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Psychology of Personality: Real and Virtual Context

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL JEWISH CHILDHOOD IN THE RUSSIAN EMPIRE: STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS AND CLASSIFICATION

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Abstract

This paper discusses the Jewish experience of childhood in the Russian Empire in the 19th century, based on an analytic reading of autobiographies. These autobiographical sources give access to the internal perspective of experience. They allow us to analyze presumptions about childhood absorbed by the autobiographers as children from their socio-cultural environment. Using structural analysis, the authors of this paper distinguish two different types of childhood narrative, type A and type B, which correspond to premodern and modern discourses. These two types are delineated by several parameters, including the position and role of parents and siblings in the narrative, the position of the child, the general attitude toward childhood, social identification in childhood, etc. The authors argue that the two types of childhood narrative coexisted throughout the 19th century, although type B started to dominate childhood discourse beginning in the late 19th century. The findings presented in this paper shed a new light on the process of modernization among Jews in the Russian Empire and the way it affected childhood discourse and practices. Moreover, this paper contributes to historical understanding of the roots of contemporary child psychology as well as to examination of the influence culture of childhood has on the development of personality.

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Keywords: Childhood studies, Jewish autobiographies, Jewish childhood, Jewish history, Russian Jewish history.



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1. Introduction

Contemporary psychological research is usually based on the presumption that its conclusions are true for the culture within which the study was conducted. Cross-cultural studies comparing one phenomenon across several cultures are becoming more and more popular. Nevertheless, historical material is still rarely used for comparison, although it could clarify the development of concepts currently used and liken contemporary society to the past. Historical comparison would remind childhood psychologists that what they encounter now in their practice is a product of contemporary culture, not a “natural” attitude toward children.¹ Such a comparison would also allow social, cultural and psychological phenomena to be understood holistically, alongside the deeper socio-cultural and historical roots of psychological conditions.

This study is an attempt to examine psychology historically and history psychologically. The authors believe that both disciplines would benefit from this complementarity. This paper focuses on the experience of childhood in Jewish society in the Russian Empire and the development this experience underwent, analyzed from the internal perspective of the autobiography.²

2. Problem Statement

As Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu argued, one cannot think and behave outside the frame of discourse in which one was brought up. A similar idea, though from a different perspective, was developed in the field of cultural-historical psychology in Russia (Burlakova & Oleshkevich, 2012; Vygotsky, 1978). According to cultural-historical theory, a culture with its presumptions and concepts is interiorized by its culture-bearers and psychological phenomena are derivatives of the particular culture developed in tandem with it.

With this theoretical basis, we presume that when one describes childhood, one’s experience of childhood is present nestled within the text. To gain access to that experience, one must extract it from the very content of the text and examine its structure and structurally significant situations and images. When analyzed in such a manner, the text reveals the author’s unconscious presumptions about childhood, exposing the actual childhood experience.

This kind of research has rarely been conducted before. Historians tend not to trust autobiographers, considering their information unreliable. Psychologists rarely take an interest in history. Even when historians do study ego-documents, including autobiographies, in most cases they read them “straight,” without addressing the deeper and unconscious structures of the texts (Pollock, 1983). Several attempts were made, however, to analyze ego-documents and material evidence from a structural and discursive perspective in order to access a first-hand experience of childhood (Calvert, 1994; Dekker, 2000; Grenby, 2011, etc.), but these are very few and mostly based on documents where adults describe their children, not their own childhood experience.

¹ Sociologist Jenks (1996) has analyzed in depth the “natural” approach to childhood in humanities including psychology and argues that the “natural” approach should make room for other approaches giving more consideration to the socio-cultural nature of childhood.

² By internal perspective, we mean the objective structural analysis of sources conveying the actual “internal” experience of childhood, i.e. ego-documents — in this case, autobiographies.

The authors of this article take a different perspective and aim at reconstructing childhood experience on the basis of sources internal to this experience, i.e. autobiographical descriptions of childhood. Attempts to listen to voices of children themselves, rather than adults describing children, have begun to appear in recent years (for example, Jarzebowski & Safley, 2013; Moruzi et al., 2019), and this paper follows that trend.

3. Research Questions

When conducting the study, the main questions the authors addressed were:

- 1) What are the main features of the experience of childhood in the examined texts (on the basis of structural analysis)?
- 2) Are there variations of the same general trend in all the texts or are there several types of experience?
- 3) What are the main characteristics of this experience/types of experience?

4. Purpose of the Study

This study sheds light on the experience of Jewish childhood in the Russian Empire and on the structure of this experience. The topic is underresearched in Jewish studies and this study may provide a methodological example of research based on autobiographies and structural analysis. Moreover, the authors aim to present a “case study” in cross-disciplinary research, demonstrating the historicity of psychological structure and experience. The historical roots of every psychological phenomenon are often stated in psychological studies, but are rarely proven by actual material. This study provides concrete historical examples that may help better understand contemporary childhood experience in comparison.

5. Research Methods

The experience of childhood is something one always has and cannot lose. It is a common assumption in psychology that the echo of childhood experience is felt in one’s adult actions. The same should be true for the description of childhood (in this case, autobiographies): it should bear traces of the actual childhood experience. However, the question remains - to what extent should we believe the descriptions of childhood written by an adult?

This question is methodologically challenging, because obviously the reality of the adult author is different from that of the author as a child, as are his/her ideas, convictions, evaluations, etc. Moreover, autobiography is not a psychoanalytical conversation or structured interview — the researcher cannot ask additional questions or direct the conversation. Furthermore, an author writes an autobiography for reasons of his/her own that may significantly influence the text.

Nevertheless, the authors of this article argue that it is possible to trace the experience of childhood even in a text written by an adult who may be giving only a partial account of his/her childhood or even consciously lying about it. We will not analyze what the author wanted to say, but what s/he included in the text unconsciously. A structural analysis of a description of childhood helps reveal those unconscious assumptions absorbed by the author from the cultural environment in childhood. The possible objects of

analysis may include the place of the child in the narrative, the perception of the child by adults and by her/himself, the framework of relationships in childhood, the significant adults present in the narrative, types of communication with those adults, etc. Obviously, this method does not allow for a reconstruction of the author's childhood in all its details — and that is not the goal. It enables us instead to gain insight on the main elements of the childhood experience and to analyze it in the context of more global discourses.

The sources of this study are published autobiographies composed by Jews who spent their childhood on the territory of the Russian Empire from the late 18th to the early 20th centuries (before the Russian revolution of 1917). Fifty-two descriptions of childhood written in Hebrew, Yiddish, German and Russian were collected, translated and analyzed.³ In this period, Russian Jewry experienced rapid modernization, which influenced the discourse of childhood as well. In contrast to central Europe, this shift happened faster among Russian Jewry and their confrontation with modernization was more acute, allowing us to see the changes more clearly.⁴

6. Findings

After analyzing the structure of these descriptions of childhood and considering the main topics discussed and main figures appearing in the narrative, two types of childhood narrative are distinguishable — type A and type B.

Type A is more common in earlier autobiographies and reflects the premodern experience of childhood. In the type A narrative, the only unique feature of a child is whether or not s/he studies well.⁵ Parents care for the child materially, providing her/him with food, clothing, etc., but in everyday situations they do not show emotional affection and are present in the narrative only to instruct the child or in other situations where their presence is practically necessary. The child is perceived as an independent person and is expected to behave like an adult. Siblings are mentioned only when the context requires it, and do not play an extensive role in the narrative. Childhood happens not in the family, but in the broader social space, and the child seems to associate himself more with the broader social group (*heder* boy)⁶ than with the family.⁷

Type B began to appear in autobiographies of authors born in the 1830s and then spread rapidly to become a dominant type. This type reflects the modern experience of childhood. It emphasizes the unique “I” of the child and describes parents extensively and emotionally. Parents are mostly involved in situations of an emotional, not pedagogical or practical nature, mothers playing an especially important role. Furthermore, siblings are very present in the narrative and also get a thorough and emotional description. Thus, childhood takes place within the family, with parents and siblings present, and the author associates

³ All work with the sources was conducted by Ekaterina Oleshkevich.

⁴ On the history of Jews in the Russian Empire see Polonsky (2010); on the east-European Jewish family see Freeze (2002) etc.

⁵ The overwhelming majority of autobiographies of this type were written by males. Very few memoirs were written by women. This fact can probably be explained by the social position of women in traditional east-European Jewish society — they had significant economic independence, but intellectual activity was reserved for men only. For more on women in east European Jewish society, see Hyman and Baskin (1998), Freeze (2002) etc.

⁶ *Heder* is traditional Jewish religious school for boys. In eastern Europe in the 18th–19th centuries, boys began to attend *heder* at the age of 3–4, learning first to read Hebrew, then studying the Pentateuch, other sections of the Tanakh (Hebrew Bible) and the Talmud with commentaries..

⁷ The question of the social group with which girls identified still needs further research.

her/himself with the family. S/he considers her/himself a full member of the family and the narrative focuses on everyday life. Moreover, a child is expected to behave like a child and is less independent. But s/he also has a voice in decision-making and can even dominate this process.

Types A and B are *ideal types* according to Weber's (1949) definition. He argued that an ideal type is a rationally created construction aimed at ordering diversified reality, but it should not and cannot correspond in all its features to any particular case. Thus, types A and B help to put reality in order, but rarely exist in their ideal and complete form in these autobiographies. In most cases, one can only say that the description is closer to type A or B depending on the parameters discussed in detail below. The same is true for the categories of "premodern" and "modern," which are closely connected to the derived types A and B. These are categories invented to distinguish between different socio-historical developments, however, 19th-century Jewish society did not know it was (pre)modern, just as monsieur Jourdain "had been speaking prose without knowing anything about it." Thus, the reality of the past is not supposed to fit our invented categories completely. Moreover, there is always room for individual differentiation. Actual childhood experience obviously varied. More important though is that the general modus remained in line with one of the described types.

The main differences between types A and B are summarized in the list of parameters below:

- description of parents
- expression of care
- position of the child
- role of the child in the decision-making process
- siblings and their place in the narrative
- general attitude toward childhood
- identification with the family or with a social group not consisting of relatives
- main theme and main space where childhood takes place

6.1. Parents

In the premodern discourse of childhood and descriptions originating from it (type A), parents are distant figures responsible for providing the child with material care, i.e. food, clothing, a good education. They are not expected to express emotional love toward the child in regular everyday situations. Moreover, the everyday mode of parent-child relations is absent from these autobiographies. Both love and material care are mentioned only in exceptional situations, for example, of direct danger to the child or something equally critical. Mothers are almost absent from the narrative and if present, mostly inactive. Fathers are more visible, but mentioned mostly in the pedagogic context of "correcting" the child.

By contrast, in the modern discourse of childhood (type B), parents are expected to demonstrate love toward the child and to spend time with her/him playing and expressing their affection, not only correcting. Previously invisible mothers are often placed now at the center of the narrative. Fathers also lose their explicitly pedagogical features and begin to communicate with children without necessarily any reason, just because it brings them pleasure. The day-to-day mode of parent-child relationships becomes important too.

6.2. Position of the child and decision-making

In the type A narrative, the child becomes independent at a relatively young age. S/he is not subject to parental control in small issues and decisions. Important decisions (such as the choice of a marriage partner or the craft a child will learn) are made by the parents and not discussed with the child.⁸ Moreover, decisions affecting the whole family (like the remarriage of the father after the death of his first wife) are not discussed with children either. Children are even not always informed when the decision is made. When children make up their mind to deviate from the course programmed by their parents, they act first and do not expect their parents to give them permission.

In the type B narrative, however, the child is perceived as a personality with wishes and preferences, as someone who should be consulted. Furthermore, children take part in the decision-making process and sometimes even dominate it. When they want to act radically differently from what their parents expect, they tend to get permission first and act only afterward.

6.3. Siblings

In the type A narrative, siblings are rarely present. They are mentioned only when the context requires it, but the author demonstrates no emotional ties to them despite the fact that they lived under one roof for many years. Sometimes siblings appear only in the middle of the childhood narrative and the reader is amazed to learn, for example, that the author had two older brothers. This feature is not linked to an age difference between the siblings, though it might be linked to their gender. Brothers are more likely to be mentioned by male authors and sisters by female authors. Communication between genders seems to have been less developed.

The above description seems to contradict the known fact that girls often played a maternal role with the younger children, and were therefore constantly present in their lives, caring for them. However, this contradiction is easy to solve — just as mothers who also spent much time caring for the children are almost absent from the narrative, so are the sisters. The very fact of material care was taken for granted and usually did not get any attention from autobiographers in this type of the narrative. It was considered natural behavior for women, the same in all families (see paragraph 6.4).

In the type B narrative, siblings are much more visible. Relationships with them are emotional: siblings play an important role in the life of children and are constantly present in the narrative. In the type B narrative, there are descriptions of siblings playing together, helping each other, sisters taking care of their younger siblings and teaching them, etc.

6.4. General attitude to childhood

In the type A narrative, childhood is perceived as an inescapable phase in life, while the entire focus is on adulthood. Childhood is not considered a valuable period of life in and of itself, but only for the sake of adulthood (Ariès, 1962). Basically, the authors believe that all Jewish children have the same type of childhood, and there is nothing individual in the experience of a particular child.

⁸ In some cases, even big decisions were made by the children themselves, without consulting their parents.

This assumption does not mean, however, that childhood was not seen as a period that shaped a person’s life. It was believed that a child had to be influenced properly in order to become a good Jew as an adult, i.e. disciplined.

In the type B narrative, childhood is an individual experience and worthy of description in and of itself. It consists of specific stories and is not a similar experience shared by all children.

6.5. Identification with the family or with a social group not consisting of relatives

In the type A narrative, an author describing himself as a child does not identify with his family, but with a broader social group such as *heder* boys. The words “we, *heder* boys” are repeated often, not “I” or “we, children of X family.” This grouping gives him a certain social status.

In the type B narrative, the child identifies more with the family and the narrative in general is more individualized, describing the author’s own unique experience, not an experience shared by all children (see paragraph 6.4).

6.6. Main theme/space

In the type A narrative, much attention is devoted to events happening to the child in a public space, i.e. in the *heder*, on the street, at work, etc., especially with regard to education. The focus on the educational experience in *heder* is typical of the Jewish premodern childhood narrative. The study of the sacred texts was considered the main occupation of childhood — and the most prestigious of adulthood.

In the type B narrative, the narrative focus is on the everyday life of the child and her/his family. Educational experience remains important — its premodern value does not disappear immediately and in any case, children spent much time at school, either in traditional *heder* or in another, modernized educational facility. Yet, educational matters are not the only ones discussed in the narrative. The spatial dimension of the home, i.e. private space, is added to the picture, which coincides with the focus on everyday life and family.

Thus, the parameters detailed above can be summarized as oppositions, which are presented in the Table 01.

Table 01. Parameters as oppositions

Parameter	Type A	Type B
Parents’ care	Material	Emotional
Description of parents	Distant	Close
Position of child	Independent	More dependent on parents
Decision making	Without the child	Involves the child
Siblings	Absent, no relationship	Present, emotional relationship
Attitude toward childhood	“General” shared childhood	Individualized childhood
Identification	With broader social group	With family
Main theme/space	Education or work/public	Everyday life+education/private

Type A and B correspond to “premodern” and “modern” paradigms of childhood. Those models represent different mindsets and cannot be defined only chronologically. It is true that authors born in the late 18th-early 19th century usually used the type A model when describing their childhood and toward the

turn of the century the number of type B descriptions grew and the number of type A descriptions diminished. However, there are type A narratives written by authors born in the early 20th century. Moreover, in some locations and cultural conditions (like distant shtetls, poor neighborhoods, etc.) type A features may have existed even longer. Thus, there is no strict chronological border between the two narrative types; they coexisted for a long time, reflecting the heterogeneity of the culture.

Types A and B correspond to the classification of childhoods introduced by Chris Jenks. Relying on the theories of Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu, Jenks (1996) distinguishes between the Dionysian child and the Apollonian child. The Dionysian child is “bad” and requires discipline to set her/him straight by means of external control. In contrast, the Apollonian child is perceived as “good” by nature and possesses unique features. Control over her/him is aimed at tending the soul, not disciplining the body.⁹ Type A with distant parents and siblings, dominance of material care and independence of the child corresponds to the Dionysian image, while type B with its emotional family ties fits the Apollonian image.

These types also fit well into the development of the Western family as described by Ariès (1962), Stone (1977), Shorter (1977) etc. However, the descriptions of these authors are based on sources that do not have an *internal perspective* on the experience of childhood. By contrast, our ideal types are based on ego-documents conveying the *internal* experience. They may serve as verification of the conclusions drawn by analysis of the external perspective.

7. Conclusion

This study demonstrates the significant difference between the premodern and modern experience of childhood among Jews in the Russian Empire. The described shift cannot be measured quantitatively: one cannot say that children in the modern paradigm received more attention than in the premodern one. The whole framework of childhood was shaped differently, i.e. childhood *felt* different, it was a qualitatively different experience. A phenomenological analysis of the same material as complimentary to the objective analysis might enrich this understanding and add an authentic *internal perspective* in the phenomenological interpretation of the term.

This study is a novel undertaking: as such, it leaves many questions unanswered. One of the most important is how these types evolve and why type A was replaced by type B. Hopefully, such questions will be examined and addressed in further publications.

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⁹ Furthermore, those ideal images resonate also with the modes of punishment as described by Foucault (1995) and basically can be perceived as concrete example of those disciplining modes. The premodern one seeks to discipline the body and the modern one — to correct the soul by the means of spatial and temporal control as well as normalization.

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