Social Psychology

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Empirical study of image
as a phenomenon of interpersonal relationship

Comprehension of psychological nature of image as a phenomenon and theoretical issue and its empirical study are topical and perspective orientation of modern psychological science development. On the example of corporate image formation, the author shows the feasibility of created concept of image as a phenomenon interpersonal relationship, and in this connection she gives and analyses the results of own research on a correlation of external and internal image of large organizations and enterprises of the Ural region.

Keywords: corporate culture, external and internal image of an organization, interpersonal relationship, perception, and change of image.

Because of abolition of the command-administrative methods of control in our country, they were followed by the methods, grounded on persuasion and other means of socio - psychological influence, among which the image takes a significant place. Understanding that image of a manager, a specialist, or a state employee is one of essential components of professional competence gains more and more ground not only among the scientists, but among the managers and officials as well.

Both illustrate it, results of carried out research and extending practice of the managers of large-scale enterprises and different patterns of ownership organizations, state and municipal bodies going to image specialists.

Thus, the approaches to image formation worked out by the author were applied during the development of policy and tactics of the election campaigns at the municipal level; the elements of theory of image as a phenomenon of interpersonal relationship and practical guideline for its creation and change are included in the program of a series of seminars on effectiveness increase of the work of management personnel for the managers of enterprises and services of one of the municipal departments in the Ural region.

Scientists working at akmeological approach devote a considerable attention to the problems of image. The key concepts of akmeology are skill, development, maturity, abilities, perfection, consciousness, personality, etc. [2].

Akmeology studies "the regularity of the person's summit achievement in individual, personal, and subject-activity development" [9]. By one of

akmeology founder A.A. Derkatch, the subject of akmeology is "regularity, psychological mechanisms, and conditions and factors, promoting progressive development of a mature person and his great professional achievements" [9].

Accordingly, akmeological research of image is mainly directed towards the detection of its optimization reserves and increase of image-creating activity productivity. Akmeological aspects of perception and change of image in different areas of social life are developed by Y.N. Bogdanov, A.V. Garmonova, A.A. Derkatch, V.G. Zazykin, Z.M. Zotova, N.V. Kuzmina, A.K. Markova, A.Y. Panasjuk, A.A. Rean, A.A. Semik, Y.V. Sinyagin, R.F. Foors, etc.

The very statement of the question about the productivity of image-creating activity and optimization of image as a phenomenon of interpersonal relationship, introduces into the image research such fundamentally important, in our opinion, aspect, as ascertainment of capabilities of purposeful advancing development.

Thereby, through the characteristic of the structure of the subject of research, the methodological cycle of the very research is set: from (1) phenomenology of the subject of research, and through (2) detection and acknowledgment of development vector in the subject of research, motion to maturity and perfection, to (3) cognition of specific objective regularities of this development; and (4) detections of mechanisms, by means of which this development will be realized and goes from the ideal plan – plan of potentials – to the actual plan – plan of achievements.

The completion of the cycle ensures the scientific foundation of formation of complete concept of the research subject, which, in its turn, serves as a theoretical and methodological basis for developing humanitarian technologies, directed towards the practical implementation of the very development, motion to maturity and perfection, which capability is showed theoretically on the second step of the investigation cycle. We used the logic of this cycle in the research dedicated to the capabilities of optimization of the process of professional image formation [28].

The survey of the chiefs of large-scale enterprises and organizations of the Ural region, carried out within the framework of research that is spent according to the author's program in January 2004 has shown that more than 60 % of the respondents (37 persons were surveyed) assume that the best image of the manager helps in the administrative problem-solving.

Among the confirmative statements we will emphasize the following: "the positive image of the manager associates with the image of company", "… the image supposes the confidence of clients, partners, and employees".

It is rather significant that in their answers the respondents indicate as a

field of perception and changes of image both internal and external environment of organization, and they also mark the influence of personal image of manager on the image of company.

It is necessary to mark that in concordance with the broad definition of the subject, accepted in modern social psychology and akmeology, and using concept of "the image subject" in wide sense, we understand it as any subject participating in image relationship. This subject can be introduced not only as an individual, but as a social group or an organization as well, thus its system qualities, unconditionally, will somehow affect the course of image relationship and its results.

We advanced the hypothesis that there is a directly proportional dependence between the level of productivity of the image of social subject and the level of his internal organization.

This hypothesis has been confirmed in a number of researches. In particular, during the researches, carried out in 2001 - 2002 in the organizations of fuel and energy complex of Ural and Siberia, the correlations between separate indexes of the level of corporate culture of organization and the indexes of productivity of its internal and external image were detected [26].

In February - March 2004 the researches on the inner structure of corporate image were continued. As an object of research were chosen two companies with the common scope of activity (advertising-publishing), their internal and external image in correlation with the corporate culture (1st Company - advertising and news agency and 2nd Company – advertising and publishing concern). The best employees of the 1st Company (44 persons) and best employees of the 2nd Company (39 persons) were chosen for a survey.

Along with the questionnaire technique (the open problems prevailed in the questionnaire) a detailed interview of the management of both companies was carried out, and the projective methods were used as well, in particular, the method of "10 words" (people under test are offered to write during the limited time 10 words that they consider to be associated with the company) and the drawing method "bubbles" (people under test were offered to "dress" a doll - model so that she would associate with the image of the company).

Results of analysis of the answers on the questionnaire items were the following. In the answers to the item "What is the organization image?" the employees of both companies expressed the comprehension of corporate image predominantly as an external image of organization (symbolical image of the company as it is seen by clients, partners, and other people).

Only 7 answers out of 83 related to the description of internal image of organization (for example: "Image is "a behavior of employees", "Image is

professionalism and quality of the employees' work", "Image is a respect for clients", "Image is an internal atmosphere"), 6 of the 7 answers were given by the employees of the 2nd Company.

In the answers to the question "What the image of organization is necessary for?" dominated prevailed orientation toward the external image. All employees of the 1st Company assume that the main function of corporate image is a positioning of the organization in environment (for example: "image is necessary for attracting new clients", "for creating the public opinion", "for keeping up the rating", "for prestige" etc.); the overwhelming majority of the employees of the 2nd Company hold the same opinion, however 4 persons among them answered that image is necessary "for uniting the collective", "for a good spirit", "for making the workers proud for the working place", "for being different from others", that is they took into consideration the existence of internal image along with the external one.

These results are especially interesting from the point of view of the respondents answers on the question "What, in your opinion, is the image of your organization?"

First, attention was paid to the prevalence of evaluative answers upon the descriptive ones. Thus, *employees of the 1st Company* consider that image of their organization is "positive", "stable", "solid and strong" etc., characterize their organization as "a solid establishment, ensuring the activity of high quality and distinguishing itself by friendly attitudes to its clients".

Secondly, the employees of the 1st Company describe the image through the organization positioning on the environment, while some of the employees of the 2nd Company interpret the corporate image in the first place as an internal one, that is quite concordant with the answers to the previous questions.

Third, while all employees of the 1st Company characterize the image of their organization as a positive one, some employees of the 2nd Company estimate it negatively ("the image is still crude", "very various in the opinion of different people", "has not been worked over at the moment", "average, is lacking in something" etc.), and 2 persons answered vague ("do not know", "find it difficult to answer").

As a whole, employees of the 1st Company estimate the organization positively, employees of the 2nd Company - rather negative, than positively. Comparison of these answers to the answers to the previous questions shows the following regularity: when the employees are satisfied with their company, internal image is not realized by them, as their relations with the company are founded on the participation principle, they feel themselves as a part of the company and do not accept it as a separate subject. But when there is a lack of

such "participation", the internal image of organization in the employees' consciousness is just an image of the subject, which is separated from them and not always positive. These theses correlate with the results of data analysis of projective techniques.

The given hypothesis, put forward during the research, has received a partial confirmation in the results of interviewing the managers of two companies. The interview has shown that unlike the management of Company 1, the management of Company 2 does not devote attention to the image formation of the company in the employees' opinion and has no clear idea of what kind of image it should be.

Thus, there is following, prima facie paradoxical, ratio: if the company management is lacking the idea of internal image of the company, the staff has got this idea naturally and more often in negative form, rather than in positive one. And vice versa, if the management of company deliberately and purposely forms internal image of organization, the employees of the organization accept this image at subconscious level as a positive one, however they do not take it as a subject of reflexion.

It is interesting that answering the question: "What the image of organization depends on?" - employees of the Company 1 mentioned the whole set of different factors, which in their opinion can affect the image of the company (among them such factors as behavior of employees, product quality, marketing policy of the company, company identity, etc.).

From the context of answers it is clear that all of them meant an external image. At the same time, the answers of employees of the Company 2 were notably less various, more than a half of them came to the point that everything depends on policy and style of the management, but the way, in which the manager should act, was not designated.

Apparently, bad situation with internal image make the employees to concentrate their attention on this component of the company image, and "overshadows" thereby a problem of external image formation in the consciousness of employees, making them less initiative in the image problems solutions and more inclined to rely on the managerial staff.

Answers to the rest questions of the questionnaire showed that the employees of both companies unanimously consider that the image of organization can be purposely formed and changed.

However the minority of the employees of Company 1 considers that it is the work of managerial staff, while more than 60 % of the employees of Company 2 has the opposite views. As a whole, employees of the Company 1 have more detailed idea about corporate image than employees of the Company 2.

Besides, their idea is practically more feasible in a sense, as in the answers there is an interest in formation and improvement of company image and there are opinions about the ways to fulfill it, herewith the matter concerns only the external image.

The organization image idea of the employees of Company 2 can be characterized as fatalistic: showing displeasure with the image of organization, they, at the same time, rely entirely on the managerial staff in the matter of the image changing, from the context of the answers it is understandable, that in the first place is they mean an internal image.

The direct question "Does employees' image of company have an influence upon the clients' image of company?" the employees of both companies answered in the affirmative.

However, in their answers, employees of Company 1 predominantly marked a positive influencing ("We represent a part of our image to the client"; "Employees' sincere respect for the company disposes the clients to confidence and respect"); while employees of the Company 2 suppose that influencing on clients takes place in the case when an employee has some personal problems, which he "pours dawn on the clients and it adversely affects the image effect".

On the grounds of results of corporate image research in 2001 – 2002, we formulated the conception of internal and external image correlation, which consists shows that creation of internal image of organization requires mastering the corporate culture of the given organization by all its members. It occurs by means of self-categorization of the employees as organization members on the basis of community of behavior and aims, cultivated by management within the framework of corporate culture.

We have assumed that the internal image, aroused from this process, includes, along with the personalized image of organization, realization of ones own membership of it, and in this sense partly coincides with the personal image of the members of organization. Thus, the internal image gets over in the environment that converts it into external image [26].

The new results let us introduce amendments into this concept. The necessity of these amendments is caused by the fact that researches in 2001 - 2002 were carried out on the basis of the organizations, in which the experiment on transforming the corporate culture (transition from authoritarian type of corporate culture to its participating type) was made. The managerial staff realized the necessity of changing the corporate culture, as well as general direction of forthcoming changes.

With methodical support of the personnel advisers, the actions on the corporate culture transformation were carried out; these actions were

expressed in intensive corporate trainings, publication of printed matter (brochures, leaflets), explaining the strategical aims of companies and basic principles of their marketing policy, compensatory system modification, intensive contacts of the chiefs of company with the managers, etc. In other words, the organizations, in which the employees successfully categorized themselves as the members of organization, served as a base of research.

The characteristics of internal image of organizations, in which this image is not so successful, as well as degree of this image realization by the employees, were not the objects of the research. In the focal point of research there were mechanisms of successful formation of internal image of organization and its transmission to external audience.

Therefore, the results achieved in spring 2004, amplify and make more exact the earlier formulated conception, having expanded the sphere of its application.

First, we have cleared up that the internal image of organization is not always realized by employees as an image. In case of its successful formation it is not separated in their consciousness from the company, the part of which they consider themselves to be.

In such cases, the employees perceive the company external image as its image. In case of unsuccessful formation of internal image, in consciousness of the employees it is associated with the negative image of company. In that case, by "company image" the employees imply the internal image, instead of external one, that is their own negative overview about the company.

Thus, in the company with positive internal image the attitude of the employees to external image of the company is productive, while in the company with negative internal image the attitude of the employees to external image of the corporation can be described as unproductive.

The given conception of the corporate image is a kind of theoretical hypothesis, which requires an additional confirmation and further specification and development by means of new experiments and steps in theoretical analysis.

As a whole, the corporate image has some characteristics of the subject image. It particularly becomes apparent at creation of the organization image, which is usually endowed with the subject characteristics. In this view, the corporate image, like the subject image, arises and operates in interpersonal relationship owing to the personification mechanism.

One of external demonstrations of this internal similarity of two types of image is the phenomenon of brand name, which has appeared only in the second half of the twentieth century.

Today, brand name implies not only the image of trademark, but also

image of company that has the rights to possess this trademark. From the point of view of the set out here conception of image as a phenomenon of interpersonal relationship, the brand name is an image of the trademark of goods or services created by its owner in the buyer consciousness for the purpose of making it stand out against the background of the number of competitive companies [29].

Personification is widely used in advertising as an object image creation tool, which is directly connected with the introduction of the advertising character in the commercials.

Presence of characters in the product or service advertising is one of the main and most widespread means of attracting attention to commercials [16, 12, 15]. As a matter of fact, the use of personification in advertising creates some special social line or attitude to the introduced subject.

The cognitive component of this line consists in ascribing to the subject - prototype of image one or another property that usually may be observed at the subjects. The object can be characterized, as the one having a strong will, personal features, and ability to take a decision and to perform actions.

The affective component of this line involves the emotionally coloured relations (likes and dislikes, friendship, love, confrontation, fear, pity, compassion, contempt, etc.) directed to the object of personification.

The conative component of the personifying line expresses in readiness to cooperate, compete, care, resist, avoid, etc.

But it should be marked that most often advertising agencies aim to use as an advertising character the image, which consumer can identify himself with. Thus, they intuitively reproduce the scheme of creation of the successful internal corporate image as though aiming to "participate" their consumers.

As a whole, at the heart of different types of image (personal, collective, corporate, subject, etc.) lie the unified objective regularities, by means of which the nature of image as a symbolical subject character, created in the process of interpersonal relationship, becomes apparent.

Having defined the image as a character, "created" (instead of "appearing") in the interpersonal relationship, we thereby emphasized the initiating role of the subject that, proceeding from the objective purposes and tasks of presenting itself or other subject, which image is created, forms this image, wrapping it in symbolical form taking into consideration all system of relations generated by: first, cultural and historical experience; second, system of specific relationships in the scope of its direct social environment; third, professional and active context of social intercourse situation, predetermining the necessity of image-creating activity coordination with the purposes and tasks of professional work of the subject.

Taking into account all these determinations, the subject initiates image functioning in the system of social relationship, generating thereby the image relationship as a system of developing on their basis specific interactions, specific character of which is determined by essential characteristics of image.

Then, resting on its own perception of the way the others perceive its image, the subject, in the process of image interaction, performs a continuous and repeated correction of its own image during its functioning, moving it in that way to the optimum state (from the point of view of objective criteria), which is subjectively satisfying it at high image competence of the subject.

OUTLINE OF THE RESEARCH OUTLOOK

The outlook of further working out of social and psychological conception of image as a phenomenon of interpersonal relationship is connected first of all with concretization of the rules, developed within the framework of the formulated conception, heading toward the extension of the empirical base of image research by adding new, not investigated yet spheres of social interactions, within the framework of which perception and change of the image is realized.

For example, if actuality of developing the principles and technologies of positive socially claimed images creation (e.g. the state employee image, the fatherland defender image, etc.) does not give rise to doubts, then, creation and strengthening of negative images of social groups, playing destructive role in the constitution of society (e.g. image of terrorist), represents, in our opinion, no less actuality.

These problems solution involves carrying out the basic research, directed to the detection of mechanisms of the subject - prototype estimation on the basis of image perception and, in particular, mechanisms in charge of negative estimations formation.

However, the main (and still the least developed) direction of further research of image is conditioned by inherent in it potentialities to affect the personal characteristics of the subject - prototype.

As stated above, being one of the powerful means of psychological influence, image is capable to perform simultaneously the functions of self-expression, self-knowledge, self-development, and self-perfection regarding the subject, reflected in it.

The definition of image as a character of the subject, created in the interpersonal relationship, has already implied an acknowledgment of image as a phenomenon of interpersonal relationship that has the development vector, directed toward the optimum condition achievement.

Data of conducted social and psychological research shows that

respondents having no special training demonstrate naive and low-production self-perception and perception of others (the evidence of it is the data of research of social and psychological characteristics of image of the leader [28], conducted in Ekaterinburg in 2002).

On the other hand, the respondents, having received series of special trainings, directed toward the increase of image competence, demonstrated the raise of the level of integral personal self-appraisal. The pattern of image-creating activity influence on the image subject self-perception, presence and directivity of personal changes, resulting of this activity influence, have been rather poorly studied for the time being and require further fundamental research.

With this direction of image research is associated such a direction as image competence research. Depending on the conception of communicative competence, worked out by L.A. Petrovskaya [30], was formulated the conception of image competence, according to which the last represents "the developed psychological ability and readiness to create socially and personally adequate self-image, directed to its perception by other participants of social interactions" [28].

In our opinion, at the heart of this complex capacity, besides the mentioned above sources of self-perception and sources of perception of others, lie the following sources:

1) Perception of self-image, arising at others, through the correlation (identification, distinguishing) the self-perception of others with the same perception by other different people;

2) Perception of self-image, arising at others, the way others accept different from them other people;

3) Perception of self-image, arising at others, through the perception of the results of this image influence upon their behaviour;

4) Direct perception of self-image, arising at others, which is possible due to its symbolical mediating in image;

5) Perception of self-image, arising at others, through the explication of their internal state, coming from the given image effect.

The purposeful development of image competence involves the development and detailed practical approbation of the special educational programs, including theoretical and practical trainings on creation and change of image. The certain steps have been already made in this direction [28], but they require the further conceptual development and extension of experimental and methodical base.

It is significant that the image problems become an interdisciplinary phenomenon and today it is an essential component of the advertising activity

theory, control theory, PR, marketing, etc. Pithy approaches and practical solutions in these fields take pages of educational, scientific and popular literature precipitately. The modern political theory and practice are inseparably linked with formation and perception of the corresponding images.

In the researches, conducted today, more than 86 % of the leading employees of the municipal establishments of Ural region emphasize the image importance for their work effectiveness.

The understanding of psychological essence of image, these and other pathways of functioning and development of image as a phenomena and theoretical problem in the context of its comprehension as a phenomenon of interpersonal relationship is one of the urgent and perspective line of development of modern psychological thought.

The literature

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