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Psychological boundaries of "I" in the role play of peer-unaccepted children

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This article examines the psychological peculiarities of children who are not accepted by their peers in the course of play. Problems in peer communication are analyzed in respect to the violation of "I" psychological boundaries. The phenomenology of the psychological boundaries of "I" and their violation in the course of play are investigated. New data are provided on the peculiarities of play (mainly its subject matter, including also specific plots, roles, and the organization of play space) in children who are not accepted by their peers; differences between children with low sociometric status and children from a control group were ascertained. Projective methods and observations of children's play and communicative behavior in different situations were used. The sample included 140 children from 5 to 6 years old, 70 of whom were not accepted by their peers. Additionally 80 mothers (40 of them mothers of children who were not accepted by their peers) participated in the research. The link between the peculiarities of the children's play, their peer relations, and violations of the psychological boundaries of "I" is described. The work provides elaboration of the notions of play developed within the framework of L. Vygotsky's cultural-historical approach.

Keywords: psychological boundaries of "I", role play, role, subject matter, play contact, acceptance by peers

Introduction

The experience of peer relationships in childhood and adolescence is the ground for the development of self-consciousness and personality, one's attitudes toward the world, and the search for one's place in society; it affects notions of one's future and one's life perspectives. Peer acceptance and support are profoundly connected with a child's psychological well-being, self-realization, and life satisfaction. It is difficult to overestimate the gravity of the consequences of violations in peer re-

lationships and rejection by peers. It is known that children who are not accepted by their peers belong to the group at risk for the development of different affective disorders, low academic achievement, and suicidal behavior.

Obvious differences among children according to their sociometric position occur already at preschool age. Rejection by a peer group is usually a tough experience for children. An alarming fact is that the number of such children is increasing.

The issue of peer relationships has been the object of research for several decades. Investigations of children who are not accepted by their peers have focused on different factors. Researchers have studied the links between sociometric status and social competence; predictors of high sociometric status; peculiarities of popular and rejected children; possible criteria for uniting isolated pupils into groups; perceived social competence; perception of self and relationship with parents in rejected children; and reasons for the popularity of children among their peers (Boivin & Hymel, 1997; Deković & Gerris, 1994; Kolominsky, 1976; Lisina, 2001; Ommundsen, Gundersen, & Mjaavatn, 2010; Pijl, Frostad, & Mjaavatn, 2011; Volling, Mackinnon-Lewis, Rabiner, & Baradaran, 1993; Verschueren, K., Marcoen, A. 2002; Zakriski & Coie, 1996). The wide scope of the issues investigated within the research field of children and adolescents' social status and relationships demonstrates both the significance of the problem and its insufficient comprehension.

There are different approaches to the notion of the essence of peer preferences in young children. Thus Kolominsky (1976) argues that a child prefers a peer who fits his/her social ideal. According to another approach (Ruzskaya and colleagues, 1989), a young child's popularity depends on his/her ability to fulfill the leading needs of a peer–needs for a benevolent attitude, play cooperation, empathy. The lack of consensus on the core reasons for unpopularity and rejection by peers leaves this issue open to further investigation.

Methods

Because play is the leading activity and one of the most important forms of communication in young children and also the most authentic context for the manifestation of a child's self, the aim of the present research was to study play in communication-challenged children.

Taking into consideration the fact that "communication-challenged children" constitute a vague category that merges problems of different etiology, the children were included in the sample according to one formal criterion — their low sociometric status in the group.

The research was done in a Moscow kindergarten. Sociometric data were used to select children with low sociometric status. This group included children who were rejected by their peers — that is, those who received a large number of negative selections with no joint selections and ignored children who were not selected by anybody.

The study involved 140 kindergarten-age children; 70 of them were children with low sociometric status (nonaccepted children). This group comprised two subgroups: ignored children and rejected children. The control group included 70

children with high sociometric status (peer-accepted children). The study also involved 80 mothers: 40 mothers of children in the control group and 40 mothers of children in the study group. Data were collected in the course of 4.5 years.

The results were processed with the SPSS statistical application; the significance of variation was checked with χ2 and Mann-Whitney criteria; correlation, factorial, and cluster analyses were also performed.

Observation of children's play

Observation of the free play of children (collective and individual) was the main method of investigation. The following parameters were recorded: subject matter; roles; the organization of the play space; the type of toys a child selected; and the type of play, individual or collective, a child preferred. We also tried to identify the main conflicts and relationships reproduced by a child in play—that is, the content of play (Filippova & Pivnenko, 2008).

Observation of play revealed some specific features demonstrated by children with low sociometric status, features that made their play different from that of peer-accepted children. The differences are given below in detail.

Subject matter

According to Elkonin's (1978) definition, subject matter is the area of a social situation that is reproduced in play. It was found that the subject matter of only 16% of the nonaccepted children was socially significant "adult" activity, such as "At the doctor's," "On the train," "School." Family narratives (for example, "Mother-daughter" or household play, "Family dinner") were the subject matter in both groups, but nonaccepted children reproduced personally significant, affectively tainted aspects of family relationships—for example, family conflicts—rather than standard role relations. Variations between the groups are statistically significant at $p < 0.01$.

In the control group, 73% of the peer-accepted children reproduced the plots of classic fairy tales and popular TV series compared with 25.7% of the nonaccepted children group. In nonaccepted children's play, the plots of fairy tales and shows deviated from the traditional ones: they were predominantly related to fighting (40% of the children) or to caregiving and helplessness (50% of the children). Battle narratives were also encountered in peer-accepted children's play but only in a broad context, while with the nonaccepted children's fighting was the essence of play; the narrative did not go further than that.

It turned out that nonaccepted children cannot stay long within the selected subject matter and thus destroy play.

Roles

Nonaccepted children, unlike the peer-accepted children group, almost never assumed professional roles such as "doctor," "construction worker," "salesperson" (84.2% of nonaccepted children never assumed such roles at $p < 0.01$). In "household" play they seldom took the role of parents (31.5% of the children) but rather played young children; when they did play the roles of adults, the roles acquired a negative affective aspect. The nonaccepted children group showed a preference for

roles related to the "strength-weakness" theme: rejected children usually played aggressive fighters; ignored children played weak characters in need of care — for example, a younger child (80% of the ignored children). Interestingly, in collective play the ignored children, as a rule, played only secondary roles (80% of the children); even the main roles they played got transformed into secondary ones. For instance, Cinderella never became a princess; in the course of play everybody ill-treated her and the prince never found her.

Nonaccepted children cannot stay long within a role, disrupt the role action, and exit into real relationships ($p < 0.01$).

Organization of play space

Differences between the groups became even more pronounced in the organization of play space. Nonaccepted children, as a rule, tried to fence off their space from the space of others: they would crawl into a toy house, build a border wall, place weapons at the border or dig a ditch, or mark up the border of play (64% of nonaccepted children). They occupied an inappropriately sized space for their play: rejected children took up a huge space and carried as many toys there as they could; ignored children, on the contrary, took up a small corner and almost never left it (the difference between nonaccepted and peer-accepted children is significant at $p < 0.01$).

Toys

Nonaccepted children more often than not selected multifunctional objects—for example, parts of a construction set not used for intended purposes, nonstructured play materials such as sand and play dough (76% of nonaccepted children); very often they (particularly rejected children) selected aggressive toys. Control-group children more often selected substantive toys — copies of household objects, toy cars, Barbie dolls ($p < 0.01$).

Investigation of the extent of "I" psychological boundaries

The results of the first stage of our study for nonaccepted children — namely, the detected violations of subject matter, the exit from roles, and the inappropriateness of play space — gave us ground to assume that nonaccepted children have unformed or distorted psychological boundaries of "I" (or the boundaries of "I" psychological space). In this article "I" stands for integrated whole personality.

Psychological space is understood as the space of "I" that is expressed in physical phenomenology (bodily or territorial), in social interaction, or in preferred values. Psychological space is inseparably connected with the concept of boundaries; psychological boundaries of "I" represent a border, a dividing line between "I" and non-"I," between the things that a child identifies with him/herself and his/her belongings and those things he/she does not identify with him/herself. The boundary of "I" has a dual function: isolation of "I" from the Other and from the outer world, and unification with them, which ensures contact and interaction between "I" and the Other, "I" and the world. We identify the following types of psychological boundaries: bodily, territorial, and social ("I"–the Other, mine–not mine, "I"–

society"), as well as value-based boundaries ("I"–the Other "I", "I" real–"I" ideal," "good-bad," "kind-evil").

In young children it is through play, through assuming a role, that "I" is differentiated and a basis for decentration is formed; in play young children learn how to identify with the Other, to differentiate and coordinate positions. It is not surprising, therefore, that it was in play that the disruption of boundaries was so clearly observed.

The second stage of our study investigated to what extent "I" psychological boundaries were formed in nonaccepted children. The concept of boundaries was first introduced and studied in psychoanalysis and was further developed in object-relations theory, where the shaping of psychological boundaries is viewed as a child's separation from the mother in early childhood (Mahler, Pine, & Bergman, 1975; Spitz, 1965; Winnicott, 1971; and others). If interaction between a child and the mother plays the main role in separating "I" and not "I" in early childhood, the father becomes a no less significant figure in this process: he destroys the symbiotic connection between mother and child and introduces new forms of interaction.

The concept of boundaries is a central feature of gestalt therapy, in etiological and existential/phenomenological approaches. Only in recent decades have psychological boundaries come into the focus of research by Russian psychologists (Arina &Nikolayeva, 2005; Nartova-Bochaver, 2008; Petrovsky, 2010; Tkhostov, 2002; and others). Space limits preclude a full analysis of how the problem of psychological boundaries is approached by these authors.

The term *boundary* had not previously been used by classical Russian psychologists, although their works implicitly contain this concept. The process of child mental development (the neonatal crisis, the isolation of "I" from "proto-we" the 3-year-old crisis, the emergence of voluntary action and personal consciousness, the differentiation of external and internal life, decentration, peer interaction) is, in its essence, the process of building boundaries between "I" and the Other. According to Elkonin, "I" always contains the Other "I" — in other words, there is always an interaction between "I" and the Other "I", where "the Other" is an example to follow. Decentration, a child's attitude toward him/herself through the Other and toward the Other as if to "I", develops, primarily, in the process of a narrative role play through which a child assumes a role and develops role-based and real relationships with play partners (Elkonin, 1989).

Despite the fundamental differences between cultural-historical and psychoanalytical approaches, they correlate in their understanding of how the boundaries and psychological space of "I" develop: from the initial feeling of inseparable "I" and non-"I" and mother-child symbiosis toward a gradual separation of "I" from non-"I" and further individualization and differentiation of "I".

Because the play characteristics of nonaccepted children gave us ground to assume that they do not have well-formed psychological boundaries of "I", it is worth looking into the role of play in the formation of these boundaries. Erikson (1996) views play as an important element in the formation of early childhood identity, which is, in essence, the building of "I" boundaries. Winnicott (1971) sees play as a kind of a creative process that takes place in a safe, potential space between "I" and non-"I", between a child and the Other, where "I" boundaries are formed. The

proponents of a client-centered approach (Landreth, 1998) believe that play content represents structuring of the inner world and the experience of a child per se. In play a child experiences a feeling of getting the situation under control—that is, the child streamlines a process and state by building boundaries, structuring them in time and space.

Psychological borders are explicitly present in the concepts of play developed in the cultural-historical paradigm (Elkonin, 1978, 1989; Leontyev, 1983; Vygotsky, 1966, 1978). In regard to boundaries, not only do players exceed boundaries of reality (play necessarily contains an imaginary situation; Vygotsky, 1966), but a child exists simultaneously in two affective spaces: "a child cries as a patient and rejoices as a player" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 290); in other words, a child constantly resides at a boundary of two worlds: imaginary and real. Boundaries in play, as Elkonin (1989) stressed, lie not only between role-based and real space but also between roles (between role spaces) and between real positions of players; boundaries in play define, we can thus say, three spaces. Here we should mention a study by Elkoninova (2004): her concept of play is based on Lotman's idea (1970) that a boundary is a borderline between semantic spaces; by crossing this borderline a person acquires his/her own essence.

Thus, a conclusion can be drawn that role play facilitates decentration, the differentiation of "I" and non-"I", and, consequently, the formation of "I"–Other and "I"–Other "I" boundaries; in addition, play is the space where boundaries related to the ability to obey a rule and the boundaries of child self-limitation are built—that is, the boundaries between a child and the society. Crossing the boundary between real and play space is a precondition for acquiring a sense of human actions.

The second stage of our study tested the assumption that nonaccepted children do not have well-formed "I" boundaries. A battery of techniques was developed to study the characteristics of the psychological boundaries of "I", the personal characteristics and peer relationships of nonaccepted children. The battery comprised the following techniques: Kingdom-State (Gromova, 2003), Geometric Shapes Test (Beskova & Tkhostov, 2005), Homunculus (Semenovich, 2002), modified Metamorphoses and Family Picture, talks "about myself" and "my peer," and a "picture of a nonexistent animal." (Self-evaluation, aggressiveness, and anxiety were also investigated.) Additionally, real mother-child interaction was investigated in 80 mother-child pairs (joint action and joint drawing tests). The results obtained from studies of psychological boundaries using these different techniques are briefly described here.

The *Geometric Shapes Test* showed that, in most nonaccepted children, psychological boundaries are unformed and unstable; their integrity is compromised. Differences between groups were also found in how they build their contacts with the world. Nonaccepted children exhibit a one-way strategy of building contact with the world; among them, ignored children mostly avoid contact, and rejected children predominantly show self-presentation and aggressive-defensive forms of contact.

Kingdom-State results confirmed the data obtained through play observation. Nonaccepted children often did not recognize the boundaries of other children but were very sensitive to violation of their own borders and tirelessly strengthened them. Children either drew passive defenses on borders (ditches, flying bridges,

fences) or placed aggressive defenses there (mine fields, armies of soldiers with cannons) at $p < 0.01$.

The *Metamorphoses technique* was used to evaluate the level of the barrier presented and the permeability of boundaries of "I" and to analyze the self-images of children and their attitudes toward themselves. In a play environment, a child was asked what animal or plant he/she looks like, wants to look like, and does not want to look like. To evaluate the quality of the child's "I" boundaries (the level of barrier strength and permeability), Fischer's pattern (1986) was used. It was found that nonaccepted children rejected animals and plants that have high permeability of boundaries (49%, 66%); moreover, they preferred those, like a turtle or a cactus, with a high boundary function (51%, 28%). These findings substantiate the assumption that nonaccepted children put a clear emphasis on the permeability and barrier strength of "I" boundaries ($p < 0.01$).

The *mother-and-child joint action test (Joint Drawing and Joint Play)* evaluated the number of initiatives, responses to initiatives, and conflicts. It showed a disrupted interaction with the mother in 42.5% of nonaccepted children ($p < 0.01$).

Observation of children's behavior and attitudes toward norms and rules during classes and in a group revealed frequent violations by nonaccepted children of adult-set boundaries—regulations, requirements, general rules. Observation of the children in play with rules showed that nonaccepted children significantly more often than peer-accepted children violated the rules ($p < 0.01$). Probably children try to prove the real existence of their own "I" by violating others' boundaries. In the context of the issue of developmental crises, Elkonin (1989) argued that it is necessary for a child to overcome the resistance of adults in order to experience and recognize the child's own "I". The research by Nikolskaya has shed some light on the reasons for such behaviors. Transferring her ideas about the levels of affective-sphere development to the issue of nonaccepted children's behavior allows us to explain their motivation for breaking boundaries. In the process of actual collisions with obstacles-boundaries that arise in children's lives as norms and rules, children strive to obtain some information about potential boundaries and the possibilities for their own influence. Having overcome an obstacle, children increase their "I" level, transforming the negative energy of a barrier into their own positive potential (Nikolskaya, 2008).

Other techniques mentioned above also identified significant differences between nonaccepted and peer-accepted children in how well the boundaries were formed. Personality characteristics of nonaccepted children were also identified: increased anxiety, aggression, no positive-behavior skills in conflict situations, low self-esteem, nonacceptance of self. It was also found that the majority of these children have a negative peer image. These children feel emotional discomfort in their families: the boundaries between family members are disrupted; interaction with the mother is disrupted too. (In all the characteristics mentioned above, nonaccepted children significantly differ from the peer-accepted children group, $p < 0.01$.)

Factor analysis of these data revealed three significant factors that cover 65% of the entire sample: F1—"nonnormative play"; F2—disruption of "I" boundaries; F3—aggressive violation of rules (limitations). Nonnormative play is, in our terms, play where mastering adult social relationships does not happen. Differences be-

tween nonaccepted and peer-accepted children in factors F1 and F2 are significant (at $p < 0.01$).

Correlation analysis per *r*-Spearman revealed a significant positive correlation between "unfavorable psychological climate in the family" and "violation of role boundaries in play" ($r = 0.456^{**}$); between low self-esteem and "disruption of "I" psychological boundaries" ($r = 0.406^{**}$); and between "disruption of "I" psychological boundaries" and "unfavorable psychological climate in the family" ($r = 0.543^{**}$).

Observation of play revealed disruption of psychological boundaries in nonaccepted children's play. Disruption was shown in subject matter, roles, the organization of the play space, and play content. Nonaccepted children often trespassed the real boundaries of peers (took away toys, intruded into play, destroyed structures built by others) and did not maintain role boundaries by mixing play and reality. For instance, a boy in the role of the Gingerbread Boy resisted being eaten by the fox, in accordance with the play narrative, and fought the fox and offended the girl who was playing the role of the fox. Nonaccepted children cannot play for a long time within the subject matter and destroy play by their transition from play to reality relationships. They take up too small or too big a space and do not share toys. Nonaccepted children play plots often deal with trespassing boundaries, with fighting or helplessness. The significance of a boundary is often stressed by fencing it with walls and ditches and by hiding oneself in the fenced space.

Almost all nonaccepted children have a conflict between their needs and the requirements of the environment as well as an unsatisfied need for emotional closeness and support. These conflicts and needs come to the forefront in play and shut off the social relationships of the adult world. These children need most of all to work through these inner conflicts, and this work may consume a part of the developmental and cognitive resource of play. As a result, normative, "adult" relationships, which constitute the content of the role play of young children, remain untapped. A gap between "I" and the real social world remains open, and these children always have to "catch up" with peers; at the same time, play fails to fulfill its "therapeutic" function because the children get stuck in their conflict.

Vygotsky and then Elkonin demonstrated that play's constitutive element lies in transitioning from the existing space into a different one, from a real to an imaginary space, and in maintaining this dual plane of existence. This simultaneous existence in two spaces on their borderline constitutes play (Elkonin, 1978; Vygotsky, 1966, 1978). Such play did not occur with the children in the study group. They either exited play (started to take offence or to squabble or simply left) or they turned the play situation and play relationships into reality. They demonstrated a "naturalistic" attitude toward play. Strictly speaking their play was not play; they continued to be in the real world all the time. Their play did not cross the border from reality into a different space as they stayed on one side of the borderline; the transition did not happen.

In Vygotsky's words, "Play … tries to leap into the sophisticated world of higher forms of human activity contained in the environment as a source of development" (1978, p. 290); in other words, play is a movement toward the ideal form. If this "leap" into the world of human activity does not take place, then the present state

cannot be surmounted and there is no development. This is what we see in nonaccepted children play: they remain within the sphere of their affect.

Conclusions

We assume that the nonacceptance of children by their peers is connected with violations of the psychological boundaries of "I". The research results revealed interesting intergroup differences between ignored children and rejected children: in their ways of violating play roles and plot, in their ways of organizing play space, and so forth. We suggest that this study proves that any form of violation of psychological boundaries of "I" (expanded or narrowed boundaries, permeability or barrier-function distortions) cause peer rejection irrespective of the forms of the behavioral manifestations of such violations. The heterogeneous nature of nonaccepted children is proved by the foreign research carried out on different samples (Crosby, Fireman, & Clopton, 2011; Rubin, Hymel, LeMare, & Rowden, 1989; Verschueren & Marcoen, 2002; Zakriski & Coie, 1996,).

Thus we have argued that psychological boundaries of "I" in nonaccepted children are unstable and highly permeable and often lead to protective activation of the barrier function. The integrity of the boundaries is violated, and they are distorted and underdeveloped. Insufficient development of boundaries manifests in the children's actual behavior—the violation of social norms and rules. Those violations are especially dramatic in role play as violations of the boundaries of role, plot, and play space. Probably such low role-play competence becomes one of the reasons for nonacceptance by peers. Again, age of 5-6 years is the sensitive period for development of the psychological boundaries of "I". When children adhere to a role, relationships between the role and actual play interactions as well as correlations between the role and actual internal positions are the conditions for boundary formation. A vicious circle emerges: play is the condition for boundary formation, and, simultaneously, psychological boundaries are the condition for successful play.

One should not expect that a child can overcome such a contradiction on his/her own without any psychological intervention; the problem is aggravated with the empirical finding that the families of most of the nonaccepted children are not able to provide them with an adequate environment for the formation of psychological boundaries. Those children perceive their family situations as adverse and uncomfortable; mother-child interactions are distorted. Therefore, nonaccepted children need specially organized play activities aimed at the development of psychological boundaries of "I". The links among violations of the psychological boundaries of "I" and peer relationships and the data on subject matter, roles, and the other peculiarities of the play of nonaccepted children revealed in the study provide a range of new opportunities for approaching therapeutic and psychocorrectional work with this category of children.

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