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**Variability of Personality:  
The Study of Ordinary Consciousness Concepts**

Natalia Grishina (a)\*, Marina Avanesyan (b), Victoria Manukyan (c), Inna Murtazina (d)

\*Corresponding author

- (a) Saint-Petersburg State University, 6 Makarov emb., Russia, n.v.grishina@spbu.ru,
- (b) Saint-Petersburg State University, 6 Makarov emb., Russia, m.avanesyan@spbu.ru
- (c) Saint-Petersburg, State University, 6 Makarov emb., Russia, v.manukjan@spbu.ru
- (d) Saint-Petersburg State University, 6 Makarov emb., Russia, i.r.myrtazina@spbu.ru

*Abstract*

A changing reality puts a person before the need for change. The authors assume that implicit concepts of human variability on the possibility and necessity of changes largely define people's readiness for change. In this paper we discuss the results of a study on the ordinary consciousness concepts about variability of personality. The research involved 62 people (27 men, 35 women, average age 34.8 years). The data was obtained using semi-structured interviews, aimed at identifying the attitudes towards the possibility of self-change and readiness for personal self-change and also clarifying biographical facts, and information about the current life situation. We obtained 145 descriptions of life changes, systematized by 15 categories and identified different types of individual implicit concepts, accepting the possibility of changes in varying degrees, and found their relationships with the readiness for change. The results of the study showed that in people's mind, the situation of change is perceived as a significant event contrasting something new to the old and associated with adoption of human independent decisions, resulting in personal changes, changes in the system of values and attitude to the world which are often accompanied by intense emotional experiences. The ordinary consciousness connects life changes and their necessity with dramatic events of life and underestimates the role of self-changes. The notion on the need for human variability existing in modern psychology is in conflict with the views of ordinary consciousness.

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**Keywords:** Variability of personality, readiness for personal self-change, ordinary consciousness concepts.



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## 1. Introduction

One of the most popular subjects in current scientific literature relates to the changes in modern reality; the features of which are expressed by the popular metaphor of "liquid reality". The nature of the changes and their consequences for contemporary culture, social communities and human relations with the world are actively discussed in social sciences and humanities. Psychology focuses on the challenges of modern reality and their consequences for the individual. A specific question that arises from this discussion is how a person changes in a changing world.

Traditionally, psychology has always been focused on human development. However, the concepts of "development" and "change" are not identical. Any development necessarily involves changes (structural or functional) where development itself is a special form of change, but not every change means development. The main essential characteristic of change is that it is an alternative to stability.

The concept of change is used in current literature to describe the trends of development of modern reality and human existence. The author of "liquid modernity" metaphor Bauman (2000) writes about "non-direction of change", which most accurately reflects the concept of change. "Non-direction of change" means the presence of an individual in a constantly and unpredictably changing environment. The existence of individuals in the modern world is transformed into a process of changes in the context of life and themselves.

Thus, the concept of change used in modern science reflects the real phenomenology and processes in which an individual is involved. Psychology is beginning to pay more and more attention to this subject. However, the following important question is not the focus of attention – how ready is a person to change his life situation, everyday behavior, and his own personality?

One of the basic ideas in different psychological approaches and theories of personality is the changeability or invariability of personality. This parameter reflects the answer to the question to what extent the individual is able to change fundamentally throughout life (Hjelle & Zigler, 1992).

The differences between various approaches to the answer to this question are fundamental. Proponents of invariability (or weak changeability) of the personality protect the notion of the traits or structures of the personality that make up its core and determine human behavior throughout life. Proponents of personality changeability, in turn, work on the problem of what factors (forces) provoke changes in a person, whether these changes are of a stage character, whether these changes can be predicted, etc. It is obvious that the differences in these positions have serious consequences both for research in the field of personality psychology and for practical psychological work.

In 1994, The American Psychological Association published a collective monograph under the remarkable title "Can personality change?" (Heatheron & Weinberger, 1994). It is impossible to deny that a person changes throughout life, as well as the fact that some personal features remain unchanged. The differences in the presented approaches are determined by the ratio of the changing and unchanging features in the structure of a personality and what is given priority.

Traditional studies of this problem are carried out on the basis of developmental psychology: studying of human development at different age stages, tracing changes in the intellectual characteristics or personal traits, etc.

The individual's stability is determined by the stability of psychological mechanisms, the repeatability of the problems faced by the individual, and the consolidation of successful strategies for solving regular adaptive problems. In turn, variability in personality in a changing world can be explained by the fact that a person faces other adaptive problems, with the result that ineffective problem-solving strategies are replaced, and new solutions are included in the set of strategies (Buss, 1994).

The answer to the question about the mechanisms and nature of change depends on what is meant by psychological change. For example, observed or recorded changes in human behavior - whether they can be qualified as changes in the individual or they remain the status of external changes.

MacAdams (1994), in accordance with his conception of a personality, which identifies three levels – dispositional features, personal goals and aspirations and life stories, notes that each of these levels is described by the wide range of personal constructs. The answer to the question whether the personality can change, depends on which of the three levels is considered. Thus, in his opinion, the moments of changes and turning points in life scenarios can be described with the help of life narratives.

A significant number of studies traditionally focused on factors related to personal changes - from the research of external, stress factors, dramatic events in human life to changes associated with the process of psychotherapy or psychological counseling.

The most important trend in modern psychology of personality is the growing interest in the subject of self-processes – self-development, self-regulation, and self-improvement.

This also applies to the problem of personal changes. Currently, there is an increase in research, where personal changes are not so much the result of certain events or changes in social roles, but occur due to the active role of an individual (Caspi, Roberts, & Shiner, 2005; Hudson & Fraley, 2015; McCrae et al., 2002). Thus, the problem has moved from the field of clinical studies to the sphere of personality psychology, development and social psychology (Baranski, Morse, & Dunlop, 2017).

To study the desire for self-change Hudson and Roberts (2014) based on the five-factor personal questionnaire "The Big Five Inventory" (BFI), developed the questionnaire "Change Goals Big Five" (C-BFI), which measures the desire of individuals to change their personality in five basic traits. In the C-BFI version questions are modified to indicate the degree to which respondents would like to change a certain trait. Thus, the goals of self-changes are formulated as the goals of increasing, reducing or preserving certain personal traits (Hudson & Roberts, 2014).

Another area of research is an attempt to study the factors mediating individual differences in the processes of self-changes. In particular, the incremental theory of personality is considered. It is the implicit theory concerning the changeability of a personality by his/her own efforts during the course of life (Dweck, 1999). Dweck is the author of this concept and scale, reflecting the orientation of the individual on the immutability or changeability as an internal implicit theory. She and her colleagues proved that the belief in self-changeability of a person is associated with greater success in overcoming difficult situations in various spheres of life (Dweck, 1999; 2008). Use of this scale in conjunction with the BFI has shown that the commitment of an adult to theory of variability is associated with more pronounced real personality changes that were logged in the longitudinal research (Robins et al., 2005).

These studies show that a person's belief in the possibility of change and readiness for change are associated with his real experience of overcoming difficult situations. In our view, the characteristics of

the wider context, in particular its relative stability or, on the contrary, significant social transformations, are of great importance for the formation of the relevant human attitudes. This is in part consistent with the results of studies showing that people tend to attribute changes in their lives to external contexts more than their own efforts (Baranski, Morse, & Dunlop, 2017).

## **2. Problem Statement**

To identify people's attitude to the possibility of self-change and readiness for self-change, to find out what causes a person's belief in the possibility of changes and readiness for changes, and what is associated in ordinary consciousness of life changes, self-changes and their necessity is the issue that concerns this study. In our study we assume that implicit concepts of human variability on the possibility and necessity of changes largely define people's readiness for self-change.

## **3. Research Questions**

- 3.1. What conceptions exist about the possibility or impossibility of change in ordinary consciousness?
- 3.2. What kinds of implicit concepts of human variability exist in the ordinary consciousness?
- 3.3. What are the links between people's implicit representations and their personal willingness to change?

## **4. Purpose of the Study**

In accordance to the research questions the purpose of the study is to;

- describe individual conceptions on the essence of life changes.
- study the representations of ordinary consciousness on variability.
- identify possible types of implicit concepts of variability.
- identify a possible link between implicit concepts and personal readiness for change.

## **5. Research Methods**

The research design was mixed method as the study aimed to uncover people's perceptions and conceptions of a certain phenomena. The choice of mixed-method approach is related to the fact that self-change concerns the personality and his/her life history, reflecting the values and beliefs system and their inter-correlation. Phenomenological and biographical methods allow for a better understanding of the diversity of the interaction of the individual and the environment, and to clarify the role of situational and personal factors of self-changes. Qualitative methods also take into account the cultural and historical context of life. Quantitative analyses employed descriptive and inferential statistics that provided us the tools for identifying the links between categories.

In this study, the qualitative data was obtained through interviews. Semi-structured interviews containing 25 questions were used. The interview aimed at clarifying biographical facts (parent family, experience of change of residence and other life changes), information about the current life situation and

attitudes regarding the possibility of self-change and readiness for personal self-change. The average length of the interview was about an hour. The interviewers were the masters students of the faculty of psychology of St. Petersburg University in Russia.

The sample included 62 people (27 men, 35 women), average age 34.8 years (SD =10.9: min - 21, max - 72), whose native language was Russian (table 1). The participation was voluntary ("sampling if possible", opportunity sample), the data collection was done in different cities in Russia (St. Petersburg (54.8 %), Yekaterinburg (9.7 %), Kirovo-Chepetsk (8.0 %), Moscow (6.5 %), Simferopol (3.2 %), Sevastopol (1.6 %), Kazan (1.6 %), Tomsk (1.6 %), Asbestos (1.6 %)), individual participants were from foreign cities (London, Hamburg, Tel-Aviv (1.6%)).

**Table 01.** Characteristics of the sample of participants

	Age	Marital status			Level of education		
		Married	Separated, Divorced, widowed	Never married	High Education	Incomplete higher education	Secondary education
Women	37.1±12	45.71	17.14	37.1	68.57	11.42	20
Men	31.7±8.6	37.03	3.7	59.25	51.85	25.92	22.22

As a result, narrative descriptions were obtained (which, according to McAdams (1994) are the most accurate tool for obtaining information about life changes), the content of which was further analyzed using thematic, descriptive and comparative data. Some of the data were quantified by correlation analysis: characteristics of the sample of participants; life situations of changes (in the past); categories of ideas about whether it is possible to start life with a clean slate; whether it is possible to change the character; ideas about the desired sphere of changes; ideas about ability to change something in oneself or one's life.

## 6. Findings

### 6.1. The concept of significant life changes

The concept of significant change is often associated with the cultural concept of biography that defines the normative transitional life events and their normative time. With the help of the question: "In the life of every person there were and there are situations that change something significantly in life. Can you say that such situations have happened in life?" The types of situations leading to significant changes in life (table 2) and the criteria of these situations, determined by the participants themselves were identified.

**Table 02.** The concept of significant life changes

Number of answers	Response rate %	The concepts of significant life changes (n=58)
21	14.5	Professional activities (change of job, career)
17	11.7	The birth of children (grandchildren)
16	11.0	Moving to another city, house
15	10.3	University entrance

14	9.7	Marriage, divorce
10	6.9	Breaking relationships
10	6.9	Rethinking values after training, reading a book, meeting someone, religion
9	6.2	Death in the family
8	5.5	Meeting with a partner / friend
7	4.8	Love, friendship
4	2.8	Personal crisis
4	2.8	Journey
4	2.8	Events related to politics (eg, the collapse of the USSR)
3	2.1	Health (of a participant or his relative)
3	2.1	Graduation from school, university
145	100	Professional activities (change of job, career)

Of the 62 participants, 4 denied that there had been significant changes in their lives; their responses show that they associate significant changes primarily with "dramatic" events that "break" lives.

The set of situations is quite limited: some events relate to the normative life scenario, and some to the individual history of the person. These events do not have symmetry, i.e. the participant could mention the divorce without mentioning the marriage, and about entering the University – without mentioning graduation. Thus, a normative life event is more likely to fall into the category of a significant life event if it is characterized by a high intensity of experience.

## **6.2. Criteria for the detection of significant life situations of changes**

The thematic analysis of the answers revealed the following criteria of significant life situations of changes.

- \* Contrasting the new to the old ("If not...then things would have gone differently, otherwise...")
- \* Independent decision-making, often in opposition to other people or circumstances ("It was my personal choice")
- \* Normative significance of the event ("Death of parents. I have not yet realized how much it has changed my life").
- \* Personal nature of changes ("After my father's death, I became more attentive and caring").
- \* Change of attitude to the world or changes in the system of values ("After that began to trust people").
- \* The intensity of emotional experiences ("Very hard and long experienced divorce").

Thus, the criteria are individual, determining whether a particular situation will be assessed as significant; significant in the living space and life scenario of a person.

The analysis of answers allowed the definition of not only the content of categories, but also the organization of the narrative about life changes. Three types of structure of the description were allocated (table 3).

**Table 03.** Structure of description of essential life situations of changes (n=58 people)

Type of structure	Response rate, %
Temporal	60.34482759
Thematic	20.68965517
Turning point (divides life into "before" and "after")	18.96551724

The most represented type of structure was the description of situations in accordance with their location on the time axis ("admission to the institute and its ending, marriage and the birth of a daughter, the collapse of the USSR, the onset and overcoming of the crisis, the birth of a grandchild"). The situations were described as independent and autonomous from each other. Of similar importance, the thematic and turning point description of life changes are presented. The thematic type is represented by the description of the essential life situations, which the participants combined on any basis ("my movements", "betrayal, disappointment in friends", "my parting and depression caused by them"). Critical events are often presented as a separate life situation that divides life into "before" and "after". In more rare cases, participants describe other life changes associated with a critical situation ("after the death of my father, I became more responsible and caring").

### 6.3. Ideas about the possibility of changes

Ideas about the possibility of changes in human life, as well as personality changes, form a system of implicit concepts regarding the "life philosophy" of the individual associated with the theme of life changes. To identify these views 4 interview questions were formulated; two of which concerned the possibility of fundamental changes ("Do you think a person can radically change his life, starting from scratch" and "Can a person change himself-for example, his character"), while the other two were related to the possibility of personal changes ("Would you like to change something in yourself or your life - What is it?", and "Will you be able to change something in yourself or your life").

The ideas on the possibility of fundamental changes are summarised as follows (table 4).

**Table 04.** Ideas about whether it is possible to start life with a clean slate (n=60 people, 2 answers were not received)

Number of answers	Response rate, %	Category
33	55.0	Possible in the case of a great aspiration for it (caused by a strong desire or as response to fatigue from the existing situation)
13	21.7	Impossible, because a person cannot forget his past, get rid of the environment, responsibilities to loved ones
6	10.0	Possible, but it requires personal characteristics (for example, readiness for change, which is not typical for everyone)
6	10.0	Possible under certain circumstances (if there are material resources, young age as opposed to the elderly)
2	3.3	Impossible
60	100.0	

The highest response rate (55%) is related to the recognition of the possibility of changes in the case of a great aspiration for it (caused by a strong desire) or as response to fatigue from the existing situation, or dissatisfaction. This was followed by the judgment that fundamental changes are impossible,

because a person cannot forget his past, get rid of the environment, and/or responsibilities to loved ones. Some respondents said that it is possible to start from beginning, but it requires suitable circumstances or personal characteristics (for example, readiness for change, which is not typical for everyone).

Another issue related to the possibility of fundamental changes, concerned the possibility of personal changes (the results are shown in the table 5).

**Table 05.** Conceptions about whether it is possible to change the character (N=60 people, 2 responses are not received)

Number of answers	Response rate, %	Category
29	48.3	Can be partially changed
21	35	Can be changed
10	16.7	Cannot be changed
60	100.0	

Most of the answers, suggesting the possibility of a partial change in character; meaning changes in habits and reactions, were mentioned as "smooth", "improve", "weaken", "strengthen", "soften" some character traits. Those who believed that the character can be changed, referred to two types of situations. The first type - the circumstances that make a person change and the second type - long and hard work on yourself. The main arguments of those who deny the possibility of changing the nature is that it is innate or based on lifetime formation, the inability to affect the physical basis, etc.

The following questions related to the identification of implicit representations of human changes, concerned the possibility of personal changes.

The vast majority of participants would like to change something in themselves or their lives. Their answers to the question of the sphere of change were quite variable (table 6). In general, the responses can be broken down into two main categories – 1) changes in the environment or material changes, 2) changes in character, obtaining new knowledge (education, reading).

**Table 06.** Ideas about the desired sphere of changes (N=56 people, 6 responses were not received)

Number of answers	Response rate, %	Category
16	28.6	Character, values
7	12.5	Education, self-education
7	12.5	Professional sphere
6	10.7	Material benefits
6	10.7	Healthy lifestyle
6	10.7	Family and relationships
5	8.9	Moving to another city, house, change of scene
3	5.4	Change of appearance

The most frequent categories in the description of the changes within themselves were self-confidence, resoluteness, and changing attitudes toward people on the more positive side. Often, participants responded with not one, but several characteristics, and of the 28 answers 6-concerned self-confidence and resoluteness, 4 – changes in attitude toward people.



Regarding the confidence in the possibility of changes, the study participants take a rather optimistic position (table 7).

**Table 07.** Will you be able to change something in yourself or your life? (N=55 people, 7 responses not received)

Number of answers	Response rate, %	Category
22	40	Able to change
23	42	Able to change, if...
10	18	Not able to change
55	100.0	

Most of the respondents believe that they are able to cope with changes. Those who are confident in their capabilities often rely on their own positive experience or the experience of familiar people. Those who doubt the possibility looked for an external resource: money, time, and sees possible obstacles in unforeseen circumstances or their own characteristics (laziness, indecision, pride). A small number mention the fact that one cannot change completely despite the circumstances, but can manage them.

#### **6.4. What events can trigger self-changes?**

Analysis of the statements of the participants allowed for the identification of the following types of situations:

- Self-change as a consequence of the awareness of its necessity, the inner feeling, the feeling that you can't go on living like this and that the situation is no longer satisfactory ("a sense of deadlock", "the point of no return ... you understand that if you continue to do the same, then nothing will change", etc.).
- Purposeful work on yourself to prevent mistakes of the past (for example, preparation for the second marriage or work on changing yourself to prevent divorce).
- Creating situations-challenges that allow for self-change ("All this-marriage, birth of children, change of work—is my choice, I think that I change when I create these situation-challenges myself").

It is noteworthy that in the vast number of descriptions, the process of personal change is reactive, i.e. it is a response to the prevailing (most often negative) circumstances, and not a proactive change of himself/herself as a manifestation of the free will of the individual.

The hypothesis of the connection between the ideas about the possibility of fundamental changes in life and personal changes was confirmed: the fact that a person can change his life, starting with a clean slate, due to the fact that he can change his character ( $r=.29$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). The belief in the possibility to start your life with a clean slate is associated with situations of self-development in human life ( $r=.25$ ,  $p<0.05$ ): the more a person believes in the possibility of change, the greater place in his life is occupied by situations of self-changes (reading literature, attending special classes, etc.).

Data were obtained on some factors related to the characteristics of a person that affect his implicit ideas about the possibility of changes and self-changes.

Age with relevant biographical events has an obvious impact on the selection of life situations of changes. Life events such as childbirth and divorce are positively associated with age ( $r=.25$ ,  $r=p<0.01$ ), change of employment, marriage, death of a loved one ( $p<0.05$ ). The younger the respondent is, the more

likely it is that self-development situations (e.g. participation in psychological trainings) and reading books ( $p < 0.1$ ) are referred to as significant categories of life changes.

With age the belief of people about the possibility to start their life anew also decreases; increasing the amount of related duties, primarily associated with family, children, etc. ( $r = .30$ ,  $r = .25$  at  $p < 0.05$ ). Several participants made it clear that fundamental changes in life are not possible, because the person is always bound by some obligation to the family.

Some differences were derived from gender: it turned out that men are more likely than women to believe that people can change their lives radically, start with a clean slate ( $r = .29$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ).

For persons whose implicit concept of change is based on the recognition of the possibility of only partial change, it was characteristic to indicate the partial nature of the desired change (for example, education or the acquisition of some skills and knowledge), as well as the change of its individual features (e.g., increased confidence, resilience, restraint) ( $r = .27$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) were noted in this study.

## 7. Conclusion

The study raised questions about the nature of existence in the ordinary consciousness of people, their implicit ideas about the possibility of change and their relationship with attitudes towards self-change. The results of the study showed that in the minds of people, the situation of change is perceived as significant events leading to something new and associated with the adoption of human independent decisions, resulting in personal changes, changes in the system of values and attitude to the world; often accompanied by intense emotional experiences. Different types of implicit ideas about the possibility of changes in human life, differing in the degree of their ability/impossibility are revealed. The process of personal change is described as the human response to the circumstances. The connection between the ideas of the principal possibility of changes in life and a person and beliefs about the possibility of personal changes has been established. Implicit representations of people are considered a restrictive factor arising with age obligations, especially with family relationships.

Some limitations arising from this study relate to the limitation of the sample size and predominantly qualitative nature of the study, which did not allow strict mathematical data processing. The prospects of the study are associated with the expansion and clarification of ideas about the individual implicit concept of change, which is a significant factor mediating the personal activity of a person.

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