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# The Authoritarian Syndrome in Attitudes and Educational Practices of Russian Parents

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## Abstract

In the structure of indicators of authoritarianism, a central position is occupied by rigidity of educational attitudes as a manifestation of the syndrome of authoritarian aggression. This article addresses educational attitudes of mothers, as well as their idea of the role of a father in families with varied economic resources. The study involved 500 mothers, selected basing on the criterion of self-identification of their economic status (low and medium), under the age of 45, with children aged from 1.5 to 3 years old. Educational attitudes were estimated on the basis of views characterizing typical principals of upbringing of children in everyday family life. This study highlighted that authoritarian attitudes are characteristic of low resource families, rather than of families with medium resources. A similar tendency can be traced in mothers' perception of fathers in these families: as more authoritarian and more democratic, sensitive, partner-oriented in communication with their children, respectively. This work suggests the directions in correction of authoritarian educational attitudes.

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*Keywords:* Authoritarianism; education; economic resources; parents; children

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## 1. Introduction

The problem of an authoritarian personality is attracting considerable interest due to its direct relation to vital issues of social development such as democratization, reinforcement of humanistic values, tolerance, high legal

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consciousness etc. The problem under consideration is particularly important for societies with a totalitarian past, undergoing processes of radical reorganization. The early 1990s witnessed appearance of a number of researches by Russian authors, focused on the authoritarian syndrome, its occurrence and search of meaningful correlates that allow projecting its dynamics (Abalakina, Ageev & MakFarland, 1990; Samoylova, 1996; Jurtajkin & D'jakonova, 2001).

The first to investigate the phenomenon of authoritarianism, T. Adorno, co-authored by Frenkel-Brunswik, D. Levinson and N. Sanford, gave a definition of the “authoritarian syndrome” and its major traits: hierarchization of social space, an irrational attitude towards authorities, building self-esteem basing on humiliation of the weak, aggression, superstition, projectivity, stereotypy, anti-intraception. These researchers saw a psychoanalytic explanation of its causes in the influence of relationships in a family, traditional methods of punishment, the degree of parents’ attachment to their children (Adorno et al., 1950). B. Altemeyer’s explanation of authoritarianism (1988) was based on the theory of social learning, in compliance with which behavior is the result of cognitive, personal and environmental factors. According to K. Stenner authoritarianism is a dynamic characteristic of a personality that depends on exogenous factors. In the presence of a social threat, actual or fabricated by mass media, authoritarian personalities would expect the government to restore order by all manner of means, including suppression, resorting to force and harsh sanctions (Stenner, 2005).

There is little agreement among researchers on a number of issues connected to the etiology and specifics of the syndrome, and Karen Stenner’s opinion on nebulousness of what it looks like and what it does seems to be quite agreeable (2005). Empirical findings point out to the absence of any insuperable contradictions between personal and environmental approaches, while, in our view, the integral approach to the phenomenon appear to be the most reasonable. Authoritarianism exists as a stable personal formation, the degree of intensity of which depends on external conditions, and the social situation may actualize or, on the opposite, weaken corresponding personal dispositions.

A comparative study suggests that the level of intensity of authoritarian attitudes of the Soviet people, observed in the period of a sharp up-turn of democratic expectations, appeared to be lower than that of the Americans, however, in terms of the binding force the authoritarian syndrome of the Russians was more solid (Abalakina, Ageev & MakFarland, 1990). Tight intercorrelations of indicators of the modified F-scale, used in investigations starting from 1992, prove Adorno’s idea that the authoritarian syndrome is a stable personal nucleus inherent in some people. At the same time, one could observe a decline in typically authoritarian attitudes in relation to the condition of the social and cultural climate, for example, increased tolerance with regards to gender issues. An increase in the level of sympathy with disabled children with cognitive impairments, recognition of their right to a decent life on level with healthy children is another example. Thus, an attitude opposing the authoritarian paradigm, having acquired the character of a social norm, lowers the power potential of the authoritarian syndrome (Samoylova, 1996).

Rigidity of educational attitudes as a manifestation of the syndrome of authoritarian aggression is the centerpiece in the structure of indicators of authoritarianism. Its significance is exacerbated by complexity of mechanisms of intergenerational transmission, extreme resistance of principles and methods of upbringing that parents carry from their own early experiences over to relationships with their children. In the Russian practice of family education, this is reflected in a right, in parents’ opinion, to use aggressive disciplinary methods (verbal and physical). Even if these attitudes are latent, they increase likelihood of domestic violence and endanger psychological health of children. Analysis of the dynamics of educational attitudes of parents is, therefore, of topical social interest: what are the possibilities of democratization of family education as one of the mechanisms to bridge the gap between the proclaimed democratic values and the inertia of authoritarian consciousness in the Russian society.

Research Questions. Are there any differences in educational attitudes of mothers from families with low and medium economic resources? What are the interrelations of mothers’ educational attitudes with their age and educational level? What image of an educating father is characteristic of families with different economic resources? What are the strategies of correction of authoritarian attitudes of parents?

## **2. Method**

### *2.1 Respondents*

The study involved 500 mothers selected basing on the criterion of self-identification of their economic status (low and medium), under the age of 45, with children aged from 1.5 to 3 years old. Economic resources, within the

framework of the study, are generally understood to mean a complex of material goods in the possession of a family, including aggregate income, property security, housing situation, together with assessment of a subjective consumer status. The findings suggest that mothers coming from low resource (hereinafter LR) families compared to those from medium resource (hereinafter MR) families characterized consumer practices of their family as practice of the poor (96.5% vs. 19.4%). Property security of MR families appeared to be higher. They were more likely to say that the family had a car (96.8% vs. 43.4%), an apartment (88.7% vs. 64.7%), a country house, a summer house (38.0% vs. 6.9%), a plot (11.3% vs. 3.2%).

A significant part of the families from the LR group compared to the families from the MR group have indigent status and receive state welfare benefits (56.9% vs. 8.7%) or financial assistance from their parents (25.2% vs. 18.0%).

LR group mothers are often younger and less educated; on the contrary, MR group women are of a more mature age and have a higher level of education. The share of young mothers under the age of 20 and between 20-24 in the LR group amounted to 32.6% and 37.6%, in the MR group – to 6.0% and 28.0%. In the MR group representatives of the 25-29 age group (40.7%) prevailed, the percentage of women over 30 years of age was 25.3%.

In the LR group, more than half of the mothers had secondary vocational education - 58.7%, secondary education - 20.5%, and only one in five respondents (20.6%) had higher education. The share of women with higher education in the MR group was three times higher - 62.0%, with secondary vocational education - lower - 34.0%, with secondary education - only 4.0%

## 2.2. Instruments

The instrument employed here to obtain primary information was the direct questioning method - a personal interview with registration of respondents' answers to questions put by the interviewer, in accordance with the purposes and objectives of the study. The interview included close-ended questions. When replying to a *close-ended* question a respondent was supposed to choose the most suitable option (one or more) from those provided. Statistical data analysis was performed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

The questionnaire included the following sets of questions: (1) social and demographic characteristics: age, educational level, family and professional status, (2) family structure (nuclear and extended), parents' family status (normative family, stepfamily, single-parent family), parenthood status of the family; (3) economic resources of the family (family income level, property security, housing situation, subjective assessment of the consumer status, (4) cultural resources of a family (cultural and educational competencies, cultural practices); (5) attitudes and educational practices of mothers/fathers. The last block of the questionnaire features sections from Varga-Stolin's parenting style test questionnaire: the "authoritarian hypersocialization" scale (6 items), "acceptance and cooperation with a child" (6 items), additionally "symbiosis" (2 items) and a generalized attitude to the educational role (1 item).

## 3. Results

The sequence of presentation of the research findings corresponds to the sequence of the research questions.

### 3.1. Educational attitudes of mothers from LR and MR groups

The Table 1 contains distribution of responses to the items describing educational attitudes of mothers from families with low and medium economic resources.

Agreement with the points of the scale "acceptance – cooperation" (lines 1-6) and "symbiosis" (lines 7,8) characterizes the parental attitude as emotionally warm, accepting, concerned, based on perception of a child's identity and appreciation of his/her potential. Mothers show focus on a child and his/her well-being.

Analysis of the data suggests that mothers from MR families are generally more positive towards their children in comparison with mothers from LR families. A larger part of them show empathy, readiness to always sympathize with their child (92.7% and 84.4%, respectively), sensitivity to the needs of a child (92.0% and 81.7%), willingness to respect his/her individuality (81.3% and 68.8%), to consider his/her opinion as the one of an equal member of a family (92.7% and 75.2%). They accompany their love for a child by a desire to protect him/her from hardships of life (78.7% and 67.4%), to secure calm childhood free from cares for him/her (90.7% and 75.7%). Although

attitudes of most mothers from LR families are similar, a significant percentage of the latter do not consider it necessary “to get adapted to a child ...” (31.2%), “to consider a child’s opinion when taking family decisions” (24.8%), “to protect their child from difficulties in life” (32.6%).

Table 1 – Educational attitudes of mothers from families with low and medium economic resources (as a percentage of respondents)

	Educational attitudes	General data selection		Level of family resources			
		Generally I agree	Generally I disagree	Low resources		Medium resources	
				Generally I agree	Generally I disagree	Generally I agree	Generally I disagree
1	Parents must like their child the way he/she is	93.5	6.3	92.7	6.9	94.7	5.3
2	A child’s wish is something to be attended to from a very early age	85.9	14.1	81.7	18.3	92.0	8.0
3	A child’s opinion is to be considered when taking family decisions	82.3	17.7	75.2	24.8	92.7	7.3
4	Parents must get adapted to a child, instead of only demanding from him/her	73.9	25.5	68.8	31.2	81.3	17.3
5	Parents must always sympathize with their child	87.8	12.2	84.4	15.6	92.7	7.3
6	A child must be taught everything in life step by step	91.0	9.0	89.9	10.1	92.7	7.3
7	Good parents protect their child from difficulties in life	72.0	28.0	67.4	32.6	78.7	21.3
8	The most important thing for a child is to have a quiet childhood free from cares	81.8	17.9	75.7	23.9	90.7	9.3
9	A child must have no secrets from his/her parents	82.1	17.7	79.8	20.2	85.3	14.0
10	It is advisable that a child is friends with children that his/her parents like	83.7	16.3	78.4	21.6	91.3	8.7
11	I think, my child I not going to succeed in life without my help	75.3	24.7	76.1	23.9	74.0	26.0
12	Things must be explained to a child only when he/she is able to understand them	91.3	8.7	87.6	12.4	96.7	3.3
13	The most important thing to be cultivated in a child is respect to the elders	89.1	10.9	85.3	14.7	94.7	5.3
14	A child, when an adult, will thank his/her parents for strict upbringing	81.5	18.2	79.4	20.6	84.7	14.7
15	Upbringing of children is nothing but hassle	48.1	51.9	48.2	51.8	48.0	52.0

Points of the scale “authoritarian hypersocialization” (9-14) reflect the form and direction of control over behavior of a child. When the total score is high authoritarian domination is obvious. A parent excessively interferes with a child’s life, tries to impose his/her will, expects unconditional obedience and discipline, and shows excessive strictness in punishment.

In all sections, but one, the level of agreement of mothers from MR families is higher. “A child must have no secrets from his/her parents” (85.3% vs. 79.8%), “It is advisable that a child is friends with children that his/her parents like” (91.3% vs. 78.4%), “Things must be explained to a child only when he/she is able to understand them” (96.7% vs. 87.6%), “The most important thing to be cultivated in a child is respect to the elders” (94.7% vs. 85.3%), “A child, when an adult, will thank his/her parents for strict upbringing” (84.7% vs. 79.4%).

Almost half of the women in both groups (48.1%) believe that upbringing of children involves “hassle” (high emotional stress, which is associated with negative emotions such as irritation, shame, anger). Thus, the nature of their expectations of the role of a mother creates a high probability of negative emotions towards their children.

### 3.2. The attitudes in relation to the age and education of mothers

Analysis of educational attitudes in relation to the age of mothers shows that mothers over 30 years of age, in comparison to younger mothers, are more likely to respect a child’s personality, they more often take into account his/her individual peculiarities and adapt to them, believe in the potential of their child and in his/her ability to succeed. With age, focus on a child’s needs and security grows. At the same time, no age-related differences in attitudes were revealed with respect to the level and nature of control over a child’s behavior. From 80 to 90% of mothers are in favor of strict upbringing, based on unconditional respect for the elders and allowing for excessive

interference in a child's life.

Education of mother has a positive effect on their ability to get along with their children and receive more positive emotions from the parent role (34.1% of mothers with higher education characterize upbringing as "hassle", compared to 58.7% of those with secondary vocational education). They more often take a child's opinion with respect (87.0%), are ready to consider his/her individuality and adapt to him/her (78.3%), they do their best to protect a child from difficulties (73.2%) and secure a calm childhood free from cares for him/her (81.9%). Focus on a child is characteristic of mothers with secondary vocational education as well. They, more often than other mothers, consider total control and strict discipline, as well as guarding, essential, as they believe that a child is unable to succeed alone (86.6%). Taking into account that most of them experience a stress caused by interaction with their children, it can be assumed that this very group is characterized by the highest authoritarian potential.

### 3.3. Mothers' perception of parenting practices of fathers

The survey shows that mothers from families with different levels of economic resources have significantly different views on parenting practices of fathers. For example, women from MI families more often cited joint upbringing and joint free time activities (73.3% responses against 56.9%), as well as discussions and advice regarding the children's development (62.0% against 40.8%) as the priority areas where fathers play a role in the upbringing of their children. On the contrary, more mothers from LI families consider the father's personal involvement in taking care of the child (including spending free time with the child without the mother) as a more important factor (57.3% against 45.7%). They more often choose responses that imply the delegation of responsibilities for key parenting decisions to the father. For example, more than one third of all the mothers cited "taking a firm line and providing support in making decisions regarding the upbringing and future of the child" as a more important aspect of fathering (40.6% against 24.7%). At the same time, women in this group were twice as more likely to find it "important that the father does not interfere with the upbringing of the child, because the mother knows better" (18.3% against 9.3%).

The subjective satisfaction of the mother with her husband in the role of father influences, to some extent, the perception of the upbringing of a child as a natural, harmonious process. For example, mothers who are "satisfied with the father's performance" in the upbringing of their children experience fewer parenting-related stresses than those "unsatisfied" (43.4% against 62.5%), are more willing to take into account the children's opinion in making family decisions (85.1% against 75.0%), and are ready to accept the child as is (95.1% against 80.0%). At the same time, the mothers "satisfied with the father's performance" more often agree to statements, such as "respect for adults is the most important thing to be nurtured in children" (92.7 % against 77.5%), "it is desirable that the child have friends from among children liked by his/her parents" (89.2% against 62.5%), "parents often regret that their children grow older and mature" (75.3% against 42.5%), "when the child becomes an adult, he/she will be thankful to his/her parents for the strict upbringing he/she had" (85.7% and 60.0%).

## 4. Discussion of Results

Despite inevitable difficulties of the transition period, a higher level of activity, independency and responsibility, conscious attitudes to life events, and well-developed skills in making independent decisions are in line with the trend for enhancing the adaptive capacity of individuals in the contemporary Russian context. A desire to nurture independence in their children challenges parents with complex problems, because as children, many of them were taught the qualities of discipline, obedience and conformity. Russian families still rarely recognize and encourage autonomy, activity and self-control of a child as goals of upbringing, and this manifests itself in parenting strategies and everyday practices.

The stability of the authoritarian personality syndrome, of which "strict upbringing strategy" is part, is conditioned by its complex nature and difficult living conditions. Therefore we expected it to be stronger in low income families. The focus on the needs of survival reduces the parents' capability to allocate sufficient time for communicating and playing games with their children, engaging in comfortable, developmental leisure activities, and developing both their own and their children's interests. We also assumed that the older the mother, the more competent she is as a parent and the more aware she is of the needs of her child and of the conditions necessary for the full-fledged development of the child's personality. The level of education is one of the most important demographic factors of authoritarianism. A low level of education is positively correlated with authoritarianism, while higher education

helps reduce authoritarianism by raising the level of culture and the extent of the breadth and freedom of convictions. Secondary vocational education (in vocational schools and colleges) does not diminish authoritarian tendencies in a personality, but rather expands them (Samoylova, 1996).

The surveyed mothers from LI families not only live in difficult financial circumstances, but also appeared to be less educated and of younger age, hence less mature personalities; therefore they were very likely to show authoritarian tendencies in their parenting strategies. On the contrary, mothers from MI families showed an unexpected result. Their parenting strategies appeared to be not only contradictory, but also even more authoritarian in terms of control of the children. According to them, the well-being of their children is closely connected with providing a high level of direction, defining the limits of safe behavior and strictly monitoring that these are not violated by the children. Mothers from IC families are willing to give more freedom to their children, but less often tend to establish emotional bonds with the child, more often ignore the child's interests and desires, and tend to be more detached from the child's life in general.

Thus, the specific factors of authoritarianism of mothers in the surveyed groups can be summarized as follows: In the LI group, it is the lack of awareness of the importance of the parental role and the lack of focus on their educational competence. In the MI group it is an exaggerated care for the safety of the child (probably as a result of the enhanced parental responsibility).

The authoritarian model of family life manifests itself in specific patterns of everyday interactions between the spouses as parents, the nature of attitudes and the degree to which mothers are satisfied with their husbands as fathers. Mothers from LI families rather tend to have contradictory requirements for fathers that are typical of an authoritarian parental culture. On the one hand, they more often want to see fathers playing a traditional role as a mentor and leader in making decisions concerning the upbringing and future of their children, the one who communicates control, strict rules and norms. On the other hand, they not only see the father's role as a power resource of traditional masculinity, but also perceive it as a source of moral responsibility of the father for the upbringing of the child. At the same time, in practice, this group more often gives a passive role to fathers, with mothers denying a proactive role of men in the upbringing and development of children, which, in fact, promotes a model where the father is "missing" and the dominant and possessive mother becomes *an active educator*, putting the father's decisions into practice in everyday life.

Mothers from MI families have higher requirements for the activity of their spouses in the role of father. This concerns both the division of joint responsibility for the care of the children and the involvement of fathers in the upbringing process, which refers to the amount of time that fathers spend with their children and the quality of relationships between the father and the child. They more often pay attention to democratic parenting strategies and practices typical of the involved fatherhood, such as discussion of upbringing issues with the father, building a rich environment for the development of the children together with the father, joint leisure activities, and planning the future of the child. The surveys carried out in St. Petersburg show that fathers of this type find their identity in joint activities with other fathers in men's clubs and support groups, participate in childbirth and share their experience with fathers-to-be (Bezrukova, 2012, 2013). According to the research by J.H.Plek (1997), the involvement of fathers in upbringing is positively correlated with emotional well-being of children, enhanced empathy, cognitive competence and the ability to establish trust-based relationships with peers.

Authoritarian parenting sets back personal development. The children of dominant parents grow into passive adults who tend to avoid life or, on the contrary, into aggressive and demanding individuals with high expectations of others. Excessive parental control adversely affects the emotional state of children and teenagers (Chong, Rahim, Teh & Tong, 2014). The intergenerational transmission of authoritarianism has complex psychological mechanisms which are disclosed by K.Horney (1937); therefore authoritarian models of parenting are difficult to change. According to J.Brownlie and S.Anderson (2006), the supporters of strict socialization practices are most commonly found among those who were physically punished as children (72%). This is a very significant fact for parenting practices in Russia. While methods of disciplining children become softer and most parents deny the use of physical punishment, only about one fourth of them are firmly convinced that it is not acceptable under any circumstances, and 75.0% of parents of teenagers think that physical punishment can be used in different situations, such as, for example, stealing, drinking alcohol, smoking, lying, rudeness and disrespect to parents, truancy and poor academic performance (Samoylova, 2014).

The social situation also influences the overall level of authoritarianism. Parenting practices are affected by consequences of a cultural trauma caused by the post-Soviet transformations, the anomie, stresses and uncertainty experienced by parents. At the same time, in a democratic society, open coercion to stop unwanted behaviors cannot be accepted as an appropriate upbringing strategy. In our opinion, there are several ways to overcome the

authoritarian syndrome in parenting strategies and practices among Russian parents. Real measures that can help improve family education include active education of parents, support to young parents in undertaking their role, primary prevention programs, the development of cooperation between specialists and parents, and raising awareness through media, provided they are widely applied, particularly through the development of civil society institutions and parent communities. A special role is to be played by professional psychologists who work directly with parents and children at psychological centers or social services or train teachers, social workers, etc. When working with children, teenagers and students, specialists should put a particular focus on the development of their creative capabilities. Openness to new ideas, flexibility and broad creative thinking are opposed to authoritarian rigidity and stiffness (Rubinstein, 2003). Therefore it is necessary to provide a space for the development of creativity in students in educational institutions (Iskra & Moskvicheva, 2014).

## 5. Conclusion

Results of the study suggest the following conclusions. In mothers' attitudes an authoritarian position towards their children is expressed quite clearly: expectation of obedience, willingness to control all aspects of his/her life, strictness. This model of education is the result of both a simplified approach to the parent role characteristic of part of parents, and a reflection of hypertrophied care of loving parents for their child's in a society undergoing numerous transformations. Authoritarian attitudes are more often characteristic of families with low economic resources. Improvement of material conditions of life and high level of education of parents contribute to weakening of authoritarian tendencies, at the same time, by virtue of complex psychological mechanisms of their intergenerational transmission, the inertia of authoritarian upbringing continues to exist. Awareness of parents of the effects of authoritarian practices on mental and personal health of children, growth of competence in developmental psychology, effective communication with children, development of tolerance skills, cooperation, and respect for personal space and children's right to free choice are vital for democratization of family education. These directions of correction are meant to help bridge the gap between the proclaimed democratic values and the inertia of authoritarian consciousness in the Russian society.

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