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# SOCIOCULTURAL DYNAMICS OF THE “EDUCATION” CONCEPT IN SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS OF RUSSIAN PEOPLE

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### *Abstract*

The concept “education” contains a different semantic meaning in an industrial and post-industrial society. The present research is devoted to identification of the change in social representations of education among modern Russian people - adults with children who continue their education. The authors used an association experiment and open coding to highlight the semantic core and periphery of ideas about education in a timeline from the education of their parents to the education of their children, as well as to highlight the categories of building a grounded theory of modern social representations concerning education. An invariant semantic core in the ideas of Russian people about education was studied, they are associated with the value of education as a perspective for a social elevator, as a valuable period of childhood (studentship) connected with communication. Taking all things together, the industrial dominant of the concepts of education as a service and the post-industrial shift vector associated with the perception of lifelong education as an environment of development, creativity, self-realization, new experience and communication have been discovered. As a result of the research, institutional changes have been predicted in the form of convergence of formal education, non-formal education and educational edutainment, an increase in demand for corporate educational programs and institutions.

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**Keywords:** Social representations, education, association experiment, grounded theory, postindustrial society.



## 1. Introduction

Having passed the first two decades of the new century, Russian education is characterized by the same features as its mixed economy: the relationship of personal dependence and the ideas of education as an institution serving the interests of the state and dominant groups that are typical of a pre-industrial society have not gone completely yet, while relations based on personal independence, characteristic of an industrial society and ideas about education as a service sector brightly flourish, and relations of a free personality and value of education as the environment for creativity, flexibility, ability to learn, typical of a post-industrial information society begin to develop (Bulkin, 2001). In a post-industrial society, the sociocultural determinant of education is a so-called prefigurative culture (Mid, 2007), which is characterized by the simultaneous appearance of new knowledge and its acquiring by adults and children, in this process children happen to be more successful and they often act as holders of new forms of interaction, ways of solving new problems.

The modern scientific discussion about education centers is mainly based on its three missions: education as a social institution, public benefit and educational service. The social and professional discourse is focused on the issue of designing the results of education, on the content of “education of the future”. A group of scientists from the National Research University of the Higher School of Economics in their report “Universal Competencies and New Literacy: What to Teach Today for Success Tomorrow” (Dobryakova & Frumin, 2020) summarized the country and international skill frameworks of the 21st century (including PISA) and came to the conclusion that all the lists of universal competencies have a similar set of elements related either to universal competencies or to the “new literacy”. Critical, creative, systemic, analytical, innovative thinking, communication, leadership, cooperation, as well as understanding of oneself, one's goals, desires, the ability to self-organize and self-communicate, to realize the boundaries of one's personality have been referred to universal competencies. Universal literacy (basic and branch) is always connected with the ability to use the tool: sign systems, as well as the ability to use certain knowledge, skills of behavior in a society and modulation of emotions.

The Agency for Strategic Initiatives in the Atlas of Future Professions (Varlamova & Sudakov, 2020) identifies over-professional skills that are noted by employers as important for professions of the future: system thinking, inter-industry communication, project management, customer focus, lean manufacturing, environmental thinking, working with people, dealing with ambiguity, artistic skills, programming, robotics, artificial intelligence, multilingualism, multiculturalism. Complementing the discussion about the skills of the 21st century that occurred in the society, the team of authors: Luksha et al. (2018) - present the results of education of the future in the form of a four-layer Russian nested doll, the core of which is presented by deep “existential skills” used during the life: an ability to set goals and achieve them, an ability to gain self-knowledge and an ability to train and retrain. Then meta-skills are presented by layers: different types of intellects, for example, emotional and movement ones, cross-contextual skills (for instance, reading, writing, project management, self-organization skills) and contextual / highly specialized skills. These frames of competencies create a coordinate system in which the future of education- education of the future - should develop.

The more clearly postmodern images of a person with a subjectivistic dominant appear in a scientific discourse, the tougher anti-pedagogical views of scientists on the bureaucratic organization of the

educational process and on the need of the school are: from the proclamation of human autonomy and education as a social institution by W. Hermann, W. Herner, etc. to the complete de-secularization of the society by I. Illich (as cited in Ogurtsov & Platonov, 2004).

Such scientific polyphony should be either confirmed or not via the method of a grounded theory. A well-constructed substantiated theory must meet four central criteria in order to judge how applicable the theory is to the phenomenon: it must correspond to reality, be understanding, generalizing, and controlled (Strauss & Korbin, 2001). The key criterion for evaluating concepts developed on the basis of the grounded theory method is the interpretation of the data obtained that "takes into account the influence of the social structure on the experience of respondents" (Strauss & Korbin, 2001, p. 236). Since the authors of the research are holders of sociocultural experience of Soviet education and professional researchers in the field of social psychology, history and theory of education, the method of grounded theory will allow them to detect a change in social representations among the population of Russian adult people.

## **2. Problem Statement**

According to the All-Russian Public Opinion Research Center<sup>1</sup>, half of the respondents (51%) are sure that the situation in the educational field has worsened over the past 5-10 years. Every third (30%) respondent believes that school does not pay enough attention to the development of individual abilities of children, the development of analytical thinking and general education. This reflects disappointed expectations from the education system caused by undetected ideas about education among adult population. These groups are socially active, they study on their own and take their children to educational organizations, and they financially support their development or let one or another educational format disappear. Through the information on social media they form public opinion, which no state is able to avoid accounting in a post-industrial society. Their ideas about education are the subject of our study. The comparison of the results will be carried out with modern studies (Dobryakova, 2018; Martikainen, 2019; Pirttilä-Backma et al., 2017; Tolstykh, 2019).

## **3. Research Questions**

We have formulated two research questions: 1) what is the core and periphery of social ideas about education among its key customers - adults who have children but continue lifelong education throughout their lives; 2) what are the demanded changes (categories in a grounded theory) in the institutional structure of education in the near-term prospect.

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

We intend to detect a change in the social representations of education among active adult population and to make predictions about institutional changes.

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<sup>1</sup> The All-Russian Public Opinion Research Center: survey data. (2019, September, 2) School education: tasks, priorities, needs. Retrieved from: <https://wciom.ru/index.php?id=236&uid=9874>

## 5. Research Methods

Moscovici (2000) defines social representations as “ways of interpreting and understanding everyday reality, a certain form of social cognition that presumes cognitive activity of individuals and groups” (p. 33). In the most general meaning, social representations are made up of cognitive and social components. The development of social representations takes place in everyday life in order to explain the existing reality. Three main functions of social representation in public life can be distinguished: 1) maintaining steadiness and stability of an individual or group cognitive structure; 2) regulation of the behavior of an individual and a group subject, 3) adaptation of external social facts, their introduction into the system of the spiritual life of a collective subject. The functions of regulation and adaptation are especially significant for us, since at the level of the social system we can speak about adaptation of newly received information to norms, assessments and ideas that have already developed in the social community; at the level of the cognitive organization of the individual - about the adaptive restructuring of the “cognitive universum” of the subject in order to maintain its internal balance (Dontsov & Emelyanova, 1984). As these representations are generated in a dialogue, in communications of various subjects and social groups, they, being socially developed and shared by groups of social subjects, fulfill another important function - making communication performing easier. It is quite urgent in the case of education perceptions because only communication among all groups of participants in the educational process will allow us to obtain the result, to provide genuine education “for the future”.

Abric (2001) came up with a concept according to which there is a central core in social representations which consists of ideas, substantial elements of social representations that reflect collective memory of a particular group, community and that are stable and shared by the majority of the group participants. The core is stable, strong and well-connected, not very sensitive to a specific context. The “peripheral zone”, on the contrary, reflects the heterogeneity of the group, the diversity of ideas and representations of its members; it provides the integration of individual experience of each member of the group, this zone is variable, contradictory, sensitive to the current context of its existence, thereby fulfilling the functions of adapting to the realities of today's life and protecting the “core” from external effects (Abric, 2001). Nowadays this approach is widely spread due to the fact that it allows to operationalize the concept of social representation successfully and to provide massive opportunities for empirical research.

Doise (2001) writes that the dynamic nature of a concept, which consists in the possibility of its continuous change, is based in its genesis, in its connection with the concept that had existed before. Bovina (2010) agrees with his point of view and notes that the representations, on the one hand, are historical, they represent the ideas that serve as organizing principles at a certain historical moment for a number of objects and situations. Therefore, to understand the existing representations, it is important for us to know how they change over time and follow the transformations taking place in society. On the other hand, the representations are culturally specific: representatives of different cultures develop different perceptions regarding the same social reality (Bovina, 2010). Thus, the representations are included in the “frame of previous ideas” and depend on the belief system characteristic of certain values, traditions, and images of the world. Changes in these ideas are, to any extent, the result of changes in culture and style of social life. The example concerning ideas about education makes it possible to say that differences between generations, groups of subjects of the educational process are viewed in connection with the extent to which

ideas penetrated institutions, beliefs, attitudes and behavior of their participants in order to construct the reality.

In order to reconstruct the system of ideas about education, we used an association experiment. Associative structures make it possible to reflect the existing relationships between objects of reality and establish new relationships, on the basis of which the process of recognizing an object occurs. This association mechanism is characterized by vicarious manner, intimacy of associations and their orientation to sensory experience. In a free association experiment, reactions are limited only in terms of quantity. The absence of substantial limitations determines the free nature of this experiment. Each respondent was asked to give five associations to the words “education”, “my education”, “education of my parents”, “education of my children”.

In our research, we applied the technique of prototypic analysis developed by Pierre Verges (as cited in Emelyanova, 2016). The combination of individual representations of group members about a particular phenomenon (phenomenon, event, abstract category, etc.), consisting of a set of free associations to the word expressing this phenomenon, is divided into four areas (zones).

The core - the first area - includes substantial elements (in our case, associations) that meet two requirements:

- 1) the frequency with which they occur in this group should exceed the median value for the group;
- 2) the association should be mentioned first of all, in other words, the rank of mentioning should be less than the group average.

Thus, the core consists of those associations that are included in the semantic universal of the concept, and at the same time they were first to be mentioned in the list of associations. The correlation between frequency and rank determines other structural areas of social representations as well: the second (buffer) area includes elements that have a low frequency and low rank, i.e. they are mentioned not often, but as a matter of priority. The third area (also buffer) contains elements characterized by high frequency at high rank, i.e. they are mentioned frequently, but not in the first place. The fourth area, the periphery, is represented by elements that respondents mention rarely and in the last turn.

In the described series of the experiment adults aged from 24 to 46 years, a total of 246 people, including 130 women and 116 men, took part. 1226 associations were received for each stimulus word; the total number of associations is 4904. At the first stage, associations similar in sense and meaning were combined into more generalized concepts. For example, the notion of “educational attributes” combined the associations “school desk”, “classroom”, “blackboard”, “notebooks”, “notes”, etc. The concept of “perspective” includes such associations as “door to the future”, “road to the future”, “climbing the social ladder”, “status”, “solid position”, etc.

At the second stage, the frequency of mentioning each concept in the group was determined and the median was calculated, as well as the average rank of each concept reflecting the order in which it was mentioned. A low rank means that the concept was mentioned by respondents at the top of the list of associations, mainly in the first or second place. In accordance with the indicators of frequency and rank, a structure of social representation consisting of four zones has been built.

**Table 01.** The structure of social representations of modern Russian people concerning education

Zones of the structure of social representations	Social representations			
	Education	Education of my parents	My education	Education of my children
Core (I)	Higher Knowledge Experience Development	Higher Good quality Profession Knowledge Necessary	Higher Interesting Knowledge	Of their choice Higher Interesting Good quality Experience Achievement-oriented
Buffer zone (II)	Good quality Science Educational stages Educational institutions Obligatory	Interesting Studentship Free of charge Without computer Patient labour Necessity	I like it Creativity New experience Multi-purpose Useful in life	Training attributes Stress Development Independence Pleasure Continuous Communication
Buffer zone (III)	Interesting Conscious Necessary Affordable Prospects in life Need Training attributes	Development Comprehensive Complete State Choice according the possibilities Good teachers Classroom relationship	Development Self-realization Interest Courses Educational institutions Multifaceted Continuous Self-education New acquaintances Free of charge	Self-learning Perhaps not higher Courses Creative Multifaceted Conscious Perspectives in life Will bring pleasure Self-organization Remote Motivation Competent educators
Periphery (IV)	Mobile Profession Self-development	Training attributes Circles, classes Little practice	Training attributes Perspectives in life	Money Educational stages Multilingualism Useful in different professions Internships Close to real life

The first thing that draws attention is connected with the differences in the filling of the nuclear and peripheral zones. The ideas about education of children are largely reflected in both stable, established ideas regarding education based on its historical value, and the transformational trends that are currently taking place in the world in general, but also affect the sphere of education (Table 01).

In terms of content, the core of ideas about education as such and education in the time perspective “parents - I - children” is quite stable. Education can be considered as such when it is higher education that provides knowledge and experience, the opportunity for development. In the education of parents, its quality and relevance (need, suitability, work in the specialty) are noted, in own education the emphasis shifts to the internal interest in getting it. The core of ideas about children's education is the most packed,

and the leading position of associations connected with a child's own choice of their educational route should be noted. In the future, education should be high-quality, interesting, give experience (interesting that associations of “knowledge” in the concept of children's education are absent even in the periphery), and ensure competitiveness.

In the second buffer zone (associations are quite rare but they have a low rank), the completeness of associations for each stimulus is approximately equal in number, but significantly different in content. The idea of education as a social phenomenon is described through the educational stages and institutions where it can be got, the need for education and the importance of its quality are noted. The association with science and research that may reflect the connection of education with discovering new knowledge is worth attention.

Social representations of education of parents can be connected with associations that characterize education as interesting, to some extent due to student life, education is interpreted as a necessity and hard work, its contact character (without a computer) and free education are highlighted. To a great extent such representations reflect the characteristics of “typical Soviet education” that were formed with the help of films, books, publications, and parents’ stories. The representations of a person’s own education are different: it should appeal to a person, be universal enough (there is no correlation with a certain specialty already), provide new experience, possibilities for creativity, active position and be useful for life (not just for work). Since the education of children is something that happens in the lives of respondents “here and now”, associations related to educational attributes, stress (possibly due to the current situation) were included into the second buffer zone. However, the appearance of such associations as development, pleasure from the learning process, independence and continuing character of education should be emphasized. We especially want to pay attention to the association "communication". Despite the fact that recently the issue of contemporaries' passion for virtual communication has been discussed, communication in the learning process with peers and teachers is noted as significant.

The third buffer zone seems interesting (high frequency of association occurrences is at a high rank), because its constituent elements are found often enough to become a part of the core during the transformation process of the buffer zone.

Education as such, according to in the view of our respondents, should be interesting and conscious. The appearance of the association “conscious” characterizes a change in the attitude towards education: not only because of the need, not because it is necessary, but by living through the process of getting education. Of course, the availability of education, its ability to open new perspectives in life and educational attributes remain important issues.

Education of parents is presented as comprehensive, full-fledged, development-providing and public. The respondents note that the choice of education of their parents depended on their possibilities but teachers and relations with classmates were good. Their own education is presented by a wider range of associations that reflect current trends: it can be obtained not only in a traditional way, but also at various courses, as a result of self-education, it is multifaceted, continuous, provides opportunities for development and self-realization, helps to establish new acquaintances and connections. At the same time, tuition-free-education remains an important factor.

In the analysis of associations related to the education of children, we would like to note the appearance of such association as "perhaps not higher." Although this association is presented in the buffer zone now, the frequency of occurrence is already quite high. In this regard, it is possible to speak about the evolution taking place in the minds of Russian people who considered higher education a reliable social elevator for a long time. Education of children is understood as self-education, possibly at various courses, distance learning, it must be conscious, creative, multifaceted and bring pleasure, it requires motivation and self-organization, competent teachers, and gives prospects in life. In the analysis of the periphery, conspicuous is the fact of considerable completeness of this zone for the "my children's education" stimulus. It is interesting that the associations referring to cash disbursement on education and educational stages are placed in the periphery. The appearance of such associations as multilingualism, approximation of education to real life, including, thanks to the internship system, the possibility of applying the education in various fields and professions also should be noted. Although these associations are peripheral at the current moment, the fact of their presence is important to us, because in the course of communication they can become a part of consciousness of a larger number of people.

The periphery of other stimuli is poorer, but interesting is the fact that education of parents did not include much practice but its presence in education of children is desirable. In this regard, wide discussion and implementation of a competency-based approach in education has a chance to be approved by the parent community. Social representations of the respondents in their entirety were further subjected to the open coding procedure. All the associations obtained were combined into concepts (see above) and these concepts were compared among themselves as different objects, phenomena of the same category, its features or degree. A higher abstract concept became a category. The initial theoretical framework was the idea of the quality of a product or a service in which the quality of conditions, the quality of the result and the quality of the process are highlighted.

The open coding procedure has made it possible to identify the following categories by interpreting the obtained data (See Table 02):

**Table 02.** Results of the open coding for the theory of "Sociocultural dynamics of the concept of education"

Category	Measurement
Requirements to the results	Final level
	Fundamental / Applied connection with the profession
	Emerging prospects (bonus for education)
	Personal results, development
Requirements to the process	Connection with practice
	Communication
	Personality Consideration
	Labor input
	Emotional measurement
	Creativity
	Continuity
Requirements to the conditions	Tuition fees
	Internal study mode/ distance teaching
	Institutionality
	Flexibility



	Obligatory character, guarantees
	Quality of teaching stuff

## 6. Findings

The central part of the core of social representations about education in the time continuum “parents - me - children” is the concept of “higher” - as a reflection of the level of education that can be considered to be high-demanded. The concept of “knowledge”, which describes education of the respondents and their parents, characteristic of the industrial era, with regard to children's education is replaced by the concept of “experience” as a much more significant educational result in the post-industrial era. Another line of transformation in the concept of education can be seen in the moving from interpretation of education as learning the profession needed in society to the choice of education, first of all, meeting individual interests and ensuring competitiveness in the changing world.

Further, we would like to discuss the results obtained in the context of sociocultural dynamics. Education of the parents of our respondents took place in the 60-80s of the last century. It was necessary to get it; education was public from the point of view of institutionalization and from the standpoint of ideology. The existing conditions provided little opportunity for choice, so this education was enforced to some extent. At the same time, it was high-quality, comprehensive and full-fledged (classical, forming broad horizon and worldview basis). The respondents note that “knowledge character” dominated the practice, and elective classes and circles, as well as communication with classmates and teachers providing the necessary experience compensated this “set context” somehow. This view reflects an objective situation: for many decades stages of education and traditional formats for organizing educational activities have existed but the innovations introduced (technologies, techniques, and new content) have not changed the main essence of education. Consequently, the concept of education of parents reflects the concept of formal education.

The respondents themselves got education (school) starting from the second half of the 80s of the last century up to the present. This period included both transformations of the social structure and active educational reforms, carried out since the beginning of the 90s of the XX century. In perceptions of the respondents not always conscious and articulated order for their own education for life in a crucial era can be noticed: universal, useful in life, appealing, able to provide new experience and new contacts, connections, communication, multifaceted, continuous. Along with the focus on traditional educational institutions and formal education, there is a need and willingness to get non-formal education - through various courses, workshops, and trainings. Non-formal education performs the function of complementing, expanding, and compensating for knowledge and skills, bringing them in line with the requirements of the modern life situation. Non-formal education gives a person opportunity for development and self-realization through self-education. Interesting is the fact that the concept of “public” stops being typical of the structure of ideas about own education, which reflects the appearance of a wide range of commercial organizations at that time, including in the system of additional education. We can assume that as customers for their education and the education of their children, the respondents would prefer to get some “educational constructor”, which could make it possible to assemble their own “universal” model by combining its content, ways of getting an education and its duration.

In the concept of education of children an internal transition to understanding education as an informal - individual cognitive activity is being made. Education of children that is, education "for the future" - is a conscious education of their own choice, high-quality and interesting, creative and multifaceted, giving experience close to real life, useful in different professions (transfessional), ensuring independence and competitiveness. It can be got in various ways: through formal (educational stages), non-formal (courses, internships) education, self-education, including distance learning. Though, currently only in buffer zones, the idea of education which is not limited to a certain period, sometimes "falling out" of life, but becomes its integral and continuous part, is being formed. This requires motivation and self-organization. At this point we would like to discuss the following: in order to be engaged in any activity constantly and for a long time period, some stimulus is needed. It is possible to make volitional efforts, self-organizing and disciplining through recognizing the importance and necessity of actions. However, since the resources of the nervous system are not unlimited, the will power also has a tendency to a breakdown, leading the body into a stressful state due to overstrain. A different situation arises when a person does something with pleasure. Emotional uplift allows carrying out activities without a visible effort but with a feeling of pleasant fatigue, and not exhaustion. Perhaps that is why simultaneously in two buffer zones there are concepts associated with pleasure of education as a process and a result. However, the features of a new generation of children and parents growing up in the culture of mass consumption of the entertainment industry can also exert its influence. Competent teachers (however, not manifested in their education directly) and possibilities of communication as a stable invariant of the concept of education remain the desirable conditions for getting education.

Thus, according to the categories identified in the answers of the respondents and the core of social ideas about education, the following possible institutional consequences in response to a sociocultural shift in understanding of education and the subsequent demands of the population for educational services are identified:

- Future establishment of the guarantees for getting higher education by any Russian citizen, the so-called de jure universal higher education but with the increase of consumption of secondary vocational education programs.
- Expanding the range of differentiated educational products (programs), the possibilities of their "fitting" and "adaptation" to a consumer.
- Widely spread penetration of event and edutainment techniques in education, access to the market of hybrid products of secondary vocational and even higher education in the type of educational edutainment.
- The appearance of public (socio-professional) mechanisms for marking educational products on the quality mark.
- Increasing demand and response proposals for corporate programs and institutes of higher and additional education, giving not only work experience during training, but also job security.

## 7. Conclusion

The study of social representations of the associative experiment method and open coding of the method of the grounded theory showed that for the key customers of education - adults who have children but who continue lifelong education throughout their lives, there is a difference between the perception of the essence of education of the XX and XXI centuries. The sociocultural change that has been found in the core and buffer zones occurs in such dimensions, as "formal education - informal education - self-education"; "Education as academic work - education as entertainment"; "Fundamentality - application", "education as a duty - education as a right", "invariance - variability".

The core of ideas about education that is not amenable to sociocultural dynamics contains a value-oriented component: education as a social elevator, education as a valuable period of childhood (studentship), education as communication and interaction. Some difficulties are presented by the association-concept of "competent teachers" which is manifested in the buffer zone in the ideas about the education of parents and requirements for education of children; however, it does not appear in the education of modern adults.

Open coding has made it possible to single out categories of requirements for results, process and conditions that allow us to conclude that nowadays the idea of education as a service dominates among the representatives of adult Russian population. This indicates the "industrial" dominant in social perceptions of education. At the same time, in the core and buffer zones, the ideas about education for adults and their children are vague but the "post-industrial" vector is persistently presented: lifelong education as an environment for the development of creativity, communication, abilities to learn, life and practice-related, interesting and enjoyable.

The results obtained in the study enable to predict the future development of education in response to the requests of the population as a service sector with fixing the problems of ensuring its quality, with increasing requirements for variability, taking into account individuality, with criteria for the absence of stress and getting pleasure. It should be noted that in the core of representations, the concept of "higher" reflects the idea of education as a public benefit, with which our predictions about polemics in the near future concerning the state guarantee for higher education for every citizen, which means problems of access to educational services, are related.

We believe that the rapprochement of the spheres of institutional formal education guaranteed by the state and non-formal, corporate education, educational edutainment will continue increasing. The state and parents as key consumers of educational services will form the educational environment through the ongoing continuous discussion about the quality of education.

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