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Research into adolescents' suicidal thoughts in Kazakhstan in the context of cognitive-behavioural approach

Badanie dotyczące myśli samobójczych u młodzieży w Kazachstanie w ujęciu poznawczo-behawioralnym

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Abstract

This article is devoted to empirical research of adolescents' suicidal thoughts in the context of the cognitive-behavioural approach. In Kazakhstan, this type of research is being conducted for the first time. The studies are conducted in general educational institutions of Kazakhstan with the consent of teachers, parents and participants themselves. The aim of this paper is to study irrational attitudes that generate cognitive distortions and become predictors for suicidal thoughts as well as adolescents' attitude towards parents, family, teachers, the same and opposite sexes, to their doubts and fears, feelings of guilt, the past and future, and to life goals. Research methods applied in this paper are CP-45 by Yunatskevich, Irrational Beliefs Test (IBT) by Ellis, Sachs and Levy's The Sentence Completion Test, and the psychological verbal and communicative method "Conversation." Study results revealed the most commonly used cognitive distortions formed as irrational settings such as "Frustrating tolerance," "Owes to yourself," "Owes to others" and "Catastrophisation," which are the reasons for low self-esteem and irrational thinking to be generated. Other main reasons are negative attitude towards one's own future or own past, and to their parents. In a risk group, adolescents represent dominance of irrational attitudes which are later transformed into a cognitive distortion of reality leading to suicidal thoughts. Suicide-oriented adolescents have a negative attitude to their own future and past and to their parents as well as socially oriented fears.

Keywords: suicidal thoughts, cognitive-behavioural approach, irrational attitudes, adolescents, Kazakhstan

Streszczenie

Artykuł ten jest poświęcony badaniom myśli samobójczych u młodzieży w ujęciu poznawczo-behawioralnym. W Kazachstanie takie badania prowadzone są po raz pierwszy – realizują je placówki edukacyjne za zgodą nauczycieli, rodziców i samych uczestników. Celem badania było zbadanie irracjonalnych postaw, które generują zniekształcenia poznawcze i stają się predyktorami myśli samobójczych, a także postaw młodzieży wobec rodziców, rodziny, nauczycieli, osób tej samej i przeciwnej płci, swoich wątpliwości i obaw, poczucia winy, przeszłości i przyszłości oraz celów życiowych. Metodami badawczymi zastosowanymi w pracy są: CP-45 Yunatskevicha, Irrational Beliefs Test (IBT) Ellisa, The Sentence Completion Test Sachsa i Levy'ego oraz psychologiczna metoda słowna i komunikacyjna „Conversation”. Wyniki badań ujawniły najczęściej stosowane zniekształcenia poznawcze uformowane jako postawy irracjonalne, takie jak „Tolerancja frustracji”, „Potrzeba w sobie”, „Potrzeba w innych” i „Katastrofizacja”, które leżą u podłoża niskiej samooceny i irracjonalnego myślenia. Inne ważne powody to negatywne nastawienie do własnej przyszłości lub przeszłości oraz do rodziców. W grupie ryzyka wśród młodzieży dominują postawy irracjonalne, które później przekształcają się w poznawcze zniekształcenia rzeczywistości prowadzące do myśli samobójczych. Młodzież zorientowana na samobójstwo ma negatywny stosunek do własnej przyszłości i przeszłości oraz do rodziców, a także lęki społeczne.

Słowa kluczowe: myśli samobójcze, podejście poznawczo-behawioralne, postawy irracjonalne, młodzież, Kazachstan

INTRODUCTION

According to the World Health Organization (World Health Organization, 2015), 800,000 people die each year as a result of suicide attempts. Thus, suicide is the 15th leading cause of death in the world accounting for 1.4% of all deaths, and the second leading cause of death among 15–29-year-olds in the world (World Health Organization, 2015). At the same time, about eight thousand of them are Kazakhstani; in other words, someone ends up with a suicide every hour in our country. Taking this into consideration, it is obvious that studies into this field are constantly increasing.

On international scale, the cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) has already proved its effectiveness in solving suicide problems by scientists such as Beck et al. (1999), Brown et al. (2006), Wenzel et al. (Wenzel and Jager-Hyman, 2012; Wenzel et al., 2009), TARRIER et al. (2008), Jager-Hyman et al. (2014), De Groot et al. (2007), Gandy et al. (2014), Morley et al. (2014), Rudd et al. (2015), Shneidman (1996), Slee et al. (2008), Wagner et al. (2014), Mewton and Andrews (2015), Reinecke (2006) and others. Butler et al. (2006) proved that the cognitive-behavioural therapy is effective in reducing the symptoms of mental illness associated with an increased risk of suicide, including depression, anxiety and psychosis.

In the mainstream of CBT, it was found that suicidal individuals show a higher level of hopelessness (Brown et al., 2006), have irrational beliefs (Ellis and Ellis, 2006), perfectionism (Hewitt et al., 2006) and the lack of problem solutions (Reinecke, 2006). Brown et al. (2006) and Beck et al. (1999) believe that cognitive distortions play an integral role in suicide ideas and behaviour development and maintenance (Wenzel et al., 2009). All these data have been taken into account in our study, and based on the results of foreign scientists, screening among modern adolescents was conducted in our country.

As it is known, adolescent suicide is often characterised by impulsiveness of actions due to hormonal changes in a body and turning into adulthood. Broadly speaking, there are various internal and external factors that are predictors of a suicidal behaviour in adolescents, some of which are identified in our study.

The main task of the current study was to find out on the basis of preliminary research, whether adolescents who had committed unsuccessful suicide attempts or were prone to suicidal behaviour, possessed any cognitive distortions in the form of irrational attitudes, and whether they had negative thoughts about their future and their close people.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The first method used in our study was the technique of revealing suicidal reactions propensity (CP-45). Yunatskevich is intended to reveal the propensity to suicidal reactions. All questions of this technique are adequate for

suicidal manifestations. The use of these questions and statements as a stimulus material made it possible to identify those students who were addicted to suicidal reactions during the survey, which helped to form a risk group. Yunatskevich (1998) singled out groups of social and sociopsychological factors influencing suicidal risk relying on foreign research by Lukas (2000), Shneidman (1996) and Russian psychology developers Kondrichin and Lester (1997), Davydov (1991), Shustov (2005), Danilova (1987), Brovchuk (2006). The next technique was Ellis's Irrational Beliefs Test (IBT) (Ellis et al., 2010). All our negative emotions do not emerge from life events and rather from a negative interpretation due to irrational beliefs learnt from our closest environment in childhood. This technique was designed to identify these very irrational settings as well as to realise their negative impact on emotions and thereby bring personality closer to emotional well-being state. The third technique that we used was "Methodology of unfinished sentences." "Unfinished sentences" methodology has been used in experimental and psychological practice for a long time. There are a lot of various options and interpretations. In this case, it was decided to present a variant developed by Sachs and Levy.

This version of "Unfinished proposals method" includes 60 unfinished proposals which can be divided into 15 groups that characterise in-family relationship system, relationship to one's own and opposite sex, to sexual relations, to higher-ranking officials and subordinates in varying degrees. Some proposal groups relate to fears experienced by a person, to their sense of comprehension of their own guilt, testify their attitude to the past and the future, touch on relationships with parents and friends and one's own life goals. The test was developed by Sacks and Levy in the 1950s (Sacks Sentence Completion Test, SSCT) refers to projective diagnostics is a variation of the technique of verbal associations. This method is approved by Rumyantsev (1969) who showed its effectiveness for carrying out rehabilitation measures. Finally, the fourth method that was used during our research was a psychological verbal and communicative method "Conversation" which is directed by observation in its essence and concentrates around a limited number of issues of importance in this study and assuming an easy communication with participants. The corresponding variants of participants' attitudes to conversation task are psychologically different situations and require as a different inclusion in these situations and various tactics and conversation forms (Ailamazyan, 1996).

RESULTS

The total sample size in this study amounted to $N = 100$, including 54 young men and 46 young women aged 15–17 ($M = 16.4$), 14% of whom were 15-year-olds, 29% – 16-year-olds and 57% – 17-year-old teenagers. Initially, the entire sample was divided into two groups: the experimental group (50%) consisted of those who had had a suicide attempt or suicidal ideation, and a control group (50%)

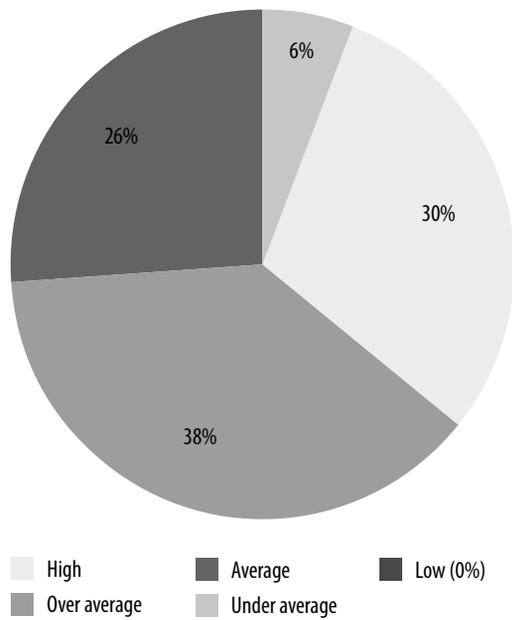


Fig. 1. The level of suicide reaction disposition in the experimental group

randomly selected from overall teenage population. The selection of experimental group of applicants was based on the information provided by teachers and adolescents themselves, and on the basis of some test results. All participants were schoolchildren from general educational institutions in Kazakhstan. In the framework of this study, a validation experiment has been conducted where the following data was obtained. An analysis of CP-45 method by Yunatskevich showed the percentage of suicidal reactions propensity level which can be seen in Figs. 1 and 2.

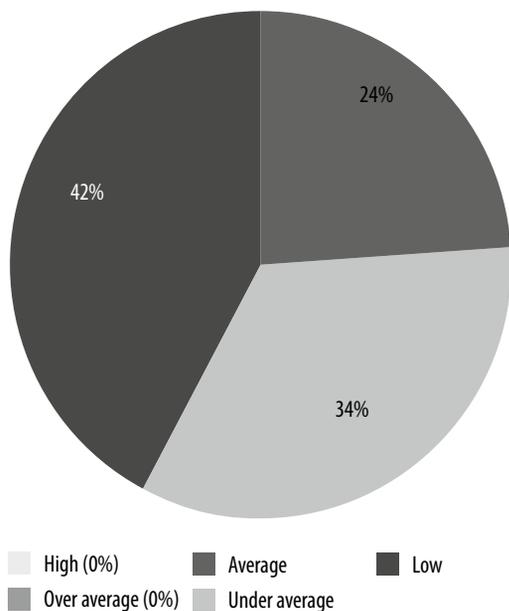


Fig. 2. The level of suicide reaction disposition in the control group

As we can see in Fig. 1, the number of adolescents with a higher average and a high level of suicidal tendencies (68%) prevails in the experimental group, which means that in the case of adaptation disorders, a suicide attempt or self-destructive behaviour, and in internal and external conflict situation some medical and psychological help may be needed. When interpreting the obtained data, one should remember that methodology states only the initial level of a person's propensity development for suicide during examination. During any conflict situation, other negative conditions and deforming motivation for vital existence (weakening motivation for later life), this propensity may develop (Kamenyukin and Kovpak, 2008).

Based on Fig. 2, we can see that a greater predominance goes to under average and a low level of propensity to suicidal reactions (76%) in the control group. This suggests that a suicidal reaction can occur only against a background of prolonged mental trauma and with reactive states of the psyche, or not at all. The analysis of the following procedure shows pronounced differences in the mean values in the control and experimental groups, which can be seen in Fig. 3.

DISCUSSION

Based on the results of two research, we can clearly see the presence of irrational beliefs in the experimental group. Many people are frustrated with tolerance $X_{sr} = 27.6$ (pronounced presence of an irrational setting), owe to itself $X_r = 18.9$ (expressed presence of an irrational beliefs), owe to other $X_{sr} = 22.4$ (pronounced presence of an irrational setting) and catastrophic $X_r = 27.4$ (marked presence of an irrational setting). The scale of "Catastrophisation"

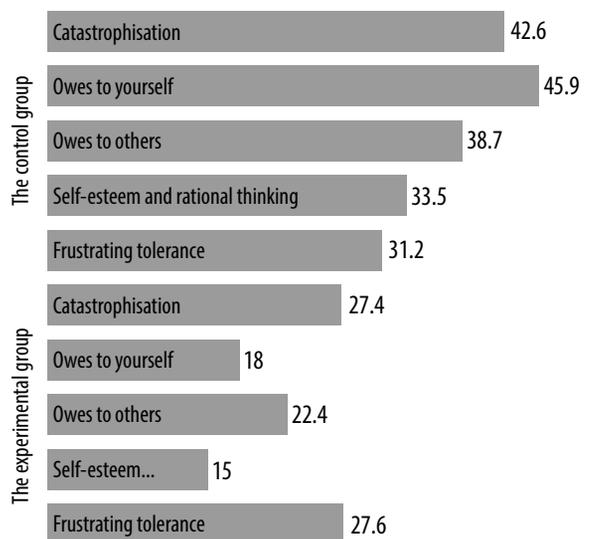


Fig. 3. The results in diagnostics of irrational beliefs (Ellis and Ellis, 2006)

reflects the perception of various adverse events by people. The low score on this scale indicates that it is natural for a person to evaluate every adverse event as horrible and unbearable, while the high score indicates the opposite. Scale indicators "Owes to yourself" and "Owes to others" indicate the presence or absence of excessively high demands on yourself and others. "Evaluation setting" shows how a person evaluates themselves and others. The presence of such an installation may indicate that it is natural for a person to assess not individual traits or actions of people, but a person as a whole. The other two scales are an assessment of the people's frustrating tolerance which reflects the various frustrating tolerance degrees (i.e. it shows a stress resistance level), and the overall assessment of rational thinking degree (Sizova and Philippchenkova, 2002). To determine the differences between the control and experimental groups, we used the Mann-Whitney *U* test which allows to identify the differences between small samples when $n_1, n_2 \geq 3$. The following result achieved as $U_{emp} = 0$ and is in significance zone; accordingly, hypothesis H_1 is accepted and H_0 is rejected. Thus, there are differences between control and experimental groups. The method "Unfinished sentences" is used to find out applicant's attitude to life, to their own future and to their parents. In the course of qualitative and quantitative data processing, we found that suicidal-oriented adolescents often appear to be "foggy" (30%), "illusory" (20%), "frightening" (16%) and "far away" (12%). Basically, all have a desire to forget their past (74%). Such negative statements against a father as "I do not know him" (26%), "I rarely get attention" (14%), "I rarely remember" (14%) or left unanswered empty space (10%) are also made. In relation to a mother, the following statements are singled out: "Strict" (40%), "We strongly swear" (18%), "Does not understand me" (12%), "Drinks" (8%). In addition, there is a fear of "loneliness" (32%), "future" (16%), "disappoint someone" (10%), "lose loved ones" (6%).

The control group presents completely different results on "unfinished sentences" method statements by adolescents. The future seems to them "light" (42%), "good" (26%), "bright" (18%). The attitude towards the parents is as follows: father "rarely rests" (22%), "spends time with us" (22%), "leaves the mountains" (18%) and a mother "loves me very much" (46%), "close girlfriend" (28%), "native man" (8%), "we are alike" (6%). There is a fear of "darkness" (24%), "public" (16%), "difficulties" (14%). We used the method of conversation to find out the specifics of possible suicide attempts causes and factors among adolescents in the experimental group, and also to establish trust with them. All conversations were controlled and monitored by the researcher himself. The technique of reflexive listening was used to control the unambiguity and accuracy of the researcher's understanding of what he heard. After the series of interviews with almost all participants (80%), it was found that mainly because of unrequited love, bad relationships inside a family or at school and also because of fears of a dubious future or lack of confidence in their abilities.

Thus, we can see that the adolescents in the control and experimental groups differ in irrational attitudes diagnosis and in attitudes toward their future/past, parents and fears diagnosis. The experimental group most often dominates the irrational setting "Frustrating Tolerance, Self-Reliance," "Owes to others" and "Catastrophisation." Self-esteem in adolescents in the experimental group is low and rationality of thinking is absent. There is also a negative view of the future, the past, the parents, mostly fear of loneliness, the future, frustrating of a loved one or loss of it. And the control group has irrational settings but not as clearly expressed as in the experimental group. The future seems bright and good to them, the relationship with their mother is very close, and the teenagers have a desire to have a rest and visit their home more often.

CONCLUSIONS

The study of adolescents with a tendency to suicidal behaviour in the context of cognitive behavioural direction leads to the following conclusions:

1. Adolescents in a risk group represent dominance of irrational attitudes which are later transformed into a cognitive distortion of reality leading to suicidal thoughts.
2. Suicide-oriented adolescents have a negative attitude to their own future and past and to their parents as well as socially oriented fears.

The obtained research results can be used by psychologists in general educational institutions, teachers as well as by all interested researchers in trainings preparation, programs and seminars. Nowadays, the cognitive behavioural trend has been recognised as one of the most effective in addressing the issue of reducing suicidal tendencies among adolescents and adults. In this regard, we hope our country disseminates widely training direction for the future psychologists and specialists who will have to deal with increasing phenomenon of teenage suicide in modern Kazakhstan.

Conflict of interest

The authors do not report any financial or personal links to other persons or organizations that might negatively affect the content of this publication and/or claim rights thereto.

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