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Children's Hopes and Fears in the Ukraine

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Abstract

This study identifies children's hopes and fears for the future and the role of education in the Ukraine.. The focus is on the personal aspirations of these children, who identified education, career, self-actualization, personal relationships, including marriage and courtship, material possessions and physical well-being as important. Gender differences and the implications for education in post-communist societies are discussed. This research contributes to policy discussions on educational reform in the region.

'On this shrunken globe, men can no longer live as strangers'.
(Adlai Stevenson)

Introduction

Examination of children's expectations about the future is timely and important in an era of widespread concern about the escalation of global problems (Holden 2006; Solantaus 1987). The acceleration of climate change, the widening of the wealth gap, and the influx of immigrant workers have heightened the need for advanced industrial democracies to prepare young citizens for functioning in the increasingly interconnected world. The promotion of social competence is of even greater significance in developing states and transition societies. The successful transformation of post-communist societies into legitimate members of the international community depends, to a large extent, on the commitment of educators and policymakers to inform young people about challenges of globalisation.

The purpose of this paper is to analyse children's hopes and fears in Ukraine. Using a survey of 200 children aged 10-12, this study will address two questions: (1) Which life domains dominate children's concerns about personal, local, and global future? and (2) What are the gender differences in children's concerns about the future?

The rest of the paper proceeds in the following manner. Part I sketches historical background for investigating children's attitudes in Ukraine. Part II outlines the research design. Next, the paper discusses the findings and highlights implications of this research.

Historical Background

Upon the collapse of communism and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Ukraine gained independence. The former Soviet republic now shares a borderline with the European Union (Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia), on the one hand, and Russia, on the other. According to the 2001 census, it has a population of 48 million people, with

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77% ethnic Ukrainians and 17% ethnic Russians.¹ For centuries, the Austro-Hungarian Empire controlled the western part of Ukraine, while eastern parts of the country belonged to the Russian empire. Given its geographical location, ethnic composition, and historical legacies, it is not surprising that Ukraine has been divided over the conduct of its domestic and foreign policies (Barrington and Herron 2003).

Throughout the post-Soviet period, a tension between pro-Western and pro-Russian forces set the tone for the dispersion of electoral support across regions (Kubicek 2000). An overwhelming majority of voters in the western part of Ukraine cast their ballot for a West-oriented candidate, whereas most voters in the eastern part of the country backed up pro-Russian politicians. In a similar vein, the east-west cleavage shaped the dynamics of the 2004 presidential election. Viktor Yushchenko, former head of the National Bank of Ukraine, emerged as a champion of further market reforms and West-oriented foreign policy. Meanwhile, Viktor Yanukovich, former governor of Donetsk region, defended the economic interests of the few and articulated a pro-Russia stance. The extent of electoral fraud during the 2004 presidential election was so high that it spurred mass mobilisation against the status quo and engendered the so-called Orange Revolution.

Ukraine is still struggling to implement four types of transition: (1) from a one-party rule to democracy, (2) from a planned economy to a market economy, (3) from a Moscow-controlled Soviet republic to an independent state, and (4) from the politics of Russification to the revival of national identity (Offe 1991).

Research Design

This study is a part of a larger cross-national project on children's hopes and fears in nine countries. A total of 200 children from Ukraine filled out a pen-and-pencil questionnaire in October-November 2005. The respondents were sixth graders aged between 10 and 12. The sample was drawn from localities with contrasting sociopolitical contexts. To capture the effects of the east-west cleavage, half of the respondents were recruited in Lviv and another half came from Donetsk. The city of Lviv, located 40 miles away from the Polish-Ukrainian border, has been a beacon of Ukrainian national culture and the stronghold of electoral support for President Victor Yuschenko during the Orange Revolution. The city of Donetsk, in contrast, hosts a majority of Russian-language speakers and backs up Victor Yanukovich's policies toward greater cooperation with Russia.

This study uses the event-listing technique. The questionnaire prompted respondents to list three things desirable in their personal future, the future of their regions and the whole of mankind.

Findings

The analysis finds six domains related to the personal aspirations of Ukrainian children: (1) education, (2) career, (3) self-actualisation, (4) personal relationships, including marriage and courtship, (5) material possessions, and (6) physical well-being. As shown

¹ On Ukraine's 2001 census results, visit the web site <http://www.ukrcensus.gov.ua>.

in Table 1, career goals occupy a prominent position in children's concerns about the future. Girls, in particular, tie their future with satisfactory academic performance and university admission. Meanwhile, 27% of boys dream of material possessions, including cell phones, computers, and cars. It is noteworthy that children are able to differentiate between brands of consumer products. Boys, for example, wish they had not just a means of transportation, but a Peugeot, Ferrari, or Bugatti (one of the fastest race cars in the world). Because these cars are so expensive, owning them signifies a high social status.

Table 1. Children's Concerns about the Personal Future

Hopes	Boys	Girls	Total
Education	7.0	16.0	12.5
Job Aspirations	26.2	20.9	22.9
Self-Actualization	18.2	15.1	16.3
Material Possessions	27.1	17.2	21.0
Relationships	16.4	24.7	21.5
Health	5.1	6.1	5.7
	100%	100%	100%
Total	(214)	(344)	(558)

Fears	Boys	Girls	Total
Job Aspirations	36.4	35.3	35.7
Relationships	22.5	29.4	26.8
Being a Victim	31.1	19.0	23.6
Health	9.9	16.3	13.9
	100%	100%	100%
Total	(151)	(252)	(403)

These attitudes reflect, in part, how the transition to a market economy has triggered intense competition for lucrative jobs and has pushed boundaries between what is a basic good and what is a luxury item.

Nonetheless, respondents frequently refer to family relations as an important dimension of a fulfilling life in adulthood. Consistent with earlier findings (e.g., Lamm, Schmidt, and Trommsdorff 1976), Ukrainian girls are more concerned about personal relationships than boys. Most female respondents dream of having a caring boyfriend or a loving husband. Some of them desire to raise well-bred children or maintain good relations with their parents:

'Get acquainted with a kind and handsome boy' (Donetsk, girl)

'Marry Olesia and have two children, a boy and a girl' (Lviv, boy)

'Raise smart kids' (Lviv, girl)

'Live close to my parents' (Lviv, boy)

'Have a kind dad' (Lviv, boy)

Children's attachment to family members resurfaces in their statements about health issues. Several respondents wish their parents and grandparents to have a long and healthy life.

A closer look at the personal ambitions of Ukrainian children reveals how the spread of American/British culture has shaped youth culture in the non-Western world. One girl, for example, dreams of seeing live the teen idol Britney Spears. Another respondent (and apparently an avid reader of J.K. Rowling's books) cherishes the idea of meeting Harry Potter. Moreover, several respondents express interest in visiting England, France, Germany, or the United States.

At the local level, Ukrainian children rank improvements in local facilities as the most urgent social problem. In particular, they want to see more openings of playgrounds and parks to enjoy frivolously their pastime. The respondents also express concern about the environment. Children refer to a wide array of issues, ranging from air pollution and industrial waste to residents' neglect of their immediate environs and spontaneous garbage pile-ups in the street.

Table 2. Children's Local Concerns

Hopes	Boys	Girls	Total
Environment	14.1	22.3	19.1
Local Facilities	22.7	19.7	20.9
Politics	10.1	11.3	10.8
Poverty	10.6	7.8	8.9
Crime	4.0	5.2	4.7
Health	0.5	4.5	3.0
Transportation	11.6	3.2	6.5
Religion	0.0	0.6	0.4
Relationships	8.1	11.3	10.1
Best City	18.2	13.9	15.6
	100%	100%	100%
Total	(198)	(309)	(507)

Fears			
Poverty	22.0	19.5	20.4
Crime	12.6	15.5	14.4
Environment	17.3	17.7	17.6
Health	2.4	5.3	4.2
Politics	21.3	20.8	21.0
Relations	9.4	12.8	11.6
Culture	15.0	8.4	10.8
	100%	100%	100%
Total	(127)	(226)	(353)

Poverty is another issue of concern to Ukrainian children. Though a wide range of food products are available for sale in local stores, many households, for instance, cannot afford to buy meat in large quantities. That is why a respondent from Lviv wishes food prices were lower. Similar, a respondent from Donetsk imagines the world in which everything costs one cent or less. As one child summarizes it, 'I wish everybody lived like a queen'. The respondents worry about the degree of unemployment and homelessness in the region.

The results presented in Table 2 also demonstrate that Ukrainian children are quite politicised. One-fifth of respondents fear most deterioration in the country's political situation. Having lived through the Orange Revolution, young citizens seem to know that elections don't necessarily put in power a benevolent leader. That is why children express the desire to have a 'good president'. Both girls and boys bring up political issues, challenging a popular assumption about girls' disinterest in politics.

By the same token, children express a sense of attachment to the local community by yearning for the city's improved image. More than 10% of respondents wish their hometown were 'the best'. For example, children from Lviv dream of witnessing the transformation of their history-rich city into a popular tourist destination known beyond Ukraine's borders.

Only a handful of girls from Lviv bring up religiosity as a desirable feature of Ukrainian society. One respondent wishes all the people were Christians, while another child dreams of another visit by the Pope to Lviv. Given historic legacies, it is not surprising that religion is more salient in the western part of the country than in the eastern part of the country.

Table 3. Children's Global Concerns

Hopes	Boys	Girls	Total
Community Relations	31.0	40.9	37.1
War	11.9	14.0	13.2
Poverty	6.5	6.5	6.5
Crime	11.3	7.5	8.9
Environment	14.9	15.1	15.0
Health	1.8	7.5	5.4
Religion	1.2	1.1	1.1
Technology	14.9	3.2	7.6
Politics	6.5	4.3	5.1
	100%	100%	100%
Total	(168)	(279)	(447)

Fears	Boys	Girls	Total
Relationships	18.4	26.1	23.4
Poverty	13.3	10.6	11.5
Crime	9.2	12.8	11.5
Environment	7.1	8.9	8.3
Disaster	28.6	20.6	23.4
Health	6.1	5.6	5.8
Politics	17.3	15.6	16.2
	100%	100%	100%
Total	(98)	(180)	(278)

When it comes to global problems, Ukrainian children see broken human relations as a major obstacle to peace and security. Children wish everybody would treat each other well. In addition, 15% of respondents consider the deteriorating environmental situation as a threat to the well-being of mankind. Almost one-third of boys are concerned about an outbreak of a natural disaster, e.g. earthquake, hurricane, or flood. Nonetheless, children appear least concerned about the health of ordinary citizens worldwide. These results suggest that many children at this age find it difficult to identify far-reaching implications of deplorable environmental conditions.

Another global issue identified by Ukrainian children is poverty. The content of responses suggests that middle-school students extrapolated from the local context the severity of economic conditions worldwide:

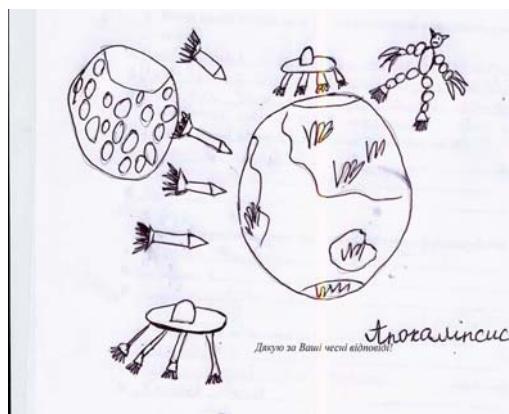
'Everybody will have a job' (Lviv, girl)

'Everybody will have *hryvnias* [Ukraine's national currency]' (Donetsk, girl)

'Everybody will earn enough money to survive' (Lviv, girl)

'All the countries will be wealthy' (Lviv, girl)

'Everybody will wear new clothes' (Donetsk, girl)



The results indicate that gender differences in children's hopes for the global future are rather small, with two notable exceptions. First, male respondents express greater anticipation of advancements in modern technology. One boy expects people to fly to other planets and discover life on Mars. Another one hopes that scientists will design cars running on sun batteries and invent new computer games. Second, female respondents are more concerned about the quality of human relations around the world. This is in sync with girls' greater emphasis on personal relationships in the planning of their own lives.

Conclusion

It is clear from this analysis that the interplay between local social context and globalisation sets the stage for children's expectations about the future. The pervasive spread of consumer culture fuels children's longing for cutting-edge gadgets. At the same time, political instability coupled with endemic corruption and low earnings diminishes the chances of leading a luxurious life. Against this backdrop, children set high career goals. Respondents also yearn for improved local facilities and a cleaner environment. At the global level, Ukrainian children are concerned about the extent of social connectedness.

Furthermore, the analysis reveals the impact of gender on the content of children's hopes in the former Soviet republic. The results demonstrate that female respondents are more concerned about family planning, whereas male respondents focus more on wealth and material possessions. At the community level, girls accord greater attention to environmental issues, while boys worry more about improvements in transportation services. In addition, community relations occupy a much more conspicuous place in girls' concerns about the future of the mankind. Nonetheless, Ukrainian respondents regardless of gender seem to display greater awareness of politics than their peers in advanced mature democracies. This level of politicisation at an early age may be attributable, in part, to the temporal proximity of the Orange Revolution and the persistence of intra-country divisions along ethnic, linguistic, and regional lines.

A major implication of this research is that schools need to promote social competence and external efficacy among children. Educators face a daunting task of empowering students with the knowledge and skills necessary to tackle social problems.

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