

SPECIFIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL INTEREST IN PRESCHOOL CHILDREN RAISED IN DIFFERENT ENVIRONMENTS

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Abstract

This article presents the results of a study on social interest – a concept interpreted as community feeling and skill of cooperation in accordance with A. Adler’s definition. The study was conducted among preschool children raised in different environments – in a family and in a social institution. The aim of the study is to determine the level of development of social interest in preschool children raised in different environments by measuring and analyzing their cooperation in a game. The results obtained from this study are interpreted from the perspective of Individual Psychology in regards to the role of the family in the upbringing of children.

Keywords: *social interest, preschool children, cooperation, joint activity, family environment, social institution*

Introduction

The concept of social interest is one of the key tenets in Alfred Adler’s works and a basic principle that serves as the foundation of his theory on personality development. The term “social interest” is derived from the German neologism *Gemeinschaftsgefuehland* does not have a simple, one-word translation. It can be interpreted as “social feeling”, “community feeling” or “sense of solidarity” (Hjelle, Ziegler, 2003, p.114). Adler claims that personality exists only within the context of social interaction and that social interest develops in and through these interactions. He links this concept to a person’s potential to identify with other people and to share their feelings. The individual is seen as part of a social system and as inextricably connected with the other people. This connection also determines the different forms in which social interest manifests itself such as empathy, solidarity, identification and closeness with the others, cooperation and helping behavior, concern for the welfare of society. A. Adler claims with certainty that the potential for the development of social interest is innate and every person is born with it, but it still requires conscious stimulation from the very beginning. This development can only take place within and through the social environment. Initially the mother and later on the other members of the family contribute to this process.

Even though community feeling is an inherent human characteristic, it may remain underdeveloped. A. Adler believes that such insufficient development is at the root of the asocial lifestyle, which eliminates the different forms of social interest. In his works, he pays particular attention to matters connected with the raising and education of children, and identifies neglect and overindulgence as two common childhood situations that undermine the development of a child’s social interest. According to A. Adler spoiled children grow up to become dependent and passive adults who lack discipline and initiative. The child’s goals are selfish and do not include cooperative behavior. The latter situation is that of neglect, rejection or abandonment of the child resulting from cold family relationships or separation of the offspring from the mother and the family. These are the main factors that could lead to undeveloped social interest. These children, feeling alienation or complete lack of parental presence, usually resort to behavior directed towards personal superiority as opposed to cooperative behavior based on social interest. Their lifestyle does not include cooperation, empathy and mutual support.

It is important for the child to develop and grow up in a favorable family environment. A.

Adler emphasized the importance of helping the child feel as an equal member and partner at home, who can cooperate with all the other members of the family. The mother is the figure that directs and encourages the increased interest of the child in the father and the other children in the family, and later on in all the people in the surrounding environment. Thus, the child will find this courage and self-confidence that develop from his contact with the others. (Adler, 1998:134)

The family environment is irreplaceable, but not all children have the opportunity to grow up in a family. Despite the ongoing process of deinstitutionalization and provision of alternative services in Bulgaria, many children deprived of parental care are still brought up in closed institutions called “homes for children deprived of parental care”. These social care facilities are responsible for a large number of children who are raised by teams of specialists. This situation precludes the possibility of providing individual care and developing a relationship between the child and a significant adult. Different staff members share and perform the functions of the mother. The situation of “multiple mother figures” is the reason why children do not have the opportunity to build a stable connection to a significant adult, which in turn deprives them of emotional attachment. Thus, the child is not given the chance to find his place in the system of human relations. The lack of adults who are personally and emotionally engaged with the child distorts the foundation on which the child and later on the grownup will build his future relationships with other people. “The child does not discover in time his significance to the others and does not feel particularly valuable to them. Additionally, his environment is much more limited compared to that of a child living with his family; the sensory information is scarce and the emotional and social contacts are poor, devoid of content and intensity.” (Stoykova, 2011:50)

Multiple studies have shown that institutions mainly satisfy the children’s basic needs, which is not sufficient for the development of a physically and mentally healthy child. Institutions cannot provide children with the emotional care and love they need. A. Adler writes that children want to be hugged, pampered, praised; they love to snuggle up to someone they love, ask to be taken into bed, etc. They are happy with a hug, a kiss, a friendly face, a kind word. (Adler, 1997:20) Later on this need for tenderness leads to relationships of kindness that develop into affection for relatives, friendship, community feeling and love. A. Adler claims on multiple occasions that the need for tenderness is a preliminary form of the community feeling. (Adler, 1997:20)

An important aspect of social interest is the formation of the skill of cooperation. A. Adler firmly believes that the emergence of the tendency for cooperation is provoked from the first day of the child’s life. In this regard, the extreme importance of the mother clearly stands out. She appears on the threshold of the development of the community feeling. The biologically inherited human sense of community awaits her care. (Adler, 1998: 132)

The earliest manifestation of cooperation in ontogenesis appears in the relationship between child and mother. It is one of the most important qualities a person needs to possess in order to surmount difficulties successfully and to strive for perfection. Only through cooperation, can a person overcome the feeling of inferiority and make his valuable contribution to the development of the community. A. Adler defines social interest as an innate potential for cooperation with other people in order to accomplish personal and social goals. The feeling of inferiority, which everyone experiences, can be overcome only through the skill of cooperation. A. Adler believes that this is the way to strike a balance between personal and socially oriented goals.

Cooperation is defined as a joint activity aimed at reaching a certain final goal in which

everyone takes into account the interests of the other parties. It includes active collaboration, mutual support and interaction between the partners.

In order to develop the child's social interest, the mother as a role model has to demonstrate sufficiently developed social interest herself, so that she can raise him with a sense of cooperation, a striving for interaction with other people, a sense of camaraderie, empathy and helpfulness. These qualities are part of the Adlerian view on the nature of social interest. The goal of the mother, which she has an evolutionary and social obligation to fulfil, is to teach her child as early as possible to be a collaborator, companion (Mitarbeiter) and brother (Mitmensch) to his fellow human beings, who is willing to help them and to accept their help when his own powers prove insufficient. (Adler, 1998:133). A main factor that encourages the development of the tendency for cooperation in a child is the upbringing provided by the mother in this regard. For the purposes of this research on the development of social interest in preschool children, the forms of cooperation that take place between children in play are studied. The following primary indicators are assessed: whether there is unity among the children in the process of accepting a goal as their common goal; whether the order of joint activities is coordinated; the extent to which the children show active contribution with their suggestions for achieving the goals of the joint activity; whether they try to help their peers; how active is the dialogue that takes place in the process of performing the joint activity; whether the children demonstrate that they are capable of evaluating the success or failure of the results of the joint activity from the position of cooperation.

Methods and Materials

The aim of this study is to assess the cooperation skills of preschool children involved in a collaborative activity. The subject of the study is the level of social interest in preschool children. The study was conducted with the participation of 52 children between 5 and 6 years of age, who were divided into 2 groups. One group consisted of 30 children raised by their parents and attending kindergarten. The other one was comprised of children brought up in an institution. The main targets of the study are as follows:

1. To determine the level of social interest in children who are capable and incapable of cooperation.
2. To determine the level of social interest in children living with their family and attending kindergarten on the one hand, and children raised in institutions on the other.
3. To perform comparative analysis of the social interest displayed in the two groups of children, based on the level of its development.

Research methodology.

A play situation called "Mittens" was used to determine and assess cooperation skills – it is an adaptation of the original game developed by L. S. Rimashevskaya (2007).

A questionnaire was developed for the purposes of this study and was used to assess the children's social interest. It is based on the criteria for the development of social interest. The questionnaire includes the following basic cooperation skills: accepting the task, following a plan, choosing together the necessary materials, demonstrating a friendly attitude towards the partner's actions, successful communication in the process of performing the joint activity, ability to complete the task. These skills were regarded as criteria for cooperative behavior in preschool children, as they correspond to the criteria for assessment of social interest presented by Roy Kern and William Curlette in their test for assessment of the Basic Adlerian Scales of

Interpersonal Success (BASIS-A) (Eckstein, Kern, 2009; Kern, Wheeler, Curlette, 1997, Stoykova, 2011a). The 6 criteria shown are based on 28 indicators - 23 quantitative and 5 qualitative.

Research procedure

The children were divided into pairs and each pair were assigned a task to complete together. A model of a pair of mittens was given to the children and each child was supposed to paint one of the mittens, with the goal being to have identically colored mittens within each pair.

The children were provided with a single set of pencils (or felt-tip pens). As every group of two children were supposed to paint a pair of matching mittens, they would also need to use the same color. The goal was to observe whether the children would help each other, whether they would share and how they would decide on the use of the pencils. All the information was recorded.

Instructions for the children: “Today we are making mittens for the forest animals. You have to decide whom you will be making mittens for – Mr. Hare or Mr. Bear.

You will be divided into groups of two and each group will be responsible for one pair of mittens. One of you will receive the left mitten, and the other will get the right one. You have to color them so that they match.

You should also know that there is only one set of pencils for each group, so you need to work together.”

Statistical processing of the recorded information.

Based on the indicators of social interest, a scale was developed with a range of 0 to 23. It is divided into three levels: low social interest – 0-7; medium social interest – 8-15; high social interest – 16-23. An answer key was used to determine the level of social interest for each pair of children. For each matching answer on the scale, the pair received 1 point. The sum of the number of points obtained in this way determines the level of the child’s social interest.

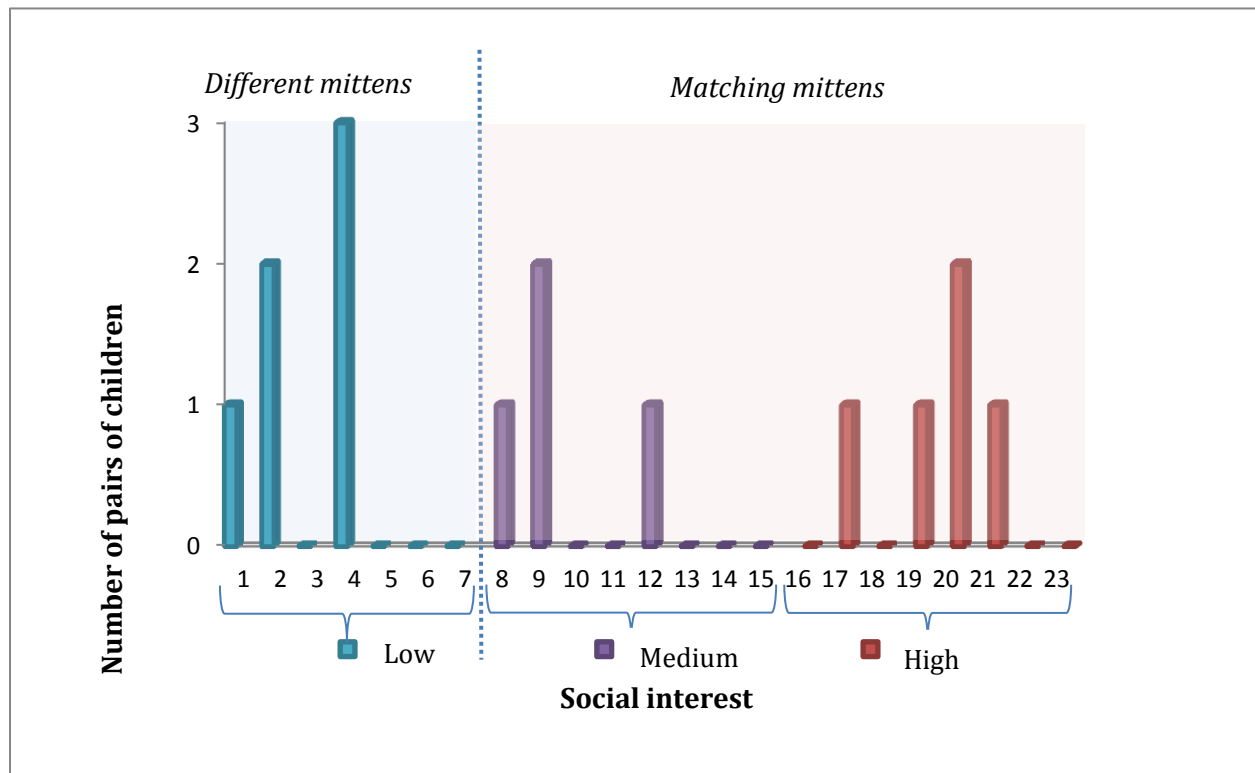
Results.

The results of the study show that in both groups the children with low social interest failed to perform the task successfully and did not paint the mittens in identical colors.

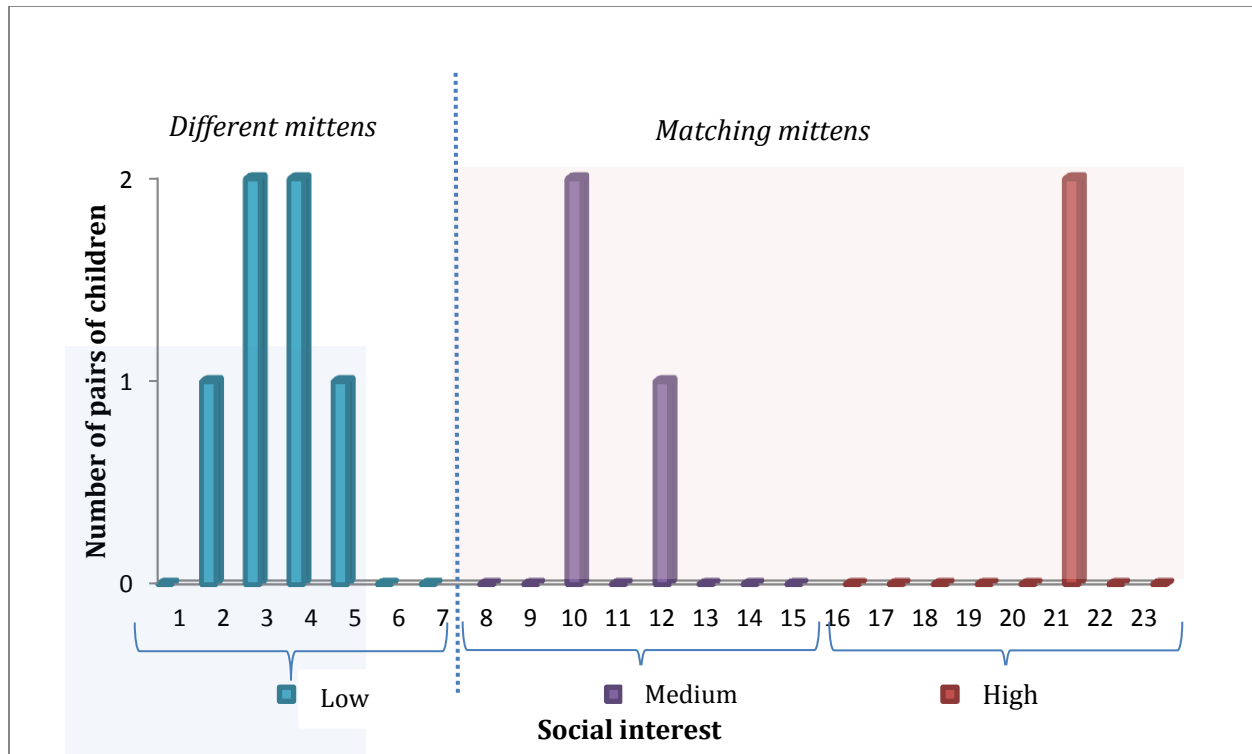
In both groups, the children that cooperated and followed the game’s instructions painted the mittens in matching colors. They demonstrated medium and high level of social interest based on the Questionnaire. (*see Graph 1 and Graph 2*)

Graph 1 shows that among the children raised by parents and attending kindergarten, the number of children with medium and high social interest (9 pairs, 18 children) was higher than that of children with low social interest (6 pairs, 12 children).

Graph1 . Level of social interest in children raised in a family environment and attending kindergarten



Graph2. Level of social interest in children raised in a social institution



Graph 2 shows that among the children raised in social institutions, the number of children with medium and high social interest (6 pairs, 12 children) was almost equal to that of children with low social interest (5 pairs, 10 children).

The comparison between the two graphs also shows a tendency for children raised in a family environment and attending kindergarten to manifest medium and high levels of social interest more often than children raised in social institutions did. That is not a statistically proven dependence and it can only be regarded as a tendency because this is a pilot study that does not claim representativeness.

Discussion.

The analysis of the results of this research shows certain notable characteristics in the development of social interest in preschool children in both groups included in the study.

The low level of social interest in both groups of children is at the bottom of the spectrum.

Among the children raised by parents and attending kindergarten, the low values of social interest vary from 1 to 4 on a scale of 0 to 7. These values fall within the low and medium range on spectrum of low social interest.

Among the children raised in social institutions, the low levels of social interest vary from 1 to 5 on a scale of 0 to 7. In this case, we can draw the same conclusions, namely that the values fall within the low and medium range on the spectrum of low social interest. Only in one pair of children the level of social interest was measured to have a value of 5.

From this comparison, we can conclude that in both groups of children with low social interest, which is at the core of the lack of cooperation, the practical result is that the children failed to perform successfully their task and did not paint the mittens in matching colors.

The analysis of the qualitative indicators in the two groups of children, however, shows a certain peculiarity. While the children raised in social institutions have not developed their social interest to a sufficient degree because of a number of objective factors, the most important of which is the absence of the mother figure, a different explanation needs to be provided for the low social interest of children raised in a family. The analysis of all the observations made in the course of the study shows that very often the children in a family environment have not been brought up in an atmosphere that encourages cooperation, but rather in a competitive setting.

In some cases, the same conclusion can be reached when observing the activities of the children with medium and high level of social interest. Sometimes there are characteristics in the development of their social interest that do not match the criteria for true cooperation. Among the children raised in a family environment and attending kindergarten, very often one of the kids in the pair dominates and controls the painting process. The other child follows his/her instructions and thus the task is successfully completed, but not by means of true cooperation.

Peculiarities can also be noted in the development of social interest in the group of children raised in an institution. The pairs that are successful and paint the mittens in matching colors very often regard this merely as a task they have to complete in a particular way. This perception of the conditions of the play situation is a result of the institutional form of upbringing. These children have accepted the belief that life consists of a series of tasks they need to perform regardless of whether they actually want to do them. In other words, the success they achieve in the “mittens” game is not always caused by a high level of social interest understood as a skill of cooperation. They often perceive their response to the task as the only possible course of action, a lack of alternatives – something they have been conditioned to as part of their life in the institution, which “deprives the child of the most important factors of normal psychological development – the continuous and uninterrupted connection with a physically and spiritually close person, the emotional care and stimulation.” (Stoykova, 2011:67)

Conclusion.

The results of this research on the social interest of preschool children show that it is still in development and the influence of the family environment and the figure of the mother are of utmost importance in this process. Additionally, the specific characteristics of this development in many cases betray a lack of true cooperation and teamwork skill, which are replaced by a striving to accomplish the task under any circumstances and in the spirit of competition and rivalry.

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