Socio-psychological analysis of the trips abroad to help to restore the health of Belarusian children in the period of post Chernobyl

Halina Hatalskaya
Department of Psychology
F.Skorina State University of Gomel - Belarus

The Chernobyl disaster led to a change in the psychological state of most of the people of Belarus who have suffered the accident. The main factors contributing to this change are insufficient knowledge of radiation effects, contradictory information on the situation of environmental radioactivity and its consequences, the persistence of fear for their health, welfare and well-being of their relatives, the sudden change in life stereotypes (forcible transfer, lost of the habits, the change of the location and of the type of work), the need to observe constantly safety measures and the need for regular monitoring.

Numerous researches confirm that among the population who have suffered the accident there is reduction of the level of psychical adaptation, diffidence, unstable self-esteem and pessimistic estimation of the future. Almost two thirds of the examined population feel the lost of personal safety, which is the evidence of the development of socio-radioecological stress. Its effects have cumulative nature, and its range is always widening. In 1987 the 48% of examined people suffered from socio-radioecological stress, in 1991 - 54%, in 1995 - 74%.

All the factors mentioned above influence children, resident on the contaminated area, which in its turn makes the problem of the trips abroad for the improvement of health conditions actual. Many European countries were willing to help to organize them. Since 90s annually about 50 thousand children, resident in the area which was affected by Chernobyl, have been to 26 countries for the improvement of health conditions. The majority went to: Italy (more than 30 thousand), Germany (10, 9 thousands), Spain (3,4 thousands), Great Britain (2,7 thousands), Irland (2,7 thousands), Belgium (2,6 thousands), the USA (1,3 thousand.), Austria (1 thousand.) and to other countries.
In the existing situation it is important to understand the significance of the trips and the improvement of health conditions in the clean ecological Belarusian areas, in the foreign countries. In the post Chernobyl period the socio-economical situation of Belarus changed in such a way that trips abroad for 12-14 years were possible only due to various foreign volunteer organizations. In our turn we can assume that trips abroad themselves (very often these children hadn’t been even outside their village) to another socio-economic and socio-cultural environment can have different impact on the psyche, the consciousness, the development of a child’s personality. For example, on one hand, they can have positive influence on the child’s cultural development, the widening of child’s horizons, positive family experience, material assistance of the host family, the development of tolerance etc. On the other hand – the development of parasitical position, non realistic point of view about a better life “there”, outside one’s country, which can affect the formation of patriotic feelings and character traits. In this connection the aim of our research is socio-psychological analysis of the experience of health recovery abroad, its retrospective estimation. The urgency of this problem is increasingly growing since there are not research in the matter.

The following methods of research were used: survey method; the method of expert evaluation; the analysis of work with a focus-group; the statistical methods of the elaboration of data; interpretation methods.

The sample research encompassed boys and girls who went abroad for the recovery of health conditions in their childhood and adolescence one or more times. 47% of the respondents went abroad for the improvement of their health conditions 1-2 times (a quarter of them – only 1 time); 3-4 times – 41%; five and more times – 34%.

The research was conducted on a sample of 258 young people. 77% actually are university students, 23% are students of vocational schools, colleges, 27 % are village young people, 73 % are from big cities. 13% of the sample are attendants. The dominating age of the sample is 19 years.
In the opinion of 94% of the respondents, Chernobyl worsened life conditions and led to various health problems. A quarter of the respondents have serious health problems connected with Chernobyl, 41% mark that their parents suffer from serious health problems, 33% - their relatives suffer, 21% - friends. 51% of young people say that they personally know people who were taken ill after Chernobyl disaster. 71% of the respondents think that foodstuff in one or another way is contaminated by radioactive nuclides.

More than a half of the respondents (61%) are sure that the state does its better to minimize the consequences of Chernobyl disaster and to protect the health of the population, but 39% believe that the measures taken are non enough.

94% of the respondents evaluate their health recovery experience as positive. Analysing it at present they mark that this experience was «a window» to another culture: it contributed to the emergence of interest to another culture, mentality of another nation; reinforcement of national identification due to understanding the differences in the mentality; widening of points of view about interaction among children, between children and adults; emergence of new ideas about family; widening of language opportunities; defining of a higher living standard, aspiration for intensive self-development. Young people consider very important a higher level of the presence of necessary life facilities which they were able to discover due to the trips, it favored the emergence of personal programme of the improvement of life conditions.

The majority of the respondents list among the positive effects of sanitary trips the improvement of health conditions due to full-value nutrition, active way of life, trips to the seaside and mountains, hearty welcome of the host family. Describing the relations between children in families, camps, schools, the majority highlights friendliness, openness, ease in making friends with foreign children. On the second day of the sojourn in another country, the respondent felt that they were accepted and people were friendly to them. It was very pleasant that nobody emphasized the differences between cultures, languages, ages.
The respondents noticed that there were more liberal relationships between adults and children («minor distance», «more permits in comparison with prohibition»). Young people remember that they were considered family members or equal members of children’s group. Sometimes they noticed that in the host family there was more care toward them, than to proper children. Some respondents believe that family relations in the host family were better and more positive than in their own families (here we speak about young people from adverse families). According to their estimation, they found some guiding lines in the formation of a proper family on the base of mutual understanding, assistance, care.

Only 6% of the respondents highlight that their experience in one way or another was negative because of:

- exaggerated surveillance of the host family;
- coldness and haughtiness toward Belarusian and Russian people (Poland);
- perception of «Chernobyl children» during the first years of sanitary trips as people from another dangerous dimension» (Germany);
- jealousy of the children in the host family, in particular when they were younger or of the same age (Italy, Belgium);
- different attitude toward proper children and invited children, the feeling that “we have stayed too long and have to go” (Germany).

68% of the students who went abroad numerous times assume that these trips contributed to the development of their patriotic feelings. They are sure that more times one goes outside the country (each of them has been abroad more than 4 times), more possibilities one has to understand the advantages and disadvantages of living there, difficulties, that people face, and to evaluate objectively the advantages of living in the native land. «These trips made us think that we don’t pay much attention and don’t appreciate the beauty of our nature and other things we have», say young people. 16% highlight that their patriotic feelings didn’t change, 16% of the
respondents still want to go abroad to study and to work. Many respondents would like to study or participate in some professional training for 3 months or more.

Analyzing the factors contributing to the desire of working and living in the native land, the respondents draw attention to:

- A great value of close relationship in the family, unwillingness to lose them;
- A great value of friendly relationship, which has a higher level of intimacy;
- Well-being of proper family, which leads to high life quality in the native land;
- understanding of perspectives of self realization in the native land, the possibility of earning in a worthy manner;
- belief in positive perspectives of the native land;
- the understanding of the difference between mentalities;
- the attitude towards emigrants, as to people of the second sort;
- the danger of becoming a slave there (abroad).

A lot of respondent remember that during their sanitary trips they were impressed by respectful attitude toward them, attention in English host families, emotional and hearty welcome in Italy, France and Czech Republic. Many respondent who have been to Italy highlight the friendly close relationship with the host family which has led to friendship between Italian and Belarusian families. Some respondents assume that it was their host family to make them think about university education.

In the opinion of the respondents, who want to go abroad to work and live, they are attracted by: the desire to make an attempt of self realization in another country, conviction that a confident person can realize himself in any country; the opportunity to improve economical conditions; the improvement of ecological conditions and etc.

Socio-psychological analysis of the influence of sanitary trips abroad in the period of post Chernobyl permits to make the following conclusions.
Sanitary trips abroad organized since 90s by volunteer organizations from various countries, got high retrospective evaluation, a range of factors contribute to it (a good organization, collaboration between Belarusian and host parties, high-quality preparedness of host party, attendants, friendliness and hospitality of the host party, positive psychological climate). These data are confirmed by the expert evaluation, which testifies to high reliability of the research results.

The experience contributed in the opinion of young people:

- the improvement of health conditions due to climate, nutrition, relationships;
- self development due to learning a new culture, widening of the horizons, assumption of important decisions;
- national identification. The majority of young people (56%), due to analyzing their experience connected with sanitary trips, begin to realize better the advantages of living in the native land, emphasizing emotional life aspects.

The importance of such a positive experience among young people at present increases in the connection with intensification of migration process, development of political, economic, scientific relations between countries, which leads to cultural and educational exchange, and to organization of conjoint enterprises. Such a positive experience contributes to optimal adaptation in the conditions of another culture, and determines effective cultural interaction.