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**PSYCHOLOGICAL IMAGE OF THE FAMILY AS THE BASIS OF  
MODERN PARENTING PRACTICES**

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***Abstract***

The article presents the results of a cross-cultural study dealing with the image of family and parenting typical of Russian and American mothers. The problem is analyzed in the context of the idea that family and family relationships evolve depending on the type of culture dominant in the society. It is noted that the today's society of prefigurative culture depreciates the parental experience of the older generations, making it less suitable for transmitting to the younger ones. The destruction of a stable family standard, the breakdown of the family upbringing tradition are the main factors that lead to the growth of parental uncertainty and the increasing demand for new models of parental behavior that are more psychologically comfortable. Information society provides an opportunity to choose the parenting strategies that are in line with the requirements and values of the surrounding reality. The study has shown that today's mothers have a lot in common in terms of the content and the structure of their family images, which is due to global socio-economic, cultural and information processes. The differences in the content of the family image among the representatives of different countries are conditioned by the dominant ideas and traditional values reflecting the mentality of a nation.

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**Keywords:** Psychological image, family, models of parenting, family image, information space, intergenerational relationships.



## **1. Introduction**

The problems of the modern family are discussed mainly in the context of its crisis, characterized by high divorce rates, low birth rates, an increasing number of incomplete families and children born out of wedlock, a rupture of intergenerational ties, spreading of unofficial forms of marriage and family units, legalization of same-sex relationship, an increasing number of single people. The destruction of a stable family standard inevitably affects people's ideas of the structure, the functions and the social purpose of family and family relations. However, it is also possible to consider the so-called crisis of the family institution not as a social catastrophe, but as a result of cultural evolution of the human society.

## **2. Problem Statement**

### **2.1. Evolution of large family.**

Studies show that the global depopulation trend is of social-evolutionary nature, and the distinct decline of the birth rate in Europe was first recorded about 250 years ago (Antonov & Borisov, 2006).

Due to the scientific and technological progress, that dates back to the beginning of the twentieth century, the quality of life has improved and the standard of living has significantly increased; as a result, the demands of the society for children's maintenance and upbringing have increased, too. Sociologists think that it was the reason of the first demographic transition: people realized that childhood was a valuable period of life, and parents wanted to create the best conditions for their children's growth, development and education, which was extremely difficult for a large family (Elkonin, 1989). The reason for the so-called second demographic transition, which occurred in the last third of the twentieth century, was the unwillingness of the adults to lower their standard of living in favour of children's upbringing (Sakharov, 2005). Nowadays, the researchers talk about a marked shift in the family values: the child-centricity is replaced by the idea that it is necessary to create the conditions psychologically comfortable for all the family members (Strelnik, 2015).

The opportunities for personal and professional self-realization provided by the modern society, the variety of forms of social life and economic relations successfully compete in people's minds with the need for having children. The so-called "deferred parenthood" and small families are typical for today's young adults. The extreme form of domination of the hedonistic values in the modern family is the "childfree" ideology, that is, conscious renunciation of parenthood for the sake of the advantages available for people who are not encumbered with dependents and corresponding social obligations. The attempts of economic (monetary and service) stimulation of birth rate undertaken in many countries produced only a temporary effect.

### **2.2. The construction of parenthood.**

Since the number of children in a family has decreased, it is getting impossible to pass down the experience of parental behaviour from generation to generation, from hand to hand. The time gap between one's parenthood and grandparenthood, that is, between the birth of the last child and that of the first grandchild, is growing. Thus, one's personal experience of child care is inevitably destroyed, while the changes of sociocultural and medical standards of children's upbringing become obvious. The rapidly

changing society depreciates the parental experience of the older generations, making it less suitable for transmitting to the younger ones (Mead, 1983).

Breakdown of the tradition of family upbringing is the main factor causing the growth of parental uncertainty, the increasing demand for new, psychologically comfortable models of parental behavior. Modern mothers willingly respond to the trends, which, in their opinion, meet the requirements and conform to the values of contemporary life.

Today it is widely believed that modern parents are incompetent and irresponsible, that they must be taught to be parents. Sociologists and psychologists discuss such a category as responsible (conscious, effective) parenting, implying not only the presence of the necessary family values, but also the desire for constant improvement of the parental competence (Strelnik, 2015). The category of responsible parenting can be considered as synonymous with the normative parenting: the cases when its norms are violated fall within the area of the juvenile justice system.

As an alternative to the institutional model of parenting there are diverse practices of family upbringing, that are shared in social networks and parenting forums. The post-industrial society produces not only information, but also so-called "experts" on any issues. Communication technologies, first of all the Internet, allow people to make their opinion, their personal experience publicly available, to offer it as a productive model of behavior.

### **3. Research Questions**

- 3.1. Genesis of modern family structure.
- 3.2. The new mothers' psychological image of family and parenting as a reflection of global social processes going on in the modern world.
- 3.3. Cross-cultural analysis of new mothers' family images affected by social and economic traditions of the society.

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

The purpose of the study is to analyze how the crisis of a family as a social institution manifests in the family and parenting representations characteristic of modern new mothers belonging to different sociocultural communities.

### **5. Research Methods**

Starting our research, we considered psychological image as a subjective picture of reality, the content and the structure of which are determined by a set of personal experience, knowledge, representations and beliefs.

The task of our study was to analyze the manifestations of the crisis of the family as a social institution as they show up in the image of family and parenting characteristic to modern new mothers belonging to different sociocultural communities. For this purpose, we developed a mixed-type questionnaire that included both closed and open questions concerning the childhood and maternal experience of the respondents, their ideas about the features of modern children and parents, their preferences in the strategies of education as well as the information and supporting resources that modern

young families can use. The study involved the mothers with children under the age of three living in big cities in Russia (40 respondents, Moscow) and in the USA (35 respondents, Houston), so we used two versions of the questionnaire – in Russian and in English. The research was conducted anonymously, as an online interview, the materials received were processed using the content analysis of the respondents' statements and the descriptive statistics (Student's t-test). As the sources of additional information we used the interviews with the mothers and with the American coordinator of the research, as well as the materials from the parenting Internet forums ("Young Parents", "The World of Loving Parents", "Krokha" ("Baby"), etc.).

## 6. Findings

The representations about the family composition largely determine the psychological image of family and parenting. Table 1 presents the comparative data on what is the best family composition in the opinion of Russian and American mothers.

**Table 01.** The respondents' representations of the real and ideal family composition (in percent)

Family composition	Russia		The United States	
	Real	Ideal	Real	Ideal
Nuclear	68,8	68,8	84,6	31
Extended	31,2	28,1	0	46,1
Single-parent	0	0	7,7	0
The one where love reigns				23,1

So, the Russian mothers' image of an ideal family coincides with the composition of their real family, that is, they think it is optimal. The American mothers' ideas of the best family composition differ significantly from their real practical experience that they have had both as children and adults. So, only 31% of American mothers consider full nuclear family to be the best option, and 46.1% would like to live in an extended family. The range of arguments justifying their desire varies from infantile ideas such as "it would be fun to live together with parents, aunts, and friends" to pragmatic statements about the help the relatives could provide to a young family. Grandparents' help is wanted by Russian mothers, too, whereas the spiritual and moral advantages of large family including representatives of different generations are less important for them. It is also noteworthy that none of the respondents mentions such an aspect of extended family functioning as the help that younger family members give the senior ones. Obviously, care for children and convenience of their own lives build the semantic centre of modern mothers' family image.

Incomplete family is not chosen by our respondents as a model of an ideal family. Apparently, the option to bear a child "for themselves" that is psychologically comfortable for some mothers meets single women's wish for motherhood, but does not correspond to their social values. There is also a type of answers given only by the American mothers: some of them say that the quality of the family does not depend on its composition, but on the atmosphere of love that reigns in it. According to the American

coordinator of the study, such answers are typical for representatives of non-traditional families, but the anonymity of our survey does not allow us to verify this statement.

Do modern mothers need the parental experience of the older generations? Judging by the answers of our respondents, only 18.8% of Russian and 23.1% of American women consider their parents' experience of child care and upbringing as useful. Occasionally 68.8% of Russian and 76.9% of American mothers ask their parents for advice, whereas 23.1% of Russians do not appeal to the experience of the older generations at all. These data indicate that the parental practices of former times are not relevant for modern mothers.

What sources of information do new mothers use in difficult situations? The data obtained reveal significant differences between the information preferences of Russian and American parents (Table 2).

As it is shown in the table, Russian mothers trust specialists (doctors, psychologists and teachers) most of all. Sometimes they rely on the advice of parents, friends and book authors: these three kinds of sources are of approximately equal importance. The least trusted source of information is the recommendations of the web communities. For American parents, social networks and friends' advice are the most reliable sources of information; one-third of mothers trust the recommendations of the experts, even fewer use books and the least number of respondents ask their own parents. Nevertheless, the general tendency of low demand for the experience of previous generations is clearly discernible.

**Table 02.** Information preferences on family and parenthood issues (in percent)

Sources of information	Russia	United States	Differences
My parents	28,1	15,4	
My husband's parents	9,4	0	
Friends	21,9	46,2	$P \leq 0,05$
Community in a social network	3,1	46,2	$P \leq 0,001$
Specialists	68,7	30,8	$P \leq 0,001$
Books	25	23,1	

(The summary rates exceed 100%, because the respondents gave more than one answer to this question.)

Why do modern mothers neglect the parental practices of older generations? What are their parents' mistakes they hope to avoid? Look at Table 3.

**Table 03.** The respondents' attitude to the methods of upbringing used by their own parents (in percent)

Methods of upbringing	Russia	United States	Differences
Psychological abuse	37,5	73,1	$P \leq 0,01$
Authoritarianism, rigid regulations	25	38,5	
No rules and regime, too much freedom	9,4	19,2	
Physical punishment	15,6	0	
Hyperprotection	15,6	11,5	

(The summary rates exceed 100%, because the respondents gave more than one answer).

The results obtained demonstrate the surprising unanimity among the mothers of both samples: they point out the same mistakes in the upbringing methods practised by their parents. First of all, it is

psychological abuse (threats, intimidation, manipulation, imposed priorities, pressure, insults, family quarrels), the second place is taken by authoritarian relations and strict regulation of family life ( $P \leq 0.01$  for the American mothers and at the significance threshold for the Russian ones). At the same time, the American mothers talk about their negative attitude to these methods of upbringing much more often than the Russian ones, which can be associated with the fact that the problem of psychological abuse is discussed in the American society more widely. However, some mothers believe that too much freedom, lack of order in the life of the child (that is, in fact, a sort of child neglect) is also incorrect. The impermissibility of corporal punishment is indicated only by Russian mothers (15.6% of statements), in most American families this method is not practised, because this sphere is to a large extent regulated by the norms of juvenile justice. In this case physical aggression may transform into psychological one, that's why a lot of respondents mention their negative experience of being psychologically violated by their parents. Hyperprotection is penultimate on the both (Russian and American) lists of wrong ways of upbringing. We associate this fact with the emotional inconsistency of the hyperprotection phenomenon, which is experienced by the child as love and care, but somewhat superfluous and suffocating.

The critical attitude of modern mothers towards the upbringing practices applied in their parents' families is explained not only by their own negative childhood experience, but also by significant democratization of parent-child relationships. 21.9% of Russian and 34.6% of American mothers say that the distance between children and parents reduces, and the "tolerance and democracy on the parents' side" increases. Closer relationships between children and parents are also fostered by development of modern leisure infrastructure that includes the so-called "child options" which create a barrier-free environment for parents with small children. The child has a real opportunity to "grow into the life of the family", travel with his/her parents, and take part in family affairs. Parents don't need grandparents' help as much as they did some decades ago, and grow more independent from the older generation.

We have already said that the modern information environment proposes a number of parenting models, some of which become especially popular among the young parents (Polivanova, 2015). We offered our respondents a brief description of the models of "reasonable", "traditional", "natural", "intensive" and "alpha" parenting, and asked them to choose the statements they agree with. The data are presented in Table 4.

**Table 04.** Different models of parenting preferred by the respondents (in percent)

Parenting model	Russia	The United States	Differences
Reasonable	59,4	61,5	
Traditional	31,3	15,4	$P \leq 0,05$
Natural	12,5	30,8	$P \leq 0,05$
Intensive	59,4	61,5	
Alpha	9,4	15,4	

(The summary rates exceed 100%, since the respondents chose more than one statement).

The data obtained indicate that parenting strategies implemented by our respondents are rather mosaic, and combine the elements of different models. The parental practices of most mothers of both samples combine the models of reasonable and intensive parenting, that is, they find it important to take

into account their child's needs and states as well as to create conditions for his/her early development. The popularity of these models reflects the inclination of modern mothers for a flexible, democratic style of interaction with the child, on the one hand, and the exposure to the pressure of the society that promotes the idea of intensive parenting through advertising goods and services useful for children, on the other hand. In the second place for American mothers there is a model of natural parenting ( $P \leq 0.01$ ), while for Russian women the model of parenting based on family traditions ( $P \leq 0.01$ ) is of the same significance. "Undemocratic" alpha parenting attracts the smallest number of mothers, which, in our opinion, demonstrates convincingly the incongruity of such ideology to the psychological culture of modern society.

## 7. Conclusion

The materials obtained during our research let us compose a generalized psychological image of family and parenting characteristic of modern mothers.

The young people's priorities such as professional self-actualization and creation of a financial foundation have become the main cause of the so-called deferred parenthood, typical of the developed countries. Modern family is mostly a full nuclear small family; its semantic centre is care for children and comfortable life of all its members. The child-centricity gradually gives way to the idea that children are to grow naturally into the life of the family, which is facilitated by the development of service infrastructure that constantly expands the list of "child options". Child's participation in the family leisure gets comfortable for parents, they need less help and feel more independent of the older generation.

The grandparents are at the periphery of modern mothers' family image, they are considered only as potential assistants who can care for children, but not as bearer of knowledge and skills necessary for young parents. Parental practices of former years are not only irrelevant, but also assessed as erroneous, repressive or suppressive, which doesn't correspond with the democratic character of psychological culture of modern society. New mothers choose the parenting models constructed by the information environment of the postindustrial society; however, the parenting strategies they implement are mosaic and combine the elements of different models. The most attractive practices for them are those of reasonable and intensive parenting, combining the ideas of following child's needs and capabilities with the conviction of the advantages and benefits of the early development.

Although family images of mothers belonging to different cultural communities have a lot in common, there are also some differences.

Thus, the American mothers admit that the atmosphere of love, mutual understanding and psychological comfort is as important for the family happiness as the traditional family structure, while in the Russian mothers' opinion family must be complete to be happy. At the same time, living in an extended family, regarded by Russian mothers as involuntary and forced, although having some advantages, is potentially attractive for many American mothers, whose real experience of living together with lots of other family members is limited to holidays and vacations spent with relatives.

As for the parenting models preferred by Russian and American mothers, there are some differences, too: one third of American mothers share the ideas of natural parenting, the same percentage of Russians prefer the traditional principles of upbringing. Apparently, it reflects the influence of the

values that dominate in the social consciousness and make the contextual ideas more important for people. That is, the inclination for eco-friendliness and healthy lifestyle, which is typical of the American society, creates a psychological basis for the acceptance of the ideas of natural parenting. In Russia the traditionalist context of national values plays a similar role.

The cross-cultural nature of our research lets us conclude that the psychological content of the modern mothers' image of family and parenting is determined primarily by the global socioeconomic, cultural and information processes going on in the prefigurative society. This is the reason for the significant similarity of many statements given by Russian and American mothers belonging to the same age cohort. The differences in the content of the family image among the representatives of different countries are determined by the dominant ideas and traditional values reflecting the mentality of the nation.

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