Connection of Features of Identification with Cartoon Characters with the Understanding of Emotions in Older Preschoolers

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Abstract

This work is a part of the series of studies devoted to the perception of animated films by preschoolers and is aimed at studying the characteristics of children's identification in connection with their understanding of emotions. The relevance of the topic is due, on the one hand, to the generally recognized fact of the close connection of art with human feelings, and, on the other, to the extremely low level of knowledge of issues in this area, especially with regard to young children. In this paper, it was suggested that the identification of preschoolers with various cartoon characters is based on the relationship between the personal attitude of children to these characters and the characteristics of their understanding of emotions. The study included children watching the cartoon Old Toy (1971; timing: 9:42; screenplay by V. Livanov, director of photography V. Samsonov), then the children were offered tests: a modified method of personal constructs by J. Kelly and the Test of Emotion Comprehension. The results of the factor analysis allowed us to identify three bipolar factors that determine the peculiarities of the perception of cartoons by children who identify themselves with the main characters or do not identify themselves with any of them. The results obtained can become the basis for further research, and can also be used for educational purposes.

Keywords: cartoons, cartoon characters, personal constructs, perception of cartoons, understanding of cartoons, art education, test of emotion comprehension, preschool age.

1. Introduction

In contemporary society, cartoons are a foundational part of early childhood experiences, representing one of the first art forms that young children engage with actively. This phenomenon has garnered significant attention within developmental psychology and the psychology of art (Barak et al., 2011; De Leeuw, Van der Laan, 2017; Demir, Sisman, 2021; Smirnova et al., 2014; Sobkin et al., 2013; Sobkin, 1989a; Sobkin, 1989b; Sobkin, 1991; Sobkin, 2006; Sobkin, Kolmanovskaya, 1990; Sobkin, Skobel'cina, 2014;Usov, 2000).

Given that children frequently identify with cartoon characters, often imitating the behaviors displayed, understanding how they perceive and emotionally relate to these characters is essential (Björkqvist, Lagerspetz, 1985; Habib, Tarek, 2015; Mahmood et al., 2020; Zhang, 2021).

Further, studies indicate that character identification can significantly impact children's comprehension of a cartoon's narrative and central themes (Antufueva, 2024; Sobkin, 2014), offering insights valuable to child psychology, early childhood education, and the formation of an artistic worldview.

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The identification process with film characters is intricately linked to the viewer's "internal point of view" (Lotman, 1992; Lotman, Civ'yan, 1994), wherein adopting the character's perspective allows children to interpret events from that character's worldview. Of particular importance to the psychology of art is the fact that the ability to adopt another's perspective is a crucial quality leading to empathy for the characters and, an overall deeper understanding of the narrative.

The "internal" or "external" view of a particular position is established through the medium of film, primarily through camerawork and editing. Thus, if the viewer is asked to look at events from a character's point of view, the camera will take a certain position, encouraging the viewer to identify their perspective with that of the character. Our previous works show that, when identifying with characters through whose eyes the viewer is invited to observe events, children most often rely on subjective attitudes towards the characters (Sobkin, 2006; Sobkin, 2014; Sobkin, Markina, 2010).

The cartoon that served as the expositional material in this study, *The Old Toy*, invites the viewer to perceive events from the perspective of a particular character, the Teddy Bear. The Teddy Bear is the Girl's good old favorite toy. She has a few other old toys, but one day she receives a new one as a gift, a Clown. The main conflict in the cartoon revolves around the relationship between the Girl and the Teddy Bear, who is jealous of her attachment to the Clown, feels abandoned, and struggles to cope with these difficult emotions. The cartoon is structured in such a way that the viewer is invited to experience events primarily through the Teddy Bear's subjective viewpoint, contrasting it with an objective view of the Girl, who is shown from an external perspective. Thus, the film establishes two opposing viewer perspectives, represented by the two main characters — the Teddy Bear (internal, subjective point of view) and the Girl (external, objective). This structure, which involves the dynamics of changing perspectives, allows us to explore pertinent issues related to preschoolers' identification with the characters. This was the decisive factor in choosing the cartoon *The Old Toy* for our study, which began in the 1980s under the guidance of Y.N. Usov in the "Cinema and Television" laboratory of the Institute of Art Education of the USSR Academy of Pedagogical Sciences. The study employed a modified version of J. Kelly's personal construct methodology to explore how preschoolers form identification with film characters, shedding light on the personal constructs underlying their perspectives (Sobkin, Kolmanovskaya, 1990).

The modified methodology used in this study is based on a triadic choice procedure, wherein children chose two similar characters and distinguished a third from each set of three cards representing characters from *The Old Toy*. Besides the character cards (the Girl, Teddy Bear, Clown, Doll, and Doggie), a "You" card was also included to represent the child. In addition to grouping two characters and excluding the third, children were asked to explain how the two were similar and how the third differed from them. For example, a child is offered a choice of three cards — "Teddy Bear," "Girl," and "You" (the card representing the child), and is asked to put two of them together and one apart, then explain their choice. The explanation represents a *personal construct*, which can be either objective (based on formal characteristics — "Cartoon characters," "People," "Alive," etc.) or subjective (differing on personal grounds — "I like them," "They are good," "They play with each other"). The total number of choices presented to the child, involving all possible combinations of the six cards, was 20 triads.

In addition to identifying the personal constructs used by the child, the methodology also reveals the nature of their identification with cartoon characters based on how frequently the "You" card is grouped with the two main characters. The data analysis resulted in four viewer identification groups: "with the Girl," "with the Teddy Bear," "Decentered position" — children who equally often identify with both main characters (the Girl and the Teddy Bear), and "Detached position" — children who rarely identify with either of these characters. For each of the four identification groups, the frequency with which the objective and subjective personal constructs were used was analyzed. Findings indicate that children identifying with the Girl or assuming a detached position were statistically less inclined to use subjective personal constructs than those identifying with the Teddy Bear or assuming a decentered position.

Additional qualitative analysis further revealed seven distinct categories of subjective personal constructs according to their thematic content.

1. *Character traits*. This subgroup included statements related to the personal traits of the characters in the film and their emotional states, for example, "The Doll is mean," "The Clown is loud," "The Doggie likes to laugh," and "The Teddy Bear was sad."

2. *The child's reality*. This subgroup of constructs includes statements related to the

children's own world, to the stimuli around them. For example, "I love doggies, but I'm allergic," "Because I want to get my sister a clown," or "I have two doggies and lots of dolls."

3. *Positive conflict resolution*. This subgroup includes statements related to the child's desired (imagined) resolution of the conflict, e.g., "The Teddy Bear and the Doll are getting married" or "The Girl and the Teddy Bear should be together."

4. *The child's attitude toward the character*. This subgroup includes statements related to the child's expressed attitude toward the cartoon characters: "I liked the Teddy Bear" or "The Girl probably doesn't like boys" (boy's answer), "I want a Teddy Bear like the one in the film," "The Teddy Bear is the most important character and is cute," "I don't like the way it chuckles" (about the Clown), "We would help each other if I were in the cartoon."

5. *Relationships between the characters*. This subgroup included statements related to the attitude of characters to one another: "the Teddy Bear and the Girl were friends" or "The Clown loved the Doll," "The Girl was happy to have the Clown," "The Doll helped the Teddy Bear," "They love each other."

6. *Actions*. This subgroup includes statements reflecting directly on actions, e.g., "The Clown and the Girl were together," "The Doll is walking the Doggie."

7. *Ethical Assessments*. This subgroup includes statements containing ethical assessments both about what was directly seen in the cartoon and matters indirectly related to it: "I want the Teddy Bear to have a better companion than he had in Doggie," "the Teddy Bear needs someone."

The study showed that the use of different types of subjective personal constructs varied among children from different identification groups, supporting the hypothesis that children's involvement in the emotional space of the film depends on how exactly they identify themselves. Moreover, age-specific features were found that clearly reflect the dynamics of preschoolers' emotional development. This allowed us to move on to the next step in our study.

Hypothesis. The findings allowed us to formulate the following research question: are identification with characters and the use of personal constructs related to the particularities of a preschooler's emotional intelligence? In other words, the hypothesis can be formulated as follows: the basis of preschoolers' identification with certain cartoon characters is the interrelation between the children's personal attitudes towards these characters and the particularities of their emotional intelligence.

2. Materials and methods

To test this assumption, an additional study was conducted. The sample consisted of 60 preschoolers aged 5 to 7 years (60 to 86 months; M = 72.3, SD = 7.63): 30 boys (60 to 86 months; M = 73.3, SD = 7.94) and 30 girls (62 to 86 months; M = 71.3, SD = 7.31) attending kindergartens following the general education curricula.

The study applied J. Kelly's personal construct methodology (Kozlova, 1976; Petrenko, 1983), previously described, alongside the Test of Emotion Comprehension (TEC). The TEC, which was adapted for use in Russia by Veraksa and colleagues in 2019–2020 with a sample of 596 children aged 5–6 years (Veraksa et al., 2021), assesses multiple dimensions of children's emotional understanding.

These include:
– The ability to recognize emotions,
– Understanding that emotions can be triggered by external situations,
– Understanding that people tend to experience different emotions in the same circumstances depending on their desires,
–Understanding that perceptions can affect emotions,
– Understanding that emotions can be triggered by memories,
– Understanding that real emotions may not match their outward expressions,
– Understanding that a person can experience conflicting emotions toward a single situation,
– Understanding that emotions can be controlled,
– Understanding that emotions can be influenced by moral norms.

The test is administered using the ChildStudy MSU e-app (Emotion Understanding Test Complex), which presents children with visual stimuli and questions. Children responded by selecting the most fitting image on-screen and advancing to the next question, with results automatically compiled into a data table for analysis.

Data analysis was performed using IBM SPSS Statistics (version 28.0.1.1) to examine statistical significance and patterns within the results.

Research Procedure. The study was conducted individually with each child in two kindergarten settings: Smart Team, a private kindergarten in Krasnogorsk, and Kindergarten No. 1344 in Moscow.

In a quiet room designated for the study, each child watched the cartoon *The Old Toy* on a laptop, after which they completed the J. Kelly and TEC assessments. To capture responses accurately, a tape recorder was used throughout the testing session.

3. Discussion and Results

The results of the study on preschoolers' emotional understanding, assessed through the Test of Emotion Comprehension (TEC), were compared with the children's attitudes toward characters in the cartoon *The Old Toy*, evaluated using J. Kelly's methodology. Identification with the main characters served as the basis for this comparative analysis. To facilitate the comparison, an initial data matrix was developed with columns representing different identification groups ("with the Girl," "with the Teddy Bear," "Decentered position," and "Detached position").The rows of the matrix corresponded to personal constructs (objective and seven subjective constructs) and TEC task performance indicators (elevenindicators). Each cell within this matrix recorded the percentage of children using the corresponding construct or correctly completing a TEC task within each identification group. The compiled data matrix, structured as a 4x19 array (identification groups x test performance results), underwent factor analysis (Principal Component Method with Kaiser's Varimax rotation). This yielded three bipolar factors with a combined cumulative variance of 99.9 %.

The primary results of the factor analysis are shown in Tables 1 and Tables 2.

Table 1 presents the factor loadings of personal constructs and TEC task performance across the identified factors, while Table 2 displays the values for the four groups along the factor axes.

Table 1. Factor loadings for personal constructs and TEC task performance on the factors identified

Use of personal constructs and successful completion of TEC tasks	F1+/- (42.3%)	F2+/- (32.7%)	F3+/- (24.9%)
Character Traits	.943	−.047	.331
Child's Reality	.405	.697	.591
Positive Conflict Resolution	.681	−.614	−.399
Child's Attitude Towards the Character	−.793	.605	−.067
Relationships Between Characters	−.145	−.969	−.200
Action	.384	−.077	−.920
Objective Personal Constructs	.015	.299	.954
Ethical Grounds	.773	.381	.507
Recognizing Emotions	.927	.374	.004
Understanding the External Causes of Emotions	.348	−.236	.907
Understanding Desires as Causes of Emotions (Task 1)	.541	−.820	.187
Understanding Desires as Causes of Emotions (Task 2)	.968	−.248	−.020
Understanding Beliefs as Causes of Emotions	.680	−.668	−.302
Understanding the Impact of Memories on Emotions	.523	.782	−.339
Emotion Regulation Strategies	−.925	−.366	−.100
Understanding Hidden Emotions	.158	.977	.142
Understanding Mixed Emotions	−.139	.821	−.554
Understanding Moral Emotions: Self-regulation	.993	.052	.108
Understanding Moral Emotions: Communicative Situation	−.546	.218	−.809

To interpret these factors meaningfully, we first consider Factor F1, the most influential bipolar factor, accounting for 42.3 % of the total cumulative variance. This considerable variance highlights Factor F1's critical role in understanding preschoolers' perceptions of the cartoon. Let's examine it in more detail.

Table 2. Values on the axes of the factors identified for the four groups of children differing in their identification with the cartoon characters

Identification Group	F1+/-	F2+/-	F3+/-
with the Girl	0.5	1.0	1.0
with the Teddy Bear	−1.0	0.6	−1.0
Decentered Position	1.2	−0.6	−0.8
Detached Position	−0.7	−1.1	0.7

On the positive pole of the first bipolar factor F1, three subjective personal constructs are grouped: "character traits" (e.g., "The Doll is mean," "The Clown is loud," "The Teddy Bear was sad"); "ethical grounds" ("the Teddy Bear was sad and thought that the Girl wouldn't play with him, and that was wrong," "The Doggie can bite if you hit him, but if you don't hit him, he won't bite," etc.); "positive conflict resolution" (e.g., "The Clown and the Doll will get married," "The Girl and the Teddy Bear should be together"). It's easy to see that the combination of these three subjective personal constructs is associated with the tendency to evaluate the character's uniqueness in relation to the main conflict of the film and the use of moral and ethical norms in resolving it ("You shouldn't abandon an old toy").

Notably, these personal constructs correlate with the successful completion of four types of TEC tasks: 1) "understanding desires as the causes of emotions," i.e., understanding that a person will be happy (or sad) depending on whether the situation meets their desires; 2) "recognizing emotions" (ability to distinguish manifestations of basic emotions — joy, sadness, fear, etc.); 3) "understanding beliefs as causes of emotions" (i.e., understanding that knowledge and ideas about something influence one's emotional state, for example, a bunny who doesn't know there's a wolf nearby doesn't feel fear); 4) "understanding moral emotions: self-regulation" (understanding that acting in accordance with rules brings a sense of satisfaction). Overall, this set of indicators for understanding emotions reflects a feature of the child's emotional intelligence, which consists in their ability to *relate different aspects of emotional well-being to moral and ethical norms of behavior.* It is in relation to conformity with norms that the emotional state of others is interpreted and evaluated from an external position. In general, this represents an evaluative stance.

Thus, the positive pole of the factor characterizes the child's inclination towards an ethical evaluation of the characters from an external position. The interpretation of their emotional states, intentions, and characteristics is conditioned by their correlation *with moral models and the main moral and ethical conflict of the film.* Children in this position rely not on personal sympathies but on recognized moral standards and behavioral expectations; it is an orientation towards following a moral example. It is important to emphasize that the groups identifying with the Girl and those assuming a decentered position scored high on the positive pole of Factor F1 (see Table 2).

The *negative* pole of this factor is defined by the subjective personal construct "child's attitude towards the character," where the dominant feature is the child's personal attitude towards the cartoon characters, for example, "I liked the Teddy Bear," "I want a Teddy Bear like in the movie," "I don't like such silly things" (about the Clown). This construct was associated with the successful completion of the TEC task "emotion regulation strategies," which suggests that one can cope with negative experiences by shifting attention from one thought to another (start thinking about something else). Success in this task essentially indicates the child's ability to make a volitional decision and follow it, regulating their emotional states. Meanwhile, when interpreting the content of this factor pole, two variants are possible, based on two fundamentally different attitudes towards the character: adjustment to their emotional situation (sympathy, empathy – a "warm" attitude) and a detached egocentric position (a "cold" attitude). In one case, the attitude towards the character is based on the child's understanding of the dynamics of the character's actions aimed at self-regulating its emotional states. In the other case (the detached egocentric position), the very switching from one emotional state of the character to another is fragmentary, leaving the viewer in an "external" position in relation to the general logic of the cartoon character's experiences. In this respect, it is quite indicative that the negative pole of this factor with high values was occupied by the groups of children identifying with the Teddy Bear or occupying a detached position (see Table 2).

Overall, Factor F1 represents a contrast between "*Adherence to moral standards and Self-focus.*"

Factor F2 (32.7 %). *The positive pole of* this factor is defined by the subject's use of the *subjective* personal construct *"child's reality,"* where the dominant aspect in comparing characters

according to J. Kelly's methodology relates the similarity of the film characters to one's own life experiences, such as "I have a doggie like that too" or "Because I want to buy my sister a clown." The findings indicate that this strategy of connecting the film's reality to one's own is linked to three aspects of emotional intelligence: "understanding how memories influence emotions," "recognizing hidden emotions," and "comprehending mixed emotions." In other words, relating the film's situation to one's own life experience is based on a complex set of intellectual abilities that enable the emotional aspect of perceiving the work. Thus, transferring the film's situation to one's own lived reality implies a special development of the child's *emotional memory*, where the child understands that past events can influence their current emotional state. However, this feature of memory alone is not enough to relate the cartoon's situation to one's own life. It requires a special ability to "read" hidden emotions in behavior, to *see real inner feelings* rather than those another person tries to show, i.e., to distinguish between the "outer" and "inner." Finally, transferring the film's events to one's own reality involves developing an aspect of emotional intelligence: the *ability to discern complex ambivalent reactions*, some related to real situations and others to probable, imagined, or mental ones.

Thus, the positive pole of factor F2, which determines how a child transfers the film's situation to their own lived reality, indicates that this transfer is based on a set of abilities related to emotional intelligence: emotional memory, distinguishing between real and hidden emotional expressions, and understanding the ambivalence of experiences. Overall, this factor can be labeled as "Self in the given circumstances." It captures the richness of emotional connections that the child can "catch" when watching a cartoon, their understanding of the characters' emotional dynamics and their sensitivity to the film's meanings, and also reflects how the child relates what's happening on screen to their personal experience. Such a viewer empathizes with the range of characters' emotional experiences, "putting themselves in the shoes" of the cartoon characters. Notably, the positive pole of this factor is occupied by groups of children who identify themselves with the Girl and with the Teddy Bear (see Table 2).

The *negative pole of* this factor is characterized by the use of the subjective personal construct "relationships between characters," which focuses on the child's orientation to the cartoon characters' relationships: "The Clown loved the Doll," "The Doll helped the Teddy Bear," "The Teddy Bear and the Doggie are friends," etc. This personal construct was associated with successfully completing the task "understanding desires as causes of emotions." The negative pole of F2 reflects a viewer's position where the characters' relationships with each other come to the forefront, with their understanding of the meaning of these relationships arising through modeling the characters' motivation from an "external position" (Sobkin, 2014; Sobkin, Markina, 2010).

In other words, understanding the cartoon's main conflict relies on interpreting the desires of the characters that shape their relationships. The groups of children with detached and decentered positions were placed on the negative pole of this factor (see Table 2).

Thus, F2 can be considered a key factor in film perception as it directly relates to aesthetic response: "*The self in the given circumstances – Understanding motivation in relationships*."

Let's consider the content of the *third bipolar factor F3* (24.9 %). Its positive pole is defined by a focus on using *objective* personal constructs. This indicates that when solving triadic tasks on Kelly's test, the child mainly uses parameters such as "animate/inanimate," "toy/non-toy," "boy/girl," etc. This approach to comparing characters' similarities and differences correlates with successfully completing the task "understanding external causes of emotions" in the TEC methodology, where the child needs to understand how emotions depend on *external causes*. This external focus implies that these children remain *uninvolved* in the narrative's *semantic space*, concentrating on cause-and-effect without emotionally investing in the events, while the experiential aspect of events remains outside the child's attention. It can be said that such a preschool viewer's perception remains *at the level of meanings rather than personal significance* while viewing. This pole of the F3 factor is occupied by children who identify themselves with the Girl and those who take a detached position (see Table 2).

The opposite situation is observed at the negative pole of factor F3, which combines an orientation towards the *subjective* personal construct *"action"* and successful completion of the TEC task "understanding moral emotions (in a communicative situation)." Note that the "action" construct reflects a situation where, when comparing characters with each other and with themselves, the child focuses on action in relation to others: "They *were* together," "The Doll *walks* the Doggie," etc. Notably, the use of this personal construct was linked to understanding an

emotional state arising from a communicative moral situation (for example, a child misbehaved but doesn't admit it to their mother). Successfully completing this task involves the child understanding that they are not only being *dishonest* by deceiving their mother but also feel *upset* about the deception. It's clear that the negative pole, unlike the positive one, is characterized by the viewer taking an active position based on the emotional evaluation of an ethical action, i.e., a *deed*. In this regard, we can specify that such a viewer is characterized not simply by empathizing with the film characters through *involvement* (Zaporozhets, 1986), but precisely through emotionally experiencing the meaning of the character's *action*.

Overall, this factor generally defines the characteristics of the child's engagement with the cartoon's content: "*Emotional detachment* (positive pole) — *Emotional involvement* (negative pole)." Note that the group of children who identify themselves with the Girl and the group of those who take a detached stance were placed on the positive pole with high values. On the negative pole, however, are groups of children who identify themselves with the Teddy Bear and those who take a decentered position (see Table 2).

Thus, factor analysis allowed us to identify the following three factors that characterize the unique relationships between certain personal constructs when evaluating characters and the features of emotional intelligence among preschoolers who differ in their identification with the main characters of a cartoon:

F1 —"*Following a moral pattern — Self-focus*";
F2 —"*The self in the given circumstances — Understanding motivation in relationships*";
F3 —"*Emotional detachment — Emotional involvement.*"

In characterizing the factors identified, we noted the positioning of different groups of children, categorized by their identification with the cartoon's main characters, along the factor axes. The following discussion examines how each of the three factors manifests in the four groups of children, aiming to reveal how varying identification profiles influence *viewer positions*. These positions derive from the relationship between character assessments (using objective and subjective personal constructs) and the distinct features of children's emotional intelligence. Based on the values along each factor axis for each group (Figure 1), we explore the implications of these differences in identification.
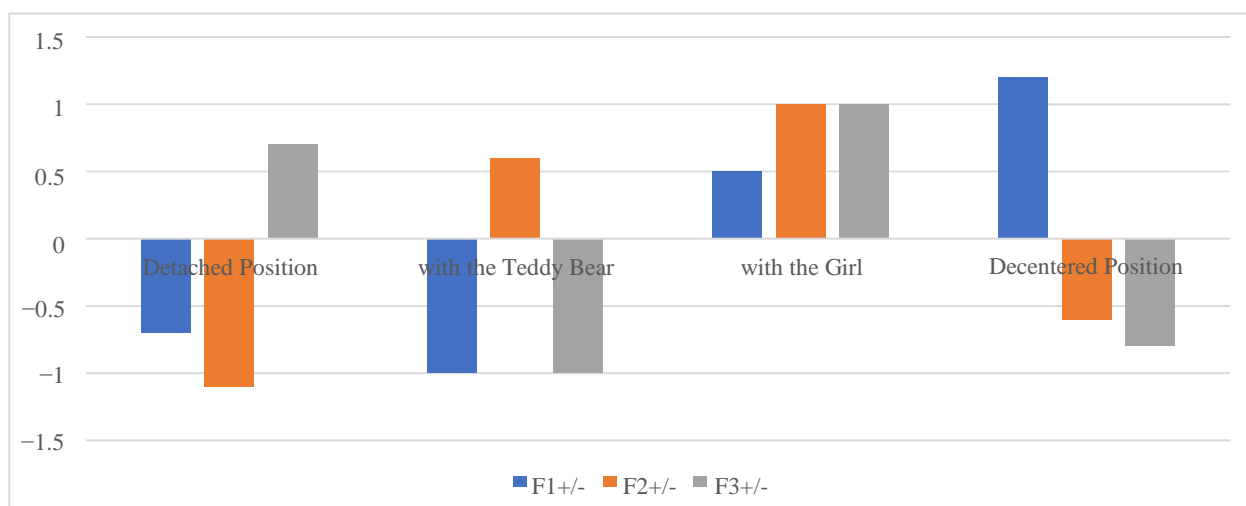

Fig. 1. Expression of values on the axes of selected factors F1, F2, and F3 for children from different groups identifying with the cartoon characters

F1 – "*Following a moral pattern* (+) – *Self-focus*" (–);
F2 – "*The self in the given circumstances* (+) – *Understanding motivation in relationships*" (–);
F3 – "*Emotional detachment* (+) — *Emotional involvement*" (–).

Detached position. Let's consider the profile of factor values for this group of children (see Figure 1). We'll start with the positive indicator for factor F3, which, as we see, largely corresponds to the main characteristic of this group and indicates children's "emotional detachment" from the cartoon characters. Typically, these children use objective personal constructs (people/animals, animate/inanimate, etc.), correlating with an emotional intelligence

feature that explains emotions through external causes. This relationship implies a viewing style focused on *objective event recording* and cause-effect relationships, while experiential elements remain peripheral. It should be added that children in this group show a negative score on Factor F1, indicating an ability to manage negative emotions by shifting their focus. Since this group of children is characterized by a lack of strong identification with any of the film's main characters, we can assume that this fragmented emotional perception causes their "disengagement" and prevents them from emotionally accepting and experiencing the position of any character in the film's main conflict. Finally, children with a detached position typically do not relate the film's situations to their own experiences, as indicated by the negative score on Factor F2, reflecting a preference for maintaining an external stance toward character motivations and relationships.

Overall, the analysis shows that the way that children with a detached position perceive the cartoon is based on their inability to follow a character's complete behavioral arc. Their perception is *fragmented*. This is related to a feature of their intelligence: the ability to emotionally switch from one state to another. In other words, while watching the film, they focus on individual episodes, emphasizing external causes of behavior and explicitly expressed desires when grasping the characters' emotional states. Note that many children's cartoons are designed for this type of perception, built on a series of short, simple episodes that don't require any deeper interpretation or strong empathy with the characters (for example, cartoons like *Well, Just You Wait!*, *Masha and the Bear*, *Tom and Jerry*, etc.).

Identification with the Teddy Bear. The unique nature of this group's relationship to the cartoon is defined by a positive value on the factor F2 axis, "The self in the given circumstances." This suggests that children who identify with the Teddy Bear perceive the film from an *internal perspective*. As we noted when describing this factor, the strong positive values here indicate that these children *apply* the film's events to their own reality. Note that such a transfer is related to the development of the child's emotional memory as a special characteristic of their intelligence. This ability leads to these children recalling emotional events from their personal experience during the film, which they "overlay" onto the cartoon's plot. At the same time, they are particularly sensitive to the *ambivalent* emotional experiences of the character they identify with (in this case, the Teddy Bear). It is important to emphasize their developed ability to "read" such hidden emotional feelings that the character doesn't explicitly express. Thus, a characteristic feature of these viewers is that they place themselves in the character's emotional situation and *perceive the film's events from the character's perspective*.

Another aspect of their perception of the film is the negative value for factor F1 ("Self-focus"), which manifests in *their own* personal attitude towards the cartoon characters. We must emphasize that this attitude is based on a special strategic ability of emotional intelligence, manifesting in the ability to "catch" the dynamics of negative feelings and cope with them by shifting attention to other thoughts. In this respect, speaking of the unique identification with the Teddy Bear, we can assume that these children are particularly sensitive to scenes where the Teddy Bear, after being hurt by the Girl, closes his eyes and imagines the forest, or when he puts on the clown "mask" and looks at his reflection in the fountain water. Let's emphasize that in defining their personal relationship to the character, they "reproduce in themselves" the dynamics of his emotional experiences. Thus, we can conclude that these viewers, in addition to relating the film's situations to their personal experience, are also very sensitive to the *emotional range of the character's experiences* (they live through the dynamics of his emotional states "themselves").

Finally, this category of children shows clearly negative values on the factor F3 axis "Emotional involvement," which is based on the special attention they give to the character's actions towards others and their moral evaluation. In other words, they assess the moral meaning of the character's behavior through their emotional engagement with him.

Thus, children who identify with the Teddy Bear represent a type of viewer perception based on the ability to transfer affective events from their life experience to situations in the creative work, the ability to recognize and reproduce the emotional range of the character's experiences as the plot develops, and to make moral judgments about his actions. Overall, these features of emotional intelligence characterize an *emotionally engaged, empathetic type of viewer*.

Identification with the Girl. Let's consider the profile of factor values for this group of children (see Figure 1). As with the previous group, we'll start the analysis with the positive pole of factor F2 ("The self in the given circumstances"). In this regard, we can conclude that children who identify with the Girl perceive the film (like those who identify with the Teddy Bear) by applying its

events to their own lived reality. In doing so, they rely on the ability to feel and understand the ambivalence of the emotional experiences of the film character with whom they identify (in this case, the Girl). Consequently, and this is perhaps the key point, such viewers clearly put themselves in the character's shoes and *see the film's events through her eyes*. However, it's important to note that this is where the similarities with viewers who identify with the Teddy Bear end.

As a result, significant differences in the F1 factor became apparent. Here we observe a pronounced tendency represented by the positive pole: "Adherence to a moral standard." This is evidenced by the fact that attitudes towards cartoon characters are built on the significance of three subjective personal constructs ("character traits," "ethical grounds," and "positive conflict resolution"). These constructs characterize viewers' approach to assessing a character's personality in relation to the main conflict of the film and the use of moral and ethical norms as a means of conflict resolution. It is worth noting that this approach to character perception is also linked to a wide range of emotional intelligence features ("understanding moral emotions: self-regulation," "understanding desires as causes of emotions," "understanding beliefs as causes of emotions," and "recognizing emotions"). These generally indicate the ability *to connect different aspects of emotional well-being with moral and ethical behavioral norms*. In other words, such a viewer, when perceiving characters, relies not on personal sympathies, but on an assessment of their behavior based on known *norms and rules*.

Finally, for factor F3, children who identify with the Girl show a clear tendency to use characteristics represented by the positive pole: "Emotional detachment." These children are characterized by a reliance on objective personal constructs and a feature of emotional intelligence that focuses on explaining emotional expressions through external causes. This correlation indicates that the child focuses on *objectively recording events* and searching for cause-and-effect relationships, while the emotional experience of the events remains outside the child's attention.

Thus, if we compare the profiles of children identifying with the Teddy Bear and the Girl in terms of their scores on the three factors (see Figure 1), we can observe quite fundamental differences in their viewing positions. The first important thing to note is the ability of representatives from both groups to transfer affective events from their life experiences to the context of the creative work. However, the nature of how the children identifying with the Girl reference life experience is fundamentally different, despite the outward similarity in the significance of this aspect when perceiving the film, when compared to the group identifying with the Teddy Bear. Indeed, for these viewers, relating their affective life experiences to the film's situations is associated with a desire to understand the character's situation from an "external," detached position. This approach relies on evaluating the character's behavior based on objective cause-and-effect relationships between their actions, external circumstances, and moral standards.

Thus, comparing the two groups of children's identification with the main characters (the Teddy Bear and the Girl) leads to an important conclusion about two different ways children *"process" their life experiences*. In the first group (children identifying with the Teddy Bear), life experience is "processed" through affective mechanisms of sympathetic understanding of the character while viewing the film. For the second group (identification with the Girl), abilities to process life experience involving logical explanations of the character's behavior based on moral and ethical models are activated.

We must emphasize that these differences, in our opinion, are based precisely on how the characters are presented in the film's structure — from "external" or "internal" *points of view*. In other words, identifying with characters portrayed differently in a creative work "triggers" different emotional intelligence mechanisms within the viewers for processing their life experiences. In one case, art as a *social technique for feeling* (Vygotskij, 1986) involves emotionally experiencing oneself (testing one's feelings) in a new (artistic) situation. In the other case, the main content of the "art technique" is understanding the moral and ethical grounds that determine the choice of behavioral strategies.

Decentered Position Based on the data presented in Figure 1, this group of children is fundamentally different from the two discussed above. The main difference lies in a fundamentally different attitude towards the significance of one's own personal experience when watching the cartoon ("The self in the given circumstances"). Instead of relating the film's situations to their own reality (positive pole on factor F2), children in this group emphasize the relationships between the characters (negative pole on factor F2). We must emphasize again that this distinction seems fundamental, as the child doesn't simply perceive the situation "from the outside" (as when

identifying with the Girl), but considers the different positions of the two main characters (the Teddy Bear and the Girl), alternately shifting between them. This positional shift is based not only on actively using the personal construct of "relationships between characters," but also on activating the emotional intelligence ability to understand that emotional expressions are influenced by corresponding desires. In other words, at the core of the decentered stance is the intellectual ability to understand the motivation behind the characters' behavior as the reason for their emotional expressions.

But this doesn't fully capture the uniqueness of the decentered position, as it raises the question of what enables the shift from the Teddy Bear's position (emotional involvement, internal point of view) to the Girl's position (reliance on moral and ethical models, external point of view) and back again. Thus, detachment from the Teddy Bear's position is associated with a refusal to focus on oneself and one's personal attitude, and a desire to follow moral norms (factor F1 (+)). Moreover, moving away from this position is linked to activating emotional intelligence features such as: "understanding moral emotions (self-regulation)," "understanding desires as causes of emotions," "understanding beliefs as causes of emotions" and "recognizing emotions." In turn, we note that these intellectual features are characteristic of the group of children who identify with the Girl.

A different principle governs the shift from the Girl's position, which is related to emotional involvement (factor F3 (-)). Here, the viewer's focus on emotionally supporting the character and his or her understanding the moral meaning of the latter's actions plays a crucial role. Furthermore, this "exit" from the Girl's position leads to a partial acceptance of the Teddy Bear's position in a situation of decentered identification.

Thus, analyzing the characteristics of a child's adoption of a decentered position towards the main cartoon characters reveals two extremely important points. One is related to the refusal to rely on personal experience when watching the cartoon and shifting attention to the relationships between characters. The other concerns the ability to *disidentify with* the character, allowing the viewer to shift between the positions of different characters while watching the film, as this type of viewer partially retains features of identification with both the Girl (according to factor F1) and the Teddy Bear (according to factor F3). It should be emphasized that in this case, we are touching upon a fundamental psychological theme related to the development of preschoolers' intelligence – the theme of decentration (Vygotskij, 2004; Piaget, 2001).

At the same time, it's equally important to discuss the decentered position of cartoon viewers apart from comparing the groups of children who identify with the Teddy Bear or Girl. Considering the similarities and differences with children taking a detached stance is also important. As shown in Figure 1, there is one fundamental similarity between these two groups. That is, children in both groups lack the tendency to relate the film's situations to their personal experiences. Instead, they focus on the relationships between the cartoon characters. Thus, they perceive the cartoon's reality as a special "not their own" but someone else's – artistic – reality. However, the attitude toward this "other," fictional reality is fundamentally different.

While some (children in a detached position) are unengaged with the cartoon's reality and actively distance themselves from it, others (children with a decentered position) are, on the contrary, actively involved in the film's events. Another important difference is that, for children with a decentered position, the focus is on considering moral norms in character relationships (allowing them to grasp the meaningful conflict underlying the work). In contrast, children with a detached position rely on fragmented reactions related to their attitudes towards the characters in specific situations.

4. Conclusion

Let's recall once again one of L.S. Vygotsky's key statements about art as a *social technique of feeling* and try to view our results from this perspective.

Even the title of the short cartoon we showed the children, *The Old Toy*, embeds a moral norm that the young viewer learns by experiencing a certain moral dilemma. To us adults, the film seems understandable, and its moral problem appears obvious. But is it really so? Surprisingly, the experiment's results show that children's reactions reveal aspects of the multiple meanings hidden within this "simple" ten-minute film. First and foremost, this multiplicity is connected to our ability to immerse ourselves in a fictional reality and experience it — perhaps with the same naivety as children do. And perhaps behind their naivety lies the depth essential for a creative experience of art.

Indeed, all four types of viewer perception of the cartoon show, on one hand, the fundamental features of intelligence that underlie the criteria for relating to the characters, and on the other hand, unique ways of identifying with them. Both the character's positions in their relationships with other characters and how they are presented on screen (from an external or internal point of view) are crucial for understanding the results obtained. In other words, we can assume that these features of viewer perception are characteristic of us adults as well. Who knows, perhaps adult subjects would reproduce the same four identification patterns. Could we be encountering a fundamental aspect of artistic perception here? It would be interesting to conduct such an experiment not only with younger students or teenagers but also with adults.

There is another aspect of the types identified that is worth discussing, that is, how and why they emerge. Perhaps, following Piaget's concept of how moral consciousness develops in preschool age, the initial type of artistic conflict perception is characteristic of the group of children who identify with the Girl (Piaget, 2006). This is the pre-conventional level, where the child perceives the conflict of character relationships through the lens of simple moral norms given by adults ("If a nasty bully beats a weak boy, I wouldn't even want to put such a boy in a book" (Mayakovskij, 2023). Then the child discovers the complex emotional world of others, relating the character's experiences to their personal feelings, and *sympathizing* with them (identification with the Teddy Bear). Having mastered these ways of perceiving a creative work, they become capable of holding different perspectives in character relationships (the decentered position). In essence, this is the transition from *inter to intra*, when the "miracle" occurs that Kant never tired of wondering about: the moral law "within me" (Kant, 1999).

As for the detached position, it characterizes the mechanism of refusing to get emotionally involved in the film's plot. On one hand, this might be the mechanism underlying the ability to resist emotional pressure. This is an important point that can be conventionally labeled as a defensive reaction to the emotional impact of a creative work. On the other hand, such a reaction may indicate an underdeveloped artistic sense. And that is a wake-up call for both parents and educators. How can we enable a child to relate their life experience to what they see on screen, and not only view the situation from different perspectives but actually *experience* the "rightness" of each character in search of their own position? After all, this search, based on the affective experience of contradictions in the characters' actions and relationships, determines the special cathartic experience that underlies the artistic perception of a creative work and sets the direction for developing art education.

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