

## GENDER-SPECIFIC DESIRES OF TODAY'S PRESCHOOL CHILDREN

Semenova L.E., Chevachina A.V.

Minin Nizhny Novgorod State Pedagogical University, Nizhni Novgorod, e-mail: annochka\_y@mail.ru

The article deals with specific features of personality phenomena insufficiently studied so far: desires of preschool children and linkage between the subject matter of their desires and the conditions of social and cultural development of contemporary preschool children, in particular, with pressures in the course of differential gender socialization. The authors present the results of the comparative content analysis of desires of girls and boys in senior preschool age. Differences and similarities in the content aspects of the desires of children of opposite sexes are shown in concrete empirical data. General age-related and gender-related specifics of desires of senior age preschoolers are established. Indirect influence on the subject of children's desires through inherent in the modern Russian society individual cultural norms of femininity and masculinity, which are already starting to be followed by many girls and boys, are shown. Some nuances in the content of preschoolers' desires depending on the impact of the factor of social desirability are revealed.

**Keywords:** desires, senior age preschoolers, gender socialization, norms of femininity, norms of manhood

As asserted at the time by P.Y. Galperin, "every good psychology begins with child psychology". Therefore, it is not accidental that for many decades now the national psychology does not lose interest in the process of personality development in childhood, which in recent years has adopted a new – gender based point of view towards considering many traditional problems [4; 5; 7; 8; 10 etc.]. However, despite availability of a sufficiently large number of studies, there are still some "white spots" in modern psychology which may include among others the issue of desires, and, in particular, their gender specifics in relation to childhood.

It may be emphasized that till date the desires of an individual remain one of the least studied psychological phenomena. The only exception to this end, perhaps, is the work of P. P. Blonsky, in which an attempt was made to trace the process of the development of desires, specifics of their manifestation and nature of upbringing [3].

So, according to the interpretation of P.P. Blonsky, desire is a complex psychic formation, related to the activities in different psychic spheres – motivational, intellectual, emotional, and volitional. And, according to the author, the source of desires is in the collision between the needs and possibilities to satisfy them. "In case, writes P.P. Blonsky, we are not able to satisfy our needs, our aspirations turn into desires" [3, p. 116], whereas the desires themselves are the thought about the desirable, and the thought itself being emotionally charged and close to the action to the maximum extent. In other words, a desire represents a kind of synthesis of the intellect, emotions and will pertaining not to reality per se, but only to a potentially possible reality. At the same time it is known that the nature of human

needs and possibilities of their satisfaction depend on those social and cultural conditions in which the human being lives. So, there is every reason to assert the fact of cultural-historic determination of the subject matter of desires or, to put it differently, the social construction of these motivational preferences associated with unmet needs.

Thus, the analysis of the content of desires allows us to obtain a lot of information about the inner world of a person, its individual life experiences and the nature of development as a representative of specific culture and social group, as well as about the socio-cultural environment in which this development takes place that is crucial in terms of optimization of the process of personality development with regard to the stages of early ontogenesis, in particular, the preschool period.

#### Purpose, hypothesis and research methods

Realizing the importance of studying children's desires and lack of information in contemporary psychology with regard to indirect influence of cultural gender-based norms and standards on their content, we conducted our own research aiming at a comparative analysis of content aspects of desires of girls and boys in senior preschool age. While sharing the view of modern experts on gender standardization of personality development in accordance with the existing in the culture tradition of gender polarization [1; 2, etc.] and considering the wide spread of differential gender socialization strategy in the Russian society [9], we assumed that the content of girls' and boys' desires along with age-related features relevant to the main tasks and social situation of development, would clearly manifest gender specifics as a result of gender-differentiated socio-cultural influences on a

child. As for the age of the subjects, its choice was determined by the following: by senior preschool age most children clearly realize their gender identity and, along with that, they have already acquired significant experience regarding gender-based behavior models acceptable and unacceptable from the point of view of prevailing norms in the culture, which is reflected in their aspiration to adjust their behavior so as to meet corresponding social expectations [2; 6; 8 etc.].

In total, our study involved 197 children, 5-7 year-old, including 101 girls and 96 boys.

Our study comprised of two series of individual problem-oriented psycho-diagnoses. The first series aimed at revealing hidden desires of the subjects, not influenced by the factor of social desirability. For this, we have used a projective technique "Tsvetik-Semitsvetik", based on the principles of fairytales. Children were asked to recall the contents of the fairytale by V.P. Kataev, heard by the children at the preliminary lesson, and then to compose a story similar to its plot, the hero of which was a girl or a boy, according to the sex of the subject. The wishes were made on behalf of the main hero/heroin named by the child himself/herself. In doing so we proceeded from the idea of the ability of children to project their inner experience, feelings, vital needs and desires on to their protagonist with whom they identified themselves. Besides, we also believed that modelling by the subjects of a fairy-tale plot would greatly facilitate them the process of expressing their main desires, reducing the possible "internal censorship" and the influence of social desirability factor. The second series of the study was conducted at re-meeting with the subjects 3–5 days later and was aimed at the study of openly verbalized desires of senior preschool children, taking into account the probable influence of their "internal censorship" and the factor of social desirability. To this end, we used the same technique, but without the elements of projection: the children made wishes on their own behalf.

All results obtained from the study were processed using content analysis, based on the categories pre-selected by the group of experts (vide Table). Having established the frequency of occurrence of each category in the subjects' statements, we carried out a comparative content analysis of girls' and boys' desires in the first and second series of the study using the criterion  $\varphi^*$  – Fischer's angular transformation. In the course of the study we managed to collect 2624 desires.

### Results of the study and their discussion

The results obtained are briefly described herein under and are reflected in the table.

So, as it might be seen from the table data, the contents of desires of boys and girls of senior preschool age have certain specifics due to differentiated practice of social pressures aimed at children of different sexes. This fact finds its confirmation in the statistically significant differences in the categories corresponding to gender stereotypes, and is a testimony to the process of acquiring by pre-school children of gender norms existing in the society.

Thus, the girls participating in our study, didn't speak at all about their aspiration towards emancipation, and very rarely mentioned improving of physical qualities and athletic abilities, i.e., those characteristics that traditionally are not referred to the standards of "normative femininity". At the same time, they more often than boys turned over to the theme of appearance in terms of attractiveness and its accessories (clothing, ornaments, cosmetics), as well as to their potential family roles, specifically focusing on those aspects that are the main components of a traditional female image ("long hair", "to wear high-heel shoes", "red lipstick to paint lips", "to have a daughter", etc.).

As for the boys, for the majority of them, on the contrary, of special value were desires falling under the category "health / physical qualities and athletic abilities", which, in our view, is a consequence of acquiring by them of widely spread in our society socio-cultural standards of masculinity associated with a norm of physical stamina [2] ("to be the strongest", "to be able to fight back", "to become a world champion in ski jumping", etc.). In addition, some boys, unlike the girls, were found to aspire for emancipation, which can also be regarded as a consequence of the orientation of preschoolers towards the known social norm of male independence ("to be allowed to do whatever I want", "not to ask anybody's permission", etc.).

Also noteworthy is the fact that compared to the girls, their male peers mentioned often enough their achievements (a norm of social success as one of the landmarks of male socialization [2]) and the desire to prove their superiority over others which, judging by the subjects' own comments, is caused by the presence of competitive tendencies, the need to be the first, the best, the boss ("that everybody should obey", "to conquer everybody"), i.e. those motives that, as per the data found in literature, become of paramount importance in the boys' community [4].

## The gender-wise specifics of senior preschoolers' desires

Category	Subjects	% of mentions from the total number of desires	
		1 <sup>st</sup> series	2 <sup>nd</sup> series
Magic wishes	Girls	4,85	4,4
	Boys	4,8	5,0
Socially significant desires	Girls	4,1	4,6
	Boys	3,3	4,0
Material well-being	Girls	3,7	3,3
	Boys	4,3	3,9
Family/relatives	Girls	8,7	8,7
	Boys	8,6	8,7
Professional roles and achievements	Girls	2,85	2,6
	Boys	3,7	4,0
Family roles	Girls	1,6*	1,9**
	Boys	0,6	0,3
Interaction with adults	Girls	3,2	3,9
	Boys	3,3	2,9
Interaction with their own sex peers	Girls	2,7	2,4
	Boys	3,6	3,5
Interaction with the opposite sex peers	Girls	—	0,4**
	Boys	—	—
Toys and sweets	Girls	11	11,7
	Boys	12,6	13,2
Clothes, ornaments, cosmetics	Girls	8,1**	7,7**
	Boys	1,1	0,4
Technical appliances and useful items	Girls	6,7	7,2
	Boys	9,9*	10,7*
Animals	Girls	3,2	4
	Boys	2,3	2,6
Entertainment/travels	Girls	6,1	5,4
	Boys	7,9	7,4
Gift for their own sex peers	Girls	1,7	3,3
	Boys	2,9	3
Gift for the opposite sex peers	Girls	1,15	1,3*
	Boys	0,5	0,4
Gift for adults	Girls	6,7	7,3
	Boys	6,0	6,3
Emancipation	Girls	—	—
	Boys	1,2**	0,9**
Refusal to work and communicate	Girls	3,0	2,6
	Boys	4,5	2,7
Appearance	Girls	3,4**	3,1**
	Boys	0,2	0,4
Intelligence, abilities and academic competence	Girls	1,5	1,4
	Boys	1,2	1,4
Health/physical qualities and athletic abilities	Girls	1,15	0,9
	Boys	3,4**	4,0**
Socio-demographic characteristics	Girls	1,7	1,4
	Boys	1,2	0,8
Skills and abilities	Girls	2,4	2,5
	Boys	2,2	2,3
Changes in their own sex peers	Girls	2,0	1,7
	Boys	2,3	2,6
Changes in adults	Girls	5,1	3,9
	Boys	4,2	5,0
General view characteristics	Girls	2,4	2,3
	Boys	2,8	3,2
Return to the past	Girls	1,0	0,1
	Boys	1,4	0,4

Note. \* – differences significant at  $p \leq 0,05$ ; \*\* – differences significant at  $p \leq 0,01$ .

Along with that, the results of the comparative analysis of the girls' and the boys' statements revealed a rather curious feature that read as follows: when there were a rather pronounced tendency to manifest their commitment to future professional achievements (especially in the 2nd series of the study, where openly verbalized desires were formulated), many boys more often than girls, demonstrated hidden desires to avoid activities and communication. We are of the opinion that this kind of situation may be a consequence of the fact that a man and his activities, as a rule, are excluded from the daily life experiences of contemporary children (including boys), and what is typically done before the eyes of a child, in what he is involved (including kindergarten activities) comes from women. That is why many boys, probably guided by the cultural norm of anti-femininity [2], prefer to ignore the activity that they think is not for men, and confirmation to this effect is found in their responses under the category "refusal to work and communicate" ("not to wash dishes", "not to be on duty with girls", "not to attend music classes", "not to do any kind of nonsense", etc.). On the contrary, if we speak of desires pertaining to travel and entertainment, they possessed a higher degree of importance for boys, and this was observed both in the first and the second series of the study.

Besides, the priorities of senior preschool boys included desires related to technical appliances and useful things ("I would ask Tsvetick for a "Ferrari", "scuba diving items", "the most powerful computer", etc.). And, contrary to the girls, wishing for "cute trinkets" – "a jewel box", "a piano", "a looking glass with a handle", etc., their male peers among the useful things, in addition to weapons, usually named cars, sports equipment and various tools, the use of which as well as the interest in technical items in general, is regarded by many and, above all, by the men themselves as a significant indication of "real" manliness [4] ("a short gun", "a real hockey stick and skates", "muscles training unit", "football", "screwdrivers set", etc.).

Thus, summarizing the above, it may be noted that by the end of preschool age the subjective experience of a child begins to reveal social pressures of differentiated gender socialization, as is evidenced by the emerging tendency of orientation towards gender stereotypes prevailing in our society. They gradually enter children's minds and, consequently, begin to show themselves

up in the content of some desires of senior preschoolers.

However, it should be noted that apart from differences identified by us in the content of the boys' and girls' desires, some common features arising out of the specifics of their age, social situation of development and leading type of activity, have also been found out. In particular, we became confident that regardless of sex all of our subjects equally valued as important a family and happy atmosphere within a family ("so that mother and grandmother would not quarrel", "daddy came back", "a brother was born to me", etc.), toys and sweets ("the most delicious ice cream" "kinder surprise toys", "puzzles with a thousand pieces and a dog", etc.). Moreover, almost as often children talked about their magic wishes ("to learn to fly", "to become a magician and to fulfill any wish all by myself", "self-placing into cupboard toys") as well as about skills and abilities, although in terms of content the last category of the preferences of the girls focused mainly on domestic skills and artistic abilities ("to learn to cook pancakes", "to sew like my mom"), whereas the boys' preferences indicated their desire to master mainly technical skills ("to learn how to assemble a computer", "to drive a real car" "to be able to repair a bike"). We believe that this kind of children's orientation is quite understandable, since in this case we are talking about the interests and activities that are at par with the norms of femininity and manhood existing in our society.

### Conclusion

Thus, summing up the above study, it may be concluded that the analysis of the desires' content really makes it possible to get valuable information about the inner world of children, specifics of their personality development where general age tendencies are complemented not only and not so much by the influence of the child's individual life experience but of differentiated gender socialization. In other words, being a phenomenon of individual consciousness, children's desires bear the stamp of the socio-cultural environment, its various norms, including gender standards of behavior, the reflection of which can be found in quantitative and qualitative characteristics of motivational preferences of senior age preschoolers, which in turn confirms our hypothesis.

### References

1. Bem S. The Lenses of Gender: Transforming the Debate on Sexual Inequality. – M.: "Russian political encyclopedia"(ROSSPEN), 2004. – 336 p.

2. Burn Sh. The Social Psychology of Gender. – SPb.: praym-EVROZNAK, 2001. – 318 p.
3. Blonsky P.P. The Psychology of Desire // Questions of Psychology. – 1965. – № 5. – P. 112–137.
4. Kon I.S. A Man in the Changing Society. – M.: Time, 2009. – 496 p.
5. Boys and Girls: The Realities of Socialization. A collection of articles / Ed. M.A. Litovskaya, E.G. Trubina, O.V. Shaburova. – Ekaterinburg: Publishing House of the Ural University, 2004. – 373 p.
6. Newcombe N. Child Development. – SPb.: Peter, 2003. – 604 p.
7. Semenova L.E. Gender analysis of the claims' strategy and tactics in children of upper preschool age // Questions of Psychology. – 2002. – № 6. – P. 23–31.
8. Semenova L.E. Features of verbal self-presentation of children with DPD as gender subjects // Defectology. – 2008. – № 4. – P. 25–32.
9. Semenova L.E. The contents of the main patterns of gender socialization in modern society // Yaroslavl Pedagogical Bulletin. – 2009. – № 3. – P. 143–147.
10. Talakova E.A. Gender peculiarities of an I-Concept in the process of personality formation of children of younger school age: dis... of PhD (Psychology). – N. Novgorod, 2012. – 186 p.