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Psychology of Personality: Real and Virtual Context

“THE FASHIONABLE CHILD”: PARTICULARITIES OF SELF-IDENTITY AND DEVELOPMENTAL RISKS OF CHILDREN

N. Burlakova (a)*, V. Uvarkina (b)

*Corresponding author

(a) (Lomonosov Moscow State University, Mokhovaya str., 11/9, Moscow, 125009 Russia, naburlakova@yandex.ru

(b) Lomonosov Moscow State University, Russia

Abstract

This article discusses the trend of children’s cultural development based on the idea of “glamorization” and the parental project of a “fashionable child,” which is relatively new in Russian society. It also presents a psychological definition of the phenomenon of the “glamorization of children.” A methodological basis of cultural-historical psychology is used to analyze the results of the study of particularities in the self-consciousness and personal identities of children of primary school age (6-9 years) from high-income Moscow families who are engaged in the fashion industry. The article identifies risk areas in the development of their personality. It also studies the parental project of a “fashionable child,” parents’ ideas about the image of a modern child, and the most desired and emphasized qualities associated with the value priorities of this social group. In addition, the article presents an analysis of the planning of children’s development in a children’s fashion modeling school (fashion modeling agency), and demonstrates the specifics of the sociocultural environment (fashion industry), the values of which are assimilated by children at an early age, which contributes to the formation of certain risk-related possibilities for the development of their personality and self-consciousness.

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1. Introduction

The contemporary socio-cultural situation is characterized by rapid changes in cultural forms, the transformation of established life priorities, demands and expectations from society, etc. This also applies to the culture of childhood, where new trends of child development are emerging, along with new forms of the upbringing and education of children (Feldstein, 2010; Karabanova, 2010; Smirnova, 2015), which coexist alongside a significant change in the trajectories of experience transfer from the older generation to the younger one (Martsinkovskaya, 2015). These processes are occurring in a context of increasing social heterogeneity in Russian society. Current realities lead psychologists to deal with specific trajectories of children's development (Karabanova, 2007) not only in different cultures, but also in different social environments within different subcultures, social groups with their own values, “child projects,” etc., which can lead to significant differences with regard to not only the content of development, but also its mechanisms (Burlakova & Oleshkevich, 2012).

Within these changes, we may observe, on the one hand, a number of new trends in the development of cultures of childhood, and, on the other hand, the emergence of various educational and other formative technologies and practices that ensure the reproduction and development of these trends. The study of such phenomena is also becoming a topical subject for clinical and psychological research, as the emergence of certain cultures of childhood presents a number of dangers and risks for the comprehensive development of the child's personality and self-consciousness. Thus, it is possible to distinguish a separate area of cultural-historical clinical and psychological studies, which seeks to analyze all kinds of deviant phenomena that may accompany the emergence and functioning of new cultural trends of the development of children and technologies, as well as social practices accompanying and participating in their “production” (Burlakova & Bykova, 2015; Burlakova & Davidovich, 2019, etc.).

In this context, the phenomenon of the “glamorization” of children, which is discussed by contemporary scholars in the humanities and social sciences, is particularly notable (Shalygina & Kholmogorova, 2015; Mayorova-Shcheglova et al., 2017). The concept of “glamorization” emerged recently, but is now gaining momentum, involving children in the form of parents' “narcissistic expansion”. According to sociologists and scholars of cultural studies and other humanities disciplines, “glamorization” is based on the consumer culture of luxury (which denies suffering, poverty and death), as well as the value of “beauty,” which should be demonstrated to society in various ways – via clothing and other consumer goods, fashionable body standards, sexuality, behavioral looseness, special social status, etc. (J. Baudrillard, M. Foucault, U. Eco, etc.). In Russia, after the social crisis of the 1990s, which led to the destruction and crisis of traditional values, ideas of “glamorization” began to resonate in Russian society (Mayorova-Shcheglova et al., 2017).

Reflecting on the phenomenon of the “*glamorization of children*” psychologically, we *define* it as a way to “move away” from the authentic existence of the child, towards external forms of self-expression. That is, it is an issue of the objectification of self-identity and its specific formalization, in keeping with the parent's perception of the child as presenting and publicly demonstrating the special status and means of the family. The idea of the “child for show” borrows widely from trends of fashion, prestige, consumer culture and the culture of narcissism. Research has shown that the values of consumer culture promoted in modern society are internalized quite early, at 6-8 years of age (Shalygina & Kholmogorova, 2014). The

strategies of the organizations involved in the implementation of this “child project,” in accordance with the value priorities of the parents and the corresponding parental demands that reinforce them, are introjected and internalized by children as an internal standard.

The spread of the phenomenon of the “glamorization of children,” which first took place outside of Russia, gave rise to new social practices — children’s beauty contests and the children’s modeling industry (Giroux, 2000), with its corresponding system for training “stars.” Children’s beauty contests have not taken root in Russia. However, the inclusion of childhood in the field of commercial development is contributing to the rise of the modeling industry. A consequence of “glamorization” is parents’ “placing” of children into the fashion industry with its a well-established system of training “podium stars,” which plays a specific role in the formation of the personal characteristics of children of this group (Gundl, 2011). Following the idea of illusory self-determination embedded by adults in the corresponding “blueprint,” often without proper awareness, the child can increasingly break away from his real self, demonstrating internal “emptiness” (Oleshkevich, 2019) and trying on various “faces of simulated maturity” (Mamycheva, 2010).

2. Problem Statement

In contrast to the cultural trend of the development of a “competent” child (educated and intellectually developed, but often overloaded with information), which has been well studied in Russian psychology, the trend of children’s cultural development that is embedded in the concept of “glamorization” and the blueprint for the image of a “fashionable” child has received little empirical study. While the first cultural trend lays down a sense of the deep, gradual absorption of culture, which requires the child to make efforts to acquire new knowledge, in the cultural trend of the development of a “fashionable child,” new to Russia, the deep study of culture and the desire for a sophisticated education are not assumed. This trend is characterized by a focus on external expression, which does not require intense study to gain some particular knowledge. The focus on success is highly pronounced – success that can be materially backed and is achieved through surface manifestation (clothing, following the canons of beauty and fashion), and that also requires discipline and effort on the part of the child, but, clearly, of a very different type than that required by the first cultural trend. This appears to be the orientation of parents, whose children are professionally engaged in the fashion industry, which “vividly” demonstrates the foundations, ideas and “selfish values” embedded in the concept of “glamorization,” which are rapidly projected onto a wide socio-cultural space across the blurred boundaries of the Internet and social networks.

This article will focus on various social aspects of development (Bozhovich, 2001; Karabanova, 2007), parental views, and the personal identification of elementary-school age children involved in the fashion industry, as well as the corresponding problem areas and risks in their personality development. This work is a part of a broader research project within the framework of L. S. Vygotsky and M. M. Bakhtin’s methodology of the development of ideas in the field of cultural-historical clinical psychology (as cited in Burlakova & Oleshkevich, 2012 etc.).

3. Research Questions

The group studied included children of age 6-9 (n=15), professionally engaged in the fashion industry, who regularly attend the modeling school of one of the Moscow agencies, as well as their parents (n=15, mostly mothers). Children who had been studying at the school for an extended period (of more than a year and, in some cases, two years) were selected for the study. It was assumed that, under the conditions of children's long-term involvement in the corresponding development practices at elementary-school age, most children within this social trajectory of development had already internalized the patterns of self-identification that are cultivated in modern culture (in this case, the image of a "fashionable" child), which depend on both the conditions of development and on parental views of the child's image.

Thus, this article will present both a description of the objective cultural and historical social situation of the development of elementary school age children from well-off Moscow families in the conditions of the children's modeling industry, and an analysis of the particularities of self-identification and children's and parents' ideas about the image of the child, as well as risk areas in the personality development of children of this social group.

The following research questions were used:

- personal identification of children of age 6-9, seeking to participate in the fashion industry;
- parents' view of a modern child as an "ideal blueprint" of a child, which is imparted to children;
- reconstruction of the values laid down in the strategy of the organization (children's modeling agency), implicit and explicit definition of the vector of children's personality development in the context of this cultural "environment";
- risks for children's personality development in the pursuit of the social course of development studied (the fashion industry).

4. Purpose of the Study

In this article, the direct subject of study is the assessment of the personal identities of a group of children involved in the modeling industry, as well as parents' views and the views of representatives of the modeling industry involved in strategy development and the training of children to meet the requirements of the fashion industry. We were also interested in the problems and risks associated with the personality development of children in this group.

5. Research Methods

The personal identification of children is directly related to the social conditioning of identity (Burlakova, 2013; Burlakova & Oleshkevich, 2001), as well as to the system of value-semantic and social role-related choices that are the basis for the determination of the meaning of life, towards which the methods and methodologies that we used were targeted (Antonova, 1996).

The specifics of the questions that we were addressing led us to develop a special research strategy that would allow us to organize respondents' activity and demonstrate the projective content in diagnostic conditions, focused on studying the image of a modern child and the particularities of his or her self-

identification and self-awareness (Burlakova & Oleshkevich, 2001). The following methods were used: 1) participant and non-participant observation (with records of the behavioral and emotional/personal characteristics of children engaged in the fashion industry); 2) semi-structured interviews with representatives of model agencies; 3) conversations with parents of children, during which they filled out a questionnaire developed for the study, which required the completion of unfinished sentences and a short free essay on the topic “My Child”; at the end of the questionnaire, parents were asked to perform the “Family Sociogram” technique (Eidemiller G.), as well as the “Emotional Communication in the Family” questionnaire (Kholmogorova A.). Based on the ideas about the child’s image and the values of the parents identified through the questionnaire, a sort of “ideal blueprint” for the child was drawn up; (4) conversation with the child, including a number of techniques such as the Animal Preference Test (APT), “Three Wishes,” “Golden Age”, drawings of “My Future Self”; 5) our own, specially developed “Pick a Photo” experimental method, meant to confirm and supplement the results of other data, aimed at revealing children’s means of identification and their ideas about the image of a modern child. During its use, a situation was created that allowed for the identification of the unconscious or weakly conscious contents of the child’s consciousness and the introjects of the “image of Me” that form his personality.

6. Findings

The general methodological provision of the cultural-historical theory of human consciousness (L.S. Vygotsky) served as the basis for the implementation of this study: at the first stage, it was necessary to describe the sociocultural conditions of children's development (on the one hand, the analysis of the characteristics of families — their socioeconomic status, material needs, central values related to the upbringing of children, ideas about the “ideal blueprint” of a child, etc., on the other hand, study of the strategies of the organizations used by families to promote their child’s development). At the second stage, we attempted to analyze the specifics of children’s personal identities and qualitatively describe the particularities and risk factors of children’s personality development. In this way, we implemented our intention to integrate objective and phenomenological research (Burlakova & Oleshkevich, 2001; Burlakova & Bykova, 2015, etc.).

6.1. Objective sociocultural situation of children’s development (family characteristics)

(a) The data indicates that families in the groups mentioned above are generally of high socioeconomic status, are quite well-off, and both parents have higher education. The frequent coincidence of the contents of the parameters analyzed (socioeconomic status, education, parents’ occupations, type of family, etc.) indicates that the subgroup/strata has quite homogeneous material and economic characteristics.

b) One of the characteristics of this group is the focus of mothers on the family and the upbringing of children; as a rule, the father works, providing for the family's high economic status. To a large extent, parents aim to create the conditions for their child to have professional success as early as possible, as is illustrated by the following statement by a parent: *“It was important to start a career in the modeling business by the age of three months, so that now (at 6-9 years old) [the child] would be able to earn something”*.

c) In this group, parents are focused on their children's professional success, which is defined by the number of photo sessions and invitations to runway shows, television, and cinema. The activity of children and their parents is focused on the lessons offered by modeling agencies, which are aimed at the development of "external" qualities — parents emphasize the importance of *"self-image, the child's popularity."*

d) With regard to parent-child relations, it is important to emphasize the existence of a certain "scenario" observed in the families studied: a low degree of differentiation of "ego" in family members is reflected in emotional relations that are characterized by parents' increased control of, and excessive involvement in, the child's affairs (in a number of cases, there was an heightened score on the "Over-Inclusion" scale on the "Emotional Communication in the Family" questionnaire).

6.2. Cultural and social conditions of the development of children engaged in the fashion industry

Based on data from observations and semi-structured interviews with representatives of the children's modeling industry (directors of two children's modeling agencies in Moscow, a director of a casting agency and an employee (photographer) at a modeling agency), we have analyzed the specific features of institutions where children worked and studied:

a) The development strategies of modeling and casting agencies are polar opposites, but, in both cases, they are focused on one result – profit; the modeling agency offers a training program for children, while the casting agency selects "in-demand" images for work at photo shoots, runway shows, and in the film and television industries. The photographer is responsible for the creation of the "for-sale" portfolio, without which any casting calls are impossible.

b) In this regard, it was especially important to highlight the most important components of the cultural and social conditions for children's development, as conveyed by representatives of the children's model business:

- the development of self-confidence ("emancipation") and popularity;
- the unlocking of creative potential;
- training in skills that are "useful" for future work ("posing");
- potential to earn at a young age.

c) From the statements of representatives of the modeling industry, we have identified the qualities that characterize mothers of children of this group:

- ambition and motivation for their child to attain major achievements;
- self-realization/prestige (presentation of oneself through the child's success);
- domination and often excessive control of all aspects of the child's life;
- competitiveness.

A belief in the uniqueness of their own child becomes an overarching idea for parents who create a "ideal blueprint" of their child without taking into account the real possibilities, abilities and difficulties of the child's development: *"You have to be the best, you have to be first – you have to!"* (a typical parental

message to children). In the case that the child fails to meet these expectations, parents demonstrate visible disappointment, often expressing it in ways including physical actions towards the child, irritated shouting, etc., which may lead to particular emotional and personal deformities in the child's mentality.

d) To briefly summarize the most in-demand image of a child for modeling work, it should combine a specific physical appearance and a no less specific personality type. Most in-demand is a European physical appearance — blondes with blue eyes, while “unusual” types — “*redheads and mulattos*” – may spur interest. Important parameters also include: “*a pretty little face,*” “*cute children with teeth, with long hair and a beautiful smile*”; moreover, “for runway shows, children are evaluated in kilograms and centimeters.” The importance of ability to work (“12-hour shifts”) and organization are emphasized, as well as a serious attitude to discipline. Typical mottos of children's model agencies are: “*There's no such thing as 'I can't,' there's only 'I don't want to'!*”, or “*Learn to endure, restrain yourself, work on yourself and your emotions, and then you will earn a lot of money!*”.

In this way, the specially developed questions in the semi-structured interview allowed for certain categories of analysis to be identified. The conflict of these categories is worthy of note. Based on the data, we have identified the following thematic oppositions:

- Understanding the obvious difficulties of children vs. following the logic of business. Children's breakdowns, intolerance of failure, extremely painful reactions, overwork and other affective disorders are ignored in order to increase profits.
- Declarations of the value of studying in a modeling school with the goal of self-realization vs. lack of demand for children who have attended modeling schools. Modeling agencies impart to parents the need for special modeling skills for the purpose of earning money, but, ultimately, such promising training is likely to “erase” the child's individuality, childishness and spontaneity and to make their behavior artificial and formulaic, rather than contributing to their further advancement in this sphere.
- Emphasizing the individuality of the child vs. symbolic consumption of childhood. On the one hand, parents and modeling agencies accentuate the value of the child and his uniqueness. In this regard, the modeling world guarantees *freedom and the unlocking of the child's creative potential.*” On the other hand, however, analysis of the data obtained demonstrates a “technical” perception of the child, both by the representatives of the fashion industry and by parents; for the latter, the child becomes either the “breadwinner” of the family or the representative of the parent and his success, so the “failures” of the child are perceived as the failures of the parents themselves, who demonstrate offset forms of self-assertion.

6.3. Parents' perceptions of the child's image

The mechanisms for the development of children's “self image” have been studied alongside the views of parents. Relations with parents form the crucial link in the assignment of the system of standards that subsequently guide the child in his choice of strategies for life, interactions in life, and decision-making, thus contributing to the development of his self-identity. In this regard, based on the data from the parent questionnaires, we identified values and parental claims related to the child's image and expectations for the child's future:

a) Parents place the highest priority on the model of a successful person. Along with choosing success as the most valuable category for the future of their child, parents often note “breakthrough” qualities such as *“commitment,” “confidence,” and “independence.”*

b) In their essays (“My Child...”), parents emphasize the value of creative self-expression (*“very creative personality” or “creative, extraordinary”*) when describing their children. At the same time as they highlight their child’s originality, parents pay attention to emotional manifestations in their child’s behavior (*“temperamental,” or “very emotional,” or “can’t tolerate criticism addressed to them from other children,” or “prone to mood fluctuations”*).

c) A low tolerance for frustration is observed among children in the group — they are unable to endure situations in which they do not end up as the winner. For example, many parents note that *“if something goes wrong, not like [my child] planned, he immediately gets upset,” or “[my child] tries to be the first in everything,” “[my child] does not know how to lose, worries if he fails at something,”* etc. Such reactions are the result of excessive demands on the part of parents, for whom the crucial link is the need for major social achievements, without taking into account genuine opportunities and the difficulties faced by the child.

d) The reverse side of such high expectations on the part of parents is the increasing perfectionism of children, who try to prove their worth to the adult through “diligence,” “goodness,” and “correctness.” In their essays, parents describe the characteristics of children (*“responsible, meticulous, able to concentrate,” or “very obedient, attentive,” or “a very attentive actor — follows the instructions of directors and photographers very precisely,” or “likes to do everything according to the rules, pays careful attention in order to do everything correctly, like it should be done”*), fixation on which can be quite dangerous in the further development of children’s personality.

Thus, the types of identification encouraged by parents are characterized by features of full obedience with regard to the chosen strategy of studying at a modeling school, pronounced “competitiveness” and a desire to “be first”; children are perceived as a tool through which parents often maintain their own self-esteem and significance and demonstrate success.

6.4. Risk trends in children’s development

Turning to the structure of children’s personal identities and the nature of their desires and ideas about the future, it can be seen how values are processed and embedded in the child’s inner world and the corresponding models of relationships. The children’s modeling business declares the primacy of the external over the internal and cultivates the idea of the overwhelming importance of the attractiveness of the body, clothing, jewelry, etc. Research of personal identities demonstrated the following results:

a) The most commonly used basis was the “aesthetic choice” of animals that are externally attractive and thus valuable in this aspect, which the child would “want to turn into” (the Animal Preference Test technique), as well as a fear of rejection and “smallness,” which was perceived with contempt, manifested by the choice of animals which the child would never want to turn into;

b) In the choice of photos (“Pick a Photo” method), first place was taken by photos from the “Fashion-consuming child” category. When describing these photos, children focused on their physical traits (features of external attractiveness, clothing).

c) The method of the “My Future Self” drawing demonstrated children’s interest in choosing “fashionable” professions or “fashionable” sorts of idle leisure (children painted themselves as “photographers,” “designers,” “people relaxing on a yacht,” “waiting for an order in a cafe,” “doing makeup,” or “going shopping”), which indicates a desire for pleasure, enjoyment, and popularity. This constitutes the framework of children’s perception of the future and themselves in it.

d) The result described in item (c) also correlates with the data from the “Golden Age” projective question, which allowed us to reveal the preference of the majority of children of this group for their earlier infantile position, but that may also be seen as a subjective return to an age when there was not such strong pressure from adults with regard to expectations placed on children. Parents’ desire to achieve a high level of material well-being is also noted in the children’s responses: in the “Three Wishes” technique, children’s focus to a large extent on material values (*new things*, “a lot of money,” “a house with a pool,” etc.) is quite notable.

Analysis of the results shows the following main risky positions in the development of children’s personality and self-consciousness, which are formed by the child’s environment:

- in children’s self-consciousness, there is a particularly sharp view of themselves as successfully/unsuccessfully presenting themselves to others; a contradictory combination of the pleasure of admiring oneself and aesthetic appeal, alternating with a fear of rejection;
- difficulties in communication with other children and difficulties of social interaction due to high competition in the modeling industry;
- heightened desire to be the best model, in keeping with the wishes of adults, entails difficulties with the child’s authentic experience of self-expression, rigidity, lack of freedom for personal preferences;
- painful reactions to the success of others and to one’s own failures due to the requirements that one “shine” individually;
- early fixation on external attributes of prestige and social status.

7. Conclusion

Analysis of the self-consciousness of children professionally engaged in the fashion industry makes it possible to identify the relation between sociocultural tendencies, attitudes of the relevant environment, and ideas about oneself and processes of self-identification that have been internalized by the time children reach elementary school age. These results allow us to identify serious risk areas in the emotional and personal development of children in this group with regard to the conditions of their social and cultural “production,” which is important within the framework of cultural-historical clinical psychology. They also provide the opportunity to understand the data obtained from a broader cultural and historical perspective, including the phenomenon of the “glamorization of children,” the cultural trend of the “fashionable child,” the inclusion of business and commerce in the sphere of childhood, and other phenomena.

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