

Psychological Assessment of a Doll within the Framework of Cultural-Historical Psychology: Possibilities and Limitations

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The problem of toy expertise is that a cultural object comes with no “instruction manual”. The goal of the article is to reveal both potential and limitations of the cultural-historical psychology and activity theory as a conceptual framework for doll expertise and test the cultural form of pretend play as a criterion of its developmental function using the example of Barbie and Monster High dolls. The article proves the necessity of cultural and psychological analysis of doll play to assess the developmental potential of a doll. The work demonstrates that the image of a doll determines how a child plays with it, i.e. how the doll itself plays with that child (F. Boitendijk). For the first time it also describes how the unit of analysis of pretend play - its two-step form (Challenge + Reply to Challenge) is used as a tool to examine the function of these dolls in child development. An exploratory empirical study of children’s play has shown how the images of Barbie and Monster High dolls define the way they are played with and answered negatively the following questions: does Barbie arouse premature interest in adult sexuality among preschoolers, and does playing with Monster High dolls blur the lines between good and evil.

Keywords: psychological expertise of the doll, cultural and psychological analysis of the play action, the unit of pretend play, the act of development in the play, the space of the play.

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Психологическая экспертиза куклы в рамках культурно-исторического подхода: границы и возможности

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Проблема экспертизы игрушки связана с тем, что на культурном предмете «не написан» развивающий способ действия с ним. Задача статьи — выявление потенциала и границ культурно-исторической психологии и теории деятельности как понятийных рамок для экспертизы куклы, испытание культурной формы игры в качестве критерия оценки развивающей функции игрушки на примере кукол Barbie и Monster High. В статье обоснована необходимость культуролого-предметного и психологического анализа игрового действия с куклой для оценки ее развивающих возможностей. Впервые описана функция единицы анализа сюжетно-ролевой игры — ее двухтактной формы (связки вызова и ответа на вызов) как инструмента экспертизы развивающей функции куклы. Поисковое эмпирическое исследование игр детей показало, как образы кукол Barbie и Monster High задают способ игры с ними, и позволило отрицательно ответить на следующие вопросы: вызывает ли Барби преждевременный интерес дошкольников к половой жизни взрослых, а так же размывает ли игра с куклами Monster high понимание детьми границ между добром и злом? Размывает ли игра с куклами Monster High границы между добром и злом?

Ключевые слова: психологическая экспертиза куклы, культуролого-предметный и психологический анализ игрового действия, единица сюжетно-ролевой игры, событие развития в игре, пространство игры.

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Introduction and the Issue of the Research

The starting point of our analysis and understanding of a doll assessment and evaluation is the psychological and pedagogical concept of toy evaluation developed by E.O. Smirnova, N.G. Salmina and I.G. Tikhanova [7] in the “Center for Psychological and Pedagogical Expertise of Play and Toys” of Moscow State University of Psychology and Education. The authors propose the following main criteria for psychological assessment of the quality of toys: (a) the toy complies with age-related tasks (analysis of games and toys should be carried out through analysis of the developmental actions preprogrammed in them); (b) the properties of the toy ensure complete orientation of play actions; (c) the toy allows to perform various developmental actions (i.e., its developmental potential).

A toy “is a kind of ‘packaging’ of all components of an activity, and it is from this point of view that its assessment should be carried out (analysis of the characteristics of motivational, orientational, control and evaluation parts), and, thereby, its ability to realize its developmental functions” [7, p.10]. A figurative toy — a doll — as a means of mastering relationships between people should trigger pretend-playing of human relationships, the meanings of actions. “*This type of toy does not contain complete orientation and operatorics for the child to pretend-play a relationship*” (emphasis ours) [ibid.].

The difficulty of toy evaluation is that its developmental action is not “written” on the toy as a cultural object: the full form of orientation of the play action in the toy is merely suggested. How? According to the concept of the Center, the developing capabilities are programmed

in the toy: all the components of the activity are “packed” in it, and the toy itself provides them (if an adult shows a child how to handle it properly). Thus, the duality of the meaning and sense of the action with a figurative toy is smoothed out, whilst the “decoding” of the symbolic meaning of the play vanishes into the background.

How can a researcher watching the pretend-play be sure that the child has identified the ideal cultural form of human relations instead of only recreating an example of behavior shown by a specific adult? When evaluating a doll, one cannot do without an ideal cultural form of a pretend play: mental development is assessed through establishing a gap between the real and ideal forms of the play. Otherwise, it is unclear whether the toy activates an age-appropriate play or not.

The ideal cultural form of pretend play \ as the unit of its analysis

When determining the ideal form of a pretend play, we relied on the procedure of objective and normative diagnostics of development, which was applied in the theory of developmental learning [5], and we found out that an ideal form of a play contains two steps: a challenge and response to a challenge [13]. The motive of play action is considered an initiative, and the agency of the child consists precisely of children testing the meaning of an action. The two-steps form for us is the norm of development, the unit to which the observed plays of a child with a toy can be compared.

Objective-normative diagnostics of the developmental function of the doll require (a) semantic analysis of the

symbolic content embodied in the doll, i.e. the answer to the question of how the toy's image plays with the player (F. Boitendijk), and (b) psychological analysis of the play actions by which the child discovers the doll's image.

Questions to be answered by the experts

We have chosen two dolls that cause a lot of controversy and negative ratings: Barbie and Monster High by Mattel. It was not so much the general characteristics of their negative and positive qualities that were important to us, as was the answer to specific questions from parents and specialists about possible negative consequences of playing with these toys. As for the Barbie doll, this is the question of whether it causes preschoolers' premature interest in adult sex life; while for Monster High dolls, it is whether playing with them blurs the boundaries between good and evil.

Analysis of Preschool Children's Playing with a Barbie Doll

Semantic analysis of playing with a doll is a new challenge for a developmental psychologist. Given the cultural predetermination of development, it is necessary to understand the socio-cultural context of Barbie, which affects its perception. Barbie was the first doll to embody the image of a young teenage girl. The target audience age for Barbie is defined by the company in the range from 3 to 12. For girls, she embodies an attractive image of future adulthood. L. Goralik [1] pointed out the ambiguity of Barbie's image. On the one hand, the company has been promoting this doll for decades as a friendly and active girl with good taste, able to make decisions on her own and take responsibility for her behavior, living a life full of diverse experiences (including professional ones), in which, nevertheless, there is no place for marriage or motherhood. On the other hand, Barbie has a feminine figure, and her image has always corresponded to an ideal of female beauty [19] fashionable at the release of the next collection of dolls of this brand.

The company offered not just a doll, but a holistic, diverse world of Barbie's life, which mirrored social changes that caused lively controversies, such as female emancipation or transformation of family relations. According to L. Goralik, Barbie has become one of the brightest

socio-cultural symbols of the Western civilization. The author pointed out a number of symbols, or even stereotypes, with which Barbie is associated in the mass consciousness: femininity, prestige, well-being of its owner, a sex symbol, etc. The latter stereotype has caused arguments between supporters and critics of this doll, since it concerns a difficult-to-study personal sphere of the child and is associated with adults' understanding of psychosexual development and gender education of children. For example, when we asked a five-year-old girl in the kindergarten, who was constantly playing with Barbie, if she had such a doll at home, she said no, mom wouldn't buy one. "Mom says you can't put her in a stroller!" Adults want girls to play the maternal role in the right way, but they are not ready to recognize a child's right to a question about where children come from, and reasonable parents do not allow children to be aware about the intimate aspects of adult life.

How can adulthood, preset in culture, implying intimate relationships, be seen by preschoolers? It involves starting a family, bringing up the children, and a legal definition of a minimum age of marriage. Folk fairy tales addressed to preschoolers end with a wedding and accession to the throne; their characters undertake difficult but noble deeds, and they always win. The characters have high morals and beautiful appearances, but there are no hints of intimate relationships in these texts. In the plots of books, magazines and cartoons about Barbie's life, there is no wedding of Barbie and Ken. Barbie's body has no genitals or nipples. At the same time, some psychologists, educators and parents all over the world believe that Barbie causes premature interest in sexual relations in girls. Unlike preschoolers, those specialists do know about sex life, and their negative attitude towards this doll is based on a projection: it is difficult to explain to a child where children come from, so it is easier to remove the doll. But with the disappearance of the doll, the question of children's comprehension of the birth of children or marital relations does not disappear. It is important to understand whether preschoolers really do associate adulthood with intimate relationships, if they do read sexuality in the image of Barbie, and if this is how playing with Barbie differs from playing with ordinary dolls. To answer this question, we did a pilot research¹ aimed at identifying differences between the play of girls aged 3–7 with Barbie and with ordinary dolls.

Psychological analysis of playing with two types of dolls made it possible to determine the agency of chil-

¹ The pilot experiment conducted by M.V. Antonova [14] involved 10 girls from 3 years, 4 months old to 6 years, 8 months old; the total number of recorded plays was 56 (with Barbie — 29, with ordinary dolls — 27). The partner in the play was an adult who acted for another doll, played along with the child, but his participation in the play was aimed at supporting the initiative of the child, avoiding repetitions of the same events, so he built situations requiring leaving the house (the child coughs; there is no food). At an older age, the girls unfolded the plot on their own, and pointed out to the adult what he should do.

dren's play initiative, which was evaluated according to the following indicators:

1. Structuring of the play space and the presence of polarized semantic fields (if adult and non-adult/children's relationships were played as oppositions).

2. Intentional transitions across the border of semantic fields of child-parent relations and other semantic fields where relationships are arranged in an adult way. The place, where the girl playing for Barbie goes indicates her interest in human relationships characteristic of this semantic field.

3. Features of characters' behavior in each of the spaces, i.e. what actions, according to the player's ideas, are appropriate there.

The following features of playing with different sets of dolls were observed.

Younger preschool age (3–5 y.o.; 19 pretend plays)

1. While playing with *both* types of dolls, the girls started inhabiting only "their own" space: the parent's house, in which the dolls acted as mom and dad taking care of the baby (Barbie was mom Alina, and Ken was dad Seryozha), or the house in which a mom, a child, and a mom's sister lived. They gave the other doll, Veronica², the role of an aunt, a neighbor or a parents' friend. The girls played "family", played "house" where everybody lived in one place, for example, in the kitchen, i.e. in an inner space of the house, which was gradually becoming well-differentiated: a bedroom (each doll had its own bed, but girls could put dad and mom in the same bed, and the baby and friend in other ones), a dining room, and a bath appeared. By the age of 4, children were building separate bedrooms for their parents and family friends. By the age of 5, they were creating separate houses for their own family and family friends.

2. In the beginning, the dolls left the house for the outside world only when heading for two places: mom or dad would go to do the shopping or to work. But by the age of 5, the "other" world had expanded significantly: there was a forest with a clearing, a zoo, a circus, a hospital, a barbershop, etc. These transitions were accompanied by changing the clothes: before going to the zoo, the dolls put on different dresses. The transitions were supposed to ensure a normal life of a family, so they cannot be considered semantic transitions from childhood to adulthood.

3. Since the girls gave the dolls the parts of parents, i.e. adults, the doll's behavior in the external space was relevant to the role given: mom tried on clothes in the store ("Ask me where I came from, so beautiful"), scolded her daughter, put her in a naughty corner for dis-

obedience, went out with the child for a walk or to the doctor's, took her to kindergarten, etc. Barbie's female friend Veronica would cook. Manifestations of a close relationship between dad and mom consisted of a kiss before leaving for work, or before going to bed. The dolls changed into pajamas for the night.

Senior preschool age (5–7 y.o.; 25 pretend plays)

Since the age of five, important differences between playing with two types of dolls started emerging.

1. When playing with *Barbie dolls* (17 pretend plays), the interior space of the house was divided into functional zones (separate bedrooms for parents, child, guests; a dining room, a kitchen, a bath). The outer space was also well differentiated; there were many different locations in it.

2. Plays with threefold content were observed. The first content consisted of family life (parents and a child, or a husband and a wife without children), in which transitions were similar to transitions in the plays of younger children, e.g., as in "playing house".

The second content consisted of a transition from the children to the adult space. It was embodied in three consecutive plays, which made up for a semantic transition from a girl to a wife/mother. In the first play, Barbie and Ken meet, Barbie and Veronica invite Ken to visit, and offer to choose a bride (a challenge). In the second play, Ken chooses his future wife, they go dancing or to a movie, and then they go back to their own homes. The main event of the last play is Ken and Barbie's wedding (an answer to the challenge). After that, they move houses to live together as a married couple, go to bed, and in the morning, there is a baby in the crib. They take care of the baby.

In the third content, the couple lives together in a pink house, they do not have any children, the wedding is not played out, but is implied to have happened (one-step plays). Barbie and Ken go to work, visit friends, do the shopping, or go dancing.

3. In all the plays, the girls adequately recreated the characters' behavior appropriate, in their opinions, in each of the spaces. For example, the wedding was played out very enthusiastically and in much detail: they prepared a celebratory dinner, an engagement ceremony, and a bouquet. When the child was born, they chose a name and a godmother, etc. The girls paid a lot of attention to the dolls' appearance.

1. When playing with *ordinary dolls* (18 pretend plays), the play space was divided into "their own", i.e., home, and "another", external space: shops, work, a kindergarten, a dance floor, etc.

² Veronica is a Russian version of Barbie.

2. When six-year-old girls “played house”, transitions between spaces were not semantic, since they were determined by the context of family life. However, in the plays of children aged 6+, the behavior of dolls at home and outside it changed: the dolls lived a new, teenage life, were independent from their parents, and we assess this fact as a semantic transition.

3. Six-year-old girls located the play in the house and recreated family life. The family, or just the mom, would go for a walk with the child, the dad could go to work or take the child to kindergarten, parents did shopping, went to the pool, etc. By the age of seven, the repertoire of play actions had narrowed gradually: dolls came home to eat, change clothes, pretty up, go to bed in the evening, but they spent most of the days and evenings visiting friends, going to birthday parties, dancing, walking in the park, buying new outfits in the store, etc. Dolls acted as grown-up friends, took care of themselves, combed their hair in front of the mirror, applied creams, and changed before going out.

The research helps to answer the question of whether playing with Barbie causes an untimely interest in the sexual life of adults, i.e. to picture to yourself how the image of Barbie plays with the imagination of a child playing. We have already mentioned that understanding Barbie as a stimulus of having interest in the intimate relationships comes from an adult. The children’s question is rather where children come from³. The image of Barbie (a teenager, a young girl) is ambivalent; she fits into the children’s understanding of the structure of the family life in different ways. In one case, it engages the child’s interest in understanding the path that must be followed in order for a child to appear. This path is associated with external attractiveness, responsible choice and a wedding as a public sanction for the birth of a child, as a ritual separating adulthood from childhood/childlessness. A girl aged 5 years 5 months plays a dance of Alice (Barbie) with Sasha (Ken), and tells Sasha: “We are going to have a baby. Oh no, first the wedding, and then the baby!” The cohabitation of Ken and Barbie in the same house is possible after the wedding, which is played out in detail and in various ways, the couple returns home, lies down in the same bed, they kiss, and the next morning their common life is focused on taking care of the baby. The girl is interested in the event of the ritual itself, in which love is embodied and revealed, rather than in the details of the fertilization procedure. It is evident from the flow of the play, as natural as breathing. We argue that the child’s understanding of the appropriateness of the appearance of a baby after the wedding is an age-appropriate older preschoolers’ idea of adult intimate relationships. It is

important to the child that the baby appears when mom and dad love each other.

In another content, Barbie awakens a different experience in the child: the wedding is not being played out, Veronica and Ken are already married and live together. In the evening, after dinner a girl of 6 years 8 months puts V. and K. in the same bed, K. kisses V., while the child giggles, looking closely at an Adult’s (hereinafter – A.) reaction, covers the dolls with a blanket over their heads, with only her feet left visible. Another girl (6, 1 y.o.) who has not played the wedding either, puts B. and K. in the same bed in the evening, looks at A., says they will sleep naked, and laughs; K. kisses B. and the girl giggles again. She recreates the behavior of a couple in love in the play (this child has young parents who got married before the mother came of age). The translation of the peek at A. and the giggling indicates that the girls had had an experience which replay A. may disapprove of. The ban gives rise to interest, but *playing with Barbie reveals having such an experience rather than stimulates it*.

A 7-year-old boy approached A., who was looking for Barbie dolls in a group for an experiment, and gave him one of them with her legs spread, showing her crotch: “Here’s Barbie!” The child is living in a one-room apartment with parents who do not hide their intimate life from him, not to mention the TV with movies of 18+ content turned on.

Analysis of Children Aged 5–10 Playing Monster High Doll

Conducting a semantic analysis of plays with Monster High dolls (hereinafter – MH), we rely on the modern interpretation of the concept of monster by M. Foucault: “A monster is determined by the fact that by its very existence and appearance it violates not only the laws of society, but also the laws of nature” [11, p. 79]. In 2010, Mattel introduced fashionably dressed monster dolls as toys for girls, while rejecting the negative meaning of the concept of “monster”, and claiming a new one: a monster is a bright teenager with a unique appearance, willing to communicate in the community of unique personalities [20]. The first line of MH dolls quickly became infamous. To promote the dolls, an animated series was filmed, books were published, video games were developed, etc. As characters, these dolls represent fashionable teenagers. In their images (and, hence, in the appearance of dolls), human and non-human features are combined. Thus, Frankie Stein is a “daughter” of Dr. Frankenstein, and her body has traces of artificial cre-

³ One of the age tasks of a preschooler is to understand the finiteness of life and its origin (see K. Jung. Conflicts of the child’s soul).

ation: seams, neat metal bolts in her neck, unnatural skin color. Some adults, in their turn, saw the products of the Monster School as wrecking, introducing unacceptable topics of death and demonism into the lives of children, representing evil as good.

A comprehensive study of these dolls was conducted under the guidance of E.O. Smirnova [8]. It shows that MH dolls for girls of preschool and primary school age are the standard of beauty. Most preschoolers played with MH as with ordinary dolls, without demonstrating any non-human specificity; there was no recorded aggression or fear manifested in their plays.

We were basing our assumptions on the following: *if undesirable ethical and aesthetic meanings are set in the dolls of the Monster High, then these meanings should manifest themselves in the plays of children with MH.* Our goal was to establish how children recreate the non-human, ambivalent image of monster dolls, the subjects of what actions these dolls become in the play. To identify the personality traits set in these dolls by the brand owners, we analyzed popular animated series sharing information about MH. Our analysis was based on the works of Yu.M. Lotman on the structure of the event of the plot text as a transition across the border of semantic field [2].

The world of MH is presented as chaotic and uncontrollable, with comical and incompetent adults: the school principal is an adult daughter of a headless equestrian, who cannot remember what happened a moment ago; the Math teacher — foolish Lu Zar, (hinting at *loser*), who is the only human in the animated series.

The characters themselves are stable in this world; the plots of media products about MH are built around their relationships, and the events in the series consist of changes in these relationships. The mood of the series is ironic and cheerful. All conflicts are resolved successfully, each character is right in his own way, heroes can compete, but they are not enemies. Monster High students are focused on communication and self-expression.

The characters' non-human features have the following functions: a) to help the viewer to identify the character and the reasons for their behavior (Minotaur's son is stubborn as a bull); b) to turn scary characters into funny ones, to create specific comical situations (Gorgon's son can take off his glasses at the request of an impenetrable teacher, and turn the teacher into a stone until the end of the class). Non-human features are often played out ironically: vampire's daughter has fangs, but is vegetarian.

The images of MH dolls are difficult to perceive due to their ambivalence. According to their bodily proportions and colorful clothing, these dolls represent modern beauty dolls, but upon careful examination of the details,

their non-human properties and signs of possible aggression (claws, fangs) become visible. Mattel designers intentionally conceived this combination of beauty with non-human properties as a joke.

A wholesome perception of ambivalent images of the MH requires simultaneous perception of various aspects of their appearance and an ironic connection between these two sides. It is not that easy for children: preschoolers are not yet able to hold several intellectual positions at the same time, while at primary school age this ability is only being formed [12].

The sample of our research consisted of 46 girls aged 5 to 10.

The researcher invited children into the play room in groups of 2–3 people to play with four MH dolls, as well as several Barbies, in order to reveal not only how children play monsters “among their own”, but also the behavior of MH in relation to people; children could use toy furniture and some play objects (cubes, buttons, etc.).

If there was no meeting of people and monsters in spontaneous play, then A. joined them, acting for a Barbie (they were less popular) and played out such a meeting (Barbie accidentally met monsters, and was very surprised by the peculiarities of their appearance). To determine the agency of MH dolls in children's play, we used analysis of role-playing conflicts (challenges) that occur when monsters and people meet.

Senior preschool age (5–6 y.o., 3 pretend plays, 6 children)

We did not organize many plays for preschool-age girls, because they do not notice the non-human features of MH dolls [8]. Consequently, the children did not divide the play space into *human* and *monster* spaces: Barbie and Monsters got along in the same house and acted with the same rights (participated in the same beauty contest).

At the same time, all preschoolers avoided answering Barbie's questions about the features of the appearance of their monster dolls (“Oh, why is your skin of such an interesting color?”⁴). In the situation of role-playing conflicts, there were no cases of aggression on the part of monster characters to humans in general, or to Barbie in particular.

Primary school age (7–8 y.o., 8 pretend plays, 15 children)

Girls aged 7–8 perceived the non-human features of monster dolls in the play in one of the three ways.

1. They ignored all the differences between people and monsters (even despite Barbie's questions).

⁴ Examples of answers: “It's okay”, “How do we know, right”?

2. The children tried to convince Barbie that the differences were insignificant (her reference to fangs is countered by the fact that the “monster” does not eat meat at all, while grave skin color is explained as “just a tan”).

3. Children used non-human features of monster dolls in the play as magical properties that have no “evil” or “good” meaning.

The space was divided between humans and monsters in a single play⁵, and this distinction arose during the development of the play plot⁵. In other plays of children of this age, MHs could have an unusual appearance and magical abilities, but this did not lead to the opposition of people and monsters. MHs did not show any aggression to people, and in a situation of role conflicts (challenges) they acted in a human way⁶.

*Primary school age (9–10 y.o., 15 pretend plays,
23 children*

Children aged 9–10 perceived the non-human features of monster dolls in the play in one of two ways.

1. The girls played with monster dolls as glamorous [10] villains who were both up for public entertainment, and ranged against humans. At the same time, the non-human traits of the characters (fangs, claws, magic) were used to gain an advantage in a conflict with people.

For example, Anya (nine y.o.) – Frankie, Olya (9) – Draculaura, and Nara (9) – Vandala went to McDonald's. Vandala went to make an order (Nara was busy looking for a suitable substitute item), and Frankie and Draculaura talked while they were waiting: Frankie: *Why do these people always cook for so long?*

Draculaura: *Because they are people, and we are monsters!*

They laugh.

Frankie: *We're monsters; we want it all in a second!*

Draculaura: *Yes, because we can eat people.*

In the same place, after a few replicas.

Vandala: *Girls, would you like a glass of juicy... eh, of bloody juice?*

Frankie and Draculaura, simultaneously: *Yes!*

In another play, Frankie, having tied up Barbie, asked her an ominous rhetorical question: “We are monsters. Do you think monsters can be kind?”

Predominantly, the meeting of Barbie (A.) and monsters ended with her death. If Barbie noticed their non-

human features, they willingly turned them against her, and, using physical superiority and magic, killed her, after which they would often eat her.

The main topics of the plays were fashionable entertainment and villainous behavior. The girls' characters usually went to have fun in a restaurant or bar, and while playing, they often turned into real monsters (committed murder, fried the victim in a frying pan, and then ate them).

2. The girls played with MH dolls as magic tricksters, accentuating the situation that allowed them to violate social norms. The non-human features of the characters were used by children to play out provocations. When meeting Barbie, the monsters did not harm her, and let her join their activities (e.g., a party).

For example, two girls were playing out going to the bar. Alice (10) said about her doll

Frankie: “She is drinking alcohol” (giggles, looks at A.).

A. does not comment in any way, pretends to be busy.

Alice: “Okay, she's not drinking.”

In an imaginary situation, while playing with dolls, children crossed the border, leaving the socially acceptable semantic field, and on a few occasions, they returned. In such plays, the challenge was often addressed to an adult: when a character intended to do something forbidden, the play slowed down, the children giggled and looked for the researcher's reaction.

Comparing the plays of girls of different ages allows us to imagine how the images of Monster High dolls play with the imagination of a child playing. We emphasize the complexity and ambivalence of the images of these characters. MH dolls can simultaneously respond to several different needs of girls: a) be beautiful and expose this beauty (model body proportions and bright, shocking doll outfits); b) actualize accumulated aggression in the play (signs of possible aggression of the MH lead to this), and c) try out prohibited behaviors (smoking, drinking alcohol).

At the same time, the topic of entertainment related to exposing their beauty was repeated in all the studied ages (becoming more complicated with age: from relaxing on the beach and participating in a beauty contest at preschool age, to visiting bars, clubs and restaurants in the plays of children aged 9–10).

⁵ 8-year-old girls played Barbie and Claudine (a werewolf). They shared a house, but the werewolf began to growl and scare Barbie for fun. Other residents of the house were unhappy with the noise, but the werewolf had fun scaring Barbie, and as a result, some characters moved to other houses.

⁶ When Barbie (A.) came to the monsters and claimed that their house belonged to her, and she was unhappy that some monsters lived there, they asked her to show her documents, and sent her off only in two cases using their own features (Claudine: I'm a werewolf! Shoo! Or I'll scratch you!).

⁷ Frankie, Vandala (girls aged 10) and Claudine (Olya, 9) are going to play “truth or dare” in their house, and put their dolls to sit in toy furniture. Sasha (Vandala), pointing to the dolls-girlfriends on the couch, says: “And these two are pregnant.” The girls giggle and look at A. “I'm kidding, they are not.”

We have observed the following dynamics in perception of the non-human characteristics of MH dolls. Up to the age of 9, girls know that these dolls are “monsters” (they often called their characters by names from the animated series), but the meaning of the concept of “monster” remains unclear and has no negative connotations. In one of the plays, the character of a 6-year-old girl (Claudine) tells the character of A. (Vandala) that they are both monsters and, therefore, “should look great!” People and “monsters” are not opposed in any way, but get along; the non-human qualities of the images of the MH were perceived as their exceptional or magical properties.

Girls aged 9–10 oppose humans and monsters in plays. Monsters act as glamorous villains or “tricksters”, violating behavior norms. Each of the described ways of playing with MH is based on the dolls' features. On the one hand, they call themselves monsters and have signs of traditional negative characters. On the other hand, according to the manufacturer of these dolls, they only look like monsters, but never behave like ones.

If the girls perceived dolls as villains, then the play acquired the character of *a direct discharge of aggressive feelings*. When Barbie (A.) appeared in the play, the girls' characters were happy to kill her, and eat her.

Analyzed plays do not allow us to assert that Monster High dolls “blur the boundaries between good and evil.” Since these boundaries are never given to children in a ready-made form, the child is faced with a task of setting the boundaries themselves. Proper and unacceptable behavior can be safely tested in a play. The analysis of various play actions (role-playing conflicts, construction of semantic fields and metacommunication) showed that the characters of the children acted consistently, as beauties, villains, or “tricksters”. The beauties were exemplary well behaved, the villains were exemplary monstrous, and the activities of the “tricksters” were built around the possibility of violating the norms of a child's life. In the first two cases, the boundaries between good and evil were represented clearly, while in the last one, the focus of the children's attention was crossing the border: they tried violating the norm of their life, to act in a way they saw adults do.

Living through and making sense of aggression in a play situation is a norm [16]. Although MH dolls belong to the type of toys intended to be an example for children, their images cannot but “trigger” an aggressive experience of a child (e.g. fangs and claws are there for a reason). Some of the study participants were on the

threshold of adolescence, and the tasks of this period include testing and mastering one's own aggressive or provocative behavior. Unfortunately, we do not know the family circumstances of our subjects (as it was in the experiment with Barbie), so we do not allow ourselves to try to guess the experiences that the images of MH awakened in them. A separate research question is to identify ways of playing in which the children themselves intentionally overcome the aggression preset in the image of monster dolls.

If the girls perceived monsters as non-humans, but not villains, then the play took on the task of testing out the norms of behavior. The characters of the girls went to have fun and found themselves in situations open to violating the norms of a child's life. At the same time, the images of dolls did not suggest ready-made behaviors to children, as it was in the play “Villains”. The girls hesitated, giggled, looked for an adult's reaction⁸ — they were looking for reasons for their own choice in relation to the ban that existed for themselves.

A junior schoolchild is surrounded by rules and regulations. Awareness and comprehension of these norms is an age-related task (especially so, as we approach adolescence). The study of the phenomenon of the play usage of MH as characters of unclear agency (neither “evil” nor “kind”) who find themselves in provocative situations seems promising to us, since this way of playing allows a child to objectify and comprehend the real circumstances of one's own life that cause ambivalent experiences.

Conclusion

Finally, it is necessary to answer the question of the possibilities and limitations of our method of doll assessment and evaluation. The semantic and psychological analysis of playing with a doll has shown how difficult it is to link general scientific schemes of ontogenetic development with daily child-adult life. At the same time, our study revealed a relatively complete and lively process of children searching and recognizing the contradictory image of Barbie and Monster High set in the toy, and helped to evaluate the toys' functions within the framework of developmental psychology.

Based on the research, it is legitimate to formulate the following conclusion: the comparison of the results of cultural analysis, real children's plays with a toy, and indicators of the ideal form of pretend play is a productive way of psychological assessment of a toy.

⁸ It is essential that in the plays of villains, children did not hesitate and did not show any interest in the adult's reaction while their characters committed monstrous acts.

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