0.05$) (more typical for young people).

As for young men and women, there were quite a lot of statistically significant differences (according to Student's t-test). It should be noted that female respondents were more disposed to

receive psychological help. Despite the fact that young men and women had more or less identical experience of seeking psychological help, the latter were more likely to trust in this type of assistance ($t = -3.55, p < 0.01$), experience the need to resume counseling in case of difficulties ($t = -6.99, p < 0.01$), as well as consider it necessary to create a psychological service at the university ($t = -2.16, p < 0.05$). The group of young women was also characterized by significantly larger share of positive attitudes towards psychological help ($t = -5.61, p < 0.05$).

Now let us examine the content of social representations of psychological help by means of Vergès' prototypical analysis and identify *the core* and *the periphery* of these representations. The theory of central core was proposed by J.-C. Abric in order to make existing models of studying social representations more specific (Abric, 2001). The core contains consensual representations of a particular group, which are associated with the studied object (in our case, psychological help). The central core of social representations is scarcely recognized and hardly variable – this ensures the stability of social representations. The periphery system located around the core contains representations that vary within one social group. They are more dynamic and allow to adapt to the current situation.

To study the core and the periphery of students' social representations of psychological help, we applied a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, including association analysis using Vergès' matrix and content analysis.

Based on the meaning, we grouped 381 students' associations with psychological help into 17 categories of representations, which comprised the core and the periphery (Table 1). In total, 1254 associations were specified by the students.

Assessment criteria	Low rank (< 3.1)	High rank (> 3.1)
	Core:	First periphery:
High frequency of term occurrence (> 31)	Help (50; 1.8) Support (45; 2.1) Conversation (35; 2.7) Salvation (31; 2.9)	Understanding (38; 3.7) Advice (34; 3.4) Psychologist (46; 3.2) Treatment/therapy (40; 3.2)
	Contrasting elements:	Second periphery:
Low frequency of term occurrence (< 31)	Problems (29; 2.1) Tears (18; 2.5) Pain (21; 1.8) Trauma (16; 2.7) Work (26; 2.9)	Way out (20; 1.3) Deceit (15; 1.9) Problem solution (25; 1.8) Relief (28; 2.7)

From the Table it can be seen that at the core of social representations there are such words as 'help', 'support', 'conversation', and 'salvation'. Contrasting elements of representations, which according to some researchers (Abric, 2001) constitute the position of the minority (low frequency

of occurrence, high significance), include such concepts as 'problems', 'tears', 'pain', 'traumas', and 'work'. Therefore, such interpretation implies that psychological help is perceived as an opportunity to cope with negative emotional states and life adversities, overcome difficulties by means of being involved and working on one's state with a psychologist.

The first periphery included such representations as 'understanding', 'advice', 'psychologist', and 'treatment/therapy'. Some researchers believe that associations in this zone are often dictated by the media. This zone contains trivial representations that a psychologist can understand and offer advice.

The second periphery also gives us an understanding about the content of social representations, although it is less stable and can reflect a contextual response at a given moment of research. It includes such words as 'way out', 'deceit', 'problem solution', and 'relief'. Notably, deceit implies negative attitude to psychological help, and in this category we combined several closely related associations, such as 'money laundering', 'fraud', 'swindle', 'idle chatter', etc.

Performed content analysis allowed to aggregate all the categories of social representations of psychological help that constituted the core and the periphery into four blocks based on the analysis of association similarity (using similarity coefficient): 'relief of the condition', 'problems', 'support', and 'interaction' (Fig. 5).

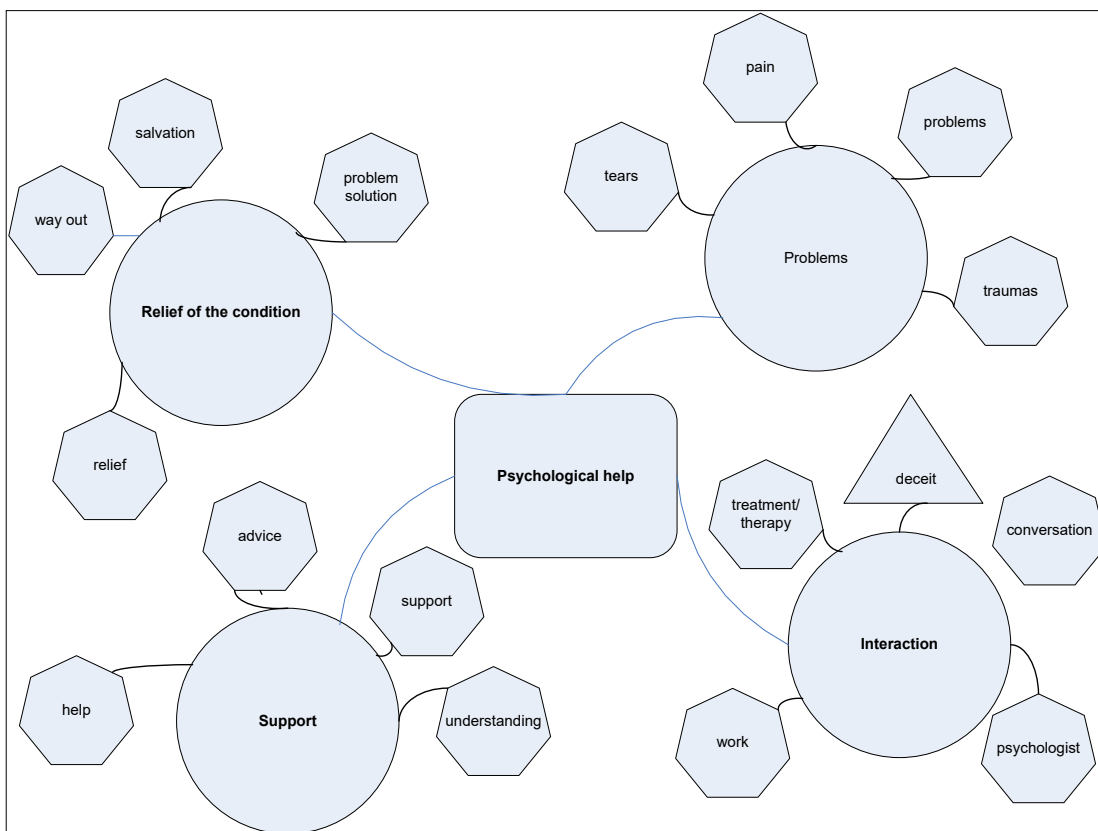


Figure 5. Results of similarity analysis of associations with the 'psychological help' stimulus

Discussion

Among young people, reasons for seeking psychological help can include the need to receive support and understand themselves better, among adults – the need to get a particular advice and learn. Young people tend to perceive a psychologist as a mentor, adults – as an expert. This can be explained by specific characteristics of the young age, when it is very important to encounter a wise and uncritical mentor to overcome the crisis of self-identity and embrace the opportunity for personal growth.

Results of performed study showed that in general, young men demonstrated significantly lower trust in psychological help than young women and were more inclined to overestimate their level of psychological expertise. Compared to young men, young women are less inclined to stigmatize psychological help, have a clearer understanding of its objectives and higher level of readiness to seek psychological help. Foreign authors note that exaggerated standards of masculinity strengthen men's resistance to professional counseling, and many men would rather start taking medications than see a psychotherapist (Pattyn et al., 2014).

From the obtained results, we can infer that trust in psychological help depends on the gender more than it does on the age of an individual: women are more disposed towards the probability of seeing a psychologist in a difficult period of their lives. This agrees with the data from other studies, which prove that men are more likely to stigmatize psychological help and believe that only 'weak people' and 'people with mental deviations' request it (Pattyn et al., 2014; Nohr et al., 2021).

More positive representations of psychological help were observed in students with majors in Humanities and individuals who already had an experience of psychological counseling. Young respondents who earlier applied for psychological help specified the following main reasons for seeing a psychologist (the wording was generalized): 'adolescence', 'family problems', 'parental divorce', 'death of a loved one', 'running away from home', 'mother insisted', 'nervous breakdowns', 'panic attacks', 'neurosis, anxiety disorder', 'hard times', 'depression, apathy', 'guilt, obsessive thoughts', 'low self-esteem', 'lack of self-control', 'adaptation difficulties at school', 'unsociability', 'aggressiveness, irritability', and 'emotional instability'. These responses demonstrate a certain dependency of young people on their parents and significant adults in making decisions about seeking help, sometimes even their pressure.

Among students, important conditions of inspiring trust in psychological help include recommendation focus, reviews of other clients, price, examples of success cases, competence and proficiency of the psychologist. The age of the potential psychologist is also important – it must be a middle-aged specialist, not too young and not too old. When seeking psychological help, young people also attach great importance to safety, 'comfortable atmosphere in the office', and even 'availability of tea and cookies'.

Having examined structural and content characteristics of social representations of psychological help, we can draw a conclusion that young people are not very eager to seek psychological

help (compared to older adults) and that in case of difficult situation they are less likely to ask for psychological counseling. A motivation for receiving psychological assistance may be a desire to sort out one's feelings and find support, whereas for adults the prevailing motive is to learn something from a psychologist, master a certain skill, or get a particular advice (which by the way contradicts the ethics of providing psychological help).

The basis of students' representations of psychological help is composed of representations about the mission and function of such assistance: 'save', 'support', 'help'. Students understand that psychological help is administered in the process of conversation (dialogue), i.e. a variation of subject-subject communication, not a one-sided influence of the psychologist on the client. In the periphery, which is considered to a large extent formed by the media, social stereotypes are reflected in the associations that psychological help is treatment associated with disease, 'abnormality', health problems, etc. Young people find it difficult to distinguish between the terms 'psychological help' and 'treatment' and sometimes demonstrate stigmatizing attitudes towards individuals who seek psychological help, which is confirmed in a number of foreign studies (Fukuda et al., 2016; Pattyn et al., 2014).

Conclusions

Social representations of psychological help manifest in students' consciousness through recognition of the opportunity to receive support and relieve one's emotional state by means of experiencing pain, tears, analyzing difficult situations and problems. In the implicit worldview of the young people, psychological help is associated with interaction primarily based on the dialogue and respectful attitude, but it also contains elements of distrust and the fear to be deceived.

Students' mental representations of psychological help are not always positive, and the prejudices of some young men and women hamper their full integration into the system of providing psychological help.

In our opinion, obtained results can be used to develop programs for optimizing the operation of young people's mental health services that take into account their social representations and increase the level of trust in psychologists among the population. Encouragement of seeking psychological assistance can increase the level of trust in psychological help among the young people, which is an important task of children and young people's mental health services. There is also a need to formulate theoretical foundations and higher methodological standards for the development of techniques associated with attitudes and readiness of young people to seek psychological help. This will create an opportunity to compare results obtained for different samples and in different social contexts, increase predictive validity of developed methods and programs, and provide timely access of the population to the maintenance of their psychological well-being.

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Author Details

Albina Aleksandrovna Nesterova – Dr. Sci. (Psychology), Associate Professor, Professor at the Department of Social Psychology, Moscow Region State University, Mytishchi, Russian Federation; Scopus Author ID: 56719360200, ResearcherID: AAD-8250-2019, SPIN-code: 2844-3800; e-mail: anesterova77@rambler.ru

Mikhail Alekseevich Esipov – Postgraduate Student, Moscow Region State University, Mytishchi, Russian Federation; SPIN-code: 1764-8560; e-mail: scientia76@bk.ru

Author Contributions

A. N. Nesterova planned and supervised the research, provided statistical analysis and interpretation of empirical data, worked with literature, tables, and illustrations, and prepared the manuscript.
M. A. Esipov planned the research, collected and processed empirical data, worked with literature, prepared illustrations, and edited the manuscript.

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