

## HOW DO HOME ENVIRONMENTS CONTRIBUTE TO THE MENTAL HEALTH: CASE OF RUSSIAN ADOLESCENTS<sup>1</sup>

Sofya Nartova-Bochaver, Natalya Dmitrieva, Sofya Reznichenko, & Aleksandra Bochaver

*Department of Clinical Psychology and Special Education,  
Moscow State University of Psychology and Education (Russia)*

### Abstract

One of the most crucial problems of contemporary clinical psychology and psychotherapy is searching for ecological resources of well-being and mental health. Based on the environmental psychology researches (Coolen, 2011; Edgerton, 2014; Kytä, 2004; Nartova-Bochaver et al., 2015; Nordström, 2014) we assumed the friendliness of home environment to be an important predictor of its inhabitants' well-being. We define friendliness of home environment (FHE) as extent of how much it satisfies the inhabitants' needs. FHE combines number of affordances providing by home to its inhabitants and its conformity to their personalities. Our tools were: developed by authors Functionality of Home Environment Questionnaire (2015), The Personal Relevance of Home Environment (2015), Authenticity Scale (Wood et al., 2008), Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (Tennant et al., 2007). Participants were 124 adolescents ( $M_{age}=14.1$ , 58 males, 66 females), living in Moscow and rural area in various social contexts (regular school, gymnasium, orphanage, village home). In total, 15 variables were investigated. We have found that: 1) Well-being is stronger predicted by the personal relevance of home than by its functionality; 2) Girls are more sensitive to home friendliness than boys; 3) Moscow school students are more sensitive to anti-predictors than to predictors of well-being. Hypothesis is partly confirmed. In discussion, we consider gender differences and specificity of life plans among adolescents from different social contexts.

*Keywords: home environment, well-being, authenticity, inhabitants, friendliness, social context.*

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### 1. Introduction

The world and the way of life style have changed, as well as personal needs and opportunities, but the desire to return home as soon as possible from work, business trip, school and other places remains unchanged. It represents the value of a home as a significant environmental and social resource maintaining psychological well-being, helping to overcome difficult life situations and preventing from the stresses. It is proposed to study home environment based on its socio-psychological functions in human life. The analysis is conducted from two positions – from the objective opportunities, affordances (activities promoted by the environment) and from subjective suitability (how this environment suits to the subject).

The theoretical ground of our study is a number of classical and contemporary researches in the environmental and personality psychology (Nordström, 2014; Ritchie L., Edgerton E., 2014; Seligman, 2007). First, we could refer to the substantive theories describing the relationship between man and environment. To sum up the main idea of this approach, people maintain some emotional reactions (place attachment, sense of place, feeling at home) and attitudes toward their homes (home dependence and identity), and, if these relations are positive, home is becoming a resource of people's mental sustainability and flourishing (Nartova-Bochaver, 2008). The second theoretical area that supports our research is the Theory of affordances that reveals the actual individual abilities in particular environment and the ideal functionality model of environment (Kytä et al., 2004). A wide range of individual characteristics, social and cultural norms, and practices are regulated by affordances. Third, our theoretical framework included the concept of environmental friendliness. Friendly environment is characterized by satisfying human needs, stimulating and compensating inhabitants' development, encouraging self-actualization, personal growth and sense of self-usefulness in people, e.g. a congruity

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between objective features of the residential environment and their subjective meanings (Coolen, 2011; Horelli, 2007). The congruity/discrepancy between the environmental content and the personal needs satisfaction shows the level of personal friendliness of this environment.

## 2. Objectives

The relationship between the attitudes towards home, on the one hand, and well-being and authenticity, on the other hand, in Russian adolescents living in different social contexts we attempted to reveal in our confirmatory research. First, the key constructs require to be operationalized. Friendliness of home environment is determined by congruity between objective features of the residential home environment and subjective meanings and needs. We understand psychological well-being as a synonym for mental health in the current study. Psychological well-being covers positive affect (feeling happy, dignity), psychological functioning (autonomy, competence, self-acceptance, and personal growth), self-realization, and interpersonal relationships (Tennant, 2007). Authenticity is considered as the most fundamental aspect of well-being that implies the authorship and sovereignty of person's own being, which is manifested in the experience and social interaction. Following the person-centered psychology, we consider the structure of authenticity as consisting of three aspects: 1) self-alienation between conscious awareness and the true self; 2) authentic living which determines the congruence between behavior and expressing emotions (that is reflected in accordance with one's lifestyle and his/her values and beliefs); 3) accepting external influence is the extent to which an individual is influenced by other people and strives to meet the expectations of others (Wood et al., 2008).

## 3. Design

We have formulated the following research hypotheses. 1) Well-being and authenticity are predicted by the personal relevance of home, and by its functionality; 2) the level of home environment friendliness has gender specificity. Participants were 124 adolescents ( $M_{age}=14.1$ , 58 males, 66 females), living in Moscow and rural area in various social contexts (regular school, gymnasium, orphanage, village home). Respondents were asked to complete the questionnaires and to provide information on age, sex, and residence place. The survey was voluntary, intrapersonal, and interactive and was conducted in one stage for 40-60 minutes.

## 4. Methods

In our study, friendliness of home environment was an independent variable; mental health was a dependent one. To measure the friendliness of home environment, we have developed a tool set consisting of two scales ('Functionality of Home Environment Questionnaire' (FHEQ) and 'The Personal Relevance of Home Environment' (PRHE)). These questionnaires included constructs associating with a specific need or affordance of home environment (Nartova-Bochaver et al., 2015). Authenticity and mental well-being assessed by Authenticity Scale (A.M. Wood et al., 2008) and The Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS) (Tennant, 2007) were the indicators of mental health.

The FHE-Questionnaire consists of 55 statements with the Likert scale for each item from 1 to 7, it has the 4-factor structure, and it finds the individual's relationship to the ideal home environment. The scales are following: 1) *Usability* (25 items) includes the description of those simple everyday functions without which home becomes inconvenient. 2) *Development* (12 items) describes the properties of home environment which stimulate personal development (e.g. supply sensory, cognitive, social information or maintaining the inhabitant's identity). 3) *Stability* (7 items) reveals providing psychological and physical stability and predictability, home recognition by living space. 4) *Security* (11 items) is associated with successful social interaction; it reflects needs of self-presentation, presentation of resident's status and power, and aesthetic needs.

The PRHE questionnaire contains 54 constructs (e.g. needs for privacy, for self-presentation, for storage, etc.). Each construct is given by two statements; there are 108 items in total. The Likert scale represents a score for each item from 1 to 5. This questionnaire is designed to explore views about the actual (real) model of home environment. The questionnaire includes 7 scales. 1) *Home environment management* (27 items) describes the possibility of controlling and predicting the environmental context. 2) *Resource* (19 items) includes constructs associated with home supporting and stability. 3) *Self-presentation* (17 items) is associated with the inhabitants' possibility to personalize their own space and to signify individual and social characteristics of dwellers through the home environment. 4) *Ergonomics* (17 items) is associated with the views on the home environment usability and on aesthetic needs satisfaction. 5) *Home alienation* (12 items) concerns with the reasons of home estrangement, loss of

home attachment and sense of belonging. This scale includes statements related to discomfort, anxiety, low functionality of living space, and to the lack of social cohesion and of the purpose to return home. 6) *Flexibility scale* (9 items) determines the ability of home environment to be dynamic and to respond to the variable resident's needs. 7) *Historicity scale* (7 items) reflects the home links with personal, family, and general past.

## 5. Results

### 5.1. FHE and social contexts

The regression analysis confirmed our suggestion that home environment is an important resource of psychological well-being and authenticity, as the very essence of well-being and healthy functioning (Table 1). According to our expectations, flexibility of home environment is the predictor of well-being, while home alienation isn't. Home alienation is the predictor of self-alienation and the anti-predictor of authentic living; this is especially true for the adolescents from orphanages. For village adolescents, home environment resources are the anti-predictors of authentic living; but flexibility and usability predict accepting external influence. In adolescents from gymnasium, flexibility, stability, and self-presentation prevent self-alienation, while ergonomics and home environment management factors don't. We can see that gymnasium students are more sensitive to features of home environment, and this influence is more favorable in comparison with other groups. In the group of adolescents from regular school, accepting external influence is predicted by home alienation.

Table 1. Significant ( $p < .05$ ) Standardized Multiple Regression Weights of FHE and PRHEs as Predictors of the Well-being and Authenticity in teenagers from different social contexts.

$\beta$	Well-being	Authentic living	Accepting external influence	Self-alienation
<i>The whole sample (N=124)</i>				
<i>Flexibility</i>	.245			
<i>Home alienation</i>	-.20	-.31		.416
<i>Village home (N=29)</i>				
<i>Resource</i>		-.98		
<i>Flexibility</i>			.733	
<i>Usability</i>			1.09	
<i>Orphanages (N=30)</i>				
<i>Home alienation</i>		-.57		.727
<i>Regular school (N=31)</i>				
<i>Home alienation</i>			-.46	
<i>Gymnasium (N=34)</i>				
<i>Flexibility</i>			-.49	-.50
<i>Stability</i>				-.72
<i>Ergonomics</i>				.939
<i>Self-presentation</i>				-.51
<i>Home environment management</i>				.54

### 5.2. FHE and gender

The analysis of gender specificity and FHE shows that girls are more sensitive to home friendliness than boys; for girls, more psychological constructs (affordances) are personally meaningful (Table 2).

Table 2. Significant ( $p < .05$ ) Standardized Multiple Regression Weights of FHE and PRHEs as Predictors of the Well-being and Authenticity depending on sex.

$\beta$	Well-being	Authentic living	Accepting external influence	Self-alienation
<b>Males (N=58)</b>				
<i>Security</i>	-.51			
<i>Resource</i>	.50			
<i>Home alienation</i>		-.34		.444
<b>Females (N=66)</b>				
<i>Development</i>	.396			
<i>Stability</i>	-.42			
<i>Flexibility</i>	.386			
<i>Home alienation</i>		-.27		.360

Development and flexibility that are necessary to change and shape home environment are the predictors of well-being in the female group. In the group of boys, home resource predicts well-being in the male group. Desire for stability of the ideal living space in girls and security in boys have a negative impact on their current mental health; teenagers who need home stability and desire for it are not very well. Thus, not the home environment features themselves are most important, but the congruity between adolescents' representations about the ideal home environment and the actual environment where they live. If the discrepancy between real and ideal models of home environment is considerable, it has a strong negative influence on mental health and on stress resistance at present.

## 6. Discussion

Our study has shown that mental health and home environment have the fairly clear interrelation. The inability of a living space to meet the adolescent's specific needs may contribute to teenager's dissatisfaction with quality of life and loss of personal sovereignty (Moser, 2009). Often, it leads to the emergence of deviant behavior – runaways from home, homelessness and so on. Also it is important to pay attention to the life context and life plans of an adolescents (Dmitrieva, 2014). We assume that for example the low level of personal importance of home environment in the group of rural adolescents may be associated with the specificity of their life plans: they plan moving from rural to urban areas, therefore, they do not consider their homes as a resource. The orphans are very sensitive to home alienation: it may be explained by their inability to keep their own identity through the home environment and to implement one's plans and life projects (Rezmichenko, 2014). Noteworthy, that relatively 'disadvantaged' groups of respondents show higher rate in different scales, which may indicate a greater need to 'improve' their home environments as compared with the respondents from regular school and gymnasium. The social contexts play an important role in these differences. There are also gender-specific relationships of adolescents to their home. Girls are more focused on the development of the internal space of home environment, while boys learn the external relations with the outside world. It is important to know for parents and practitioners that even if a boy doesn't show obvious home attachment, he still needs to put effort in designing a friendly dwelling.

## 7. Conclusion

Our study represents the initial attempt to explore mental health of young people from the perspective of environmental friendliness. Despite the necessity of additional systematization, the obtained data may be of interest to various fields of applied psychology, sociology, and architecture. Our research confirms the idea that the study of home environment and of its impact on mental health should not rely on separate assessments of certain affordances of the environment, but should take into account the congruence between desired and ideal environments.

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