

УДК 159.922.736.3

Historical Crisis of Childhood. 35 Years Later

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Received 09.09.2014, received in revised form 20.10.2014, accepted 04.11.2014

The article investigates the modern status of the childhood and the possibilities to describe it in terms of cultural-historical theory, particularly, as the crisis of childhood by analogy with D.B. Elkonin. Foreign investigations on the modern childhood and early adulthood are reviewed. The obtained data are further applied to the analysis of basic assumptions of cultural-historical theory. The description of new lifecycle – the occurring adulthood is presented. It has been showed that young people of the developed countries are not inclined to make final decisions regarding their family life and the future profession, they do not marry even when they live together and have sexual relations, they do not plan to have children and alternate short periods of study in universities with due periods of work. It was also presented that the presumption of the universality of the position of an adult and his role in the development of a child been an absolute characteristic of childhood and the condition for its current development requires a review. The results of international project “Childhood as a social phenomenon” are described. The refusal from domination of Euro-Christian model of growing up towards the recognition of the diversity of childhood models was particularly showed. These results are being described and analyzed as the basis for renunciation of the idea of singularity and universality of the development standard. Classical model of childhood is specified as insensitive to the socio-cultural recognition of the value of the individual and even marginal. The conclusion is made on the necessity to reject the idea of reproduction of cultural forms as of the only form of development. Also the presumption of predetermination of sense is being discussed as something that is acquired within the process of development and in conjunction with an adult. The necessity of considering a self-generation of a meaning was specially underlined. A hypothesis on the replacement of the axial (purposeful) child development by rhizomatic development (multidirectional movement) has been suggested.

Keywords: historical crisis of the childhood, modern childhood, cultural and historical psychology, norm of age.

This article is an output of a research project implemented as part of the Basic Research Program at the National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE) 2014.

Research area: pedagogy, psychology.

The childhood is being changing by leaps and bounds. Today our children are growing under extremely new realities which often seem strange

for adults. The time for family communication is being reduced and new activities appear. Adults much less know what their children are

doing. It seems important to find out what from that considered to be sustainable 50-60 years ago should be reconsidered today, or at least put into question concerning forms of children growing-up, which were described in the works of D.B. Elkonin.

In spite at the everyday and professional-pedagogical level we recognize the significant diversity of the knowledge and experience of modern children it is very little official data on the status of childhood in Russia in contrast to western countries. At the end of 80s a scaled polydisciplinary international Project of the European Center of social policy "Childhood as a Social Phenomenon"¹ was launched under the leadership of Danish sociologist Jens Qvortrup, where different childhood models in different countries and social cultures were described (Qvortrup, 1993). An idea of social designing of the childhood was the general framework of the project. Actually, it was an idea of reliance (or, by D. Elkonin, not of what is given, but of the predetermination) of childhood. The project was focused at forms of life of children and the through line was issues of poverty and violations of children's rights. Instead of usual "psychologizing" of the world of childhood, social-economic, demographic and political problems appeared to be the center of this project: the childhood was considered as the special social-demographic group occupying a particular place in the social structure of the society- different places in different countries. Intergenerational connections, the status of children in the family, children activities- their employment, school classes, leisure as «the planned spontaneity» and so on has been investigated. The project has rose multiple-valued questions, for example the relationship between the state, parents and children; dialectic of the protection of children and childhood autonomy. Despite some politicization of research problems, the results of the project

are impressive due to large-scale demonstration of the heterogeneity of childhood.

Based on the works of this project, but slightly beyond its scope we can insist that the culture and social realities predetermine, "suppose" childhood image- via different ways and approaches. For example the state fixes documentarily the legal age – i.e. the age at which a growing person gains a full responsibility. "Places where a child is "appropriate" appear in the culture and everyday life (literally: where his place is), boundaries of permissible in respect of children and for children are defined. This image is fixed in products of culture- in books, films, and mass media.

Although the project is less related to a psychological sphere, it is interesting to us theoretically as it has for the first time rejected the uniqueness of the Euro-Christian model of childhood, and recognized the diversity of «childhoods». The long European childhood was recognized as one of possible models; presentation of western requirements to organization of child's life – a sign of Euro centrism. In particular, child labor was considered to be not only an evil, but also a right of the child; to deprive this right means disrespect for the rights of the child.

Changing the childhood reality and infinite diversity found out within the frames of the project obviously contradict paternalistic attitude to children which is typical for Russia. But at the same time these results make us to look at the modern status of childhood in a new way. It is really not enough to have a simple comparison of models described in the 70s vs. modern models. It is strange to assume that in the 70s countries of Christian culture had the Golden Age of childhood, but today we are watching its decline. It seems to me that this contradicts the spirit of Cultural-historical theory itself. But interpretation of such data may clarify basic assumptions of approaches

which considered being classical for the national psychology. It is not enough to say simply that the current situation is “the crisis of childhood”, it is important to define the essence of this crisis.

As long ago as 1971 D.B. Elkonin (1971) in his paper on periodization considered the existing childhood periods as historical periods, paying special attention at the differentiation of a system “a child in a society” by two types- “a child and a social adult” and “a child and a social object”. More than 35 years ago, in 1978, D.B. Elkonin in his monograph “Psychology of play” being investigated the history of a play as a form of child’s life has suggested a hypotheses on presence of critical periods in the history of childhood. He has particularly showed that emergence of game is connected with the disappearance of a direct (natural) consistency of life of children and adults. It was a bright and rare example of the practical application of the principle of historicity for investigation of psychological phenomena. Also a small book of “Psychology” series of Znanie society named “Psychology junior student learning” was published in 1974 . It was particularly demonstrated how educational objectives of primary school are changing with the amendment of the pattern of basic education (Elkonin, 1997).

D.B. Elkonin writes: “a hypothesis on critical periods in the historical development of childhood- crises of childhood. This hypothesis allows putting a question on what period in childhood development – stable or critical- our country suffers at present i.e. the question on the diagnosis of childhood status (1992, page.7).

It should be noted immediately that I doubt whether modern childhood can be defined as transient or stable as it seems premature to give new forms of a child’s life a status of new *activities* yet now we can see only the process of their appearance. Therefore, I would like to set the question in a different way- to what extent

basic assumptions of cultural-historical theory remains sensitive to new realities of childhood.

The first most important assumption is that the adult as an image of “an accomplished activity”. Therefore, the condition for consideration of childhood as philosophical and psychological category is its opposition to adulthood. D.B. Elkonin writes: “An image of an adulthood, an image of a perfect (ideal) adult is the only way and the basis for children’s interpretation of their future. All attempts to design the life of a child should be based on a clear understanding of ideal form. Outside such basis they lose its significance” (1992, p.9). However we must admit today that the boundary between a childhood and adulthood as the basis for both constructs is disappearing. And it’s not that the border itself becomes uncertain, the essence is in the “disappearance” of adulthood, howsoever paradoxical it sounds.

An explosive growth of technologies has led to the fact that the development of new content became directly available for children, without the participation of an adult. In case we support positions of cultural-historical theory, it will lead to an undecidable contradiction- the development by a principle should have an ideal form, as the development is possible exactly in respect to real-ideal. According to M. Mead, the current situation can be described as co-figurative or even as pre-figurative society, and a lot of speculations on this topic have appeared now. However, M. Mead wrote about the authority of adults, but not about the development mechanism. It is more important to understand the role of universal adult in the modern situation and to find out whether it will be preserved.

In 1985 The New York Times newspaper for the first time published the word “kidalt” (“kidalt” From English words “Kid” and “Adult”) for a description of man aged 30 and above, which were interested in cartoons, fantasy, computer games

and useless, but often beautiful and expensive gadgets. 15 years later the first scientific paper on this topic was published (Arnett, 2000), and the notion «Emerging adulthood» has been introduced into the scientific practice. Now this notion has an extended bibliography.

In his first publication Arnett was arguing that the period 20 to 30 years can be related to the stable period of “early childhood” (“Young adulthood”). Arnett suggested considering this period as a transitional. His arguments were based particularly on the fact that young people proceed with searching for their identity, find difficulty in responding a question whether they can identify themselves as adult people or not. It has become evident today that not all young people which overpass the age of thirty, became adult. So, the question whether we can consider this period to be a transitional, or a transition becomes the sign of stability- remains unanswered yet.

The phenomenon is as follows: 20-30-year-olds do not make decisions about their future, do not enter into long-term relationships, their relationship does not lead to marriage, they do not have and do not plan to have children, and they do not start neither a regular job nor plan a career. Study periods are usually alternate with periods of work and travel at the universities. Today this phenomenon is actively being investigated and some distinctions by countries have been identified: it is mostly typical for the developed countries and less presented in the developing countries. Young people, refusing to become adults are more presented in the countries with the higher social-economic status. We should add that the idea of life-long education must be also referred to factors of such continuing non-maturity. The boundary between “adults” and “non-mature” is localizes not on the scale of age, but on the scale of social-economic and educational possibilities of a person.

N. Postman (1982) philosopher and a theorist of mass media indicates in his work which has somewhat paradoxical name «The Disappearance of Childhood» that if childhood (in his opinion) appeared in regard to literacy occurring, than today we should recognize its disappearance as mass media presently train us to react directly to visual information, i.e. the ability of analyzing is being replaced by emotional reaction. So, there no difference between an adult and a child remains. The distinction indicated by Postman is very popular and often cited, even in spite his small brochure was published in 1982 and he discussed the occurrence of a television (not an Internet) as mass phenomena.

So, many multidirectional social processes lead to an acceptance that the choice of becoming or not being an adult should be made individually. I.e. the world of adults which is contrary to the world of children is diffusing, losing its vividness and gains individuality. But the logic of arguments in the analysis of childhood in papers of 60s-70s was based on presentation of the world of adults to a child as clear and certain. For example, D.B. Elkonin writes: “The communication activity here is a peculiar form of *reproduction* of relations *that exist among adults* in relations between peers. During the process of communication a deep orientation in norms of these relations occur and they are being mastered (my italics – K.P.)” (Elkonin, 1971). Therefore, if we proceed to work in the frames of cultural-historical theory, we must understand, whether the mentioned reproduction remains, and if yes- in what forms. The other place of the same article says:” A subject action taken in isolation “does not have a sign” for which purpose it is implemented, what is its social meaning and real motive. Only when the subject action is included in the system of human relations, it reveals its true social meaning and its orientation on other

people.” The subject action, by D.B. Elkonin, is developed in combined actions of a child and adult, and today we observe an independent mastering of the complicated actions, connected with IT-technologies without the participation of intermediary adult.

The second important basis of cultural-historical theory is an idea of a norm. Particularly- an idea of age norm, which is expressed in the uniqueness of social situation of the development for the specific age (L.S.Vygotsky).

We have already mentioned that today we are observing a theoretical rejecting the idea of a single trajectory of growing up. In particular, this is due to a meaningful comprehension of globalization (Van Undenhoven, Wazir, 2010).

Strictly speaking, recognition of cultural and ethnic mediation of trajectories of development theoretically requires enhancing of analysis and the development of additional versions of changing age periods. But only after it is empirically shown that the localized periods proceed exist. Theoretical situation seems more complicated.

The given norm which is equal for all is *a perspective* and the guideline for development.

Such reliance is based on the assumption of the development direction (known by its basic characteristics), also on the idea of clarity and the phenomenon of the end result – an image of an adult in all its diversity.

The most important trend of the economy of the Modern time significantly effecting all spheres of social life- is an acceptance of all kinds of marginality. Appearance of creative class, the strongest economic force of the last decades, makes as to admit “the usefulness” of non-norm: each individual participant of creative activity should not be neither normal, nor successful or efficient. It can be proved by the examples of the most successful corporations -Microsoft and Apple, which were for a long time led by

people who failed to get a university degree in due time .

And finally, *the third* assumption derives from the two previous. The whole construction of training (development forms- by V.V. Davydov) or taking widely- education- was based on the idea of sense, been found by the growing-up person. In other words the sense was given before the young man began to understand it. The norm is connected with sense: ”senses and tasks of human relationships” were to be opened within a certain periods of childhood. This point of traditional philosophy for which it is typical, by M. Foucault, that “things already give us a certain sense, our language has only to pick it up” (1996, p.80).

Today, the whole logic of social fragmentation leads to the fact that prior to the act of sense generation no single universal sense existed.

But the development, by A.N. Leontiev, involved the reproduction of generic activity, from there the fundamental principle of acquisition originated. The task of the reliance of individual sense, i.e. the task of identity cannot be solved within the frames of activity paradigm, which is understood as reproduction. The question then is as follows: do we keep the image of acquisition or are looking for a way to describe the situation of free generation.

Theoretically, the rejection of development uniformity and unidirectionality changes goals and guidelines of the development i.e. sets the question of validity of understanding development as something which happens in regard to existing senses, modes of action and image of an adult and mediated by an example represented by adult.

To what extent the current state of childhood can be interpreted as a crisis? I think that in order to answer this question positively, we should specify the concept of a crisis.

If the crisis is a synonym for disaster and dangerous trouble, then it is difficult to accept such a definition. If we talk about the transition –

we can neither accept nor reject this assumption, since it presuggests a sustainable period in the future, but the history of last decades makes this forecast hardly probable. But if under a crisis we understand a qualitative (or significant) change, not only by forms, but also by significant basics – than such definition seems to be reasonable. If consider the existing processes as objective

and irreversible, than one should accept that the “axial” (purposeful, having a goal, mediated by specific means, deterministic) development is replaced by rhizomatic (probabilistic, possible, but not preset, having no selected direction). This is a chaotic process of “vagrancy” in unstructured nodes of social and cultural network – individual or group.

¹ D. Elkind has wrote the book «Hurried child: growing up too fast too soon» (2006) This name is hard for literal translation. It can be only approximate version of the name in Russian: «Rebionok, kotorogo toropyat: rastet slishkom bistro I slishkom rano».

² Childhood as a Social Phenomenon

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Исторический кризис детства.

35 лет спустя

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В статье поднимается вопрос о современном состоянии детства и возможности его описания в терминах культурно-исторической теории, в частности, как кризис детства по аналогии с работами Д.Б. Эльконина. Приведен обзор зарубежных исследований современного детства и ранней взрослости. Представленные далее использованы в анализе базовых допущений культурно-исторической теории. Дано описание нового этапа жизненного цикла – возникающей взрослости, показано, что молодые люди в развитых странах не склонны принимать окончательных решений относительно семейной жизни и будущей профессии, они не закрепляют браком сексуальные отношения даже в ситуации совместного проживания, не планируют рождение детей, перемежают непродолжительные периоды учебы в университетах с периодами работы. Показано, что презумпция универсальности позиции взрослого и его роли в развитии ребенка как безусловная характеристика детства и условие развитие в нынешней ситуации требует пересмотра. Описаны результаты международного проекта «Детство как социальный феномен», в частности, показан отказ от доминирования евро-христианской модели взросления, и признание многообразия моделей детства. Эти результаты описываются и анализируются как основание для отказа от идеи единственности и универсальности нормы развития. Далее указывается на нечувствительность классической модели детства к социокультурному признанию ценности индивидуального и даже маргинального. Делается вывод о необходимости отказа от представления о воспроизводстве культурных форм как единственной формы развития. Также обсуждается презумпция заданности смысла как того, что приобретается в ходе развития во взаимодействии со взрослым. Указывается на необходимость учета самостоятельного порождения смысла. Предлагается гипотеза о смене осевого (направленного) детского развития ризоматическим (при котором движение может происходить разнонаправленно).

Ключевые слова: исторический кризис детства, современное детство, культурно-историческая психология, норма возраста.

Работа выполнена в рамках проекта, реализуемого Программой фундаментальных исследований Национального исследовательского университета “Высшая школа экономики” (НИУ ВШЭ) 2014.

Научная специальность: 13.00.00 – педагогические науки, 19.00.00 – психологические науки.
