

# Aggression and Belief in a Just World Among Adolescents from Belarus and Ukraine: A Comparative Analysis

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In connection with the spread of a culture of violence in modern society the problem of aggressive behavior of adolescents takes on new impetus. For a comprehensive consideration of this problem, one should take into account not only the intrapersonal and interpersonal aspects of the personality relations system, but also its relations with the world, which can be expressed in the two forms of the belief in a just world — general belief in a just world and personal belief in a just world. 70 Belarusian and 109 Ukrainian adolescents completed two questionnaires: the Buss–Perry Aggression Questionnaire and the Just World Scale by C. Dalbert. It was found that Belarusian adolescents are characterized by lower aggression compared to Ukrainian ones. The relationship between aggression and the two forms of belief in a just world (general and personal belief in a just world) is negative among Belarusians and Ukrainian adolescents. Belarusian and Ukrainian adolescents on average believe that the world is “rather fair”. This indicates a similar view of the world among adolescents in both cultures.

**Keywords:** aggression, belief in just world, adolescents, justice, aggressive behavior, worldview, socio-psychological factors, frustration.

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### **Problems and trends in the study of adolescent aggression**

It may seem that the problem of adolescent aggression exhausted itself in scientific terms long ago, and numerous studies have confirmed the fact that its level is increasing among adolescents. However, the realities of the modern world have revealed some new aspects of this phenomenon. The general tension in adolescents' emotional life has led to the spread of such phenomena as school violence, Columbine (massacres in schools) and school shooting (armed attack on schoolchildren committed by a student or an intruder inside an educational institution). Thus, this problem has ceased to be the preserve of psychological science solely. Both lawyers and representatives of security forces are taking some interest in it.

Recent studies have revealed two trends in the study of aggression among adolescents. On the one hand, the manifestation forms of their aggressive behavior are analyzed, and the predictors provoking it are identified. On the other hand, in an attempt to discover intrapersonal factors that cause aggressive tension among some of tweens, psychologists have finally decided to look into the inner world of children who are taking their first steps of the integration process with the adult world.

Within the scope of the first trend in the study of child aggression, there have now appeared numerous publications devoted to such new forms of violence as bullying (school violence) [8; 9], Columbine [11], school shooting [14; 18]. D.G. Davydov and K.D. Hlomov, who reviewed a wide range of both foreign and Russian studies concerning the Columbine phenomenon, write that the culture of violence is a noticeable factor contributing to the aggressive behavior of youth in modern society [11]. V.O. Karpov notes the development of destructive subculture development, i.e. the emergence of groups promoting violence, including the cult of Columbine, suicide among children and adolescents [14], sadism towards animals [13] and vandalism [10]. According to N.F. Greben', modern school is perceived by adolescents as an insecure place where bullying is widespread [8]. A.A. Rean found that the involvement of participants in the bullying process at school, regardless of their role — victim, bully or bystander, is associated with a lower level of security at school [18]. In turn, it was noted that the experience of bullying provokes the formation of negative self-esteem and an increase in the risk of suicidal behavior among the objects of bullying [9].

Psychologists pay attention not only to studying personality determinants of aggression among adolescents, but also to researching the factors associated with the emergence of aggressive reactions [1]. While studying social and psychological factors provoking aggression on a sample of Belarusian and Ukrainian adolescents, E.K. Ageenkova, P.M. Larionov and V.A. Volchek found that adolescents not only respond to the frustrating factors of the environment affecting them directly, but also to the phenomena they observe such as vandalism, misbehavior of teachers, other adults and peers [1; 15]. These authors noted that careless behavior of adults towards a teenager can change their worldview radically and provoke the formation of a maladaptive life scripts [1]. Earlier K. Horney paid attention to this, and stated that “people surrounding a child are immersed in their own neuroses too deeply to love the child, or at least think of them as of a separate individual personality ... they can be suppressive, overprotective, intimidating,

irritable, over-pedantic, indulgent, unstable, hypercritical, indifferent, they can have favorites to the detriment of other children, etc.” [20, p. 31].

Within the bounds of the second trend, aimed at identifying intrapersonal factors that cause aggressive strain among adolescents, there is a number of works addressing the new aspects of this phenomenon. In particular, E.K. Ageenkova et al. using the projective research methods of studying the life script supposed that many negative phenomena of the “big world”, such as misconduct of adults and misbehavior of peers, do not coincide with adolescents’ mindsets and worldview, formed by family values and fairy tales for children. In this regard, according to these researchers, for many adolescents the large social world begins to be perceived as filled with injustice, sexual harassment and cruelty, which provokes their aggressive reactions towards it [1]. Studying a wide range of social and psychological factors in causing various degrees of aggression among adolescents, P.M. Larionov noted that experiencing injustice is one of the key factors provoking aggressive behavior. Adolescents respond especially strongly to the unjust treatment by teachers (choosing a “scapegoat”, choosing “favorites”) [15].

It is also necessary to refer to the opinion by E. Erikson, who defined adolescence as a “moratorium” in which adolescents look for their niche in the society. The author defined that the development of mechanisms protecting the “ego” from the constantly increasing intensity of impulses coming from the mature genital apparatus and the powerful muscular system, the consolidation of the most important achievements in life, as well as resynthesizing all childhood identities into a single whole and bringing these experimental data into line with the roles offered by a larger part of society all fall within the tasks of adolescence [21].

### **The phenomenon of belief in a just world**

Many researchers emphasize that negative emotional state, in particular anger, fear and guilt, are associated with a loss of faith in justice, and the interaction of these factors can lead to a vicious circle [2]. In this regard, according to V.N. Argunova, the experienced or manifested aggression, can serve as a means for realizing the desire to “put things in order quickly”, to find and punish other people, blaming the problems that have arisen on them, evading one’s own responsibility for what happened” [2, p. 84]. As emphasized by N.B. Astanina and S.A. Golubeva, people have different sensitivity to justice and susceptibility to injustice, which reflects the promotion of different reactions to the observed injustice [6].

American scientist M.J. Lerner played an important role in the study of the concept of justice, introducing the concept of belief in a just world into psychology. Belief in a just world is a person's faith that the world is fair and that everyone gets what they deserve in life [35]. In the history of the mankind, culture and religion, it has been noted that injustice is an integral and often manifested attribute of the world, however, people are not inclined to abandon their belief in a just world. According to M.J. Lerner, belief in a just world is a fundamental illusion which has an adaptive meaning, since it allows a person to perceive life as safe and orderly. A person is not only an observer of fair and unfair situations in life, which he/she interprets and evaluates, but also a participant in them, coming in direct

contact with a just or unjust attitude of other people towards him/her in their life. In this regard, I.M. Lipkus et al. offered to distinguish between two forms of belief in a just world — general belief in a just world (General BJW) and personal belief in a just world, i.e. belief in justice in relation to oneself (Personal BJW). General BJW reflects the belief that the world is a fair place where everyone gets what they deserve. In turn, Personal BJW reflects a person's belief that they are treated fairly [36]. General BJW is embodied in the question: "Is the world arranged fairly?", whereas the phenomenology of Personal BJW is reflected in the question "Is life fair to me?". The development of 4 different attitudes is possible, formed due to the combination of different positions of belief in justice: high or low General BJW with high or low Personal BJW. A similar analogy can be found in the theory by E. Berne, in which 4 life positions are considered: 1) I am okay, you are okay (healthy position); 2) I am not okay, you are okay (depressive position); 3) I am okay, you are not okay (paranoid position); 4) I am not okay, you are not okay (schizoid position) [32]. According to E. Berne, both healthy attitudes, and a high level of Personal BJW and General BJW can be a resource for a person and is associated with their psychological well-being [16].

### **Belief in a just world and its role for a personality**

Due to the discovery of the relation between aggressive tendencies among adolescents and their perception of the world around them as "unjust" [1; 15], which was made with the help of projective research methods and questionnaire methods, the interest in studying this phenomenon using objective research methods, in particular, Belief in a Just World Scale, arose. The scale was introduced by K. Dalbert in 1999. It is used to measure Personal BJW and General BJW [25]. Considering the role of different BJW dimensions, it should be noted that BJW is more important for an individual's psychological functioning. Personal BJW was found to be positively associated with life satisfaction [43], psychological well-being, constructive coping behavior, positive future orientation and prosocial behavior [22], as well as low negative affectivity [39] and less explicit feeling of envy [40]. When controlling the personal traits of neuroticism and extraversion, on a sample of 195 male students aged 15–19, researchers J. Dzuka and C. Dalbert noted that Personal BJW correlates with psychological well-being positively [28]. S.K. Nartova-Bochaver et al. found that Personal BJW correlates with depressive symptoms negatively, but it correlates with self-esteem and psychological stability positively [39]. It should be noted that the studies concerning BJW are well-consistent, and they reflect the positive role of this BJW form. Personal BJW plays a more important role for an individual than General BJW, since a person experiences just or unjust situations in their life and evaluates them much more often than develops and reconsiders their set of beliefs about the justice of the world in general.

Studies concerning the role of General BJW for an individual reveal both the adaptive and maladaptive role of this BJW form. Among the positive effects of General BJW, its relation to psychological stability, psychological well-being and positive affect can be noted [33; 39; 42]. General BJW is associated with the intention to help other people through the perception of the sense of life [31]. Personal BJW is associated with a less explicit experiencing Schadenfreude (gloat) at the sight of someone else's misfortune, whereas General BJW is associated with a higher level of Schadenfreude [40]. There was found

a positive correlation between General BJW and discrimination against the elderly [23]. The decrease in the level of General BJW is associated with a decline in social and political activity [30; 37].

It is needed to analyze the relationship between Personal BJW and General BJW in order to study the beliefs of an individual and their role for mental health. While conducting a comparative analysis of BJW forms among patients with depression and those without depression, it was found that patients with depression perceived the world as unjust towards them (low Personal BJW), but at the same time they were convinced that the world is a fair place in general (high General BJW). The beliefs of those without depression were less polarized. [41]

Thus, both high and low levels of General BJW have positive as well as negative consequences for an individual and for society, which was also highlighted in the review by N.B. Astanina [4]. Anyway, General BJW compared to Personal BJW is a broader concept in phenomenological terms which is, in our opinion, too vague. Probably, in this regard, the heterogeneity of research results is shown. It should be noted that General BJW compared to Personal BJW is much less *personally tangible*, and, therefore, *less psychotherapeutic* (it is more likely to meet a person experiencing a situation of injustice in their life than a person worried about the unjust world order, provided that they are not experiencing an existential crisis in the process of self-realization). For a deeper understanding of the psychological functioning of an individual, one should analyze the ratio between Personal BJW and General BJW, paying special attention to the level of Personal BJW and somewhat less attention to the level of General BJW.

### **Belief in a just world among teenagers**

The regularities of the relationship between BJW and different variables, which were obtained on samples of adults, are consistent with the results of studies among adolescents. N.B. Astanina found positive correlation between psychological well-being and General BJW in a group of 212 Russian teenagers aged 13–18 [3]. There are some gender differences in the levels of BJW. It was noted that Russian adolescent girls are characterized by a slightly higher level of General BJW compared to boys [5]. Considering the relationship between the BJW and social behavior, it should be noted that Personal BJW is positively correlated with prosocial adolescents' behavior [26]. At the same time, the decrease in Personal BJW is related to an increase in the level of bullying, which was addressed by M. Donat et al. while studying German and Indian adolescents [27]. On a sample of Portuguese adolescents, who were 12–18 years old, it was also confirmed that low Personal BJW is related to being prone to bullying [24]. While analyzing the literary sources, only one study directly examining the relationship between BJW and aggression was found. It was carried out in Iran among people over 16 years old. It was found that General BJW negatively correlates with anger ( $r=-0.17$ ) and hostility ( $r=-0.12$ ) [29].

As the results of these studies show, BJW is indeed associated with some forms of bullying, which creates new opportunities for early diagnosis and prevention of aggressive behavior among adolescents. Nevertheless, it still remains unclear to what extent an adolescent's inner reflections concerning the justice of the world in general and their

subjective belief that the world is just towards themselves, determines the overall level of their aggression. It is also significant to study the forms of aggression related to BJW, including hostility, which is a precursor of aggressive behavior among adolescents. According to A.A. Rean and I.A. Konovalov, the strategy of the search for factors predisposing to aggression is the most appropriate, because it contributes to the early identification of adolescents belonging to the risk group, before they commit aggressive illegal actions [19].

### **Hypotheses of the research**

It can be assumed that both aggression with all its components, and BJW can be experienced in different ways by adolescents whose personalities are formed in different environmental conditions, including the cultural ones. This has conditioned the choice of the aim of the research, which is to identify the features of expressing BJW and aggression, as well as to reveal their relationship among adolescents living in Belarus and Ukraine. Herewith, it is assumed that for Ukrainian adolescents, whose personalities are formed in the conditions of social cataclysms which have taken place in their country, these features will be different compared to Belarusian adolescents living in stable social conditions at the time of the study. In addition, as a hypothesis, it was suggested that the degree of expressing BJW can be related to aggression and its components: physical aggression, anger and hostility.

### **Participants of the study**

The Belarusian sample consisted of 70 people aged 12–16 years ( $M=13.80$  years old,  $SD=0.77$  years old), including 38 boys and 32 girls. The research was carried out in one of the schools in Minsk region, in November–December 2019.

The Ukrainian sample consisted of 109 people aged 12–16 years ( $M=13.61$  years old,  $SD=1.09$  years old), including 49 boys and 60 girls. The study was carried out in one of the schools in Zhytomyr in September–November 2019.

The survey was carried out in accordance with the policy of conducting scientific studies in Belarus and Ukraine. The study was voluntary, anonymous and in accordance with the principles of scientific research confidentiality. As for the sociodemographic variables, the survey participants reported only gender and age.

### **Research methods**

The study used two methods: the Buss–Perry Aggression Questionnaire (BPAQ), adapted by S.N. Enikolopov and N.P. Cibul'skij [12] and the Just World Scale, developed by C. Dalbert [25] and adapted in Russia by S.K. Nartova-Bochaver et al. [38]. The respondents filled out special standardized diagnostic forms of the BPAQ and the Just World Scale individually, using the paper-and-pencil format.

The BPAQ allows to quantify the severity of the three aggression components: physical aggression, anger and hostility, as well as to calculate the integral (general) indicator of aggression ( $Aggression_{integr}$ ). The Russian version of the BPAQ contains 24

statements, which are offered to be rated on a five-point scale from 1 (“extremely uncharacteristic of me”) to 5 (“extremely characteristic of me”) [12].

The Just World Scale (Belief in a Just World Scale) serves to assess the degree of general belief in a just world (General BJW subscale of the questionnaire) and personal belief in a just world (Personal BJW). The questionnaire contains 13 statements, which are offered to be rated from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 6 (“strongly agree”) [16; 38].

The statistical analysis was performed using program Statistica version 13.3. There were used the methods of descriptive statistics, Spearman’s correlation, Mann–Whitney U test.

### The results of the research

The mean values of the studied variables for groups of Ukrainian and Belarusian adolescents, including separate values for boys and girls, and the results of the comparative analysis, which was carried out using Mann–Whitney U test, are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

#### Comparative analysis of the aggression levels and belief in a just world among Belarusian and Ukrainian teenagers

Variables	Ukrainian adolescents <i>Mean</i>			Belarusian adolescents <i>Mean</i>			Significance level of differences <i>p</i> between the groups of Ukrainian and Belarusian adolescents	Significance level of differences <i>p</i> between Ukrainian boys and girls / Belarusian boys and girls
	Total sample	M	F	Total sample	M	F		
Physical aggression	25.34	26.67	24.25	23.74	23.24	24.34	0.135	0.093 / 0.346
Anger	20.9	19.35	22.17	17.19	17.08	17.31	<0.001	0.014 / 0.805
Hostility	23.22	22.00	24.22	18.41	18.32	18.53	<0.001	0.075 / 0.755
Aggression <sub>integr</sub>	69.46	68.02	70.63	59.34	58.63	60.19	<0.001	0.394 / 0.625
Personal BJW	27.99 (4.00)	27.76 (3.97)	28.18 (4.03)	28.57 (4.08)	27.34 (3.91)	30.03 (4.29)	0.565	0.772 / 0.094
General BJW	23.38 (3.90)	22.96 (3.83)	23.72 (3.95)	23.84 (3.97)	23.08 (3.85)	24.75 (4.13)	0.509	0.296 / 0.440

*Note.* M — boys, F — girls. For Personal BJW and General BJW, the sums of the scale scores are presented and in brackets there are the average values of the points sum.

Comparative analysis showed that Ukrainian adolescents, compared to Belarusian ones, are characterized by significantly higher severity indices ( $p < 0.001$ ) of anger, hostility

and aggression in general ( $Aggression_{integr}$ ), except for one of its forms — physical aggression, for which statistically significant differences were not found. The same regularity is observed in the comparative analysis of the aggression levels ( $Aggression_{integr}$ ) and its components among Ukrainian and Belarusian girls — all indicators, except for physical aggression, are significantly higher ( $p < 0.001$ ) among Ukrainian females (Table 2). Among Ukrainian boys, the aggression levels ( $Aggression_{integr}$ ) and all its components are significantly higher than among Belarusian boys, however, these differences are less obvious (levels of  $p$ -value vary from  $p < 0.05$  to  $p < 0.01$ ; Table 2).

The comparative analysis of the aggression levels and its components did not reveal any significant differences between boys and girls in both the Belarusian and Ukrainian samples in general. A significant increase was found only in the average anger levels among Ukrainian girls compared to boys in this country ( $p = 0.014$ ; Table 1). It is possible that this is due to the temperamental features of the female part in the Ukrainian sample, but this assumption requires verification.

Statistical processing of the data did not reveal statistically significant differences in the level of Personal BJW and General BJW between Belarusian and Ukrainian teenagers (Table 1). Within both cultures, no significant differences in the level of BJW components were found between boys and girls either.

Table 2

**Results of the comparative analysis of aggression levels and belief in a just world between Belarusian and Ukrainian boys and girls**

Variables	Ukrainian	Belarusian	<i>p</i> -value
	boys / girls <i>Mean</i>	boys / girls <i>Mean</i>	(difference between Ukrainian and Belarusian boys / Ukrainian and Belarusian girls)
Physical aggression	26.67 / 24.25	23.24 / 24.34	0.014 / 0.787
Anger	19.35 / 22.17	17.08 / 17.31	0.015 / <0.001
Hostility	22.00 / 24.22	18.32 / 18.53	0.028 / <0.001
$Aggression_{integr}$	68.02 / 70.63	58.63 / 60.19	0.008 / <0.001
Personal BJW	27.76 / 28.18	27.34 / 30.03	0.546 / 0.082
General BJW	22.96 / 23.72	23.08 / 24.75	0.650 / 0.515

The correlation analysis of aggression and its forms (physical aggression, anger and hostility) with all the components of belief in a just world (Personal BJW and General BJW) was carried out. The data are presented in Table 3. According to the results of the correlation analysis, the correlation of aggression and its forms with BJW among



Belarusian and Ukrainian adolescents is negative. Hostility is negatively correlated with BJW and its subscales the most strongly, whereas anger is correlated with it the least strongly.

Table 3

**The correlation between aggression and belief in a just world  
 among Belarusian and Ukrainian teenagers**

Belarusian adolescents / Ukrainian adolescents	Physical Aggression	Anger	Hostility	Aggression <sub>integr</sub>
Personal BJW	-0.37** / -0.22*	-0.24* / -0.24*	-0.51*** / -0.43***	-0.49*** / -0.38***
General BJW	-0.22 / -0.23*	-0.04 / -0.14	-0.33** / -0.39***	-0.26* / -0.35***

Note. \* — p<0.05, \*\* — p<0.01, \*\*\* — p<0.001.

Thus, the data on studying Belarusian and Ukrainian adolescents confirmed the hypothesis that the loss of BJW (especially Personal BJW) is correlated with the increase in the level of aggression and its components — physical aggression, anger and hostility.

**Discussion**

The undertaken research showed that the assessment and study of aggression as an isolated phenomenon in the psychological space of adolescents' personality is an uninformative approach. Aggression is usually considered only as a reaction to the factors of the external and internal environment, which are traumatizing a child. For example, L. Berkowitz, the author of the frustration-aggression hypothesis, wrote that aggression arises as a natural reaction in conditions when a person cannot satisfy their certain needs in a real or alleged situation [7]. In this regard, it is clearly not enough to state an increase in its level to understand adolescent aggression. Aggression should be considered in conjunction with the established views of the world among adolescent children, the conditions of the social environment, the features of the psychological functioning of an individual, taking into account, among other things, the specificity of using emotion regulation strategies [34]. The undertaken research has shown that an integrative worldview — the idea about the just world — can serve as a factor determining the emergence of aggression.

The conducted research has revealed higher indicators of aggression and some of its forms among Ukrainian adolescents compared to Belarusian ones. This data can be explained by two factors. First, Belarusians are traditionally considered to be tolerant and calm people, which has been covered by a lot of studies, some of which explained this phenomenon from the perspective of L.N. Gumilyov's ethnogenesis theory, in particular, the lack of energy in the ethnos itself [17]. Secondly, at the time of the study, Belarus, compared to Ukraine, did not experience serious social and economic disruptions which

could condition an increase in the levels of aggression. However, as this study shows, even the presence of social upheavals, which Ukraine experienced, did not promote the need to use physical strength against another subject or object (defined as the level of physical aggression in BPAQ) among Ukrainian adolescents.

The increase in the levels of BJW, especially Personal BJW, is negatively correlated with the level of aggression and most of its components both in the group of Belarusian and Ukrainian teenagers. It should be noted that there are strong interrelationships between the integral indicator of aggression and Personal BJW received on the Belarusian ( $r_s=-0.49$ ) and Ukrainian samples ( $r_s=-0.38$ ), and less strong relationships with General BJW ( $r_s=-0.26$  and  $r_s=-0.35$  respectively). These data indicate that the emergence of aggressive reactions among adolescents is more correlated with experiencing an unjust attitude of the world and other people (Personal BJW) towards them rather than with their experiencing an unjust world order (General BJW).

On average, Belarusian and Ukrainian adolescents are characterized by the attitudes of a person who “rather agrees” that the world is just in general and in relation to them in particular. This indicates the similarity of the worldviews among adolescents in these cultures. It should be emphasized that in both cultures General BJW is slightly lower than Personal BJW, which is much more favorable than the opposite situation (General BJW > Personal BJW).

This work, devoted to aggression and BJW among adolescents who are 12–16 years old, is consistent with the results of the Iranian study which considers the existence of negative correlation between General BJW and aggression among people who are over 16 years old [29]. The conducted research in general indirectly highlights the results by other researchers who found that more explicit BJW in its two forms is correlated with such psychological characteristics as psychological stability, psychological well-being, and positive affect [33; 39; 42], with the intention of helping other people [31]. The opposite tendencies, found by other researchers, regarding the negative effects of General BJW, such as the positive correlation of General BJW with discrimination against the elderly [23], will most likely not be confirmed in Belarusian and Ukrainian sociocultural space, since representatives of three generations, including children and elderly people, traditionally live together in the families of these communities.

The study of adolescent aggression presented in the article is mainly based on detecting statistically significant relationships between the variables as well as on searching for differences in psychological variables within the test among the two groups. This approach is the most widespread in modern psychology, although it has some significant limitations — it reveals only certain facets of the infinite inner world of a person. However, the testing has a higher level of standardization and accuracy interpreting the data, therefore it remains the mainstay in conducting scientific research. The undertaken research also provides some new opportunities for studying the seemingly hackneyed topic of teenage aggression. The possibilities of understanding aggression not as an isolated characteristic, but in connection with other variables, in particular, with belief in a just world and with belonging to different sociocultural spaces were analyzed in the article. This kind of approach is developing new possibilities in understanding the personal grounds of aggressive behavior.

## Findings

1. Belarusian adolescents, compared to Ukrainian ones, are characterized by significantly lower levels of anger, hostility and aggression in general. No statistically significant differences were found in the levels of physical aggression.
2. There were no statistically significant differences found in the levels of Personal BJW and General BJW among Belarusian and Ukrainian adolescents.
3. Among Belarusian and Ukrainian adolescents, the correlation between aggression and its components with Personal BJW and General BJW is negative. Personal BJW is the most correlated with aggression and its components. The adolescent's experiencing the unjust attitude of the world and other people *towards them* is more correlated with aggression than the adolescent's experiencing the unfair world order.
4. Among the components of aggression, hostility is the most negatively correlated with the two forms of BJW, whereas anger is the least correlated (only with Personal BJW).
5. Belarusian and Ukrainian teenagers "rather agree" that the world is just in general (General BJW) and towards them in particular (Personal BJW). This indicates the similar worldviews among adolescents in both cultures.

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