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How children see their parents – a short intergeneration comparative analysis

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Abstract

This research is based on Rose Vincent's 50-year-old project, showing how children live their relationships with their parents. The findings show that girls are more critical of their mothers, but more permissive with their fathers. The respondents' ideal parent includes not only elements that the contemporary social life finds in the family, but also elements that are found in time (friendship and the mother-friend) evidence of common necessities in ontogenesis about the intra-family relationships and the emotional climate.

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1. Introduction

The following issues are very important in human life: image, concept and self-esteem, beliefs and values that are passed from one generation to another. Being the most constant, they are the most essential human psychological characteristics contributing to personality development, initiation and development of relationships, being formed during childhood under the great influence of family, persisting throughout life.

Every family has its own values, customs, patterns of functioning that are maintained by two types of constraints: the former is generic, regarding the universal rules of family organization and hierarchy of power; the latter is idiosyncratic, regarding the mutual expectations of some members, each contributing to the development and strength of these expectations. The most important influence of family environment on children's development comes from the familial atmosphere, which can be supporting and loving or full of conflicts. In a research on 226 families from diverse ethnical background with children of school age, marital conflict was correlated consistently with ineffective parenting, and the children exposed to the misunderstandings between parents and poor parenting tended to show a high level of internalizing behavior such as anxiety, fear and depression, and also externalizing behaviors, such as aggression, involvement in fights, disobedience and hostility. The way parents address their

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children's need to make their own decisions, their economic situation and work affect the well being of children, which contributes to the family atmosphere (Papalia, Olds Wendkos, & Feldman Duskin, 2010). Parenting practices and parenting skills and how parents see their children and take care of them are very important in human life in its manifestation and personality development in initiating and developing relationships (Baumrind, 1991).

2. Objectives and Hypothesis

2.1. Objectives

The goal of this project was to verify if and how the time has changed children's perception of parents, referring to a similar study of Rose Vincent, created 50 years ago in France.

The objective of this research was to illustrate how children perceive their parents and their preferences for the different parenting styles.

- Note1. We compared different cultural spaces, in different time intervals using different illustrations.
- Note2. We worked on a narrower age range compared to the author's reference study in order not to overlap two of Piaget's intelligence stages of development.
- Note3. We used the work *Knowing the Child* published and translated into Romanian language in our practical work with our students only for the didactic-scientific purpose.

2.2. Hypothesis

The working hypotheses have sought to ensure that:

H 1. the children's perception of their real mother and father is different from the children's image of the ideal mother and father;

H 2. boys and girls have different images of ideal mother and father;

H 3. children would like a certain parenting style.

3. Methods

3.1. Participants

In order to represent the target population appropriately in our research, sampling was made by random selection in such a way that each individual had an equal probability of being selected.

47 boys and 54 girls answered the *Rose Vincent* questionnaire. The children were pupils in grades 3, 4 and 5 at School No. 2 and *Unirea* National College from Braşov. Thus, the photographs were presented to 101 pupils with very diverse backgrounds, boys and girls, aged between 7 and 11, pupils of a neighborhood school and a central school.

Compared to the original research, where the children were between 4 and 14 years old, we changed the range of ages due to the following considerations: - in developmental psychology the ontogenetic development plan is particularly important, the staging periods being realized while taking into account some fundamental needs, development tasks, types of activities and relationships; - the age interval from 4 to 14, which the psychologist Vincent Rose used in his research, encompasses several periods of age. Thus, the first stage, called the preoperational stage by J. Piaget, lasts from approximately 2 to 7 years of age and has a sub-stage of intuitive thinking that lasts from about 4 to 7 years of age, when the child performs sorting and grading operations by various properties (at this level the classification is done by only one feature). After that Piaget talks about the concrete operational stage (from approximately 7 to 11 years of age), characterized by the development of mental operations and of reversibility, when children begin to apply logical rules to the information processing operations in order to solve the problems they are facing, the child also acquiring the ability to classify things according to several features. Thus, during the concrete operational stage, the child performs a large number of intellectual tasks provided the child has intuitive support.

In conclusion, Rose Vincent included in his sample two different stages of cognitive development, and we wanted to carry out this research for a single stage, i.e. the concrete operational stage.

Numerous studies show that family relationships are more harmonious in this age range than they appear in the ‘folklore’ and that the children actually just seek parental approval. The tension that appears once the child becomes an adolescent is present on both sides of the relationship. In addition, as the children were under 14, we needed parental consent for asking the children questions. We would like to mention that the primary school teachers and the head teachers were very helpful.

3.2. Instruments

To illustrate how children live their relationships with their parents, Rose Vincent developed between 1967 and 1968 a test, a research tool, we are trying to use after nearly 50 years to see how the children’s perceptions of their mothers and fathers changed and what they think should be their role. For this, along with the first year students of the Faculty of Psychology and Pedagogy from Braşov, we tried to look for photographs of mothers and fathers in a very specific situation, involving their children, the physical appearance of the characters being consistent with their role. In order to eliminate our own judgement, we balanced an attractive detail with a nasty one, so that the children could freely interpret the role (character) of the parents from the photos. For this, the images that had been selected by the students were then reselected at a roundtable by joint vote, drafting the final photographs and multiplying them, editing the rules of the test and the preparation for the field work being devised in detail, with deadlines and students to be held responsible for them.

3.3. Procedures

The research is quantitative, measuring how frequently children want / do not want a particular model of mother and father, how often children identify their own parents and how often children want to marry when they get older.

To comply with the rigorous rules of the test without influencing the children in any way, field workers were trained in understanding and applying the test correctly. The test rules and questions to be asked are the original ones (Rose Vincent, 1980, p. 6.).

Imagine that you are in another world ... and you can choose your ideal mother.

I. If you lived in this world and you could choose, which of these mothers would you choose? Why?

II. Which of them would you never choose? Why not?

III. For girls – Which ones would you want to look like when you grow up? Why?

For boys – Which of them would you like to marry later? Why?

IV. For girls – Which of them would you never want to look like? Why?

For boys – which of them would you not like to marry? Why not?

V. Which of these mothers most resembles your real mother? Why?

VI. Which one is least resembling your real mother?

Mother

Photo 1 is the mother-friend, the closest to them.

Photo 2 is the sweet mother, the mother who spoils her children.

Photo 3 is the fashionable mother.

Photo 4 is the busy mother.

Photo 5 is the calm mother.

Photo 6 is the child-mother.

Photo 7 is the energetic mother – the mother hen type.

Photo 8 is the authoritarian mother.

Father

Photo 1 is the important father.

Photo 2 is the seductive father.

Photo 3 is the authoritarian father.

Photo 4 is the jack-of-all-trades.

Photo 5 is the star father.
 Photo 6 is the 'man of interior' father.
 Photo 7 is the sweet father.
 Photo 8 is the sports father.

4. Conclusions

Table 1. Children's choice of mother

	Boys	Girls	Overall
The ideal mother for them	The mother-friend; photo 1; 51.06%	The mother-friend; photo 1; 81.48%	The mother-friend; photo 1; 81.48%
The one that resembles the real mother the most	The busy mother; photo 4; 51.06%	The busy mother; photo 4; 24.07%	The busy mother; photo 4; 36.63%
The least wanted mother	The sweet mother; photo 2; 48.93%	The sweet mother; photo 2; 59.25%	The sweet mother; photo 2; 54.45%
The one that resembles the real mother the least	The calm mother; photo 5; 40.42%	The fashionable mother; photo 3; 35.18%	
The one girls would like to resemble later and the boys would like to marry later	The mother-friend; photo 1; 57.44%	The mother-friend; photo 1; 59.25%	The mother-friend; photo 1; 58.41%

The girls' and boys' options for the ideal friend-mother indicates the children's urgent need of emotionally open continuous relationship, as the busy mother, least wanted by both categories, expresses the harsh reality of the contemporary family where the mother, concerned about her profession, neglects her role as a friend in her relationships with her children. The ideal friend-mother is also found at Vincent, being clear evidence that after half a century the relational and emotional necessities are relatively the same; on the other hand, the busy mother specific to the contemporary society requires a 'school for parents' in the direction of spending more active time with the family. The sweet mother, found very often among the choices of Vincent's respondents, is rejected by our respondents showing this new generation's need of independence and of responsible involvement in their own lives. The idea of sweet mother and mother hen is rejected for the future too, neither the girls, nor the boys wanting to look like them later or to have a partner like them in the future.

The conclusions point out the fact that girls are more critical of their mothers and more permissive with their fathers. For girls, the real mother is the sweet mother who spoils her children, but they do not want her, and the ideal mother is still the friend-mother. The ideal father is the sweet father, who is the real father, too.

According to the data from Table 2, the real father should be equally jack-of-all-trades and the 'man of interior'. The boys preferring the latter told us that this type was more available to communicate with his family than the jack-of-all-trades type, who was appreciated for his practical, operative interventions in the household. It is also surprising the fact that in Rose Vincent's research the French population appreciates the father's authority, quality which is not found very often among the Romanian children's choices, showing that authoritarianism is either not properly exercised by the parent, or misinterpreted by the child, and therefore rejected. The sports note and the need to move, specific to childhood, are present in our population as the sports father is one of the important choices. He combines not only the movement and communication, but also the outfit and the physical appearance, which sport and movement maintain. Regarding the options for the jack-of-all-trades, one special answer is worth mentioning: father 'wastes his time on work'. In this case the child sees work as an enemy; he is frustrated because the time father spends at work should have been spent on the father-son relationship.

Looking at the mother's personality, we notice that the ideal mother is a friend, while the real one spoils them. We can conclude that the youngsters refuse concessions, a lenient attitude and the overtaking of duties and tasks by their mothers, because they think of them as a form of minimizing their opportunities, bringing excessive protection.

Table 2. Children's choice of father

	Boys	Girls
The ideal father for them	The sports father; photo 8; 57.44%	The sweet father; photo 7; 38.8%
The least wanted father	The jack-of-all-trades; photo 4; 38.29%	The jack-of-all-trades; photo 4; 24.07%
The one boys would like to resemble later	The sports father; photo 8; 34.04%	The 'man of interior'; photo 6; 40.74%
The one boys would not like to resemble and girls would not like to marry	The jack-of-all-trades; photo 4; 38.29%	The seductive father; photo 2; 25.92%
The one that resembles the real father the most	The jack-of-all-trades; photo 4; 19.14% The 'man of interior'; photo 6; 19.14% The sports father; photo 8; 17,02%	The sweet father; photo 7; 33.33%
The one that resembles the real father the least	The important father; photo 1; 19.14%	The seductive father; photo 2; 40.74%

The data obtained shows that the ideal mother differs from the real mother. This fact should be taken into consideration by parents, counselors, trainers, teachers, social workers or by all those who influence or want to influence a child's development.

The degree of independence of today's children explains why the answers of our respondents are different from the answers received by Rose Vincent regarding the ideal mother.

Both past and present girls and boys feel the relationship of friendship between their parents and them as an acute need.

We cannot propose a generalization of data, given the size and selection of the sample, but we want to draw the attention of all those involved in the children's lives on some directions the social intervention can take if they consider our results.

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