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Life Stories of Women: Terminated Parental Rights

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Abstract

The article presents the results of the analysis of women's life stories whose parental rights are terminated. The applied sociological research is conducted in three Russian regions: Belgorod, Saratov regions and the Trans-Baikal Territory in 2017. The main method for the collection of primary data is the depth interview (n = 15). The study evaluates the analysis of an individual case and the reconstruction of frames which are based on the observed practices of destructive maternity, and help to identify two main strategies of women's behavior referring to the role of "mother". The first strategy is related to the place of motherhood in the self-identity system that means the stronger the awareness of a woman herself as a "parent", the more likely the child will be returned home. One of the most stimulating factors increasing the maternal awareness is the influence of woman's immediate environment, including members of extended family or a new spouse. The second strategy demonstrates conscious changes in women's life trajectories regarding voluntary renunciation from the role of parent under difficult circumstances. The subjective paradigms of the second strategy, based on the self-excuse (the child will be better in an orphanage or in a foster family) and are accompanied by the identity crisis and the deep degradation of woman's personality.

Keywords: Life history, Women, Termination of parental rights, Sociological research.

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INTRODUCTION

The conceptual framework of the interdisciplinary study of social orphanhood's problems is primarily in the fields of sociology, law, education, and psychology. Sociological studies of the family develop the issues of social orphanhood in the logic of the family crisis and the family roles' changes (Antonov, 2011). Deviantology views social orphanhood as a consequence of anomie in the society which leads to the degradation of motherhood and parenting (Grigoreva, 2008). Sociology of childhood (Mayorova-Shcheglova, 2013) pays particular attention to methodological principles of up-bringing and education of children in bio-families and in out-of-home care.

Some studies focus on life trajectories of incarcerated women as a reason of orphanhood (Kruttschnitt & Bijleveld, 2017); others bring attention to the special turning points in women's lives and illuminate relationships between identity, learning and agency that develop through work, family and life experiences (Evans & Biasin, 2017); the third put some stress on the role of parent substance abuse and its influence on danger to children (Kepple, 2017), while the fourth group of scientists show the correlation between prolonged interpersonal childhood trauma in institutional settings and motivation capacities in adulthood (Weindl, Knefel, Glück, Tran, & Lueger-Schuster, 2017).

The research of life trajectories of parents who's parental rights are terminated allows to divide them into four groups: (1) in the first group most of parents do not have clearly articulated goals for the further life perspective and do not make any attempts to change their life style and return the custody of their children; (2) parents of the second group show the intention to change the situation in the next marriage, parenting other children; (3) the third group of informants demonstrate the potential to return their children, making positive personality changes; (4) respondents of the fourth group, whose children are in kinship care have very low motivation to restoration of their parental rights (Volkova, Beschetnova, Mozgovaya, Babintsev, & Zhiron, 2017).

The analysis of theoretical approaches regarding reasons of social orphanhood allows talking about four mainstreams in sociological studies: (1) macro-social crises, (2) institutional anomalies, (3) social dysfunction, and (4) individual violations. Most of works on social orphanhood are devoted to the study of personal characteristics of children left without parental care, the structural and institutional factors of abandonment or the evaluation of rehabilitation and socialization measures of this category of children.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

In this article the authors make an attempt to look at the problem of social orphanhood with the point of view of the concept of frames, offered by I. Goffman (1974). The choice of the methodology is due to the growing interest to microsociology in the last decade which is the result of the increasing influence of modern globalization trends. The study of life trajectories of women terminated of parental rights, seems to be interesting through understanding of their life courses, where the practice of termination/restoration of parental rights are out of the opposition "subjective – objective" certainty, instead they are both internally and externally determined. The analysis of life stories of women terminated of parental rights, and in a few cases of women whose parental rights are restored, gives us the opportunity to realize the architectonics of social orphanhood in the modern contexts. According to V. Vakhshayn, the frame is a matrix of events and at the same time the interpretation of the events by actors participating in them (Vakhshayn, 2011). So I. Goffman's concept of frames allows considering a matrix of events as well as a scheme of interpretation of these events by specific people simultaneously.

The research contains the empirical data, obtained in Belgorod, Saratov regions and the Trans-Baikal Territory in January – March 2017. The main method of collecting primary data was the depth interview.

The procedure consists of three blocks: 1) history of termination of parental rights; 2) the further fate of women and children; 3) actions taken to restore the rights.

The objective of the study is the analysis of life stories of women terminated of parental rights (n = 15), two of them have restored their rights and returned children to the bio-family, and one woman is in the process of restoration of rights at the time of the interview. Mostly informants are women 30-45 years, living in rural areas, with a history of alcohol or drug dependence. The research is conducted with the financial support of the Russian Foundation for Basic Research (The life trajectories of children and their biological parents restored their parental rights, project 16-03-00057).

EMPIRICAL RESULTS

During the research the authors have faced with some difficulties regarding data collection from informants. Firstly, this was due to the informants' physical and psychological conditions (some of them were out of home for a long time, in alcohol/drug intoxication, demonstrated inadequate or aggressive behavior). In most cases we contacted with women whose parental rights were limited and who had a strong intention to return the child to the family and actively collaborated with social services, guardianship authorities and other institutions. Secondly, it was necessarily to make tremendous efforts to overcome woman's suspicion and hostility and start the conversation. The only exception was those women who had got some alcohol/drug treatment, but these were isolated cases.

1. Frame is as a universal explanatory category: the restoration of parental rights

Story 1.1

Interviewer: Tell me please, what did you feel when your child was returned home?

Woman: Relief, primarily because I have walked a long thorny way and can feel like I'm a mom 100 % again. Although I have been the "mother" for 13 years, but in order to find myself again in this format formally – it is a great joy, relief and maybe even pride that I have managed to achieve this goal. Unfortunately, I was a bad mom and they [note: the guardianship authorities] took my son away. I was unable to provide my child with the necessary level of care and nutrition. I had such a difficult period in my life, and the guardianship made a decision to terminate my parental rights. It's hard to talk about it now. The reason was the drug addiction. I took a course of treatment. Now this problem is behind me.... Well, that has happened. The most difficult thing was to deal with myself during a long treatment; it was a hard internal work.

Interviewer: Have you completed the full rehabilitation course?

Woman: Certainly, because only after that you are able to start the procedure of coming the child back. But it's only formalities, you know.... I am very glad that I'm not in category of risk now, and I have been given the right to up-bring my child myself (Belgorod region, woman, 35 years old, restored her parental rights).

This fragment of interview shows that for the woman her role as mother is significant that in the temporal context sounds like "bad mother" in the past and "mom" at present. This case helps to understand that the woman has lost her orientation in the social and role space, but obviously the power of self-identification with the role of mother has helped her to return to the normal condition and motherhood.

The analysis of collected stories illustrates that one of the causes of women's alcoholism is the break-downs with a boy-friend or husband. The research of modern Russian sociologists [Gurko, 2013; Kozlova, 2016] proves that in most cases the rejection of the child and avoidance of parental responsibilities are dictated

by the feeling of revenge to the man, by the intention to quit, forget the last psycho-traumatic events and to create a new family. In addition to that, a woman living with an alcoholic man began to abuse alcohol herself or comes to alcoholism due to the experienced infidelity or separation.

Story 1.2

I've got married very early. I thought we would be a happy family. In two years I've got a baby, my wonderful girl. My husband and I called her Ksenia. The husband loved me and our daughter. Two years later I've got pregnant again, the pregnancy was not planned, my husband did not want the child, but I decided to keep the baby anyway. We had very hard time financially and psychologically too. There were constant scandals, sometimes it came to fights, despite the fact that I was pregnant and I had two-year-old daughter. In March I gave a birth to a wonderful little boy Kirill. I took care of the children all time, the husband had been working hard, but money was desperately short, and he was constantly reproaching me that it was my fault and I shouldn't have the second child. I was silent and was trying to be patient. Three years later, when our daughter was 5 years old and Cyril was 2, the husband came and said that he was leaving me for another woman that I was not the same as before... Of course, what would I be? I have been taking care of my kids.

Interviewer: What has happened next? How did it happen that you had lost the custody of your children?

Woman: After husband's leaving the world became empty to me... I forgot about the children, I forgot to feed them, and one day, I took them to my mother, and went to the club with a friend, where she offered me to "relax" ... to take a drug... and then... and then what? Then the clubs, the booze, the drugs, the new men who took turns one after the other... I gradually began to forget about problems with money and my children were remained at home along, with nothing to eat except chips... then I got dependent of drugs.

I kept changing new men and brought them home, kids did not go to the kindergarten, and they stayed home and cried all the time... I did not clean the house, the kids were dirty and hungry, often were begging for food..., so neighbors called the social services and one day they came... The house was a mess, I was under drugs and I didn't care what was going on in this world....

I woke up in a methadone clinic where I was brought by my mom... you know... when I understood what had happened, I had been crying for a long time... I didn't know what to do... and one night I had a dream that my little kids were sitting in the room and weeping bitterly, and called me, and, you know, after that I decided to change my life... Well, husband is not a light in the window, and he is not my life, but the children... Kids are everything to me, they make my life worth... and the money... you know, there is always a lack of money.

Interviewer: Have you taken a rehabilitation course?

Woman: Yes, after that night I began to recover quickly, I went through all of this. I had done it for my children. I was released from the hospital and found a job. My mom helped me to make the repairs in my apartment, because after all the parties it looked like a basement for the homeless... I worked, worked very hard, I worked for the kids.

In a year and half I applied to the court to return the children. During this period I had been working. I also provided positive characteristics from the place of residence and the place of work. The staff of social services and the orphanage confirmed that I regularly visited my kids, brought gifts to them and paid alimony. The employers of Guardianship Department periodically come to visit our family and they don't complain about me.

Interviewer: What can you say or recommend to parents who are in such a difficult situation?

Woman: As I have already said, no man, no club or a friend can replace the joy of motherhood, when your kids laugh and say, "mommy, you're the best, we love you most of all"... believe me... that's the most important thing in life...I only regret about one thing, and I'll never forgive myself that I have forgotten about my kids for two years... I hope they will forgive me someday, because I've got out of this abyss for them... not everyone will be able to do that (Belgorod, woman, 33 years, restored her parental rights).

This story demonstrates the collapse of the established woman's life, and the chain of changes, including the drug addiction, immoral lifestyles, social decline, and termination of parental rights. In this case we observe a strong binding of identity to the role of "woman", "wife", and after that as a result of the reframing of consciousness is the return to the frame, where the role of motherhood as the main purpose of life is dominated. Woman's identity has a great influence on the positive or negative outcome of the situation. According to the research, the support system, obviously, plays the key role in the outcome of the identity crisis. In all stories where women manage to return the child, there is a powerful support from the mother or a new husband.

The problem of economic insecurity is presented in all informants' stories, either as a cause of alcohol or drug abuse, or on the contrary, as a consequence of addiction. From our point of view, the main conditions for the procedure of restoration of parental rights are the ability to obtain the stable income and provide comfortable accommodation for the child. Among the surveyed women, there are those who have abandoned or suspended the process of restoration of parental rights due to the lack of funds. Feeling the despair, women begin to abuse alcohol/drugs again and make the recovery process and the restoration of parental rights more complicated. In this study, only three cases out of fifteen have the successful outcome – the returning children to their bio-families.

2. Frames of rejection of motherhood in the system of identity

Story 2.1

In one of the family fights a woman injured her spouse with a knife, after that she was imprisoned, and her parental rights were terminated. Her husband was deprived of parental rights too because of alcohol abuse. Their custody on their daughter was given to the grandmother. After a year in prison, the mother came back because of the amnesty. In the interview she said, she wanted to restore her parental rights, but she had no permanent job. The woman did satisfied that the grandmother took care of her daughter, so she did not make any attempts or active actions regarding the restoration of parental rights (Saratov, woman, 41 years, deprived of parental rights).

In some cases, the woman builds their emotional and explanatory frame around the fact that her child is living in good conditions: in kinship care, foster family or in an institution, while in other situations there is a strong desire and attempt to return the child, but there is not enough effort to overcome the addiction.

Story 2.2

Galina, a woman of aged 41, had three minor children. Because of her asocial behavior, poor living conditions her parental rights were terminated and children were brought into the state custody. In 2014, she gave a birth to another child. In fact, it was not possible to return children from institutional care to the family, because of the extremely poor living conditions, moral and psychological climate as well as very low income of the family, that threat to the lives and health of children (Trans-Baikal Territory, woman, 39 years, deprived of parental rights).

Unfortunately, the most typical situations when there are not any perspectives of returning children to a bio-family due to the antisocial way of parents' lives, poverty, unemployment, alcohol or drug abuse, degradation.

DISCUSSIONS

The problem of social orphanhood cannot be seen with the point of view of the immorality of women terminated of parental rights. In the sociological and law context, it is possible to link the phenomenon of social orphanhood with the problems of drug addiction and alcoholism as triggering mechanisms leading to the decay of the family, woman's personality, and crime.

Today the dialectics of parenthood and childhood unequivocally asserts the priority of family up-bringing of children, although the priorities of institutional and collective care of children took place in our history in the past. However, the understanding of all the benefits of family care does not always guarantee the willingness of parent to perform their functions properly.

CONCLUSION

This article contains only a few life stories of women faced with termination of parental rights. Frame analysis of destructive motherhood has helped us to consider two framework strategies of women's life trajectories. The first strategy is related to motherhood in the system of self-identification: the stronger the woman's association with parenting and the support of her immediate environment, the more likely she comes back to the normal life. The second strategy is characterized by woman's self-justification, identity crisis and changing of motherhood values under the influence of difficult life circumstances.

Despite the differences in women' life stories, some common reasons of termination of parental rights have been identified: poverty, alcoholism, unemployment, the high level of aggression in the society which generates anomie of family and provokes the refusal of women from parental responsibilities.

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