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**FEMALE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' VIEWS ON FAMILY AND  
PARENTHOOD: CROSS-COUNTRY ANALYSIS**

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*Abstract*

Perceptions of family and parenthood can be seen as a determinant of fertility and a society's socio-cultural state. Studying these across different countries is particularly topical amid growing migration.

The paper presents the results of an international research project in which we studied ideas about family and parenthood of female university students from Russia, Austria and Kazakhstan. Data was collected in 2015.

The results of our research showed that young women from different countries had similar views about the purpose of family in contemporary society. At the same time they had different assessments of the significance of family for the fulfilment of some functions. We obtained the image of a happy family in the students' minds. We found out that there were certain differences in the students' ideas about a happy family. We obtained the image of parenthood and identified its main aspects. We also saw differences in the female students' ideas about parenting.

Differences in perceptions of family and parenthood are likely linked to differences in the types of parenting culture and the substance of future parental labour. Researching students' ideas about family and parenting enables assessing a country's demographic prospects. The implementation of education focused on reproductive intentions and behaviours could be an effective way to improve the demographic situation.

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## 1. Introduction

Demographers and sociologists around the world are today noting transformations that are happening to family as a social institution: the changing nature of relationships between family members, the rethinking of family roles, the widening configuration of the family and so on (Castren and Widmer 2015). According to Morgan (2011), family is at simultaneously both a stable and a changeable phenomenon. With this in mind, it would be more appropriate to talk about changes to family practices, family living or family life courses, rather than to family as a social institution. In asking whether family is a social construction or a natural phenomenon most scientists agree that "family" can mean whatever we want it to mean" (Almond 2008). A similar question arises with respect to the definition of parenthood. For example, Hays (1996) and Furedi (2001) believe that parenting should be seen as a socially constructed phenomenon. Lee et al (2014) argue that "parenting" is now viewed as an activity that cannot be effectively carried out 'naturally'. As such, a parent should have specific skills to fulfil parental functions. Ramaekers and Suissa (2011) add that "parents are expected... to do things with their children that are in very specific sense goal-oriented" .

Viewing family and parenthood as social constructs implies their differentiation across cultures and societies. We note that many European countries and Russia are today facing a rather difficult demographic situation. Thus the highest total fertility rate in Europe is 2.07 (in France), while for 28 European countries, it ranges from 1.2 to 1.6 (Country comparison 2016). Russia's total fertility rate for 2015 was 1.61, which is 23.3% less than the below-replacement fertility. The differentiation of European countries on the basis of this indicator is shown in Figure 1.

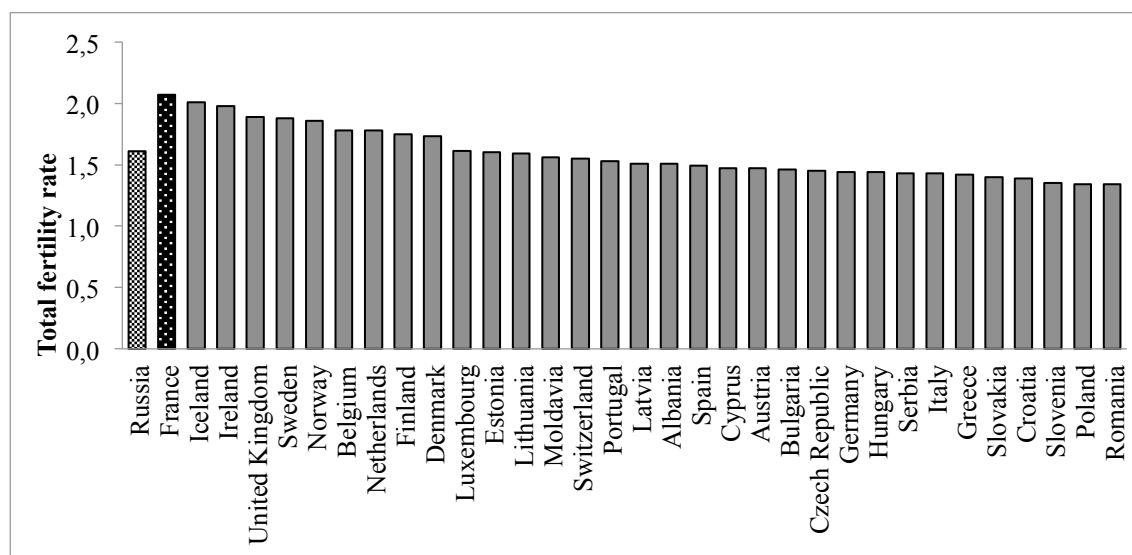


Figure 01. Total fertility rate across different countries for 2015

By defining 'family' and 'parenthood' as social constructs that can have their own specifics in individual societies and by differentiating fertility rates across countries, we can suppose that different nations can have their own ideas about family and parenthood. Research into these ideas is especially pertinent among young people – the most important demographic resource with the highest parenting potential. We note that these ideas about family and parenthood are potentially influenced by a number of

factors: the prevailing socio-cultural situation, the intensity of migration flows, the political environment, a society's national and religious structure, the level of economic welfare and so on.

## **2. Problem Statement**

Contemporary society today faces a number of socio-economic trends that potentially threaten the social institution of family. In developed countries, these are declining fertility, growing diversity of family forms, increasing divorce rates, higher levels of urbanisation, adverse media messages and so on (Shorter, 1975). Scientists believe that these phenomena are bringing about (or have already brought) a crisis of – or, to put it more mildly – a modernisation of family as an institution (Sinelnikov, Medkov and Antonov 2009). Discussions of the change/collapse of the family mostly refer to the transformation of social functions fulfilled by the family. There are changes to a family's core and secondary functions. A family's reproductive function can only be measured quantitatively, whereas its educational function has mostly qualitative dimensions (Lee et al. 2014). Undoubtedly, these processes are affected by the social norms that exist in a given society.

In light of this, research into young people's views about family and parenthood is topical both as regards demographic prospects and from the point of view of forecasting a society's socio-cultural state. It is important to understand how today's youth view the concepts of 'family', 'parenthood' and 'happy family'; what they see as the purpose of a family. All of these can be seen as a determinant of forming and developing the need for children and thus as factors of reproductive behaviour and future parenthood.

## **3. Research Questions**

Within this context, there are two research questions in our paper:

What specific ideas about family and parenthood prevail among young people in Russia, Austria and Kazakhstan?

Can these perceptions be viewed as one of the determinants of future parenthood?

## **4. Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study is to identify similarities and differences in views about family and parenthood among female university students from three countries. These perceptions can be considered as one of the determinants of the nature of parenting and parental labour, the understanding of parenting culture.

## **5. Research Methods**

This research entails an international project in which we studied female university students from Russia, Austria and Kazakhstan. Data was collected in 2015. In each country we surveyed 200-250 female university students.

This paper analyses the questionnaire responses that reflect female university students' views about family and parenthood. We studied inter-country differences in answers to the following:

A question about the reason for having a family in contemporary society. Female university students were offered multiple-choice answers, with the option of providing their own answer.

A question about what constitutes a happy family. This was an open-ended question. There were no time or space restrictions for answers. In subsequent analysis we classified the full spectrum of answers into homogenous groups.

A question about what 'being a parent' means. This was also an open-ended question, without time and space limitations. The obtained responses were classified into homogenous groups.

For our analysis, we used descriptive statistics and contingency table analysis. Since we studied nominal variables, we used the Chi-squared criterion and the Cramer coefficient.

## 6. Findings

In the course of our analysis, we obtained the following results.

1. Young women from different countries have similar views about the purpose of family in contemporary society. An analysis of the female students' answers enabled us to conclude that they see family as a social institution which mostly fulfils the following functions:

- educational (more than two-thirds of the young women in each country noted that a family is needed to raise and develop children);
- recreational (between one-third and two-thirds of the girls in different countries said a family is needed for psychological support; 46% to 53% said family is needed for interaction and shared leisure);
- reproductive (between 36% and 48% of the females said family is needed for childbirth).

We note that in the ranking of family functions, sexual and economic aspects came last (table 1).

**Table 01.** Female students' responses to the question "What is the purpose of family in contemporary society?"

Family is needed for ...	Russia		Kazakhstan		Austria	
	Percent of Cases	Rank	Percent of Cases	Rank	Percent of Cases	Rank
regular sexual relations	8	5	14	5	24	5
interaction and joint leisure	53	3	46	3	51	2
childbirth	45	4	48	2	36	3
bringing up and developing children	75	1	68	1	74	1
business	2	6	8	6	1	6
psychological support	68	2	42	4	34	4

The fact that young women from different countries have similar ideas about the key functions of family as a social institution could be partly explained by the high value these countries place on family. According to the World Values Survey (2014), 92.4% of the Kazakhstani population, 85% of Russians and 77.6% to 91.1% of the European population rate family as a very important value (table 2, Austria not included in the research).

**Table 02.** Responses from different countries to the question: “Indicate how important family is in your life” (%)

Would you say family is:	Countries				
	Russia	Kazakhstan	Netherlands	Germany	Spain
very important	85.0	92.4	85.5	77.6	91.1
rather important	12.7	7.0	8.8	17.9	8.4
not very important	1.3	0.4	2.3	3.6	0.2
not at all important	0.5	0.2	1.3	0.6	0.2
inappropriate response	0.2	-	-	0.2	-
no answer	0.2	-	-	-	0.1
don't know	0.1	-	2.2	0.1	-

Source: The World Values Survey (2014)

It can be said that the stability of family mentioned by Morgan is underpinned by the fulfilment of traditional functions. The need for a family to fulfil these very functions determines the significance of family in the minds of people from different countries. The transformation of family, which is reflected in changes to family forms, family living and family life courses, does not impact the substantive foundations of family as a social institution, which continues to be its reproductive, educational and recreational functions across different countries.

2. The students from the three countries had different assessments of the significance of family for the fulfilment of sexual and psychological support functions. We learnt that the need for family for regular sexual relations is most obvious to females from Austria (the respective answer was chosen by almost one in four) and the least for young women from Russia (only 8% of respondents). As regards psychological support, the situation is reversed – this is most sought after for Russians (two in three women) and least for Austrians (one in three women). Respondents from Kazakhstan were in the middle.

The rather low role of family as an institution of psychological support in Austria compared to Russia and Kazakhstan can be explained, in part, by the developed state of professional psychological support in Europe. According to the classification of the World Health Organization, some activities with families provided by psychological services are an element of psychological interventions (Policies and practices 2008). As a result of such psychological interventions, patients may be prescribed certain treatment. WHO data shows that over half of the countries do not provide information about such

treatment. At the same time, it is known that 3,763,000 prescriptions (0.45 per person) were written in Austria in 2008 (Policies and practices 2008). On the whole, one of the conclusions from a WHO report on “Policies and practices for mental health in Europe” is that “services in European countries appear to be so differentiated that any comparison is haphazard” (Policies and practices 2008).

3. In analysing the young women’s responses to the open question of what constitutes a happy family, we grouped similar answers to obtain the image of a happy family in the students’ minds. As it turned out, the attributes of such family include: mutual understanding, harmony, love, children, a complete family, financial security, meaning of life (table 3). We note that in describing a happy family, female students commonly mentioned its size and composition (“a complete family”, “a large family”, “a family with many children”, “three children, husband, wife, two dogs”) and relationships between its members (“a family that supports each member”, “children born into a loving, harmonious family”).

**Table 03.** Attributes of a happy family in the students’ minds

A happy family is...	Percent of Cases			
	Total	Russia	Austria	Kazakhstan
mutual understanding, harmony	63	61	63	65
love	29	30	34	24
children, a large family	18	37	3	21
a complete family	18	24	11	18
financial security	8	10	5	8
the meaning of life	5	4	8	4

4. There are some similarities in the students’ ideas about a happy family. Thus, respondents from all three countries named the following attributes of a happy family: mutual understanding and harmony (61-65% of respondents), love (24-34% of respondents), the presence of both parents/ a complete family (11-24% of respondents). It is interesting to note that financial security was one of the least significant attributes of a happy family (table 3).

5. There were certain differences in the women’s ideas about a happy family. Thus, very few young women from Austria pointed to a big family with children (3% of respondents). For women from Russia and Kazakhstan, this attribute was rated second and third (37% and 21% respectively). Moreover, responses by Austrian young women are characterised by a lesser frequency and diversity than the responses of women from Russia and Kazakhstan. The latter give a greater number of descriptors of what constitutes a happy family.

We believe that the difference in the view of children as an attribute of a happy family may be linked to the real demographic situation in the studied countries. Thus, Austria has the lowest birth rates, while Kazakhstan has the highest. In 2015, Austria had a total fertility rate of 1.46, Russia – 1.61 and Kazakhstan – 2.31 (Country comparison, 2016). We note that the fertility rates in a particular country are determined, among other things, by the social norms, which in turn shape individual need for children

(Antonov 2012). Our research showed that in Austria, and in part in Russia, the social norm for having fewer children shapes the respective low need for children (Bagirova et al. 2016). This is the reason why the image of a happy family in these countries is not necessarily linked to having children, and particularly – a large number of children.

6. In the course of analysing the women’s responses to the open question about what “being a parent” means, we grouped similar answers and thus obtained an image of parenthood in the young women’s minds. We identified two aspects of this image. On the one hand, respondents noted a parent’s obligations towards children (being a parent means to be responsible, to look after and provide for children); and on the other hand – they identified certain benefits to fulfilling parental obligations (self-actualising, being happy). The most important attribute of parenthood, in the young women’s minds, is the parents’ responsibility – this response outstripped others with a large margin (table 4).

**Table 04.** Attributes of parenthood in the female students’ minds

Being a parent is...	Percent of Cases			
	Total	Russia	Austria	Kazakhstan
to have responsibility	65	58	71	66
to take care of children	22	20	33	14
to provide for children	6	5	11	3
to self-actualise	6	5	13	1
to be happy	13	18	4	17
to love and be loved by children	11	9	14	9
to be heroes	7	4	6	11
to invest in the future	1	0	3	0

Our results align with researchers’ conclusions that “the work of mothering and fathering was now endowed with profound importance. It became defined as a distinct skill that could assure the development of character traits necessary for a successful life” (Furedi 2002). Children today are seen as a special object of care, education and development, which requires significant investment on the parents’ part as regards time, money, emotions. Moreover, there is a growing number of books about parenting around the world – ‘parenting manuals’, ‘parenting guides’, ‘parenting classes’, ‘parenting education’ where parents are taught what they need to do to be “good” parents. Thus, according to Google Books Ngram viewer data, from 1970, the number of books on parenting has been growing rapidly (Google Books Ngram viewer).

7. We saw differences in the female students’ ideas about parenting. Thus, women in Austria have a more “serious”, rational attitude towards this phenomenon. They more commonly link parenting with obligations – Austrian respondents more commonly cited responses referring to “accepting responsibility” and “taking care of children” than their counterparts from other countries. They also more readily

recognised a parent's need to provide for children financially. Austrian women also demonstrated a greater "seriousness" in their perceptions of parenthood through the realisation that parenting helps a person to self-actualise (table 5). Yet the emotional aspect of parenting (the perception that it brings happiness) is the least significant for these young women (just 4% of respondents mentioned this in their questionnaires). At the same time, for women from Russia and Kazakhstan, the perception of parenting as happiness is on a par with the attribute of looking after children. Moreover, females from Russia and Kazakhstan have rather similar views of parenthood. It should be noted that Kazakhstani girls cited looking after children as an attribute of parenting far less frequently than women from other countries (table 5). This may be linked to a greater commonality of extended families in this country, which creates the objective possibility of "delegating" some childcare duties to other family members. Thus, according to the Kazakhstan Census, in 2009 extended families accounted for about 30% of all private households (Households in the Republic of Kazakhstan 2011). Between the 1999 and 2009 Censuses, this indicator rose from 22% to 30%. For comparison, data from the Russian Census for 2010 placed this indicator at no more than 19% (Russian Census results 2010).

The identified differences could also be explained in terms of Catherine Hakim's Preference Theory (Hakim 2003), according to which women's lifestyle preferences are a key fertility factor. Our results correspond to the lifestyle preferences she identified: career-oriented, family oriented, oriented towards combining work and family. In our view, the first could typify Austrian women, the second – women from Kazakhstan and the third, combined lifestyle type, could describe Russians. However confirmation of this hypothesis requires further research.

## **7. Conclusion**

In our view, the results we obtained lend themselves to the observation that subjective ideas about family and parenthood can be viewed as one of the determinants of future reproductive behaviour and parenting. We discovered that to a certain extent, our results align with real demographic trends in the studied countries. As such, targeted shaping of perceptions about family and parenting can adjust the reproductive behaviour and the emerging demographic trends.

We suppose that one of the effective instruments for influencing these ideas could be the implementation of education focused on reproductive intentions and behaviours. There are opportunities for regulating reproductive behaviours of the population at every level of the education system. Undoubtedly, the development of such educational programmes should consider country-specific socio-cultural differences that affect the prevailing parenting culture, the nature of reproductive behaviour and the substance of parental labour. However, the development of these ideas requires further theoretical and empirical research.

In conclusion, we note that the study of female students' ideas about family and parenting creates an informational foundation for more reliable assessments of a particular country's demographic prospects. Such studies are all the more topical given the heightened intensity of migration processes.



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