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**WHAT DO RUSSIAN PRESCHOOLERS THINK ABOUT WEALTH**  
**AND POVERTY**

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*Abstract*

The present study focused on the worldview of Russian preschoolers (n=150) who attended daycare centres in Moscow in 2009–2010. The method of a structured interview was used. The results were compared to the previous periods of the study: the year of 1992 was a period of radical reforms; the year of 1995 saw relative stabilization; the year of 1998 was the time of a powerful financial and economic crisis; in 2009–2010 the country experienced the influence of the global economic crisis. Since 1992 the opinions of preschoolers about wealth and poverty became more realistic and less clearcut. The ratio of the answers “the rich are good,” “bad,” “different” was about 7:6:4. The respondents practically never mentioned the topic of the criminal origin of wealth. In the opinion of the children, the main sources of material well-being were work, one’s own efforts, and the redistribution of wealth. The children generally viewed themselves and their families as “average” or “normal,” neither rich nor poor. Most of them viewed the future optimistically: “We cannot become poorer.” Money for the children was a means to achieve financial and psychological well-being. Importantly, we found that the preschoolers felt equally happy, protected and sheltered during the time of economic stability as during the time of crises. The preliminary assessment of the data collected in 2015–2016 showed that this trend remained, as parents guarded their children against social problems, the children viewed the world around them in a happy and harmonious way.

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## 1. Introduction

Studying children's attitude towards wealth in the context of real social life, we considered two main factors: cultural traditions and social context. The present study spanned three time periods. The results of the study in 2010 were compared to the previous periods of the study completed in 1992, 1995, and 1998. The situation in the country was quite different across those periods. The year of 1992 was the period of radical reforms and "shock therapy". The year of 1995 saw relative stabilization and people adapting to changes. 1998 was the year of a powerful financial and economic crisis, when the population lost faith in the government. In 2009-2010, after a decade of political and economic stability, the country experienced the influence of the global economic crisis. The results of the third stage of studying children's understandings of wealth and poverty (conducted in 2015–2016) were not presented. A separate article on this topic will be written later.

### 1.1. Cultural traditions.

Cultural traditions – those of Russia and the rest of the world – present the least changeable and relatively stable background of the study. The negative attitude to wealth as a form of covetousness is quite widespread: it can be found in religious canons ("Rich will not enter the Kingdom of Heaven."), and become a part of the folklore tradition. Nonetheless, attitude to wealthy people and wealth is transformed with time in accordance with changing economic paradigms, ethical norms and behavioural strategies. This fact is reflected in fiction, where the topic of money, wealth and poverty is reflected in many ways with one unchanging motif: "Longing for money is a crime; money is repulsive to culture, almost every book rebukes it" (Yastrebov, 1999, p. 5).

The Russian cultural stereotype of wealth were from the same sources (religious texts, folklore and fiction). But there were unique overtones in the Russian cultural tradition, as well. Before 1917, Russia was predominantly a peasant country; most people shared the norms and values of community life; and the desire for social security and ensured (albeit limited) income outweighed the aspiration to become rich (Mironov, 2000). With the beginning of the country's modernization, all conditions were set for creation of a powerful middle class and encouragement of entrepreneurial spirit. However, this period was short-lived, and in 1917 the Soviet era began.

During the Soviet times, wealth was criticized by the official Soviet ideology; it was equal to profiteering, something that was inconceivable for people building communism. Every citizen studied the Code of Man Building Communism as early as in kindergarten. Everyone was required to follow the maxims of that short text, and at least, to formally declare their allegiance to what he said. This purely negative attitude to wealth and entrepreneurship was historically popular among Russians, so the Soviet tradition became to despise money, rich people, and plenty. Only immaterial, spiritual richness was viewed positively. In fact, some people were somewhat "well-to-do" during the socialist era, but their financial well-being based either on certain perks or illegal ways of getting rich. These people never advertised their wealth in public. The main values of the Soviet period were equality and social justice.

## **1.2. Social context of the study.**

The social context of the study had to do with the present-day situation in the country. We could appreciate the social context by comparing different age cohorts. The study was carried out at the time of social change, and affected three main periods: the rapid onset of reforms, the gradual emergence of a new social order, and the end of the epoch of radical changes. By 2010, the country changed in a drastic way, and that change could not be undone. Nonetheless, Russia continued changing but those changes were no longer radical, and followed the newly established socio-economic order. The processes of modernization of the social structure of the Russian society continued, and “so far, it was too early to see it as fully stable, although the process of stabilization had commenced.” [Modernization of social..., 2008, p. 5].

Therefore, at the first stage of the study, in 1992–1998 we studied the children who lived in the world, undergoing catastrophic changes. And, in 2009–2010 our subjects lived in the changed world that continued changing at a relatively smooth pace.

We could not assess directly the effects of social stratification because we had no information on that what social strata the families of the children belonged to. However, we could consider the child’s self-identification as “rich or poor,” and use this variable to study the attitude of children towards poverty or wealth. On the other hand, we did have data on the state of affairs in terms of difference in income levels, and these data could be compared to the results of our study.

## **2. Problem Statement**

The impact of socio-economic changes in the Russia on the attitude of children to poverty and wealth has not been sufficiently studied.

## **3. Research Questions**

What is the range of children’s opinions on wealth and poverty? What do children pay attention to? What is their attitude to different situations, people, and events? What do Russian preschoolers think about wealth and poverty?

## **4. Purpose of the Study**

The study focuses on the worldview of Russian preschoolers in the different times. The article discusses the data collected in the process of structured interviews with six-year-old children at the first two stages of the study, in 1992–1998 and 2009–2010.

## **5. Research Methods**

The set of questions on wealth, poverty and money was a part of the structured interview (55 points) with the children. The study included 339 preschoolers who attended daycare centers in Moscow. At the moment of the interview, all the subjects were six years old.

## 6. Findings

### 6.1. Review of First Stages of the Study (1992–1998).

Let us begin with a brief summary of previous stages of the study. What was the attitude of children to wealth, poverty and money in 1992, 1995, and 1998? The set of questions on wealth and poverty was a part of a structured interview with the children. The study included 189 preschoolers who attended daycare centres in Moscow. At the moment of the interview all the subjects were six years old. A detailed description of the study results was shown in the book (Egorova et al., 2001).

*Social context of the study.* The USSR ceased to exist in December 1991, and Russia appeared on the map as an independent country. Social and economic reforms started in 1992. The country gave up on the idea of building socialism and focused on introducing market relations into the national economy. The changes were quite radical and affected the lives of Russian citizens in every sphere. The first consequences of the reforms caused a sharp decline in living conditions, as people lost their savings, unemployment grew, and many social guarantees were cancelled.

As their routine practices disappeared and the old system of values around them changed, Russian citizens saw very few choices in their future. Most people were worried, disoriented and vulnerable, and had no idea how to adapt to changing conditions. However, others acted fast, using new opportunities to their advantage. The privatization program that started at the nation-wide level in 1992, helped form a new social class of property owners. The accumulated material wealth of the country was redistributed, and many people became instantly wealthy. Entrepreneurial skill started bringing its dividends.

By 1995 most Russian citizens got adapted to new socio-economic conditions, and the situation in the country stabilized. A major financial and economic crisis shook the nation in 1998. Once again, many people became poor and lost faith in their government. The exchange rate of the rouble plummeted. However, the consequences of the crisis were quite positive, and steady economic growth began. A relatively long period of stable development started. People grew more satisfied with their lives, and there were fewer people who lived below the line of poverty.

For the first time in the recent Russian history, new social characters emerged in Russia after the reforms – the poor and the rich in the modern sense of the world. The new rich (the new Russians, as a newspeak word of the early reform period) tried to make money and became proprietors on their own. Unfortunately, criminal ways of making money could not be excluded either. The initial capital accumulation period was associated with criminal business in the mind of people and made many Russians perceive the new rich in a negative light. There was a saying of that time “perestroika is now perestrelka” (“perestroika is now a shootout”). There were many stories in the media on illegal ways of accumulating wealth, legal violations during redistribution of national property. They coupled with the cultural stereotype of a rich man as a greedy and dishonest person who thought about nothing but of violating moral norms.

*What did the children talk about?* We found out that six-year-old respondents knew very well that richness and money were necessary for them to have “a good life”. Perhaps, this was the most evident reflection of the real changes in the world around them. The children did not want to be poor, they wanted to have money. As they wished themselves and others to be happy and joyous, the children did not seem to understand the reasons for injustice, inequality, and poverty. The children said that they wanted the

world to be fair, they thought of redistributing money among all people so that no one would be rich or poor. They thought this was partially equal in their minds with making everyone prosperous and happy.

The children gave rich people some attributes (money, gold and things) and certain character traits (from kindness to wrath, from being selfless to being greedy). Quite often, especially in 1992, the stories about the rich and the poor were “fairy-tale” in nature: rich people “reigned”, “they had chests with treasures” and “found riches buried in the ground”. With time, the perception of rich people became more realistic; the image of the poor person was subdivided into many more categories. The children often described their families as “average” and “normal”. Half of them said that they could get poor, and the other half – that they could get wealthy.

The children of 1992–1998 knew very well that money had to be earned, and for that they had to find a good job, start working and work hard. They also described other sources of becoming rich, unreal and tale-like (buried treasures, chests with gold, etc.). Most frequently the children said that in order to get rich they had to put forth the effort (work diligently, work a lot, study well, get a good job, etc.).

Considerable changes revealed themselves in the assessment of the poor and the rich during three years (from 1995 to 1998). For instance, in 1995 only ten percent of the children thought of the rich people as “bad”, the others responded that rich people were either “good” or “some of them are good, and some are bad” (the latter two responses occurred with the same frequency). In 1998, however, the share of those who thought that the rich people were bad increased, and the shares of three responses (“good”, “bad” and “different”) became relatively equal (one-third for each). Therefore, we might assume that in 1995, the children who had had little personal experience, gave the rich the benefit of the doubt and viewed them more favourably. Regarding the poor, most of the children believed that the poor people were “nice” but with time the number of such answers went somewhat down (85% in 1995 and 75% in 1998). Interestingly, in 1995 there were no answers “poor are bad”, and even the number of responses “some are good, some are bad” is very small. Unequivocally, “bad” poor people appeared in the children’s stories first in 1998, but then there were still many more “good” poor people than “bad” (by 8 times) or “different” (by 4 times). Therefore, the attitudes of the children to the poor and the rich became less clear-cut, wealth was not perceived more negatively, and being poor was no longer viewed as something definitely positive.

## **6.2. Results of the 2009–2010 Study.**

The study included 150 preschoolers aged six years old who attended daycare centres in Moscow. As at the previous stages of this research project, the interview included a set of questions about money, being rich and poor.

*Social context of the study.* By 2010 the social structure of the Russian society was mostly shaped, although some changes were still taking place. A new generation of people born after the socialist period grew up. People learned to live according to new rules and thought of the changes as irreversible. Gradually, there were fewer people living under the poverty line, most people became psychologically sounder. Even the crisis of 2008–2009, which affected many Russians in different ways, did not end the trend. The new middle class survived the test of the economic crisis of 2008, showing fairly good adaptability (Gorshkov & Tikhonova, 2004; Kozyreva, 2009; Gorshkov & Sheregi, 2010). The attitude to

rich people and entrepreneurs became more stable and definite (Chernysh et al., 2009). According to the Russian Centre for the Study of Public Opinion, half of all Russians believed that the work of Russian businesspeople and entrepreneurs benefited the state (51%) and one third believed that it was harmful (31%); most young people (aged 18–24) viewed business positively (61%); the number of those who wanted to review the privatization process gradually decreased (Reviewing the results..., 2008).

By 2010 one distinguishing feature of the situation in the country was a higher differentiation of different classes in terms of the level of income (the same trend continued and even increased, later). According to the Russian Statistics Office, in 2009 10% of the most wealthy held 31% of all the monetary revenue, while 10% of the poorest held only 1.9% of the total revenue of all the residents in Russia (Socio-economic indicators..., 2010). An extremely high level of income differentiation led to a considerable tension in the society. The position of the poor did not improve significantly, they lost optimism and hope for the future. However, sociological studies showed that no stable negative attitude to the rich had formed: “The rich respect themselves, and the poor are indifferent to them; the poor feel sorry for themselves, and the rich people feel sorry for them, too” (Gorshkov & Sheregi, 2010, p. 15).

The study of social self-identification showed that children were more optimistic as compared to adults when describing their family and its financial situation (Modernization of social structure..., 2008). The authors said about the self-identification of adults and adolescents in terms of material welfare: “Children in comparison with adults present their families as more well-to-do; their assessment is always higher than that of their parents. Perhaps, the parents still follow the moral norms of the socialist era, and try to guard the children from experiencing financial hardship in their family life” (Modernization of social structure..., 2008, p. 193). These conclusions matched the results of our previous study (Egorova et al., 2001), and the results obtained in 2009–2010.

*Children’s understanding of the rich and poor.* As previously, the respondents said that the main difference between rich and poor people was in the quantity of money and things they had. The rich has “millions” of money, gold, they had “palaces” and many cars, and they lived in comfortable homes. A new statement that came up was that “rich people have workers” and “servants”. The rich were “merchants”, “millionaires” and “rich folks,” who did different things: from doing nothing (“looking at their money”) to working actively and hard. Oftener “they work hard and well”; seldom “they do not want to do anything”, “they sit around with their riches,” and “count their precious money”. Dating back to 1992, the participants under study did not wish to become bankers “because they get killed”. Some of the respondents in 2010 said that rich people behaved like criminals (“they steal and take away money from others”). The rich were good because “they give everyone food” and “they give money to the poor because they are very kind”; they were also bad because they did not share their money with others (“evil”, “greedy”). In short, the rich “can be very different”. The ratio of answers “the rich are good”, “bad”, “different”, “I don’t know” was about 7:6:4:1. These results were practically the same as in 1998, when the responses (except for “I don’t know”) were subdivided into approximately equal thirds.

The children today give very few details and colourful descriptions, which can be seen often earlier. Except for single very rare responses, there are no more stories about kings, chests with treasures, magic collections, which may become sources of wealth. The image of a rich person becomes more concrete, the artifacts of his or her life and behaviour are easily recognizable and typical.

Unlike the responses in the studies of 1992–1998, later descriptions of the poor were less detailed and extensive in comparison with descriptions of the rich. The extreme opinion of some of the children was that “there are no poor people.” The most outstanding attribute of a poor person was that he or she did not have enough money. Why so? Poor people “do not work” or “have not a good job, which they would be paid for more.” Some respondents explained poverty by the character of a poor person (“they are lazy and unorganized”, “they are often late”, “do not work well”). Oftener, the children blamed the circumstances of other people, who, for instance, fired a poor person. Overall, the poor were viewed by the children as being less active compared to the rich who also got involved in more things.

We asked the children about how we could get rid of poverty. Their answers were: “You need to work a lot, work hard,” “Rich people could share their wealth with them”. Therefore, there were two main ways of getting rid of poverty: sharing wealth with the poor, or giving them a good job so that “they could earn more money”. The children mentioned the same solutions in 1992–1998, although previously the range of “solutions” was more extensive, including unrealistic, and even unthinkable scenarios: “We need to kill all of them”. By 2010 the children became realists: they mentioned the ways that were practically achievable, and could be used in real social practice.

How did children perceive themselves and their family – as rich or poor? As they pondered how to class themselves, their parents and friends on the dichotomy of “rich versus poor”, the children often used more neutral descriptions and said that they were “average” and “normal”, and some noted “we are rich, but we are good people.” Here’s an example of a response about the child and his family: “We do not have a castle, like some other people do, but we are not poor, like those who have nothing. We have many cars, for instance. Grandpa has two, mom has one, dad has one.” The children were likely to call themselves rather “average” than “rich” more than twice. Some of the children thought it to be only natural that when they talked about their family and relatives; they had to call themselves “rich.” One girl commented, as she drew her picture: “If I say I am rich, I need to draw mom, dad, grandpa, grandma and brother.” Typically, the children could not imagine their family becoming poor. They were confident that their financial situation was stable; only a handful of respondents said that “we can get poorer.”

Money for the children was not just an attribute of wealth; they knew that money could bring about welfare, make you happier and make members of your family happier. This general attitude was summarized succinctly by one girl who said: “[I’d wish] for my mom to have a good life... I’d wish I would be happy... that mom and I had everything we needed... and that mom had a lot of money for it.”

*Practice of handling money.* As during the previous years, few children appeared to have pocket money; some of them could not even comprehend the question of whether they had any money. As more questions were asked to clarify, they responded that they had “coins”, “kopecks” and “a little” money. The children got their money from their parents, grandparents, “Uncle Serezha” and other close relatives. Some children said they “found” money in the street or “in the apartment.” Some children said they had piggy-banks, others would spend their pocket money immediately on whatever they needed: “ice-cream”, “a chocolate bar”, other pleasures or “tasty things”; and still others said they “gave money back to their parents.” The children who said they had no pocket money were equally likely to spend it, or “to save it” if they had money to spare. Some of the children said that their parents gave them money to pay for their purchases in the store, in the presence of the adult. Some parents played games with their children using

real money. These games taught children real-life shopping behaviour. Sometimes, the children got money for something useful they had done, for their efforts and perseverance. The children said that they did not consider “kopecks and coins” as money; “money” was viewed as something being distinctly different.

Overall, we found practically no differences from the results of the previous years. Usually the preschoolers had no pocket money but were taught how to pay for purchases in stores, played games with money at home, learned to handle money, or were given with some small sums of money to save, or a little pocket money. The topic of deceit, that had been present in the interviews earlier, disappeared (the children used to say “I’d get deceived, they wouldn’t give me the change, and Mom would get angry.” In comparison with the previous studies, considerably fewer children wished to purchase something that their family badly needed for that amount of money, like food (exactly food, not something fancy) or clothes. However, the children were equally likely to purchase something useful or necessary for their family members (“lipstick” for mom, or “something useful” for Mom or Grandma). Judging by the children’s responses, the topic of pocket money was of no interest to them, they showed little concern about having pocket money. On the one hand, the children were fairly small and had little practice with money. On the other hand, the children and their family members most likely had everything they needed (“If I want something, Mom will get it for me”). The children therefore had no need for the money as a way to get something they did not have at home. The children reported having money for “ice cream”, “juice”, “candy”, and other sums were given to them regularly for things like “ski”, “roller blades”, etc.

What did the children know about the dollar and the euro used often for savings and payments during trips abroad? Only the rouble was considered to be a legal tender in Russia today; this was different from the time of previous studies when the dollar was almost universally accepted, and the euro did not exist. In 2010, about half of the respondents said they “heard something” about dollars and euros, and others “forgot” what it was or had no idea about foreign money (“The euro? How would I know?”). The children were a bit less familiar with the euro than the dollar but some children did say that the exchange rate of the euro and the dollar was different. However, often they did not know precisely “which money cost more.”

The children knew that the dollar and the euro were different from the rouble. However, they were not able to explain the difference, referring mostly to the appearance: “a paper coin”, “a silver thing”; in other words, it was different from the ordinary rouble. We could see from the children’s answers that the more informed children knew that the dollar and the euro were “money, which is more than a rouble.” This phenomenon reflected the social reality. Despite the economic stabilization in the country, the rouble was used as only one of several ways in which to keep savings. Firstly, people had become more experienced in financial dealings and tried to diversify their investments. The crises over the past several decades led to people’s perception of the rouble as being not very reliable; the trust in Russian financial institutions had not yet been fully restored, either.

## **7. Conclusion**

The study of 2010 revealed no important changes in the attitude of children to wealth and poverty in comparison with the results of the 1992–1998 study. However, the new study showed that poverty and

wealth became less important for children, they were less interested in these topics. The respondents shared fewer spontaneous and enthusiastic stories with vivid details about poverty and wealth. Their stories were extensive seldom and based on the stories of adults or mass media reports, and transformed by the children's perceptions. More children responded to the questions: "I don't know." Adults acquired more definitive attitudes towards wealth and poverty and stopped discussing it, including conversations in the family. Possibly, for this reason, the children were less involved in the process of perceiving and assessing the poor and wealthy. In our study of the 1992–1998 years, the children did not seem to focus too much on what was habitual and routine. They were less interested, and their perceptions of the issue were less differentiated and often not remembered.

Overall, the preschoolers did not offer any actively negative comments about wealth and rich people, saying that "Rich and poor people can be very different." The children were less interested in accumulating wealth or the topic of money at all; they were less familiar with different kinds of money. Work and one's own efforts were cited by the respondents as the main sources of wealth, which in the study of 2010 was again identical to the previous stage of the study. Social self-identification was mostly like "normal," and the view of the future was fairly optimistic ("We cannot get poorer."), as previously.

The results of the 2009–2010 study showed that, as previously, the children were guarded by the parents from discussing social problems of the adult world; this topic was not found to affect the children's consciousness in a major way (not even the avalanche economic crisis of the years 2008–2009). The discussion of the extreme social stratification in terms of income level might be tense, but the children did not see themselves as underprivileged. A similar conclusion could be drawn from the children's responses to the questions about the crisis, unemployment, or happiness (Zyrianova, 2010).

Later, we will present the results of the study of preschoolers' worldview, done in 2015–2016. We hypothesized that this trend would remain in place in the future, as well. Families, parents and other relatives would continue setting up a sort of barrier that would not let social contradictions and problems touch children. As a result, children would remain happy despite all social or economic upheavals.

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