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PSYCHOLOGICAL AND ONTOGENETIC ASPECTS OF THE PROBLEM OF RESPONSIBILITY: A THEORETICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract: This article provides a comprehensive theoretical analysis of the concept of responsibility within the frameworks of psychological counseling and psychotherapy, alongside its ontogenetic and phylogenetic developmental trajectories. The study contrastively examines the foundational approaches to the phenomenon of responsibility formulated by key theorists such as E. Berne, F. Perls, V. Frankl, S. Freud, and E. Erikson. Furthermore, it delineates the critical role of responsibility in personality maturity, distinguishing between "healthy" and "unhealthy" responsibility, exploring the impact of the initiative versus guilt dichotomy during early childhood development, and evaluating the overarching influence of socio-cultural determinants.

Keywords: responsibility, psychotherapy, healthy responsibility, unhealthy responsibility, logotherapy, conscience, ontogeny, phylogeny, initiative, personality maturity.

Introduction

In contemporary psychology and psychotherapy, the ontogeny of personality and the mechanisms underlying an individual's integration into the social environment remain perennially critical areas of inquiry. At the core of this developmental process lies the paradigm of responsibility. Responsibility is conceptualized as the degree of an individual's conscious awareness of their own life trajectory, autonomous choices, and the subsequent impacts these choices exert on both the self and the external environment. This paper aims to conduct a rigorous theoretical investigation into the interpretations of responsibility within foreign psychological frameworks and its sequential ontogenetic developmental stages across the human lifespan.

The Paradigm of Responsibility in Psychotherapeutic Theories

The question of responsibility occupies a pivotal status in the theoretical foundations of psychological counseling and psychotherapy. Eric Berne posited that an individual assumes responsibility by autonomously deciding what they aspire to achieve in life and how they choose to live. Barring instances involving severe organic brain trauma, every human being possesses an inherent capacity for independent cognition, problem-solving, and decision-making. According to Berne, the ultimate meaning and direction of human existence are fundamentally determined by decisions grounded in how an individual envisions their potential self and their desired life path.

Frederick Perls, the founder of Gestalt therapy, interprets responsibility as the individual's capacity to respond to and be accountable for their own desires, expectations, fantasies, and actions, viewing it as a hallmark of psychological maturity. A responsible individual recognizes their inherent freedom of choice in shaping their actions, thoughts, and attitudes. Crucially, Perls differentiates between "healthy" and "unhealthy" forms of responsibility. Unhealthy responsibility typically develops at an unconscious level, originating from internal psychological pressures that compel the individual to subjugate themselves to the needs and desires of others. In this state, the individual prioritizes external obligations while remaining alienated from their own authentic needs. It is highly noteworthy, as observed from an analytical standpoint, that in such dynamics, the individual enters a process of self-destruction rather than self-actualization, which ultimately diminishes their capacity to exercise genuine responsibility toward others.

Viktor Frankl, the architect of logotherapy, elucidates responsibility as one of the primary defining dimensions of human existence. Analyzing the essence of human being, Frankl rigorously maintains that "conscience and responsibility play a leading role in the drama of human existence... to be human means to be conscious and responsible" [4; p. 24]. In his view, discovering the meaning of one's life is an imperative that can only be actualized through conscious responsibility.

Addressing the question of to whom the individual is accountable, Frankl emphasizes that the human being is, first and foremost, answerable to their own conscience. "Ultimately, man should not ask what the meaning of his life is, but rather he must realize that he it is who is asked. Life poses questions to him, and he must respond to these questions by being fully responsible, and this response can only be given through taking responsibility for his own life" [3; pp. 15–16]. This underscores the premise that in Frankl's theory, responsibility is an existential construct inextricably bound to inner freedom and conscientiousness, serving as the definitive determinant in life choices and decisions.

Although Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory often conceptualizes the individual as a casualty of internal instinctual drives and intrapsychic conflicts, the concept of responsibility nevertheless holds significant structural value. For instance, within Alfred Adler's individual psychology, the patient is systematically encouraged to accept responsibility for their symptoms, thereby consolidating personal accountability and strengthening the Ego. This approach explicitly calls the individual to active responsibility for their life and conduct. Concurrently, classic psychoanalysis highlights that neurotic individuals frequently resort to evading or denying responsibility as an unconscious defense mechanism to absolve themselves of guilt, which is identified as a primary etiology of psychological dysfunctions.

The Ontogenetic and Phylogenetic Evolution of Responsibility

In international psychological discourse, the ontogeny of responsibility is viewed as an invariant component of an individual's moral and psychological development, heavily contingent upon intellectual and social maturation. It manifests through the internalization of social norms and regulations. The attainment of a highly developed level of responsibility is functionally correlated with a deep, conscious comprehension of the ethical and legal codes established within a society. This evolutionary process enhances the individual's capacity for critical self-evaluation and amplifies their socialization.

The scientific literature dedicated to the problem of responsibility distinguishes two distinct developmental processes:

- **Phylogenetic Development:** Historically, responsibility was initially regulated through customs, rituals, and traditional habits, which later evolved into formal legal and ethical frameworks within stratified societies. In certain socio-political contexts, such as socialist structures, the equilibrium between legal and moral codes shifted predominantly toward ethical norms, emphasizing the supremacy of personal spirituality and moral decision-making.
- **Ontogenetic Development:** This refers to the sequential formation of responsibility as the child develops as a distinct personality and adapts to the social matrix. In this trajectory, the micro-environment—specifically parents, educational institutions, and the immediate peer group—exerts a paramount influence.

Within the framework of developmental theories, particularly G. Stanley Hall's recapitulation theory, the ontogenetic development of a child uniquely replicates the phylogenetic evolutionary stages of humanity; that is, ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny. If responsibility is conceptualized as an individual's social and personal duty, its development unfolds progressively through age-specific ontogenetic stages.

A widely consensus-driven view among international psychologists regarding the ontogeny of responsibility dictates that the sense of duty begins its initial formation during early childhood—specifically from the age of one. In Erik Erikson's psychosocial development theory, the emergence and active consolidation of a sense of responsibility occur precisely between the ages of one and six, a period wherein the sense of initiative progressively overrides guilt in children aged three to six, leading to a substantial crystallization of responsibility.

During the initiative versus guilt stage (ages 3–6), the child develops a foundational sense of responsibility toward physical and social objects in their immediate environment, including toys, siblings, and domestic pets. During this phase, the psychological validation and support of the child's initiatives by parents and adult caregivers play a decisive role. When parents respect the child's drive for autonomous thought and action, the child is empowered to fully manifest initiative and internalize responsibility. Conversely, the suppression of initiative amplifies feelings of guilt, thereby severely impeding the healthy maturation of responsibility.

Ultimately, the ontogenetic trajectory of responsibility cannot be decoupled from broader macro-systemic variables; it is inextricably intertwined with individual psychological processes, age-stratified milestones, social pressures, and the overarching cultural context.

Conclusion

Responsibility transcends the mere mechanical adherence to external regulations and social obligations; it represents the alignment of an individual's behavior with their inner psychological world, subjective outlook, core values, and existential goals. Consequently, it serves as a critical psychological locus that ensures human freedom, autonomy, and meaningful participation in life. The ontogenetic development of responsibility, while bounded by individual chronological and psychological stages, is fundamentally co-determined by the socio-cultural milieu, parental rearing paradigms, and the systemic environment in which the individual is embedded.

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