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

Lyudmila I. Elkoninova
Moscow State University of Psychology & Education; Moscow School of Social and Economic Sciences, Moscow, Russia
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8257-7871, e-mail: milaelk@gmail.com

Peter A. Kryzhov
Moscow State University of Psychology & Education, Moscow, Russia
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3094-8321, e-mail: forlucker@yandex.ru

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.

Acknowledgements. The authors express their gratitude to the MSUPE Center for Psychological and Pedagogical Expertise of Play and Toys for providing dolls for organizing the experiment.


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 which are smoothed out, whilst the “decoding” of the symbolic meaning of the play vanishes into the background.

The difficulty of toy evaluation is that its developmental action is not “written” on the toy as a cultural object: 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 research 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-
Children'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 opposites).

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, Veronica, 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 disobedience, 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 (onestep 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 from. 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 7-year-old boy approached A., who was looking for a monster is a bright teenager with a unique appearance, claiming a new one: “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 (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).
The images of MH dolls are difficult to perceive due to 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?”). 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).

---

1 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 play, and this distinction arose during the development of the play plot. 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 way.

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 their 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).

---

3 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, and the werewolf had fun scaring Barbie, and as a result, some characters moved to other houses.

4 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.

**Analysis of the data.**

**Preparation of the material.**

Analyzing the data, we have formulated 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.

**Analysis of the data.**

**Preparation of the material.**

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 toy's 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.
References

19. Rice K., Prichard L., Tiggemann M., Slater A. Exposure to Barbie: Effects on thin-ideal internalisation, body

Litteratura

3. Лотман Ю.М. Куклы в системе культуры // Декоративное искусство СССР. 1978. № 2. С. 36—37.
5. Развитие основ рефлексивного мышления школьников в процессе учебной деятельности / Под ред. В.В. Давыдова, В.В. Рубцова; Психологический институт РАО, 1995. 227 с.
8. Смирнова Е.О. Орлова И.А., Соколова М.В., Смирнова С.Ю. Что видят и чего не видят дети в куклах Монстр Хай // Современное дошкольное образование. Теория и практика. 2016. № 2. С. 34—43.
9. Смирнова Е.О. Современные игрушки: риски и опасности (по материалам семинара в центре игры и игрушки МГППУ) // Культурно-историческая психология. 2016. Том 12. № 2. С. 86—89. DOI:10.17759/chp.2016120209
12. Эльконин Б.Д., Семенова В.И. Условия инициации пробного действия // Культурно-историческая психология. 2014. № 3. С. 95—100.
Information about the authors

Lyudmila I. Elkoninova, PhD in Psychology, associate professor, Moscow State University of Psychology & Education; lecturer, Moscow School of Social and Economic Sciences, Moscow, Russia, ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8257-7871, e-mail: milaelk@gmail.com

Peter A. Kryzhov, PhD student, Department of Educational Psychology, Moscow State University of Psychology & Education, Moscow, Russia, ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3094-8321, e-mail: forlucker@yandex.ru

Информация об авторах

Эльконинова Людмила Иосифовна, кандидат психологических наук, доцент кафедры возрастной психологии факультета психологии образования, Московский государственный психолого-педагогический университет (ФГБОУ ВО МГППУ); Московская высшая школа социальных и экономических наук (ОАО МВШСЭН), г. Москва, Российская Федерация, ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8257-7871, e-mail: milaelk@gmail.com

Крыжов Пётр Алексеевич, аспирант факультета психологии образования, Московский государственный психолого-педагогический университет (ФГБОУ ВО МГППУ), г. Москва, Российская Федерация, ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3094-8321, e-mail: forlucker@yandex.ru


