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CHILD PARTICIPATION IN FAMILY DECISION-MAKING: THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE RUSSIAN PARENTS' FORUM

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ABSTRACT: The topic of children's participation in various issues was updated in the second half of the last century. It was largely due to the adoption of an important international document such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Children are as important participants in social life as adults, so they have the right to express their opinions on various issues related to their activities, as well as to take into account these opinions by adults in decision-making in the family, in school, in the community, etc. Russian society is dominated by the traditional discourse of the perception of children as human becoming, socially and mentally immature, not-yet-an-adult. To study the parental discourse of children's participation in family issues, empirical material of the network discussion organized at the parental forum called Vladmama (Vladivostok, Russia) is used. In order to organize the discussion, an information injection was carried out. It was the description of the imagined problematic situation of child-parental relations on the issue of child's participation in family affairs. The 81 messages received from 25 users were analyzed according to James Gee approach. Seven Gee's "building tasks" (Activities; Identities; Relationships; Politics; Connections; Sign Systems and Knowledge) are researched on the materials of mother's forum. The process of creating value is always connected with the exercise of power. In our case, mothers using their power as parents redefine the meanings of children's participation. The main resource that opens the way for adults to power is money. Earning money is interpreted by the participants of the forum as a way for a child to involve in the adult's world, an opportunity to legalize the child's right to express his/her own opinion and defend this opinion. Other sources of parent's power are their own life experience, knowledge and social skills.

KEYWORDS: children's rights, CDA, child's participation in family design-making, site discussion, parent's discourse, parent's forum

INTRODUCTION

The topic of child participation in solving various issues gained in relevance at the end of the last century. This happened to a large degree due to the adoption of a number of international instruments, primarily the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Convention established the child's right to express his or her views in all matters affecting the child, including the freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds (articles 12 and 13).

The ideas of identifying forms of civic participation have been actively developed by researchers since the second half of the 20th century. Sherry R. Arnstein (1969) outlined eight rungs of the ladder of citizen participation: manipulation, psychotherapy, informing, consultation, placation, partnership, delegated power and citizen control.

Subsequently, researchers offered different classifications of participation. Gerison Lansdown discusses children's decision-making in the terms of the four elements (Lansdown 2005): (a) ability to understand and communicate relevant information; (b) ability to think and choose with some degree of independence; (c) ability to assess the potential for benefit, risk, and harm; (d) achievement of a fairly stable set of values. Roger Hart (Hart 1999) presents a modified version of Arnstein's "ladder of participation". Hart's ladder includes eight rungs, or stages of child participation: "manipulation", "decoration", "tokenization", "assigning, but informing", "consulting and informing"; "adult initiative and shared decision-making with children"; "children's leadership and initiative"; "children's initiative and shared decision-making between children and adults".

The topic of children's participation in addressing issues that affect their interests have been actively explored by researchers all over the world (Handley 2005; Holland & O'Neil 2006; Jones &Walker 2011; Sinclair 2004). A considerable amount of methodological literature (brochures, guides and manuals) has been published by UNICEF, commissioners for children's rights and ministries of social development of various countries: "Save the children", "Involving children in decision making", "A journey in children's participation", etc.

In Russia, a certain amount of experience in assessment of child participation and involvement has been gained (Kalabikhina, Kuchmayeva, Kochnev, Vasilyeva, Odinokova, Rusakova, Filipova etc.). Irina Kalabikhina et al. (2014) researched the models of child's participation in decision-making on issues that affect their interests in Moscow and Krasnodar, the two Russian cities that have joined the UNICEF Child Friendly Cities Initiative. On the one hand, the researchers note the diversity of aspects of urban life that involve children: sports, culture, leisure, social advertising, social assistance to the needy, environmental protection and urban planning. On the other hand, they identify problems of children's access to information, paternalistic attitudes of participating adults, creation of elite groups of "child professionals", low expectations from child participation, mass passivity of children, etc.

As the child grows up, he or she obtains more experience of social participation at all levels, from families to schools, communities, cities and countries. Family is a small social group in which the child gains his or her first experience of social interaction, learns a set of social roles and participates in decision-making that is relevant for his or her family.

The first document that promoted the idea of child participation in the life of the society in Russia was the National Strategy for Action in Children's Interests. The Strategy was in force in 2012-2017. It contained a special section titled "Child participants of the National Strategy". Children were referred to as participants in social relations. The section enumerated the main organisational forms contributing to the realisation of the right of the child to express his or her views: children's and young people's civic associations, youth councils, chambers, parliaments and school self-governance bodies.

Prior to the adoption of this document, children were viewed as subjects mostly under family law, when it came to the right of the child to express his or her views on family matters where the interests of the child were at stake (the choice of residence in the event of the parents' divorce, agreement or disagreement with the selection of adoptive parents, etc.). Under the Russian family legislation, it is mandatory to take into account the views of children aged 10 or older. However, the situations related to family every-day life that are not covered by family law remain the responsibility of parents and other adult family members.

This publication deals with parent interpretations of child participation in addressing issues of family every-day life.

Research questions:

(1) How do parents understand "the involvement of children in family matters"?

(2) Which practices do parents use to involve children in decision-making?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study is rooted in CDA – Critical discourse analysis, which is a problem-oriented interdisciplinary set of theories and methods that are widely used to analyse texts of various kinds.

Discourse reproduces the society through social structures of the latter, relations and value structures. Discourse is also involved in transforming the society, as people use discourses for the pursuit of their daily and creative activities.

The empirical data for studying the discourse of child participation in addressing issues that affect their interests has been collected using the method of online discussion on a Russian parents' forum, Vladmama.ru. The forum is hosted on the portal for parents of Primorsky Krai, a Far Eastern region of Russia. The portal exists since 2006.

We have suggested an online discussion as a method of data collection in social networks. We "injected" information – a message that provoked users to discuss the proposed topic (Abrosimova et al. 2019). In order to initiate a parent discussion of the topic of child participation in family decision-making, a researcher under the nickname "Mask" (we use this nickname to preserve anonymity) described a problematic

situation of relationship with her child. The situation had been invented for research purposes.

The topic of child participation was "injected" on the Vladmama forum through the following message that reflected parent-child relational problems: "Hello! I don't know if my problem is a serious one, but it makes me feel pretty sore. I have two kids, a 12-year-old boy and a 7-year-old girl. I have constant problems with my son: he's become very independent. He doesn't really care about our parental opinion, and he wants to decide everything for himself at that. It's about everything: from what we make for dinner to the colour of our future car! We are constantly bickering and quarrelling about that! I think he is still too young for expressing his views on how the parents spend their earned money! What is this?! Is this the problems with all kids today? Are they all grown up and independent? I am tired of incessant quarrels! I'd appreciate objective opinions on my situation".

The researcher's message received active feedback from forum members. Most messages (33) were received on the first day as the main message was posted. This is typical for a forum discussion. On the second day, another 30 messages were posted. As the discussion saw a significant decline in intensity, three days after the discussion started, another message was written in order to "revive" the forum: "Thank you for your opinions! Maybe my child's behaviour doesn't come out of nothing. But on the other hand, I understand he is at a difficult age and the like. But I really don't get the point beyond which I should consider my child's views on family matters. It is clear that he has the right of choice when it comes to oatmeal, but what about something big, such as appearance or clothing?"

The additional message provoked 21 more comments posted in the following two days.

A total number of 25 users took part in the discussion, and 81 messages were posted. Table 1 lists their summary statistics.

Table 1. Summary statistics of the forum's participants

	Nickname	Number of messages	City
1	Cac|tus	12	Vladivostok
2	Barbie na pensii [Retired Barbie]	11	Unspecified
3	Svetlyachok [Firefly]	7	Vladivostok
4	Lebed' belaya [White Swan]	6	Vladivostok
5	karapuzik L [toddler L]	6	Unspecified
6	Aystre	4	Vladivostok
7	Energy	4	Unspecified
8	Mamo	4	Unspecified
9	Zhemchuzhny mix [Pearly mix]	3	Unspecified
10	Olchik_1980	3	Unspecified
11	Samaya [the most]	3	Unspecified
12	@vok@do	3	Vladivostok
13	Cat	2	Unspecified
14	Treugol'nik [Triangle]	2	Vladivostok
15	Lipka	1	Vladivostok
16	Ferari	1	Unspecified
17	Valiko	1	Unspecified
18	Belladonna	1	Unspecified
19	BO yarova	1	Vladivostok
20	Macau	1	Unspecified
21	Vintage	1	Unspecified
22	Capuchin	1	Unspecified
23	Dinka15	1	Vladivostok
24	Anatolyp	1	Vladivostok
25	Yarilochka	1	Vladivostok

Source: Self-generated 2019.

For the analysis of messages Gee's approach is used. It is based on seven positions; the researcher calls them "building tasks": Significance; Activities (Practices): Identities; Relationships; Politics (the distribution of social goods); Connections; Sign Systems and Knowledge (Gee 2011: 30-33).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To answer the first research question, it is important to discuss Gee's building tasks of creating "Significance" and "Identities".

Significance is what matters for a participant in a group discussion. For most participants in the online discussion, the debate on child participation moves into another plane, i.e., discussing issues of earning money, sharing of domestic responsibilities or relations with adolescent children:

> The neurologist smiled and said: wait, be patient, this is the prepubescent period that lasts from 9 to 13 years in boys. Their hormones are starting to change; it's different for everyone (Svetlyachok [Firefly])

> As regards money, that's another story. I think children should learn to spend money wisely since they are babies. Otherwise you'll never teach them. (Retired Barbie)

Olchik_1980 demonstrates visibility of participation:

> Ok, he expressed his view (by the way, it's not bad at all); you listened to him and did it all your way… so what's the problem?

This remark contains a contradiction. On the one hand, its author admits the relevance of participation (the child should be able of expressing his/her opinion). On the other hand, she neglects the child's right to participate in family decision-making.

An apparent contradiction of another comment demonstrates the complexity and ambiguity of the topic of participation and the lack of established practice of child participation in family decision-making:

> And why shouldn't children have the right to voice their views in principle? Why do you do all your way after listening to him? I don't suggest you do as children tell you. I mean joint discussions and joint decisions that will certainly be the way parents need.

First, the author of this remark advocates children's right to have their views ("voice"), but she ends up with a "joint decision" that is still a decision made by adults. It is the same as in the above-quoted comment, but it offers a greater semblance of participation.

According to the forum's comments, participation can be interpreted as "being part of the family". They do not specify whether this part is bigger or smaller. It probably implies equality.

> Your problem is actually that children attempt to be part of the family… (Retired

Barbie)

With significance it is strongly connected identities. *Identities* of a child-participant are related to the peculiarities of perception of children by their parents.

An overwhelming majority of comments posted by female participants of the online discussion is related to a peculiar perception of children as "not-yet-adults". Here, social roles of children vary from objects of parental attention and care, whose opinion does not decide anything, to imaginary subjects whose participation is reduced to a possibility of expressing their views, although these views mean nothing to adults.

The "growing up" role has been emphasised on many occasions in the discussion by comments on puberty, prepubescence, etc.

The role functions of "Adult" and "Child" are distributed so that, for example, the child asks questions and the adult answers them or the adult does something and the child repeat the actions:

> And we always provide answers so as to make the children understand that cheaper doesn't always mean better, neither does expensive mean better (Retired Barbie)

Moreover, the adult demonstrates behaviour patterns, teaches, shows restraint, etc.

Performing the role of a "Child", on the contrary, includes inability to govern one's emotions, lack of sufficient competences and knowledge for independent decision-making.

A comment by a female forum member contains recognition of child expertise, albeit with some reservations, in the IT sphere:

> His opinion and arguments can be listened to… maybe he will also suggest something worthy. Nowadays, kids are so… tech-savvy (Dinka15)

The underlined part of the phrase points to the domination of an adult that does not want to admit fully the capacity of the child to be more competent than him in certain matters.

A rigid hierarchy is discernible in relationship-building. The child appears to be an immature and unexperienced object of influence that has no financial self-sufficiency. The adult is viewed as elder sophisticated educator and mentor. The relationship is built on the paradigm of dominance, where a subject endowed with public goods, and with the right to make decisions in particular, finds himself in a stronger position:

> I don't see what all this quarrelling is for… Reply him calmly: you will spend money when you earn your own money… (Dinka15)

> Sometimes I am leaving him with no choice: please eat what I have cooked, but I still explain why I serve him a meal he doesn't like. He is sitting silently and eating.  Before buying a new car, I remember we also consulted with him  , and of course we bought what we saw fit, but again we convinced him in a calm conversation that it was better that way. (Svetlyachok [Firefly])

To answer the second research question, it is necessary to share family's questions,

adult's questions and child's questions. They are three different spheres of power and power relationships, supposing or not children's involvement in the process of decision-making. Child's questions are connected with the child's interests. Parent's discourse follows legal discourse. The commentary to the article 57 of Family Code of Russian Federation ("the right to express the opinion") contains an interpretation of the interests of the child: "The interests of the child should be understood as ensuring a healthy lifestyle, normal mental and physical development, education, adequate material and living conditions and other needs". But parents incompletely interpret "child's right to express his/her opinion" and "child's interests", family's practices proved it.

Participatory practices developed in the online discussion were grouped around two topics initially set by the initiator of the discussion, cooking and buying a car.

The topic of cooking is therefore mentioned much more often than car purchase and finds its elaboration in dishwashing, taking out the trash, etc. So, we can use "cooking" as a concept collecting family affairs. Through it, female respondents express their relations to daily domestic work.

In Russia, home environment and its organisation are traditionally considered a women's job. Hence, female participants of the forum (sometimes ironically) men's rights are regarded as equal to those of children:

> Does the husband have the right to voice his opinion with regard to what he wants to eat for dinner? (Retired Barbie)

> …. if my children and my husband come and tell me "oh, please cook this and that, because we miss it / haven't eaten it for a long time, etc.", no problem, but if I should… (Cactus)

Or there shows up a remark related not only to the children, but also to the remaining family members:

> I often ask, "What do we cook for tomorrow? Options include chicken cutlets with buckwheat, pilaf and pollock cutlets with rice!" We reach an agreement by a majority of votes or through persuasion. (Retired Barbie)

While cooking can be referred to group of family affairs, buying of the car and everything connected with it - it is the sphere of competence of adults. To be more precise it is the scope of masculine authority:

> The husband chooses the car himself. For him and for me. This is not discussed (@vok@do)

According to the forum comments, the most widespread participatory practice is a joint discussion with children on adult matters. Such discussion allows adults to influence children's views:

> (…) And we were making our decisions together with children!!! Of course, the final decision is ours, and their opinions can always be changed, directed elsewhere, pointing out the advantages of the second option (Retired Barbie)

Retired Barbie is the most active in demonstrating participatory practices in the discussion. She enumerates various participation situations of both her children in family decision-making:

> As for children, I have been consulting with them since they were born, as regarded where we would go on vacation; and before buying a flat, we went with our 4-year-old daughter to look whether she liked trees and playgrounds in various areas of the city. I also consulted with my daughter when planning my youngest son. We also choose our newest car on the computer at Drom.ru as a family. And right now, we are all deciding en masse where and when to go on vacation. And even before buying our second flat, we sat down with our kids and discussed what we wanted to buy: on the one hand, it was an advantage, but, on the other hand, it was also a disadvantage, because, perhaps, we should live more economically in terms of entertainment and travel for a couple of years (Retired Barbie)

This statement demonstrates a shift in participatory practices for children: one type of practices applies for pre-schoolers (visibility and game) and another type of practices applies for schoolchildren.

The possibility of participation correlates with the age of children. Children are likely to defend their right to express their opinion more actively in their adolescence, and parents are forced to listen to them:

> It is my eldest son whom I myself often ask what to cook; he doesn't care, though (Svetlyachok [Firefly])

> Maybe you always present him with a fait accompli and don't consult with him on anything, although he is 12, not two years old… And he is already a personality to be reckoned with in the family, whose opinion should be taken into account (Svetlyachok [Firefly])

Here the effect of legal discourse can also be found – according to the same article of the Family Code (article 57) "taking into account the opinion of a child who has reached the age of 10 years is mandatory".

In allocating public goods, parents follow two approaches. The first one is an approach of overt or explicit dominance, and there can be no doubt in whose favour the public good of participation in family life through decision-making is allocated:

> Well, perhaps I am "a mother after all"  It never even crossed my mind to ask children what kind of car my husband and me should buy, let alone choosing its colour  They didn't even know we were going to purchase a car, they only learned it after the fact  (Cac|tus)

> Ha ha. I can't imagine consulting with children regarding what kind of car, what kind of TV set or what kind of fridge we should buy or to what area we should move (Lipka)

The second approach to allocation implies a more latent dominance. Parents pretend their children have the public good to take part in family life through de-

cision-making, but all decisions are in reality made by parents independently. The availability of public good thus turns into a semblance, a phantom or a simulacrum:

> I can't understand how a kid can decide what colour car you buy? And the same regards dinner.
>
> I mean a joint discussion, a joint decision that will be, of course, the way the parents need it. (Retired Barbie)

Parents associate child participation with upbringing, delegation of responsibility, right to choose and financial autonomy. But here again, adults apparently dominate, as they seek to set boundaries to child participation because of their seniority. In one case, participation is limited to the purchase of personal items:

> We only listen to their opinions with regard to their personal items: motorbikes, tablets, mobile phones or the like (Lipka)

The division into personal and family-wide issues is apparent in the following statement:

> They are independent and grown-up where they are mature enough to be grown-up and independent: what to wear, which club to attend and how to spend their free time. The rest can be discussed as well, for instance, where to go on vacation, but the decision is up to the parents anyway (Cat).

Sharing out spheres of influence between adults and children is a possibility to solve a conflict in interactions:

> We share out degrees of responsibility, and still we don't consult with our children what kind of car or flat we should buy. These issues are solved by my husband and me. But when it comes to choosing a summer camp, the children decide. We also consult with them with regard to what they wear, especially with our son who is 13. Our daughter is 7; we don't consult with her, but we sometimes tell her: just take on whatever you like today. Most often, everything works out normally (Lebed' Belaya [White Swan])

In another case, the respondents go so far as to state the dependent status of children. The financial dependence of children on their parents is the decisive argument in this regard.

In other words, equality implies financial autonomy. Money is a resource that opens the child's way to the adult world.

Meanwhile, adults work, get tired and they are not up to child participation:

> Let them eat what I cook. If they don't like it, then they will have dumplings for dinner. And it's okay, everyone's happy. Mother gets tired, she is dreaming of vacation, and on top of that she gets this pain  No way, thank you.  (Lipka)

It should be noted that this applies not only to food choices. Information cause to start the discussion referred to the two points of opinion clashes between parents and

children, cooking and buying a car. Adults perceive child participation as a game, as an amusement that disturbs and annoys them; this is one of their associations. Another association refers to puberty: parents perceive children's defence of their opinions as an inherent difficulty of the transition to adulthood.

Participation interpreted by parents as children's inclusion in the adult world is also associated with household duties. It appears that only adults have a right to voice their views, whereas children only may strive to obtain this right through performing household chores. The child has a limited choice within household duties:

> Your child wants to be part of your family, so impose responsibilities on him: not one-off, but permanent ones. All dishes are his duty, and let him decide on his own what colour sponge and what scent Fairy dish detergent you use. Let him take out the garbage every day (Karapuzik [Toddler])

In so thinking, some adults are certain that, after having tasted a little bit of adult life in the form of the aforementioned duties, children will choose to return to their childhood, free from the burdens of problems and concerns, as well as from participation in everyday family decision-making.

As children grow older, as already mentioned, they are increasingly defending their right to express their opinion:

> The girl is growing up, her character is shaping up. She is less suggestible and expresses her views more often… And I am in crisis because of that I am trying to play it cool, but I am in a real crisis: I find it difficult to accept that the girl becomes adult and independent. And she wants to have a right to her own opinion and to her own mistakes… (Retired Barbie)

The possibility to express their views matters to children. It is important to be listened to, heard and noticed by the people around them:

> It is important for children to feel involved in choosing, and we give them such an opportunity. Still, we make distinctions, since there are issues that are really beyond their level of competence (Lebed' Belaya [White Swan])

Female participants in the discussion are projecting the existing child-parent power relations upon adult relationships with their grown children. In some instances, they reproduce the discourse on "children as parents' support in old age":

> If it is inconsistent with the position of the parents, it is more honest to explain that the child doesn't have the right to voice his or her opinion in this family, than to "listen to him and do it all your way". Explain to him that he will decide on himself when he grows up. And, with such a stance, get prepared that, in principle, as your child grows up, he or she can also exclude parents' opinions and desires from his/her priorities (Retired Barbie)

Beside means of natural language, the participants in the discussion make active use of emojis, a language of ideograms and smiley faces that appear in electronic communications and on web pages. This graphic language, where combinations of pictures stand for words, appeared in Japan and spread worldwide. Emojis are often used

to imitate spoken language. Studies have revealed that women use more emojis in their messages than men do.

The emojis used in our discussion can roughly be divided into four groups: embarrassment and doubt emojis; fun emojis; disapproval emojis; and sarcasm emojis. They appear 33 times in our discussion.

In some cases, emojis provide additional visual means to emphasise that conversations about child participation and possibilities of children to influence family decisions cannot be serious:

> My eldest son was in crisis when he was about 15… My younger children happen to be in crisis every full moon  . I agree that much depends on adults. (@vok@do)

Emojis often appear also when various crises are discussed: transition to adulthood, personal development and midlife crises. Crises affect not only children, but also their parents.

> … Now the situation at home improved. So, if such behaviour is out of character for your son, maybe, well, hello, prepubescence… I wish you patience, wisdom and strength.  (Svetlyachok [Firefly])

> Prepubescence, puberty, postpuberty  I probably wouldn't survive such amount of puberty, and I still have to survive crises  (Cac|tus)

> I've recently listened to a webinar, and they said that crisis affects parents, not children. Well, that's right  (Ferari)

Increases in frequency of emoji usage during discussions on certain topics may indicate a high degree of emotional involvement of interlocutors, their wish to express one's point of view as comprehensively as possible and relevance of the topic under discussion.

CONCLUSION

Female participants in the discussion predefine the child as immature, incompetent and unexperienced. Accordingly, even when the child is given voice and opportunity to discuss family issues with his or her parents, "the decision will suit the parents' needs", not the situation.

Everything is limited to the child's possibility to express his or her opinion. Different scenarios are then possible, but all of these end up in parents' ignoring the child's opinion: after listening to it, they do it all their way or convince the child to change his or her mind.

The discussion on child participation in family decision-making lapses into reasoning about age crises of child development and distribution of household tasks. Therefore, it is understood as inclusion in adult life through performance of domestic duties, where children are given a certain choice.

Critical approach to discourse analysis is peculiar because it always studies the pro-

cess of creating a meaning in relation to exercise of power. In our case, parents that exercise power redefine meanings of child participation. Money is the main resource that opens the adult's way to power. Earning money is interpreted by female forum members as a way of inclusion into the adult world, a possibility to legalise the right to express one's own opinion and defend this opinion. Another source of power, also invoked by the parents, is one's own life experience, knowledge and skills that are essential for life in society.

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