

National Research University Higher School of Economics

As a manuscript

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**PERSONALITY CHANGES: PHENOMENOLOGY AND ASSESSMENT
IN THE CONTEXT OF PRACTICES OF PERSONALITY DEVELOPMENT**

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GENERAL SCOPE OF THE STUDY

Relevance of the study. The problem of personality change comes to the fore in the 21st century. Today, it covers a large field and is becoming a common problem in modern psychological science (Grishina, 2022). As time passes, we become more and more aware of the absoluteness of change; and the formula “a changing person in the changing world” (Asmolov, 2010) more accurately than ever describes the position of a person in modern times. Fundamental changes in the new scientific picture of the world bring to the fore the idea of instability, which, according to I. Prigogine, completely changes our understanding of determinism (Prigogine, 1991). The ability to change is considered as a resource for survival and preservation (Taleb, 2014).

The problem of personality changes in psychology has also become a relevant area of empirical research that studies the influence of external and internal factors on this process (Anusic, Schimmack, 2016). Developmental psychology has traditionally considered two main forces, or two factors, influencing personality change. The first factor relates to biological grounds and shows us that changes can be influenced by heredity, hormones and other aspects that contribute to the process of personality change. The second factor is the environment in a broad sense, which also includes the socio-cultural environment, such as social roles, life circumstances, and the experience of various interpersonal relationships. The third developmental factor has been highlighted since the emergence and consolidation of ideas in psychological science, in which the person is seen as an active agent, controlling one’s life (Leontiev, 2013). It is the factor that plays the key role in new approaches to the study of personality changes and reveals the role of goal setting, subjective well-being in this process (Baumeister, 1994, [Dabrowski](#), 1967, Hudson, Fraley, 2020).

We suggest that personality changes can manifest themselves in the subjective perception of one's own life and attitude towards it. We assume that the changes manifest themselves in the qualitative parameters of the perceived life trajectory of development rather than in shifts in personality values. This can be using a visual technique that includes subjective perception of one's own life. The category of life position is assumed to be the most relevant for describing and understanding personality

changes in the context of developmental practices. The fundamental assumption for this was the understanding of the life position as the attitude of the individual to his/her own life (Leontiev, 1993). The key task of this exploratory research is the search for indicators and instruments for assessing personality changes in the context of practices of personality development.

The object of the present study is the phenomenon of personality change.

The subject matter of the research is psychological indicators and individual characteristics of personality changes in the context of practices of personality development.

The purpose of the study is to identify the general and individual-specific content of medium-term personality changes in the course of practices of personality development.

Aims of the research:

- To conduct a theoretical analysis and present an overview of modern research on the problem of personality changes in psychology;
- To conduct a theoretical analysis of the use of visual methods in psychological diagnostics;
- To develop a visual method for assessing a perceived trajectory of development;
- To conduct a theoretical analysis of attitudes towards one's own life as a possible mediator of personality changes;
- To describe the general phenomenology of personality changes;
- To conduct an empirical analysis of changes in personality characteristics in the course of developmental practices.

The main research question: What are the subjective manifestations of medium-term personality changes and how can they be assessed, in particular those related to participation in practices of personality development?

The theoretical and methodological basis. The methodological basis of this study is the concept of a changing person in the changing world (Asmolov, 2010) and the functional paradigm (Leontiev D.A., 2016), which postulates the primacy of the process and the actual functioning of the individual as regards stable morphological and

psychological structures. The theoretical basis of the work is based on such general psychological approaches as existential positive psychology (EPP) and the theory of personal constructs. The EPP explores the ability of a person not only to survive, but also to thrive, overcoming existential anxiety and suffering (Wong, 2021).

Among the micro-range theories considered in the theoretical study were general psychological views on personality changes (R. Baumeister, N.V. Grishina, N.V. Hudson, R.K. Frailey, V. Blaydorn, P. Vaclavik, K. Mustakas, N. Taleb, D. A. Leontiev, T. D. Martsinkovskaya, etc.), the personality as an active subject of activity (K. A. Abulkhanova-Slavskaya, A. V. Brushlinsky, B. G. Ananiev, A. Leontiev, S.L. Rubinshtein, V.A. Petrovsky and others, etc.).

The empirical base of the research. A series of studies was carried out – four preliminary ones and one main one.

A preliminary study on the phenomenology of personality changes was conducted on a sample of students of the humanities major of one of the Moscow universities (N = 101), aged 18 to 20 years (M = 18, SD = 0.5), the share of female participants was 81% (n = 82). This study used Qualitative Document Analysis (QDA) (Altheide, Coyle, Devriese, & Schneider, 2008) involving three independent experts.

The sample of the preliminary study was devoted to the psychometric testing of the visual technique “Trajectory” for assessing the perceived trajectory of individual development. It was carried out on a sample of participants of the summer school of Russian Reporter magazine (N = 231), the share of female participants was 86%; mean age – 20 years). The majority of respondents had secondary (31%), incomplete higher (40%) or higher (30%) education.

The following questionnaires were used to test the validity:

- 1) Big Five (BFQ-2; Russian adaptation by E.N. Osin) (Osin, 2011);
- 2) Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS: Diener et al., 1985/Osin, Leontiev, 2020);
- 3) Differential perfectionism test (Brief Differential Perfectionism Inventory (BDPI; Russian adaptation by A.A. Zolotareva, 2018);
- 4) Differential reflexivity test (DTR) (Leontiev, Osin, 2014);

5) Multidimensional Inventory of Loneliness Experience (MILE: Osin, Leontiev, 2013);

6) Noetic orientations test (NOT: Leontiev, 1992).

SPSS Statistic 29.0 software was used for statistical data analysis.

The third preliminary study was devoted to the approbation of the three-factor model of the theoretical construct "personal life position". The sample of the study (N=367) consisted of undergraduate and graduate students of the HSE Faculty of Social Sciences, including 79% of females (n = 291) aged 19 to 29 years.

The raw data matrix containing the respondents' ratings was subjected to the factor analysis procedure in the SPSS 29.0 package. To determine the statistical correspondence of the theoretical model to the experimental data, we used the procedure of confirmatory factor analysis performed in the program in the EQS 6.1 package based on raw data.

The main study had a mixed design and included two blocks: qualitative and qualitative-quantitative. The sample of a qualitative study of personality changes within the framework of group existential work consisted of participants in existential life enhancement groups (N = 182), which occurred in a number of cities in Russia, Ukraine and Kazakhstan in 2010–2019. 146 out of 182 participants were female, all had higher education, the age ranged from 21 to 63 years.

The study included a content analysis of the self-reports of participants involving four experts and the use of the "Trajectory" visual technique (Leontiev, Miyuzova, 2016).

A qualitative-quantitative study of changes in personality characteristics in the framework of group existential work included two data collections (before and after group work) on a sample of members of the groups that occurred in a number of Russian cities in 2018–2019, when elaboration of the new instrument of assessing personal changes was completed. 44 out of 75 participants in the developmental groups were female, all of them had higher education, age ranged from 21 to 63 years.

In the main study of changes in personality characteristics within the framework of group existential work, the following methods were used:

- 1) Personal Life Position Inventory (Leontiev, Shilmanskaya, 2019);
- 2) "Trajectory" visual technique (Leontiev, Miyuzova, 2016);
- 3) Multiple Stimulus Types Ambiguity Tolerance Scale (MSTAT-II: McLain, 2009; Russian version by Leontiev, Osin, Lukovitskaya, 2016).

SPSS 29.0 program was used for statistical analysis of data from the study of personality changes in the framework of group existential work: descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, internal consistency of scales), one-way analysis of variance, analysis of variance with repeated measures and post hoc analysis (Tukey's test).

Scientific novelty of the study:

- 1) The phenomenology of medium-term personality changes was described and classified;
- 2) The «Trajectory» visual technique was theoretically substantiated, validated and adapted on the Russian sample. It is aimed at assessing the person subjective perception the general dynamics of one's own life;
- 3) A three-factor model of a person's life position as an attitude to one's own life was tested and the "Personal Life Position Inventory" was validated;
- 4) Subjectively perceived and psychometrically recorded changes were revealed in the course of group existential work.

Theoretical significance of the research:

- 1) A theoretical analysis of modern approaches to the study of personality changes in psychology has been carried out;
- 2) The possibilities of using visual methods in the study of personality changes were considered, a review of existing methods for assessing personality changes has been conducted.

Practical significance. The results of the study contribute to the understanding of the phenomenon of personality change, its relevance in the individual life of a person, as well as the role of personality characteristics in the process of personality change. The data obtained have notable psychotherapeutic potential and can be used in the practice of psychological counseling to persist the life trajectory, as well as personal life position, which will allow working with persons attitudes in relation to one's own life.

The results of the theoretical analysis highlight the contradictions in various methodological approaches to the study of personality changes and raise the question of developing relevant methods of empirical research. The results of the work can also be helpful in training courses on personality psychology and psychological counseling.

Reliability of the research results. The reliability and validity of the results obtained was substantiated by a systematic theoretical analysis of the research problem of personality changes, the psychometric validity of methods that correspond to the objectives and aims of the study, the sample that meets modern requirements for data representativeness, the use of qualitative and quantitative analysis methods, as well as a large set of statistical methods for data analysis, that are relevant to the obtained data and the formulated research questions. Mathematical processing and visualization of the obtained results was carried out using MS Excel software version 16.57 (2022), SPSS 29.0., EQS 6.1.

Principles for the defense:

1) The perception of life is manifested in the choice of a visual image that symbolically expresses the subjectively perceived trajectory of one's own life. The corresponding symbolic images are associated with personality characteristics.

2) One's attitude towards one's own life includes in three dimensions of a personal life position: harmony with one's own life, awareness of one's own life and activity in relation to it. The choice of a visual trajectory is associated with indicators of harmony with life, awareness and activity of the personal life position.

3) In the course of existential group work, the level of tolerance for ambiguity increased and changes in the visual image of the life trajectory occurred. The variable of person life position did not change significantly.

Approbation of the study. The materials of the study were discussed at the meetings of the postgraduate research seminar on the specialty 19.00.01 of the Department of Psychology, Faculty of Social Sciences, HSE University, as well as at the meetings of the International Laboratory of Positive Psychology and Motivation (HSE University).

The main results of the study were presented at the Fifth Russian Scientific and Practical Conference on Existential Psychology (Lomonosov Moscow State University, 2013), the First International Congress on Logotherapy (Haifa, Israel, 2015), the XXII International Symposium "Psychological Problems of the Meaning of Life and Acme" (Moscow, PI RAE, 2017), 9th European Conference on Positive Psychology (Budapest, Hungary, 2018), International Scientific and Practical Conference "Personality in an Era of Change: mobilis in mobili" (Lomonosov Moscow State University, 2018), First Conference of the European Association for Qualitative Research in Psychology (Thessaloniki, Greece, 2021).

The content of the PhD thesis is reflected in four publications in journals included in the HSE list of journals recommended for defense.

The structure of the PhD thesis reflects the general logic of the research and consists of an introduction, three chapters, a conclusion, a list of references, which includes 210 titles (124 in a foreign language), and four appendices. The results of theoretical and empirical analysis are presented in 17 tables and 8 figures. The main text of the dissertation is presented on 149 pages. The total volume of the dissertation is 250 pages.

GENERAL CONTENT OF THE RESEARCH

The **introduction** presents the relevance, substantiates the problem, the object and subject matter of the study, as well as sets objectives, aims, and puts forward research question, describes the empirical, theoretical and methodological bases of the study and methods of analysis, reveals the scientific novelty of the work, its theoretical and practical significance, justifies the reliability of the obtained results, formulates principles for the defense, and presents data on the approbation of the research results, as well as the structure of the PhD work.

The **first chapter** consists of seven sections and substantiates the problem of personality changes in psychological science, in particular, a theoretical analysis of foreign and domestic approaches to the study of the problem of personality changes is presented, as well as the results of a pilot study of the phenomenology of personality changes.

The theoretical analysis shows that the problem of personality changes is fundamental for psychological science (Hudson et. al., 2020a). There are two main vectors of research that consider personality changes as a result of a change in personality traits or as a result of a change in attitude towards general or specific aspects of one's life (Hudson, 2021). A person finds oneself in a stream of constantly changing relationships with the world and strives to improve these relationships, and the relationships themselves are the precursors of any stable structures of the psyche and personality (Leontiev, 2016). Understanding the phenomenon of personality changes presupposes access to a wide dynamic context of life and can hardly be limited to changes in individual traits and other elements of the personality structure (Hudson et. al., 2020b). We decided to approach personality change first from a phenomenological perspective, as well as to consider ways of understanding the process of change and individual ways of identifying. The results of the content analysis of the

phenomenological content of personality changes confirmed that qualitative-phenomenological methods allow us to describe the content of medium-term personality changes during the transition to early adolescence (graduating from school, entering a university). Characteristically, these changes, firstly, are consistent in our sample and, secondly, are in good agreement with the consideration of personality development in terms of the development of self-regulation (Loevinger, 1976), as well as with the thesis of the development of an understanding of the world as the form in which our own development is perceived by us (Leontiev, 2007). According to the data obtained, the most frequent categories that relate to predictors of personality changes are "changes in world views, thoughts and worldview", as well as "changes in attitudes towards people, problems, situations and "different things"", which is in good agreement with the theoretical concept claiming that attitudes toward various aspects of life and one's life in general can be a real predictor of personality change. However, the data obtained only allowed to outline a potential field for further research and raised the question of developing a methodological ground for assessing personality changes through the prism of perception of and attitude to one's own life.

Chapter 2 provides an overview of existing methods for assessing personality changes and discusses the possibilities of visual methods for assessing personality changes, as well as a series of studies devoted to the development of instruments for assessing personality changes. The elaboration of two methods is based on the idea that personality changes can be recorded through the perception of one's own life, which includes a visual image of an individual life trajectory, as well as through the attitude to life, the parameters of a person's life position.

As a part of the second pilot study, the visual technique "Trajectory" was tested to assess changes in the subjectively perceived individual development trajectory. The results of the study confirmed the existence of a connection between the choice of a visual trajectory and indicators of basic personality traits, as well as other personality variables that are associated with indicators of psychological well-being, reflexivity, perfectionism, experience of loneliness, and noetic orientations. The findings suggest that the choice of visual representation of the life trajectory is correlated with traits and

other personality variables. If we divide people into groups according to the choice of a trajectory, it turns out that they differ on some psychological parameters. We found significant differences in the average values in terms of energy, emotional stability, life satisfaction, noetic orientations, reflection, perfectionism, and experience of loneliness. The possibility of creating a visual technique that reveals a person's actual subjective attitude to his/her own life raises the question of elaborating a verbal technique that could assess a person's attitude to his/her life. We can make a general conclusion that the use of the visual technique "Trajectory" is promising for express assessment and revealing changes as a result of the practical work of a psychologist.

As a part of the third pilot study, Personal Life Position Inventory was created and its psychometric characteristics were presented. Is it possible to measure the attitude of a person to his/her life, what parameters can be distinguished? Research showed that people who are not satisfied with some aspect of their life, or even life in general, are more likely to change their personal qualities (Hudson and Roberts 2014; Kiecolt 1994). But what exactly is their relationship to their lives remains a question. Creating a questionnaire that could assess this area is important for studying the area of personality change. Structural analysis made it possible to identify three dimensions of life position - awareness, harmony and activity - which can be legitimately considered as cognitive, emotional-evaluative and active components of a person's life position, respectively. Many years of work on the development of a questionnaire for assessing a person's life position ended in success. Despite the compactness (4 items for each of the three scales), the Personal Life Position Inventory demonstrates good psychometric properties and conforms to the structural model. It can be concluded that this instrument seems to be a promising tool for research in the psychology of personality and the psychology of change, which will allow solving new types of research problems (Leontiev, Shilmanskaya, 2019).

The development of two methods raised the question of their application in the context of practices of personality development, it was decided to organize a qualitative and quantitative study of personality changes in order to implement an attempt at a more comprehensive study of the process of personality changes.

Chapter 3 presents an exploration of personality change through group existential work. A qualitative study of personality changes in the framework of group existential work illustrates the possibilities of two new approaches to assessing the effectiveness of the existential groupwork: content analysis of descriptions of changes and the visual methodology "Trajectory" (Leontiev, Miyuzova, 2012). Both methods seem to be applicable to a wide variety of forms of psychological assistance. Of course, they do not give a direct answer to the question of the effectiveness or real consequences of the corresponding form of work, but they help to take a step in solving the methodological problem of finding indicators and means of assessing personality changes in the process of psychotherapeutic or practices of personality development. As far as the assessment of existential life enhancement workshops as a specific form of such work is concerned, the above results allow us to conclude that as a result of such work, there are shifts in attitudes towards one's own life along two interrelated parameters (Leontiev, 2012). The first of these is acceptance and awareness of unavoidable uncertainty, which, according to modern ideas, is most productive for personal development and resistance to stress (see Leontiev, 2015). The essence of such an attitude is to abandon the childish illusion of stability and unambiguity of the picture of the world and to develop a more mature position of accepting uncertainty, the other side of which is the discovery of new opportunities. Growing openness to new opportunities is the second aspect of the identified changes.

In a qualitative-quantitative study of personality changes within the framework of existential life enhancement groups, the data presented illustrate the possibilities of two new methods for assessing the group form of psychological assistance: the Trajectory method and the Personal Life Position Inventory.

The hypothesis of significant shifts in the choice of trajectory after participating in group existential work was confirmed, which is consistent with the results presented in the pilot study (see Leontiev, Miyuzova, 2016)

The hypothesis about shifts in the parameters of tolerance for ambiguity was confirmed, significant changes increases were found on the following scales: attitude to novelty, attitude to complex tasks.

The hypothesis about the relationship between the choice of the trajectory and the indicators of personal life position and tolerance for ambiguity was confirmed. As part of the analysis of variance, it was found that the choice of a certain trajectory is associated with the average values of the indicators of harmony, awareness and activity of the life position of the individual, as well as with the indicators of tolerance for ambiguity.

Significant changes in the parameters of the personal life position were not found, but in Measurement 1 the personal life position parameters showed moderately positive relationships with the scale of general tolerance for ambiguity ($0.231^* < r < 0.449^{**}$, * – $p < .05$; ** – $p < .001$), and also, according to the results of Measurement 2, the indicators of the Personal Life Position Inventory showed moderately positive relationships with the scale of general tolerance for ambiguity ($0.195^* < r < 0.363^{**}$, * – $p < .05$; ** – $p < .001$).

GENERAL CONCLUSIONS OF THE RESULTS OF THE STUDY

1) Qualitative phenomenological methods make it possible to describe the content of medium-term personality changes during the transition to early adolescence. The subjective idea of personality changes is expressed in different substantive categories, the most frequent being: “change in worldviews, thoughts and outlook” and “change in attitude towards people, problems, situations and “different things””.

2) The subjective perception of life can be represented as a visual image – a life trajectory. The choice of a visual image to characterize one's own life is associated with traits and personality variables (energy, emotional stability, satisfaction with life, noetic orientations, self-reflection, perfectionism, experience of loneliness.)

3) Attitude towards life can be expressed through the concept of a personal life position and includes three dimensions: harmony with life, awareness of life (or reflexivity of life position), as well as activity (agency) in relation to one's own life.

4) Subjective personality changes in the course of existential group work are manifested in self-reports in the form of sensations of changes, feelings accompanying changes, comprehension of changes and practical implementation of changes, based on the attitude to uncertainty. The essence of such an attitude is to abandon the childish illusion of stability and unambiguity of the picture of the world and to develop a more mature position of accepting uncertainty, the other side of which is the discovery of new opportunities. Growing openness to new opportunities is the second aspect of the identified changes.

5) The choice of a visual trajectory is associated with indicators of harmony with life, awareness and activity of the personal life position. In Measurement 1 the personal life position parameters showed moderately positive relationships with the scale of general tolerance for ambiguity ($0.231^* < r < 0.449^{**}$, * – $p < .05$; ** – $p < .001$), and also, according to the results of Measurement 2, the indicators of the Personal Life Position Inventory showed moderately positive relationships with the scale of general tolerance for ambiguity ($0.195^* < r < 0.363^{**}$, * – $p < .05$; ** – $p < .001$)

6) In the course of existential groupwork, tolerance for ambiguity increased and changes in the visual image of the life trajectory occurred. The personal life position

parameters did not change significantly. The parameters of tolerance for ambiguity was confirmed, significant changes increases were found on the following scales: attitude to novelty, attitude to complex tasks.

The research was carried out in the International Laboratory of Positive Psychology of Personality and Motivation of the National Research University Higher School of Economics.

The list of publications

1. Shilmanskaya A.E., Leontiev D.A. Personality changes: new approaches and perspectives // *Voprosy Psychologii*. 2021. Vol. 67. № 4. P. 111–120. (in Russian)
2. Shilmanskaya A.E. Visual Methods in Qualitative Psychological Research of Personality // *Cultural-Historical Psychology*. 2020. Vol 16. № 4. P. 49–55. (in Russian)
3. Leontiev D.A., Shilmanskaya A.E. Personal Life Position of the Individual: from Theory to Operationalization// *Voprosy Psychologii*. – 2019. – № 1. – P. 90-100. (in Russian)
4. Leontiev D.A., Miyuzova A.E. Personality Changes as a Result of Life Enhancement Work // *Counseling Psychology and Psychotherapy*. 2016. Vol. 24. № 1. P. 44–63. (in Russian)

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1. Leontiev D.A., Miyuzova A.E. Methodical approach to recording personality changes as a result of existential work // *Fifth Russian Scientific and Practical Conference on Existential Psychology: Materials of the conference, 6—8 May 2013*. M.: Smysl, 2013. P. 138—141. (in Russian)
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