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Childfree as a Social Phenomenon: Russians' Attitude to Voluntary Childlessness

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Abstract

This paper investigates the childfree phenomenon in the context of Russian society. The late modernism dramatically affects the structure of society and traditional social values. This applies to the social institution of the family and the social norm of parenthood. These social changes can be considered, on the one hand, from the position of hyperliberalization and autonomy of the individual, and, on the other, as a manifestation of the institutional crisis of the family. The latter point of view is more typical of the Russian sociological tradition. The paper deals with the study of the main reasons for the appearance and spread of the phenomenon and the classification of childfree. Based on the results of a questionnaire survey conducted by the authors, the paper provides data on the relative potential possibility for the distribution of childfree ideas in Russia. The survey results show that about half of Russians have heard about childfree. 40% of Russians give negative evaluation to childfree, about half of Russians are neutral to people who have voluntarily refused to parenthood. The data correlate with the studies of public opinion poll centers, according to which about half of the respondents express their loyal and neutral attitude. More than half of surveyors see a potential threat in the childfree movement for Russian society, noting at the same time (45%) that the phenomenon is not widespread in Russia. The authors see the prospects for research in the study of the relationship of age groups and the degree of loyalty to childfree.

Keywords: Childfree, Voluntarily refusal of parenthood, Social attitudes, Social values, Family.

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Introduction

Amid the “Runaway World” of late modernism, the society represents an extremely volatile, dynamic system with many social norms blurred, such as family, marriage, parenthood and maternity (Giddens, 2003). The role and importance of social institutions, including the institution of the family, is re-evaluated; societal and individual functions are redefined; the value-institutional basis of their functioning becomes eroded.

The state of the institution of the family in Russian sociological science is often characterized from the standpoint of an institutional crisis, which is explained by the social changes in the traditional nuclear family, the partial loss of meaningful functions, their transition to other social institutions, for example, education (Antonov, 2014). At the same time, some sources consider families without children anomalous, due to the lack of parenthood (Druzhinin, 2006) and interpret them from the point of view of abnormality.

Sociological discussions about the institutional crisis of the family are accompanied by research on issues and trends related to the increase in the number of divorces, extramarital motherhood and lonely parenthood, premarital and extramarital sexual activity, an increase in the childless period of the family, the spread of forms of birth control, such as abortion and contraception, as well as a relatively new phenomenon in the context of Russian realities such as voluntary childlessness.

The relevance of the study of childfree as a social phenomenon in Russian society is due to several reasons. Firstly, there is a yearly negative natural increase in population in Russia (Rudnitskaia & Novikov, 2014), which, during the last five years, have caused discussions and proposals of some conservative political, religious and public figures on the "moral traditional values" to impose a tax on childlessness and non-marriage (Filippova, 2017). Obviously, the dissemination of voluntary abandonment of parenthood can further exacerbate demographic problems. Secondly, sociological studies have recorded a stably high position of the family, children in the hierarchy of values of Russians and the deep rootedness of parenthood and maternity as social norms, which raises the question of the semantic interpretations, the degree of loyalty to this idea and the possibilities of distribution of childfree in Russia. At the same time, one should take into account the fact that recently there has been rise in the number of the supporters of the idea, as evidenced, for example, by one and a half times increase in the number of social groups on the Internet in the last year, and the activity of users in adopting and disseminating the ideas of childfree is much higher than that of the groups and institutions aimed at promotion of traditional family values.

Given the level of importance and urgency of this problem, there is still a few studies devoted to voluntary childlessness in Russia. The sociological analysis of the mass survey data proposed in the paper is aimed at revealing the attitude of Russians of reproductive age to childfree and the possibility of spreading the movement of "non-parents" in Russia.

The results of the study show two dominant groups of opinions among Russians: 49% of respondents have a neutral attitude towards childfree, 40% - negative. The collected data can be used to solve practical issues related to optimizing the demographic policy and prediction of possible scenarios of reproductive behavior. The question of 10% of respondents positively predisposed to this idea remains open: how far the acceptance of the idea can become the basis for their personal biographical project.

Methods

In the course of the research, we applied a traditional analysis of documents, a survey of Russians of reproductive age (N=407, December 2016 - January 2017), and a secondary analysis of data from Russian public opinion poll centers.

Results

Childfree as a movement appears in the west in the eighties of the twentieth century. According to data by A. Giddens, 20% of women born between 1960 and 1990 in the UK will remain childless on their own volition. The figures presented by Amy Blackstone in regard to the American society indicate that the number of childless women aged 40 years was 10% in 1976, and 23% in 2006 (Blackstone, 2012). Voluntarily childless women resist the combination of the discourse of femininity with motherhood, transform the discourse of femininity and give it alternative meanings (Gillespie, 2000). The dissemination of childfree as a form of social renunciation of the birth of children is based on several reasons, including the development of a culture of individualism, hedonism, women's access to the labor market, opportunities for autonomy and self-realization through work, and freedom of choice of life style (Giddens, 2009). Researchers of the transformation of family-marriage relations have noted that childfree as a social movement has a significant impact on the state of the institution of the family.

The adherents of the movement consider the category "childfree" to be a more correct option for self-identification, because the term "childless" characterizes people voluntarily refusing to parenthood as unhappy and deprived of the ability to have children. When classifying groups of childfree, the Western sociologists distinguish those who have a dislike for

children, and those who are attracted by a carefree lifestyle (Veevers, 1980; Gillespie, 2003), as well as those who have a latent desire and/or potentially do not deny but constantly postpone the birth of children (the so-called "ambivalent childlessness") (Kneale & Joshi, 2008). The researchers of the childfree phenomenon note that, compared with previous decades, the number of adherents in the West has been growing (by spreading and accepting ideas in social classes with lower level of incomes, education and high religiosity), and negative attitudes regarding voluntary childlessness thaw (Basten, 2009). The last remark concerns also texts of Western textbooks devoted to the problems of family and marriage (Chancey & Dumais, 2009).

In Russia, on the one hand, there is an increase in individualistic, pragmatic social landmarks, and, on the other hand, a high place of the family in the value system. At the same time, the number of divorces have remained highly stable for the last fifteen years in the range of 50-70% (while in 2015 this figure was 52%) (Natural Change in Population, 2017). Contradictory tendencies in the position of the institution of marriage and the family must be considered in conjunction with the relatively new to Russian society social phenomenon - childfree - and the attitude of Russians towards it. However, in Russian literature this problem has not been studied enough. A few Russian studies devoted to this phenomenon touch upon the aspects of the problem related to communicative strategies of the representation of this ideology in social network texts (Antonova, 2013), to the life scenarios of adherents of childfree from the point of view of psychology (Kamzina & Samykina, 2014), the prevalence of childfree in the student environment in the context of pedagogical work with youth (Kislov & Shapko, 2016), and a number of others.

To clarify the potential possibility for the dissemination of the childfree idea, the conducted survey included a question about the Russians' awareness of this phenomenon: the majority of respondents (54%) have heard about childfree, 34% - have not ever heard, 13% - did not answer.

The attitude of the surveyed to people who voluntarily refuse to have children is as follows: half of the respondents (49%) are neutral to this group of people, 22% are more likely to be negative, 19% are negative, 7% are more positive, and 2% are positive. At the same time, 85% of respondents expressed a positive attitude to the question about the attitude towards children, 12% - took a neutral position, and 4% of the respondents shared a negative attitude.

Among other things, the respondents were asked how they assess the degree of threat of the childfree movement for a modern family. Most respondents gave a positive answer to the question (58%). 17% of the surveyed see no threat of childfree.

45% of the respondents expressed the opinion that childfree is not commonly distributed in Russia, 27% - estimated its prevalence as an average, 14% - spoke about the absence of this social phenomenon in Russia. 12% and 3% noted a sufficient and a huge extent of the childfree phenomenon in Russia, respectively. The expectations of respondents regarding the possibility and predictions of distribution of childfree in Russia were distributed as follows: 57% believe that the number of adherents of childfree will increase, 18% - do not think so.

The question of the motives of people who joined this ideology was asked in an open form and grouped as follows: selfishness and the desire to be free from responsibility (33%), fear (17%), personal choice (15%), insolvency and immaturity (8%), difficulties of childhood (7%), protest and stupidity (3%), and 16% - found it difficult to answer.

The answers to the question "Do you share the point of view, which is the basis of a refusal of childbearing?" were distributed as follows: 47% completely do not share this point of view; 18% - half-and-half; 13% completely do not share. The point of view of refusing parenthood is shared completely and partially by 4 and 8% of respondents, respectively. The remaining 10% found it difficult to answer the question.

Discussion

The results of the mass survey show that people of reproductive age predict the depression in traditional family values and see a threat to the institution of the family from the spread of the childfree movement. Conscientious refusal of childbearing can adversely affect the demographic situation in Russia, where migration flows are not as high as in Europe, which, presumably, largely normalizes demographic indicators right due to the influx of migrants. At the same time, the neutral attitude towards people who decided to refuse childbearing is predominant. About half of the respondents of reproductive age, according to the questionnaire, are neutral to the social phenomenon of childfree, 40% show their negative attitude. This is comparable to the data of 2015 obtained by the Levada Center, according to which 44% of Russians are considered to be voluntary childless (Childfree, 2017). In 2008, the Public Opinion Research Foundation (PORF) recorded 27% of Russians who condemned childfree, 60% were neutral to the adherents of the idea (Childlessness and Unwillingness to Have Children, 2017). This, on the one hand, may indicate a tendency to reduced loyalty to voluntary childlessness, but on the other, this assumption requires more detailed study in the light of the fact that among students, according to a regional study in Russia, only 24% of respondents expressed their negative attitude towards childfree in 2016 (5% expressed adherence to the idea) (Kislov & Shapko, 2016), which may indicate a higher level of

tolerance to the alternative life scenario among boys and girls aged 18-23 years. Such ambiguous results in the context of loyalty among Russians to the phenomenon require further elaboration and study. In addition to the aspect of loyalty, an important field for sociological analysis is the dynamics and factors of the spread of the social phenomenon, the motives and social strategies of the adherents of childfree.

Conclusion

Childfree is a relatively new to Russian society movement, however its distribution speed among the subscribers in the networks suggests that the idea of voluntary refusal of parenthood is interesting to the young segment of the Internet audience. The change in the social value of parenthood in the family, the change in the interpreting the discourse of femininity in circumvention of maternity comes amid globalization, development of the culture of neon-narcissism, and change in the socioeconomic position of women in society. The attitude of Russians revealed during the mass survey to the idea of refusing to give birth to children demonstrates two dominant opinions - loyal and negative - to this phenomenon, with more than half of those surveyed calling childfree as a threat to the institution of the Russian family, but not considering it to be a widespread phenomenon at the moment.

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