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Characteristics of Lifeworlds in Male and Female Youths at Different Age Periods

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Abstract

Introduction. The transition from adolescence to young adulthood is an important stage in personality development, which changes the perception of the surrounding reality and lifeworld. Yet, little is known about this issue. This paper is the first report on the characteristics of lifeworld in male and female youths of different age groups. This study is based on the concept of F. Ye. Vasilyuk, who distinguished external and internal perspectives of lifeworld and their main characteristics (easiness/difficulty of the external world; simplicity/complexity of the internal world).

Methods. The study used the technique for graphic representation of the vital psychological space (by G. V. Shukova) to assess the multi-component nature of the world as a criterion of its simplicity/complexity. To assess lifeworld easiness/difficulty the following diagnostic tools were used: (a) a modified version of the inventory for assessing the subjective distance of need-related objects by A. B. Kupreichenko; (b) the Questionnaire on the Value-Accessibility Ratio in Various Life Areas developed by E. B. Fantalova to determine the subjective difficulty of achieving meaningful objects; and (c) the questionnaire for assessing global life satisfaction and subjective level of happiness for an overall assessment of the subjective difficulty of the world.

Results. The findings indicated that males and females aged 16–17 have similar lifeworlds in terms of the internal world simplicity/complexity and the external world easiness/difficulty. At the age of 18–22, females have a more complex and differentiated internal world. In males the space of lifeworld is simplified by this age. At this age differences manifest themselves in the fact females are less happy and satisfied with life, which is associated with an increase in the subjective difficulty of lifeworld.

Discussion. Male and female youths' lifeworld restructuring is associated with different ways in which they transform subjective reality.

Keywords

lifeworld, internal world simplicity/complexity, external world easiness/difficulty, male youths, female youths, adolescence, young adulthood, distance of social groups, subjective well-being, meaningful objects

Highlights

- Lifeworlds of male and female youths are almost the same at the age of 16–17; at the age of 18–22 their lifeworlds are characterized by certain differences both in terms of simplicity/complexity and easiness/difficulty.
 - Differences in lifeworlds of females aged 16–17 and 18–22 manifest themselves in the fact that 18–22-year-olds perceive the world as more difficult.
 - Compared to males aged 16–17, those aged 18–22 are characterized by a simpler internal world.
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Introduction

Socio-economic changes in the post-industrial world are characterized as a situation of uncertainty. Thus, there are no clear value-meaning guidelines; the collectivist type of consciousness is supplanted by the individualistic and utilitarian one; the traditional forms of socialization and intergenerational continuity are destroyed; there is a rapid dissemination of information via the Internet, etc. The speed and scale of transformational changes in modern society require sufficiently developed individual abilities of social adaptation. This means a qualitatively different way of self-organization and self-regulation of individuals in modern society, which enables them to coordinate external and internal conditions for the implementation of activities in time, to coordinate all mental states, traits, abilities, possibilities, and limitations (A. V. Brushlinskii, D. A. Leont'ev, and E. A. Sergienko).

In this context the periods of transition from one age stage to another, which are crises and accompanied by the processes of restructuring and transformation of the human psyche are of particular interest. Traditionally, psychological studies examine changes in mental processes, self-consciousness, the system of relations between the individual and the world during a crisis period, and the problems that individuals solve at each age. Researchers generally focus on the age period between birth and adolescence. However, the transition from adolescence to young adulthood, which corresponds to the beginning of an autonomous life in the modern world, becomes an important starting point which changes an individual's perception of the surrounding reality constituting his/her lifeworld. Some researchers note that the issues of personality development in the period of young adulthood are insufficiently elaborated (N. R. Bityanova, V. A. Nepomnyashchaya).

According to most psychologists (L. I. Bozhovich, A. V. Petrovskii, I. S. Kon, E. I. Isaev, V. I. Slobodchikov, E. Erikson, G. Craig, G. Marcia, J. Cote, etc.), during this period individuals solve the problems of professional development, life self-determination associated with values, planning for the future, finding an ideal, searching for the meaning of their own existence and realize the opportunities for self-development and self-actualization as well. At the same time, the requirements of society for young men and women are quite different. Professional development is the main requirement for men. Meanwhile, along with professional development and knowledge acquisition, women are supposed to create family and give birth to children (Soldatova, 2007).

The transition from adolescence to young adulthood is a period of active construction of personal lifeworld, transformations that may be both constructive and destructive. Therefore, it is necessary to understand the processes taking place in order to prevent possible negative trends and support young people in this age period.

At the same time, the category of lifeworld is a rather new phenomenon in psychology associated with a shift in scientific focus on studying 'self-determination' and 'world-transformative activity' of the individual (V. A. Belyaev, V. A. Barabanshchikov, A. L. Zhuravlev, A. B. Kupreichenko, T. V. Levkova, etc.). This tendency is found in numerous psychological studies which indicate the need to use a phenomenological approach in psychological research. Thus, Bengtsson (2013) believes that an approach based on the phenomenology of lifeworld is important for empirical research in the field of education. Gorichanaz, Latham, & Wood (2018) emphasize the importance of studying lifeworld as a unit of analysis of human information behavior.

Siriwardane-de Zoysa & Hornidge (2016) note that the concept of 'lifeworld' is ambiguous and has no single definition. Kraus (2015) emphasizes that there is a confusion of concepts in scholarly works. From a phenomenological point of view, lifeworld should be considered as a result of the subject's appropriation of the world and individual construction of reality, his/her subjective view of living conditions. However, lifeworld is often described as external conditions of life (life conditions).

Vasilyuk (2003) described the essential characteristics of the 'human lifeworld'. He believed that the world objectively exists independently of us, and we exist within it. The world differs from the environment and is not reduced to it; it is integral, but not unique. All our worlds, even the external world, which we identify as reality, are constructed by ourselves. Any opportunity to influence the external world is determined by the presence of the internal world. In other words, an individual's lifeworld goes beyond the actual (given situation); it exists in the past and in the future and may be desirable or undesirable. An individual's internal world creates a basis for relative independence from the external world.

When studying human lifeworlds, researchers focus their attention on their typology, highlighting different criteria. Thus, Leont'ev (2019) suggested his own typology of lifeworlds, which is based on the following criteria: (a) the ratio of the past, the present, and the future; (b) the ratio of the individual and society; and (c) the ratio of the values of the existing, the required, and the possible. This typology is applicable to both an individual and a social group. He distinguished three lifeworlds, placing them in a sociogenetic sequence. These were traditionalist, hedonistic, and progressive lifeworlds.

Sapogova (2019) distinguishes the types of lifeworlds proceeding from ultimate ontologemes that individuals use as supporting structures for self-understanding and building a life story (autobiography) – ontologemes of fate, chance or free will. They stimulate the predominance in self-interpretation of one of the mental processes (faith, thinking, and intuition) and set three possible frameworks for interpreting the path of life – 'fate–fulfillment–faith'; 'chance–incident–intuition'; 'free will–deed–thinking'.

Vasilyuk (1984) was the first who identified the characteristics of lifeworlds. In his opinion, 'lifeworld' has external and internal perspectives, which he defined, respectively, as external and internal worlds. Easiness and difficulty are the main characteristics of the external world. Easiness of the lifeworld external perspective provides security to all life processes; difficulty is associated with the presence of obstacles to their achievement. The internal world (the internal structure of life, the interconnection and association of its internal world units, as understood by F. E. Vasilyuk)

may be simple or complex, where simplicity is considered as its single-composition nature, the absence of structuredness and association of individual moments of life.

In our study, we assumed that individuals' external and internal lifeworlds are not static. They undergo considerable changes in the process of personal development; they also depend on the events that occur with a particular individual during his/her life. As he/she grows up, his/her external world becomes more difficult. Meanwhile, as he/she psychically develops, his/her external world becomes more complicated because of the expansion of social space and the inclusion of various objects in the field of consciousness.

In the concept of F. E. Vasilyuk, the internally complex and externally difficult lifeworld is characterized by a basic life principle – life creativity, active self-construction, conscious self-creation, and realization of individual plans under conditions of complex existence. With this type of lifeworld, the goal-achievement process is impeded both by external obstacles and internal hesitation, which requires volitional self-regulation. We believe that this direction of changes is constructive in transforming lifeworld. However, transformations occurring in lifeworld during the transition from adolescence to young adulthood still remain an open question in psychology.

Specific characteristics of lifeworlds in male and female youths are still poorly studied in psychology. Some studies focus to the characteristics of the living space of young people (Arendachuk, 2018; Lodkin & Chetverikova, 2018; Osipchukova & Popova, 2020; Stefanova & Krugova, 2019) and the prevalence of different types of lifeworld in this age group (Gryazeva-Dobshinskaya & Mal'tseva, 2016; Men'shikova & Levchenko, 2015). Demidova (2012) studied youth people's lifeworld from a dynamic perspective. She noted that as individuals get older, their type of lifeworld becomes more pronounced. Instrumental values are changed in the value and creative types of lifeworld. The hedonistic and realistic types become stabilized.

Meanwhile, the distinctive features of lifeworlds in male and female youths are understudied. We admit that they have their own specific characteristics that manifest themselves especially intensively during periods of crisis, because the strategies of coping with difficult life situations differ between male and female youths.

For example, compared to female youths, males are more likely to use avoidant coping strategies. Numerous studies confirm this assumption (Roeker, Dubow, & Donaldson, 1996; Hampel & Petermann, 2005; Eschenbeck, Kohlmann, & Lohaus, 2007). In young adulthood, this pattern persists. Thus, Gentry et al. (2007) found that compared female youths, males more often use the avoidant strategy.

Vasyura & Korobeinikova (2014) found that when young male students have doubts about their own abilities, they tend to underestimate the importance and seriousness of the events taking place and to suppress their emotions. Male youths cannot experience stress and internal discomfort for a long time; they start to protest and feel exasperated by difficulties.

Kolomenskaya, Sklyar, & Koskina (2015) found that male youths are more likely to have high self-esteem and are more confident in themselves and their strengths than girls. Uncompromising following their destiny and faith in its implementation are more characteristic of male youths. Female youths are no longer confident in themselves, tend to have low self-esteem, and do not believe in themselves.

Such characteristics of coping, which become more active during the crisis period, can lead to differences in the processes of restructuring lifeworld during the transition from adolescence to young adulthood in male and female youths.

This study *aims* to examine easiness/difficulty and simplicity/complexity of lifeworlds in male and female youths at different age periods.

Methods

The empirical study was conducted in Komsomolsk-on-Amur. The sample consisted of 260 youths aged 16–22 years (mean age 18.6 years), 176 of whom were females and 84 of whom were males.

We divided all the respondents into two groups. The first group comprised high school students aged 16–17; the second group consisted of youths aged 18–22 aged. In different countries, the age range for youths are defined differently. In most European countries, the USA, and Japan, youths are those aged from 13–14 to 29–30. In England and the Netherlands youths are not attributed to a special group. In Russia, this group consists of 14–24-year-old young people. Our study involved respondents aged 16–24 years, which corresponds to the age range for youths defined by the UN declaration. According to sociologists, this age range is associated with a so-called age stratification, that is, vertical age differentiation (Boryaz, 1973). In our study, we used the following age gradation for youths: adolescence (high school students at the age from 13–14 to 16–17 age) and young adulthood (individuals of the first young civilian age from 18 to 20–25 years) (Pavlovskii, 2001).

The multi-composition nature of the internal world was measured using the technique for graphical representation of the psychological life space by G. V. Shukova (Shukova, 2014); this was a criterion for assessing its *simplicity/complexity*. The respondents were offered two circles – ‘my real life’ and ‘my ideal life’, which they had fill with circles indicating people, relationships, processes, phenomena, etc. that they considered meaningful. In our work, we took into account the number of meaningful objects depicted in images of real and ideal lives.

To assess *easiness/difficulty* of the external world, we used the following two criteria: 1) subjective distance of need-related objects; 2) subjective difficulty in reaching meaningful objects.

To assess *the subjective distance of need-related objects*, we used the modified version of the inventory measuring the psychological distance in social contacts by A. B. Kupreichenko (Zhuravlev & Kupreichenko, 2012). Using a five-point scale we assessed the rate of psychological distance between the group and the respondent for 17 social groups (from family and friends to the country’s population as a whole, including professional and non-professional spheres). The rates of psychological distance distributed as follows: the closest (5 points); close (4); neither close nor distant (3); distant (2); the most distant (1).

We assessed *the subjective difficulty in achieving meaningful objects* using the Questionnaire on the Value-Accessibility Ratio in Various Life Areas developed by E. B. Fantalova (2011), which determined the gap between the significance of a particular personal sphere and its subjective availability in 12 spheres of life. When processing, we applied the integral (total) mismatch index (the total amount of mismatch between values and their availability).

In addition, we used the following two indicators of subjective well-being as an overall assessment measure for *the subjective difficulty of the world*: (a) the rate of global life satisfaction and (b) the subjective level of happiness (Yaremtchuk & Novgorodova, 2015). These indicators determine the gap between individual desires and possibilities (Michalos, 2017). Subjective well-being and the extent of experiencing positive emotions decrease if the real world does not correspond to the ideal one (Carver & Scheier, 1990). Thus, a decrease in subjective well-being may indicate ‘difficulty’ of the external world, problems in realizing individual needs, goals and values.

Differences between different age groups, as well as between males and females, were calculated with the Mann–Whitney U test. The STATISTICA, a statistical package software version 10.0, was used for data processing.

Results

Table 1 presents results of the study of the living space among youths of various age groups.

<u>Indicators of the life world assessment</u>	<u>Females</u>				<u>Males</u>			
	16–17 years	18–22 years	<u>U</u>	<u>p</u>	16–17 years	18–22 years	<u>U</u>	<u>p</u>
1. Assessment of lifeworld simplicity/complexity								
Number of circles in the image of the real world	5.0	5.4	2832.5	0.470	5.1	4.2	413.5	0.042
The number of circles in the image of the ideal world	5.8	5.5	2725.0	0.275	5.1	4.4	353.0	0.029
2. Assessment of lifeworld easiness/difficulty								
2.1. Subjective distance of social groups								
Family	4.4	4.6	3030.5	0.167	4.4	4.6	544.0	0.075
Parents	4.7	4.5	3059.0	0.437	4.6	4.6	670.0	0.846
Children	2.9	2.4	1152.5	0.302	2.6	2.7	357.0	0.899
Peers	2.9	3.0	3347.5	0.981	3.0	3.1	610.5	0.367
Class-mates (group-mates)	3.1	3.0	3037.5	0.547	3.1	3.2	538.0	0.368
Friends	4.1	3.9	2884.0	0.140	4.0	4.0	662.5	0.795

Table 1
Characteristics of lifeworlds in male and female youths at different age periods

<u>Indicators of the life world assessment</u>	<u>Females</u>				<u>Males</u>			
	16–17 years	18–22 years	<u>U</u>	<u>p</u>	16–17 years	18–22 years	<u>U</u>	<u>p</u>
Compatriots	2.2	2.1	3043.5	0.790	2.2	2.2	636.5	0.894
Citizens / fellow villagers	2.1	2.2	3057.5	0.304	2.2	2.6	530.0	0.106
Ethnos	2.1	2.3	2870.0	0.253	2.4	2.2	594.0	0.412
Coreligionists	2.1	2.3	2608.5	0.182	1.6	2.4	316.0	0.003
Teacher-mentors	2.8	3.0	3073.0	0.325	3.0	2.9	582.0	0.569
Colleagues	2.5	2.4	2072.0	0.850	2.1	2.2	483.0	0.853
Authorities	2.3	2.2	2697.0	0.778	2.4	2.1	546.0	0.320
Successful individuals	2.7	2.5	2933.5	0.224	2.7	2.7	634.5	0.867
Careerists	2.6	2.5	3046.0	0.716	2.6	2.6	553.0	0.753
Individuals believing in the future	3.0	2.6	2592.0	0.016	2.9	2.6	480.5	0.236
Individuals living "like others"	2.4	2.5	3041.0	0.214	2.2	2.7	445.0	0.033
Individuals making their own destiny	3.3	3.1	3017.0	0.242	3.3	3.1	581.0	0.327
Average distance	2.9	2.9	3104.0	0.345	2.9	3.0	647.0	0.689

Table 1								
<i>Characteristics of lifeworlds in male and female youths at different age periods</i>								
<u>Indicators of the life world assessment</u>	<u>Females</u>				<u>Males</u>			
	16–17 years	18–22 years	<u>U</u>	<u>p</u>	16–17 years	18–22 years	<u>U</u>	<u>p</u>
2.2. Subjective difficulty in reaching meaningful objects								
Total mismatch between values and their availability	23.5	29.4	2594.0	0.012	24.5	27.0	632.5	0.577
2.3. Subjective well-being								
Global life satisfaction	7.4	6.5	2638.5	0.009	7.6	7.6	678.5	0.800
Subjective level of happiness	7.5	6.6	2764.5	0.028	7.8	7.9	697.0	0.957
<i>Note: significant differences are indicated in bold italic type.</i>								

Table 1 shows that 16- to17-year-olds perceive living conditions almost equally. No significant differences were found in the degree of differentiation of the perception of meaningful objects (neither in creating a real image of life, nor in constructing an ideal one). However, females of this age attributed a larger number of meaningful objects to the circle of an ideal life; the average number of objects was identical in both cases among male respondents.

We also observed no differences in the perception of lifeworld as easy/difficult between female and male respondents aged 16–17. Their assessments of the subjective difficulty of achieving meaningful objects and subjective well-being were similar.

The assessment of the subjective distance to social groups also does not differ in most cases. Significant differences are found in the assessment of distance only in relation to fellow believers. Female respondents rate representatives of their religion as closer ones ($U = 1079.5$; $p = 0.043$).

Thus, at the age of 16–17 the world in which male and female respondents live appears to be similar, both in terms of the internal world simplicity/complexity and the external world easiness/difficulty. At the same time, a comparison of different age groups enabled us to identify characteristics of lifeworlds in male and female respondents.

Lifeworld simplicity/complexity does not differ significantly between females aged 16–17 and 18–22. The number of meaningful objects does not differ significantly in their ideas about real

and ideal life. Despite this, there is a tendency towards greater coordination of objects in real and ideal living spaces. Females aged 18–22 attribute a greater number of meaningful objects to the image of real life, and a smaller number of meaningful objects to the image of ideal life.

We found the following differences in characteristics of perception of the external lifeworld in female respondents. First, achieving meaningful objects is subjectively more difficult for females aged 18–22 years ($U = 2594.0$; $p = 0.012$), which determines an increase in a mismatch. Secondly, they are characterized by a lower level of subjective well-being, both in terms of global life satisfaction ($U = 2638.5$; $p = 0.009$) and subjective level of happiness ($U = 2764.5$; $p = 0.028$). Third, compared to those aged 16–17 years, they are more distant in relation to individuals who have not lost faith in the future ($U = 1079.5$; $p = 0.043$).

Thus, we observed differences in the characteristics of lifeworld in female respondents aged 16–17 and 18–22 years. Females aged 18–22 years perceived the external world as more difficult for realizing their own life values, satisfying their individual needs, which determined a lower level of subjective well-being and distancing from people who believed in the future. Moreover, their internal world did not differ from lifeworld of 16–17-year-old females in terms of the number of meaningful life spheres and is characterized by a similar complexity. Females aged 18–22 years were more realistic and pessimistic; in their consciousness they moved meaningful objects to a greater distance, which impeded their achievement.

As for male respondents from different age groups, their lifeworlds were characterized by phenomena that were completely opposite to those found in females. In contrast to female respondents, the main differences in the living space of males relate to the processes of simplifying the complexity of the internal world. Males aged 18–22 years attributed a smaller number of meaningful objects both to the image of real life ($U = 413.5$; $p = 0.042$) and the image of the ideal life ($U = 353$; significant for $p = 0.029$). The internal lifeworld of males aged 18–22 years is simpler, with fewer meaningful objects and meaningful needs.

At the same time, the external lifeworld has no specific characteristics. For male respondents, age differences in life easiness/difficulty are mostly related to distance in relation to social groups. Males aged 18–22 years showed a reduction in the distance towards fellow believers ($U = 316$; $p = 0.003$) and those living “like others” ($U = 445$; $p = 0.033$).

The study showed that at the age of 16–17 lifeworlds of male and female youths were almost identical in their characteristics; at the age of 18–22 their differences relate to both the internal and external components of the living space.

Therefore, we may conclude that 18–22-year-old females differ from males in terms of a more complex and differentiated internal world ($U = 980$; $p = 0.033$), where they distinguish which more meaningful objects. At the same time, females are significantly less satisfied with life ($U = 1119$; $p = 0.012$) and are less happy ($U = 1074$; $p = 0.006$) than their male peers.

Discussion

As Kon (1989) points out, adolescence (15–17 years) is a period of forming life prospects, which are experienced as a passionate desire to start something and an unshakable confidence that everything will work out. In other words, the external perspective of the psychological world develops into a certain space-time perspective. High school students discover the psychological ‘extension’ (‘there’ and ‘then’) of life, which enriches the structure of their psychological world and grasps the previously unreachable future and present. In adolescence the idea of an ideal

future is especially vague and unrealistic, as it often does not correspond to an individual's real capabilities and the conditions of his/her life. Youthful dreams, where everything is possible and ideal gradually give way to a more realistic image of the future, which is focused on reality.

The transition from adolescence to young adulthood is associated with the emergence of contradictions between the ideal and reality, with a reflection of the objective difficulties of the external world. Slobodchikov & Isaev (2000) describe this period as a 'crisis of young adulthood', which is characterized by a 'meeting' of ideal life plans and social reality, by entering into an independent life in society and gaining financial independence from parents. At this age, there are often disappointments in professional and life choices, a discrepancy between expectations and ideas about the profession and the reality of its mastering, the real nature of its development.

Having found themselves in a situation of life and age crisis, male and female youths structure their lifeworlds differently. The results of our study indicate that female youths perceive difficulties and the world as difficult, hindering the realization of their needs, which is associated with the emergence of a more pessimistic internal stand and a decrease in life satisfaction. In contrast to females, male youths overcome the crisis by reducing the subjective complexity of life, reducing the number of meaningful objects and strengthening the tendency to 'be like others', and a partial rejection of their own individuality.

Thus, for female adolescents and youths, differences in lifeworlds are only related to the external world; for male adolescents and youths these differences occur in the internal world. Meanwhile, a comparison of females and males in these age periods indicates negative processes.

For female youths, lifeworld, while maintaining a rather simple structure, becomes subjectively more difficult, approaching to the "externally difficult and internally simple lifeworld" (according to F. Ye. Vasilyuk's typology). The simplicity of the internal world frees an individual from internal limitations, leaving the focus on external obstacles. Therefore, in such a world, activity is characterized by an aspiration to a need-related object without distractions, hesitations, and doubts.

As for male youths, a comparison of their lifeworlds in adolescence and young adulthood indicates a simpler structure of lifeworld at young adulthood, their focus on a narrowed sphere of meaningful objects, which also determines an externally difficult and internally simple lifeworld. These trends enable us to think about the direction of support of these life periods for both male and female youths, which should increase the complexity of their internal world, expand the scope of their meaningful objects and values, and their awareness of the associations between meaningful objects and phenomena. This provides a basis for possible creative transformation of the individual life and world, which is especially important during periods of crisis.

The findings of this study enabled us to draw the following *conclusions*:

1. At the age of 16–17, lifeworlds of males and females do not differ in their characteristics. At the age of 18–22, the differences relate to both the internal and external components of the living space.

2. Differences in lifeworlds of females aged 16–17 and 18–22 relate to the perception of the world as more difficult in young adulthood. This determines a lower level of subjective well-being experienced and distancing from people who believe in the future.

3. Differences in lifeworlds of males aged 16–17 and 18–22 years manifest themselves in the fact that the internal world is simpler in 18–22-year-olds. At the same time, the external lifeworlds do not differ considerably.

The limitations of the conclusions are that the study sample comprised youths living in the urban environment of a region remote from the center of Russia, which determines the prospects for further research – testing the results obtained in this study in other regions and settlements of different types.

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