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## **Sociocultural Specifics of Siberian Residents' Ideas of the Meaning of Life and Attitude to Death at the End of the XX Century and at the Beginning of the XXI Century within the Framework of Postnonclassic Approach**

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*A highly significant feature to describe any social culture is attitude of the people towards two «eternal» problems: the meaning of life and the meaning of death. These concepts serve as basic characteristics for the level of spiritual and social development of a society. In modern Russia, as well as in any other society in crisis, most people try not to think about these problems and focus their main attention on daily needs. Moreover, the rapid change in dominant values which occurred in Russia at the end of the XX century led to social anomia. All that has rapidly made difficulties for people's adequate understanding of the meaning of life, and, correspondingly, changed their attitude to death. The paper deals with the research of sociocultural specifics of Siberian residents' ideas of the meaning of life and attitude to death on the basis of postnonclassic approach in sociology. The application of postnonclassic approach allowed to conclude that according to our empiric study findings the level of spiritual and moral development of Russian society has substantially deteriorated for the last 15 years.*

*Keywords: mass consciousness, mass unconsciousness, the meaning of life, attitude to death, attitudes, postnonclassic sociology, universal approach.*

### **1. Specifics of the Postnonclassic Approach in Sociology**

**The dominance of classical and neoclassical approaches in modern Russia,** (this becomes evident if we for example take a look at how articles for the only Russian sociological journal with impact factor «Sociologicheskie Issledovania» (Sociological Studies) are being selected) it is well known, forms the cornerstone of **socio-economic determination of social**

**processes.** In fact, this is misleading information which is still supported by some Russian scientists with high degrees and scientific «regalia». For example, the idea of representing personality as a merely rationalistic phenomenon gives no sociological consideration neither to the sphere of irrational motives nor to the vast domain of the social unconscious. Furthermore, there is a powerful scientific world tradition of «irrational» approach in sociology and neighboring scientific

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disciplines, which is represented for example by works of K. Horney, K.G. Jung, E. Fromm, A. Adler, D. Risman, H. Marcuse and works of other famous western scientists.

We developed the postnonclassic approach in sociology about 20 years ago and today it has obtained fame as one of the most up-to-date scientific schools in Russian sociology. The formation of postnonclassic science can be represented as self-organization of interdisciplinary knowledge.

It is known that sociology in the course of its formation has come through several stages. From our point of view, this scheme can be represented in the following way: 1) protoclassics 2) classics and neoclassics 3) modern and 4) postmodern as nonclassic manifestations 5) postnonclassic (universal) approaches. We consider the essence of interrelation between the cognizing subject and the cognized object to be productive criterion for the distinguishing of various stages in the development of social knowledge.

Thus, it is difficult not to admit that in the classical stage in social science priority is given to the linear relationship between subject and object. This excludes direct analysis of the counter impact on cognition process made by the object. The nonclassic stage features another element added to the subject and object interrelations – another subject. Sociologists, in particular, display considerable interest in the social context of cognition process; take into account all limits and precision errors induced by the specificity of a social group or institute, which a certain researcher belongs to.

Correspondingly, more and more often methods of «gentle» methodology are being used. They provide for fixation of diverse qualitative parameters and characteristics of an object (biographical method, surveys and tests). A distinguished feature of the new, postnonclassic stage of social knowledge development is a

complex, interdisciplinary and problem-oriented approach to research.

Here social science sets itself free from mono-objectivity and narrow disciplinarity, lays the foundation for ontological pluralism and gnoseological relativity (Reznik 2000). It is the postnonclassic stage when sociology comes though the «destruction» of man and the universe, which is typical of postmodernism. In this way sociology leaves fragmentary virtual reality in the past – simulacrum.

It is generally known that the universe is an integrated whole. Distinguishing universal logic and symbols runs like a common thread through the main monuments of human culture: from ancient myths to the New Testament. Acceptance of the fact that society (social reality) acts as a fixed part of the highly organized universe forms the core of the postnonclassic universal approach. When changed, each element of this system necessarily reflects this change and changes the state of its other elements and subsystems.

In the light of the universal approach, it is required to reconsider the definition for the object of sociology. It is not accidental that sociology becomes more interdisciplinary and unideologized, it penetrates into extreme complexity, multivariations and diverse dimensions of human existence. For example, in most sociological theories the principal human distinguishing feature is considered to be his sociality. However, the progress of modern animal psychology, ethology and other sciences shows that animals and even insects are able to form quite complicated organized societies. This is why the main distinguishing characteristic of human as a generic creature is not only sociality, but spirituality, i.e. an ability to create, aspiration for higher values and for the Absolute.

Unfortunately, in Russian sociology this notion is often substituted; it has nothing in

common either with literacy and education or with aesthetic tastes of a person. The expression «spiritual life» is often understood as aesthetic, philosophical and a generally speculatively abstract experience, whereas traditionally in Christianity it denotes a particular inner, experiential mystic human life. For example, in a popular sociology textbook, by J.T. Toschenko, which has been published several times, the part «Sociology of Spiritual Life» contains such chapters as «Personal Sociology», «Sociology of Education», «Sociology of Science», «Sociology of Culture» and «Sociology of Religion» (Toschenko 1998). Meanwhile, culture and education used in the common sense of these words directly do not increase human spirituality. Sometimes illiterate people can surpass literate ones in spirituality, though the latter have access to diverse cultural achievements of society. It is spirituality that played a crucial role in progress of mankind, yet the progress is not material, not scientific or technical, it is of a moral nature. Societies which oppressed this quality in humans, despite significant scientific and technological advances, just as it has happened with modern Russia, stayed at the level of animal hordes and insect colonies.

Thus the object of the postnonclassic universe sociology is the society, which evolves through humans, the society in the unity of its natural, social, spiritual interrelations and manifestations, which relate both to the objective (outer world, macrocosm) and to the subjective (inner world, microcosm) reality.

Based on the modern scientific worldview postnonclassic sociology contains the following features:

- Development of an interdisciplinary and complex approach towards analysis of social reality;
- Synthesis of socio-humanitarian and natural sciences;

- Application of multi-paradigm approaches;
- Application of modern trends of system analysis (synergy, diatropics, fractal approach, etc.);
- Traditional oriental philosophy and Russian Anthropocosmism as guidelines for research;
- Broadening concepts underlying the object of sociology and elimination of distinctions between sociology and other socio-humanitarian sciences (Nemirovsky 2003).

Finally, postnonclassic sociology belongs to a universal type of sociology, which views human and society in the unity of their natural and universal relations and dimensions. From this perspective postnonclassic sociology has a close connection to transpersonal sociology and applies its research methods (Grof 1985, 1988; Ferrer 2002; Braud, Anderson 1998). Transpersonal approaches in sociology allow scientists to reach new horizons of human and society cognition, to do away with rusty Cartesian chains which bound classic sociology.

*Diatropics* holds a special position in the postnonclassic social cognition (the word «diatropics» originates from the Greek word *diatropos* which means different, diverse, of different kinds). A science about diversity, in short, investigates those common features of similarity and difference, which are found in large aggregations of objects. The modern scientific worldview has given birth to diatropics. Here it is significant to single out that the scientific worldview relates to a paradigm not in a direct way, but via cognition models, which operate as organization and interpretation methods for specific material and are applied by scientists who work in different fields, but have a similar world outlook. Five cognition models are typical in modern science: scholastic (regards

nature as a text, a code), mechanistic (nature as a mechanism, a clock), statistic (nature as a balance of average values), system (nature as an organism) and **diatropic** (nature as a garden, a fair) (Tchaikovsky 1988, 1990).

In different times and places priorities were given to different cognition models, but all of them are practically always found in science. Over the last several decades a shift away from the statistic model towards the system has been taking place; however, the latter one already does not satisfy the new scientific worldview, which underlies the diatropic model. The diatropic model does not substitute all the former models, it acts as a continuation of their development and interaction. Thus G. Galilei and I. Kepler treated the world as a book, I. Newton and P. Laplas – as a clock, Ch. Darwin and G. Maxwell – as a balance of accidents, V.I. Vernadsky and E. Jansch – as an organism, whereas scientists of the next few decades will possibly regard it as a garden, following G. Leibniz, who was able to easily apply all the five models.

The diatropic model of cognition focuses its main attention on the common characteristics of diversities, independently of nature which forms the basis of elements involved in these sets. The basic concept of diatropics, as Y. V. Tchaikovsky points out, is the series, similar to the role of fact played in experiential and observation sciences. The fact has no significance beyond an explanatory scheme; the series operates likewise: it has no significance for diatropics without being compared to another series. Series for comparisons can be taken from considerably distant fields of science. Comparisons of these series are an elementary diatropic operation, where a series is not necessarily an integral system, but often a simple reordering of the examined set. On the basis of such comparison we may distinguish an archetype – the generalized image of the examined object: e.g. it can be a

bird anatomy, a tree structure or the structure of a social institute or society. The concept of «social and economic structure», developed by K. Marx, is an illustrative archetype example. The **generalized** archetype can be represented by the **diatropic principle of minimal universe** which we formulated in 1991 (Nemirovsky 1991). Generalization of this archetype implies its interdisciplinary character, an ability which can be applied to various scientific fields.

Our society is a self-organizing system, which goes through the evolution process in full accordance with all material laws. These laws are formulated in the **diatropic principle of minimal universe**. The latter denotes the minimal characteristics that are essential to describe any developing system. We used the diatropic principle of the «series comparison», where we take the compared series from different fields of science. In the course of comparison the «archetype» is formed – a special matrix, which in this case reflects the laws of material development. Briefly it can be described in the following way: **two elements** (instrumental and expressive or, using the terminology of Chinese philosophy, yang and yin), **three levels** (real-energetic, functionally organizing and informational), **five states** (conditions) (birth, development, bloom, fading and collapse), **seven layers** (e.g. similarly to the number of rainbow colors), **twelve qualities** (the twelve zodiac signs, twelve years in the Chinese animal cycle, 12 points of the clock-face, etc.). In addition to expressing the most general laws of the material development, the minimal universe principle has a solid basis in the history of human culture and achievements of modern science; it forms some kind of matrix, underlying the essence of development of any material system. The described matrix can be «imposed» onto any society or an element of society in order to define its structure and dynamics.

It is this basis which forms guidelines for a **new trend in postnonclassic sociology – universal sociology** (Nemirovsky and others 1991, 1994, 1998, 1999, 2001, 2002, 2004, 2006). It has already obtained quite a few supporters: the principles of universal sociology have already provided grounds for two doctoral dissertations and for more than twenty five dissertations of science candidates.

## **2. The Meaning of Life as a Socio-cultural Phenomenon in the Context of Postnonclassic Approach**

Further, we are going to show how the minimal universe principle can be applied in order to analyze such significant socio-cultural phenomena as the meaning of life and attitude to death.

However, before we proceed to analyze the meaning of life, we need to answer two questions:

- First, what is the meaning of life?
- Second, what does it consists of?

In scientific literature this term is used in several ways:

- the meaning of life as a result, a sum of life;
- the meaning of life as something one ought to accomplish (tasks, functions, which characterize humans from the outside)
- the meaning of life as the phenomenon of consciousness;

Resting on the diatropic principle of minimal universe, we shall examine the meaning of life in the unity of its two sides:

- a. Objective (from the viewpoint of human requirements; put forward by society);
- b. Subjective (from the viewpoint of human's individual aspirations);

The objective side of human's life acts as the instrumental element, whereas the role of the

expressive one is performed by the significance, which he (or she) has for society. The active role is to be performed by the instrumental element, implementing the ability to adapt to a developing system (i.e. in this case – human) to the requirements of the environment. The passive role belongs to the expressive element, implementing the function of keeping balance within the system itself. In the situation of discord between them, e.g. the expressive element in the meaning of life acquires priority, an independent person turns into a passive «screw», which becomes totally dependent on the interests of a certain society. It is generally agreed that this situation is typical of totalitarian societies.

As for the meaning of life as the phenomenon of consciousness, it is often understood as the task of life. However, this viewpoint suffers from a substantial disadvantage. In fact, if we ask people on the street about the meaning of life, most of them will give no clear answer. Even after a considerably long period of time spent in mulling over this question, many people will still be bewildered and will have nothing to say. At first glance we come to a conclusion that the phenomenon named «the meaning of life» is absent in their consciousness. Yet, does it mean that their life has no meaning? Certainly, not.

The point is that traditional philosophical, economic, sociological and psychological human models found in Russian science all bear the traces of rationality. It means that two significant points are not taken into consideration: first – human has a field of uncognized motives; second – human has emotions and feelings.

From the postnonclassic sociological viewpoint **the meaning of life can be described not only in rationalistic terms. Quite often it obtains the form of emotions and has different degrees of understanding (realization): from unclear variations in mood, to distinct life principles and programs. In this connection,**

**the meaning of life can be defined as a stable dominant orientation of the group or individual consciousness, which is directly expressed in the social life of human or the social life of a group. Therefore the meaning of life has this or that social significance** (Nemirovsky 1990).

We live in a society and all its structures and their interrelations «refract» ideas about the meaning of life. This occurs in accordance with a specific place occupied by this or that person. A system of stereotypes runs through the human consciousness; they reflect (quite often in a very distorted way) the meaning, which representatives of diverse social and professional groups put in their lives. These stereotypes embody, first of all, ideas about life *objectives* and life *style* adopted by people of different sex, age, place of living, national identity, various professions and positions. To put it differently, they reflect socially normative ideas concerning *why* and *how* should a person live in this or that social group. This is what the external, *social side* of the meaning of life consists of. It forms the significance of personal human life in a society. Still, since modern Russian society is quite heterogeneous, it displays contradicting and chaotic conceptions on why and how should human live and what the significance of human life is.

The meaning of life is a personal phenomenon found in different *life-meaning orientations*, which form the life-meaning structure of a person. It involves at least four types of life-meaning orientations:

- life-meaning experience;
- life-meaning feelings;
- life-meaning ideas;
- life-meaning principles.

Applying the minimal universe principle, we can distinguish three levels of human activity:

**The lowest – real-energetic** – consists of two types of activity – **creation** (the instrumental element) and **consumption** (the expressive

element). Creation is aimed at the person's development, at the recognition of human value, «the measure of all things». In this respect human is treated as an individual, possessing its consciousness and free will. Consumption concerns the usage of human as a means of achieving some aim. The range of these aims can be quite broad: from someone's selfish motives, to a considerably noble idea. Humans in this context are treated as a thing, an impersonal object embodying «labor force», «the masses» and the like.

**The middle level – functionally organizing** – describes the functions and place of humans in the organization of social life. In the most general sense it consists of wielding power (the instrumental element) and subordination (the expressive one).

**The highest level – informational** – characterizes activities aimed at its process: sacred (the instrumental element) or profane (the expressive one). The profane activity aimed at its process is nothing but a game. The sacred activities are different forms of the religious life aimed at serving the God and saving the soul; it belongs to the other, unrevealed world. Subjective satisfaction is received by human from the activity itself.

**Thus we have singled out six dominant meaning-forming ideas: creation, consumption, wielding power, subordination, the sacred and the profane.**

They form an entire series of life conceptions. In this, or another society, in a specific culture priorities are given to certain conceptions of the meaning of life. We shall give more attention to the ones, which are typical to modern Russia. However, first we point out that for answering the question of the meaning of life, this is not enough, since life is just one side of human reality. Thirst for life, a characteristic of all people, though they do not always realize it, lies in ideas about

immortality, which forms the basis of every cultural conception of the meaning of life.

**In this way the meaning of life acts as an integral (generalized) indicator of the needs and value-orientations systems, which describe a specific person. Realization of specific kinds of the meaning of life serves to satisfy specific human needs.**

It is agreed that value orientations form a complex hierarchical system. Thus there is a widely known hierarchy of human needs and corresponding values developed by an outstanding representative of humanistic and transpersonal psychology, A. Maslow (Maslow 1948).

Sticking to **the diatropic principle of minimal universe** (Nemirovsky 2005) we have been applying the seven-layered values system for more than 20 years. Within the postnonclassic framework, each value level correlates with a level in evolutionary development of the system.

On **the first level** evolution of any object begins from birth and survival.

On **the second level** of evolution the object proceeds to stable existence. The problems of survival are changed to the problems of guaranteed development.

On **the third level** the object seeks after reinforcement. For example, when a country has become prosperous, it starts to care about its defense against external enemies and starts to care for its inner stability. The country starts to feel the need for strong authority, army, administrative and punitive structures.

On **the fourth level** the object «clears up»; it gradually starts to reveal the superior objective of evolution.

On **the fifth level** development of the object itself comes to an end.

On **the sixth level** the object integrates into its environment.

On **the seventh level** the object achieves the principle aim of its development.

Therefore the essence of the seven-layer value system lies in the fact that on its «lower» floors are where only material value orientations are located, whereas the «upper» floors contain spiritual and moral value orientations. In other words, the value «ladder» reflects an individual or society's climbing from selfishness towards altruism, from destruction towards creation (Nemirovsky 2003).

On the whole, we can describe the following concepts of the meaning of life, which are to some extent distributed in modern Russia.

The conceptions of the meaning of life form the following hierarchy:

1. Passive flow of time, which rests not on the thirst for life, but on the craving for death. Strictly speaking, this level is a conditional one, it does not belong to the presented hierarchy, since society on this level is destroyed, disintegrated.
2. Game conceptions of the meaning of life, aimed at human's physical development (sports);
3. Hedonistic conceptions of the meaning of life, which embody human's craving after enjoyment and diverse pleasures;
4. Socially demographic conceptions of the meaning of life, which concern the birth and upbringing of children and grandchildren;
5. Prestigious conceptions of the meaning of life, which are expressed in the striving after rising of social status and obtaining power over other people;
6. Socially creative meaning of life, devotion to labor;
7. Creatively altruistic meaning of life, which concerns the striving for being useful to other people;
8. Spiritually moral meaning of life with a focus on self-improvement.

Thus we face «the ladder of meanings» – the bottom of this ladder (0 level) – craving

for death, the top (the 7<sup>th</sup> level) – the triumph of life. It illustrates that any human and society can either climb the top of spiritual and moral development or degrade, slipping down to the infernal depths.

If a person's life is not devoted to moving upwards, towards spiritual development and self-improvement, it moves downwards, towards infernal depths (from the Latin «inferno» – hell). There is no other way. Therefore we can distinguish two principle, strategic *life-meaning orientations: spirituality* and *infernalness*. The first underlies humans' craving after spiritual development, the second orientation is completely contrary. In actual fact, spiritual orientation coincides with modus of Existence, according to E. Fromm, whereas infernal orientation coincides with modus of Possession.

The mass consciousness of modern Russian society is saturated with different ideas about the meaning of life, death and immortality. They are closely interconnected and form specific structures.

### **3. Empirical Study of Life-meaning Orientations in Siberia**

For our investigation into the meaning of life we have used an image-model of a desirable future, which humans would like to have. For several years sociologists of Krasnoyarsk State University have been asking adult residents of Krasnoyarsk region this question: «Imagine, what your life will be like in ten years time? What characteristics, you think, will your life obtain?» Afterwards the respondents were given 11 indicators, each denoting a certain life-meaning conception. The task was to assess each of them using the three point scale: «certainly», «possibly» and «unlikely». It is worth noting that Krasnoyarsk region is one of the largest regions in Russia, with a population of over three million people, occupying 13,6 % of Russia's territory,

it stretches for more than 3000 kilometers from the Arctic ocean to the southern borders of the country. It has justly obtained the fame of «Russian New-Hampshire», since for a number of reasons results of any elections held in the region reflect the general situation in Russia. In 1995, 2001, 2006 among the 1200 interviewed residents of the region from the age of 18 and older a sociological survey was carried out; representative samples from the participants were selected for a formalized interview. Later the research findings were analyzed by SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences).

The results gained show that the elements of a desirable future image or, to put it differently, life-meaning orientations, are tightly connected with where a person lives (a big city, a medium or a small city, rural area), with his sex, age, level of education, material well-being, social and professional status.

We shall compare our data with the results of similar surveys among residents in the Krasnoyarsk region, which we carried out before (see table №1).

As we see, from the period of 1995 to 2006 priorities in the mass consciousness of the region's residents took a shift towards prestigious, consuming, hedonistic and status, and spiritual development orientations as well. Orientation toward the socially-altruistic motives became much weaker.

It is remarkable to mention, that for this period the number of respondents, who consider faith in God to be a compulsory element of their future, increased almost in two times. However, in that case, religious orientation is just a manifestation of a certain fashion and official ideological support of the Orthodox church in Russia. Being widely spread on the verbal level, as a socially approved stereotype, faith in God on the level of mass subconsciousness became considerably weaker.

Table 1. The distribution of answers to the question: «Imagine, what your life will be like in ten years time? What characteristics, you think, will your life obtain?» The variant «certainly» (percentage).

«Certainly»	1995	2001	2006
Active sport activities	7	10	13
Material well-being	8	17	23
Faith in God	12	20	19
Prestige, admiration from those around you	4	6	9
Good opportunities for recreation and entertainment	10	18	21
Good family	37	57	52
Executive position	6	7	12
Interesting and creative work	17	18	20
Regular reading of books, attendance of theaters, concerts of «serious» music	29	22	29
Life for other people's sake, regardless of profession, position and place of living, even if it leads to the infringement of your own interests	11	11	8
Spiritual development, moral self-improvement	20	20	24

Still, by summarizing the answers of the participants we obtain quite a superficial understanding of the mass consciousness, which is strongly conditioned by both social standards and different mechanisms of psychological defense. A deeper understanding of the life-meaning orientations can be perceived through factor analysis.

In that way in 1995 three generalized images of a desired future were uncovered:

- prestige and consumption (28 %)
- cultural and moral (20 %)
- religious (10 %)

In 1995, faith in God formed an independent, considerably significant orientation, whereas in subsequent years it became just one of elements of cultural, moral, spiritual and altruistic orientations. Moreover, according to the results of correlation analysis, **respondents inclined to believe in God do not give much credit to the church and priesthood.**

In 2006, as well as in 2001, we can pay special attention to two common orientations of similar structure, but possessing somewhat different expressiveness. The first orientation is substantially more «intense» – **prestige and**

**consumption** – in describes the following elements of a desired future: good opportunities for recreation and entertainment; material well-being; prestige, admiration from those around you; executive position; active sport activities; interesting and creative work and good family. Total – 45 % (2001 – 38 %).

The second orientation – **spiritually altruistic and culturally moral** – quite «weak» in comparison with the first one. It features the following elements of a desired future: spiritual development, moral self-improvement; life for other people's sake, regardless of profession, position and place of living, even if it leads to the infringement of your own interests; regular reading of books, attendance of theaters, concerts of «serious» music; faith in God. Total – 14 % (2001 – 17 %).

Applying the terminology we introduced above, the **infernal** orientation is much stronger than the **spiritual** one. In other words, following the terminology of E. Fromm, we can say that the **possessive** orientation is much stronger than the **existential** one.

The system of life-meaning orientations is an important factor, which makes an impact on

the degree of satisfaction, which a person feels towards life (correspondingly, it influences their social health). According to the results of the correlation analysis, in 2006 *possession-oriented* respondents, as a rule, were satisfied with their life. Those people, who rejected possession-oriented values, were quite often dissatisfied with life. In 1995 there was a different situation: «possession-oriented» respondents were basically satisfied with their life, since they had no opportunities to fully realize their infernal values. **Our observations indicate that modern Russian society is organized in a distorted way: total freedom for realization of motives is given to infernally-oriented people. This is another substantial indicator of our country's deep social pathology, since modern Russian society supports development of infernally-oriented people. It is this kind of people who live happily and comfortably in Russia.**

Analysis of the life-meaning orientations dynamics reveals the fact that at the beginning of 90s of the XX century they were located somewhere near the third level, whereas at the beginning of the XXI century they are situated between the first and the second. **To put it differently, in the social and cultural sphere, Russian society has degraded.**

It is worth noting that orientations which concern faith in God and altruistic behavior are not interconnected with social health of people. The outcome of this is that these orientations exist only on the verbal level, i.e. these are «mere words», which do not influence the real behavior and position of people in society.

In this way from the value viewpoint, we can distinguish two main kinds of **social health** of the participants. The first – **positive** – based on the orientations of consumption, prestige, comfort, dominance, high social status. The second – **negative** – has no distinct value basis. Thus we come to the realization of the fact that

«possession-oriented» people display more satisfaction with life and confidence in the future. The more such people, the higher indicators of social health the region has.

In this connection, quite an important characteristic of the desired future image is not only value content of constituent life orientations, but the degree of confidence displayed by the participants towards the realization of their plans.

In 2005, for statistical processing of data, we used an effective method of mathematical statistics called **cluster analysis** with the help of centroid method. As a result, we picked out two clusters, which form the basis of aspiration for the future. In the most general way they can be described like this:

aspiring for future, confident that their dreams and wishes will certainly come true (22 %)

not confident in the realization of their own motivations in future (78 %)

It is remarkable to mention that from the viewpoint of certain orientation structures, they are almost identical. Thus more than three quarters display uncertainty about their future and uncertainty in the realization of their life motivations, which means that modern Russian society has no «distinct rules of play», generally accepted social and moral standards or stable channels of social mobility.

#### **4. Conceptions about Death as an Object of Sociological Research**

In every culture death is a logical continuation of life, and the conception of death is a distorted reflection of human life. The other world acts as a distorted repetition of the real world. Conceptions about the other world are an inseparable element of «the universe image», which underlies the culture of any age.

Thoughts about human life inevitably lead to the comprehension of its finiteness: the meaning of

life and the meaning of death are interconnected. Conceptions about death act as a principle value orientation of people. In modern Russia, where the mass consciousness has rapidly changed its value system, which is often accompanied by the situation of existential vacuum, research of human value orientations is especially relevant.

What kinds of **death conceptions** dwell within the mass consciousness of modern Russia's residents? In the course of studies by the means of content-analysis, we thoroughly scrutinized a great number of opinions and distinguished six main concepts of death and immortality, which are typical in modern Russia.

After a specialized formalized interview we applied content-analysis to examine the answers and singled out six typical conceptions of immortality, which later as indicators were added to the sociological research tools. They form three types:

#### *Social*

1. Social and creative: «after death a person continues his living through his achievements, until other people remember him».
2. Social and demographic: «after death a person continues his living through his children and grandchildren».

#### *Religious*

1. Christian: «after human's death his soul goes to hell or heaven, depending on how he has lived his life».
2. Buddhistic: «after human's death his soul returns to this world, but in a different physical appearance (in another body)».

#### *Rejecting postmortem existence*

1. Nihilistic: «after human's death everything disappears, therefore all that is done is done in vain».

2. Consumption: «nothing happens after death, therefore we should take everything from life».

The participants were asked to assess these conceptions using a three point scale: «totally agree», «partly agree» and «disagree». Naturally, a respondent's agreement and disagreement with some «religious» judgments does not display his deep Christian faith or day-to-day observance of Buddhism postulates. The matter is more focused on social conceptions (as they are understood by S. Moscovici) (Moscovici 1981), which underlie orientations of a certain personality.

In 1995, 1998 and 2005, applying the formalized interview method, we carried out surveys with the Krasnoyarsk region residents (each time with more than one thousand of participants) according to the representative samples, reflecting the region's sexual, age-specific, educational and settlement structure.

This is quite natural, that meaning of diverse death conceptions is considerably dependent on age. Thus representatives from the older generation are far more oriented towards socially creative and socially demographic conceptions of death and immortality, whereas the young generation supports nihilistic and consumption conceptions.

The findings of the study show that death conceptions are quite stable. Basically socially creative and socially demographic conceptions are more popular. In other words more than a half of the participants intend to continue their life in an individual form: in memory of their relatives and grateful citizens, who remember their good achievements.

Far less popular were Christian, Buddhistic and consumption conceptions of immortality: less than one fifth of the informants totally agree with the statements which support such ideas. Nihilistic attitudes towards death were rejected by two thirds of the respondents.

Table 2. The distribution of answers to the question: «To what extent do you agree with the following statements?» (percentage)

Conceptions of death and immortality	Totally agree			Partly agree			Disagree		
	1995	1998	2005	1995	1998	2005	1995	1998	2005
1. After death a person continues his living through his achievements, until other people remember him	50	53	54	36	36	37	13	10	9
2. After death a person continues his living through his children and grandchildren	60	55	51	32	39	37	8	7	11
3. After human's death his soul returns to this world, but in a different physical appearance (in another body)	17	21	23	38	39	25	45	40	52
4. After human's death his soul goes to hell or heaven, depending on how he has lived his life	18	16	12	32	35	38	48	45	49
5. After human's death everything disappears, therefore all that is done is done in vain	7	8	18	23	25	31	70	67	51
6. Nothing happens after death, therefore we should take everything from life	19	20	27	35	34	40	46	45	33

As it is displayed in Table 2, from 1995 to 2005 on the level of mass consciousness stereotypes, a small reduction occurred in socially demographic conceptions. We consider it to be a result of the weakening of family as a social institution in posttotalitarian Russia. This has resulted in increased divorces, increased number of homeless children and the decrease in birth rate. The fall of Christian death conceptions, which occurred in these years, in many respects, is determined by the fading of the «Christian renaissance» process, which began in the country after the elimination of the communistic ideology.

At the same time we need to pay attention to the increase in the number of people who support socially creative and Buddhistic conceptions of death. The popularity of Buddhistic conceptions is accounted for by the spreading of nontraditional religions in Russia.

**Yet a more dramatic increase occurred in nihilistic and consumption attitudes towards**

**death: half of the participants agree to a certain extent with the statement that «after human's death everything disappears, therefore all that is done is done in vain» and two thirds – that «nothing happens after death, therefore we should take everything from life». These results provide evidence for the fact that the number of «disposable» people in our society has increased.**

A similar situation exists in the depth of mass consciousness. According to the results of factor analysis, there were three generalized conceptions of immortality in 1995:

- **The first** is described in terms of «socially creative» and «socially demographic» immortality. We shall use the term «social immortality» for this. (descriptive force 34,5 %)
- The second features orientations towards Christian and Buddhistic immortality (20,8) – this is «religious» conception of immortality

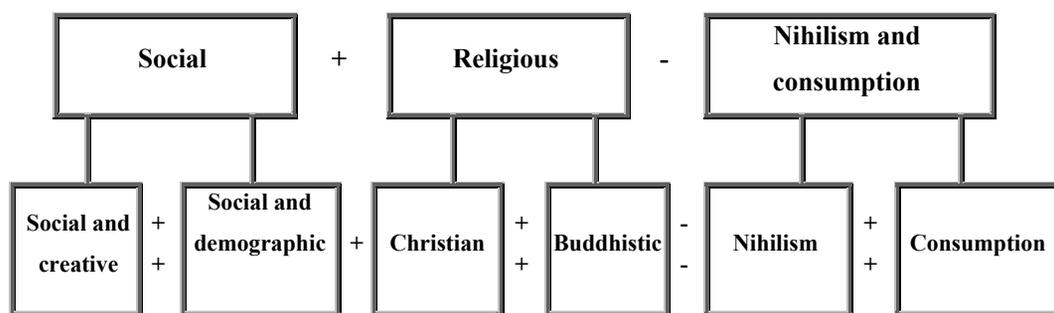


Fig. 1. Conceptions of death in the mass consciousness of the informants

- The third according to its constituent characteristics can be named «nihilistic and **consumption**» orientation (17, 5 %)

In 1998, a new structure of death conceptions was uncovered in the mass unconscious. Although the content of the orientations remained the same as three years before the prime position was given to «**religious**» orientations (descriptive force 30,2 %), which were followed by «**nihilistic and consumption**» (25,1 %) and «**social**» (19,1 %).

As we can point out in those years orientations of «social» immortality weakened dramatically. The number of people who were disappointed in the opportunities to succeed in the society only through «good memory» increased. At the same time «nihilistic and consumption» ideas and especially «religious» ones obtained significance.

In 2005, on the level of the mass unconscious, three general tendencies were singled out:

- **The first** features socially creative and socially demographic immortality orientations – the «**social**» conception. Nihilistic attitudes towards death were rejected. Descriptive force – 35,4 %
- **The second** – «**religious**» is expressed by Buddhist and Christian conceptions of life and immortality (20, 0 %)
- **The third** – «nihilistic and consumption»

**Thus, in 2005, on the level of the mass unconscious, a «return» towards the situation of**

**death conceptions in 1995 occurred.** Moreover, the descriptive force of the distinguished latent orientations coincides up to 1 %! Unconsciously, most people hope to leave some good memories to their descendants, hope to find «a continuation of their life through their achievements». Increasing opportunities for private enterprise and certain accumulation of capital have contributed to this situation: even the cost of a privatized apartment, which can be bequeathed to children, gives many people a feeling of significance towards their existence in this world.

On the basis of correlation analysis, we can distinguish a bipolar situation of attitudes towards death, existing in the mass consciousness of the participants (see Fig. 1).

As it is displayed in Fig. 1, the one pole is formed by social and «religious» attitudes towards death and the other is formed by «nihilistic and consumption».

Nonreligious mass consciousness regards birth of human and all subsequent individually biographic events in his life to be a result of accidents; death is also treated as a specific accident: even in hospital it is often considered to be a result of some medical mistake. Nonreligious views of the world give far less freedom for consoling illusions. Therefore most our contemporaries actively use a psychological mechanism of exclusion: though everyone knows that we are mortal, in daily life people prefer not to think about it, pushing it to the

most «secluded nooks» of their mind (there is even a phrase «to forget like you forget about death»).

On the contrary Christianity regards human's life and his subsequent death as a logical result of God's will: «the Lord gave and the Lord takes away» is an old Russian saying. This attitude towards death as a natural end, typical of a religious outlook, contributed to people psychological stability against the fear of diseases and the fear of death.

The cult of suffering and death, which is to a certain extent typical of all Christian branches – Catholicism, Protestantism and Orthodoxy, treated suffering as a merit, which will be estimated at its true worth in «the other world». Moreover, millennial religious practice has developed various magic mechanisms and rituals for weakening of the fear of death: prayers, Eucharist, penitence and the like.

However, the participation in such rituals (following the viewpoint of Orthodoxy) requires a lot of inner active work and constant struggle against vices and personal flaws. It is far easier to address the widely popularized, different modern exoteric cults and beliefs, where the majority contain such an important constituent element as «reincarnation».

The studies show, that many people, who reject any sort of postmortem existence, belong to a specific social personality type, which lacks moral qualities and an ability to think critically. As a result almost any thoughts can be

induced into their minds, they tend to think in a stereotyped way and often feel an unconscious aspiration for death (the latter, primarily, is typical of those people, who support nihilistic orientations towards immortality) (Nemirovsky 2006).

### Summary

Thus, the state of mass consciousness in posttotalitarian Russia is quite typical for social and political cataclysms and economic upheavals. More attention is given to the other world, in its most primitive and common forms, drastic increase in «the modus of possession» (following E. Fromm) at the expense of weakened positions belonging to the «modus of existence», increasing thanatophilia (aspiration for death).

**Postnonclassic approach** in sociology allows us to address such previously «tabooed» subjects for Russian classical and neoclassical sociology as the mass unconscious, life-meaning orientations. It allows us to uncover changes that have occurred in the hierarchy of social orientations (Nemirovsky 2006). In addition to that, it allows us to analyze the attitude of people towards the meaning of life and death. To put it differently, it allows us to scientifically define a decline of social culture in postreform Russia, where people try to find the meaning of life «on this side of existence». Striving for self-realization in daily life strengthens, yet this life becomes more and more «possession-oriented»

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**Социологический анализ социокультурной специфики  
представлений сибиряков о смысле жизни  
и отношении к смерти  
в конце XX-го – начале XXI-го столетий  
на основе постнеклассического подхода**

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*Важнейшая характеристика любого социума – отношение людей к двум «вечным» проблемам: смыслу жизни и значению смерти. Эти представления выступают основными характеристиками уровня духовного и социального развития общества. В современной России, как в любом кризисном обществе, большинство людей стараются не задумываться об этих вопросах, ограничивая круг своих размышлений повседневными заботами. Более того, резкая смена системы доминирующих ценностей в России в конце XX-го века привела к ситуации социальной аномии. Всё это резко затруднило адекватное понимание россиянами смысла жизни и, соответственно, изменило их отношение к смерти. В статье описано применение постнеклассического подхода в социологии к изучению социокультурной специфики представлений жителей Сибири о жизни и смерти. Применение постнеклассического подхода позволило выявить по данным эмпирических исследований, что уровень духовного и морального развития российского общества за последние 15 лет значительно ухудшился.*

*Ключевые слова: массовое сознание, массовое бессознательное, смысл жизни, отношение к смерти, аттитюды, постнеклассическая социология, универсумный подход.*

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