DOI 10.37539/2949-1991.2026.46.11.003
УДК 159.9

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# THE INTEGRATIVE "IKIGAI" MODEL IN CAREER COUNSELING OF ADULTS: OVERCOMING THE SELF-DETERMINATION CRISIS THROUGH PSYCHODIAGNOSTICS AND METAPHORICAL ASSOCIATION CARDS

**Abstract.** The article addresses the problem of psychological support for adults experiencing a crisis of professional self-determination. The subject of the study is the dynamics of emotional burnout and professional motivation under an intervention based on the integrative "Ikigai" model combined with psychodiagnostics and metaphorical association cards (MACs). The study involved 30 women aged 35-60 who were at a career-change point (returning to work after maternity leave, burnout in a previous profession, a period after dismissal, or the search for a new direction), divided into three groups of ten. The following methods were used: the "Diagnostics of the Level of Emotional Burnout" inventory (V. V. Boyko), the "Motivational Profile of Personality" inventory (V. E. Milman), and projective MACs ("Self-Realization" and "About You"). The study employed descriptive statistics and the Wilcoxon test for dependent samples, with the Holm-Bonferroni correction applied for multiple comparisons. A statistically significant positive dynamic was revealed: the severity of the "Tension," "Resistance," and "Exhaustion" phases of burnout decreased ($p < 0.001$), and the significance of the "Life support" motive increased ($p = 0.0197$). The main conclusion is that combining the Ikigai model with diagnostics and metaphorical cards helps reduce burnout and expands the "window of tolerance," restoring the capacity for conscious choice. The findings are considered preliminary given the limited sample.

**Keywords:** Professional self-determination, career-change crisis, emotional burnout, Ikigai model, metaphorical association cards, window of tolerance, career counseling, mature age.

## INTRODUCTION

Relevance. In the modern world, the professional path of an adult is no longer linear. Labour-market changes, digitalization, economic instability, and the growing length of active life mean that more and more adults (35+) find themselves in a situation where their former profession no longer makes sense while a new one has not yet emerged. They go through a crisis and a state of uncertainty, which turns into dissatisfaction with life as a whole.

Women aged 35-60 face this crisis more often than others. Some return after maternity leave and look for their place anew; some see that their profession is no longer in demand; some are tired of living up to the expectations of family and society. On top of this comes a personal sense of not having fulfilled themselves. Over time, this builds into burnout: work loses meaning, anxiety grows, and a feeling of a "closed door" appears.

Research problem. The study addresses a practical question: how can an adult be helped during a career change when the usual formats – tests and interviews – do not provide a complete picture. Combining meaning-of-life diagnostics, work with barriers, and emotional regulation within a single tool is still rare – and this is the core difficulty.

Aim of the study – to understand how well the Ikigai model works when combined with conventional diagnostics and metaphorical cards.

Object of the study – the crisis of professional self-determination in adults.

Subject of the study – how participants' burnout and motivation change under the influence of work with the Ikigai model, diagnostics, and metaphorical cards.

The study was based on the assumption that combining the Ikigai model, psychodiagnostics, and MACs leads to two changes: participants show less burnout, and the range of states in which they are able to make decisions (the "window of tolerance") expands.

In the course of the work, we set ourselves five tasks:

1. To understand how professional self-determination is understood in psychology and why the career-change crisis arises.
2. To show why the Ikigai model can be used both for diagnostics and for work with a client.
3. To describe and test in practice an algorithm combining diagnostics and metaphorical cards.
4. To compare burnout and motivation scores before the work and after it.
5. To compile practical recommendations for career counselors.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1. In Russian psychology, professional self-determination was written about extensively by E. A. Klimov, N. S. Pryazhnikov, and D. A. Leontiev [1; 2; 3]. Klimov viewed the person as the subject of their own professional path, Pryazhnikov – through the meanings of work, and Leontiev – through the meaning regulation of life. What they shared was a view of self-determination not as a one-off choice but as a long process of finding meaning in one's profession.

2. The Ikigai model. In Japanese, "ikigai" is usually translated as "that which is worth living for." In practice, it is a scheme of four parts at whose intersection an activity feels meaningful: a favourite occupation, an easily mastered occupation, an occupation useful to others, and an occupation that brings income [4]. This scheme resonates with several psychological ideas at once: with the theory of basic needs of E. Deci and R. Ryan [5; 6], with the attention of C. G. Jung's analytical psychology to inner meanings and symbols [7], and with V. Frankl's idea of the striving for meaning as the leading force in a person [8].

3. Self-determination and motivation. According to self-determination theory, a person stays engaged in an activity for a long time when they feel autonomy, competence, and connection with others [5; 6]. As soon as the work stops providing this, interest fades and the work itself becomes draining.

4. Emotional burnout. Burnout is examined within V. V. Boyko's model, which includes the phases of "tension," "resistance," and "exhaustion" [9].

5. Window of tolerance. D. Siegel's concept describes the range of optimal emotional arousal within which a person can think and act effectively [10]. Expanding the window of tolerance is regarded as a mechanism of resilience to stress during professional change.

6. Metaphorical association cards. Work with metaphorical cards is built on the image: the participant does not analyse herself "point by point" but responds to a picture and says what she sees. This helps touch upon what is difficult to capture in a conversation or a questionnaire and to translate a vague experience into words, allowing for personal insights [11].

7. MACs in career counseling. Metaphorical association cards are used in career counseling as a projective tool that helps bypass psychological defenses, work with images, and access unconscious motives [11]. The classical Ikigai model serves as an external scheme for inspiration, whereas its psychological interpretation serves as a tool for survival and transformation in adulthood. The transition from the popular to the deeper approach of Ikigai is a process of turning an external scheme into inner work and allows an adult to safely remove the "rose-colored glasses" of the search for a vocation and rely on reality.

Theoretical synthesis. Together, these approaches provide a clear working logic: the Ikigai scheme, along with the ideas of Frankl and Deci-Ryan, helps a participant see what her choice is made up of; metaphorical cards show what is blocking her progress; and the notion of the "window of tolerance" explains why a person under strong stress loses the ability to choose consciously – and how to reduce that stress.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Sample. The study involved 30 women aged 35-60 experiencing a crisis of professional self-determination. Participants were divided into 3 groups of 10. Their requests were associated with different life circumstances: returning to work after maternity leave (for a first or second child), emotional burnout and disillusionment with a previous profession, a job change or a period after dismissal, and the search for a new professional direction.

Instruments:

– the "Diagnostics of the Level of Emotional Burnout" inventory (V. V. Boyko) [9];

– the "Motivational Profile of Personality" inventory (V. E. Milman) [12];

– projective metaphorical association cards: "Self-Realization" (E. Baksan, MACARDS, 2025) and "About You" (G. Batishcheva, Moscow: Genesis, 2016).

Procedure. The work was conducted in groups of 10 and included three sessions in each group.

Stage 1. Diagnostic (rational). At the first session, primary diagnostics were carried out using the V. V. Boyko [9] and V. E. Milman [12] inventories. The test results were discussed with the participants, and an individual request was formulated.

Stage 2. Projective (emotional). At the second session, the Ikigai model was explained to the participants, and a template with four domains ("what I love," "what I am good at," "what people need," "what I am paid for") was provided. Work with MACs proceeded in two steps.

Step 1. Using the "Self-Realization" deck, participants selected cards face-up for each domain of the Ikigai model. Instruction-question: "Select the cards that correspond to each Ikigai domain." The deck was used to describe tasks, competencies, desires, and opportunities.

Step 2. In the domains where barriers were identified, participants placed cards face-up from the "About You" deck. Instruction-question: "Find the card that corresponds to your barrier preventing you from earning income from the work you enjoy." Working with the cards helped reveal what the tests could not show: what is missing, what fears exist, low self-esteem, negative attitudes, the need to master a new skill, or the need for individual psychological work. MACs reduced resistance, brought hidden barriers to the surface, and provided direction for further work and for solving the set tasks.

Stage 3. Synthesis (evaluation). At the third session, repeated diagnostics were conducted, and the test results were compared with the metaphorical material of the cards. An updated Ikigai model was formulated, in which the participant found the point of connection between meaning, competencies, and demand.

Data processing. Descriptive statistics; comparative analysis of related samples (Wilcoxon test) to assess the significance of shifts in indicators before and after the intervention; qualitative and psychosemantic analysis of work with MACs.

Rationale for combining methods. Tests provide facts; metaphorical cards provide meanings. In our work this proved especially valuable: the tests recorded the level of burnout and the structure of motivation but did not answer the question "why." The cards went further – participants named their barriers ("no right to want more," "I'm afraid I won't manage"), which would not have surfaced in a questionnaire. One participant formulated on a card, for the first time, what she had not dared to say aloud for years. MACs bypassed the defenses where a direct conversation about fears caused resistance. This approach helped bypass psychological defenses, work with images, and gain access to unconscious motives.

RESULTS

According to the primary diagnostics (the V. V. Boyko inventory [9]), a formed phase of emotional burnout was identified in most participants. The quantitative percentage data (the share of participants) are supplemented by a comparative analysis of mean scores on the scales.

Table 1

Share of participants in the "Resistance" phase before and after the intervention (n = 30)

| Indicator | Before | After |
|---|---|---|
| Share in the "Resistance" phase, % | 80 | 60 |
| Share outside a formed burnout phase, % | 20 | 40 |

Comment. The share of participants with a formed "Resistance" phase decreased from 80% to 60%; accordingly, the share of participants outside a formed burnout phase increased from 20% to 40%.

Note on units of measurement. This study uses two complementary ways of presenting the Boyko inventory data. First, the share of participants in whom a particular burnout phase is formed (expressed as a percentage, Table 1); this indicator reflects the prevalence of the phase in the group. Second, the mean severity score for each phase across the sample (Table 2); it reflects the intensity of symptoms among participants. Thus, the decrease in the share of participants in the "Resistance" phase from 80% to 60% and the decrease in the mean score for the same phase from 75.0±11.5 to 45.0±9.0 are two distinct yet mutually corroborating indicators of the same positive dynamic: the phase became both less frequent and less pronounced.

To assess the statistical significance of shifts in the motivational structure and burnout indicators, the Wilcoxon test for dependent samples was used. Calculations were performed for the entire sample (N = 30).

Table 2

Dynamics of indicators on the V. E. Milman and V. V. Boyko inventories (N = 30)

| Inventory / Scale | Before (M ± SD) | After (M ± SD) | Wilcoxon T | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| V. E. Milman | | | | |
| Communication | 28.0±3.5 | 30.0±3.2 | 103.00 | 0.0066 |
| General activity | 26.0±4.0 | 28.0±3.8 | 152.00 | 0.1004 |
| Life support | 30.0±3.0 | 31.0±2.9 | 120.00 | 0.0197 |
| Comfort | 29.0±3.2 | 30.0±3.0 | 191.00 | 0.4045 |
| Creativity | 31.0±3.8 | 32.0±3.6 | 149.00 | 0.0879 |
| V. V. Boyko | | | | |
| Tension | 80.0±12.0 | 60.0±10.6 | 0.00 | < 0.001 |
| Resistance | 75.0±11.5 | 45.0±9.0 | 0.00 | < 0.001 |
| Exhaustion | 60.0±10.0 | 40.0±8.5 | 28.00 | < 0.001 |

Comment on Table 2. For the Boyko inventory scales, a decrease in mean scores indicates a decrease in the burnout level. For the Milman inventory, an increase in scores indicates a rise in the significance of the corresponding motivational factors.

Note to Table 2. The zero values of the Wilcoxon T-test for the "Tension" and "Resistance" scales (T = 0.00) reflect the absence of inversions in the calculation of shift ranks: among all participants included in the analysis, the direction of the shift was unidirectional (a decrease in scores), so the sum of the ranks of "atypical" shifts was equal to zero. This result indicates a maximally stable and homogeneous intervention effect on these scales. The significance level is reported as $p < 0.001$.

Note on multiple comparisons. Since 8 scales were analysed (5 Milman and 3 Boyko), the Holm-Bonferroni correction was applied to minimize the Type I error (false positives) when interpreting the data. The adjusted significance threshold is 0.05 / 8 = 0.00625. With this correction, the shifts on the "Tension," "Resistance," and "Exhaustion" scales remain statistically significant at a high level ($p < 0.001$). The shift on the "Communication" scale ($p = 0.0066$) is significant at the

conventional 0.05 level but, after the correction is applied, lies at its borderline and does not cross the adjusted threshold. This allows the dynamics on the "Communication" scale to be regarded as a trend requiring confirmation on a larger sample, rather than as a fully established effect. The shifts on the "Life support" ($p = 0.0197$), "Creativity" ($p = 0.0879$), and "General activity" ($p = 0.1004$) scales do not reach significance after the correction and are interpreted as a qualitative trend.

Qualitative results (cases). In the course of the work, participants visualized the internal conflict as a "wall" between the domains "what I love" and "what I am paid for." The MAC method helped bring unconscious barriers ("closed door," "no right to want more") into the conscious plane. Upon completion of the work, most participants formulated an updated Ikigai model, connecting meaning, competencies, and demand.

DISCUSSION

In modern psychology and coaching, the concept of Ikigai is gaining increasing popularity – the Japanese philosophy of finding the meaning of life, which focuses on the intersection of four domains: what we love (Passion), what we are good at (Profession), what we are paid for (Vocation), and what the world needs (Mission) [4]. In popular literature, "Ikigai" is often reduced to a cheerful formula about "work you love," but behind the attractive scheme lies a much older tradition – the Eastern view of the human path.

C. G. Jung, reflecting on the differences between Western and Eastern worldviews, noted that Eastern thought seeks not a cause but a resonance of events [7]. For him, the fundamental principle of the Eastern tradition is not the road as such but a law pervading all that exists. This understanding is close to the idea of Ikigai: it too points to the point where a person's inner desire and external circumstances converge and a sense of meaningfulness is born. Thus, "Ikigai" is not simply "that which brings joy" but, in Jung's terminology, a point of intersection where a chance confluence of circumstances acquires deep psychological meaning.

In this work, we propose to consider "Ikigai" as a psychological model rather than an esoteric practice. We rely on Eastern philosophy but subject it to critical analysis, integrating it into scientific discourse, as Jung did [7].

The findings indicate that the integrative Ikigai model combined with psychodiagnostics and MACs contributes to a statistically significant reduction in the severity of emotional burnout and a transformation of the motivational structure in adults experiencing a career self-determination crisis.

An analysis of the dynamics on the V. E. Milman inventory [12] shows that the intervention significantly increased the value of the "Communication" sphere ($p = 0.0066$) and "Life support" ($p = 0.0197$). The growing importance of communication correlates with the need to seek social support when changing a profession. The growth of life support reflects a shift of focus from the existential vacuum to the pragmatic need for a financial base as a condition of security during a career change. Although the shifts on the "Creativity" and "General activity" scales did not reach statistical significance across the whole sample ($p > 0.05$), their positive dynamics indicate the actualization of growth needs.

The mechanism of action can be described through the expansion of the "window of tolerance" (D. Siegel [10]): visualizing the internal conflict and working with MACs reduce emotional tension (as confirmed by the decrease in the severity of the "Tension" phase from 80 to 60, $p < 0.001$), restoring the person's capacity for conscious choice. The visual Ikigai model makes the conflict between values visible and therefore available for processing.

Connection with theory. The results are consistent with the provisions of logotherapy (V. Frankl [8]) on the role of meaning and with self-determination theory (Deci, Ryan [5; 6]): restoring the meaning of professional activity reduces the risk of burnout.

Role of the barrier. A key element of the work is the figure of the "wall" – a symbolic barrier between "what I love" and "what I am paid for." It is this barrier that keeps a person in the state of a "closed door," preventing the integration of meaning and income into a single professional identity.

The concept of Ikigai, rooted in Japanese philosophy [4], offers a model of harmonious self-realization through the intersection of four domains: what I love to do; what I am good at; what I am paid for; and what the world needs. This search for balance largely resonates with the fundamental idea of Viktor Frankl's logotherapy [8] that the human striving for meaning is the main driving force. For Frankl, the value of life does not depend on external conditions – meaning can be found through work, through relationships, and through one's attitude to what cannot be changed [8]. These three paths map easily onto the Ikigai scheme: some domains correspond to "I am good at" and "I am paid for," others to connection with people, and still others to mission. In other words, "Ikigai" can be viewed as a visual map that helps a person follow the paths to meaning described by Frankl – now applied to work and professional growth. Frankl himself emphasised that the meaning of life is individual and changes over time but never disappears [8]. This is consonant with the idea of Ikigai, which does not offer a universal recipe but serves as a tool for an individual search for one's unique path.

Limitations. The sample is limited (n = 30) and homogeneous by gender and age (women aged 35-60); there is no control group, which does not allow an unambiguous separation of the intervention effect from natural dynamics or the placebo effect. The results should be considered preliminary. In addition, the absence of a longitudinal cut does not allow judging the persistence of the achieved changes in the long term.

CONCLUSION

The study demonstrated that the integrative Ikigai model combined with psychodiagnostics and metaphorical association cards is an effective tool for supporting adults in a crisis of professional self-determination. The observed dynamics – a statistically significant decrease in the severity of the "Tension," "Resistance," and "Exhaustion" phases ($p < 0.001$) – support the hypothesis of the positive influence of the proposed approach. The increased significance of the "Life support" motive ($p = 0.0197$) and the pronounced trend toward a rise in the "Communication" motive ($p = 0.0066$) indicate the actualization of needs for security and social support during a career change.

The Ikigai model alone, without additional research, is idealistic and non-specific. A preliminary conclusion can be drawn that for different age groups, at different periods of life, what matters are not identical and equal desires but quite specific tasks under different life circumstances. For the 35-40 age group, the emphasis on "Communication" and "Activity" can serve as a resource for entering a new profession, whereas for the 45+ group, "Life support" becomes the basis on which "Creativity" later grows.

Practical recommendations. The proposed protocol (diagnostics → work with MACs → visualization of the conflict → synthesis of a new ikigai) can be used by career counselors, psychologists, and coaches working with adults during professional change.

Future research: studies with a control group, larger samples, inclusion of men and different age subgroups, and longitudinal observation to assess the sustainability of the results. A repeated measurement is planned in 3-6 months.

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