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Dreams and desires of preschoolers

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Abstract

The research presented in this article is part of the “Children in a Changing World” project, a cross-sectional study that explores the influence of social changes on the world views of children. The project was launched in 1992, at a time when socioeconomic reforms began to unfold in Russia. Six cross sections have been conducted to date, each including interviews with older preschoolers in the age range of 5.6-7.0 years. The children were asked about their life today and how they imagine it in the future. This article analyzes the way that the dreams and desires of older preschoolers have changed over the past two decades (comparing the dreams and desires children expressed in the 1990s with those voiced by children of the same age in 2015). The main results obtained through qualitative analysis suggest certain changes in the structure of the preschooler’s desires (in particular, an increase in “magical,” non-realistic wishes) and a decrease in the negative influence of the distant environment on the children.

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1. Introduction

Psychology studies on children show conclusively that research into the development process must analyze not only the influence of the immediate (proximal) environment but also the effects of the distant environment, which has an indirect but no less substantial impact. Changes in the social situation are among the main sources of

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changes in the distant environment and they can cause heightened anxiety and learned helplessness and impair value systems even when family relations (i.e., immediate environment) remain favorable.

Longitudinal studies that describe the immediate impact of major social shocks such as the Great Depression of 1929-1939 or the farm crisis of the 1980s [1], [2], [3] and then trace their delayed effects have shown that the psychological consequences of social crises extend to self-esteem, internalization of gender and family roles, relations with peers, and perceptions of one's ability; going forward, all of this affects success in both personal and professional life. The age at which children experience social shocks is crucial: the younger the child is, the more destructive and enduring the impact is. For this reason, in recent years, studies of social changes have been increasingly conducted with preschoolers and early school-aged children.

Studies on the psychological effect of social changes on young children can be divided into two groups. The first one analyzes the effects of crises (e.g., [3], [4], [5], [6], [7]), the other describes the effects of changes that occur gradually, over time, on children's attitudes, values, and perceptions [2], [8], [9], [10], [11]).

We should note that the significance of studies on the attitudes, fears, and desires of preschoolers and early school-age children is not limited to their insights into how destructive particular situations are or how much of a mismatch exists between development conditions and children's needs. Analyzing the perceptions of children about their surroundings makes it possible to assess the severity and dynamics of social problems.

Our study examines how the dreams and desires of today's preschoolers have changed compared to those expressed by preschoolers in the 1990s (the period when the economic reforms were beginning in Russia).

2. Research Design, Participants and Method

The results presented in this article are a small part of a cross-sectional study conducted within the framework of the "Children in a Changing World" project. The project was initiated in 1992; several months after the economic reforms began in Russia. The format of the study is discussions (structured interviews) with preschoolers about a wide range of aspects of their lives. Interviews with participants from the same age group were conducted two more times in the 1990s and three times between 2001 and 2015. The interviews were timed to correspond with major social changes in the country (transition to market relations, the banking crisis and others). This is the only study on preschoolers in Russia that spans more than two decades and makes it possible not only to assess the features of the children's development in a particular social situation, but also to evaluate changes over relatively long segments of time. The study was supported by the Russian Foundation for Humanities, project № 16-06-00758.

The participants included older preschoolers residing in Moscow and attending preschool. The age of the children ranged from 5.6 to 7.0 years and each of the six stages involved 80-100 participants. The samples were formed based on the same principles each year and are comparable.

Responses to the following question were interpreted to identify the participants' dreams and desires: "If you had a magic wand that could grant you three wishes, what would you ask for?" This phrasing allowed the children to express any desires, even the most unusual ones, and it permitted the researchers not only to see the children's desires and fantasies, but also to analyze their immediate needs.

The responses were classified as "magic" or "realistic" and the latter were broken down into three groups (wishes for oneself, wishes for friends and family, and wishes for everyone). Changes in the distribution of different responses over the time were analyzed (responses in the 1990s were compared with those in 2015). This article presents only the qualitative analysis results.

3. Results and Discussion

In the 1990s, children had fewer "magic" wishes than those that reflected their real needs. The typical 90-s "magic" wishes included wanting to become a sorcerer or learning to fly.

The number of "magic" wishes increased in 2015 and these became the most common category. Today's children are more likely to desire unrealistic or unrealizable things ("to have nothing impossible in the world...

teleportation... being able to move things at will... so that nothing is really impossible”) than children of the 1990s. Modern children want to become sorcerers, have magic wands (“not a simple one, but one with instructions so that it can only do good and can’t do evil”) or other magical devices, such as flying brooms. Some children want personal fairies, or cartoon or computer game characters that have come to life. Other children want everything at once (“special magic jewelry that can make me a fairy or a ballerina or a mermaid”).

In our view, this increase in the proportion of “magic” wishes has three causes: First, the improved quality of life (the children’s basic needs have already been satisfied) means that children don’t need to “waste” their wishes on candy or toys; second, the popularity of fantasy books, films, and cartoons (such as books about Harry Potter or films about vampires and sorcerers). Third, adults’ increased belief in the supernatural, which is an unfortunate mark of our time and cannot but affect children. It is interesting and meaningful for an understanding of social changes that the increase in “magic” wishes occurs among not only preschoolers but also older children, such as teenagers [12].

Children who make realistic wishes most frequently ask for things for themselves (in the 1990s, such wishes were even more prevalent than “magic” ones). Children are less likely to ask for things for friends and family and even less likely to wish things for everyone. A good representation of the dreams and desires of the participants is the statement of one child: “I wish to have all of the toys I want, to be allowed to do anything I want, and to become a grown-up as soon as possible.”

Notably, the coveted toys have changed over time. In the 1990s, girls usually wanted Barbie dolls and boys wanted transformers. Many kids wished for stuffed animals. In 2015, various types of Lego sets were most popular. Children also wanted radio-controlled toys, dolls, and transformers. Stuffed animals weren’t named as desired objects. In 2015, children often talked about wanting various gadgets, such as mobile phones, tablets, iPads, iPhones, and other devices that did not exist in the 1990s.

Almost no one asked for sweets, tasty foods, or nice clothes in 2015, which clearly suggests that these items are more accessible—they were available in the 1990s, but the children were not getting their fill. The number of children who talked about wanting to get rich and have a lot of money was the same in 2015 as in the 1990s. The same amount of children also talked about wanting a pet. In addition, equally prevalent were wishes to grow up quickly, become adults, become smarter, learn to read and write, “get all A’s in schools,” “get a degree and do well at work and earn a lot of money.” As before, children wanted to be healthy, “to never get sick” and “to never die.” The study participants also wanted “for mom not to get upset” and “to be proud of me,” for “more weekends,” and to “always be friends with friends and to help each other out in times of need.”

Wishes for friends and family have changed somewhat. In the 1990s, children wanted their parents to earn a lot of money or find jobs with a bigger salary (i.e., desires for financial well-being). In 2015, very few such wishes were made. Other hopes for friends and family were the same in 2015 as in the 1990s: “for everything to be good in the family,” “for none of us to get sick,” and “I would give these wishes to my sister and brother and other brother so they could wish for something.”

The “global” wishes that children had “for everyone” were different in 2015 compared to those in the 1990s. During the first cross section in 1992, when socioeconomic challenges were particularly acute, children wanted everyone to benefit from lower prices and more accessible food, and “to have enough money.” In 2015, such wishes were not voiced, but the overall number of “global wishes” was unchanged. Children wanted “for things to be good for everyone, and for no one to be sick, including little babies in the hospital who were just born,” “for everyone to live forever,” and “for everyone to be happy.”

On the whole, the dreams and desires of preschoolers in 2015 attest to their relatively favorable living conditions and a decreased negative impact of the distant environment compared to the 1990s, despite the existing political and socioeconomic problems in Russia. As expected, the structure of the children’s wishes has changed somewhat in line with the social, economic, and technological changes in society.

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