

## Research Capacity of Qualitative Sociological Methods When Studying Actual and Future Family Models of Children in Russia

<sup>1</sup>Albina Beschasnaya and <sup>2</sup>Ekaterina Dashevskaya

<sup>1</sup>Department of Sociology, Saint Petersburg State University of Architecture and Civil Engineering,  
Sadovaya Str. 83-2, 190121 St. Petersburg, Russia

<sup>2</sup>North West Institute of Management of the Academy of National Economy,  
Gavanskaia Str. 4/2-12, 199106 St. Petersburg, Russia

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**Abstract:** Comparative analysis of the images of the actual and probabilistic future families was conducted in order to study the peculiarities of formation of family models in children (senior preschool age). Data was collected using a combination of two research methods, i.e., focus group method and family drawing projective technique. The reasons for selection of qualitative research methods in sociology were the following: psychological specifics of childhood, close determination of an evolving mind and children's relations with the "lifeworld" and social space. The research has shown differences in the actual and future family models as viewed by children with a trend for their transformation.

**Key words:** Family, children, sociology of childhood, focus group, projective procedure, daily occurrence, construction of social reality

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### INTRODUCTION

**On theoretic and methodological basis of qualitative research methods in sociology:** Despite the fact that sociology is a comparatively new science (the term "sociology" was introduced by Auguste Comte in the early 19th century and the science was acknowledged publicly in the early 20th century) by the early 21st century it has accumulated a wealth of theories and concepts that allowed explaining social issues of public life from various methodological positions and modelling research procedures using various cognition methods. The earlier classic theories as well as the new ones were enriched (Fourcade, 2016; Gobo, 2005; Richer, 2015; Strauss and Corbin, 2001). The modern sociological thought, like a democratic society, is of pluralist nature with regard to opportunities for using theoretical and methodological bases, analysis and interpretation of events. In the 20th century, sociology changed the public opinion by considering public and social issues in the light of the problems of an individual, analysis of his/her perception of reality, "lifeworld" and personal social space. The representatives of the "interpretive sociology" (Weber), symbolic interactionism (Cooley, Thomas, Mead, Habermas, Blumer), phenomenological (Schutz, Berge, Luckmann) and ethnomethodological theories (Garfinkel), etc., made a fundamental contribution to this context.

According to the interpretive theory, sociology seeks to understand the motive, meaning and orientations of people's social actions in their communication with the environment. Based on the ideas of symbolic interactionism, a researcher is interested in the internal meaning and sense encoded in symbols, gestures, language and images, through which an individual understands, communicates and organizes his/her social interaction. The phenomenological endeavor of sociology explains that motifs, notions, concepts and images of behavior and life and the whole structure of the society are formed within individual biographic situations of individuals which are then typified and institutionalized. According to the ethnomethodology ideas, human interaction and the structured nature of the society are formed based on the everyday routine life (expectations). Together, all these theories form the sociology, focused on studying direct interaction of people and their individual experience that has been shaped under specific socioeconomic and cultural conditions. Studying the lifeworld of individuals, habitus of their routine life allows determining the moments of significant shifts in the society as a whole. Social changes that collectively create new outlines of history are generated at the level of everyday social actions of people. This is why the use of "warm, mild qualitative methods serves well for identification of individual motifs and meanings.

The qualitative research methods in sociology are the following: focus group method, case study, in-depth interview, various projective techniques of psychological nature, etc. One of the most important advantage of qualitative methods is that they do not require strict constraints on the age of respondents. Therefore, they can be used for the sociology of childhood studies where children are the informants.

Cognitive abilities of children (of senior preschool age) are characterized as eye-mindedness with underdeveloped abstract thinking. Using the mental processes of comparison and generalization, analysis and synthesis, children (of senior preschool age) can group, classify and structure the social reality and form their own worldview. Based on these visions they are able to coordinate their own intentions, social actions and form social interaction and due to their spontaneity, they also accurately reflect the social reality. Senses and meanings that children perceive during the socialization period are the pivots used for further construction of the world and relationships with other individuals, with the society and within the society, both currently and in future (Kos *et al.*, 2016).

The peculiar features of the focus-group method fit with the features of the child's way of thinking. A focus group allows for children to communicate directly and emotionally, show their individuality and feel secure due to the presence of a group of homogeneous participants. A small number of children participating in a group interview (6-10 children) create an atmosphere of trust and self-presentation of a child as a member of the group and ensures simultaneous acquisition of socially significant information and prevention of intrusion into the private zone of the child's life and family. A focus group allows for digression from the general line of the conversation, alternation of questions, introduction and development of various aspects of the conversation, freedom of expression and feelings. This allows preserving the spontaneity of participants and acquiring the maximum range of children's opinions (Bryman and Bell, 2012; Krueger *et al.*, 2000).

Projective psychological techniques allow acquiring in-depth information about personal feelings, irrational sentiment, ways of arranging and structuring of the social reality and constructing own social world by respondents (Valeeva and Kalimullin, 2016). The family drawing method is informative for studying the image and structure of a family, its well-being, hierarchy and roles and interpersonal relations (Shearn Russel, 2010). This tool for collecting information and knowledge is described in the works by Appel, Burns, Kaufman, Wolff (Oster and

Gould, 2000). Application of the family drawing projective technique was accompanied by the following instructions: "Make a drawing of the family you live in" with the drawing of the future family accompanied by the following instruction: "draw you future family when you become adult". The use of the drawing method that reflects the real and future families allows, according to E. Subbotskiy, facilitates identifying "mundane reality" and "non-mundane reality", respectively, through which children get to know the world. "Collective and individual fantasies having acquired the status of reality in myths, religion, arts, children's imagination and games" are reflected in the projected image of the future family that acts as the "non-mundane reality".

Combination of a focus group and a projective technique allows correlating the objective and the subjective, the rational and the emotional in the understanding and explaining of the social reality. This approach is concordant with the hypothesis by Erlich, concerning the existence of two forms of experience: the objective one (with the subject and the object being separated) and subjective one (with the subject and the object as a single whole). Human mental life is formed through these two kinds of experience that co-exist in space and time. New experience is constantly built around them. The form of the experience a human is focused on right now becomes prominent. Confrontation of those two forms of the child's experience is manifested apparently in the issues of constructing of the reality, trajectory of life and family as an element of personal life space. In these forms, a child acts as a passive object and an active subject of living simultaneously, both currently and in future.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

In this study, the researcher intends to study the peculiarities of formation of the family image through the current perception of the family and modelling of its future image under the conditions of the "liquid modernity". The author chose qualitative sociology methods, i.e., the focus group method and the family drawing projective technique as the main tools to collect the information. It is assumed that the actual image of the family is recorded, copied and reproduced through the lens of the child's perception, upbringing and socialization in the family. Then, the model of a future family is formed which is integrated into the objective conditions of the society. Everyday practice components have meanings and the subjects act as active participants of social system construction. Children act as a foundation for future

events. Children's current (actual) notions of family, parenthood, distribution of family roles, balance between the notions of "childhood" and "adulthood" in the family and in the society and their reflection in construction of family models in future represent the background of the research. Children of age 7 from Saint Petersburg (total of 70 children) and its suburban areas participated in the research as respondents. The duration of the focus group was 20 min and the duration of the drawing exercise was about 40 min (20 min for each drawing of actual and future families).

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

A modern family is a rather complex phenomenon. It lays the most in-depth foundations of personality. It acts as an integrating link between an individual and the society and forms a world view and social behavior skills. Transformations of the family as a social institution in the period of industrialization, expansion of the urbanized lifestyle and ongoing changes in the postindustrial epoch shattered "traditional" concepts of the family and modified the status and role hierarchy and functions performed by its members, modified the social norms of fatherhood, motherhood and childhood, "transformed intimacy", destabilized and diversified the notion of marriage (Barnes, 2014). Children got involved into such changes both as observers and participants. The fast pace of changes in the society complicates their socialization and personality formation. A child, without sufficient life experience, must choose foundations for his/her current life or those needed for construction of a future life from the social situation and events around him/her. In other words, it is the child who designs the model of his/her future family and his/her role in it based on various forms of organization of the family and marriage existing today.

Childhood is a social phenomenon with cultural and historical roots and social characteristics. According to Russian psychologist Blonsky, "childhood as a time segment of a human life, expands as the society moves towards higher stages of its development, as the longevity increases" (Ribinskiy, 1990). French researcher Philippe Aries showed childhood as a social phenomenon, comprehension of which is expressed in a certain image. "Childhood reflects the adults' vision of a child's nature of an individual and their ideas of themselves". Understanding of any life period is related not only to biological age but also to its cultural and social meanings attributed by the society. How does a child understand and perceive the meanings and senses which divide the world into "children" and "adults"?

During the focus-group session, the children expressly defined that there were two ways to understand and measure "childhood-adulthood": inside and outside the family. These ideas get along well in their consciousness, building a foundation for ambiguous insights into events and facts of the social reality and duality of social norms. According to the children, in the families where they are brought up, they are viewed as adults in most of cases. At the same time, the children make reservation that outside their home and family they are children, both for other people and themselves: "Angelina: they think of me as a grown-up. Katia: that's because we graduate from preschool. Alexander: I'm a grown-up because I'm already six".

As adulthood criteria, the children name a large amount of knowledge and opportunities, availability of a broader range of activities and having children. Furthermore, they often mention ability to buy things which is definitely a differentiating feature and a sign of adopted consumption-oriented standards of modern society which in turn, reflect a "postmodern value revolution" and "redistribution of freedoms": "Karina: no, we are thought to be children. Because we are not so grown-up. We can't walk alone. Vova: you are adult when you buy things, take care and wash dishes. Adults give food. Polina: adults can do everything on their own and children can't. Dasha: an adult can go alone anywhere. A small child may buy things only if mom allows. Danya: they (adults the authors) go to work".

Milestone events in children's lives which integrate them into adult life, also show a differentiating nature of their social adjustment and life of their parental families. Despite, the absence of any generally established initiation rituals (other than obtaining a passport which happens in Russia at the age of 14), the everyday life of children and families involves symbolic events and customs which refer children to gender, cultural environment, a specific social and economic class and mark children's transitions to a whole new level of a life cycle in their self-consciousness and the consciousness of other people: "maxim: people think I'm grown up because I can already drive a car and a snowmobile. Alyosha: I will become a grown-up person after I finish school. Slava: after I finish university. Karina: when we go to university, we become grown up. Lera: when we start working. Anya: when we start going to school". "Maxim: people think I'm grown up because I can already drive a car and a snowmobile.

Alyosha: I will become a grown-up person after I finish school. Slava: after I finish university. Karina: when we go to university, we become grown up. Lera: when we start working. Anya: when we start going to school".

Social and psychological well-being of children is directly related to the factor of having a family; they know that a family is a prerequisite of well-being of children and adults that this is a link between the internal world, lifeworld and meso and exosystems and they fully understand their dependent position in this context and need for care: “Nikita: it’s better to live with a family because children can’t make dinner. Vova: children cannot buy things on their own. Lenya: we feel good all together. Yulya: when alone, it’s scary. When with parents, it’s funnier and I feel more brave. Sasha: when you are alone, you don’t have any friends. Anya: we need adults to make food and when a child is too small, they walk with a baby carriage, feed it and take care of it. Lisa: we need to live as a family. If mom lives alone, it will be hard for her to bring up a child”.

Modern children in their statements about their parental families and the social roles in them reflect the need for the adults to have a balance between work and family, between professional, familial and parental obligations (Benini and Matos, 2016). Also, we observe a gender asymmetry in children’s perception of the family roles: more chores shall be performed by a woman (activities outside the family and household chores) and much smaller range of functions is performed by a man (activities outside the family): “what shall mother do? Masha: take care of children. Kristina: clean the apartment. Polina: cook and clean. Dima: work. Daniil: cook, clean, sew, do the laundry, take care of children. Gleb: mother shall take easy jobs. Vova: or she could take less easier ones”.

The focus group demonstrated gender differences in forming reproductive notions. The majority of boys tried to define the desired number of children in their future families larger than that of future families of other group participants. This spoke for the fact that they did not have any meaningful, rational approach to the answer and for appearance of the competitive intragroup dynamic processes during the focus-group session (besides the rivalry of boys is archetypal). Girls, however addressed the question more prudently and tried to explain and give reason for their answers. The majority mentioned two children in a family: “Katia: One child is better because mother will be able to cook for her husband, wash things and change bedclothes for the baby. Alisa: if there is one child, then you need to buy less food and spend less money. Nastya: the less the better ‘cause then you can see if someone’s lost. Dasha: I don’t know, I don’t know what I want to be and what to do. Milena: i don’t want any children. Lisa: I don’t want



Fig. 1: The drawing of Ira of age group

children so much. Alisa: I want to be alone. Polina: with children, you are always too busy for anything else”.

The analysis of the respondent’s answers concerning determination of conditions for a happy family also showed gender differences. The boy’s answers were quite spare and reflected, apparently, absence of clear examples of active participation of men in their parental families due to single-parent families, their busyness (outside the family) or their inaction inside the family. The girl’s answers showed a variety of conditions and eventfulness in lives of women and mothers.

“Gleb: to feed. Gleb: To feed the family, or celebrate something every day. Vova: to love. Vlad: to buy toys. Alexander: to make presents. Kostya: do not be rude. Anya: you need to tidy up, so that father didn’t yell. Katia: you need to have everything you need. Aleksandra: take care, cook. Polina: friendship, good behavior. Karina: a car is needed. Milena: an apartment is needed. Leyla: a big table. Aleksandra: a father is needed”.

We conducted the analysis of the drawings in which the children depicted their actual and future families in order to identify the meaningful aspects of such drawings: is it a complete or incomplete family? are there any children depicted? Is there any contact between the family members? what else is depicted besides the family (people)? Interpretation of the projective drawing technique showed the following results: 11% (16 children) of the participants showed similarity between the actual and future families models which included either complete or incomplete models 9% (14 children) of the participants showed similarity between the actual complete families and future families (for example in Fig. 1 and 2, Ira of age 7 depicted the parental family and the future family when she grows up).



Fig. 2: The drawing of Ira

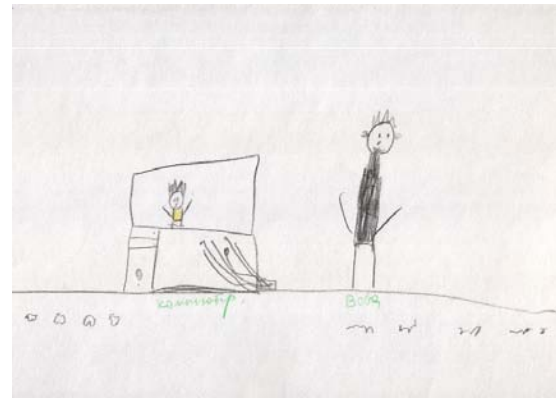


Fig. 4: The drawing of Vova



Fig. 3: The drawing of Katia



Fig. 5: The drawing of Ksyusha

The 10% (15 children) of the participants depicted an incomplete family as the future family a child and a mother or a child and a father (for example, in Fig. 3, Katia of age 6 years 10 months depicted the future family as incomplete, despite the fact that her parental family was complete). About 11% (16 children) of the participants showed the existing model of a family without a parent, i.e., both in the actual and future families there was only (in Fig. 4, Vova of age 6 years and 2 months builds the model of the future without a family based on the actual incomplete family).

About 9% (13 children) of the participants showed the actual model of a family without children and researchers of the drawings in particular, i.e., only parents or 1% were in the actual and future family models. (Figure 5 shows the parental family of Ksyusha, age 6 years, 4 months). About 4% (6 children) of the participants depicted symbolic interaction in the actual families through taking each other's hands; other children who depicted themselves in their actual families showed isolated or distanced presence in the families (for example,

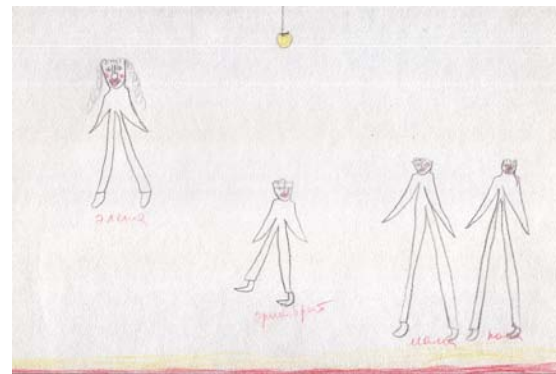


Fig. 6: The drawing of Elena

Fig. 6 and 7 by Elena, age 7 years, 1 month); 13% vs. 6% (19 boys vs. 9 girls, respectively) showed gender peculiarities in understanding the symbolic attributes of the family: they depicted a house as the space where the actual and future families exist (for example, Fig. 7 by Vova, age 6 years, 8 months).



Fig. 7: The drawing of Vova

### CONCLUSION

Statement of today's instability of a complete family model with a trend for incomplete family (a parent and a child, childless family or lone individualized lifestyle) has been the general result of the projective technique used in the sociological context. Transformation of the family model in a child's mind can be apparently explained by the absence of the closeness between family members as demonstrated in the drawings, autonomy of family members and interpersonal communication issues.

Comparative analysis of the focus-group session results and the drawing method interpretation has shown the fruitfulness of their combination in studying the peculiarities of constructing a family model and familial relations as an element of social reality. These methods showed the dualistic nature of child's understanding of the reality, prevailing discordance between rational and emotional responses to the objective reality, identified the adjustments made to the regulatory circumstances and those imposed by the society, based on the subjective and emotional meanings and evaluations of everyday life of the "people most close" to the children. The study showed that the majority of children do not identify themselves as a part of the family and do not integrate themselves into it, both in the actual and future families. A family as a value has not yet been formed in the majority of respondents which requires understanding and activity approach from the close adults and law-makers in family politics.

In addition to the research results, the researcher would like to add that the children took great interest in

the event and wished to meet one more time so that somebody talked "to them about them". Therefore, the author would like to express profound gratitude to the little respondents for their sincerity, to their parents for their trust and the personnel of preschool educational institutions for their help in arranging for this study.

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