

# Social Influence on the Formation of Attitudes toward Political Personalities in Children

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**ABSTRACT----** *Authors aimed to study the influence of TV and parents on the formation of attitudes towards political personalities in children. Experiment was conducted in 2003 and 2006 (E series A and B respectively) in Georgia. Year of 2003 was distinguished by the widespread social-political protest against the government with mass media and general community openly supporting and propagating opposition leaders, while the year of 2006 was a period of relatively stable political situation. In both, A as well as B, third graders of elementary schools of both sexes, mean age 7.5, served as an experimental subjects. Photo of the flower (aster) was presented to each subject with a request to give a name to the flower that first comes to the mind. Experimental subjects were not familiar with the botanical name of the flower. Majority of subjects named the flower sample by the name of opposition leaders in the A. No names of political leaders have been registered in the B. Association of the flower with the name of a particular person reflects the mental connection of two emotionally positive stimuli – flower and person, which is nice to the subject. According to parents witness, adult household used to watch TV political broadcasts as well as to discuss political events in the presence of experimental subjects in 2003. Children in primary school age, not capable of understanding complicated social events, rely on the social environment bringing interpretation of political events and persons. Presumably results obtained demonstrate the strong TV and parental influence on the formation of positive attitudes of children towards political personalities.*

**Keywords--** children, attitude, society, political personalities, free association test

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Current study was aimed to study the influence of TV and parents on the formation of attitudes towards political personalities in children. According to Social Impact Theory [7] three powerful factors increase people's likelihood to respond to social influence. These factors are the following: strength (the importance of the influencing group to the individual), immediacy (physical and temporal proximity of the influencing group to the individual at the time of the influence attempt) and number (the number of people in the group). Mass media is well established powerful factor of social influence. TV is the average families' main source of gathering information, providing an outlet for spreading information and propaganda to all ages, including children. In particular, television has been shown to have a capacity to influence awareness and to change attitudes, beliefs and behaviors [5,6,7,9,10,12,13,14,15]. Television is a one-way medium, bringing interpretation of political events directly to the home of every citizen [5]. At the same time, household play important role as a influential social factor taking into account the importance of parents' opinion as well as physical and emotional proximity of parents to children [8,11].

## 2. MATERIAL AND METHODS

Experiment was conducted in the years 2003 and 2006 (Experimental series A and B respectively) in Georgia. Third graders of elementary schools in Tbilisi, the capital, 73 subjects in A and 65 subjects in B, of both sexes, mean age 7.5, served as an experimental subjects. Special written permission was taken from parents of experimental subjects. Free association test, specially designed for the purposes of the study presented, was delivered to all experimental subjects. Photo of the flower – Aster ammelus was presented to each subject with a request to give a name to the flower that first comes to the mind. Experimental subjects were not familiar with the botanical name of the flower. In preliminary interview, parents were questioned about the availability of political information to experimental subjects. According to parents' reports, adult household used to watch TV political broadcasts as well as to discuss political events in the presence of experimental subjects in 2003.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Out of the total of 73 names, given to flower sample in the A, 65 names referred to the first name or family name of political leaders, engaged in the political protest against the government. The rest 8 names referred either to the particular color or shape of the flower presented as well as to the first name of the household. No names of political leaders have been registered in the B. Total of 65 names, given to the flower sample referred either to the color or shape of the flower presented, as well as to the first name or nick-name of the household and friends. Table 1 represents the detailed description of the data obtained.

Table 1. Number and percentage of names given to the flower sample in the A and B

A	B
Name of political leaders - 60 (82 %)	Name of political leaders – 0
Family name of political leaders - 5 (7 %)	Family name of political leaders – 0
Color - 3 (4 %)	Color - 15 (23 %)
Shape (star) 2 (3 %)	Shape (star, palm) – 32 (49 %)
Name of mom 2 (3 %)	Name of mom – 13 (20 %)
Name of sibling 1 (1 %)	Name of sibling – 2 (3 %)
	Name of classmate – 1 (2 %)
	Nickname of friend – 2 (3 %)

Producing names referring to the color and shape should be ascribed to the process of direct matching of the physical features of the aster flower to particular color and shape. On the other hand, association of flower with the names of the household, classmate and friends should reflect the mental connection of two emotionally positive stimuli – flower and individual, which is nice to the experimental subject. The question rises as to what reasons names of politicians have been associated to positive stimulus – flower and why such associations have been revealed only in the first series of experiment (A). Presumably experimental subjects have got under the political propaganda of TV and parents – two powerful factors for child socialization. At the same time, the influence of TV and parents on the mind of children was different in the two periods of observation: 2003 and 2006.

In our opinion, situation in Georgia provided good model to study the effects of political propaganda on children. Experiment was conducted in one and the same social structure (primary school third graders) in two different situations: in the period of political anti-governmental protests (year 2003) and in times of relative political stability in 2006. In 2003 TV was actively engaged in anti-governmental movement and openly supported opposition. TV permanently transmitted the emotionally strained anti-governmental meetings, with people demanding the government to resign and crying out the names of opposition leaders. Opposition leaders made everyday appeals to people through all TV channels. According to parents witness, adult household used to watch TV political broadcasts as well as to discuss political events in the presence of experimental subjects in 2003. Thus, children had direct access to TV propaganda and at the same time, they can easily hear discussions held by the household in support of opposition leaders. In contrast, in the year 2006, TV was working in the stable every-day regime not overloaded with emotionally strained political propaganda. Adults in the families were less involved into political discussions.

People develop their political values, beliefs and orientations with agents of socialization throughout the life cycle. The formation of political values begins in early childhood and continues over a person's lifetime. Agents of socialization include parents, teachers, friends, coworkers, church, club members, mass media. School, family and mass media are the crucial factors of political socialization of children. The Cultivation Hypothesis suggests that some TV viewers may begin to repeat questionable or even fictitious information gleaned from the media as if it were factual [2,3,4]. In our opinion, experiment participant third graders were hardly capable of understanding complicated political situation and completely relied on the TV, bringing interpretation of political events. In 2003, TV actively cultivated the positive and even heroic image of opposition leaders and therefore, could trigger children's positive attitude towards these politicians. Parents, discussing political events in the presence of children, encouraged the development of a positive image of opposition politicians as well. Presumably results obtained demonstrate the powerful effect of TV propaganda and parents' opinion on the formation of the political values in children. At the same time, we do not know if experimental subjects experienced influence of political opinions of teachers and classmates. Therefore, the role of school community in the formation of political preferences of experimental subjects can not be completely excluded. At the same time, anti-government movement in 2003 was called as "Rose Revolution". The possibility remains, that at least some experimental subjects could associate the flower sample to the "Rose Revolution" and as a consequence, produce secondary associations to political leaders, engaged in "Rose Revolution".

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