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# CHILDFREE AS SOCIAL PROBLEM: REPRESENTATIONS OF RUSSIANS ABOUT VOLUNTARY CHILDLESSNESS

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## ABSTRACT

The paper includes the constructivist approach to studying the childfree phenomenon. Childfree is a fairly new phenomenon, characterizing, from one point of view, the crisis of the traditional family relations, from another point of view, the evolution of the social institution. Within the framework of this paper, childfree is considered from the standpoint of the process of constructing a social problem within the framework of the concept of M. Spektor and J. Kitsyuz. [4] Despite the fact that voluntary childlessness is on the periphery of public arena, the social phenomenon is actively discussed by the inhabitants, including within the Internet sites, which allowed making a mass survey to reveal the image of the deliberately childless people that exists among citizens. We identified the most loyal group within the population, sympathizing with the world view of childfree people: single childless young girls. At the same time, it was noted that the neutral attitude of citizens, with a slight preponderance to the negative pole of the scale, to the deliberately childless people, somehow neighbors the respondents' high anxiety about the future development of the childfree problem and the degree of spread of this phenomenon. Thus, according to the results of the author's survey, it is possible to fix in the society some traces of the unfolded moral panic produced by the mass media regarding the childfree topic.

## INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, public institutions are constantly in the process of development and change. Some scientists consider such transformations as manifestations of the crisis of established social institutions, other researchers tend to see changes in the manifestation of new stages in the life activity of social organizations, their adaptation to the changing conditions of the society's life. To date, changes in family-marriage relations do not lose their relevance, since the family is one of the main social institutions. Among other things, new forms of family behavior, to which the childfree worldview can be attributed, receive broad public discussion and scientific study. Childfree means an outlook that involves voluntary social abandonment of the birth and adoption of children due to personal, non-medical reasons.

The study of childfree in sociologists most often involves studying the features of the value orientations of childfree, generalized notions of the childless people, as well as childfree, in the transformation processes of family relations. To date, there are no attempts to comprehensively study the social phenomenon of childfree, as well as attempts to study childfree people outside the crisis [1] and evolutionary paradigms [2]. In our opinion, the transfer of attention to a constructive reading of the phenomenon under investigation will be fruitful [3]. The construction of social problems is a complex and volatile process, conditioned by the variability of the most modern society and the inconsistency of public attention. The researchers-constructivists noted a certain tendency in relation to life cycles taking place in the situations that cause public concern. M. Spektor and J. Kitsyuz use the concept of "stages of a social problem" [4] and offer their own conception of the historical stages of the social problem in their paper. The main difference from earlier concepts is that they offer a description of the stages after the so-called "solution" of the problem, most often expressed in the authorities' response to the situation problematization.

Stage 1. The initiative group tries to indicate the existence of some condition, defines it as threatening and undesirable, and gives it publicity in society.

Stage 2. The power groups recognize the legitimate right of the initiative group and react to the proclaimed problem by the official actions.

Stage 3. Repeated provision of the requirements of the initiative group as part of the initial, or different from it. When making repeated provision, the group members express their dissatisfaction with the way of problem solution.

Stage 4. The refusal of the initiative group provoking repeated provision of the activities of official organizations and creation of an alternative force to resolve the claim-demand.

In modern Russian society, the childfree problem enters the periphery of public arenas [5], in particular the mass media (newspapers, magazines, online publications, etc.), political discussions, and it can be rather said at the moment that it is being discussed only at the initiation level of a certain group. However, we can say that childfree, as a life strategy, has only recently become widespread in Russia. At the moment, we can state unsystematic, single discussions within the scientific community, a small publicity in the media, a growing dissemination and discussion within the Internet sites. It can be assumed that deliberate childlessness is increasingly becoming a subject of discussion at the level of public rhetoric and acquires its definite reflection in the minds of citizens. Childfree can be seen in modern society as a social problem, as described in appropriate terms in the media. According to public opinion polls it can also be viewed as a threat to Russian society and traditional family values [6].

### KEY WORDS

constructivism, social problem, construction of

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In this regard, the research question can be formulated as follows: What imaginative construct of a deliberately childless person is present in society and how is it reflected in the consciousness of citizens?

## METHODS

The methodological basis of this paper is the paradigm of constructivism, which is based, in particular, on the papers of Berger et al. We used a contextual version of the constructive approach, which involved identifying the demands put forward on the public agenda for real or imaginary social problems on the basis of analysis of statistics, public and expert opinions on the situation, which are considered as the context of the problem. Particular attention was paid to the papers of foreign sociologists who are developing the concept of explaining the childfree phenomenon. The study of the peculiarities of the childfree formation [7], as well as the process of stereotyping the deliberate childless people [8] allowed developing some tools for conducting a mass survey.

The Internet survey conducted in 2017-2018 on the basis of the Kazan Federal University is an information base of the research. (N=475). The survey was conducted among the reproductively active citizens aged 16 years old and over. The selection of respondents was carried out using the "snowball" method. The researchers decided to turn to this selection method because the Internet survey had its own specifics, which included complexity of selecting units by random, nested, stratified methods. Also, in view of the specific nature of the Internet survey, there is a bias in the age-gender distribution of respondents from the side of the most active users of the Internet (20-29 years old), which, however, allows talking about the existing trends in public opinion. In addition, this age group is a priority in the study of the childfree topic, since it will soon become that part of the society that creates new families and individually addresses the issue of childbearing. The survey results were analyzed using frequency analysis and statistical chi-square test. [8]

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study was aimed at revealing the prevalence of the childfree worldview among citizens, the prevailing attitude towards childfree, as well as the trends typical for the phenomenon in the views of ordinary citizens. The attention of researchers was focused on the general trends and relationships that can be distinguished from the data obtained during the survey.

One of the survey questions was aimed at determining the level of respondents' awareness about the existence of deliberately childless people. It was found that more than half of respondents were aware of the existence of childfree people, the third part found it difficult to answer the question, the rest were not familiar with this worldview. It was found that childfree awareness depends on gender ( $\chi^2 = 27,929$  at  $p < 0.0001$ ), age ( $\chi^2 = 77.062$  at  $p < 0.0001$ ) and parenthood status of the respondents ( $\chi^2 = 37,144$  at  $p < 0.0001$ ). It should be noted that women are more aware of the existence of childfree (61%) than men (42.3%); younger respondents are more likely to respond positively than older ones; and childless respondents are more likely to respond rather than the survey participants, having children.

Within the framework of the survey, we formulated an indicator reflecting the acceptance and rejection of the childfree outlook. According to the data received, the number of respondents whose opinion was focused on the negative pole of the scale (that is, disagreement with the view of the childfree) significantly outweighed those who took a neutral and likeable position on this issue. At the same time, consent and disagreement with the childfree philosophy do not depend on gender, age, or parenthood status, but depend on the marital status ( $\chi^2 = 60,385$  at  $p < 0.0001$ ). The most sympathetic childfree group is single people (38%).

In the course of the survey, we made an attempt to subjectively assess the prevalence of the childfree phenomenon among the familiar participants in the survey. 23.2% of the participants positively answered the question of whether there were some adherents of the childfree outlook among their acquaintances, and 32% found it difficult to answer. On the one hand, this may indicate a large number of childfree among the citizens of the country; on the other hand, any childless, regardless of the reasons for the children absence, could be attributed to childfree person by the respondents. This is confirmed by the fact that the correlation was found between the variable and the parenthood status ( $\chi^2 = 20,458$  at  $p < 0.0001$ ), marital status ( $\chi^2 = 27.468$  at  $p < 0.001$ ), gender ( $\chi^2 = 11.725$  at  $p < 0.003$ ) and age ( $\chi^2 = 64,742$  at  $p < 0.0001$ ) of the respondents. Among the respondents, the most sympathetic group are young girls who do not have children and are not in a relationship.

At the same time, the idea of which childfree portrait prevails among the respondents turns out to be depending on the gender of the survey participants ( $\chi^2 = 55.095$  at  $p < 0.0001$ ). Thus, according to the opinion of the survey participants, the status of childfree is most inherent in the young woman (up to 30 years old) living in the west. This point of view is prevalent both among men (22.1%) and among women (35.9%). The second place is taken by the answer according to which the status of childfree is inherent in a mature man (30 or more years old), living in the west among men, while the second most popular answer is a young man (up to 30 years old), living in the west among women. It is worth noting that in 11.6% of cases, participants offered their own answer and the most popular one was "anyone can be childfree".

One of the questions in the survey was aimed at assessing the respondents' subjective views on the prevalence of childfree in the west (Europe, the USA) and in Russia. It is interesting that the respondents' opinion regarding the prevalence of childfree in the west is in a reciprocal relationship with the age of the respondents ( $\chi^2 = 42,162$  at  $p < 0.003$ ). Thus, it is possible to fix a big concern ("5" at approximately 30%) among people over 50 years old than among young people up to 30 years old ("5" at approximately 10%). In this case, it is possible to record estimates of the childfree prevalence at the level of 3 and 4 points according to the proposed ten-point scale, where 0 indicates a complete absence of childfree representatives and 10 - that all citizens, residing on the territory, share the childfree view. With regard to estimating the prevalence of deliberately childless people, the majority of respondents concentrated on the level of 2 and 3 points, which was lower than the estimates in the West, which could be characterized as a low degree of spread in the minds of the respondents. In this case, the opinion on the childfree prevalence in Russia also depends on gender ( $\chi^2 = 22.894$  at  $p < 0.0001$ ) and on the respondents' age ( $\chi^2 = 69.194$  at  $p < 0.0001$ ). It is interesting that men are more concerned about the childfree prevalence in Russia than women. The trend revealed in relation to the degree of childfree prevalence in the West coincides with the estimates for Russia. [9]

One of the questions in the survey was devoted to the extent to which, according to respondents, the world view of childfree poses a threat to the modern family as a unit of society. So, we can note the tendency to shift the opinion of the participants of the mass poll to the positive pole of the scale ("yes" - 23.2%, "rather yes" - 33.9%). Having estimated the degree of interdependence of the signs, it was found that the perception of the degree of impact made by childfree on the family values depends only on gender ( $\chi^2 = 18,534$  at  $p < 0.001$ ), and does not depend on the age, marital status, and parenthood status of the respondents. Thus, women are more likely to see a threat (26.7%) compared to men (15.4%).

The survey participants noted that the likelihood of an increase in the number of followers of the childfree movement is estimated by them as a fairly likely event that depends on the social situation that will influence this process. Only 2.7% of respondents believe that the number of deliberately childless people will not increase. At the same time, the respondents' estimates depend on age ( $\chi^2 = 45.638$  at  $p < 0.0001$ ), and do not depend on other variables. Among young people, unequivocal agreement is voiced by 21.8% against 4.5% of the most senior participants in the survey. The answers of other age groups are located in the middle.

The data of the mass survey conducted within the framework of the empirical research fixes the level of people sharing the world view of the childfree at the level of 4.6%, while the All-Russian Public Opinion Research Center calls the figure 6% in 2018, which does not contradict the objective statistics data [9], however some metropolitan researchers refer to a higher percentage of the deliberate childless people in Moscow - 18% [10].

## CONCLUSION

Thus, the following picture of the problem situation can be observed. The media recorded an increase in the number of publications devoted to the problem of deliberate childlessness. The media has grown six times for five years from 2013 to April 2018. ( $N = 202$  (2013) against  $N = 1158$  (2017)). But there is no objective data on the growth in the number of advocates of the childfree worldview, rather, on the contrary, there is a stabilization of the number of deliberately childless people in society [11].

Having carefully studied the data of the mass survey, we can say that the concern of citizens is growing. This is primarily manifested in an unambiguous and unanimous assessment of the trend toward a wider distribution of childfree in the future, with the undoubted threat of thinking that the deliberately childless people are a social unit. The most loyal to the childfree group among the surveyed citizens are young single childless girls, who presumably can adopt the worldview of childfree and replenish their ranks.

Summing up the conducted research it can be said that the society is at the initial stages of creating a social problem by the initiative group regarding voluntary renunciation of the birth of children. The mass media are actively involved in the discussion of this problem, whose activities are to some extent reflected in the minds of citizens. The society reveals the group, which is the most loyal to the deliberately childless people, although the general attitude of the respondents fluctuates between the negative and neutral pole of the scale. With a subjectively low assessment of the childfree distribution both in the Russian Federation and in the West, the findings of a mass survey show the state of high concern of citizens regarding the future development of the worldview of childfree in society. The state of threat perception among citizens most often destabilizes the society, and appropriate media support can lead to negative stereotyping of childfree in the society, further breaking the balance. Thus, the media and public opinion monitoring is relevant in the matter of further study of childfree.

### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There is no conflict of interest.

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## FINANCIAL DISCLOSURE

None

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