

## Gender aspects of status in teenage student groups

Marianna E. Sachkova<sup>a,b\*</sup>, Irina N. Timoshina<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*Social Psychology Faculty, Moscow State University of Psychology and Education, Moscow, Russia*

<sup>b</sup>*Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration, Moscow, Russia*

\*Corresponding author. E-mail: sachkova@list.ru

Typical male and female roles and relationships can be observed at different social levels: intergroup, intragroup, interpersonal, intrapersonal. In adolescence, increased development of gender characteristics (gender identity, gender stereotypes, gender roles) appears at all levels. Since the leading activity at this age is interpersonal communication, research into gender characteristics and their influence on relations in the student group is one of the most important tasks of modern psychology.

One hundred and forty teenagers in grades 6-8 from secondary schools in Moscow, aged of 12–14, were involved in the research. Special social-psychological techniques were applied for assessment of status relations (sociometry, referentometry, methodology for defining the informal intragroup power structure) and gender characteristics (Bem Sex Role Inventory in classical and modified versions), as well as correlation and cluster analyses.

We found that representations about the group leader contained clear masculine features. We underline the discrepancy between the qualities attributed to the image of the leader and the qualities of the actual group leaders. Thus, the image of the leader includes predominantly masculine characteristics, while actual high-status group members describe themselves with both feminine and gender-neutral features. Finally gender-typed behavior and masculine traits are more typical of low-status teenagers.

**Keywords:** status group structure, gender identity, gender stereotypes, teenagers

### Introduction

Gender identity is a special part of social identity that involves self-awareness in accordance with accepted cultural notions of femininity and masculinity (Kletsina, 2004, p. 359). Gender is a “multi-faceted system of relations that arises and exists in the process of communication and social interaction in a specific socio-cultural space” (Vorontsov, 2008, p. 24). To clarify the concept of “gender,” it is useful to apply the three-dimensional model of T. Eckes and H. Trautner (2000), which forms a basis for gender study from a socio-psychological point of view. Each cell of the

matrix proposed by these researchers refers to a specific research problem that arises at the intersection of “a particular content area with a particular construct and level of analysis” (Eckes & Trautner, 2000, p.17). The authors identify the following levels of analysis: individual, interpersonal, group, and cultural. I.S. Kletsina (2004) also describes four levels of gender relations: macro, meso, micro, and intrapersonal. At the micro level, relationships can be identified as a system of “personality–personality.” The domain characteristics at this level are gender attitudes that are manifested primarily in the willingness of persons to behave in a certain way in a particular role, according to their sex. The specificity of gender relations can be seen in the distribution of informal roles and power. Taking into account these characteristics, it is possible to study gender characteristics according to features of interpersonal relationships in groups.

Despite the high relevance of research into the relationship of gender characteristics and building relationships in the student group, such studies are rare. In western psychology, studies of gender flexibility in building interpersonal relationships were conducted. Katz and Ksarsnick (1994) found that gender flexibility is enhanced during the period of preadolescence to older adolescence. Lobel (2004), on the contrary, showed that older teenagers and young men are prone to discriminate against peers, demonstrating atypical gender behavior, whereas young adults usually do not discriminate. Watterson (2012) studied the flexibility of adolescents and young adults in gender roles for three areas: occupation, personal characteristics, and appearance. The author tried to assess whether the discrepancy is acceptable behavior for men and women in modern society. The results showed that adolescents and especially young men negatively assess violations of stereotypical gender roles, but this can only be applied to occupations. Deviation from stereotyped roles was considered more acceptable in adulthood, but undesirable in childhood and adolescence.

Gender identity begins its development from birth, starting the process of gender socialization that can occur throughout a person’s lifetime. In adolescence, a gender identity develops most intensively, as teens pay more attention to femininity and masculinity, try to understand and accept gender roles. Gender stereotypes of the society and of reference groups (e.g., a student group) have a great impact on this process.

Some researchers have confirmed relationships between gender stereotyping and gender identity development, i.e., “gender intensification” (Hill & Lynch, 1983). This approach showed that early adolescence is a period that requires adaptation to puberty, learning new information processes, the new skills that are required for entry into different groups, such as secondary school. Gender intensification is needed to cope with a difficult transitional phase and is a tool of socialization. The process of strengthening of stereotypical male and female roles occurs first of all through interaction with peers, but is also supported by parents.

But some researchers disagree with the gender intensification hypothesis. For example, S.M. Lindberg (2008) found that gender identity development of adolescents is very individual, depends on many factors, and includes gender flexibility. Girls clearly expressed an initial level of femininity, but the femininity of boys and girls did not change between ages 11 and 15. The masculinity of girls and boys is not different and is consistent during adolescence. The author’s results confirm the

influence of peers, family, romantic relationships, and the media on the adoption of gender roles. K. Reene's (1994) study examined the influence of cognitive factors on the development of gender identity. It was shown that the level of cognitive development did not determine the development of gender characteristics, as boys and girls showed differences only in the pre-formal level of mental operations. Reene found that at the age of 10, children perceived both male and female traits as inherited and unchangeable. However, closer to age 12, adolescents become familiar with information about how social roles are subject to change. This situation leads to variability in the choice of gender roles, and consequently, to the formation of less gender-typed identity. We agree with this explanation and believe that with the advent of reflection, adolescents evaluate gender-typed behavior, which narrows the repertoire of social roles and does not allow them to fully express their individuality in relationships with significant others.

Thus, gender characteristics in adolescence require further clarification in contemporary socio-cultural conditions. This research is closely intertwined with the study of interpersonal and power relations in the classroom, since teenagers are highly motivated to meet social expectations of the peer group.

During adolescence, an intensification of informal relationships is observed, as well as greater independence from adults, formation of one's own settled opinions, and special perceptions of oneself and others. The desire to find their place in the student group becomes the main motive of behavior in adolescence. The opinions of peers become more important and have greater influence on a teenager's self-esteem than do an adult's (parent's or teacher's) judgments. During adolescence, a person's self-esteem, level of aspiration, and desire for self-affirmation are intensively developing. A student's peer group becomes the immediate environment, and has the greatest influence on the opinions, moral judgments, feelings, and especially important personality traits of a teenager. Given the basic needs of adolescents for individualization, teenagers tend to show all these qualities in interpersonal communication. I.A. Zimnyaya (2008) notes that as teenagers begin to assess the "I", they feel the need to find a good position in the class, while strong emotionality and sharp judgments overthrow the authority of the adult.

Adolescents want to assert themselves, but they also want to be accepted in the group, so they adhere to the standards of behavior, habits, and values, of their reference groups. Thus, in adolescence the processes of individualization and socialization are closely related. The goals of adolescents are determined by group norms, which are used by teenagers to obtain information about the convergence of their behaviors with those of the group.

Teens are often so greatly influenced by peer groups that they compromise their beliefs, if their opinions differ from those of the group. According to A.L. Krupenin and V.A. Petrovsky (1985), in teenage reference groups, adolescents tend to "borrow" from their role models perceptions of a significant situation or person.

The most urgent problems of life for adolescents are those associated with their future relationships with their parents and friends as well as school, free time, personal identity, and relations with the other gender. Adolescent girls pay more attention than boys to their emotional relationships, experience them more intensively.

The relationship between personal characteristics and status in the teen group is manifested more clearly in adolescence. Y.L. Kolominsky (2000) determines that

at this age, high-status students usually have good abilities, even temper, sociability, independence, initiative, and loyalty in friendship. The status becomes higher if the adolescent adapts well to the group, and fits in with its structure. “Unpopular” teenagers do not usually accept group norms, do not feel involved with the class or resist the group’s values. According to Z.A. Kireeva (2008), people with low socio-metric status have qualities that prevent effective interaction: distrust, behavioral addiction, confrontation, anxiety, aggressiveness, avoidance of warm emotional relationships, irresponsibility.

However, there has not been not enough research on how status in the group shapes the gender characteristics of adolescents. Knowing what qualities of the communication partner are preferable for a particular status, we can understand current trends in the socialization of children and assess their knowledge of the individual “significant others” of the group, and the influence of “gender” on intra-class structure. That defines the purpose of this study: to find the relations between status in student groups and gender characteristics of adolescents.

We formulated the following empirical *hypotheses*:

- There is a correlation between the status of the adolescent in a student group and his or her gender identity.
- Gender-typed behavior is more typical for outsiders than for the other status categories.
- Students attribute more masculine traits to the image of a leader than to themselves.

## Method

The research involved 140 teenagers – students in grades 6-8 at secondary schools in Moscow, aged 12 to 14. The research was conducted by the authors during Russian language class and the session lasted 45 minutes. All students in the class were asked to take part in the research, the purpose of which was formulated as follows: “We are interested to know what the atmosphere is like among students in your class and how you imagine the ideal leader of your class”. At the beginning there was a short discussion of the definition of “leader”, to ensure that all participants were familiar with this idea. All groups were provided with feedback, and the results of the study were presented in a summarized form and discussed with the school psychologist.

Such factors as family situation (complete/incomplete family, economic status), ethnicity, and school performance were not taken into account in the selection of study groups, but it was important for us to know these factors in mixed classes.

For study of the status structure of student groups, we chose the three-factor model of “the significant other” by A.V. Petrovsky (1991), which includes reference to authority, attraction, and power. The study of these factors allows us to determine the integral status of the individual in the group, which is a reflection of the student’s favorable or unfavorable position. Complex socio-psychological methods and instructional techniques were applied to determine the status structure of the groups:

**Sociometry** aims to identify relationships of the type “sympathy–antipathy” and makes it possible to identify the particular emotional (attractive) group structure. Sociometry was conducted in parametric form with a limit of three choices. The instruction to respondents was: “Imagine that your class will be disbanded and new classes will be formed. Who are the students in your class you would most like to be with in a new class? Give no more than three names.”

**Referentometry** determines the significance and the authority of each group member. It was performed in a parametric form with a limit of three choices, immediately after the sociometry measurement. The instruction was: “Mark on the form if you agree or disagree that other group members should be allowed to see your answers.” After that, we asked the respondents: “Specify no more than three names of those whose responses to the previous questions you would like to see”.

**Methodological Procedure for Definition of Informal Intragroup Power Structure in the Contact Community.** This technique makes it possible to determine the structure of the informal power system in the group. The survey ranks all the members of the student group based on who plays the main role in group activity and who can make important decisions for the group. The highest positions will be held by those who have these abilities and at the lowest positions will be those who do not influence the group at all.

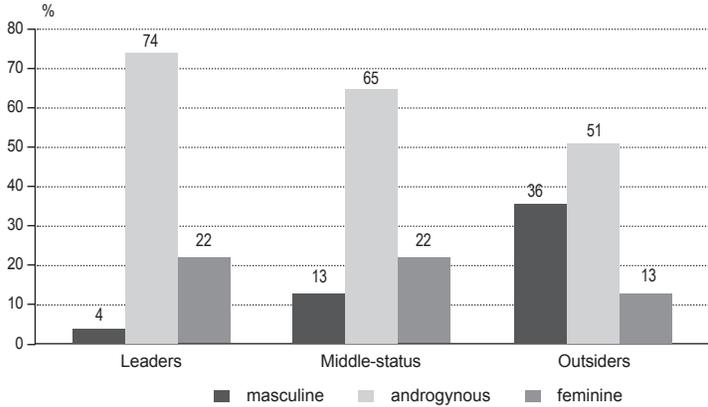
To study the gender characteristics, the **BSRI** (Bem Sex Role Inventory) in its classical and modified versions was used. The classic version was used to diagnose gender identity and personal preferences. The modified version was changed to assess the qualities of group leaders.

Statistical methods (U Mann-Whitney and chi square, correlation, and cluster analyses) were applied.

## Results

### *Gender identity of students*

A correlation analysis was performed to explore the relationship between the adolescent’s status in the group and gender identity. As expected, the measured characteristics are correlated ( $r = 0.248$ ;  $p \leq 0.01$ ). As status in the group declines, the percent of students with masculine gender identity increases, while the percent with feminine and androgynous gender identities decreases (Fig. 1). The hypothesis was confirmed: Gender-typed behavior is not correlated with high status in the group, but is more common with low-status group members. This suggests that the quality contained in the category of “masculinity” is less approved in teenage student groups and does not contribute to status. Indeed, some of the “masculine” qualities included in the questionnaire have clearly negative and destructive meanings, for example “aggressiveness”, “authoritarianism”, “propensity to take risks”, and such qualities as “satisfaction of personal interests”, “competitiveness”, “autonomy”, “standing up for one’s own position”, “tendency to defend one’s views,” don’t suggest a person who will implement common group goals, but rather a more individualistic attitude. In adolescence, belonging to a group, adoption of group norms, and the capacity for empathy are important criteria for positive group status, but these “masculine” qualities are clearly not aimed at those goals.



**Figure 1.** Gender identity of teenagers in different status categories

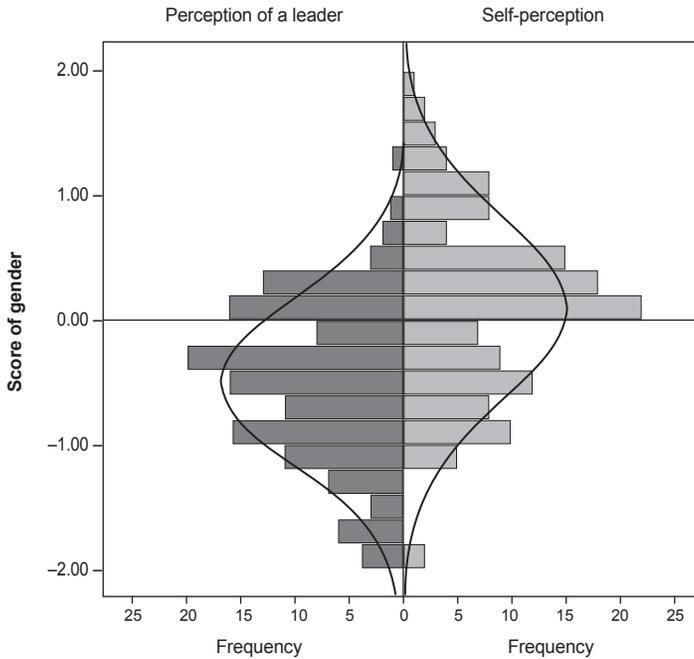
A set of selected characteristics of the adolescents has significant differences depending on their status in the group ( $\chi^2 = 10.533$ ;  $p \leq 0.01$ ). Leaders and middle-status students select such traits to describe themselves as “sympathetic”, “cheerful”, “reliable”, “eager to soothe hurt feelings”, and “loves children”. Middle-status teenagers differ from the others by such characteristics as “gentle”, “self-reliant”, and “sincere”. “Outsiders” stand out against the others in the greater variability in the responses. They characterize themselves as “masculine”, “defends own beliefs”, “forceful”, “willing to take risks”. Low-status teens often have an inappropriate view of themselves, which is reflected in the high ratings they give themselves on the criterion “ability to make friends” (87%) or because they are more concerned with other (non-school) relationships, and the classroom group does not play any significant role for them.

Note that “the ability to lead” was marked by only 33% of adolescents. Moreover, the lower the actual status of the student in the group, the smaller the percentage of leadership skills they find in themselves (in high-status — 41%, in middle status — 36%, in low status — 23%).

### ***Image of the group leader***

We estimated the distinctions that were obtained using the BSRI test in the classical and modified versions, the second aiming at an assessment of the image of a group leader. Fig.2 shows that the qualities of the image of the ideal leader of the group tend toward one of the poles (negative in the figure), i.e., toward masculinity, whereas the assessment of their own qualities is more in the middle (androgynous), or tends to the positive pole (feminine). These differences are statistically significant ( $U = 5201$ ;  $p \leq 0.01$ ). This fact is a manifestation of a gender stereotype about the group leader: that the image of the leader includes predominantly masculine characteristics in comparison with self-perception. As confirmation of these results, it should be noted that the characteristic “masculine” was attributed to an image of the leader by 54% of students, while “feminine” only by 13%.

The hierarchical cluster analysis (between-groups linkage, binary data) of qualities chosen by teenagers as inherent in the image of the leader allowed us to identify



**Figure 2.** Distribution of coefficients in the BSRI test about the perception of the leader and self perception

10 groups of characteristics (Table 1). The result was that the most frequently selected group (over 80%) includes only the “masculine” qualities (“quick decision-making”, “strong personality”), and assumes that the leader is self-confident and active.

**Table 1.** Results of cluster analysis

No. of group	Qualities	%
1	self-confident, strong personality, ability to lead, quick decision-making	83
2	helpful, sensitive to others’ needs, understanding, eager to soothe hurt feelings, friendly, gentle	75
3	lucky, cheerful, reliable, honest	69
4	acts as a leader, adaptable, tactful, ambitious	61
5	defends own beliefs, independent, athletic, assertive, forceful, analytical, willing to take risks, dominant, masculine, individualistic, competitive	59
6	sympathetic, sensitive to others’ needs, compassionate, sincere, willing to take a stand	55
7	self-sufficient, solemn, does not use harsh language, conventional	47
8	able to accommodate oneself to the view of others, tender, devoted, warm, soft, credulous	37
9	theatrical, unpredictable, likable	28
10	subject to flattery, feminine, secretive, soft-spoken, unsystematic, frowning, aggressive, infantile, jealous	9

These qualities are not predominant in the actual leaders' assessments of themselves, which highlights the discrepancy between representations of the leader image and the typical characteristics of actual high-status members of student groups. The average value of these qualities in the leaders' assessment of themselves is only 44%. However, other status categories are also not active in the selection of these characteristics: 47% by the middle-status category and 46% by low-status teens. The second preferred the groups of qualities that are mainly «feminine». This refers to the capacity for empathy and mutual assistance, the ability to help and support, to make friends. These features were most pronounced in the middle-status students (75%), which probably can be explained by their potential to be a link between high-status and low-status groups of adolescents, maintaining positive relationships with all group members (Sachkova, 2011, 2014). These qualities were marked by the subjects much less often – 68% by high-status and 65% by low-status adolescents. The next group of qualities includes «gender-neutral» attributes and summarizes the characteristics of 69% of the answers. On the one hand, these are positive emotional characteristics (lucky, cheerful); on the other hand, these are moral basics, which are important in adolescence (reliability and honesty). This group of characteristics is expressed mainly by the high-status students when they evaluate themselves (66%). This value in the category of middle-status students is 59% and in the category of low-status adolescents it is 47%. Thus, the image of the leader is not related to the actual qualities of representatives of the various status categories.

The groups of qualities that have the lowest percentage contain mostly «feminine» characteristics (able to accommodate to the views of others, tender, devoted, warm, soft, credulous) as well as socially disapproved and negative masculine and gender-neutral characteristics («frowning», «aggressive», «infantile», «jealous», etc.). As for the last three groups of qualities, one of them (37%) includes the qualities of passivity, softness, and peacefulness; the second group (28%) consists of qualities that describe visual appeal and artistry; the last group (9%) cannot be combined under a general criterion, but they describe a socially closed personality. It is interesting that this cluster includes «frowning» and «aggressive» together with «feminine».

## Conclusion

The study confirmed the hypothesis that there is a relationship between a teenager's status in the student group and gender identity. It was confirmed that the percent of students with a masculine gender identity decreases with the lower status of teenagers, while the number of students with a feminine gender identity increases with this position. The hypothesis that gender-typed behavior is not due to the high status of the individual in the group, but on the contrary, is more common for the low-status category was also confirmed. Masculine gender identity is increasingly common for members of the low-status groups of students. This argues that the qualities that are contained in the category of “masculinity” are less approved in teenage student groups and do not contribute to high status. This can be explained by the aggressiveness and individualistic orientation of certain characteristics that are included in the category of “masculinity”. These results refute the gender hy-

pothesis of Hill & Lynch (1983), because strict adherence to prescribed gender roles doesn't guarantee success in adolescence. Moreover most of the respondents in our study have androgynous gender identity.

The characteristics marked by teenagers as inherent to themselves is significantly different in all status categories. High-status and middle-status group members are similar in characteristics such as "the ability to empathize," "vitality," "reliability," "ability to comfort," "love of children." The low-status category differs by greater variability in the responses. For low-status adolescents, such qualities as "courageous," "the tendency to defend their views," "forceful," "propensity to take risks" are more common, which can be a resource to reach a leadership position in other environments.

The study confirmed the hypothesis that adolescents attribute more masculine characteristics to the image of the leader than to themselves. Thus, the gender-stereotyped image of the leader is manifested and is given pronounced masculine qualities. Cluster analysis identified 10 groups of qualities that teenagers attribute to the image of a leader. The first contains only the "masculine" qualities and describes the leader as a self-confident and active personality. The second group consists of "feminine" qualities that describe a person's empathy and assistance to others. The third group includes "gender-neutral" characteristics: a positive emotional state, reliability, and honesty. In general it was found that students attribute more masculine traits to a leader than to themselves. Our results are similar to the findings by T.V. Bendas (2006), who showed that gender-stereotyping of leadership could be seen only in respondents' answers but not in real life.

In practice, teachers and psychologists need to integrate gender aspects of status relations and role interactions of adolescents. Resolution of the contradiction between the image of the leader and the qualities of the actual group leader contributes to the development of positive interpersonal relations, group cohesion, reflection, and understanding in interpersonal relations, which is especially important during adolescence. In further studies, we plan to explore the representations of adolescents about outsiders in different types of groups. This will not only probe the causes of a low-status position, but also will open up new areas of corrective and developmental work with teenagers who are in an unfavorable social-psychological situation and will show how they can be socialized in the group and society. Such significant factors as ethnicity and family status should be taken into account.

## References

- Bendas, T.V. (2006). *Gendernaya psichologiya* [Gender psychology]. Saint Petersburg: Piter.
- Eckes, T., & Trautner, H.M. (Eds.) (2000). *The developmental social psychology of gender*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Hill, J.P., & Lynch, M.E. (1983). The intensification of gender-related role expectations during early adolescence. In J. Brooks-Gunn, A.C. Petersen (Eds.), *Girls at puberty: Biological and psychosocial perspectives*. (pp. 201–228). New York: Plenum.
- Katz, P.A., & Ksiansnak, K.R. (1994). Developmental aspects of gender role flexibility and traditionality in middle childhood and adolescence. *Developmental Psychology*, 30(2), 272–282. doi: 10.1037/0012-1649.30.2.272

- Kireeva, Z.A. (2008). *Socialno-psychologicheskaya struktura attrakcii i ee vliyanie na sociometricheskij status lichnosti* [Socio-psychological structure of attraction and its effect on the sociometric status of an individual]. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Yaroslavl, Russia: Yaroslavl State University.
- Kletsina, I.S. (2004). *Psychologia gendernykh otnosheniy. Teoriya i praktika* [Psychology of gender relations. Theory and practice]. Saint Petersburg: Aletheya.
- Kolominsky, Y.L. (2000). *Psychologia vzaimootnosheniy v malykh gruppakh* [Psychology of relationships in small groups]. Minsk: Tetrasistems.
- Krupenin, A.L., & Petrovsky, V.A. (1985). *Mezhindividualnoe vliyanie [Interindividual influence]. Lichnost' v obschenii i deyatelnosti* [Personality in communication and activity]. Ulyanovsk: UGPI.
- Lindberg, S.M. (2008). *Gender-role identity development during adolescence: Individual, familial, and social contextual predictors of gender intensification*. (Doctoral dissertation). Madison, WI: UMI Dissertations Publishing.
- Lobel, T., & Nov-Krispin, N. (2004). Gender discriminatory behavior during adolescence and young adulthood: A developmental analysis. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 33(6), 535-546. doi: 10.1023/B:JOYO.0000048067.83738.e6
- Petrovsky, A.V. (1991). Trekhfaktornaya model znachimogo drugogo [Three-factor model of the significant other]. *Voprosy psichologii [Issues in Psychology]*, 1, 7–18.
- Reene, K.J. (1994). *Gender intensification in adolescence: a study of cognitive and heterosocial factors*. (Doctoral dissertation). Philadelphia, PA: Temple University.
- Sachkova, M.E. (2014). Middle Status Preschooler in the System of Peer Relations. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 146, 296–301. doi:10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.08.133
- Sachkova, M.E. (2011). *Srednestatusny uchashiysya v obrazovatel'nom prostranstve* [The middle-status student in educational space]. Moscow: SSU.
- Vorontsov, D.V. (2008). *Gendernaya psychologia obscheniya* [Gender Psychology of communication]. Rostov-on-Don, Russia: Southern Federal University.
- Watterson, E.S. (2012). *Evaluative reactions to gender stereotype violations: A test of the gender intensification hypothesis*. (Doctoral dissertation). St. Louis, MO: Saint Louis University.
- Zimnyaa, I.A. (2008). *Pedagogicheskaya psychologia* [Pedagogical psychology]. Moscow: Logos.

*Original manuscript received January 18, 2015*

*Revised manuscript accepted February 08, 2016*

*First published online June 30, 2016*