

PREDICTORS OF MIDDLE AGED WOMEN`S PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING: ATTITUDES TOWARD PARENTS¹

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Abstract

The analysis of developmental theories of well-being in middle adulthood, concerning women is presented in the paper. The research is based on Ryff's (1996) conception relating *psychological well-being* to eudemonic lifestyle as most confirmed. Empirical results reveal how middle aged women's attitudes toward parents impact on their psychological well-being through 4 basic adult attachment types. Special focus is made on correlations of emotional autonomy from parents, guilt and well-being. The guilt of responsibility is enhanced in middle age, being a mechanism motivating a woman to realize the eudemonic lifestyle (self-realization through care, first of all for aging parents and growing up children).

Keywords: *middle adulthood, women, psychological well-being: predictors, attitudes toward parents; an eudemonic lifestyle, guilt, responsibility, care, autonomy.*

Introduction

The two main approaches – the eudaimonic/eudemonic and hedonistic ones - have become firmly established in the modern study of personal psychological well-being. The first approach focuses on the process and outcomes of individual intrapersonal resource mobilization which results in one's experiencing the fullness of being. Its research object is *psychological well-being* (personal resources, personal positive traits, psychological capital). The hedonistic approach studies a person's *subjective* experiences of joy and pleasure involving one's self- and life satisfaction, i.e. its object is subjective well-being as happiness. Diener has enormously contributed to the understanding of these psychological well-being phenomena with his concept of "subjective well-being" (Diener, 1999). The content of this term shares similarities with the interpretation of psychological well-being (Bradburn, 1969). According to Diener (1999), subjective well-being consists of the three basic components: satisfaction, positive feelings and negative feelings. Boniwell (2008) observes that the concept "subjective well-being" in academic works is synonymic to more ordinary term "happiness" (Boniwell, 2008, 51). The most theoretically and methodologically well-developed modern approach to the problem of individual's PWB is self-determination theory by Deci and Rayn (2008). It

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introduces three universal fundamental innate needs (autonomy, competence, and relatedness). The authors observe profound differences between self-determination and subjective well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2008).

The multi-dimensional model of psychological well-being is being developed in modern psychology by Carol Ryff (Ryff, et al., 1995, 1996, 2008). In many respects, it is based on the analysis of positive psychological functioning conceptions (Birren, 1996; Bühler & Allen, 1972; Maslow, 1971; Neugarten, 1968; Allport, 1961; Rodgers, 1963; Erikson, 1950; Jung, 1933; Jahoda, 1958). The works by Seligman and colleagues (2004) demonstrate that while pursuing hedonistic pastimes (recreation, relaxation, or fun), individuals experience many pleasant feelings, demonstrate more vigor, and lower negative affect. Moreover, they are being happier than those who cherish eudemonic values. Nevertheless, in the long term, those with more “eudemonic” lifestyle (focused on developing one’s skills and abilities or learning something) are more satisfied with their lives. Some researchers suggest that eudemonic well-being should be easily achieved through self-development while others argue for seeking meaning of one’s life. Seligman has identified three paths to happiness: (1) to lead the pleasant life to be full of positive emotions and extremely gratified; (2) to lead the good life, or to be constantly engaged in interesting events and susceptible to “flow” feelings, and (3) to lead the meaningful life where individuals use their personal virtues to serve something larger than themselves (Seligman, Park, & Peterson, 2004). The two latter ways are shaped by eudemonic values.

The concept of “*psychological well-being*” used in the current research is related to eudemonic lifestyle. It is interpreted as *an integrative systemic personal trait developed by one’s effective functioning at all levels of life: biological, individual psychological, social, and spiritual ones*. Well-being is not an emotional experience but particular objective possession of certain psychological traits that significantly enhance a subject’s functioning as compared to their lack. Ryff has distinguished six components of psychological well-being:

- *positive relationships with others*;
- *autonomy* – one’s self-determination, independence, and personal control over social pressures;
- *environmental mastery*, or one’s ability to make effective use of environmental opportunities;
- *purpose in life*;
- *personal growth* – openness to new experience;
- self-acceptance – positive self-attitude (Ryff & Keyes, 1995).

Later, Ryff’s model included one more construct – social well-being, or objective generalized characteristics of social interaction (Keyes, Shmotkin, & Ryff, 2002).

The Determinants of Middle-Aged Women’s Psychological Well-Being and their Attitudes toward Parents

The studies have confirmed *one’s age* and *sex* as relevant factors in psychological well-being. The analysis of sex differences indicated women’s higher levels of psychological well-being (Ryff, 1996; Orlofsky 1977; Shevelenkova & Fesenko 2005; etc.). However, modern gender stereotypes lower its actual level while masculine behavior makes it possible even for women to secure public recognition (Burn, 1996; Gosman, 1987). High femininity often involves women’s deep anxiety (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974) while masculine women are likely to suffer from feminine gender role stress (O’Neil, 1981).

Studies on age characteristics of psychological well-being structure report that, if compared to young and middle adulthood, *personal growth* performance decreases after the age of 65. Middle adulthood is characterized by high *autonomy* whereas low *environmental mastery* is typical for young adulthood (Ryff & Keyes, 1995).

Numerous data gives evidence that main determinants of personal psychological well-being are subjective rather than objective as the latter's impact is mediated by personal unique meanings (Leontiev, 1999; Leontiev & Mospan, 2017). One of the main sources of psychological well-being is social relationships. In particular, these are family ones for women (those with a spouse, children, and aging parents) (Kryukova & Saporovskia, 2016).

Personal traits as psychological well-being factors are also of great importance and academic interest: extraversion and high emotional stability - strong correlates and predictors of one's happiness - significantly correlate with one's self-acceptance, conscientiousness is related to one's self-acceptance, control over the environment, and meaningfulness of life, while openness to new experience corresponds to one's personal growth (Ryff, 1996). Faith and religiosity has a positive impact on individual's psychological well-being level (Argyle, 1987; Yalom, 2005; Khazova, 2013; Kryukova, 2010).

Thus middle adulthood involves fundamental changes in woman's family relationships structure (particularly, in children-parents relationships). They are a source of psychological stress and require maximum mobilization of women's personal resources as well may enhance their self-development and personal growth. The stages of women's life cycle are structured around her chronological age and family cycle stages. The end and beginning of each stage in the family cycle are critical junctures for woman's personal growth. Middle age is a transition period between two generations. Middle-aged people support both elderly and young adults. The responsibility and support usually rest on a "middle-aged woman" who is to satisfy her aging parents' and growing up children's needs, perform her marital duties, and think about her own career and individual needs. Popular scientific literature has figuratively called such a woman belonging to "sandwich generation" (Pierret, 2006).

The main psychological new achievement for middle adulthood is a transition from a passive performance within a family socialization scenario to living self-constructed independent life. This is caused by the normative midlife crisis where individual's growing awareness of one's mortality is its trigger. Care for others plays an important role in adult women's self-development and psychological well-being. So, one of the essential pre-requisites for middle-aged woman's psychological well-being is a harmonious and productive transformation of the relationships with the parents.

To sum up, we should note that a woman becomes a leading subject in her relationships with parents at the stage of middle adulthood. Woman's attitude toward her parents and its correlations with her psychological well-being at this stage are mainly controversial. On the one hand, parents' health problems make a woman temporarily and morally dependent on them, anxious of her own helplessness and old age and prevent effective parents – daughter interpersonal communication. On the other hand, the support of aging parents has a deep personal meaning for a woman and makes her life full and complete. The psychological analysis of adult (particularly, daughter's) attitude to aging parents implies mentioning key universal phenomena that describe child's attitude toward their parents throughout life, i.e. *attachment, closeness-dependence conflict, a feeling of guilt* (Voronina, 2018).

Closeness is a quality characteristic of one's attachment. However, extreme closeness destroys any pleasant experience, causes the fear of intimacy and distancing. On the one hand,

too regular or close contacts with parents, tackling their problems, seeking parallels between their state, problems, and one's future make a woman experience empathy and closeness but, on the other hand, cause the fear of her own aging and the urge to distance herself from these anxieties.

Guilt is an important component of an adult daughter's attitude toward her parents. Specifics of one's early children-parents relationships mainly determine a particular type of guilt. At this stage, both constructive (an objective guilt) and destructive (an irrational guilt) personal guilt patterns can develop. A "normative/ healthy" guilt starts regulating adult daughter's attitude toward parents, enables her to keep a comfortable psychological distance from them, enhances woman's psychological maturity while an irrational guilt causes to break her own boundaries and pay back "a life-long, perpetual debt", and lowers her psychological well-being.

Modern psychology does not have sufficient data to explain how an adult woman - aging parents' relationships are related to one's personal growth and which of the aspects are sources for stress and which are resourceful for maintaining psychological well-being.

Research design

The current study addresses a problematic issue: what how positive or negative middle-aged woman's attitude toward the parents influences on her psychological well-being.

Research goal – to study the impact of middle-aged woman's attitude toward her parents' specifics on her psychological well-being.

Empirical tasks:

1. To describe the specifics of psychological well-being components at different stages of adulthood.
2. To reveal and classify middle-aged women's attitudes to their parents based on classical attachment types. To describe the place and role of adult women's sense of guilt for parents in the attitudes toward them.
3. To study how a particular type of attitude toward parents influences on women's psychological well-being at different stages of their adulthood.

The main **hypothesis** is: women's psychological well-being is determined by age (development specifics at different stages of the adulthood), socio-psychological (the type of women's attitude to parents), and individual (personal traits and individual history of relationships with parents) factors.

Method. *The sample* includes two empirical groups of females (n=172). The first group consists of 92 women of middle adulthood (from 38 to 56 years old, *M* of the respondents is 47, *M* of their aging parents is 73); the second group includes 35 women of young adulthood (from 24 to 35 years old, *M* of the respondents is 28.6, *M* of their aging parents is 58). The criterion for respondents' inviting to the study is their active engagement in aging parents' lives.

The basis of the study is a combination of quality and quantity *methods*, i.e.: The scales of psychological well-being by C.D. Ryff, adapted into Russian by Shevelenkova & Fesenko (2005); Interpersonal Guilt Questionnaire - *IGQ* by L.E. O'Connor, J.W. Berry, J. Weiss, M. Bush, H. Sampson; Attachment Style Questionnaire - *ASQ* by Feeney, Noller, Hanrahan (1994); a phenomenological interview, and mathematical statistics methods.

Results and discussion

At the first stage of our study structural organization of young and middle-aged adult women's psychological well-being components were analyzed (*Positive Relations with Others; Autonomy; Environmental Mastery; Personal Growth; Purpose in Life; Self-Acceptance; Self-Esteem; Openness to the New Experience*).

We have identified that in a dynamic perspective women give greater importance to reliable, trustworthy relationships with their environment and concerns about another one's well-being; to empathy, attachment, compromises in relationships (*Positive Relations with Others* scale, $r=0.18$; $p=0,03$). Close relationships assume more important role and particular significance for middle-aged (first of all, married) women and become indicators of their life success or failure.

At the same time, respondents report an increased sense of control over their lives, competency in environmental mastery, and ability to create optimal conditions to satisfy their needs and achieve goals (*Environmental Mastery* scale, $r=0.21$; $p=0,03$).

The significance of relationships with others and a sense of control over one's life involve the perception of its purposefulness in middle adulthood; that of the meaningful past and present (*Purpose in Life* scale, $r=0.37$; $p=0.01$; $r=0.29$; $p=0.01$).

These variables have negative correlations with *Autonomy* ($r= -0.24$; $p=0.02$ and *Personal Growth* ($r= -0.33$ $p=0.01$) scales. This suggests, though women are focusing on positive relationships, have a sense of control, attain environmental mastery, and lead a meaningful life, they perceive their personal growth and self-actualization as insufficient, their lives as monotonous and depending on people's opinions and judgment; their autonomy and independence limited.

Thus, we consider positive relationships with others as certain age new qualities, sense of environmental mastery, and purposes in life, even in connection with a lack of personal autonomy, personal growth and self-realization to be core components of a middle aged woman psychological well-being. However, their interplay with various subordinate components produces different effects on middle-aged women's psychological well-being.

The combination of these core components and low self-acceptance, negative self-esteem, life dissatisfaction, underestimated abilities to cope with life challenges and acquire new competencies and skills (*Self-Acceptance* and *Affect Balance* scales with $p<0.05$); a lack of attractive enough life prospects for a woman (*Meaningful Life* scale with $p<0.05$); poor inadequate life perception and a fear of new experience (*Individual as an Open System* scale with $p<0.05$) predict a low level of general psychological well-being.

On the contrary, the conjunction of core components with positive self-acceptance, high self-esteem, self-assurance and confidence in one's competence, life satisfaction, and openness to the new experience predict a high level of general psychological well-being.

Thus, one's self-esteem and openness to the new experience in a psychological structure of well-being are determinants of its positive or negative dynamics.

The next task was to describe middle-aged women's attitudes to their parents, to define the place and role of women's sense of guilt toward them in the structure of parent-children relationships. Through the content analysis of the materials from the interview about "A parents' image", we have identified the key categories used by the respondents to describe retrospective and current aspects of their daughter-parents relationships' history, i.e.: *emotional atmosphere of memories* about one's childhood (positive, neutral, negative, and ambivalent memories); *subjective perception* of a more loved parent (a father or a mother); *main recipients of care*

(women provide rather than receive care; they receive rather than provide care; they both provide and receive care); *a dominating motive* of care for one's aging parents (gratitude, love; a sense of duty); aging parents' *current influence* on respondents (significant, moderate; weak).

Women with positive childhood memories report a sense of closer intimacy with their parents ($p=0.00$) and *separation guilt* ($p=0.00$) toward them though these respondents are more satisfied with their current adult daughter-parents relationships ($p=0.05$) if compared to those with negative childhood memories. Women who have felt closer to their mothers are more likely to experience negative emotions in their adult daughter-parents relationships unlike those who mention their fathers as closer ones – *General Dissatisfaction with Relationships* ($p=0.02$), *Emotional and Mental Stress* ($p=0.03$), *Anxiety* ($p=0.03$). The typical feeling in this case is *responsibility guilt* ($p=0.04$). Women who provide rather than receive care feel more confident about their relationships with parents (with $p=0.04$) in contrast to those who mainly receive care. The latter seek their parents' approval as opposed to women from the first group ($p=0.04$). These respondents are more likely to suffer a *survivor's guilt* ($p<0.05$) as compared to those who both provide and receive care.

Thus, middle-aged woman's attitude to her aging parents involves her sense of guilt toward them. For a deeper understanding what role this variable plays, we have studied the correlations' structure between irrational types of guilt and components of women's attitude toward parents (Table 1).

Table 1. The correlations between irrational types of guilt and components of adult woman's attitude toward parents (statistically significant at $p<0.05$)

Components of Adult Woman's Attitude toward Parents	Survivor's Guilt	Separation Guilt	Responsibility Guilt	Self-hate Guilt
Closeness	0.50	0.65	0.52	
Autonomy from Parents		0.27		
Seeking Approval	0.46	0.31		0.62
Engagement in Relationships with Parents	0.47			0.43
Uneasiness about Closeness				0.35
General Dissatisfaction with a Current Situation		-0.29		

Most of the components of a woman's attitude correlate with irrational types of guilt, particularly *Closeness* with parents and *Seeking approval*.

The data content and factor analyses have identified four main types of a middle-aged woman's attitude toward the parents.

Type 1. *Strong (anxious) attachment* (the first factor explains 27% of variance). This type is characterized by women's emotional dependence on their parents (0.72), seeking their approval (0.62), active engagement in adult daughter-parents relationships (0.55), and closeness (0.53). Women consider their relationships with parents satisfactory though they suffer from an irrational guilt complex: a survivor's guilt (0.89), separation guilt (0.78), self-hate guilt (0.63), responsibility guilt (0.67).

Type 2. *Distancing attitude* (the second factor explains 22% of variance). This type involves women's general dissatisfaction with their adult daughter-parents relationships (0.95), anxiety (0.92), emotional and mental stress (0.76), and low closeness level (0.49). It

lacks warmth and trust; the relationships with one's parents are rather formal. The motive of one's engagement in parents' life and care for them is a sense of duty / obligation.

Type 3. *Ambivalent attitude* (the third factor explains 17% of variance). This type is characterized by both low closeness level (0.48) and active engagement in daughter-parents relationships (0.55). Women with this type of attitude experience great emotional dependence on their parents, relationships are ambivalent and cause a lot of negative feelings among respondents.

Type 4. *Normative / healthy closeness* (the fourth factor explains 15% of variance). Its characteristics are high closeness (0.69) and sufficient personal autonomy at the same time (0.72). Women with this attitude are attentive to their parents, caring and giving them emotional support. However, they maintain their inner independence and a certain distance in relationships with their parents.

According to the research design, the type of a woman's attitude toward her parents has been considered a predictor of her psychological well-being. The multiple regression analysis has revealed that *Autonomy from Parents* ($R^2 = 0.35$, $p = 0.01$) contributes most to women's psychological well-being. This suggests that weakening relationships with parents and a sense of independence from them (a successful separation) enhance middle-aged women's psychological well-being. The single-factor analysis has shown that the type of a woman's attitude toward parents is a predictor of such parameters of her psychological well-being as *Self-Acceptance* ($F = 3$; $p = 0.02$), *Affect Balance* ($F = 6$; $p = 0.00$), *Individual as an Open System* ($F = 3$; $p = 0.03$), and *Autonomy* ($F = 7$; $p = 0.00$).

Table 2. The parameters of psychological well-being among women with different types of attitude toward parents

Types of Attitude/Parameters of Psychological Well-Being	Self-Acceptance	Affect Balance (inverse scale)	Individual as an Open System	Autonomy (inverse scale)
"Normative Closeness"	57.9	85.3	62.0	39.8
"Strong Attachment"	52.1	97.6	65.3	4.5
"Ambivalent Attitude"	53.2	104.3	60.2	46.3
"Distancing Attitude"	61.3	84.6	58.1	36.9

Women with *Distancing Attitude* and *Normative/Healthy Closeness* experience higher level of well-being according to a number of parameters (more autonomous, likely to feel self-respect, self- and life-satisfied) as compared to those with *Ambivalent Attitude* and *Strong Closeness* as shown in the table above.

Conclusions

1. A middle-aged woman's psychological well-being has structural specifics (age factor). The core components are positive relationships with others, environmental mastery, and purpose in life with insufficient personal autonomy and growth. Self-esteem and openness to the new experience in psychological well-being structure are determinants of either positive or negative dynamics.
2. The main typological factor of middle-aged women's psychological well-being is their attitude to parents' type - *Strong (anxious) attachment*; *Distancing attitude*; *Ambivalent attitude*; *Normative/Healthy closeness*. Autonomy from parents contributes most to women's psychological well-being, therefore respondents with *Distancing Attitude* and

Normative closeness experience higher well-being (more autonomous, likely to feel self-respect, self-and life-satisfied). Women with *Strong (anxious) attachment* suffer from an irrational guilt complex which has a negative impact on their psychological well-being. *Ambivalent attitude* involves negative emotional atmosphere and interpersonal dependence which determines women's general dissatisfaction with her adult daughter-aging parents' relationships and life in general.

3. The subjective factors of middle-aged women's psychological well-being are their self-esteem, a sense of guilt toward parents and an individual history of relationships with them.
 - 3.1. The greater emotional dependence on the parents and more active engagement in the relationships with them are, the more severe an irrational guilt complex they suffer from and, as a result, have lower psychological well-being rate.
 - 3.2. A woman's subjective perception of the relationships with parents (the degree and nature of parents' engagement in respondents' lives, main recipients of care, a woman's perception of a more loved parent, her dominating motive of care for aging parents) predicts the level of her well-being. An optimal distance of interpersonal communication with them, psychological separation, and maintenance of high emotional autonomy enhance a middle-aged woman's psychological well-being.
 - 3.3. High self-esteem and self-acceptance are women's resources in their children-parents relationships.

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Summary

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The **purpose** of the present study is to prove the predicting role of middle-aged woman's attitude toward her parents of her psychological well-being. The presented analysis of developmental theories of well-being in middle adulthood, concerning women show that C. Ryff's conception relating *psychological well-being* to eudemonic lifestyle is most confirmed. All six components of psychological well-being are used in the research: *positive relationships with others; autonomy; environmental mastery; purpose in life; personal growth; openness to new experience*. A research **goal** is to study the impact of middle-aged woman's attitude toward her parents' specifics on her psychological well-being. Among empirical **tasks** are: to reveal and classify middle-aged women's attitudes to their parents based on classical attachment types; to describe the place and role of adult women's sense of guilt for parents in the attitudes toward them. *The sample* includes two empirical groups of females (n=172). The first group consists of 92 women of middle adulthood (from 38 to 56 years old, *M* of the respondents is 47, *M* of their aging parents is 73); the second group includes 35 women of young adulthood (from 24 to 35 years old, *M* of the respondents is 28.6, *M* of their aging parents is 58). The criterion for respondents' inviting to the study is their active engagement in aging parents' lives. Empirical **results** reveal how middle aged women's attitudes toward parents impact on their psychological well-being through 4 basic adult attachment types. It is confirmed that autonomy from parents contributes most to women's psychological well-being. It is confirmed that respondents with *Distancing attitude* and *Normative closeness* experience higher well-being (more autonomous, likely to feel self-respect, self-and life-satisfied). Women with *Strong (anxious) attachment* suffer from an irrational guilt complex which has a negative impact on their psychological well-being. *Ambivalent attitude* involves negative emotional atmosphere and interpersonal dependence which determines women's general dissatisfaction with her adult daughter-aging parents' relationships and life in general. The subjective factors of middle-aged women's psychological well-being are their self-esteem, a sense of guilt toward parents and an individual history of relationships with them. Women with *Distancing attitude* and *Normative/Healthy closeness* toward parents experience higher level of well-being according to a number of parameters (more autonomous, likely to feel self-respect, self- and life-satisfied) as compared to those with *Ambivalent Attitude* and *Strong Closeness*. Special focus is made on correlations of emotional autonomy from parents, guilt and well-being. The guilt of responsibility is enhanced in middle age, being a mechanism motivating a woman to realize the eudemonic lifestyle (self-realization through care, first of all for aging parents and growing up children). The greater emotional dependence on the parents and more active engagement in the relationships with them are, the more severe an irrational guilt complex they suffer. As a result they have lower psychological well-being rate. A woman's subjective perception of the relationships with parents (the degree and nature of parents' engagement in respondents' lives, main recipients of care, a woman's perception of a more loved parent, her dominating motive of care for aging parents) predicts the level of her well-being. An optimal distance of interpersonal communication with them, psychological separation, and maintenance of high emotional autonomy enhance a middle-aged woman's psychological well-being. High self-esteem and self-acceptance are women's resources in their children-parents relationships and psychological well-being.

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