

**PSYRGGU 2019**  
**Psychology of subculture: Phenomenology and Contemporary  
Tendencies of Development**

**RESOURCE CAPACITY OF EMOTIONAL SPHERE OF  
MODERN ADOLESCENTS**

Svetlana T. Posokhova (a)\*, Margarita Kh. Izotova (b)  
\*Corresponding author

(a) St-Petersburg State University, 7/9, Universitetskaya nab., St-Petersburg, 199034, Russian Federation,  
svetpos@mail.ru +7921-306-90-31

(b) St-Petersburg State Pediatric Medical University, 194100 St-Petersburg, 2 Litovskaya Ulitsa  
izotova.margarita@gmail.com

***Abstract***

The article describes emotional resources, which adolescents use for interpersonal interaction. Adolescents can differentiate human emotions and experience anxiety, fears, emotional communication barriers and overall psychophysiological tension. Adolescents and their mothers took part in an empirical study, the results of which are outlined below. Researchers found that 12-13-year old adolescents can accurately differentiate a wide range of emotions, expressed in generalized and specific forms. Most adolescents experience anxiety and are scared of physical violence, schooling and psychophysiological tension. They face minor communication issues, usually because they are unwilling to bond emotionally with the other people. The paper reveals how the emotional manifestations, which form the universal teenager resource system, are connected. Emotion differentiation is very important for dealing with emotional barriers, fears and anxiety. The interpersonal interaction is defined by aggression that prevents bonding with the other people and empathy that facilitates such bonding. Verbal and oblique aggression and empathy for the parents are important for adolescents. Their emotional sphere is closely connected with aggression and empathy. The ability to differentiate emotions by the face and emotional communication barriers are crucial for the interpersonal interaction. It has been proven that emotional resources can limit the aggression zones and increase emotional sensitivity. Lower aggression and higher empathy can be achieved if adolescents can accurately identify emotions, control their feelings during communication, bond emotionally with the others, and focus on positive experiences.

© 2019 Published by Future Academy [www.FutureAcademy.org.UK](http://www.FutureAcademy.org.UK)

**Keywords:** Anxiety, fear, empathy, emotional sphere, resources.



## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Emotional Sphere of Adolescents

The modern youth is influenced by a variety of contradicting social, cultural and information trends, collisions of which make them more psychologically vulnerable. Adolescents are more sensitive to life crises and internal personal problems. Such psychological vulnerability usually comes from emotional instability, seeing reality as a threat to own inherent value, being scared of running into barriers on the way to one's goal, limiting the real-life social networking, and avoiding responsibility and independence in situations that require leader's qualities and skills (Posokhova, 2017). Such psychological vulnerability creates a serious objective and subjective difficulties for interpersonal communication. It aggravates the conflict between the limited life experience, the growing sense of adulthood, need for autonomy, and inability to fulfill oneself at school and inside the family (Golovey, Danilova, & Danilova, 2017). Adolescents often deal with such conflicts in non-constructive ways: they resort to aggression and auto-aggression, lose trust in the world and themselves, display boredom and laziness.

Yet, adolescence is an important life period when the psychological and physiological resources are created that the individual will need to deal with adulthood challenges and to design the next life stages. The emotional sphere may become an important resource for adolescents. It should be mentioned, that the emotional sphere is a traditional though not thoroughly explored object of psychological studies (Izard, 2000; Ilyin, 2002; Lyons, 2004). The very concept of the "emotional sphere" is still being discussed. For some researchers, the emotional sphere is limited by a particular emotion, such as "fear". Other researchers, observing the complex structure & functions of the emotional sphere, extend it to all the known phenomena of emotional life. These phenomena differ by degree of integration and measurability. For instance, the emotional sphere can be expanded by emotionality, which is based on the capacity of emotional excitement, and intensity & duration of emotional experiences. The emotional sphere is often defined only by sentimentality (Ilyin, 2002; Ilyin & Lipina, 2007).

An overview of scientific studies leads to the conclusion that the emotional sphere is a comprehensive psychophysiological phenomenon, which consists of several interrelated components that may influence each other. In our study, the adolescent emotional sphere is seen as an integral dynamic system, which includes the emotional sensitivity, ability to differentiate emotions and experience anxiety and fears, emotional communication barriers and overall psychophysiological tension. Each component defines a particular feature of the individual's discriminatory approach to perceived reality and oneself. For example, the emotional sensitivity stands for the ability to perceive reality and changing inner states primarily through emotions. Differentiation of emotions explains the wide range of individual attitudes to significant impacts. Anxiety and fears affect individuals prone to seeing reality in general and its specific spheres as threats to the physical existence and inherent value of the individual. Emotional communication barriers demonstrate how hard it is to emotionally regulate establishing and maintaining contacts with the other people. Psychophysiological tension, in general, indicates deviation of physiological functions from the optimum condition in difficult situations. When brought into a single system, these components provide psychological comfort necessary for the functional interpersonal interaction (Izotova, 2016; Solomon, 2004).

## **1.2 Resource Capacity of the Emotional Sphere in Adolescent Communication**

The resource capacity of the emotional sphere opens up during interpersonal communication of adolescents. Aggression and empathy are the most important markers of communication controlled by emotions. The ability to differentiate emotions, low anxiety level, absence of fears and emotional communication barriers limit the aggression zone and increase the capacity for empathy in adolescents. Aggression means the ability and inclination to threaten the other people and is one of the factors of adolescent maladjustment. Empathy, as the ability to “feel into” or experience emotions of the others, is usually considered an internal barrier for aggression (Izotova, 2016).

## **2. Problem Statement**

Emotions are among the key systematic phenomena affecting the entire mental structure and different activities of the individual (Ilyin, 2002). The social nature of emotions defines their key role in establishing interpersonal relations (Zimmermann & Iwanski, 2014). When adolescents get more communication experience their emotional competence grows. At the same time, the typical emotional experiences, ability to relate emotions to social roles, emotional stability, and understanding the feelings of the others facilitate communicative behavior. The correlation of these peculiarities regulates the vector and limits of adolescent interaction with the changing social-cultural and information reality. It is necessary to identify the resource role of adolescent emotional sphere in maintaining the interpersonal interaction.

## **3. Research Questions**

The importance of the emotional sphere for efficient interpersonal interaction of adolescents has been noted by the world academic community and defined a number of issues for study.

1. Organization of the adolescent emotional sphere is one of such issues.
2. It is also important to understand how the resource capacities of the emotional sphere come out in the course of interpersonal interaction of adolescents.

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

To measure the adolescent capacity of emotion differentiation, intensity of anxiety and fears, content of emotional communication barriers, and the overall psychophysiological tension.

To identify the relation between the emotional sphere components and adolescent aggression and empathy.

It was assumed that the adolescent capacity to differentiate emotions by the facial expression, low anxiety, mild fears and insignificant emotional communication barriers reduce aggression and widen the empathy zone. The assumption was tested in an empirical study.

## 5. Research Methods

### 5.1 Subjects (cases)

94 normally developed adolescents aged 12-13 took part in the study. There were 52 boys and 42 girls. All of them attended secondary schools and had no issues with performance or discipline at school. In addition to that, 94 mothers aged 34-35 also took part in the study. The study was conducted in 2016-2018. All the respondents consented to taking part in it.

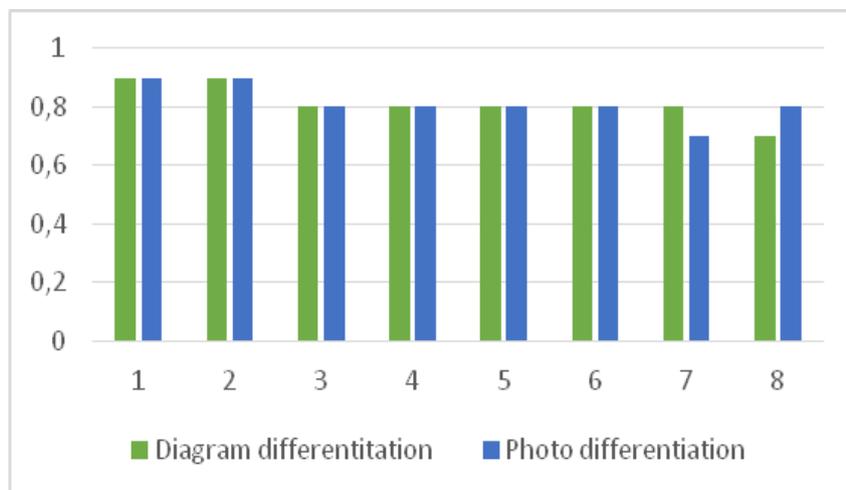
### 5.2 Study Methods

- «Pictogram of Emotions», method by Minina (as cited in Izotova, 2017)
- Luscher (2003) 8 Color Test
- “Fears”, method by Zakharov (2005)
- “Diagnostics of Emotional Barriers in Interpersonal Communication” method by Boyko (as cited in Izotova, 2017)
- “Adolescent Aggression Demonstrations observation chart” by Izotova (2017)
- “The Poly-communicative Empathy Level”, method by Yusupov (as cited in Izotova, 2017)

## 6. Findings

### 6.1. Adolescent Emotional Sphere

The study has shown that adolescents can quite accurately differentiate a wide range of emotions shown in pictograms and photos (Fig.1; maximum accuracy equals 1,0). When identifying emotions, they gave real life examples and used diverse and appropriate verbal means. Adolescents are best capable of identifying joy and anger. They often come across these emotions in their lives, so they can easily identify them in pictograms and photos. Moreover, joy and anger are accompanied by the intense expression, which makes them easy to identify. Adolescents mostly made mistakes identifying emotions with less expression. For example, they ran into some difficulties with sadness and tranquillity: the latter often got identified as indifference.



**Figure 01.** Emotion differentiation accuracy in adolescents

Legend: 1 anger, 2 joy, 3 tranquillity, 4 surprise, 5 fright, 6 guilt, 7 contempt, 8 sadness

Emotions help us to instantly define external impacts as dangerous and harmful or comforting and useful. In real life, this ability mainly dwells in disquieting feelings and fears. As it turned out, adolescents have a higher level of unconscious anxiety ( $4,71 \pm 1,99$  (out of 6 possible points)). They experience a moderate amount of various fears –  $8,50 \pm 2,52$ . The dominant fears were the fear of physical threat ( $2,80 \pm 1,15$ ) and fears related to schooling ( $2,43 \pm 0,95$ ). The fear of solitude also took a prominent place in the adolescent fear hierarchy ( $2,30 \pm 0,84$ ). The fears of natural ( $1,90 \pm 0,80$ ) and mystic phenomena ( $1,02 \pm 0,84$ ) were much less common. The most insignificant ones were the fears of illnesses and doctors ( $0,52 \pm 0,40$ ). The wide range of fears experienced by the adolescent population demonstrates the protective function of emotions. Yet, they might lose trust in the surrounding world and themselves. This might reduce their adjustment potential, which can be compensated by the passive and often destructive strategy of communicative behaviour.

During the teen years intimate communication, especially with peers, becomes the main activity (Golovey, Danilova, & Danilova, 2017). Regulation of interpersonal relationship becomes the most important emotional function for a reason. Emotions experienced by an adolescent may either broaden the communication horizon or create barriers for constructive and socially acceptable communication. Our study has shown that adolescent communication has a small number of emotional barriers. Adolescents can control their negative emotions and measure them out during communication. In most cases, their emotions correspond to the meaning of communicative situations and the roles they play there. The lowest indicator of communication barriers is the prevalence of negative emotions in communication –  $1,25 \pm 1,0$ . That is explained by the special significance of communication in adolescent life, where they can fully reveal their potential and gain experience of the judgemental approach to reality. Communication, accompanied mostly by positive emotions, brings satisfaction which increases trust in the people. Suspicion, matching oneself against the others, and unwillingness to bond emotionally with the other people show themselves at the same time –  $2,85 \pm 0,95$ . Some adolescents do not trust unfamiliar and lesserknown people, which can be explained by the influence of mass media and their parents who keep warning them about the dangers of over-trust.

The study revealed a significant deviation from the norm of the psychophysiological condition of adolescents and the inefficient use of energy resources. Such psychophysiological tension is explained by the high vulnerability of adolescents, connected with the challenges of creating social and self – identities, and well as physiological over-responsiveness.

Correlation analysis proves the integrity of the adolescent emotional sphere. Only statistically reliable correlations in the 0,60-0,99 range were taken into account. A triad was identified, which included accuracy of pictogram, photo identification, and emotional communication barriers. Accurate differentiation of joy, expressed in generalized and specific forms, is explained by the weakening of emotional barriers, created by the emotional stiffness and inexpressiveness. Communication barriers created by inadequate emotions and prevailing negative experiences are combined with overall physiological tension. It should be mentioned that psychophysiological physiological tension, common during the adolescent period, agrees with the emerging emotional communication barriers.

We found that emotion differentiation accuracy is related to fear and anxiety intensity. Inaccurate identification of guilt, fright and contempt is combined with the fear of the environment and of

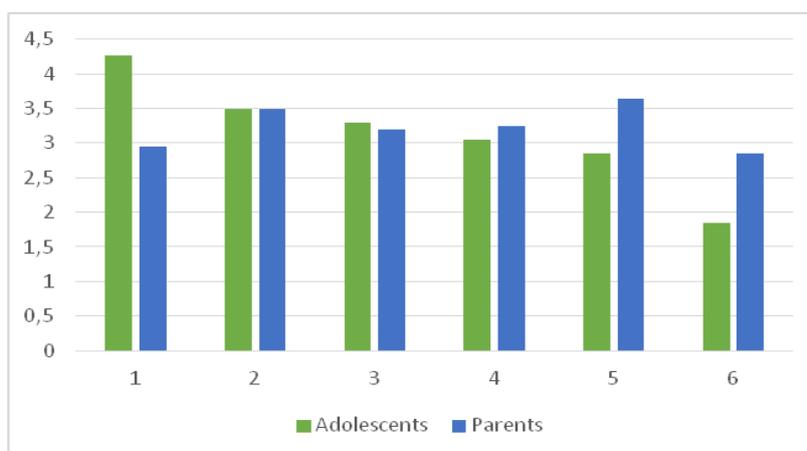
tranquillity and surprise – with social fears. When adolescents cannot accurately identify emotions of an individual by his face, their fears become more intense. Intense fears prevent accurate reading of emotions with complex facial gestures. When adolescents can read emotions by one's face they can perceive social phenomenon more accurately, which reduces tension and results in the more accurate cognitive assessment of real-life situations.

## 6.2. Adolescent Interpersonal Interaction

Mild aggression is common in adolescents. They mostly display verbal ( $3,30 \pm 0,17$ ) and oblique aggression ( $3,0 \pm 1,07$ ). Their aggression is seldom directed at animals ( $0,75 \pm 0,19$ ). The adolescent aggression is restrained by prevailing positive emotional settings, desire to establish contact and be understood by the people around, and rarely expected aggression from the environment. Adolescents tend to feel scared of being punished for aggressive actions that reduce the possibility of open aggression.

Adolescents display (fig.2) moderate empathy ( $23,35 \pm 1,25$ ). In general, they are capable of understanding the feelings of other people. They respond emotionally, try to help and assist. In real-life situations, adolescents display empathy when they understand the condition, problems and meaning of behaviour of the other person. Empathy to parents is the most intense. Adolescents not only show compassion for their parents but are willing to help. Empathy for the elderly and children is less common. Adolescents seldom display empathy to strangers and fictional characters.

Parents have a different opinion. They believe that adolescent children are more sensitive to the needs and problems of their peers, younger children, strangers, the elderly, even animals, rather than to those of their own parents. Transition to adulthood means growing apart from the parents, which is often accompanied by child-parent conflicts. Adolescents demand the extension of their rights, while parents focus on their obligations. Even fair demands made by the parents are taken negatively. Adolescents would rather share their problems with peers and strangers, than with parents. Thus, parents start feeling that adolescents have less empathy for them. They also feel that when watching films and reading books c adolescents focus more on the plot and actions rather than on feelings of the characters.



**Figure 02.** Intensity of adolescent empathy

Legend: Empathy: 1 to parents, 2 to children; 3 to the elderly, 4 to animals, 5 to strangers, 6 to fictional characters

The relation between aggression and empathy reflects the negative impact that low empathy has on interpersonal interaction. Poor empathy capacity leads to higher aggression. When adolescents lack empathy, they start expecting external aggression and react accordingly. In such situations, they cannot critically assess their behaviour.

### **6.3 Interaction of the Adolescent Emotional Sphere and Interpersonal Interaction**

Correlation analysis reveals that the emotional sphere and interpersonal interaction indicators are closely connected. Fears and emotional communication barriers are connected with empathy manifestations. Prevalence of positive emotions in perception of reality, displaying appropriate emotions in a particular situation, the ability to control external emotional manifestations, and emotional plasticity decrease the communication barriers. The absence of such barriers in adolescents is closely connected with empathy, first of all to their parents.

Inaccurate emotion differentiation, fears, anxiety and physiological tension are connected with verbal aggression. Accurately reading emotions by the face becomes possible as the emotional and physiological tension decreases. When an individual can easily identify emotions, he can easily overcome fears of social interaction, which enhances the resource function of emotions.

## **7. Conclusion**

The adolescent emotional sphere includes the ability to differentiate human emotions, anxiety and fears, emotional communication barriers and overall psychophysiological tension, which ensures selective attitude to perceived reality and multidirectionality of the interpersonal interaction phenomenon: adolescents can accurately differentiate and verbally describe a wide range of emotions. Observing facial gestures and schematic representations they can differentiate joy, anger, tranquility, surprise, guilt, contempt and sadness. Distinct fear is mostly associated with physical impact and schooling. Anxiety is not always fully recognized. The emotional communication barriers are insignificant and mostly result from an unwillingness to bond emotionally with the other people, common for this age. The higher psychophysiological tension reflects the natural course of personality development.

The investigated components of the emotional sphere are all connected to each other and form a common resource system. When adolescents can accurately differentiate a wide range of human emotions, control their own emotions during communication, emotionally bond with the other people, focusing on their own positive experiences, then the aggression zone gets smaller and adolescents become more sensitive to various communication objects. The ability to differentiate human emotions and emotional barriers play a major role in the interpersonal interaction of adolescents.

The interpersonal interaction of adolescents depends on the relation between their capacity for empathy, which facilitates bonding with the other people, and aggression, which creates barriers for such bonding. Adolescents can selectively show empathy to the people taking different positions in the interpersonal interaction and animals. The main object of their empathy are the parents, which the parents often do not feel.

## References

- Golovey, L.A., Danilova, M.V., & Danilova, Y.Y. (2017). Self-conception and Relations with Significant Adults as Life Satisfaction Factors of Adolescents. *Social Psychology and Society*, 8(1), 108–125. [In Russian].
- Ilyin, E.P. (2002). *Emotions and Feelings*. Saint-Petersburg: Piter. [In Russian].
- Ilyin, E.P., & Lipina, A.N. (2007). Emotional Sphere & Aggression Dynamics from Youth to Old Age. *Journal of Practical Psychology of Education*, 4(13), 42-46. [In Russian].
- Izard, K. (2000). *Psychology of Emotions*. Saint-Petersburg: Piter. [In Russian].
- Izotova, M.Kh. (2016). Aggressive Behavior of Delinquent Adolescents. *Modern Pedagogical Education Issues*, 10, 332-338. [In Russian].
- Izotova, M.Kh. (2017). Emotional Markers of Musical Impact in Perspective of Personality Development. In *Human Perspective: the Future as a Universal* (pp. 31-38). Saint-Petersburg: ALITER [In Russian].
- Luscher, M. (2003). *What Color is Your Life? The Law of Harmony in Us: a Practical Guide*. Moscow: HIPPO. [In Russian].
- Lyons, W. (2004). *Emotion*. Cambridge: University Press.
- Posokhova, S.T. (2017). Social & Cultural Factors and Psychological Vulnerability of Modern Youth. *Issues of Mental Health of Children and Adolescents*, 17(2), 195-196. [In Russian].
- Solomon, R. C. (2004). *Thinking About Feeling*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Zakharov, A.I. (2005). *Day and Night Fears of Children*. Rech'. [In Russian].
- Zimmermann, P., & Iwanski A. (2014). Emotion regulation from early adolescence to emerging adulthood and middle adulthood: Age differences, gender differences, and emotion-specific developmental variations. *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, 38(2), 182–94.