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Value and Motivational Prerequisites and Subjective Grounds for Women's Voluntary Childlessness

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Abstract. We have undertaken a comparative analysis of the characteristics of the value orientation of the personality, goal-based values, motivational trends, personal meanings (up to the extreme) of voluntarily childless women in comparison with women who have children or plan to have them (27–45 years old), with using a set of projective techniques. In addition, we studied the subjective grounds of voluntary childlessness using the methods of structured interviews, followed by a qualitative analysis.

The overall data showed that the group of voluntarily childless women is significantly distinguished by some internal conditions that make it difficult to successfully adopt the internal position of a parent. Such conditions include the dominance of an individualistic value and motivational orientation of the individual and hedonistic orientation, as well as the least motivational tendencies reflecting the value of relationships and willingness to act in favor of others. Based on the materials of the interviews, five main types of subjective grounds for childlessness were identified.

Keywords: voluntary childlessness, women, personality orientation, value and motivational prerequisites of the parental position, subjective grounds for choice.

Research area: Social psychology, political and economic psychology. General psychology, personality psychology, history of psychology.

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Ценностные и мотивационные предпосылки и субъективные основания добровольного выбора женщинами бездетности

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Аннотация. Был предпринят сравнительный анализ особенностей ценностной направленности личности, ценностей-целей, мотивационных тенденций, личностных смыслов, вплоть до предельных, добровольно бездетных женщин в сравнении с женщинами, имеющими или планирующими детей, 27–45 лет, с применением комплекса проективных методик. Кроме того, методом полуструктурированного интервью, с последующим качественным анализом, были изучены субъективные основания добровольного выбора бездетности.

Совокупность результатов методик показала, что группу добровольно бездетных женщин значимо отличают такие внутренние условия, затрудняющие успешное принятие внутренней позиции родителя, как: доминирование индивидуалистической ценностно-мотивационной направленности личности и гедонистической ориентации, а также наименьшая выраженность мотивационных тенденций, отражающих ценность отношений и готовность действовать в пользу других. По материалам бесед были выделены пять основных типов субъективных оснований решения о бездетности.

Ключевые слова: добровольная бездетность, женщины, направленность личности, мотивационно-ценностные предпосылки родительской позиции, субъективные основания выбора.

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Introduction

Given the difficult demographic situation in Russia, most Russians still condemn voluntary childlessness. The majority of our fellow citizens (79 %) agree that a woman's life is complete if she has children (*Semya I Deti* [Family and children] 2021). Therefore, it is important to study the internal conditions and subjective grounds of voluntary childlessness in order to provide a basis for a wide range of

people to understand this vital, and eventually irreversible decision.

Voluntary childlessness as a choice

Within the patriarchal family model, which has been prevalent until recently, a woman's primary role was to bear and raise children, which was considered to be unavoidable. The cycle of bearing children, giving birth, feeding, and raising them would repeat throughout a

woman's lifetime, unless there were health issues that prevented it.

The belief that all women have a natural desire to have children is deeply ingrained in the collective mindset, according to Josephine Coates-Davies, a British researcher (Coates-Davies, 2020). But despite this, although men also choose childlessness, women are more supportive of it, which reflects the higher opportunity costs of motherhood compared to fatherhood (Merz and Liefbroer, 2012; Rastogi, 2019).

Nowadays, deeply-rooted cultural beliefs about the "maternal instinct" are often interpreted as a "biological imperative" that essentializes or predestines a woman's life path. These beliefs are thought to contribute to a sense of stigma about choosing to be childfree, as this negates belief in the fundamental essence of being a woman (Coates-Davies, 2020).

However, *there is an increasing trend in science that suggests that there are no biological laws that force a person to have children. Instead, the laws of childbirth are purely social.* The need to have children is social, psychological and moral in nature. The need for children in this sense is an individual combination of different attitudes towards children in general, conditioned by the history of personality development (Polutova, Zhanbaz, 2015). And accordingly, in a particular woman, this need can vary in intensity, up to its complete absence. To the question of whether voluntary childlessness is a relatively new trend, there are conflicting answers.

On the one hand, there is an opinion that *women's reproductive rights appeared only in the second half of the last century as a result of the sexual and contraceptive revolutions that fixed autonomy.* Sexuality and reproduction differentiated, non-productive sexuality became the norm (Lomakin 2019).

On the other hand, it is known that there have always been people who voluntarily refused to have children, "however, before the era of the sexual revolution, perhaps someone may not have looked deep into themselves, and someone looked, but never said it out loud" (Isupova, 2014). It can be assumed that voluntary childlessness also contributed to the relatively high level of childlessness as such, as re-

corded by demographers both at the beginning of the 20th century and in the 19th century, in many parts of Europe, North America, and Australia. For Eastern European countries, for example, "the widespread permanent childlessness is a relatively recent phenomenon," but it is spreading rapidly (Lomakin, 2019). In 2010, V.N. Skotina noted that in Russian society, the phenomenon of conscious childlessness was "still gaining momentum", as it had emerged a few decades later compared to Western countries. (Skotina, 2000).

Theoretical Framework

Axiological prerequisites for the individual choice of childlessness

In today's modern social and cultural environment, people are faced with a wide range of choices. They not only have the opportunity, but are sometimes required to self-define themselves in the absence of clear and established norms, traditions, and patterns.

In times of external uncertainty, the significance of internal guidelines and regulations increases. These guidelines and regulations are, according to many authors, values and principles that are closely linked to the person's targets. E. Y. Pochtareva emphasizes the integral role of the axiological sphere, which determines a person's inner readiness for self-realization as the choice of certain means and ways to achieve life goals (Pochtareva, 2017).

In recent years, several psychological and sociological studies on the axiological and motivational aspects of childfree individuals have been conducted in Russia.

For example, M.A. Polutova and O.O. Zhanbaz (2015) highlighted the value and motivational attitudes of the childfree community from the perspective of postmodernism. N. Tiles (2016) conducted a pilot study that examined axiological orientations. A.T. Kutsuba and I.V. Ponomareva (2019) analyzed the psychological characteristics and reasons for choosing not to have children. Motivational and value attitudes during adolescence were studied by I.N. Zemzyulina and A.V. Severinova (2020). The features of the axiological sphere are presented in the work of N.G. Molodtsov (2021).

Statement of the problem

We considered voluntary childlessness, firstly, as part of the general “I am Another” basic dilemma of human existence, and secondly, from the side of the axiological assumptions of parenthood. *Indeed*, “The main human dilemma is: how to be connected to Another and maintain your self?”, write Bob and Rita Resnick. (Resnick B. Resnick R., 2008). To bear and give birth to a new life, to enter into a special bond with another human being that nothing can break afterwards, and this is a responsibility and a choice that lasts a lifetime.

Parenthood is a special type of human relationship. This contradiction in fully-fledged parenthood, at least in its early stages, resolves in favor of the child. As was first empirically proven in the dissertation of E.I. Zakharova, the adoption of a parental role does not occur automatically, but rather is a personal choice made by an adult. This willingness to make such a choice is linked to the specific characteristics of an individual’s motivational and value orientations. These characteristics serve as conditions or, alternatively, obstacles to the adoption and successful development of the internal parental position (Zakharova, 2017).

Our goal was to compare the features of the motivational and value spheres of voluntarily childless women, which distinguish them from women who have or plan to have children. We compared these features with the conditions and obstacles to the formation of the inner position of the parent. These features were presented in both the form of poorly realized values – goals and motivational tendencies – and in the form of personal meanings and subjective reasons presented in individual consciousness.

Methods

The following techniques were used to collect data:

1. The verbal projective technique *Determination of the Life Values of a Person* by P.N. Ivanov and E.F. Kolobova (Fetiskin et al, 2002: 22–24);

2. The projective technique *Diagnostics of Polymotivational Trends in Self – concept* by S.M. Petrova (Fetiskin et al, 2002: 63–66). This technique uses proverbs, which are expressions

of the accumulated cultural and historical experience of a particular people, as figurative and poorly structured stimulus material;

3. Ultimate Meanings Technique by D.A. Leontiev, which is individual in form and dialogical in nature. The methodical approach is a structured process of asking and answering questions about “Why do people do this?” starting with the first question related to any daily activity and moving towards the ultimate meaning. Beyond this point, the subject may no longer be able to answer the “why” question.

Through the series of interviews, we explored the conscious components of the attitudes of voluntarily childless women towards children and childbearing, as well as their understanding of their choice to lead a childless life, including in the context of their individual family histories and current relationships with their partners. The method of qualitative narrative analysis was used to analyze the materials of the interviews (Breslav, 2010). Statistical processing was performed using Fisher’s φ^2 criteria and Pearson’s χ^2 criteria.

The sample included 60 women aged 27–45 years, who had one fundamental difference – their attitude towards children and childbearing: 1) Women who plan to have children or already have them (30 people) и 2) Women who do not intend to have children and are firmly committed to this decision, not due to a biological inability to procreate or a lack of a suitable partner or circumstances for raising a child, but rather for other reasons related to their personal values and beliefs.

According to a report by the Statistical Office of the European Union (Eurostat) published in 2015, the average age of birth of the first child in Russia is 27.2 years (Statistics... 2015). The upper limit of the sample is determined by a woman’s ability to conceive and have a child, and according to the World Health Organization, this is the age under 45 years. Thus, both of our sample groups will consist of women between the ages of 27 and 45. The marital status and education level of the participants are evenly distributed among the compared groups. All 60 participants took part in the study throughout all its stages and completed all the proposed tasks.

Discussion

The severity of motivational and value-based prerequisites and obstacles to the development of the internal position of parents

The prerequisite for the development of the condition “*a mother’s value orientation towards the child’s interests*” (Zakharova, 2017) is a broader orientation towards another person and relationships in general. However, analyzing the results obtained, in a group of voluntarily childless women at the level of life goal-based values and motivational trends, we find their common value-motivational orientation *towards themselves*. Thus, the most commonly reported goal-based value, according to the *Determination of the Life*

Values of a Person method, is “Autonomy and independence”. In contrast, the value of “Family and Family Well-Being” occupies penultimate position, and values expressing focus on others and relationships, such as “Interpersonal Contacts and Communication” and “Affection and Love”, occupy places in the final third (Table 1).

Comparing the distributions of the two compared samples using Pearson’s χ^2 test, we combined the selected categories into the following generalized groups: their own well-being and development (categories 2, 4, 6, 8, 11); interpersonal relationships (categories 10, 12, 13); moral and spiritual values (categories 7, 14); freedom and justice in the world (categories 3, 9); independence and safety (catego-

Table 1. Response rates in the sample; the number and proportion of respondents who indicated this goal-based value one or more times using the *Determination of the Life Values of a Person* method and the significance of differences according to Fisher’s ϕ^* criteria

	Goal-based values	Voluntarily childless		Having / planning to have children		ϕ^*
		response rate	number and proportion of respondents, %	response rate	number and proportion of respondents, %	
1	Autonomy, independence	60	26 (86.7 %)	24	15 (50.0 %)	3.19***
2	Feeling of pleasure, comfort, well-being	50	29 (96.7 %)	25	22 (73.3 %)	2.79**
3	Freedom, openness and justice in society	47	25 (83.3 %)	26	17 (56.7 %)	2.3*
4	Personal development	44	28 (93.3 %)	41	24 (80.0 %)	1.57
5	Safety, security, stability	26	17 (56.7 %)	31	18 (60.0 %)	0.26
6	Health, physical attractiveness	26	19 (63.3 %)	18	14 (46.7 %)	1.29
7	Compliance with moral standards	25	21 (70 %)	52	29 (96.7 %)	3.08**
8	Professional growth	17	15 (50.0 %)	15	13 (43.3 %)	0.52
9	Helping the world	16	13 (43.3 %)	5	4 (13.3 %)	2.67**
10	Affection and love	15	15 (50 %)	17	17 (56.7 %)	0.52
11	Material wealth	10	8 (26.7 %)	8	6 (20.0 %)	0.62
12	Interpersonal contacts and communication	9	8 (26.7 %)	21	18 (60.0 %)	2.65*
13	Family and family well-being	8	7 (23.3 %)	62	28 (93.3 %)	6.24***
14	Spiritual wealth	7	7 (23.3 %)	15	11 (36.7 %)	1.14

Note: significance level: *** $p \leq 0,001$; ** $p \leq 0,01$; * $p \leq 0,05$

Table 2. The frequency of motivational trends in the “Diagnostics of Polymotivational Trends in Self – concept” method and the significance of the differences between the compared groups

	Motivational trends	Voluntarily childless		Having / planning to have children		φ*
		response rate	number and proportion of respondents, %	response rate	number and proportion of respondents, %	
1	Motivation to overcome difficulties	48	28 (93.3 %)	33	22 (73.3 %)	2.18*
2	Individualistic	46	28 (93.3 %)	26	17 (56.7 %)	3.53***
3	Striving for excellence	45	25 (83.3 %)	29	18 (60 %)	2.04*
4	Motivation for avoiding trouble	35	22 (80 %)	28	18 (60.0 %)	1.71*
5	Material and hedonistic	29	22 (73.3 %)	21	15 (50.0 %)	1.88*
6	Optimistic	27	19 (63.3 %)	42	26 (86.7 %)	2.15*
7	Moral and regulatory	24	18 (60 %)	49	27 (90 %)	2.81**
8	Altruistic	16	13 (43.3 %)	18	15(50.0 %)	0.52
9	Communicative	12	9 (30 %)	15	11 (36.7 %)	0.55

Note: significance level: *** $p \leq 0,001$; ** $p \leq 0,01$; * $p \leq 0,05$

ries 1,5). The distributions differ significantly (Pearson's χ^2 is 72.227, $p \leq 0,001$).

The dominance of an individualistic motivational orientation was also evident in the “Diagnostics of Polymotivational Trends in Self – concept” method (Table 2), both directly and through the “Striving for excellence” (the first three in terms of frequency of occurrence).

The distribution of polymotivational trends between the two groups differs significantly (Pearson's χ^2 is 25.350, $p < 0,01$).

On the contrary, a group of women having /or planning to have children is significantly distinguished by a motivational and value orientation towards other people and relationships. The priority values are “Family and family well-being”, “Compliance with moral standards” (Table 1), reflecting the orientation of the “Moral and regulatory” motivational trend (Table 2).

In the previous works of Russian scientists, the holistic orientation of the personality was not distinguished, however, certain signs of an individualistic orientation of the personality that distinguish these two groups of women were recorded earlier by other methods or based on the results of an analysis of publica-

tions. Such individual signs include the desire to be independent, the achievement of autonomy, self-development and self-actualization (Selivirova, 2010; I.N. Zemzyulina, Severinova, 2020); life in comfort (Selivirova 2010, Belinskaya, 2018), the desire for pleasure and sensual pleasure (Tiles, 2016; I.N. Zemzyulina, Severinova, 2020).

The results of the Ultimate Meanings Technique also indicate a greater degree of self-orientation and hedonistic orientation in the group of voluntarily childless women. They have almost twice the decentralisation index (13 %), defined as the proportion of categories in the individual protocol in which other people are the subject of action. The discovered semantic categories, which are marginal and close to marginal, more often express a hedonistic and individualistic orientation: “I want to achieve harmony in my soul, calmness, and an inner state of contentment.” “I want to enjoy myself.” “I want to live my life the way I choose.” At the same time, in the other group (having / planning to have children), more than two-thirds of the respondents have marginal and close meanings related to relationships with others and parenthood: “To continue to live on through my

descendants”, “To be proud of my parents”; “So that people next to me have a good life”, “To sympathize, regret, be happy for other people”. The data obtained hardly give reason to expect that in the case of an intention to give birth and raise a child, the value conflict between the values of satisfying personal, professional and communicative interests and the value of the child’s well-being will be absent or easily resolved in favor of the latter. Such conflict is attributed by E. I. Zakharova (Zakharova, 2017) to the factors that make it difficult to establish a parental position.

Thus, a significant difference between a group of voluntarily childless women and a group of women with children or planning to have them is a significantly lower degree of prerequisites for successful adoption of the parental position and a greater degree of conditions that make it difficult to adopt a parental position. The question remains to what extent and how the objective absence of these prerequisites, discovered through projective techniques, i.e. “bypassing the guardians of consciousness” of the respondents, as well as other grounds for childlessness, are represented in their own consciousness. We gained knowledge about this through structured interviews.

Subjective grounds for childlessness based on the interviews

During the interview, the basic question was the following: “Why are you not planning to have children?” Possible grounds were the attitude towards children, the family, including their own parents, both now and in the past; the relationship with a partner and their attitude towards not having children, as well as any other reasons mentioned by the respondents. These were all accepted.

As a result of our qualitative analysis of the interview data, we have identified eleven semantic categories and divided them into five groups based on the type of reason for not wanting children: I “Unwillingness to take responsibility”, II “Other preferences”, III “Negative appeal of the family, children, motherhood”, IV “Unsuitability for the maternal role”, V “The ethical unacceptability of having children” (Table 3).

As can be seen from Table 3, only one of these groups, “Other preferences”, contains reasons for “why?” that have a positive meaning. However, this positive meaning is related not to the birth of a child, but to ways of living and acting, to being realized, unrelated to children. On the contrary, what is associated with children, family, and motherhood is often described by the respondents using negative prefix “un-“, such as “unpreparedness”, “unattractiveness”, “unsuitability”, and “unacceptability”. These terms are often used to convey a sense of insufficiency and are perceived as something one wants to avoid. This type of justification for childlessness accounts for the majority of statements, which are distributed among the four remaining semantic groups.

As a result of our qualitative analysis of the interviews, we have identified the most prominent characteristics of a group of voluntarily childless women:

1) The world appears to be complex and dangerous. The focus of perception of human life is suffering, illness and inevitable death: “and wherever we are born, all of us, without exception, are waiting for illness and death”.

2) Raising a child is a complex process that requires a high level of expertise and dedication.

3) The prevailing view is that a woman does not have the necessary resources to be fully responsible mother and is not able or ready to take on the full responsibility of caring for a child.

4) At the same time, there is fear that a woman in her maternal role may feel unhappy and unable to provide for her child, leading to unhappiness for both parties.

The features of the worldview revealed during the interviews are in line with the results of the methods described above.

Through interviews, we were able to gain insight into the inner world of voluntarily childless women. We saw how they view the world, parenting, and themselves as potential mothers. The generalized subjective view of the world, identity, and parenting that we have gained through the eyes of voluntarily childless women allows us to better understand their choice to live without children and provides us with the ma-

Table 3. Subjective grounds for childlessness based on the interviews

Ground type	Number of respondents, %	Statements from interviews
I UNWILLINGNESS TO TAKE RESPONSIBILITY		
Parenting is difficult and responsible	95	“After all, amateurs don't pilot airplanes or perform surgical operations. And children are often raised by people who aren't just amateurs, but who are completely unsuited for the job”; “People who have chosen to have children do not have the right to judge those who are not yet ready for such a significant responsibility”
II OTHER PREFERENCES		
Personal and professional development	79	“It's all about priorities. Someone dreams of babysitting their children and husband. I “babysit” my business and my clients”
Independence, autonomy	68	“I see no point in sacrificing myself to fulfill their [children's] wishes”
More global problems	26	“There are more important issues than children, and I would prefer to dedicate my time and energy to addressing these global problems”
Interpersonal relationships with a partner	21	“When we were nineteen or twenty, we jokingly discussed what our children would be like. And when we got married, we just realized that we feel good together”
III NEGATIVE APPEAL OF THE FAMILY, CHILDREN, MOTHERHOOD		
Family as a burden or non-priority	58	“I have always seen family as a responsibility that takes up a lot of time and, at the same time, provides little joy”
Negative emotions/feelings towards children	47	“...I have felt nothing but irritation towards babies”; “...I developed an aversion to children, especially infants, when I was around the age of six or seven”
Difficulties in relationships with parents	47	“I knew that I was loved and cared for, but at the same time, I felt my father's distance and my mother's disappointment”
The negative experience of acquaintances who have children	42	“Not all mothers are happy, but according to my observations, every third or fourth woman wishes they could take everything back and make a different choice”
IV UNSUITABILITY FOR MATERNAL ROLE		
Unsuitability for the maternal role	58	“I'm very self-absorbed, so I often don't pay attention to other people, and you shouldn't treat a child that way”; “Childfree for me is when you realize that you don't want to have a child, because you have nothing to give them: no one will be happy”
V ETHICAL UNACCEPTABILITY OF HAVING CHILDREN		
The inability to condemn your child to suffering and death	53	“...I believe it is unethical to bring another sentient being into this world, knowing that they will suffer here”; “...I would hate to think that I made the child suffer.”; “... for me, this is ethically unacceptable, like cannibalism or incest “

terial to contribute to the discussion, which has been more prominent in English-language publications, regarding the attitude towards voluntary childlessness and the interpretation of this

choice as a manifestation of self-centeredness or, conversely, responsibility and a form of care for others (Davies, 2014; Ashburn-Nardo, 2017; Shelley, 2019; Coates- Davies, 2020).

The subjective representation of the environment is behaviorally effective. It seems internally conditioned that a woman does not choose the birth of a child when perceiving the world as unsuitable for the born child to be happy in it, herself as unsuitable for the role of a mother, the unattractiveness of family, children, motherhood and the attractiveness of other areas of life, which in her subjective picture, the birth of a child can only interfere with. At the same time, several studies have shown how difficult and time-consuming the process of making such a decision can be (Blackstone, Stewart, 2016; DeLyser, 2016) and how challenging it can be to accept the consequences of such a choice (DeLyser, 2007). In the public consciousness, parenthood is still seen, according to Ashburn-Nardo, as a moral obligation (Ashburn-Nardo, 2017). The decision to be childless can lead to a number of challenges (Morell, 1994). These include negative reactions from others, such as criticism and condemnation, as seen in Russia (Semya [Family], 2021), and abroad (Ashburn-Nardo, 2017; Iverson, H., Lindsay, B., MacInnis, C.C. (2020).

The question of whether the decision to be childless is selfish or egocentric is also not clear. On the one hand, self-orientation is prevalent, and this has been empirically established. This confirms that among childfree women, the attitude towards selfishness is more pronounced than among women with children (Perova & Kara, 2020). On the other hand, these interviews also show a concern for the unborn child, for example: “and wherever we are born, all of us, without exception, are waiting for illness and death”. “I would hate to think that I made the child suffer”. In our study, as well as in the work of J. Davies, one aspect of the meaning of egoism – placing oneself at the forefront – is confirmed. However, the second aspect, “lack of consideration for others”, is not supported (Davies, 2014). D. V. Belinskaya believes that it is not appropriate to talk about the selfishness of childfree women, as the desire for self-fulfillment is also present in people who have children or want to have them. Therefore, she argues that this is not a reflection of their child-free selfish nature, but rather a unique way

of seeing the world and their place in it. (Belinskaya, 2018). S. Z. Reuter, in her study of the experience of two voluntarily childless Canadian female scientists, concludes that “voluntary childlessness is not self-centered, but rather, it is responsible in a number of complex and interconnected ways.” Women are responsible to themselves, respecting their preferences regarding motherhood. “In a neoliberal culture where self-care is the foundation of caring for others, these voluntarily childless women do exactly what they are supposed to do” (Reuter, 2019).

Conclusion

The results of the projective techniques showed that the group of voluntarily childless women significantly differs from the group of women who have and plan to have children in such features as the dominance of individualistic value-motivational orientation of personality and hedonistic orientation, as well as the least pronounced motivational tendencies reflecting the value of relationships and willingness to act in favor of others. These features make it difficult to successfully adopt the internal position of a parent. Based on the interview materials, we have identified such basic types of subjective grounds for childlessness as: “Unwillingness to take responsibility for the child due to the complexity of motherhood”, “Preference for child free activities”, “Negative appeal of the family, children, motherhood”, “Unsuitability for the maternal role”, “The ethical unacceptability of having children due to the unwillingness to condemn them to suffering and death.”

It can be concluded that, in the absence of motivational and value prerequisites, and in the presence of obstacles to adopting a parental position, when there is a preference for areas of self-realization unrelated to childbirth, and when one experiences the unsuitability of the world and oneself for motherhood, and experiences a child’s birth as ethically unacceptable, the choice of voluntary childlessness seems reasonable and meaningful. This choice combines a predominant focus on self with anxious for the world and the future of possible children.

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