

## From “Childhood” to “Adulthood”: The Factors of Family Financial Position of Children in the Formation of Concepts

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**Abstract:** Childhood is a period of age preceding “adulthood” and having occurred as a result of cultural and historical factors. The transition from childhood to adulthood is not a one-step process; rather, it is formed stepwise. Among many circumstances which determine an individual vision of childhood, nature of weathering age-related crises and transition to adulthood, it is possible to highlight social and economic family status, individual aspects of upbringing and social adjustment of children in a family. In this study, the researcher looks at the childhood phenomenon with a child’s eyes as a dichotomy of adulthood in the social and economic context. The researcher made this attempt in a comparative study of childhood and adulthood concepts as viewed by children brought up in families with different levels of material well-being. The researcher carried out a social and psychological research with 6 and 7 years old children by applying a focus group method at one of the research stages. The focus groups showed that children’s judgements of childhood and their vision of adulthood are determined by social and economic well-being of their families. Social and economic conditions as factors of social adjustment are reflected in children’s representations and model their own “life world” at present and in future.

**Key words:** Childhood, adulthood, children, focus group, family, social and economic factor

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### INTRODUCTION

Today’s large variety of disciplines in social sciences is attributable to a multiple-factor nature of the challenges faced by the society and people. A modern society research must be built on a combination of objective and subjective information looking for the roots of the problems and forecasting their impacts. Modern social and psychological research works look at the public and social problems through the lens of individual’s personal problems, a worldview analysis of an individual, motivation, “lifeworld”, “privacy”, “social practices” and “habitus”. An essential contribution to form and develop this approach was made by the followers of interpretative sociology (verstehende Soziologie) (Max Weber), symbolic interactionism (Herbert Blumer, Charles Horton Cooley, William Isaacs, Thomas and George Herbert Mead), phenomenological sociology (Edmund Husserl, Alfred Schutz, Peter Ludwig Berger, Thomas Luckmann), ethnomethodology (Harold Garfinkel), modernism and postmodernism (Pierre Bourdieu, Anthony Giddens, Zygmunt Bauman and Jean Baudrillard) and others. The above disciplines have established a methodological foundation for a qualitative social research. A qualitative social research makes it possible to involve

children as respondents for the purposes of sociological analysis of social facts. A qualitative research methodology permits considering psychophysiological features and social experience of individuals (children). According to Russian psychologist Alexei Leontiev, a world view is a unity of cognition and emotional-need sphere of an individual, including meanings, implications, impressions (Leontiev, 1984).

Qualitative methodology research methods (a focus group, case study, in-depth interview, biographic description, etc.) permit obtaining private information based on respondent’s personal feelings, irrational manifestations, methods to regulate and structure the social reality, development by respondents of their own social worlds (Santis, 1980; Corbin and Strauss, 1998). The qualitative methods define an individual’s perception of and relation to an object form a representative world. A representative world is a whole set of psychological representative wishes, feelings, reminiscences, ideas and symbols. A representation may be viewed as a more or less long-term formation (scheme) built up from multiple impressions of the world. While developing, a child creates a whole world of schemes or representations which structure input sensory information in understanding image perception (Vasilyeva, 2006). A

focus group selected by the author for data collection is one of the information-bearing research methods. A focus group was selected as a method for collecting information due to its high research potential to uncover perceptions, in particular, a child's world view. Owing to spontaneity of children as participants of the research audience, a focus group makes it possible to promptly provoke interlocutors for action, obtain more information from respondents on the subject of social research (rather than a child as its object), put them at ease and remove any psychological barriers to uncover in-depth meanings of a subject's perception of the phenomena in question. A focus group brings together sociological and psychological research aspects in a complementary way.

This study intends to discuss the modern phenomenon of childhood as a stage of life preceding adulthood which forms a child's self-awareness affected by social and economic conditions of the family. A child's self-awareness is formed in a certain "social development situation" which integral part is an urge to become a grown-up person and join adult life and activities. The conditions of social adjustment and upbringing expressed in social and economic, cultural, national, demographic and social-psychological factors set up a background for forming a child's self-awareness (Gursoy and Bicakci, 2007; Noble, 2014). A research on social adjustment matters is one of the most popular and challenging subjects in sociology. This is explained by the interest and need to forecast a future of a child and the society in general through the lens of the present. The relevance of researching social adjustment in society as well as specific features of the "lifeworld" and "social practices" is steadily rising due to an increasing number and variety of socializing factors, upgrading living environment, transformations in the nature of relations and changing habitus of individuals. Thus, studying social adjustment matters is a cross-disciplinary field as an individual (a child) is exposed to various factors in formation of personality.

Modern research works show that completely different circumstances in a child's life may have specific effects on their physical condition, mental growth, social well-being and their attitude to themselves and the world around. The social adjustment factors include racial, ethnic and cultural distinctive aspects, financial troubles in the family, relations between the spouses and children and parents, activities of non-family social institutions and challenges of relations with them, etc. (Weaver and Prelow, 2005; Adetunji and Oladapo, 2007; Gryczkowski *et al.*, 2010; Wei and Chen, 2014).

A successful integration of an individual into society is possible by adequate development in childhood years

and the use of child's potential in accordance with sensitive development periods. It is impossible to address childhood as a social phenomenon outside the context of life, environment of development and formation of a child's personality. Provided a natural and normal scenario (namely, a child's birth and upbringing), a family is the main social institution for a child's social adjustment. A family is an intermediate step in learning the society which is the human life environment on a larger scale. Therefore, a family acts as a vehicle and a "buffer" for the impacts of the society. A modern vision of childhood is formed directly within a family.

A modern family is a rather complex phenomenon. It lays the most in-depth foundations of a personality acting as an integrating link between an individual and society and forming a world view and social behavior skills. The transformation of a family as a social institution in the period of industrialism, expansion of the urbanized lifestyle and further changes continuing in the postindustrial epoch have shattered "traditional" concepts of marriage and family and modified the norm (Mahood *et al.*, 2004), "transforming intimacy". Due to the swift-flowing events, children got involved into such changes both as observers and participants. Sweeping changes in the society make children's social adjustment more complicated as the "footholds" in forming individuals' personalities, their pictures of the world and worldviews prove to be tenuous.

Children's life world and their personal social space are thought to be fixed and reproduced by passing through a lens of children's perception, upbringing and social adjustment, thus forming a vision of childhood and adult world. The cultural and historical background for forming childhood as a social phenomenon shows a model of adults' world as a world full of possibilities, rights and acquisitions (of various kinds), the access to which is granted by initiations. Children act as a foundation for future events. The author identifies the core issue of the research as defining children's ideas of childhood and adulthood, depending on the social and economic conditions of upbringing and social adjustment in a family. Financial status, a culture of cooperation between generations, a nature of relations between adults and children, styles of upbringing and social adjustment determine the meanings and senses of social facts of the social reality (Rutherford, 2009). Such meanings and senses serve as footholds for an individual in building his or her world and relations with other individuals in society in the past, present and future. World building, by reference to personal social experiences in a social environment, creates the habitus of living and social reality of an individual.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The focus groups were held in 2008 (on the back of rising economic performance of Russian society). The sources were 7 years old children brought together in gender-based groups of 7-9 participants from relatively homogenous families with equal social and economic status, resident in Saint Petersburg and the Leningrad region (total 50 children). The focus groups' homogeneity was achieved on account of children living in the neighborhood of a children's day care center. As a result of the city development and intensified urbanistic processes (in accordance with the long-standing social practice), the residential city's districts are differentiated by social and economic indicators of a housing value, proximity, a nature and cost of goods and services, ecological conditions of life and a residential district's status value and different opportunities for children (Benini and Matos, 2016). The above social and economic indicators proved to be "social filters" in forming population homogeneity of the residential districts. Therefore, the children's focus groups were differentiated based on the location of child care centers and the prevailing type of residents in the districts, using the services of such childcare centers. Thus, the focus groups were structured as set forth below, by the location of child-care centers and the evident social and economic status of children and their families:

- Group A: children respondents living in a centrally-located and upmarket district of St. Petersburg (Petrogradsky District of St. Petersburg)
- Group B: children respondents living in a district located inbetween the city's center and the outskirts of St. Petersburg (Kupchino District of St. Petersburg)
- Group C: children respondents living in St. Petersburg neighborhood (Gatchinsky District of the Leningrad Region)

Table 1 provides descriptions of the focus groups showing the qualitative and gender composition of the presented classification. Let us look at the social dimensions of the focus researcher provides no direct addresses of the child care centers in Saint Petersburg and its suburban area.

**Holding focus groups:** Childhood is a social phenomenon with cultural and historical roots and characteristics. Expanding the childhood period and changing its vision occurs along with society development, a person's life span and an increased amount of knowledge needed for

Table 1: Focus group description

Groups	Focus group No., sex and quantitative indicators					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Sex (Boys/Girls)	B	G	B	G	B	G
Group A	8	9	-	-	-	-
Group B	-	-	9	8	-	-
Group C	-	-	-	-	7	9
Total children by groups	17	-	17	-	16	-
Total children	50	-	-	-	-	-

an adult person to be an active member of the society. French researcher Philippe Aries showed that childhood is a dynamic phenomenon, being transformed in time and space (Philippe, 1999). "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"? The children have expressly defined that there are two conceptions and dimensions of "childhood adulthood": inside and outside the family. These dual ideas get along well in their consciousness, building a foundation for ambiguous insights into events and facts of social reality and norms. In most families bringing up children, they are viewed as adults. At the same time, the children from Groups B and C make reservation that outside their home and family they are children, both for other people and themselves, whereas the children from Group A perceive themselves as adults even outside their families:

**What do you think of yourselves are you grown-ups or children?**

- Stanislav (A): I am a grown-up for everyone, so it's impossible to consider me as a small child
- Valentina (A): mom said I am a grown-up and bought me high-heeled shoes. I always wear them. Angelina (A): They think of myself as a grown-up. But I don't go out to the street alone as adults do
- Katya (B): we are still children because we go to the child care center
- Karina (B): no, we are considered to be children. Because we are not so grownup. We don't go to work
- Alexander (C): I'm a grown-up, because I'm already six
- Evgeniya (C): we are children as far as we go to the child care center

As adulthood criteria, children name a lot of knowledge and opportunities, availability of more types of activities and own 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”.

**What do you think distinguishes an adult from a child?**

- Vladimir (A): you are adult when you buy things, take care and wash dishes. Adults give food
- Sofiya (A): adults have a license (a driving license A. Beschasnaya)
- Polina (B): an adult can do all things independently and a child not all things
- Darya (B): an adult may walk around alone. A small child may buy things only if mom allows
- Daniil (C): they (adults Beschasnaya (2007)) go to work
- Kseniya (C): an adult is when everything is allowed and no one scolds you

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 and thus, granting to new citizens all rights and responsibilities), the everyday life of children and families involves symbolic events and customs which refer individuals (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 (Beschasnaya, 2007).

**What actions or events in your life will make you a grown-up person?**

- Maxim (A): people think I’m grownup because I can already drive a car and a snowmobile
- Tatiana (A): dad gives me money because I’m grownup
- Alyosha (B): I will become a grown-up person after I finish school
- Slava (B): after I finish university
- Karina (B): when we go to university, we become grownup
- Lera (C): when we start working
- Anna (C): when we start going to school

The question about the rights of children and adults showed underdeveloped abstract and conceptual thinking and, thus, the children’s failure to understand this aspect of life. Children do not differentiate between the rights and obligations, their lives are full of events where they

act to perform adults’ decisions and wishes. Generally, it emphasizes a dependent nature of children’s lives and increases adults’ responsibility for their own decision-making. The children were undecided about their rights because they had no information on this matter.

**Do you have any rights?**

- Andrei (A): my parents have rights and I don’t have any so far
- Katya (B): I have no rights
- Konstantin (C): I don’t remember whether or not I have any rights

Children directly refer their need for care and support from adults to the notion of a family. Thus, they try to tell us that their family is a “fortress” and “stability zone” for them. Children acknowledge their dependent position and their favorable social and psychological state is directly related to the presence of the family. They understand that a family is a requirement for well-being of children and grown-ups. However, children are quite conscious of their dependent state and need for care. They all agreed that a child needs a family, regardless of the financial status in their own families:

**Why do you need a family? Can you do without it?**

- Nikita (A): it is better to live as one family because children do not know how to make dinner...
- Vova (A): ... children cannot buy things on their own
- Lyonya (B): we feel good all together
- Yulya (B): a child is afraid to be alone. It is braver and funnier to be with parents
- Anya (B): we need adults to make food and when a child is too small, they go out with a baby carriage, make food, take care
- Alexander (C): when you’re alone, you have no friends
- Liza (C): we need to live as one family. If mom lives alone, it will be hard for her to bring up a child

Social differentiation of children and their families was expressed in questions about friends, circle of contacts and possibilities of spending free time together. The children living in the city’s center mostly have friends only in the child care center or other child care institutions where they use to go (music, arts, dancing or sports schools, foreign language schools, etc.) and their contacts with peers are limited due to their educational load, regulated and controlled by adults. The children of Groups B and C added to friends they had made in their day care center other children living next door to them. Outside the center, they make friends with neighbors with

whom they can play at home or when they walk outside. An important difference between Group B and C in formation of the children's relations is the adults' company (presence) during the children's contacts. The Group B children are usually accompanied by adults. The Group C children are allowed to communicate freely out of adults' sight.

**Do you have any friends? How do you keep company with them?**

- Maxim (A): I have many friends at the place where I learn to swim
- Nikita (A): I'm a grown-up, so I have grownup friends
- Karina (A): I have a friend Angelina; we play at beauty parlor with her. At home, I play with my dog Sergei (B): I have many friends. We play soccer near my house
- Angelina (B): Dasha and I are friends at home and in the day care center. Our mothers are friends too; we go for a walk together
- Ekaterina (B): I have friends here and in the dance class, we also go for a walk together
- Ivan (C): I have many friends; Kolya and Tolya are older than me. But it is interesting to be with them. Mom even lets me go for a walk with them
- Lera (C): I live next door to Anna. We are friends in the day care center and at home
- Anna (C): our parents even let us go out for a walk near our home. Sometimes they give us their mobiles so that we call them
- Evgeniya (C): I also go for a walk near my home with the girls. My parents watch me in the window. But sometimes we play hide-and-peek and my parents cannot see us

Today's information technologies affected the main children's activity type, a game. A game aimed to be a prototype of adult life, a practice ground to model and train social roles in society as a form of exercise in direct communication of children (Fleer, 2009) is being outperformed with computer games. Obviously, answering the question about their favorite games and pastimes, the children growing up in the epoch of dominating information technologies in most instances mentioned computer games. Although, there were children who showed interest in design games, subject games (construction sets, dolls, toy vehicles, imitation of home and household, etc.), remote control toys and outdoor games. The Group A children mostly preferred computer games and remote control toys, referring to the high-cost goods sector.

**What games do you like to play?**

- Nikolai (A): I like to play with my computer, there are so many games there and they are all different. Vova (A): I like to play remote control cars. I have three of them and I also have a remote control helicopter
- Sofiya (A): I have a doll Renny, she can do everything, I have also a large home for her, it has the same things we have at home
- Petr (B): I love playing soccer. I will become a soccer player
- Leonid (B): I like to play at garage with my brother. We are building it from our construction set
- Yuliya (B): I like playing with Barbie at her house
- Boris (C): I like to ride my bicycle
- Alexander (C): I like to play with my cars; I'm a driver of a sports car
- Elizaveta (C): I like to play hide-and-peek
- Varvara (C): I have many Barbie dolls, I play with them, give them food and dress them

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The made research of children belonging to different social and economic strata showed determinacy of social practices in children's everyday life, differences in their life worlds and, consequently, in the essence of the childhood phenomenon as an antinomy of adulthood. Formation of a child's "childhood adulthood" conception has a dual and contradictive nature. On the one hand, adults from children's immediate surrounding stress that children have grown up or alternatively are still children; and on the other hand, the practice of empowering, making them free from adults' control is inconsistent with the age period stated by them (adults). This discrepancy specifically reveals in Groups A and C. Thus, the Group A children are confident to see themselves as grown-ups referring to the opinion of their parents and other people from adult surroundings; however, their further answers showed that in reality children belonging to the social and economic stratum with high income and high living standards often live in a tightly controlled and regulated social space with no opportunity to take initiative or become active which is required to form their own and responsible "no-child" position. As for the Group C children, they identified themselves with the children's community but the way they spend their free time and build communications with the society showed a high level of independency and absence of intense control by adults. Intense control (like engaging a governess) and participation in a child's life, at first thought, may be determined by the parents' pressure of work and financial opportunities gained from their

professional occupation. However, comparison of too busy parents and the relation of self-identification to children's community, the level of their activity based on the answers of the Group B children shows that well-balanced self-assignment to the children's world occurs against the background of reasonable adults' presence in the children's world. This reasonable approach manifests in moderate involvement in a child's life and in the adult's position of always "beside" which makes a child more confident in communicating with peers and friends, helps to coordinate children's initiatives. Please note that in the most Group B families both parents are working in contrast to Groups A and C with one working parent in the majority of cases. Thus, the scope of parents' occupation is not a key element in forming harmonious self-identification, mastering social roles and further development of social communications in the society.

Social and economic dimension of a family's life and opportunities affects children's ideas of milestone events marking children's transition to adult life. For the Group A children, these events are attributive and are not brought about by their own initiative and developments. For Groups A and C such events have a more pragmatist and resultant nature. The difference in the lifestyles of children depending on the social and economic factors of a family's life manifests in the structure of their games. Children of well-to-do parents mostly play the toys which require no communication with other children. Such toys are interactive as such but, unfortunately, provide no opportunity of mastering and sharing social roles with other children involved in the game as a tool for establishing communication models within the society. This distinctive aspect of play/game activities corresponds to the play stage, rather than the game stage (George Herbert Mead) when children master different social roles and the things most relevant to them in the current period of life. As a rule, children from well-to-do families have a wide circle of contacts which mostly includes adults (family members and parents' friends) and their communication with other children is limited by the closed social stratum.

On the contrary, children from families with lower income are much more involved in a wide-ranging communication with other children, in particular, determined by the organization of play activity and conditions for establishing friendly relations. The children of all the groups agree that adult life is marked by the presence of privileges and a free choice of activity with no restrictions. They also agree that their families and parents' care make their lives comfortable and they are unable to adapt themselves to social life without parental support.

## CONCLUSION

In general, the research showed that social and economic status of a family, children's living conditions, special aspects of their social adjustment and a nature of relations with adults affect children's ideas of "childhood" and "adulthood". Children believe that a transition from childhood to adulthood is associated with a number of initiation events and the essence of these periods of age differs in the nature of activity and communication. Children's judgements rely on those opportunities that adults give them and those activities, in which children get involved and fulfil their own potential. The opportunities for self-fulfillment shape a sense of self in children, their assessment of self and events, differentiate the social strata.

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