

Conference Paper

Actualization of Potential Life Experience in Normal Aging

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Abstract

The paper search mechanisms for maintaining personality well-being at the stage of late ontogenesis, which is important for neuropsychology, gerontology and psychology. The authors analyze the preserved cognitive resource, acquired at the previous age stages, as a resource for life experience mobilization and providing a definite level of intellectual and mental indicators in normal aging. The experience proves that preserved self-regulating abilities in elderly are the main condition of actualizing life experience potential. Specially organized environment in thematic art-groups providing the process of goal-oriented activity and adequate interpersonal interaction is viewed as a determining factor of life experience implementation. The dynamics of viability components reflecting sustainable strategies of self-regulation is investigated and the results of this investigation are presented.

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1. Introduction

The increase in human longevity is one of true-to-fact tendencies characterizing modern society. Also, it is well-known that longevity increase does not guarantee automatic preservation of an aging person's life quality. The current situation enhances the necessity of searching for new opportunities for maintaining well-being in elderly and it stipulates the aim of this research.

Current publications confirm the predominance of the deficiency paradigm in which aging and old age are considered only in the framework of inevitable involution. The compensation paradigm considering elderly as a subsequent stage of life that has compensatory resources allowing aged and old people not to decrease the level of intellectual and mental indicators. A number of researchers consider life experience to be a specific resource of aging [1-3]. Passing through a definite life course results in a

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complex of personality characteristics, due to own self-exploration and self-regulation experiencing.

Individuality and uniqueness of life experience is an accumulation and selection of own cognitive information and emotional experiencing rather than an effect of definite situations and events in which a person participated during his/her life. They determine the accumulation of definite *information-processing strategies* that, essentially, represent another resource of elderly period – a *cognitive* one. Preservation and mobility of the cognitive resource (memory is most frequently implied) are an important means of old subject's life quality provision [4-5].

Life experience, in the meantime, is a sense-forming structure of personality determining the development at the stages of late ontogenesis [6-8]. It is important that the contribution of the previous experience depends on the own activity of the person. Due to various circumstances occurring in the course of life a person does not exhaust all the variants of his/her life experience forming «the space of potentials» and therefore the unused resource - the «*potential life experience*» [9].

This fact explains the increased interest to study personal awareness (in the period of late ontogenesis) of the need for implementing achievements and potential experience accumulated at the previous life stages in order to go through *normal aging* – a long, multi-component, ambivalent process, a process of continuing development of a person who actively interacts with the world. It is characterized by individuality and the high level of variability [10],[11].

Hence:

1. At the stage of the late ontogenesis –if the individual is as an integrative subject of mental activity – the block of the need and ability for goal-setting of one's mental development are the first to decrease, while the block of the need and ability for fixing mental self-activity ways and results in individual experience are the last [6].
2. In normal aging there is the relative preservation of activity parameters which are provided by structural-functional block of programming and control [11].
3. The «generative activity» stimulates the old person to use real and potential life experience, forming a zone of proximal development in elderly [10].

The purpose of our research - to study conditions and factors of actualizing potential life experience in normal aging.

We supposed that preserved self-regulating abilities could be *a condition* for potential life experience actualization, which modifies activity by means of changing the structure of connections in interaction with the surrounding environment.

A specially organized environment in thematic art-groups provides the process of goal-oriented activity and can be considered as the determining *factor* of implementing potential life-experience and maintaining the well-being in normal aging.

2. Methods of the Research

1. *Express-methodology of assessing cognitive functions* in the process of normal aging [11]. The method includes 12 tasks aimed to investigate the various aspects of mnemonic and intellectual activity: the volume and speed of memorizing verbal stimuli and the stability of keeping them in memory; visual-spatial activity; selective memory actualization of words connected by common semantic characteristics; verbal thinking. The Benton Test adapted for gerontology and geriatrics assesses the visual memory. This methodology allows us to define the degree of general cognitive decline and the presence of preserved components of mental processes from the standpoint of structural-functional model of brain according to A.R. Luria.
2. S. R. Maddi and S. Kobasa *Vitality Test* (adaptation of D.A. Leontiev, Ye.I. Rasskazova) [12]. The authors define Vitality in general as a system of attitudes or beliefs concerning oneself, the world, the relationships with the world: inclusion attitudes versus alienation and isolation («involvement» scale), control over events attitudes versus the feeling of helplessness («control» scale), challenge and risk acceptance attitudes versus minimization of tension («risk acceptance» scale). The Vitality is a psychological variable reflecting sustainable strategies of self-regulation [13].
3. *The questionnaire «Subjective perception of one's own life»*, determines the general subjective life satisfaction [14, 15]. The criteria include the most significant spheres of aged people's life activity: indicators of being satisfied with personal activity level, health, age acceptance, professional achievements and the spent life in general, life plans implementation, relationships with family and surrounding people, group participation satisfaction.

Subjects: Ninety 55 – 82 old persons living in Kamchatka. 49 % of respondents were married and lived together with their spouses, 31% were divorced, 20 % are widows

and widowers. The level of education was the following one: incomplete secondary education – 4,4 %, secondary education and specialized professional training – 70 %, higher education – 25,6 %. 71,1% of them retired, 26, 4% continued to work at the same place or were forced to change their labor activity. The high percentage of not-working respondents is partially determined by the regional specificity: official retirement age in Kamchatka is 50 years in women and 55 years in men. All respondents had no decompensated chronic diseases, acute mental disorders, dementia, accentuated personality and behavior disorders.

3. Design of the Research

At the **initial stage** of the investigation, we analyzed the cognitive resource (express-methodology) and *self-regulating abilities* (Vitality test components) in three age sub-groups: the 1st included 31 respondents aged 55 – 65 (the average age 55, 8); the 2nd included 30 respondents aged 66 – 75 (the average age 69, 5); the 3^d – 29 respondents aged 76 – 84 (the average age 78, 9).

TABLE 1: Average values of express-methodology performance assessment in sub-groups (points).

Tasks	Aged 55 – 65 (n=31)	Aged 66 – 75 (n=30)	Aged 76 – 84 (n=29)	Group on the whole (n=90)
1	0,5	0,9	1,4	0,9
2	0,3	0,4	1,1	0,6
3	0,4	0,7	0,8	0,6
4	0,9	1,1	1,4	1,3
5	3,5	4,5	5,4	4,7
6	0,7	0,8	1	0,8
7	0,3	0,3	0,4	0,3
8	1	1,5	1,7	1,4
9	0,1	0,4	0,5	0,3
10	0,2	0,4	0,5	0,4
11	0,3	0	0	0,1
12	0	0,1	0	0
Total score	8,2	11,1	14,2	11,3

It follows from the Table 1 that in different tasks the decrease of indicators is not equally distributed. Thus, marked gaps in the scores were found in the tasks investigating verbal memory and visual-spatial activity, the speed of memorizing verbal material and optical-constructive operations (tasks 1, 5, 6, 8). In tasks 3, 4, 7, 9, 10 and 12 which assessed verbal thinking, memorizing or actualizing from the memory the semantically arranged stimuli we revealed the relative preservation of activity parameters

realized by the third structural-functional block (upon Luria). It is a probable resource of cognitive functions in case of normal aging. However, significant differences in age sub-groups were not found out and the further analysis was performed on the basis of the whole sample set.

The analysis of *Vitality components* data shows that the indicators of all scales correspond to the medium level. This fact also allows us to make assumptions about the existence of potential self-regulation psychological resources. At the same time the results of content-analysis of personal activity perception through subjective descriptions and self-acceptance estimations (upon the questionnaire) show the tendency of the majority of respondents towards the passivity state, helplessness, feeling to be "at the periphery of life" and the belief that everything in real life can hardly facilitate the development and progress. Thus, for example, the answers to the question «Has the perception of time changed?» were: «constant daily routine», «not life but Groundhog day», «I live only in the past», «a good life has come to the end and soon everything will be finished». Subjective well-being of the research participants is determined in many aspects by the environment and the perception of «the other»; also we can notice a tendency to life goals and plans degradation, a decrease in self-value. The accepting the social situation of development as non-satisfying but forced revealed the high degree of limiting social contacts and personal activity. [15].

The second stage consisted in the development and implementation of psychological intervention program by means of system art-therapy methods [15], that provided actualization of potential life experience mediated by experiencing (going through) the happening event [16-18] and goal-oriented activity in conditions of a thematic art-group. The group had a high degree of interactivity and organization, adequate communicative interaction and orientation to reality.

The set of techniques and technologies was carried out with the consideration of preserved segments of mental activity and cognitive functions decline revealed in respondents: slowing down of activity rate, difficulties in refocusing and distributing attention, asponaneity in task fulfillment, decrease in distraction tolerance and information processing, difficulties on performing spatial tasks. In general the training sessions included the following: graphic techniques with verbal or musical accompaniment («Line of Life», «Facets of My Self», «Collage of Life», «Self-Portrait» and others), techniques of pictorial stimulation of cognitive skills and interpersonal interactions (making up an art-diary; art-techniques in combination with drama, poetry, music and

dances; work with proverbs and aphorisms and others), techniques of creative self-expression, searching and revealing self-regulation resources (photo and musical therapy, thematic installations and performance, landscape art-therapy; body-oriented art-therapy and others) [19-21]. The order of the work was determined by personality dynamics of the participants and the process of creative interaction. The program was implemented within 12 months, with the frequency of two hours twice a week, also it suggested home tasks, according to the wishes of participants [15].

4. Dynamics after Art-Therapy

A.I. Kopytin [15] notes that continual participation in a thematic art-group stimulates the person’s awareness of the presence of psychological peculiarities in oneself and other people, which allows the individual to function successfully in reality. These considerations are confirmed by the distribution of indicators of general Vitality and its components (Table 2).

TABLE 2: Dynamics of Vitality components in participants of the thematic art-group *before and after psychological intervention*.

Scales of the test	Before art-therapy		After art-therapy		Coefficient t
	Compared values	Dispersion	Compared values	Dispersion	
General Vitality	71,4	195,8	82,7	261,5	3,35**
Involvement	31,9	31,7	36,9	50,7	3,49**
Control	25,5	52,2	29,0	53,7	2,13*
Risk acceptance	13,8	17,2	16,8	19,5	3,15*

* p ≤ 0,05 **p ≤ 0,01

The dynamics of Vitality components allows us to conclude that, providing the participants with the opportunity of being the initiators of personal choice and regulating own creative activity reduces inner tension and facilitates the feeling of satisfaction with own actions and events around them. The increase in values on the risk acceptance scale means the increasing openness for the surrounding world, perception of life events as challenges and personality trials.

Summing up the obtained results one can suppose that the involvement in the process of goal-oriented activity, new skills of creative experience allow the aged people to enlarge their range of personality choice. The above-mentioned ideas are also confirmed by the results of the repeated content-analysis of personal activity

subjective perception descriptions which reflect the acceptance of reality as an opportunity to live a full-scale and multi-faceted life. At the end of participation in the art-program the significant enlargement of the range of creative activities was noticed in respondents (for example, «I have mastered the technique of frivolate and now I prepare an exhibition», «I attend quire lessons», «I am engaged in taking photos and preparing to design an album», «I am making up graphic history of the family – a genogram, I have involved all surrounding people in this activity», «I dance tango», «I have ‘made friends’ with computer graphics», «So many years have passed since the War – the whole life, but only now I can study the German language again», «I visit mountain ski stations, – unfortunately, still as an observer», «We have organized literature meetings at the geriatrics department, frankly speaking, the impressions are still ambiguous but we have marked the start», «I have been feeling shy for a long time, but my greetings verses and caricatures have great success», «I began to keep an art-diary, it organizes and stimulates a lot, and, what is more, – now it is my zest and subject of self -pride»). Emotional attitude to the activity also has changed (upon the answers to the question «What feelings accompany your activity in the art-group?»: «It brings along joy and satisfaction», «it distracts from unpleasant thoughts», «it arouses astonishment, admiration, curiosity, delight», «it creates the feeling of fullness and happiness, even maybe tranquility»; it helped «to start loving oneself again and thinking highly of oneself», «to feel self-respect and self-value» etc.).

Thus, the analysis of personal dynamics allows us to assert that immersing aged participants in a goal-oriented creative activity *facilitates the change in the structure of their connections with their surroundings, the increase of social and personality activity and independence, the enlargement of hobby range and, on the whole, the maintenance of a high level of normal aging well-being.*

5. Discussion and Conclusions

Some researchers notice that when a person accumulates and enriches life experience it allows him/her to be not only an object of life, but also its subject [3], [22], [23]. It is important that human experience is characterized by elasticity and reversibility at the expense of constant revision of cognitive and emotional assessment, re-interpretation of results of some events or life stages and, consequently, the change of its structure is observed [24]. Therefore, the unique for every person life experience is a specific resource in his/her aging. However, at the stage of late maturity the use of the resource obtained during the life may become difficult by different reasons. It can occur

rather often that, with the presence of potential life experience, under the influence of negative stereotypes interactions, a special, artificially created attitude of aged people towards themselves is formed: demonstration of devaluing themselves, loss of their competence and control over life circumstances, absence of social involvement, feeling of guilt and decline in motivation for full-scale life. Probably, this situation can be mitigated by understanding (accepting) the poorly developed culture of aging or absence of «mass aging» experience in the previous generations, aging being a period of life equal to any other period, such as childhood, adolescence, maturity [15].

This investigation presents an attempt to explore the possibilities of mobilizing preserved resources of self-regulation. Selivanov V.V. [25] notes that at the stage of «vanishing subjectivity» a great ability for self-regulation of the mental functions remains which allows people to adapt to age changes in this period. Health deterioration and cognitive disorders, especially concerning memory, are considered traditional indicators of elderly. Many researchers view the initial level of education, long-life learning and orientation of an aged person to emotionally significant goals as the key factors of preserving the cognitive abilities in the elderly [4], [5]. Adherents of the cognitive reserve conception suggest that cognitive disorders in elderly are not only structural, but also functional, i.e. have a compensation mechanism [26]. Many preserved cognitive processes in elderly, at the expense of fixed in the individual experience activity forms, can provide stability of the system of attitudes or beliefs concerning oneself, the world, relationships with it, allowing the person to implement the formed algorithms of activity and withstand negative impacts, that, essentially, is defined as a sustainable resource of self-regulation – vitality [11], [13].

Thus, at the stage of normal aging it is important for the person to have a sufficient repertoire of behavioral flexibility closely connected with the preservation of cognitive and self-regulating resources, as *the dominant condition of effective actualization of potential life experience*, that promotes his/her harmonic relationships with the surrounding people and the world on the whole.

Specially organized psychological intervention based on real (cognitive) experience of respondents, providing a goal-oriented activity, acts as a *catalyzing factor for potential life experience implementation* and, as a consequence, for maintaining the normal aging well-being.

In conclusion, it is important to note that our work may provide a source for further studies of other aging resources.

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