

# The Phenomenon of Greed (Unwillingness to Share) in Five to Seven-Year-Old Children

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*Parents and elementary school teachers have noticed that children reaching the age of five to six show a new attitude towards their peers. Compliance and indifference of four-year-old children change into aggression, touchiness, envy and greed. Most children outlive this acute conflict period without any consequences and by the age of seven their negative feelings give way to rather sociable ones: Not only do most children learn how to feel empathy but even how to share their peers' success and joy. However, sometimes the experience of negative feelings becomes „fixed“ and continues to determine some children's interaction with people. This may lead to the children's unwillingness to share, in other words to the phenomenon of greed. In order to observe this behaviour, we conducted an experiment which consisted in modelling such situations in which the phenomenon of greed could be observed, though not all of the children in the sample displayed it. This report describes the phenomenon of greed from the perspective of Alfried Längle's model of self-worth development and specifies the factors influencing its appearance.*

*Key words: greed, personal development (children), self-worth*

## Das Phänomen Gier (Widerwillen zu teilen) bei fünf- bis sieben-jährigen Kindern

*Eltern und Lehrer an Grundschulen haben festgestellt, dass Kinder, die das Alter von fünf bis sechs Jahren erreicht haben, ein neues Verhalten gegenüber Gleichaltrigen aufweisen. Die Folgsamkeit und Gleichgültigkeit der vier-jährigen wandelt sich in Aggression, Empfindlichkeit, Neid und Gier. Die meisten Kinder überdauern diese akute Konfliktphase ohne jegliche Auswirkungen, und bis zum Alter von sieben Jahren weichen ihre negativen Gefühle eher sozialen: Die meisten Kinder lernen nicht nur für Gleichaltrige Empathie zu empfinden, sondern auch ihren Erfolg und ihre Freude zu teilen. Manchmal kommt es jedoch zu einer Fixierung der Erfahrung negativer Gefühle, welche die Interaktion mancher Kinder mit den Mitmenschen weiterhin determiniert. Daraus kann sich bei den Kindern eine Widerwilligkeit zu teilen entwickeln, in anderen Worten, das Phänomen der Gier. Um dieses Verhalten zu studieren haben wir ein Experiment durchgeführt, das darin bestand, Situationen zu entwickeln, in welchen das Phänomen der Gier beobachtet werden konnte, obwohl nicht alle einbezogene Kinder es aufwiesen. Diese Ausführungen beschreiben das Phänomen der Gier aus der Perspektive des Modells der Selbstwertentwicklung von Alfried Längle und spezifizieren jene Faktoren, welche dessen Auftreten beeinflussen.*

*Schlüsselwörter: Gier, personale Entwicklung (Kinder), Selbstwert*

There is a problem of creating a situation in which the desired phenomenon will inevitably become apparent. For instance, to receive phenomenological description of a person's trust, we should ask them to fall backwards into their partner's arms; to study a person's

offence, they should recall a situation when they were unjustly criticized. Thus, to observe children's negative feelings – greed, envy, jealousy – we can either watch them play freely or, as in our research, try to model a potential conflict situation.

Some authors (q.v. Ulanovskij 2007) consider children inappropriate for phenomenological studies, as they cannot describe their feelings and thoughts sufficiently and in the literary language. Nevertheless, we can understand what they feel by their expressive behaviour and we can record their „answers“ (feelings, words and body language) with a camera.

## 1. Quasi-experimental study of greed

We have performed (in collaboration with T.Osipova) a study which deals with the phenomenon of greed. This study underlied our report at the Vienna Convention in May, 2010.

In order to provoke a setting where children might show greed we have modelled several quasi-experimental<sup>1</sup> situations in which children were faced with a choice either to share or not to share a sweet chocolate prize with their playmates.

One of the modelled situations had three stages and only two children could participate at each of them:

Stage 1: The experimenter gives the children a task to colour some pictures with markers after a certain pattern. The children sit at the same table and can use only one set of markers. Colouring the pictures at a particular moment the children realize that they need one and the same marker and so they have to decide who will be the first to use it. After that the experimenter asks the children to compare their pictures.

Stage 2<sup>2</sup>: The aim of this stage is to make one of the children (Child A) render a moral judgement of the situation. This child is told a brief

<sup>1</sup> Quasi-experiment is a kind of experiment when the experimenter cannot fully control all the conditions, e.g. he uses already formed groups of people (children who study at different types of preschool institutions). The interpretation of the results of such an experiment is rather speculative as it can be influenced by random variables.

<sup>2</sup> We have included a check on children's knowledge of moral norms in the experiment – stage 2 – because many researchers point out a significant discrepancy between what children say and how they behave. Almost all children from the youngest preschool age demonstrated a good knowledge of right moral actions. However, only few children under six or seven act accordingly (Subbotskij 2005; J. Piaget 2006; Smirnova 2006).

story about a boy/girl (the sex of the character should coincide with the sex of Child A) who refused to give his/her playmate a green pencil that it needed to accomplish its task. As a result, the playmate had to paint the leaves in its picture blue. The story thoroughly describes the feelings of the playmate who received the lower mark for its picture. After that Child A is asked whether the boy/girl was right or not and the answer is recorded.

Stage 3: The same children receive another picture for colouring and two sets of pencils. Child A receives a full set while Child B has a set missing one pencil which will definitely be needed for the picture. The task is the same – to colour the pictures according to a certain pattern. The experimenter should specify especially that the child whose picture will be more beautiful and whose colours will coincide with the pattern will be given a „sweet prize“ emphasizing the fact that there is only one prize. Then the experimenter leaves the children under a plausible pretext and comes back when they have finished their work. He asks the children who should be given the prize so that they themselves have to decide who really deserves it. After that the experimenter asks them to choose the best picture and leaves the room. All the children’s actions in the absence of the experimenter are recorded with a camera.

About 60 children of the age from five to seven from various preschool educational institutions were involved in the experiment. They were pupils from a public municipal preschool educational institution (hereinafter referred to as PEI), a private kindergarten which uses *certain* educational methods based on respectful and careful attention to children, and a PEI that works in the scope of Waldorf’s system.

The situations faced by the children were initially *conflicting*: the unfair distribution of pencils, the atmosphere of rivalry, the *temptation* by means of the prize. We were not interested in the behaviour of the child who could be-

come offended, but only of the one who was „lucky“ and received the full set of pencils. It is the latter who was under test. Its behaviour was recorded at each stage of the experiment:

- a) in the situation of rivalry with its playmate;
- b) when it had to evaluate its rival (by comparing its personal work with that of the other child);
- c) when the children had to decide what to do with the prize.

The observation of several dozens of children enabled us to single out the following repeating patterns of behaviour.

1. At the end of the experiment, the children angrily argued how to share the prize. As a result, the child under test, who initially had more chances to colour the picture correctly, claimed the prize for itself but promised to give a small piece of it to its playmate. The other child got angry, protested and even cried because it did not understand why the prize could not be shared equally, but finally it accepted the „unfair“ offer.
2. The child under test decided to take the whole prize but in return it offered its playmate something else, e.g. to play with its toys and the like. The other child reluctantly agreed saying something like „*Why should I play with his/her toys while the prize could also be mine?*“
3. At first the child under test refused the prize saying „I do not need it.“ (they frequently justified their refusal with the statement „I am forbidden to eat chocolate.“). After that the experimenter said: „Then we give the prize to.../the name of the other child/?“ The other child happily

agreed, but the child under test, who seemed to have refused the prize, protested: „No, I do not agree.“ When the experimenter asked about the reasons of its protest, the child explained: „I do not need the prize but I do not want him/her to have it either.“

4. The children could not decide who would receive the prize for a long time – each of them was convinced that it really deserved it. When the experimenter dropped a hint that the prize could be divided – both children declined this alternative or simply did not notice the hints. After that the experimenter left the children for the second time, and finally they came to the conclusion that the prize should be presented by the experimenter. The children told their decision. After the experimenter’s question „So, do you want me to decide who will receive the prize?“ they agreed and – interrupting each other – started praising their pictures specifying advantages of the one and disadvantages of the other. In the end, after a long discussion, the experimenter divided the prize between the children equally – though both children were dissatisfied, they reluctantly took their parts and left.
5. One of the children offered to divide the prize equally and the other gladly agreed.

Patterns 1-4 demonstrate greed while pattern 5 is void of it.

Most children behaved very friendly. Colouring the pictures, they gladly shared their markers as well as the sweet prize. However, this was true mostly for the children from the Waldorf’s kin-

The group	Moral judgement			Moral behaviour		“Greed”	
	Number of participants	Know the <u>right actions</u>	Do not know <u>the right actions</u>	Share their markers	Do not share their markers	Do not want to share the prize (greedy)	Gladly share the prize (not greedy)
1. Municipal PEI	20	20	0	19	1	20	0
2. Private PEI	20	20	0	20	0	0	20
3. Waldorf’s PEI	20	20	0	20	0	1	19

Table 1: Children’s behaviour in the experiment depending on the type of PEI.

dergarten and the private PEI known for its high standards of teachers' communicative competence. A common municipal kindergarten presented another picture. Here children often displayed the phenomena of greed and envy.

In the sample:

- a) the children who study at ordinary PEI are much „greedier“ than those at private PEI ( $x^2=12$ ,  $df=11$ ,  $p<0,05$ )
- b) the children who study at ordinary PEI are much „greedier“ than those at Waldorf's PEI ( $x^2=8,57$ ,  $df=11$ ,  $p<0,05$ )

The above-described phenomenon of greed is represented as an intention of a child to claim the whole prize for itself. In doing so, it gave the following arguments:

- „My picture is better! I have coloured it more beautifully!“ – says a child, though its picture is coloured less carefully.
- „I coloured my picture too hurriedly. His/her picture is better.“ – and the child cries because it realizes that it will not receive the prize. At the same time it suggests giving the prize to the one who will win a counting-out rhyme. The child starts counting, cheats and wins.
- „I have shared my pencil! The prize is mine!“

One of the children was so greedy that it refused not only to share the prize but even to share its pencil.

Another pair of children consisted of two six-year-old girls from a common PEI situated near Moscow. The girl under test easily solved the problem of moral judgement rendered by the experimenter. She answered: „Of course Sasha is not right. She should have shared her pencil with her friend.“ When the children were left alone, the other girl noticed that she did not have the necessary marker and started crying,

since, without the marker, she could not fulfil the task. At this time, the girl under test looked at her complete set of markers, then at her partner. She kept silent for a moment and then said: „Don't cry, Ira. Don't cry.“ She got up and went towards the experimenter's bag which was lying on the windowsill not far from the girls' table. The girl under test opened it and found the missing marker, went back to her seat and gave the marker to the other girl. The latter stopped crying and they continued colouring.

Furthermore, we noticed, that being unwilling to share their markers, some children felt greed while others demonstrated not only greed, but also envy: they did not need the prize until their partners received it.

### Phenomenological description of greed

1. *How does a person feel beside the one who is greedy at the moment? What is the greedy doing to me?* (A description of personal feelings that appear when facing the phenomenon – „contact feelings“ according to A. Längle, „adjoining feelings“ according to M. Scheler.)

A greedy child provokes ambivalent feelings. First of all we see their intense desire to possess the prize even if earlier they said that they „did not eat chocolate“. The force of their desire is so strong that you want to give in – because you see how strong their need for the prize is <sup>4</sup>.

On the other hand, the greedy obviously offends the other child and this fact provokes protest and indignation. We have also noticed that when beside the greedy, even very generous children become rather careful and alert about their personal things that are, at that moment, also under threat due to the greed of their partner, i.e. these children themselves become a little greedy. The children cannot adopt a definite attitude to-

wards the greedy, it varies between indulgence and rebellion – from „take whatever you want, but please calm down“ to „that is not fair, the prize is too big for you“.

2. *What does the greedy child feel? What feelings make him greedy?* (If we „bracket out our personal feelings (emotions)“ and look at the greedy, what will we feel about him? – „distant feelings“ according to A. Längle, „intentional feelings“ according to M. Scheler.)

The greedy child is sure that it will not receive the desired if it just asks for it. It also „suffers from not possessing the thing“ (Scheler 1999, 24): It desperately needs the prize to feel better. Or this feeling of need appears when the child sees the prize in its partner's hands. In this case it also starts feeling envy – the tension between impossibility to possess (as the prize belongs to the other) and strong personal desires which is accompanied by bad feelings towards the partner <sup>5</sup>.

3. *The content of the phenomenon of greed. What is greed essentially?* We can answer this question using the experience from the first two stages of the experiment in the context of our prior knowledge.

The content of the phenomenon of greed is closely associated with lack of confidence in *self-worth*.

Max Scheler, relying on the works of G. Simmel, phenomenologically describes high self-esteem as the following: „A noble man has a constantly exciting absolutely naive non-reflective vague sense of self-worth and fullness of his existence, as if he were all on his own, independent of anything, well-established in the universe.“ (ibid. 28). Self-worth is felt as it is, without any comparison with other people and without any conditions. It is an inherent part of a person just like muscle tone.

<sup>3</sup> The possibility to describe and analyze contact feelings (the feelings when you face a phenomenon) eliminates the problem of „an inappropriate person for the test“ (of a person who cannot give a proper account of their feelings). This problem is frequently mentioned in various phenomenological empirical studies. Children of the preschool age are usually considered typical people inappropriate for the experiment.

<sup>4</sup> This peculiarity of greed was also pointed out by M. Klein: „Greed is a tumultuous and insatiable crave that exceeds the subject's needs and the object's possibilities and will to give.“ (Klein 1997, 18)

<sup>5</sup> Max Scheler writes that envy „originates from the feeling of impotence that stands in the way of possessing the thing, because it belongs to another person“ (ibid. 1999, 24).

When a person is void of this feeling, they can feel their importance only by possessing something. Thus follows the logic of greed: The more I feel that I have lost my importance (value) (I am offended or neglected,) the more I need something to possess, because, if I have it, I am again important. Thus, greed (as well as envy, boastfulness and jealousy) – is one of the morbid (pathologic) psychological mechanisms of self-esteem defence.

The preschool educational institutions chosen for the experiment differ from each other in the teachers' attitude towards children. Today most of municipal PEI in Russia have a very low rate of communicative culture among teachers. The absence of respectful attention of the adults to children's feelings and needs may lead to children instinctively developing a certain defensive style of behaviour which is evoked by the following feeling: „I should take care of myself. No one else will do so.“ The same is true for greed – the impossibility to share a thing or to give it to another person stems from a feeling of impotence when you realize that the other people do not care about your feelings and needs. It is important that for five to seven-year-old children these *other people* are adults – their teachers or parents. The adults should provide justice in the children's society. However, a teacher in a bad PEI may be an unreliable advocate of justice. As a result children often suffer impotence and become very sensitive in respect of possessing things (we have noticed that the children in the experiment frequently start crying when they stand to lose the prize). Therefore, one could argue that envy makes a child dishonest: „His picture is worse! He has coloured it wrongly!“ We do not know whether the children behave this way out of kindergarten, in the family. But as to a common municipal kindergarten, this style of behaviour is displayed by almost all the children.

And on the other hand, the children from the kindergartens where much

attention is paid to their feelings and needs, and where the adults are reliable advocates of justice, do not regard even the most provocative situations as conflicts. These children praise each others' pictures and gladly share the prize.

Our results once again corroborate the significance of respectful attention to children, just evaluation of their actions and recognition of their importance – Beachtung, Gerechtigkeit, Wertschätzung, (Längle 2002) – for the prevention of personality disorders at the age of five to seven.

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