

SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

Magomed-Eminov Madroudin Shamsoudinovitch Definition of an extreme situation

The paper discusses the concept of Extremity in connection with the conception of meaning in trauma, stress, bereavement, transition studies. It shows the results of an attempt to give the integrative description, classification and systematization of phenomenon of extremeness. The article reviews the theories, approaches, discussions and problems in the field of extreme situations studies. The author's substantiation of conception of extremeness shown in metapsychological and ontological horizons is given.

Key words: *Stressor, Everyday existence, non-everyday way of existence, human being in the World and within Time, Personality work.*

The modern world is characterized by the global processes directed not only on creation, but also on malignant destructions – local wars, massive technogenic accidents that causes an urgency of extremeness studies. The extreme catastrophic situations which are situations of disaster of the concrete person, the human being, and not just human communities and human individuals, demand the psychological definition. Representations of an extremeness problem in psychology developed from, minimum, three sources: 1) studies of social-psychological consequences of catastrophic events, 2) studies in medicine and psychology of traumatic neurosis, psychic trauma, 3) studies of physiological stress – the general adaptation syndrome and later studies of “emotional”, psychological stress. In the psychological literature for extremeness designation in sense of factors of influence on an organism or the individual the set of various terms is used: stressor [41, 42], the factors, the demands towards the individual exceeding personal resources [36], extremeness [28], traumatic stressor [44], extreme stress [26], massive stress [43], disaster [39], traumatic event [35], traumatic stress [30, 46]. Besides, such situations called traumatic situations [23, 31], critical situations [6], catastrophic situations [30], difficult situations [3], life events [8], life situations [5], tense situations [9], unusual conditions [12], extreme conditions or factors [21]. Instead of the term «extreme situation» is used also the term “emergency situation” [1, 10].

The conceptual field of extremeness thematically determines the event of existence of the person in non-daily way of life in the world [14, 20]. Talking here not about theoretical abstraction, but about the space of a life, besides, about non-specific for the being – the existence of the person outside of the daily, ordinary, usual vital world. Here this moment of singularity of experience which we interpret in the horizon of transition of two modes of life (daily and non-daily) is clearly highlighted within the



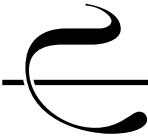
limits of variety of researches – stress in the war [32], prisoners of concentration camps [25, 27], participants of war [45], the clients, expecting surgical operation [34], stress-syndromes in different reality situations [33, 40], etc. The revealed tendency connected with underlining of value of singularity of experience, is traced in many other studies, including for example, V.I. Lebedev [12], L.A. Kitaev-Smyk [11], etc. Special value for the thematic determination of this non-daily experience different from “unusual experience” in technogenic realities, had the definition of clinical form PTSD in 1980 [29].

In the general psychological approach the concept of the person and personal meaning (sense) of extreme event and experience (meaning mastering of event) seems to be a backbone. It is necessary in the present work to develop psychological definition of an extreme situation. Therefore we move from empirical treatment to psychological and not focusing on the last one we’ll develop metapsychological conceptualisation of extremeness phenomenon. We try to outline a conceptual field of term «extremeness», proceeding not from medical, legal, economic, political, technogenic and «natural reasons», but from the points of view of general psychology [14, 20].

Empirical treatment of an extreme situation. Empirical definition of an extreme situation is based on treatment of extremeness as extraordinary incident, accident, disaster, emergency situation, etc. Event in this approach obviously or implicitly is understood discretely, out of continual temporality, as incident or a case. The extreme situation empirically in psychology is defined by attributing to concept “situation” the attributes: catastrophic, extraordinary, extreme, extraordinary, excluding, traumatic, outside of usual limits of existence, unusual, special, difficult, etc. Definition can be specified by further instructions of corresponding to the different situations of disasters – technogenic accidents, spontaneous, natural disasters, terrorism, war, violence, concentration camps and other accidents or special living conditions.

This empirical treatment is featured by the formalism and is constructed, as a matter of fact, on the extensive factor. Following this line, in all various listed disasters something general is allocated – excessive, above permitted standard, extreme character of impact for the person. As to the character of influence on the individual it is usually defined in terms of force, intensity of influence and/or the scale caused by influence of disaster, its consequences. Defining the factor of intensity of impact and reaction (consequences) the researchers try to operate (obviously or implicitly) by rather conditional concepts of “norm” and “abnormality”. Thus it is supposed that there is the certain average norm corresponding to normal adaptability of the person by environment. Then influences «falling outside the limits of a normal, standard situation», breaking normal adaptation and causing harm to the individual are corresponded to extreme. As non-standard or extra-standard, stimulation can be high or low, that is to overstep the bounds of the top or bottom threshold of a normal adaptive range, it is possible to talk about upper extreme or lower extreme situations.

Speaking about an abstract extra-standard situation of a certain average human type, it is frequent in the literature on extremeness to use “mechanical” terms such as “overload”, “demolition”, “a breach of a protective, adaptable barrier of mentality”, “an



exhaustion of adaptable potential”, etc. These views obviously or implicitly are taken from biology, and not in the last instance, from the physiological concept of stress of H. Selye, and also from Z. Freud’s concept of protection of an organism against irritation [31]. Certainly, there are such conditions of environment which are pernicious for any human body. By analogy to this conclusion it is possible to conclude that there are situations traumatic for the meaning system of the majority of human individualities. According to R. Lifton nuclear attacks across Hiroshima and Nagasaki [37] were the similar purely external condition injuring each person.

If to consider an extreme situation as function of interaction of factors of an environment and the individual in a stress context, as a matter of fact, it is a question of gradation of the reactions distributed from normal to lethal. Changes in an organism in the designated interval «norm – illness – death» can be divided in more details on the basis of various specifying terms: limiting, extremely strong, out-of-limits etc. Thus, in one case, the range can seize extremeness in wide value, in the other – extremeness could be caused only by the strongest influences.

The lack of the approaches discussed above consists, in our opinion, in the fact that the authors can’t define a conceptual field of non-daily existence of the person, and also can’t outline the area of the problems arising in adaptive existence of the person in both unusual ecological and technical systems and special realities, including virtual realities and simulative hyper-realities.

Taking into account the stated remarks we will specify empirical definition as an initial stage of scientifically-psychological definition. Empirical definition of an extreme situation in psychology should consider: 1) eventuality of the situation as incident, a case, accident; 2) life-danger of an event, or menacing, threatening character of event for the person; 3) the limiting, extraordinary demands shown by a situation to the individual – limitedness (in a sense of boundaries) defined, first of all, by actual sense of a situation for the person; the actual sense of a situation sets horizon of formation of private, specific, separate meaning formations of the person; 4) special potential or real consequences for the person (and/or for its relatives) – threat, damage (harm), loss, suffering, test, firmness (hardness) in physical, close relations, social, spiritual, existential spheres; 5) specificity of activity and interactions of a person in a situation (including, pre-situation and post-situation); 6) life-position which the person takes in a situation; 7) phenomenon TET (transordinary existential transition) which includes a syndrome of occurrences (involving), a syndrome of staying and returning syndrome – all phenomena connected with these syndromes interpenetrate.

If the account of all mentioned features of an extreme situation is incomplete we have its negative definition – as an accident or the factor causing damage, loss, suffering to the person. The consequence of the situation could be not only negative, non-adaptive but also indifferent, that is adaptive, from the point of view of frustration, moreover, representing test of firmness, courage, humanity etc. [14]. On the basis of discussed issues we can underline features, characteristic for an extreme situation, though ignored usually in psychology, but not in a life. As non-daily situation extremeness is connected



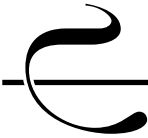
directly (or through some means), on one hand, with threat of death, with non-existence (Death-centered or D-meaning), and on the other hand – with fundamental aspiration to life (Life-centered or L-meaning) [14]. Aspiration to a survival, life preservation, will to duration are intrinsic characteristics of an extreme situation as human situation of existence. Therefore the dichotomizing structure of existence of «life-non-existence» and «D-meaning and L-meaning» is the integral characteristic of life situation. Thus, if to follow a wide empirical definition of an extreme situation vitally-empirically (in the context of Being) it's not only a situation causing fundamental threat, alarm and disaster, but also a situation of test of will, firmness, spirituality, courage, humanity. Moreover, it is a human situation of an enlightenment, growth of the person, transgression, heroism, that means fulfillment by the person his own life in life situation.

Hence, the extreme situation has triadic structure. When the extreme situation is negative it is a disaster (suffering) of the person; when it is indifferent-is steady – a test of the person; when it is positive – a formation of humanity, the person, an embodiment of life of the person. A trauma, firmness and growth – three aspects of extremeness which need to be considered as internally connected with each other. The same triad can be designated in another way to highlight other sides of interaction: «frustration – adaptation – growth» or «suffering – firmness – transgression».

Empirical definition of extremeness as we have revealed is nomothetic (in sense of empirical generalization) for it considers event of the personality and the answer of the personality to it from the point of view of general characteristics and laws, instead of ideographic as unique event of a given person. Event which is the answer of the person to a destiny call is considered here «extreme» in a sense of a case, incident. Passing to consideration of concrete-psychological definition of extremeness, it is necessary to notice that it becomes more strict, than empirical though loses some values of life eventuality – misfortunes, disasters etc. Therefore for more adequacy these definitions should be considered further in consonance with each other, especially in a sphere of extreme psychology and psychological help.

Formal-psychological definition. Formal-psychological approach to extreme situation can give definitions from the following points of view: 1) stimulus – as extra-standard (above or low homeostatic threshold) an influence pattern on a person, causing certain reaction which is specified in certain «sub-syndromes»; 2) reactive – as the situation with potential transformation of adaptive reaction in non-adaptive; the influence demands surpasses adaptive potential, resources or possibilities of the individual; 3) personal – interpretation and situation appraisal and the reference to it as super-menacing, life threatening; 4) interactive – the extreme situation is a function of extreme factors and factors of the person (the individual factors including personal features); 5) transactional – the extreme situation is understood as a situation of interaction of menacing factors (actually threats, harm, loss, a call, etc.) with factors of the personality (an estimation, revaluation, coping etc.).

The extreme situations include situations disaster, extreme life threatening situations urgently demanding the prevention of disaster or liquidation of consequences



of disaster, the help to victims of disaster get. On the other hand, the situations connected with ability to live in special technogenic, ecological conditions, demanding the excessive resources, influencing its working capacity and a state of health are also considered to be extreme. Formal-psychological definition as well as empirical, does not allow to differentiate daily and non-daily extremeness.

Catastrophic and non-catastrophic extremeness. Despite similarity of extremeness in «catastrophic» and «non-catastrophic» situations, there is an essential difference between them: 1) the accident localized in certain space-time borders, people wish to eliminate its consequences as soon as possible – it is undesirable and is rejected by people; 2) non-catastrophic situation of space flight, a scuba diving, polar expedition, monitoring activity at nuclear stations, aviadispatching activity needs the person's adaptation, carrying out the professional work – it is comprehensible to the person and even is desired. Catastrophic situations demand prevention of destruction and restoration of the damage (including trauma, crises etc.). Extreme technogenic situations (special situations) assume necessity of adaptation of the person to «the human-technical» systems created by the modern person for mastering nature.

In one case, the person wishes to prevent accident, extremeness, and in the second – it carries out the technical mission of mastering nature, speaking by Heidegger's words: "from the Techniques Being, captured by a domination desire over forces of t Nature [24]. However and the technical call quite often turns out to be an accident.

So comparing catastrophic and non-catastrophic extreme situations we can tell that the catastrophic extreme situation is destructive, violent, life-dystonic, undesirable and rejected, is wished to prevent, at occurrence to eliminate and liquidate negative consequences as soon as possible. In turn, non-catastrophic extreme situation instrumentally-constructive, life-sintonic – it is created by the personality in the purpose of mastering Nature, corresponds to his intentions and desire, is comprehensible to him; besides the person aspires to prevent transformation of an instrumental extreme situation into the catastrophic.

The extreme situation is not only a situation of influence (stressor) and reaction (stress), but also a situation of activity of the person and even wider – a situation of human existence (Being-in-life-world). Ontologic-activity measurement of an extreme situation demands the analysis of the vital problems solved by the person in an extreme situation, of the way of life he is carrying out in his activity. In a situation the personality «gives out» not only reactions, but it carries out certain actions. Therefore the situation is an intentional subject (subject sense) of human activity, instead of stimulus pattern understood as reaction of the cold person in a cold premise. The extreme situation has one more special measurement missed by stress-traumatic treatment. In an extreme situation the person not only tests and suffers from intensive stress, but he appeals for help, partnership, aspires to participating, care, attachment, and also to the statement of ability of life Being of his own and the Other. Certainly, «intense» semantic (meaning) work of the personality cannot be identified with psychological pressure or pressure of the psycho-physiological systems decreasing working capac-



ity of the individual. Meaning crisis, meaning conflict, meaning anomaly of the person is not a pathology, but a problem of human existence – Being of the person in world and time. Therefore even PTSD we started to consider as anomaly of life, instead of illness, pathology. Anomaly is an extreme functioning of normal mental process of the person in an extreme situation.

Metapsychological definition of an extreme situation. The Latin word *extrēmum* means «edge», «end» and occurs from a word *extrēmus* – «extreme», «final», for example, «in *extrēmo libro*» means «in conclusion of the book». If to adhere to etymology of this word «extreme» it better corresponds to meaning «to be on the brink, in the end», that is to “edge” effect, rather than of excess by loading (stimulation) of the threshold, leading an organism to an overload or frustration.

This statement demands specification: 1) the edge, the end are given in experience of the person, 2) edge experience is constituted in work of the attitude of the personality to certain action of experience as to something close from the perspective of the distant horizon smb’s own unique continual life event.

In extreme situation two meta-needs are actualized in correlation with each other: on the one hand, life preservation in a situation of threat of a non-existence, on the other hand, life formation contrary to non-existence threat. Two fundamental motivations, or *cares* of the person: motivation of a survival (in wider understanding – recursive motivation) and motivation of growth (wider – transgressive motivation) are twisted with each other. According to this understanding the need for safety is necessary to open in transition from ontologic horizon of life and a non-existence. In this situation of threat of destruction, and aspiration to philanthropy, to humanity are equally actualized. An extreme situation is a situation of close contact of human and inhuman, not only violence, martyrdom, but also firmness, courage, sanctity, and also solidarity, help. The extremeness phenomenon considerably bares an essence of a situation of person’s Being in the World and in the Time which demands not only descriptions and explanations, experience and understanding, but also help and care.

Three installations: experience, understanding and care – are necessary equally for extremeness definition, especially in the field of psychology of the psychological help for the person. Value of solidarity for a survival was defended by P.A. Kropotkin. H. Selye also considered it in the concept of stress under the name of “altruistic egoism” [41]. A help phenomenon (help search) and the rendering assistance, peculiar to an extreme situation is necessary to add to triadic extremeness structure «threat – test – growth» or «suffering – firmness – self-realization». To «add» – here means, to consider a help situation as a horizon in the frameworks of three directions of human existence.

The analysis of an extreme situation of the person carried out earlier has paved the way for ontologic treatment of extremeness. On the level of «narrow» psychological approach, neither with affective, nor from cognitive point of view, nor on cognitive-affective level without the reference to phenomenon of the person (understood as a way of life of the person) we can’t seize an extreme situation as a life situation of the



person. So loss of the loved one falls outside the limits affect, cognitions and even personality variables in ontologic sphere of life of the person – the tragic life calling for courage, determination in spite of non-existence.

Threat of non-existence named above «fundamental threat», threat of possibility of impossibility [24]. Fundamental possibility of possibility, on the other hand, is connected with fundamental threat – «throwing» the person in self-formation. In ontologic horizon extremeness is «throwing» in possibility: possibility to be or not to be. Ontologically the essence of any extreme situation is concluded in a possibility phenomenon – possibility life. Extremeness is defined by aspiration to possibility – possibilities to be and last contrary to a non-existence. Thus, the extreme situation, in the essence, ontologically is not a situation of absence of something, and a situation of presence of life on the edge (boarder) including possibility of own impossibility.

Even stress, according to Sele, could be treated as possibility reaction though physiologically it is based on the mobilisation of an organism directed to neutralisation of danger. Even at the level of an organism extremeness (stressability) characterises the reactance (responsiveness) of life – vitality of life (life possibility – aspiration to possibility). Limiting possibility which is connected with extremeness, has a double nature: it is possibility of the End and possibility has Beginning.

For the further advancement of the analysis we will remind that the extreme situation is life situation of a concrete person. Psychologically it means that the extreme situation is unity of the person and its environment in temporal horizon – opening of a singular human life event. To seize in an extreme situation the ontologic sense it is necessary to seize it as life situation of the given person, from the point of view of a way of life of the person. We have already preliminary characterised a way of life of the person in a triad «a martyrdom (suffering) – courage (firmness) – enlightenments (transgression)» to which have added one more component – the care expressed in triad«the help – attachments – love».

The extreme situation is such situation in which life of the person in the vital world is transformed. Daily mode of life passes in non-daily mode of being – and the situation, or a phenomenon, transordinary existential transition(TET) in which the person appears in a stream of existential transitions. Non-daily mode of being here is understood as a way of life of the person in the conditions of intrusion of a non-existence into life, death in a life. Extremeness, thus, is defined, not as special property, quality or intensity, but ontologically, as intrusion of a non-existence into life and an orientation of life of the person on overcoming (in transgressive work) non-existence.

For an ontologic concrete definition of extreme life of the person – intrusions of a non-existence into life, transformations of death into a life phenomenon – an extreme situation it is necessary to treat from the point of view of event. As to event in an extreme situation we have an event of the person as a co-existence of life and non-existence. Through event the person is involved, thrown in the extreme vital world, and the world through event interferes into the person, throwing the person in double possibility of «existence-non-existence». But extremeness is created not only



by disaster, but also by aspiration of the person to an ascension, to ennobled, sacral – ecstatic mode of life, to self-expression. Threat of finiteness, of non-existence, and aspiration, determination to be (will to be and to «last») – two fundamental aspects of an extreme situation.

Connecting together both aspects of an extreme situation, we specify a phenomenon of experience of edge which is divided on close and distant, limiting and beyond limits. Edge experience is differentiated, carried between the beginning (which is the transformation of «the hopeless end»), and distant horizon of smb's own existence from which the person concerns to what is close, where he actually stays both in action and in suffering.

Summing up it is possible to draw the following conclusions.

1. Extremeness should be defined not only from instance of the extensiveness surpassing adaptable resources, breaking a homeostasis and automatic adaptive activity and leading to frustration. Extremeness is necessary to open also from intensity horizon – qualitative specificity of existence of the person in the world. Then the extreme factor or a situation opens as event of existence of the person in non-daily life world.

2. To seize scientifically adequately concept «extreme situation», it is necessary to distinguish event which is developed, carried out, which is in formation, yet has not come to an end, yet did not become, that is a transit phenomenon, and event which grows out, which comes true case, incident, incident, collision (discrete event).

3. In the meaning (sense) approach which we develop extremeness is interpreted from the point of view of an extreme triad «restoration – test – growth». Every stressor is an event which contains these three aspects in the structure: 1) restoration, 2) test (firmness, courage), 3) growth (transgression, sacral experiences, development). The extreme triad has constructive and destructive aspects – in negative model the person as though turns away from test, growth etc.

4. Definition of an extreme situation we have given covers three approaches: 1) "empirically-psychological" (or empirical) the approach – emphasis on discrete incident (even if it repeats), a case and incident, features of behaviour and reaction of the bio-social individual are considered; 2) formal-psychological (or psychological) the approach in which functions, processes, conditions, properties, the reactions characterizing adaptive activity, mental activity of the subject are underlined; 3) metapsychological (or ontologic) the approach places emphasis on event of life of the person in a life world within the limits of psychology of the person.

5. Defining extremeness, it is necessary to distinguish: 1) extreme mode of existence, or being of the person in the world, as transition, to which there corresponds a special phenomenon of transordinary existential transition (TET), including massive, fast, sudden changes of reality and other shifts, differences, changes, even monotonous activity gets to this list; 2) extreme constellation of being, representing ontologically understood structure modes of life of the person (EKB); 3) extreme life world and, hence, extreme and daily experience, extreme and daily senses, and also, meaning structures of experience; 4) an extreme situation of the person in the extreme life



world; extreme is a situation of the person in the world and consequently in this situation the person is relevant to situation, to the world (transformation), or – irrelevant, diachronic to life world or situations (counter-transformation).

6. Extreme mode of life of the personality, or non-daily mode of life of the person, we define as a way of life of the personality in the conditions of intrusion of a non-existence into life.

7. The extremeness phenomenon in full concreteness is grasped as a situation of transition of the personality from a daily reality to non-daily and back. Any situation is trans-situational because the situation is a transition. The extreme situation ontologically is a concrete situation of life of the person in life world and consequently it does not coincide with empirically treated factors of extreme external influence (impact). The extreme phenomenon though represents itself a unity of pre-extremity, extreme-nesses and post-extremenesses, inherently, is transitional temporally latent, delayed phenomenon.

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