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Psychology of Personality: Real and Virtual Context

PROFESSIONAL SELF-DETERMINATION AND MEANING-IN-LIFE ORIENTATIONS AMONG ADOLESCENT FEMALES IN A TRANSITIVE SOCIETY

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Abstract

This article discusses the importance of examining the processes of career decision-making and personality trait development in contemporary society and highlights the specificity of the development of future-career perceptions in adolescence. Results are presented of an empirical study of meaning-in-life orientations and future-career perceptions among the female senior adolescents living and learning at Moscow All-Girls Boarding School of the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation. The objectives of the study are linked to the level of development of the personality traits that comprise a “portrait of a general school leaver” specified in the Federal State Educational Standard for basic general education. One of such traits that was examined in our survey of 9th-grade students at the All-Girls Boarding School is “occupational orientation and understanding the importance of human professional activity in the interest of sustainable development and environmental protection”. The findings show the predominance among the student respondents of a high level of perceived meaning in life, of a generally positive perception of their future professionalization, of a sufficiently high level of being informed about the ways of achieving their goals in the early stages of professionalization, and of a fully developed self-determination based on moral values. However, the analysis of perceived career prospects reveals insufficient awareness of alternative career options, just in case the primary option fails. This can be seen as a potential risk necessitating the provision of occupational guidance as a separate type of psychological support for senior school students.

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Keywords: Adolescent, locus of control, meaning-in-life orientations, professional self-determination, time perspective, transitivity of society.



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1. Introduction

In recent years, psychology has witnessed a growing interest in theoretical analysis of the phenomenon of professiogenesis in today's socio-cultural and economic situation. The significant transformation of traditional professional clusters accompanied by "withering-away" of various professions and creation of new specializations, the highly dynamic society–specialist relationships, the stricter professional competency requirements, the competitiveness challenge, as well as the highly perceived transitivity of a modern society entail the emergence of new psychological phenomena involved in the process of individual professionalization, thus requiring theoretical explanation.

Professional self-determination is a long-lasting process that begins from the formation of professional intentions and ends with the withdrawal from a professional activity. The peak of the process is a point at which occupational choice is made. The exact age-related boundaries separating each period of professional self-determination are difficult to identify, which can be explained by individual differences affecting levels of social maturity, and by occupational labor market volatility. However, the majority of initial informed occupational choices are made during senior adolescence at the end of secondary schooling.

The professional self-determination of senior school students is determined not only by the externally imposed occupational goals but also by the capacity to make responsible decisions for the future, which in turn is contingent upon such processes as active personal development, worldview formation, personal meaning and value formulation, identity model selection.

Educational institutions are capable of providing support for adolescents' personal development and professional self-determination, helping them make informed choices based on their own identity rather than on the enticing trendy role models. Special emphasis should be given to the psycho-pedagogical support for the personal development of the adolescents learning at live-in educational institutions where the functions of a general education school and a system of additional education are combined, with teachers taking on some of the functions of a parent.

2. Problem Statement

The problem of professional development has always attracted much attention from social scientists. One of the earliest approaches to studying the phenomenon of professionalism, initiated by Dr. Parkinson, used the perspective of professional aptitude. According to this approach, the process of professionalization is considered as the process of forming or attaining a professional aptitude, the main characteristics of which are professional successfulness and professional satisfaction.

According to the psychodynamic approach to the problem of professionalization (S. Freud, C. Horny, A. Adler), the main factors affecting occupational choice are patterns of unconscious needs and motives set in childhood, sexual experiences in early childhood, and psychological complexes (primarily "masculinity complex" and "inferiority complex"). The specificity of the psychodynamic approach to explaining the occupational choice and further professional development is a focus on the gender differences in the process of professional self-determination. It is this approach that was of particular interest for our study of gender-homogeneous student groups.

Berne's (1964) theory of life-script focuses on the individual specificity of self-concept structure, the dominant ego-state (Parent, Adult or Child), and the scripts created in early childhood. According to this theory, however, individuals are not considered to be capable of making their own occupational choice, i.e. the act of choice making is not the result of their own mental activity but the effect of their childhood scripts, with the choice motivation being unconscious.

A typological approach to the process of professionalization addresses the occupational decision-making and professional development processes as being associated with different stable types of personality.

The main provision of Super et al. (1957) humanistic theory of career development holds that the primary mechanism for individual choice-making and further professional development is an individual drive for self-actualization. In other words, individual occupational choice is determined by the specific content of an individual self-concept, whereas the stability of occupational choice and career satisfaction depends on agreement between individual self-concept and profession-specific requirements. Besides, the level of choice satisfaction much depends on whether the knowledge about the personality traits required for professional growth is adequate and realistic. This is why, according to D. Super, occupational guidance is most important in terms of making the right career choice and having a positive attitude in the workplace.

A significant contribution to the development of domestic theories of professional development has been made by Russian psychologists Ye. A. Klimov, V. A. Shadrikov, A. K Markova, T. V. Kudryavtsev, A. A. Smirnov, F. E. Zeyer, N. S. Pryazhnikov et al. Two most noticeable psychological approaches to addressing the problems of professionalization in Russia are *psychological-acmeological* (focusing on the relationship between personality and professional activity) and *social-psychological* (highlighting the impact of professional community on individual professionalization).

Individual professionalization is a dynamic process of social and personality development that has several stages with stage-specific tasks. Adolescence is a stand-alone period of life which is critical in terms of creation of psychological mechanisms for occupational decision-making and professional self-actualization. During adolescence, young people go through most significant changes in their personal development. Thus, at the end of adolescence, the process of formation of a perceived well-differentiated self-concept, as a system of internally consistent beliefs about oneself, is almost complete. But for the development of personality, of great importance is not only the content of real and ideal self concepts but also a discrepancy between them, affecting the emotional component of adolescent self concept and self esteem. For example, if the discrepancy is too large, the ideal self-image seems unattainable, which in turn evokes a feeling of frustration, anxiety, self-distrust, depression, defensive aggression, etc. If, in contrast, the ideal self-image is perceived as being quite attainable, it becomes an internal stimulus for personality development, helping identify appropriate strategies to attain the set goals, and enhancing the capacity for self-development, self-education, and self-actualization.

It is well within the capacity of an educational institution to create an environment facilitating the process of self-determination of adolescent students. In this respect, special attention should be paid to single-sex cadet boarding schools where students learn and live being isolated from their families. The example of such an institution is Moscow All-Girls Boarding School of the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation (hereinafter "the All-Girls Boarding School") where an occupational guidance program

is provided to senior female students. The program takes account of the girls' age and personality traits, and is designed to raise the level of their social development and facilitate their professional self-determination. The program classes and activities provided to the senior students in different majors courses involve an in-depth study of specific subjects and thus allow students to be immersed in the reality of a profession and correlate their own beliefs with profession-specific requirements. The in-school museum-educational space and the in-school activities such as thematic exhibitions, and an ongoing "Evening with..." event project. allowing students to meet well-known, accomplished professionals (in the spheres of science, politics, medicine, culture and arts), help them expand and differentiate their beliefs about the profession-specific opportunities for professional self-actualization, as well as the social value of different occupations. To assess the effectiveness of the in-school activities, the occupational orientation of school students and the level of occupational-choice satisfaction of school leavers are regularly monitored. Such monitoring is part of the overall system of gender homogeneous educational environment of the All-Girls Boarding School (Maksimova et al., 2019a, 2019b).

3. Research Questions

The issue of senior school students' professional self-determination, despite the existence of research data, is very topical and remains a challenge to researchers due to the occupational choice being largely determined by social factors and by characteristics of a rapidly changing society.

The highly dynamic and transitive nature of modern social life contributes to higher levels of anxiety in ambiguous situations where there is uncertainty about one's own ability to meet societal expectations. Adolescents may be particularly vulnerable when they go through age-specific identity crises, as well as through the period of an uneven intellectual, physical, and social development, which may result in destructive deviant behavior.

A key issue addressed in our study is the specificity of female adolescent boarding-school students' meaning-in-life orientations as a significant component of their beliefs about their future career.

4. Purpose of the Study

The general purpose of our study was to examine the effect of a gender-homogeneous boarding-school teaching and learning environment on the development of senior adolescent students' meaning-in-life orientations and personality traits that are conducive to making responsible decisions about their future life and career, thus allowing stabilization of personality development during a difficult adolescent stage of human development. The specific purpose of our study was to identify the challenges of senior adolescent' professional self-determination which might require a positive psychological intervention to help them make sound and informed decisions about their future careers, thus ensuring their socially useful occupational orientation in today's rapidly changing world of work.

5. Research Methods

5.1. Selection

Our survey-based study involved 103 ninth-grade students at the All-Girls Boarding School. Most of the students are daughters of Russian military personnel serving in remote areas of Russia, including children from incomplete or large families, and also daughters of the fallen military personnel posthumously awarded military decorations for successful performance of military duties. The study was conducted in 2019 in Moscow.

5.2. Survey methods

The study was conducted using the following methods developed by Russian psychologists: N.S. Pryazhnikov's (2005) Personal Career Path Planning Questionnaire and Leontiev's (2006) Meaning-in-Life Orientations Test.

- Personal Career Path Planning Questionnaire. This is a set of open-ended questions used to obtain an overall assessment and self-assessment of personal and professional development prospects. The instrument is based on a scheme for personal career path planning as an alternative version of the content & procedural model of career self-determination. The Questionnaire comprises 14 questions, each corresponding to the specific component of a personal career path planning process. The time required for the adolescent respondents to formulate the responses was about 30 minutes. The survey data processing involved expert evaluation of each response to each question, using a 1–5 rating scale representing the perceived level of manifestation of a component of personal career path planning: 1 point – refusal to answer the question; 2 points – clearly erroneous answer or honest recognition that no answer can be given; 3 points – minimally specified answer (e.g. “I’m going to enter a post-secondary institution, but I don’t know which one exactly”); 4 points – concrete answer with an attempt to substantiate it; 5 points – concrete and well-substantiated answer logically connected with the other ones. The average rating value for each component represents the degree of its awareness, while the average rating value for all 14 components represents the level of respondent’s awareness of her career path plans.

- Meaning-in-Life Orientations (MLO) Test. This is an adapted version of Crumbaugh and Maholick's Purpose-in-Life (PIL) Test. The instrument helps calculate a general indicator for assessing a sense of meaning in life. A meaningful life is a life of an individual who is confident in his or her ability to set and independently work on life goals, and is happy with achieving them. It is very important for the goals to be clearly future-related and emotionally colored. The five subscales represent three specific meaning-in-life orientations: 1) life goals; 2) living with intensity; 3) satisfaction with personal achievements and self-realization; and two types of locus of control: internal and external. The MLO Test comprises 20 pairs of contradictory statements summarizing beliefs about factors of meaningful life. The test data processing involves aggregating scores for all 20 scales and converting the aggregate scores to standard values (percentiles). To calculate the scores it is necessary to convert the items marked by the respondents on a “3210123” symmetrical scale to grades asymmetrically arranged in ascending or descending order. Based on the assigned scores, the response data for each scale are categorized into one of the three levels: high, moderate, and low.

6. Findings

The results of the study show that the responses given to the questions in N.S. Pryazhnikov's Personal Career Path Planning Questionnaire are quite concrete and well-reasoned, which can be interpreted as indicative of a high level of awareness of personal career path plans. The most reasonable responses (scores '5' and '4') were given to the following items:

- awareness of the importance of post-secondary vocational education (90 percent of responses were reasonable);
- identifying a long-term career goal (dream) as consistent with other important life goals, i.e. choosing a future career (86 percent of respondents have already made their occupational choice);
- being sufficiently informed about the country's social and economic situation and capable of predicting future social and economic changes (80 percent of responses are reasonable).

For example, responding to the question "Is it of any worth to be honest at work and why?", a respondent was evidently convinced of the importance of being honest at work, because "it is quite possible to be honest yet successful in pursuing favorite activities".

Responding to the question "Is postsecondary education important if it is quite possible to make a decent living without a post-secondary education?", a respondent indicated that "it is very important to receive a postsecondary education, especially if you want to acquire a critical profession, the basics of which may be acquired at school but that is not enough".

Thinking about what they want to see themselves in 20-30 years, most of the respondents indicated such occupations as designer, IT worker, doctor, military officer.

The respondents knowingly identified the steps to achieving their career dream. The most common responses involve passing basic general education state exams and secondary general education unified state exams, successfully completing school, entering a higher educational institution after successfully passing competitive entrance exams.

The respondents' perception of their occupational choice seems to be quite realistic, which is evidenced by their identifying the most challenging problems associated with their future career and their postsecondary education, such as competitive relations and work overload.

The ninth-grade student respondents are aware of the importance of a rational approach to career decision making. For example, they believe that self-actualization at work implies "an activity that brings satisfaction", "an activity that makes it possible to help people solve their problems". Besides, the respondents have a realistic perception of the activities needed for them to achieve their career dream: "apart from compulsory studies, I work with additional learning materials, perform previous-contest tasks", "I seek information about higher educational institutions, read additional literature, communicate with and take advice from my successful acquaintances who have achieved a lot". Thinking of the internal barriers to achieving their goals, the respondents indicated laziness, restlessness, impatience, uncertainty, fear.

On the whole, the degree of awareness and rationality for planning a chosen career path is slightly higher than that for planning an alternative career path in the case of a failure in the chosen career, as well as for knowing the world of jobs and professions (a macro-informational basis of professional self-determination), and for knowing how to overcome external obstacles to achieving one's goals (percentage indicators are 77, 75 and 65 respectively). Answering the question "Who and what can prevent you from

achieving your goals?”, the majority of respondents indicated “competitiveness”, “only myself”, “difficult life circumstances”.

A quarter of the respondents found it difficult to indicate alternative career options. This may be indicative of either certainty of their career choice or uncertainty in their future career path plans.

The average score obtained for the components of personal career path planning as perceived by ninth-grade students at the All-Girls Boarding School allows us to make the following conclusions.

On the whole, the level of awareness of the components of personal career path planning is high (4.30 out of a total possible 5 points).

Thus, the components “Perceived value of honest work” (a moral value basis of self-determination) and “Perceived importance of post-secondary vocational education” are characterized by a very high level of development (scores 4.62 and 4.60, respectively), while the components “Being informed on the chosen-career related targets: professions, educational institutions, workplaces” (micro-informational basis of career choice making), “Being informed on how to overcome external barriers to achieving one’s goals,” and “Being aware of alternative career options (in the case of failure in the primary option)” are characterized by a high level of awareness (scores 4.17, 4.08 and 4.02, respectively).

The results of D.A. Leontiev’s Meaning-in-Life Orientations Test revealed chiefly high and moderate values for the indicators characterizing the respondents’ meaning-in-life orientations (44 percent and 50 percent of the total number of respondents, respectively). Only one out of ten ninth-grade students shows a low level of search for meaning in life. The majority of the respondents have a moderate or high level of development of all content components of meaning-in-life orientations. Details concerning some of the specific components are presented below.

The high and moderate values obtained for the “Life goals” subscale (30 percent and 61 percent of the respondents, respectively) indicate that the majority of the respondents have a strong sense of meaning in life, showing the presence in their lives of goals, aspirations and avocations that make life more meaningful and purposeful. Only 9 percent of the respondents demonstrate a low level of perceived importance of their life goals and prospects, which might be interpreted as a natural desire to live either in the past or for today only.

The high and moderate values obtained for the “Life process or interest & intense living” subscale (36 percent and 54 percent of the respondents, respectively) indicate that the majority of the respondents are satisfied with their present lives and perceive their lives as an interesting, emotionally intense and meaningful process. 10 percent of the respondents show a low level of perceived interest in their lives’ content and intensity.

Just like for the above mentioned components, the values obtained for the “Life productivity or satisfaction with self-actualization” subscale are chiefly high or moderate (48 percent and 43 percent of the respondents, respectively). Consequently, the majority of the ninth-grade adolescents positively assess their previous life experiences, being satisfied with their self-expression and self-actualization. Less than a tenth of the respondents negatively assess the perceived productivity of their lives and the perceived level of their self-actualization.

The high and moderate levels demonstrated by the majority of the respondents for the “External locus of control” subscale (42 percent and 47 percent of the respondents, respectively) and the “Internal

locus of control” subscale (38 percent and 48 percent of the respondents, respectively) indicate that the respondents are confident in their abilities, believing they are capable of building their lives in accordance with their goals and meaning-in-life orientations. The girls with low scores on these two subscales (11 percent and 14 percent, respectively) can be characterized as being fatalistic, lacking confidence in their abilities to exercise control over events affecting their lives.

Thus, even though the results obtained for the majority of the respondents are favorable, there is a group of adolescents scoring low on the components of a personal career path planning process, which requires provision of psychological support to such adolescents. The group can be divided into three subgroups.

Subgroup 1 (8 percent of the respondents) is characterized by scoring low for all the three dimensions of lifetime: past, present and future. It is common for them to be dissatisfied with their life process, to see no future prospects, to feel disappointed with their past. The adolescents from subgroup 1 score low on the “External locus of control” and “Internal locus of control” subscales, which is indicative of lacking confidence in their own abilities and tending to attribute their failure or success to external factors.

Subgroup 2 (5 percent of the respondents) is characterized by being dissatisfied with their present life, seeing no future prospects, yet assessing their past life as productive and meaningful, which allows for the conclusion that such students are living in the past. As for the results for the “External locus of control” and “Internal locus of control” subscales, the adolescents from subgroup 2 show middling scores on both of them.

The respondents from subgroup 3 (2 percent of the respondents) feel dissatisfied with their past experiences and are “immersed” in the present, living in the moment and trying to get the utmost satisfaction in life. The meaningful values followed by the adolescents from this subgroup are situational and protective in nature.

The distribution of the results of each respondent according to the two methods used in the study, shown in figure 01, allows us to clearly demonstrate their indicator of perceived meaning in life in relation to the level of awareness of personal career path planning.

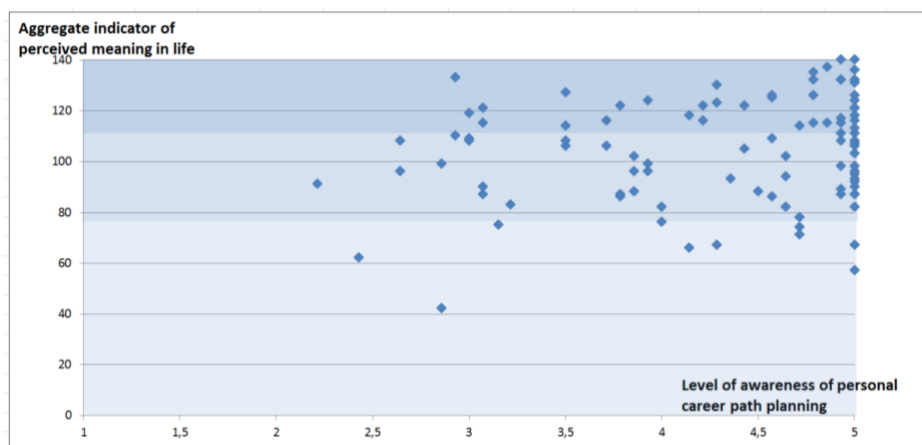


Figure 01. Distribution of respondents according to the vertical and horizontal axes measuring the aggregate indicator of perceived meaning in life, and the level of awareness of personal career path planning

Therefore, we can conclude that for the majority of ninth-grade students at the All-Girls Boarding School, their life and finding their place in life are highly meaningful. Their present state of mind can be characterized as positive, because the perceived levels of their satisfaction with life are high for all the three dimensions of time (past, present and future) and consistent with the high values on the locus of control subscales.

7. Conclusion

The obtained results allowed us to make the following conclusions:

- the majority of the respondents have life goals for the future that make life more meaningful, purposeful and prospect-oriented;
- the respondents tend to perceive their life as being interesting;
- it is characteristic of the respondents to perceive themselves as having a strong personality;
- it is characteristic of the respondents to positively assess their past experiences and consider their past lives to be productive and meaningful, with the level of satisfaction with self-actualization being moderate;
- it is characteristic of the respondents to have a mindset for being a master of their own lives, to believe in their strengths and abilities, and at the same time to adequately assess their true capabilities;
- the majority of the respondents believe their lives to be highly meaningful.

Hence we may argue that the ninth-grade students at the All-Girls Boarding School show a high level of development of the personality trait that comprises occupational knowledge and understanding of the importance of human professional activity in the interest of sustainable development and environmental protection.

The high values for the studied indicators might be explained by the educational eventful environment that has been created in the All-Girls Boarding School thanks to the concerted efforts of teachers and psychologists. It should be noted, however, that there is a tendency for the surveyed students to be insufficiently aware of the alternative career options, just in case the primary option fails. Such tendency necessitates extending the existing occupational orientation program to include measures to reduce the psychological risks faced by female adolescents at the stages of school leaving and of enrolment in higher education institutions.

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