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## **Social Consciousness and Public Opinion: Associative Experiment Among Students of SibFU**

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*The article deals with the concept of elite as a phenomenon of social consciousness and public opinion. This phenomenon was considered as part of an associative experiment, which is widely used to diagnose students' knowledge, among students of Siberian Federal University. As a result of our investigation we collected a hundred and five students' answers, mostly from three institutes. We reduced the answers to six categories of associates. We developed a diagram of a collective semantic spectrum of thematic associations and a table of eleven major associates linked to the concept of elite. We also analysed individualities of the answers of students majoring in different subjects. On balance, we established a connection of these associates with the concepts of wealth, money and power. These conclusions can help with the correction of students' educational process.*

*Keywords: social consciousness, public opinion, elite, associative experiment, associate, students' public opinion.*

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*Research area: culture studies.*

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Social consciousness, as is known, is a spiritual aspect of the historical process. It is not a set of individual opinions, but a special integral spiritual phenomenon. It is characterized by the inner structure, qualitatively different levels, among which everyday and academic consciousnesses are distinguished, ideology, emotional and mental sphere. Some specific kinds of consciousness, such as politic, economic, legal, moral, religious, aesthetic, philosophic, scientific, and others can be mentioned. Our objective is to analyze how the concept of *elite* is reflected in public mind and public opinion on the example

of a survey of associates of this concept among the students of SFU.

The category of social consciousness started being researched as early as XIX century when it was being contrasted with the category of social being. According to K. Marx: "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness" [Marx, 1959, p, 7]. It is at that time that dialectical materialist direction of the research of this phenomenon was established.

The following significant features of public consciousness can be distinguished. To start with,

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this consciousness cannot be regarded as some passive mirror reflection of the outside world but should be perceived as an extremely complex process, as a result of active position of public people to the reality. This approach allows us not only to distinguish the causal dependency of social consciousness on its material base, but also it enables us to oppose it to idealist views about substantiality of this consciousness. In addition it opposes it to the metaphysical comprehension of the subject's lack of activity. This approach exhibits the dependency of social consciousness on social being and is a foundation of the inclusion of social consciousness in the system of laws of the society.

The research into social consciousness, in particular by Russian philosophers and scholars, has decisively proved that social consciousness enjoys a certain relative autonomy, is capable of development and self-development, is characterized by continuity, interaction and cooperation of its levels and forms and is able to radically transform. Social consciousness nowadays is a major agent in the evolution of the society and aids its stabilization or destruction. The impact force of social consciousness on social being is defined by verity and integrality of the reflection of real interests and needs of social groups and the society in general and also its link with practice.

Public opinion is a special kind of social consciousness and includes obvious or hidden attitude of different social groups to the reality and certain events. Public opinion manifests itself in monitoring, consulting, directing and expressive functions, aids some social group to take a certain position, exchanges information, impressions within itself, makes decisions on certain issues of interest. There are following types of public opinion subject to their context and the nature of the statement: evaluative, analytical, constructive and nonconstructive, emotional, expressive and

trivial assessment. Public opinion strongly affects regulation of the behaviour and activity of social groups, individuals and social institutions. Public opinion influences the regulation of behavior and activities of social groups, individuals and social institutions. It contributes to the assimilation of ideas from the spheres of politics, economy, ideology, science, education, religion, etc.

Public opinion is a universal phenomenon, it penetrates the whole structure of society, its classes and social groups, responds to everything of interest happening around. Its distinguishing feature is that its assessments, estimations and views often do not concur on one and the same issue.

V.A. Medvedev, analysing tendencies in theory and methodology of the development of social humanitarian cognition states that new philosophical concepts are emerging which comprehend the role of cognition, language, cognitive practices, social reality and so on. Nonclassical and postnonclassical scientific rationality focuses on phenomenological, hermeneutic, ethnomethodological, practical, synergetic and other approaches. A modern anthropological revolution in social humanitarian cognition is taking place.

Associative experiment has recently become one of the promising lines of social phenomena research. It interests us from the point of view of its reflection in social consciousness, in public opinion about such a concept as *elite*.

Associative experiment as a method of research has outlived a long predominant theory of associanism and is used also nowadays in psycholinguistics, cross-cultural research, etc. A.I. Nazarov and R.V. Sokolov point out: "... association (connection) is not primordial and not the only mechanism of the formation of mental phenomena functioning as the classics of associanism believed, but one of the finite or intermediate forms of their behaviour which

took shape as part of whole focused activity of an individual ... associations are the result of education, not its cause”<sup>1</sup>.

Associative experiment is successfully being used to diagnose students’ academic performance. American psychologists have developed an associate test<sup>2</sup> where students are offered a list of terms on the topic studied and they should respond to them with a relevant word or a short phrase. The extend of their relevance is assessed on a four point scale. These answers are a perceived characteristic of the inner content of the memory of the student being diagnosed.

The number of associates can be narrowed down to six according to how far the associate is removed from the essential features of the concept. Those are, first, the associates having the direct relevance to the notion and characterising its structure; second, those having direct relevance to the topic and characterising its properties; third, closely related to the topic (one or two connecting links); fourth, those far removed from the topic, having more connecting links; fifth, those functionally related to the topic characterising the properties it acquires as a result of its interaction with the environment; sixth, non-relevant associates connected with the topic mostly through the personal life experience of the respondent.

In this connection we will analyse the attitude of the students of SFU to the concept of *elite* manifested in their associates.

The students majoring in Philosophy (17) delivered the following associates relevant to the concept of *elite*:

Finance	Status
Knowledge	Money (6) Authority
Personal growth	Prestige
Good education (2)	Fortune
Wealth (3)	Star
Closed-door	Chrystal
Stalin	Village

Upper class	
Power (3)	Army
Beauty	Politic
Intelligentsia (2)	Society (2)
Luxury (2)	Professional
Upbringing	Individual
Expensive	Manners
Influence	Love
Forces	High standard of living

Upper intellectual society  
 People whose life should be an example  
 Inhumanity Drugs Impudence

The respondents majoring in History (23) offered the following associates relevant to the concept of *elite*:

Aristocracy	Intelligentsia
Influence (3)	Culture
Power	Superiority
Striving for the top	Luxurious house
Expensive	Wide circle of people
Money	Upbringing
The best (3)	Minority
Wealth	Luxury
Country house	“Cool Car”
Politics	“Cool house”
Nobleman	Wealthy person Intelligentsia
Education (2)	Smug creatures
Fat man	Luxury
Upper society	Village
Bloodline	“Rublevka”
“Upper crust (2)”	Prestige
Social stratum	Respect
Haute couture	Beauty
Elegance	Upper
Top (of society)	Attitude
First-born	State, Law
Quality	Society
Social	High social status
Elitist	Nation
Language	Behaviour
“Prosperous scum”	Brazen

Respondents majoring in Record-keeping and Archival science (21) suggested the following associates:

Prosperity	Confidence
Wealth (5)	Celebrity
Privilege	Authority
Chic (2)	Uniqueness
Big, Popular	Beauty
Controllers	City tours
Accessibility	Intellect
Popular	Respect
Education	Human being (2)
Chosen	Stability
Higher education	Highest social status

Active	Ability
Prestige (2)	Might
Modernity	Trendy
Class, Society, Group	Pathos
Status (4)	Krasnoyarsk
Higher society	Recognition
Limited access	Main
Power (2)	Prestige
Key	Age
State	SFU
Village outside Krasnoyarsk	

Expensive cars, things (luxury (4))

Understanding that they are better than others

Spiritually enlightened, educated, literate

Master of his trade, profession

Rogues

Students majoring in Applied IT (3) noted the following:

Higher status	Wealth
Success	Head, main
Luxury (2)	Money
Outstanding people	

Certain group of people whose life should be an example to others

One of a kind, not like the rest

Students majoring in Town building and economy, Buildings design and Decorative applied art and design (5) provided the following:

High financial status	Mercedes
Luxury	Top
Excellent	Superior
Pathos	Social ladder
Power	Money
Best	High culture of behaviour

Lots of personal connections used for personal goals

Arrogance

Show off in front of others

Respondents majoring in Philology (2) and Journalism (1) recorded the following:

Privileges	Inaccessibility
Pathos	Power
Isolation	Highest
Money	Luxury

Arrogance

Respondents majoring in Pedagogy (2), Social cultural activity (1), Public relations (1) and Sociology (2) named the following associates:

Popularity	Wealth
Respect	Village
Money	Lineage
Power (2)	Advantage
Education	
Knowledge	People
Luxury	Intelligentsia
Position in society	Top
Science	Creativity

Students majoring in State and municipal management, Organisation management, Economy and Accounting, analysis and audit (6) suggested the following:

Highest	Intellectual
Minority	Human being
Politics	Responsibilities
Higher society	Best (about things)
Top (2)	State
Business	Intelligentsia
Superiority	Money

Erudition	Pride
Possibilities	Politicians
Intellect	Restraint
Quality	Intellect
Chosen	Fur coats
Money (4)	State authorities
Cream of society	Authority
Glory (2)	Peculiarity
Accomplishments	Influence
Head of the group	

Village (I've got a summer house there)

Top-brass in government  
Company management

A respondent majoring in Recreation and tourism suggested the following:

Management  
Organising  
Thieves

Students majoring in Linguistics (12) wrote:

Top of (higher) society (2)	Accomplishments (3)
Popularity	Intelligence
Chic	Higher education
Inflated self-esteem	Cream of society
Highest position in society (3)	Erudition

A Biology student wrote:

Village outside Krasnoyarsk  
Privileged people  
Quality

Conductor's place	
Insularity	Centre
Society	Literacy
Leadership	Success
Ethics	Government
Monocle	Money (3)

A medical student offered:

Money  
Power  
Wellbeing

High financial security

A Customs and excise student gave the following answer:

Higher society  
Manners  
Lawyers

One hundred and five SFU students majoring in different subjects took part in the research in November 2014.

Students majoring in International relations (12) stated the following:

Power (4)	Activism
Best of the best	Aristocracy
Gold	Connections
Ruling circles	Minority

We will attempt to separate individual associates into larger semantic groups. The group of concepts connected with wealth and money is the most often repeated associate of *elite*. They are such associates as *wealth*, *money*, *prosperity*, *fortune*, *finance* and their derivatives. These associates are mentioned 37 times.

The notion of *power* stands out as the next biggest group of associates which is referred to 23 times.

The relevant concept of *influence* and its derivatives are noted 5 times.

Associates linked with *authority*, *respect* and *prestige* are mentioned 6 times.

The concept of *education* and its relevant notions are often enough associated with the stated topic and are cited 17 times. Closely linked to this group semantically are associates linked to *intellect*, *intelligence*, *intelligentsia* (8 times).

Some students associate *elite* with something privileged, inaccessible, closed off (*isolated*, *minority*, *one of the kind*, etc) referring to this meaning 16 times.

Others perceive this concept as *the best* (6 times).

Respondents quite often point out the outer characteristics, façade of the concept, talking about *luxury*, *chic*, *haute couture*, *fashion*, etc (14 times).

There are also numerous rather superficial associates: *Rublevka*, *village outside Krasnoyarsk*, *cool house*, *gold*, *fur coats*, *Mercedes*, etc (17).

On numerous occasions *elite* is connected with *politics*, *government*, *politicians*, *ruling circles* (11 times).

A cluster representing something *higher* and *top* borders the group above: *higher society*, *higher class*, *top brass*, etc (13).

We set aside a distinct group of associates linked with *ancestry*: *aristocracy*, *nobleman*, *first-born*, etc (8).

A number of respondents marked *human qualities* of elite: *manners*, *high culture of behavior*, *language*, *beauty*, *love*, *restraint*, etc (9).

There are *neutral* associates, such as *society*, *social stratum*, *social ladder*, *nation*, *human being*, etc (11).

There are some definitions zooming in on the *positive side* of the concept: *people whose life should be an example to others*; *outstanding*

*people*; *master of his trade, profession*; *spiritually enlightened*, *educated*, *literate* (3).

In view of their modest life experience only a few respondents mentioned some *negative qualities* and characteristics inherent to modern elite. These are such associates as *inhumanity*, *arrogance*, *inflated self-esteem*, *lots of personal connections*, *rogues*, *brazen*, *drugs*, etc (13).

We present a diagram of a collective semantic spectrum of thematic associations according to the major groups of associates linked to the concept of *elite* (see Fig. 1).

### Notes

Wealth, money

Power

Education

Outer objective associates

Privilege

Demonstration of its exclusiveness

Higher, top of the society

Negative associates

Politics, government

Neutral associates

Human qualities

Intellect, intelligence

Ancestry

Authority, prestige

The best

Influence

Positive sides of elite

We put this data together into a table where we allocated eleven basic associates. Only the most numerous focus areas are pinpointed in the table.

We analysed the data above and observed the following. Students with major in Philosophy are represented more homogeneously based on gender therefore we can draw a comparison between male students (9) and female (8). We can see with reference to the table that the most

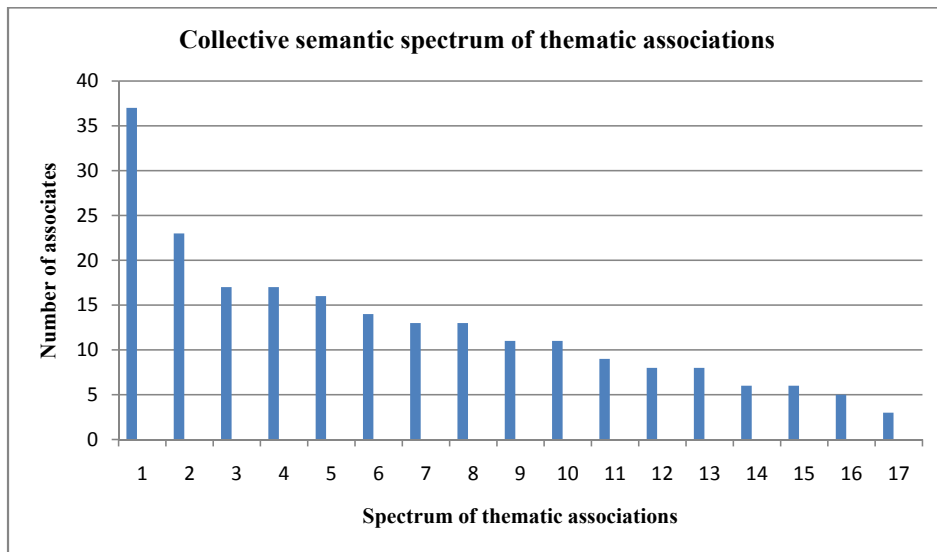


Fig. 1

Table 1

Major	Philosophy		Record-keeping and archival science		History		International relations		Linguistics
	M (9)	F(8)	M (6)	F (15)	M (8)	F (15)	M (2)	F (10)	F (12)
Wealth, money	6	7	1	6	-	2	-	4	4
Power	1	2	2	-	2	5	-	4	2
Education, intelligence	3	4	-	5	1	4	1	3	8
Outer objectives associates	2	-	2	3	4	4	-	2	2
Privilege	-	2	1	4	1	2	-	3	1
Demonstration of exclusiveness	1	2	-	6	-	4	-	-	1
Higher society	1	-	1	2	1	5	1	1	7
Negative associates	2	1	1	-	3	1	-	-	1
Politics, government	2	-	1	-	-	2	1	3	1
Authority, influence	-	2	3	-	2	1	-	1	-
Human qualities	2	2	-	2	-	5	-	3	1

frequently occurring associate in both groups is realia linked to *wealth, fortune* and *finance*; the second most popular category appears to be that of *education* and other relevant associates. The rest of the associates are put forward only once or twice.

We can only trace a trend among female students majoring in Record-keeping and archival science as the number of male students is far smaller than that of female students and we cannot draw a parallel here. Female students mostly cited associates connected with the category of *wealth,*

*money* and *demonstration*, *outer characteristics*: i.e. *luxury*, *haute couture*, *star*, etc.; next, with the margin of one reply, follows the associate of *education*; then everything linked to *privilege* and *exclusiveness*; male students accentuated *authority*, *power* and *outer objective associates*.

Students majoring in History also differ significantly based on gender. We observe that male students' largest group of associates is related to positive outer objective associates followed by negative associates. On the whole, which is most notable, this group of students offered majority of the negative associates. Female students split their focus between the categories of *power*, *higher society* and *human qualities*, which are followed by *education*, *demonstration of exclusiveness* and *outer objective associates*. Third come the associates of *wealth and money*, *privilege* and *politics*.

Female students prevail among those majoring in International relations (10 to 2). The top place was shared between associates *wealth*, *money* and *power*; *education* and *intelligentsia*, *privilege* and *politics*, *government* came second; then come *outer objective associates* and *human qualities*. Male students marked *education* and *intelligentsia*, *upper in society* and *politics*, *government*.

All the Linguistics students are female (12) and they put *education*, *intelligentsia* (8) on the first place; next comes *upper in society* (7); next, with a wide margin, *wealth* and *money* (4); then *power* and *outer objective associates* (2 each).

Drawing upon the article by A.I. Nazarov and R.V. Sokolov, to be precise upon the introduced categories of associates, it is of major importance for us to outline the content, structure of elite and its characteristics therefore we will take only top three categories, i. e. associates characterizing its structure and content, its properties and outer characteristics and associates having direct and circumstantial relevance to the topic. Using the

example of the group of Philosophy students, we will demonstrate the way to assign the number to the associates according to the logical remoteness from the basic characteristics of the concept. Such associates as *finance*, *politics* and *upper class* represent the place and the role of elite in society therefore we will refer them to the first category. *Education*, *status*, *authority* are more outer characteristics of elite and correspond with the second category. Such associates as *crystal*, *village* and *beauty* take a more remote position and their connection to the topic can be traced only with the help of some additional links and in this case we can speak of the specifics of an individual experience.

Finally, we arrive at some conclusions. Associative experiment is a specific form of reflection of such a social phenomenon as *elite* in social consciousness and public opinion. As we specified, it was conducted mainly in three institutes of Siberian Federal University in November 2014 and engaged 105 students.

Analysis of associates linked with the given category brought to light following key elements of the concept of *elite* in the given social group of respondents. It was established that associates *wealth* and *money* are significantly more widespread (37 responses) than all the others. The associate *power* follows it with 23 responses. Notably losing ground in mass perception and reflection in notions showed up *education* (17), *outer objective associates* (14) and *privilege* (16). Demonstration of exclusivity, *upper in society* and negative associates of *elite* should be designated to the third group of thematic associates. We allocate associates *politics* and *government*, *neutral definitions*, *human qualities*, *intellect*, *lineage*, *authority* into the fourth group of associates.

Associates of *wealth*, *money*, *power* and *real levers of political influence in the society* are linked with *elite* in social consciousness in the



first place taking into account a limited selection of respondents. Since the responses were given by those in university, owing to this fact they quite often linked *elite* to the associate of *education*. On the whole, the associates *authority*, the *best*, *influence* and *positive sides of elite* came last (14 – 17).

The dispersion of public opinions (associates) among students' responses depending on their major (we dealt with mainly five specialisms) and gender is of some interest, too. These specific features were recorded above.

We will attempt to move over to practical conclusions. If we accept that these associates

to a certain degree reflect the plausibility of the real status and the role of elite in our society then we have got to admit that it does not correspond with the strategic and tactic goals and aims of transformation of Russia from a lagging industrial society (over 50 % of the state budget is accounted for by raw materials sector of national economy) into post-industrial. It is fixated on itself, on self-sustainment and preservation of powers of authority. It essentially lacks passion and determination aimed at solving historic goals focused on metamorphosis of Russia into one of the leading and self-sufficient states in 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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<sup>1</sup> Nazarov, A.I. Association and Associative Experiment: Different Fate / A.I. Nazarov, R.V. Sokolov / Questions of Psychology. 2007. № 4. P. 126.

<sup>2</sup> See: Verplanc, W.S. A Brief Introduction to the World Associate Test / W.S. Verplanc / The Analysis of Verbal Behavior. 1992. V. 10. P. 97 – 123.

## **Общественное сознание, общественное мнение: ассоциативный эксперимент среди студентов СФУ**

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*В данной статье исследуется категория элиты как феномен общественного сознания и общественного мнения. В общественном мнении студентов Сибирского федерального университета был рассмотрен этот феномен в рамках ассоциативного эксперимента, который активно применяется в настоящее время для диагностики знаний в процессе обучения. В результате исследования были получены ответы 105 студентов в основном из трёх институтов университета. Ответы студентов были сведены к шести категориям ассоциатов. Разработан коллективный семантический спектр ответов, а также представлена таблица одиннадцати основных ассоциатов, связанных с категорией элиты. Проанализированы также особенности ответов в связи с различными основными направлениями подготовки студентов. В целом удалось выяснить связь данных ассоциатов с понятиями богатства, денег, власти. Полученные выводы могут помочь в коррекции образовательного и воспитательного процесса студентов.*

*Ключевые слова: общественное сознание, общественное мнение, элита, ассоциативный эксперимент, ассоциат, общественное мнение студентов.*

*Научная специальность: 24.00.00 – культурология.*

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