

# YOUNG ADULTS: MARRIAGE, PARTNERSHIP, AND PARENTHOOD. DISCURSIVE PRESCRIPTIONS AND PRACTICES IN CONTEMPORARY RUSSIA. *Summary*

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This article analyzes normative prescriptions for marital and parental roles as represented in official discourse, as well as the meanings that young people assign to domestic partnership, marriage, motherhood, and fatherhood. We aim to find convergences and discontinuities between discursive prescriptions and everyday notions about obligations and freedoms that members of the educated urban middle class should and can possess.

We analyze two types of sociological data: the legal discourse on young families and interviews with young Saint Petersburg residents living in unregistered domestic partnerships. By contrasting official discourse with the everyday meanings that young people ascribe to marriage and domestic partnership, we reveal points of convergence and discontinuity between discursive prescriptions and daily practices.

## **"YOUNG ADULTS" AS A CATEGORY OF SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS**

Young adults are a specific group whose members postpone making final decisions on career, family, and parenthood by taking advantage of the limited responsibility and freedom of choice provided them by this transitional status. Members of this group are professionals working in sectors such as information technologies, finance, services, marketing, advertising, design, and logistics. These young professionals work both on a full-time and temporary basis, preferring forms of employment such as freelancing, flextime, and home office. In terms of income and styles of consumption, they are oriented toward the standards of the middle class: they regularly buy groceries at large supermarkets, frequent shopping malls, cafes, and restaurants, travel during holidays, and spend money on fitness and sports as well as cultural consumption. They place a high value on private life: as in their professional lives, here they avoid institutionally formalized relationships and strictly regimented roles. The constitutive characteristic of young adults as a social group is

personal autonomy, which manifests itself in their professional and personal lives as well as in the ways in which they organize private space.

Young adults form the milieu where the nature of the family and intimacy is being transformed. At the same time, young adults have become an object of intense concern in current state family policy.

We distinguish between two basic semantic fields where the normative prescriptions and everyday meanings of marriage and parenthood come into conflict: marriage vs. partnership, and traditional parenthood vs. contemporary parenthood.

### **MARRIAGE VS. PARTNERSHIP: OFFICIAL DISCOURSE AND THE PRACTICE OF YOUNG URBANITES**

Russian state policies targeting young families are clearly pro-natalist and partly neo-traditionalist: they focus on officially registered marriages, encourage high birth rates, and promote a view of the “happy” and “full-fledged” family as normative. The emphasis on young families as a specific object of social and family policy can be interpreted as an attempt to constitute young people as a “demographic reserve” that is focused on the performance of social functions and reproductive aims. This reserve is formed through the introduction of an age limit (30 or younger) on the basis of young people’s reproductive potential. Definite preference is given to formally registered marital unions and two-parent families. Legal documents define a “reproductive norm”: young families aspiring to the status of “happy” families must attempt to meet that norm.

The model of the “happy young family” is thus conceptualized as one where the parents are officially married and are jointly raising no fewer than two biological children. This conceptualization is meant to form and institutionalize a clearly prescribed norm for family relations; it marks all other types of families as unhappy, as deviant, and reduces the whole variety of family and parental relationships to a single normative standard. This standard is defined by a particular biological age and those institutionally reinforced roles that, from the state’s viewpoint, members of this age cohort should perform.

We can single out three types of everyday semantic frames for the common-law marriages characteristic of young adults: partnership as an alternative to marriage; partnership as preparation for marriage; and partnership as an analogue of marriage. In the first case, partnership is seen as an alternative to officially registered marriage. This type of union is typically found among respondents aged 25 or less. This is the age when young people begin independent lives: they finish their education, begin to work, and acquire financial resources of their own for the first time. A significant factor in the creation of such unions is that they provide a legitimate opportunity to leave the parental home and begin an independent life. In the process of living together, couples produce their own autonomous space: they decorate and renovate their apartments, acquire their first items of furniture, thus constituting a sense of community, of “us,” and a feeling of independence. For such couples, the line between their relationships and official marriage is clearly drawn. Such couples refuse to call their unions marriage, emphasizing that what is essential to them is the quality of their relationships. They do not exclude the possibility of getting married in the

future. However, they need compelling reasons to change the status of their unions; one of these, according to respondents, is the birth of a child. The option to end a unsatisfactory relationship without causing significant moral or material damage (“not to get into a situation it will later be hard to get out of”) is an attractive quality of partnerships. Couples fear and sometimes actively oppose marriage, assuming that the formal establishment of status and roles will inevitably lead to a change in the quality of their relationships.

In the second case, partnership is viewed by young members of the educated urban middle class as a stage in preparation for official marriage. During this process, relationships are tested, and possible roles, their boundaries, potential conflicts and means of resolving them are defined. Successful mutual adaptation concludes with the decision to get married. The couple uses their experience of cohabitation in order to understand “whether or not we can be together.” The choice of partner and marriage (which is imagined as a “more serious and longer relationship” than cohabitations) is a self-conscious, deliberate strategy.

Partnership as a test marriage is characteristic of young people from an older age cohort (26–30 years). The partners are considering starting a family and begin to assess one another as potential spouses. Moreover, the boundary between marriage and cohabitation becomes less distinct. Partners believe that their relationships are practically no different than those of spouses in an official marriage, and they assume that nothing will change after they are married.

In the third case, young adults conceive partnership as a union that is practically indistinguishable from an officially registered marriage. In this case, respondents are inclined, practically without hesitation, to identify themselves as a family and to call each other husband and wife. Couples with children are especially prone to identify themselves as having such unions. Women who have children and are in such a union emphasize that they have experienced no complications in formally establishing the paternity of their children, and that they received the same amount of maternity benefits as mothers who are officially married. In this case, respondents were more inclined to discuss the assignment of roles and the organization of domestic life in connection with the necessity of caring for children, at the same time complaining about the lack of free time. Whereas in the first two types of domestic unions, relationships were presented by respondents as egalitarian, negotiated, and relatively non-conflictual, gender roles in the third type are polarized. They are defined by the rule that divides domestic chores between the father and the mother, and are thus potentially conflictual in connection with the differing role expectations of partners.

The young adults who participated as respondents in our research do not follow prescribed gender roles and standards of family life in their relationships with partners. They actively develop their own principles of interaction: responding to their own needs and taking into account the interests of their partners, they reformulate roles and fill them with new content. Such strategies are based on conscious planning and recognition of the value of a relationship within a broader life project. At the same time, official discourse views the domestic relationships of young people exclusively in the context of formal spousal roles and biological

parenthood—as elements in the discursive construction of the young family. The young family is inscribed in the narrow frame of formal marriage, whose goal is the reproduction of “healthy offspring” and the “full-fledged education and socialization of children.” This family is supposed to ensure the “formation of a Russian consciousness, civic-mindedness, and continuity of popular and national socio-cultural values in its children.”

The disjunction between the official discourse on the family and young people’s ideas about domestic life is obvious. Whereas in the first case the emphasis is on the performance of familial and parental roles and prescribed functions bound up with normative notions of age, in the second case what matters most to partners is the quality of their relationships and the capacity to redefine them. Young people do not reject marriage and having children: they thus agree with existing norms for marital and reproductive behavior. However, they want to reserve for themselves the possibility of choosing the time, circumstances, and motivations of these biographical events.

### **TRADITIONAL PARENTHOOD VS. MODERN PARENTHOOD**

Changes in the nature of marriage, the pluralization of forms and types of families, and the spread of domestic unions in contemporary societies affect not only relationships between spouses and partners, but also relationships between parents and children. Contemporary parenthood is not necessarily connected to traditional marriage; it is not a “natural” extension of marital relations. It implies not so much the simple fact of marriage, but rather motivations such as a striving for emotional intimacy and desire for personal self-realization within the realm of parenting. Thus, contemporary parenthood, which can be realized outside the legally established frame of the traditionally structured family, is separated from matrimony. Contemporary parenthood is also more deliberate than its traditional equivalent; it is “conscious” or “responsible.” This means that parenthood is the result of individual choices made by men and women, choices inscribed within their overall life projects.

Traditionalist family ideology assumes that people get married once and for the rest of their lives, and that marriage guarantees childbearing and regulates sexuality. Moreover, from the state’s viewpoint the family’s principal function is not only to guarantee reproduction but also to increase the population.

The pro-natalist variant of contemporary family policy chosen by the state is oriented toward providing material support for families in the period “from conception to infancy.” Not much attention is accorded to a whole range of issues having to do with the high level of actual expenses incurred by families in caring for and raising children, solving housing problems, and placing children in (scarce) preschools and kindergartens. State policy does not assist working mothers in combining family and work obligations (such as part-time or flextime work). Such forms of support are particularly relevant for young parents because, on the one hand, they are not fully financially solvent and independent; and, on the other hand, caring for young children

involves significant expenditures of money and time. The entire variety of functions performed by the family in contemporary society is thus reduced to reproduction. Traditionalist discourse disapproves of one-child families. A full-fledged family with two or more children is proclaimed the norm.

Thus, contrary to official discourse, which provides clear age brackets not only for getting married but also for having children, young adults in their daily lives are only in part guided by age in decisions about whether to have children. They are more likely to take into account the achievement of professional, social, and economic status as paramount conditions for becoming parents. State policy represents parenthood as a biological function having primarily to do with giving birth to children, which is reinforced by state rhetoric about the preservation and reproduction of the nation. For young adults, parenthood is an important stage of the life cycle, an element of their identities as women and as men. The conscious nature of contemporary parenthood presumes that spouses/partners plan the birth of a child based on their own life plans, choosing the optimal time for it and inscribing this event into stages of their own lives, such as completing their education, achieving a certain professional status, or gaining material well-being. This often makes them delay parenthood to a later age. Delayed parenthood enables them to find personal and professional fulfillment, to achieve social and psychological maturity, to prepare themselves for caring for a child and providing for its welfare.

### **THE "SECOND DEMOGRAPHIC TRANSITION": WESTERN AND RUSSIAN VARIETIES**

In the conclusion, we make a contribution to the discussion of transformations in the family and parenthood in the context of the so-called second demographic transition and discuss the problems inherent in applying this concept to gender dynamics in Russia. We argue that the second demographic transition has not been completed in Russian society, and that the term covers a multitude of contradictory tendencies. The subjects of the second demographic transition in Russia are young, ambitious members of the educated urban middle class who have a range of life-building opportunities open to them, making them engage in conscious life planning.

*Authorized translation from the Russian by Thomas Campbell*