

PERCEPTIONS OF FAMILIES AND PARENTHOOD HELD BY FEMALE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS: EVIDENCE FROM RUSSIA

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Abstract

The paper presents the results of a study into the perceptions about family and parenthood held by female university students in Russia. First of all, the study highlighted a prevailing idea, that a family is a social institution primarily concerned with facilitating the reproduction, socialization and support of the personal and emotional status of its members. Second, our research into the idea of a happy family brought forward the notion of a large family with several children, characterised by mutual understanding, harmony and love. Third, we found that female students on the whole held a positive view of parenthood. We also identified the perceived drawbacks of parenthood among the students. Finally, we examined views on what «being a parent» involved.

The research led to the conclusion that at the cognitive and emotional levels, there is no breakdown of the institution of the family in Russia. At the same time, there appears to be a growth in negative attitudes toward parenthood, which evolve under the influence of external factors. One of the approaches to making reproductive attitudes more resilient against such factors is to ensure that university education systems make a provision for components focused on reproductive intentions and behaviours.

Key words: family, parenthood, female university students, perceptions

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Introduction

The demographic situation in Russia remains volatile. Between 2001 and 2007, the country saw growing birth rates, however the changes year-on-year were highly variable. Since 2008, the rate of growth in Russian fertility has been steadily declining, except a spike in 2012, when new rules for registering new births were introduced (Demographic indicators of, 2015). The negative trends in birthrates call for improving the effectiveness of demographic policy measures. Studies of university students are particularly sought after today, given the

high quality and value of the human capital of this social group. Meanwhile, their time at university is a period of intense development of different values and ideals, which will shape their direction in life, their plans, orientations and beliefs.

The study of reproductive plans and beliefs and values systems among different social groups has a long history (Wilson& Bumpass, 1973; Mahler, 1999; Foster& Biggs, 2008). Matters related to reproductive intentions are also topical in today's Russia (Maleva&Sinyavskaya, 2007; Zvereva & Arkhangelsky, 2012; Il'inykh, 2014). In our previous research, we presented the results of a study into beliefs and stereotypes about parenthood held by pregnant women (Shubat&Bagirova, 2013). In recent years, there has a great deal of academic interest in attitudes towards families and parenthood among university students (Peterson&Pirritano, 2012; Barnhart&Raval, 2013; Mazerolle& Gavin, 2013).

1 Data and Methods

The paper presents the results of a study on perceptions of family and parenthood held by female university students in Russia. We carried out a sample survey in 2014 among 160 young women, who were selected using stratified sampling. The sampling error did not exceed 3%. The questionnaire comprised open and closed-ended questions. We asked respondents about their perceptions of family in contemporary society, the advantages and disadvantages of having children and also about the meaning of parenthood.

The focus of our research was female students, rather than the entire population of university students. We believe that a differentiated evaluation of gender groups is more productive as regards both the objectives of the present study and also the integration of our findings into demographic policy practices. For a variety of reasons (psychological, biological, anthropological and social), young men and women exhibit differing levels of engagement when it comes to issues of family and children. Such differences should be accounted for and reflected in gender-specific measures aimed at encouraging people to have families and children.

2 Results

We obtained the following results in our research. First, when asked about the purpose of a family in today's society, the students' responses were distributed thus: over 40% emphasised its reproductive function ("A family is needed to have children"); around 75% focused on its socialisation function ("A family is needed to raise and develop children"); another 75% said

a family is first and foremost a source of psychological support and another 58% highlighted interaction and shared leisure activities. Sexual and economic functions did not prevail in the minds of our respondents – only 21% and 3% of students (respectively) said these are key functions of a family.

Second, when describing a happy family, young women either focused on the relationship between its members or on its size and structure. Thus 75% of respondents pointed to the need for mutual understanding, respect, harmony and love. In their comments, they said that a happy family is “a family that supports each of its members”, “a large family, which sits down to dinner together and spends a lot of time with one another”, “a family that lives in harmony, with children born into a loving environment”, “a family where no-one has any issues with anyone else, where everyone is comfortable with one another and lives in peace and understanding” and so on. Significantly fewer women (45%) emphasised quantitative aspects of a happy family, such as the presence of children or of both parents. For example, some respondents said that a happy family is “a marriage of at least 10 years, with two or more children”, “a beloved husband and three children”, “a family with many children”, “a family with both parents and a child”, “three children, a husband, a wife and two dogs”. A quarter of the respondents highlighted both qualitative and quantitative aspects of a happy family. Only 8% said that financial wellbeing was a feature of a happy family.

Third, in the course of the study, we were able to ascertain young women's views on the advantages of parenthood. These are presented in Table 1.

Tab. 1: Advantages of having children

Advantages	% of respondents
Children give life a sense of fullness and meaning	95
Children improve relations in the family	47
Children are a way to fulfil my duty, to extend my family line	44
Having children means I will not face old age alone	38
Children enable self-actualisation	19
Children raise my social status	5
Children guarantee financial security in old age	4
Children contribute to my material well-being	1
No answer	2

Source: data of the survey

Fourth, we obtained the respondents' views on the disadvantages of having children. These are presented in Table 2.

Tab. 2: Disadvantages of having children

Disadvantages	% of respondents
Children impede professional self-actualization	34
Having children is a financial burden	33
Children prevent me from finding a good job	11
Children prevent me from enjoying life	6
Children add uncertainty about the future	5
Children have an adverse impact on the quality of your relationship with your spouse and the possibility of finding romantic happiness	1
No answer	51

Source: data of the survey

A comparison of the above answers highlights the following points:

- about 60% of respondents chose three advantages of having children, whereas the proportion of those who selected three disadvantages was significantly less (just 9%);
- half of the respondents did not choose any of the suggested disadvantages, however only 2% of the females did not choose a single advantage;
- on average, every surveyed student pointed to 0.8 disadvantages and 2.5 advantages of having children;
- most often, the respondents picked three advantages (60% of those surveyed) and no disadvantages (51% of the sample) of parenthood.

Finally, we studied the students' views on what they believe “being a parent” involves. First and foremost, we note that 90% of the young women gave at least some answer, which is quite high for an open-ended question. Moreover, we identified two parts to the respondents' views on parenthood. In the first instance, the young women highlighted certain obligations that parents have towards children. This includes things like “being responsible for your children” (67% of respondents) and “taking care of your children” (25% of respondents). The idea of caring for children was defined rather loosely and included education, development, help, psychological and material support. Secondly, female students noted particular advantages of fulfilling parental obligations. For example, they said that being a parent meant “self-actualizing as an individual” and “being a happy person”.

3 Discussions

Our research has shown that in the minds of female university students, a family is a social institution that fulfils the functions of reproduction, socialisation and emotional and personal support of its members. We can say that children are the centrepiece of ideas about a family. Indeed, they are the outcome of reproduction as a family function. Children are both the object and the subject of socialisation as a family function. Moreover, the psychological support function noted by respondents is also likely linked to the parent-child relationship. We have arrived at this final conclusion in light of the marginal and transitional status of university students, their emotional and financial dependence on their parents, and the fact that most of the students do not have families of their own.

When speaking about children as the centrepiece of the idea of a family, we believe our respondents' views to be somewhat utilitarian in light of the psychological specifics and egocentric perceptions of family exhibited by young people. Thus some of the young women we surveyed may interpret the phrase “a family is required to have, raise and socialise children” as meaning “a family is required to have, raise and socialise Me”. However we believe that our results enable drawing the following conclusion: a crisis of the institution of the family, which has been a hot topic of debate in the Russian scientific community in recent years, has not yet manifested itself at the cognitive and emotional levels among female university students in Russia.

This conclusion is supported by the respondents' ideas about what constitutes a happy family. In the minds of the students, this is usually a family where understanding, harmony and love reign supreme. Often, this is a large family with several children. Age factors are likely to be behind the relatively small proportion of respondents who link a happy family with the presence of one or more children. The late teens and early 20s are a period when the emotional side of relationships (feelings, understanding, support and love) outweighs their outcomes (marriage, children).

The students' views on parenthood also support our hypothesis about a lack of a cognitive or emotional crisis as regards the family institution. At the heart of the positive image is the idea that children fill life with meaning. This is enhanced by the potential psychological advantages of having children – improved family relationships and a reduced risk of loneliness in old age. Moreover, for the students, the idea of parenthood is permeated with recognition of the need to carry out “socio-reproductive” obligations in the future, such as fulfilling a duty and continuing one’s family line.

We note that negative perceptions of having children are considerably less prominent than positive ones. At their core is the belief that children are an obstacle to an individual's economic activities, such as professional self-actualisation, and also the creators of economic burdens. Yet our results support the idea that negative views of parenthood are not the product of antagonistic views on the subject, but are rather born of a more profound understanding of the challenges that accompany it.

The results of our research have shown that there is a multi-faceted view of parenthood: young women have an understanding of both positive and negative aspects of having children. Moreover, this looks to be a view based on many components, including biological, psychological and social factors.

Our research has shown that female students are concerned with what “being a parent” really means. In the minds of the young women, the image of parenthood is filled with different obligations that parents have towards children. We believe that this could be linked to a number of factors. The first is a youthful propensity towards maximalist thinking, egocentrism and the status of being a child (albeit a grown-up one) in their parents' family. These factors could be behind additional demands towards their own parents. Second, something of a compensatory mechanism could be at play, where the respondents noted down qualities they feel are lacking in their parents. Yet the opposite could be true: the respondents could be modelling their answers on a perfect example of care and responsibility exhibited by their own parents. Finally, there could also be a certain archetype of parenthood – a certain primary image that young people associate with responsible parenting.

Conclusion

Our research has led to the conclusion that at the cognitive and emotional levels, there is no breakdown of the institution of the family. At the same time, there appears to be a growth in negative attitudes toward parenthood, which evolve under the influence of external factors. This leads to a subsequent decline in the potentially high level of reproductive activity among young people, in turn contributing to adverse demographic trends. In our view, there should be deliberate targeting of these processes throughout the time that young people are at university, when their values and ideals are falling into place. An education system focused on reproductive intentions and behaviours, which would be a core component of the entire university education process, could be an instrument for such targeted influence. By partaking in this type of education, young people would gain a set of certain skills and establish

particular expectations and aspirations that are required to fulfil their reproductive, familial and parental potential and ensure high-quality parenting in the future.

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