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**SEMANTIC-SYMBOLIC REPRESENTATION OF THE EARLY  
CHILDHOOD IN THE CONSCIOUSNESS OF ADULTS**

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*Abstract*

The results of a study of an adult's semantic thesaurus are presented. An individual thesaurus is defined as a set of semantic zones amplified with personal significance (concepts) formed around subjectively substantial points of experience. With the help of the author's techniques "Existential dictionary of ages" and "Incomplete autobiography" it is shown that: 1) early ages in an adult's consciousness are represented by a limited range of concepts, which reflect normative life events and age-social tasks; 2) in comparison with other ages, only the following units of experience are most definitely fixed in an adult's consciousness: key life events; the most influential and significant persons; the general emotional mood attributed to childhood as a whole; the focus of internal intentions; fragments of a unique experience; 3) the key events are determined mainly by negative experience (jitters, fright, physical trauma, disease, etc.); 4) the significant persons who determine all the experience gained in early childhood are mother and grandmother; 5) the prevailing emotional mood is serenity, insouciance, complete happiness, the sense of security and the surrounding of love and care; 6) a common internal setting is "to grow up as soon as possible"; 7) the unique experience is associated primarily with the first evidence of death (an elderly relative, a pet); 8) the concept of infancy (up to 1 year) is defined by "caring", "game", "instinct", "love", "curiosity", "mother", "start"; the basis of early age (from 1 to 3 years) is represented by the concepts "game", "dolls", "curiosity" and "mother".

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**Keywords:** Childhood, psychosemantics of consciousness, personal semantic thesaurus.



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## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1. Definition of the semantic-symbolic space of personality.**

One's own psychic reality, composed of personal representations, images, concepts, etc., is a source of deeply personal experiences. This reality is perceived as a strictly private space of authenticity, where one can be by oneself, free from social roles and masks. In the internal hermeneutic work of self-reflection, self-interpretation and self-organization the person gets from this space the necessary semantic resources (memories, self-representations, fantasies, beliefs, still unrealized plans and projects) in order to adapt to the current course of life and perform the needful elections and deeds. In difficult life-situations this resource helps "to stay afloat" and in well-formed circumstances provides "a sense of the right path", confirming and strengthening selected modes and life-strategies. The content and characteristics of this internal space are interesting both for the practice of counseling and for the research of one of the operating modes of consciousness, its orientation to itself in acts of "self-care" (Fucsko, 1998): reflection, self-interpretation, designing autobiography, life-planning, etc. Nevertheless, the "human inner world is one of the most complex and poorly defined problems in psychology, since... it is all "psychical" in the broadest sense of this word" (Berezina, 2001, p. 5).

Sharing this opinion, we carried out a theoretical and empirical study and obtained a description of the internal semantic-symbolic space of life-ages from the standpoint of the author's existential-narrative approach. This article presents the results of two series of complex analysis of semantic-symbolic representations of early childhood.

### **1.2. Existential-psychological foundations for the study of semantic-symbolic representations of life-ages in an adult's consciousness.**

The initial presuppositions for this research are in a number of works devoted to the operationalization of the concept of the personal inner world (Abul'khanova, 1999; Binsvanger, 1999; Dzhems, 2011; Fromm, 1992; Kelli, 2000; Levin; 2000; Mamardashvili, 1992; Ol'shansky, 1983; Perls et al., 1993; Shkoporov, 1985; Vorob'eva et al., 1990; Zinchenko et al., 1994, etc.).

The most suitable is the psychosemantic approach (Artem'eva, 1999; Petrenko, 2010; Ulanovsky, 2012, etc.), aimed at the analysis of personal semantics reflecting the identity and partiality of human consciousness.

## **2. Problem Statement**

Semantic-symbolic representation of childhood is a part of the semantic thesaurus of personality, used in the processes of self-understanding, self-determination, self-interpretation, and self-therapy. One's internal symbolic and semantic codes, personal chronotopes and cognitions, the image-cognitive continuum are unique, because they are created in every life-stage under the influence of accumulated life experience and existential experience, personal characteristics, attitudes, self-relations, etc.

## **3. Research Questions**

1. What are the concepts that represent early childhood in an adult's consciousness?
2. Which units of the early childhood experience remain in the semantic thesaurus of adults?

3. What kind of life experience and existential experience determines the content of semantic-symbolic representations of early childhood?

4. Are there any differences and peculiarities of semantic-symbolic representations of early childhood among respondents of different ages?

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

The purpose of the study: analysis of semantic-symbolic representations of early childhood in an adult's consciousness.

#### **5. Research Methods**

##### **5.1. Procedure**

The study was carried out using the author's empirical semiprojective techniques "Existential dictionary of ages" (Sapogova, 2017) and "Incomplete autobiography" (Sapogova, 2013).

##### **5.2. Subjects (cases)**

Six age groups of 45 respondents participated in the study: 1) 30-39 years; 2) 40-49 years; 3) 50-59 years; 4) 60-69 years; 5) 70-79 years; 6) 80 years and older.

#### **6. Findings**

In the group of 30-39-year-old respondents, infancy (up to 1 year) was represented by the following concepts: adaptation, activity, serenity, helplessness, proximity, future, overprotection, movement, soul, life, care, dependence, defense, play, instinct, whims, love, curiosity, mother, start/beginning, innocence, father, joy, development, family. Early age (from 1 to 3 years) is represented by the concepts of adaptation, activity, serenity, closeness, speed, upbringing, movement, life, caring, makings, play, whims, puppets, curiosity, mother, innocence, cognition, joy, development, family.

The group of 40-49-year-old respondents characterized infancy using the concepts adaptation, serenity, helplessness, intimacy, life, care, dependence, health, play, instinct, whims, love, curiosity, mother, beginning, innocence, communication. Early age was represented by the concepts adaptation, activity, serenity, intimacy, speed, upbringing, movement, caring, play, whims, dolls, curiosity, mother, development.

In the group of 50-59-year-old respondents, infancy was represented by a number of concepts: adaptation, serenity, helplessness, life, care, dependence, protection, play, instinct, whims, love, curiosity, mother, beginning, innocence. Early age was fixed in the concepts activity, serenity, play, whims, dolls, curiosity, mother, joy.

The group of 60-69-year-old respondents described infancy with the concepts adaptation, activity, serenity, helplessness, movement, life, care, dependence, play, instinct, whims, love, curiosity, mother, beginning, innocence, father, joy, development, light, family. Early age was represented in conceptual thesauri of the respondents by the concepts adaptation, activity, serenity, movement, life, caring, play, whims, dolls, curiosity, mother, communication, joy, development.

The group of 70-79-year-old respondents for the representation of babyhood used such concepts as adaptation, serenity, care, play, instinct, love, curiosity, mother, beginning, novelty, father, joy, light, family, happiness. Early age was represented by the concepts imagination, education, care, play, dolls, curiosity, mother, thinking, novelty, father, joy, family, fear, happiness, fantasy.

The group of the respondents older than 80 years represented infancy with the concepts activity, movement, caring, dependence, play, instinct, whims, love, curiosity, mother, beginning, father, family. Early age was fixed by the concepts activity, education, movement, care, dependence, health, play, whims, dolls, curiosity, mother, father, family.

For all the groups of the respondents, similar semantic-symbolic priorities for infancy and early age were identified. It was found that the “early childhood space” was composed primarily of social-psychological constructs and cultural artifacts attributed to these ages. A rather narrow range of basic concepts was used in the representation of the both age stages: for the babyhood these were caring, play, instinct, love, curiosity, mother, start; for early age, game, dolls, curiosity, mother.

In comparison with other reflected ages, only the following units of life experience and existential experience of infancy and early age (from 20 possible units given by the technique) are most distinctly fixed in an adult's consciousness: key life-events; the most influential and significant persons (relatives); the general emotional mood attributed to childhood as a whole; the focus of internal intentions; fragments of a unique experience (if any).

The key events of early childhood are determined mainly by negative experience (jitters, fright, physical trauma, disease, etc.). The unique experience of early childhood is associated primarily with the first evidence of death (an elderly relative, a pet).

The significant persons who determine all the experience gained in early childhood are mother and grandmother (rarely father, siblings or other relatives). The prevailing emotional mood of early childhood is serenity, insouciance, complete happiness, the sense of security and the surrounding of the love and care of loved relatives.

A common internal setting is “to grow up as soon as possible”.

## 7. Conclusion

In comparison with other ages, early age is described least existentially and even not completely psychologically.

The concept of infancy (0-1 year) is represented by such concepts as “caring”, “game”, “instinct”, “love”, “curiosity”, “mother”, “beginning/start”. The semantic-symbolic basis of the representation of early age (1-3 years) is described by the concepts “game”, “dolls”, “curiosity” and “mother”.

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