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**ADOLESCENT NOTIONS OF SUCCESS**

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*Abstract*

The purpose of this study was to analyse the views of modern girls and boys on success and successful people. The sample of our study included 500 teenagers aged 15 to 17 years ( $M = 16.1$ ), who are 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grade students at Moscow's secondary schools and gymnasiums (209 (41.8%) are boys and 291 (58.2%) are girls). The results show that in the mind of modern Russian teenagers, the elements of success include achievement of set goals, self-development through overcoming obstacles, which brings them a feeling of gratification and happiness. Modern adolescents are more likely to find successful people to be people mostly from their surroundings. Other examples they strive to imitate include well-known figures in the spheres of business and show business, slightly less often those in politics. This result shows the importance of family and the media in building the image of success in adolescents. Many significant differences were obtained as to who modern boys and girls are oriented to. The analysis of examples of successful people have shown that girls are more oriented towards real people who surround them or instead they choose examples of successful women from the sphere of show business. Whereas young men are more guided by generally recognized instances of success - influential politicians, successful businessmen, and favourite sportsmen. It is important to consider the specific features of modern adolescents' notions about success thus identified in the study when consulting and helping teenagers in building their life plans.

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## 1. Introduction

In modern society, the words ‘success’ and ‘successfulness’ are highly popular and are the subject of heated debate. Many authors note the impact of the ubiquitous media that aggressively imposes its material values and images of success (Polivanova, 1996; Podolsky & Idobaeva, 2007). This is reflected in the value system of modern adolescents, for whom success achievement becomes increasingly important (Sobkin, Burelomova, & Smislova, 2010; Martishina, 2017; Rean, 2016). Yet, it remains unclear what ideas and meanings teenagers put into the notion of success, which forms the underpinnings of the value system and the construction of the image of one's own future.

### 1.1. The concept of success

The concept of success came to us from foreign culture as evidenced by the fact that the Russian dictionaries did not register this word until the early 20th century (Franz, 1994). In our country, detailed study into the phenomenon of success loaned from American culture, began to develop actively in the late 1980s - early 1990s (Efremova & Labunskaya 1999).

The study of success is carried out mainly in social psychology and labor psychology, which analyze factors and patterns of professional success in adulthood (Teplinskikh, 2007; Todysheva, 2008, Rikel, 2012). These papers treat success quite differently, for example, as ‘achieving a meaningful goal after overcoming obstacles in its path’ (Todysheva, 2008, p.224) or as ‘a characteristic of an individual's experience resulting from his actions’ (Teplinskikh, 2007, p. 92). Many authors do not distinguish between the concepts of success and successfulness however, the notion of success more often correlates with that of the result of an activity while the concept of successfulness with one's individuality and its properties (Rikel, 2012).

The most detailed and complete analysis of this concept has been made by the Russian psychologist and philosopher G.L. Tulchinsky (1990) who singles out five main definition-levels of success:

- The first and most common one in the public consciousness is the understanding of success as social recognition of a person's abilities and achievements, his or her ‘popularity’ in society.
- The second definition relates to the selectivity of a person who values most of all not any success or recognition but what is significant to him/herself, i.e. the recognition by ‘significant others’.
- To mold and develop a personality it is important for success to mean not only the recognition of the results of his/her activities, but also to signify an overcoming of life difficulties that emerge on the way to goal attainment. Success achievement in resolving seemingly insurmountable problems and the experience gained are the basis of making a person aware and appreciative of his or her abilities and capabilities - this will serve as a foundation for further self-determination and development. In this connection, the third definition of success is formulated as ‘success as an overcoming’.
- This definition of success is important in order to distinguish it from ‘success-self-overcoming’ or self-perfection, when an individual is striving to realize his or her aspirations in the most perfect and harmonious manner (Tulchinsky, 1990)
- The fifth definition is expressed in the understanding of success as the realization of one's calling when the most important thing is not the end result of an activity, but the process itself; when a person values not the assessment of an activity but the possibility of implementing it.

Tulchinsky (1990) also seeks to describe the features of the understanding of success in Russian culture; success as recognition is assessed more negatively there in contrast to American culture. Success as recognition by significant others also has its own specificity in connection with the fact that those related either to power or suffering enjoy the greatest authority. However, the author described the late 20th century realities while the modern understanding of success has been studied hardly at all.

## **1.2. Research into teenagers' views on success**

Most of the papers that deal with success focus on the values and ideals of modern teenagers (Burelomova, Sobkin, 2010, Martishina, 2017, Zaytsev, 2011 etc.). However, there are several papers devoted to the study of adolescents' ideas about success in various areas of life (Galyuk, 2004; Tugusheva, 2006).

In A.D. Galyuk sociological study (2004) obtained an interesting result on the connection between the level of adolescents' material well-being and their beliefs about success. For groups of low-income teens, success means high earnings and mental equilibrium, harmony while middle-class and well-off young people find the success criteria to include, in addition to good earnings, having a business of one's own and an exciting and favorite job. This paper also analyzed youth idols (whom young people would like to imitate), which showed that the school students basically wanted to look like their family members (40%), students wished to resemble themselves (37%), whereas working young people wanted to be similar to their relatives (26%), colleagues (22%) and themselves (26%). The study by Yu.A. Zaytsev (2011) involved 247 adolescents aged 15-17 years divided into working- and middle class representatives based on their parents' occupations. The results obtained in the study showed that the former associated success in life with luck, family wealth while the latter linked it with diligence, industry, dedication and self-development. It is important to note that both studies considered adolescents' social-economic situation while leaving out the gender differences.

In A.R. Tugusheva socio-psychological study obtained data reflecting the idea of a successful person (s/he is ambitious, sociable, has a favourite job and enjoys the support of close people) and an unsuccessful person (s/he is afraid of difficulties, is shut-in, her/his emotional background is low) (Tugusheva, 2007). There are gender differences in the notions of social success: when girls describe a successful person, the presence of enthusiasm and activity is more important, and with young men reliance on one's own independence, the ability to clearly set goals, efficiency in activities and confident behavior are predominant. A similar task was posed in the study of adolescents' ideals (grades 5-9), which was conducted by Burelomova under the leadership of Sobkin (2010). The results of this study revealed the influence of modern politicians and heroes from the school literature classes on the formation of adolescents' ideals and anti-ideals.

Foreign research related to success, on the contrary, is less focused on building fundamental theoretical models of success and is more oriented to the study of cross-cultural differences in relation to success. These studies are based on comparing Western and Eastern cultures (Fan, Karnilowicz, 1997, Lockwood et al., 2005; Lewis, 2011). A study by Fan and Karnilowicz (1997) obtained the results, according to which the ideas of success in Chinese immigrants' children differed fundamentally from those of indigenous children in Australia. The study by Lewis and colleagues (2011) investigated differences in

the emotional response to success and failure in American schoolchildren of different ethnic origins. It was found that unlike their white American classmates, Japanese students showed less emotional response to both success and failure. Cultural differences in the cognitive, emotional and behavioral components of attitudes to success have also been documented in other studies.

## **2. Problem Statement**

Despite the popular usage of the term ‘success’, its content rarely becomes a subject of independent study in psychology. Even fewer papers are devoted to studying the development of ideas about success in adolescence. Several studies investigated adolescents’ ideas about success, analyzed characteristics of a successful person and the basic concepts and values that adolescents put in it. In addition, some papers assess the SES effect on the formation of the notion of success, although few of them take the gender / sexual characteristics into account. However, it is important to remember that in addition to the SES, it is also the impact of socio-cultural norms related to gender differences that determines the psychological qualities and patterns of behavior of women and men (Fetiskin, 2014).

In this regard, the purpose of this study was to analyze the views of modern girls and boys on success and successful people.

## **3. Research Questions**

- 3.1. How do modern adolescents determine success?
- 3.2. Are there differences in the understanding of success by modern girls and boys??

## **4. Purpose of the Study**

The aim of this research was to study teenagers' beliefs about success and investigation of gender differences.

## **5. Research Methods**

### **5.1. Sample**

The sample of our study included 500 teenagers aged 15 to 17 years ( $M = 16.1$ ), who are students at Moscow’s secondary schools and gymnasiums. Of these, 209 (41.8%) are boys and 291 (58.2%) are girls. At the time of testing, 349 (69.8%) of the teenagers were high school 10th graders, and 151 (30.2%) were 11th grade students. In addition, one subject at the age of 14 and one teenager was already 18 years old.

### **5.2. Materials and Procedure**

The study was conducted in group form: the teenagers filled in all the questionnaires in class during a lesson. We used two main methods for investigation of adolescent’s notions about success:

1) For the analysis of teenagers' views on success, we also developed a questionnaire on ‘Adolescent Perception of Success’ (APS). Based on the analysis of the definitions of success that exist in society and psychology (Tulchinsky, 1994), we compiled a list of characteristics that may describe this concept. The

adolescents were to indicate the degree of correspondence of each of the characteristic to their own understanding of success according to the 5-point system. It follows that the highest average value corresponds to the most suitable characteristic of the success definition.

2) Examples of successful people.

The questionnaire included a technique in which teenagers were to give five examples of successful people and put down the reasons why they had chosen them.

## 6. Findings

### 6.1. Results of adolescents' execution of the APS questionnaire

The results obtained show that modern adolescents' understanding of success is primarily determined as 'achieving set goals' (the highest average value is 3.69 points, and the smallest spread of the data is 0.66). This definition of success is the most significant for both boys and girls and corresponds to the dictionary definition of the word.

**Table 01.** Significance of various characteristics of the 'success' concept for adolescents

Definition of the notion of 'success'	Total sample		Young men			Young women			The Mann-Whitney test, level of significance
	Mean	St. Dev.	Mean	St. Dev.	Rank	Mean	St. Dev.	Rank	
1. Luck, good fortune	2.48	1.04	2.43	1.08	11	2.51	1.00	10	
2. Popularity in society, fame	2.23	1.2	2.24	1.24	10	2.22	1.17	11	
3. Recognition by authoritative people of importance to you	2.75	1.1	2.65	1.13	9	2.83	1.08	9	
4. Attainment of the goals set	<b>3.69</b>	0.66	3.66	0.64	1	3.70	0.68	1	
5. Satisfaction from the process of doing a job	2.92	1.15	2.91	1.10	7	2.93	1.18	7	
6. Satisfaction of a job well done	<b>3.30</b>	0.98	3.28	1.00	<u>2</u>	3.31	0.97	<u>3</u>	
7. The feeling of well-deserved happiness, joy	<b>3.12</b>	1.03	3.08	1.09	6	3.16	0.99	6	
8. Overcoming of obstacles	<b>3.21</b>	0.97	3.10	1.01	5	3.29	0.92	5	U=27031.500. p=0.032
9. Personal growth, self-improvement	<b>3.38</b>	0.94	3.26	1.01	<u>3</u>	3.47	0.88	<u>2</u>	U=18227.500. p=0.043
10. Realization of one's abilities, skills and knowledge in the results of one's activity	<b>3.23</b>	0.94	3.15	0.99	4	3.30	0.89	4	
11. Happiness	2.83	1.25	2.75	1.27	8	2.88	1.23	8	

Second in importance is the understanding of success as personal growth and self-improvement (3.38 points), which corresponds to their age objectives and personal development specifics in this period.

At the same time, this characteristic of success is more important for girls than for boys (3.47 and 3.26 points, respectively,  $U = 18227.500$ ,  $p = 0.043$ ) and it is girls who rank this understanding of success in second place. It is natural that in the understanding of adolescents success should be closely linked with self-realization: we defined this concept in the questionnaire text as 'the realization of one's abilities, skills and knowledge in the results of activity' (3.23 points). However, success tends to be associated more with personal growth rather than with self-actualization in adolescents.

Every teenager ranks the emotional component of success – ‘the satisfaction of a job well done’ in third place (3.30 points). However, this characteristic of success matters more for young men than girls: this definition is second in importance for the boys while it is only the third for the girls (See the ranks).

It is important to note that ‘satisfaction from the process of doing a job’ (2.92 points) is much less consistent with success in their understanding. Thus, we see that success is associated more with the result of an activity rather than its process.

In addition, teenagers associate success with ‘a sense of well-deserved happiness, joy’ (3.12 points). These two definitions of success are quite close in meaning. However, satisfaction in our understanding tends to be more associated with the feeling of pride while happiness and joy reflect the achievement of a meaningful goal.

Another important characteristic of success for adolescents is ‘the overcoming of obstacles’ (3.21 points). It is interesting to note that this success feature is more significant for girls rather than boys (3.29 and 3.10 points, respectively,  $U = 27031.500$ ,  $p = 0.032$ ). It is important to note that for adolescents it is important that success relate more to ‘the overcoming of obstacles’ (3.21) and, to a much lesser degree, to ‘luck and good fortune’ (2.48 points).

Teenagers quite often associate success with the notion of ‘happiness’ (2.83 points). The greatest dispersion of data is observed for this item of the questionnaire because these concepts - success and happiness - are equivalent to some adolescents while others consider them fundamentally different concepts.

The least popular characteristics of success turned out to be ‘authority’ (2.75 points) and ‘popularity, fame’ (2.23 points).

Thus, one can conclude that, in the understanding of modern adolescents, success is linked to the attainment of goals, personal growth, the overcoming of obstacles and positive emotions that a human being experiences after reaching good results. Gender differences were also revealed: personal growth and the overcoming of obstacles are more significant characteristics of success for girls than they are for boys.

## **6.2. Analysis of examples of successful people**

Only 43 teenagers (8.6%) of the entire sample in our study refused to do this task, but there were also those who expressed their disagreement with this task (3.8% of the sample). This group of adolescents used two types of arguments. The first type was related to the fact that they did not really know successful people; the second one concerned their reflections that it was impossible to evaluate a person’s successfulness (for example, ‘Every person succeeds in his own way, and no one, except for him, knows for sure how he has done it. I do not envy anyone, and I do not want to slander anyone either, but I do not want to single out someone in particular. I just want to say it once again that each of us is successful in some way or other’).

There were also subjects who gave a rather abstract description of successful people without specifying certain personalities (27 people or 5.4%). They described certain traits of successful people (for example, ‘happy people who know how to enjoy themselves’, ‘This is an abstract person (I do not know this kind of person) who has achieved his goals, has a close-knit family and is confident of himself and his bright future’). Or they singled out whole groups of people they considered to be successful (for example,

‘MPs – they have certain power over the people, and consequently, authority’, ‘great minds, celebrities, athletes, businessmen’).

According to the data obtained, girls, as a rule, refuse to do the task of identifying concrete successful people more often than boys (respectively, the mean values are 0.06 and 0.01 answers,  $U=23976,000$ ,  $p = 0.004$ ). They are more likely than young men to draw a picture of a successful person in general terms when answering this question (respectively: 0.08 and 0.04 responses on average,  $U=22645,500$ ,  $p = 0.042$ ). On the one hand, it may say something about a deeper, more detailed understanding of success, and, on the other hand, it says a lot about the lack of concrete examples and reference points in their life.

In total, we obtained 1,364 examples of successful people. We also divided the above adolescents into groups that corresponded to different spheres of social life and environments:

1. The most numerous group was one that included examples of people from the adolescent’s environment - ‘acquaintances’ (24.6%). Here we also singled out some categories: the examples in this group included parents or other members of their families - 71.3%, friends - 12.8%, and the least number of the examples were associated with teachers (9.9%).

2. We placed all contemporary figures of music, cinema and television in the ‘show business and media’ group, which accounted for 20.2% of all the examples. The teenagers who gave more abstract answers often singled out this particular category of people as an example of successfulness (‘Different famous actors - they have achieved their goal, they are successful’).

3. We singled out the sphere of ‘Business’ as a separate one, (16.2%). In this group, the most popular examples are founders of outstanding IT empires - Bill Gates and Steve Jobs, as well as other computer software developers and game designers. Noteworthy is the fact this group also featured billionaires (R. Abramovich, Rockefeller).

4. The area of ‘politics’ accounted for 14.4% of the examples of successful people. The most common example is our current president Putin. The teenagers often indicated successful politicians, rulers and generals of the past (Alexander the Great, Napoleon, Margaret Thatcher and Stalin).

5. We incorporated examples of successful writers, poets and artists that the teenagers liked most of all, into the ‘art’ group (9.0%). Most often, the subjects pointed to the great Russian poet A.S. Pushkin.

6. We singled out famous athletes and cosmonauts as a separate ‘sport’ group (7.3%).

7. The sphere of ‘science’ accounts for a mere 5.9% of the examples. They included mainly natural scientists of the past (A. Einstein, I. Newton, M. Curie and others).

Thus, we can see that modern adolescents are more likely to find successful people to be people mostly from their surroundings: their parents and other family members, less often - friends and teachers. This result shows the importance of family in building the image of success in modern adolescents. Other examples they strive to imitate include well-known figures in the spheres of business and show business, slightly less often those in politics, which testifies to the significant role the media plays in shaping the image of success in adolescents.

Many significant differences were obtained as to who modern boys and girls are oriented to (Table 2).

**Table 02.** Gender differences in examples of successful people

	<b>Young men</b>	<b>Young women</b>	<b>The Mann-Whitney test,</b>	<b>Level of significance</b>
Men	<b>3.06</b>	2.10	15093,500	0.000
Women	0.19	<b>1.00</b>	11424,500	0.000
Politicians	<b>0.62</b>	0.33	18629,000	0.000
Businessmen	<b>0.74</b>	0.34	17588,500	0.000
Media people	0.52	<b>0.74</b>	19629,000	0.005
Sportsmen	<b>0.32</b>	0.16	20176,500	0.002
Close people	0.51	<b>0.99</b>	17280,500	0.000
Family	0.36	<b>0.71</b>	17280,500	0.000
Friends	0.06	<b>0.13</b>	21303,500	0.019
Russian	<b>0.97</b>	0.64	21303,500	0.003
Foreign	<b>1.69</b>	1.39	19930,500	0.023
Number of people	187	242		

There is a regular pattern of difference in the number of male and female examples in each of the sexes: young men are more often oriented toward successful men, while girls tend to indicate more often examples of successful women. Gender differences also manifest themselves in those life spheres that have become sources of success examples for girls and boys: young men tend to write more about successful politicians, businessmen, sportsmen while girls are more likely to give examples from the sphere of show business and their own environment (family, friends). When analyzing the category of answers on the domestic vs. foreign criterion we did not take into account the examples given by adolescents from their environment, the gender differences that we revealed in this parameter confirm that, in our opinion, girls are focused to their environment, and boys are oriented towards more famous and popular figures in society.

Thus, it can be concluded that girls are more oriented towards real people who surround them, and they give more thought to the self-perception of oneself as being a successful person, that is why they fail sometime to name examples of successful people with confidence, or instead they choose examples of successful women from the sphere of show business. Whereas young men are more guided by generally recognized instances of success - influential politicians, successful businessmen, and favourite sportsmen.

## 7. Conclusion

In the mind of modern Russian teenagers, the elements of success include achievement of set goals, self-development through overcoming obstacles, which brings them a feeling of gratification and happiness.

At the same time, older adolescents are the least likely to associate success with social recognition (authority and popularity). This low evaluation of the above definitions of success by adolescents may also be due to the age characteristics of older adolescence, namely, solution of tasks of professional and personal self-determination, which become more important than popularity and acceptance by others in this period. It can be assumed that, when testing subjects of the younger adolescent age, the above characteristics would occupy a higher place and would be more associated with the understanding of success.



Despite the fact that, in general, girls' and boys' notions about success are quite similar, there were many significant differences in who serves as an example of a successful person to them. When choosing successful men the boys were more inclined to rely on more objective and generally acceptable criteria for success: public achievements, power, and therefore they tended to cite politicians, businessmen, sportsmen more often as examples. The girls, on the contrary, often cited people from their close circle as examples, explaining their choice; they described the circumstances of their lives in more detail: achieving their goals in spite of life's difficulties, personal growth and self-realization, the need to work hard to achieve their goals. Another criterion of success they find to be more important for them than for boys was forming a loving family and bringing up children. All the identified differences concern the important issue for modern girls - combining a successful career and family, finding a harmonious way of self-realization in different life spheres, that is why they pay more attention to these aspects of life success.

Thus, the obtained data showed that girls have a more detailed picture of success: like boys, they see in it not only a significant widely accepted result, but also a difficult path of achieving it, which needs a lot of effort and the development of appropriate personal qualities.

It is important to consider the specific features of modern adolescents' notions about success thus identified in the study when consulting and helping teenagers in building their life plans.

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