

GENDER REGIMES OF RUSSIAN WORKING-CLASS FAMILIES

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Abstract

Purpose of the study: The study is aimed to examine working-class everyday culture gender regimes in modern Russia. The research is focused on intergenerational transmission of gender-normative patterns, macro-policy of power and domination in working-class families, forms of their discursive production and legitimation.

Methodology: The empirical base is represented by 30 biographical interviews with the informants aged from 21 to 33, living in Tyumen city and working in the field of industry, technical maintenance, and customer service. Reflexive analysis based on the categorical field of phenomenology and social constructionism, as well as data coding procedures, has been used as the main research tool.

Main Findings: It was found that the normative pattern of a male breadwinner, having power in a family-based on control over economic resources, still dominates among young working-class men and actively supported by the majority of young women. The financial and status dominance of a man does not cause doubts in his leadership but when a woman plays a crucial role in providing for the family, informants tend to talk about “equality” in the family.

Applications of this study: The results of the study can be used in the teaching of sociology, gender studies, and cultural studies; it can also be applied by local policymakers while developing social policy programs targeted on the regarded social group.

Novelty/Originality of this study: In the current research we have examined a particular social group at the intersection of three stratification features: social class, gender, and age. The approach of “agency within the structure” provides an opportunity to carry out a deep sociological analysis of the relations between the macro-social and personal aspects of the gender regimes framing.

Keywords: *Working-class, Youth, Working-class Youth, Gender, Gender Regime.*

INTRODUCTION

For the longest time gender issues had been remained on the fringes of class analysis. However, the dynamics of social processes in labor and family spheres forced to rethink the position of women in the social structure. The deindustrialization of developed Western countries led to the problematization of the traditional criteria of the working-class masculinity and the foundations of men’s domination ([Anderson 2005](#); [Connel, 1991](#); [Thébaud, 2010](#)). Due to the undeveloped class approach in the contemporary Russian sociology, gender and class characteristics’ crossing can be found only in few studies when analyzing various aspects of social life ([Pro Body..., 2013](#); [Vanke, 2014](#); [Zdravomyslova, Temkina 2002](#); [Tartakovskaya 2002](#)).

This research is aimed to fill up the gap of missing knowledge concerning gender regimes in Russian working-class families. At the intersection of three stratification features such as social class (the working class representatives), gender (men’s and women’s view of the masculine and feminine constructs) and age (the youth of three age cohorts) we aim to study the problem of the specific gender regime construction and maintaining in the particular social group. We also move away from the binary contrast between masculine and feminine, focusing on the theoretical assumption that there are multiple models of gender in modern culture, including among the working class.

The research objective is to examine everyday working-class culture gender regimes in modern Russia through the analysis of their representation in the young people’s biographical narratives. The study is focused on intergenerational transmission of gender-normative patterns, macro-policy of power and domination in working-class families, forms of their discursive production and legitimation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gender inequality was not considered as a relevant class analysis criterion in the period of the structural-functionalism conceptual dominance. A woman’s status position in the class structure took on the role of a derivative of the social position of her husband or father. Besides, women’s subordinate position and lack of autonomy were interpreted as functional for the social system ([Parsons, 1940](#)). This unifying approach was criticized by representatives of early feminist theory in the 1960s. The counterarguments were presented, such as 1) The findings obtained by the authors represent the result of a priori theorizing and are not supported by empirical data ([Watson, Barth, 1964](#)); 2) Not every individual belongs to a family cell, therefore, using the kinship as the primary unit of class analysis is problematic ([Acker, 1973](#)); 3) Ignoring the criterion of gender inequality narrows the possibilities of the practical application of structural functionalism in-class analysis. The simple inclusion of married women into the class cell determined by the status of the spouse blocks the possibility of understanding the role of female professionalization in the changing

structure of employment and the class structure of society ([Acker, 1978](#)). Besides, in modern realities, not every kindred group has a man – “the head of the family” (who can be, for example, unemployed or a pensioner), which also challenges the conventional approach ([Watson, Barth, 1964](#)); 4) The fact of the same moral assessment of the class position of husband and wife cause doubts. It was found that the social prestige of the wife in certain social grades lower than the husband’s prestige ([Haavio-Mannila, 1969](#)).

The abovementioned aspects of criticism had a definite impact on the discourse of class analysis, but in general, throughout the 1960-1970s the structural-functional approach with its disregard for gender inequality had remained dominant in-class analysis until the 1980s ([Giddens, 1973](#); [Goldthorpe, 1983](#)). New theoretical challenges were pointed out by left-oriented feminism in the 1980s. Considering women’s domestic work as a form of exploitation by husbands, the representatives of this approach argued that it was impossible to equalize the class status of spouses in the analysis ([Delphy, 1984: 38–39](#)). The notion of “cross-class” families initially based on the criterion of professional membership and the type of work performed was introduced for scientific use ([Britten, Heath, 1983](#); [Zhang, 2013](#)).

The economic emancipation of women which transformed the sphere of family and marital relationships and the increased focus on individual aspects of life experience in different class cultures led to a gradual rejection of the conventional approach. In the modern context, each person is considered as an autonomous unit of the class structure regardless of his or her gender or marital status. And the focus shifts from disputes about the criteria of class differentiation to the analysis of the real differences in lifestyle generated by social inequality ([Gavrilyuk, 2018](#)).

In current discourse, gender and class issues are integrated into the framework of life course studies. This field is characterized by a macro-sociological perspective of analysis when the individual life path acts as a derivative of the structural capabilities and limitations that exist in the historical period under study ([Augustyn, Jackson, 2017](#)). Most modern authors proceed on an assumption that there are significant differences in lifestyle and gender-normative patterns of the middle and working classes ([Meier, Allen, 2008](#); [Penman-Aguilar, Carter et. al, 2013](#); [Boonstra, 2014](#)). The theory of intersectionality can be considered as the most relevant conceptual framework specifying the overlapping of class and gender discrimination. The intersectional perspective of analysis supposes a negative definition of an identity marginalized in several ways simultaneously within the framework of historically established systems of domination, such as patriarchy, sexism, class exploitation, ageism, racism, colonialism, and heteronormativity ([Crenshaw, 1989](#); [McCall, 2005](#)). Focusing on the intersection of class and additional social identity, this framework constitutes a convincing answer to postmodern critics which claims “class death” in current social conditions. An example of the intersectional methodology use is the study of M.M. Tokarczyk and E.A. Fay, dedicated to women academics with a working-class background ([Working-class., 1993](#)). The intersection of age, gender, and class differentiation is also problematized in J. Betty’s work on working-class teenage girls ([Bettie, 2003](#)).

Nevertheless, an appeal to conventional explanatory constructs such as race, gender, class, and the influence of social institutions did not make clear the meaning of an individual act of will, the differences in individual abilities and efforts made to achieve goals, and also it could not reveal ways of making significant choices. These issues necessitated rapprochement of the life course studies field and a biographical approach. The removal of conceptual tension between theories of structure and agency made it possible to use the notion of biography to study the process of the social construction of life within the framework of institutionally defined characteristics ([Falk, Weymann, 2002: 502](#)). Many authors articulated the need for a hermeneutic perspective in studies of the life course to identify and understand subjective meanings embedded in the significant role transitions processes by representatives of different age cohorts ([Bird, Kruger, 2005: 188-189](#)). The similar perspective of analysis seems relevant to the study of gender modes of the working-class culture.

METHODOLOGY

An analysis of relevant approaches to the study of life dynamics shows the applicability of using the methodological approach of “agency within the structure” proposed by R. Settersten and L. Gannon. It allows combining a holistic algorithmic approach (when the life course is considered as organized integrity within structurally defined characteristics) with the hermeneutical outlook in the study of biography as a set of specific events, ways of their legitimization, and reflection by working-class youth ([Settersten, Gannon, 2005](#)). The combination of approaches provides an opportunity to carry out a deep sociological analysis of the relations between the macro-social and personal aspects of the gender regimes framing. It helps to look at the structural forming factors and a lot of affective flows generated by specific situations of social interaction.

By analyzing biographical narratives I aim to explain how gender constructs have been produced, transmitted, and changed in everyday practices creating a specific gender regime. The following issues need to be considered and discussed:

- Revealing of the dominant gender attitudes in the working-class youth culture, foundations and means of its discursive production in informants’ narratives;

- The studying of gender regime's reproduction and transformation in the culture of the Russian working class based on intergenerational analysis (legitimation of gender regime in the parental family; the influence of attitudes internalized in childhood on the construction of informant's ideas about masculinity and femininity).

The study's empirical base is represented by biographical interviews lasting from 40 minutes to 2.5 hours. The main criterion for the selection of informants was the fact that they were members of the Russian new working class. It means a group of employees engaged in all spheres of material production and service, whose work is routinized, divided into standardized segments, algorithm-fueled, and has quantitative standardization of results. New working-class representatives cannot participate in the management and do not have any ownership rights in the organization where they work. A total of 31 informants living in the city of Tyumen have been interviewed: 21 of them were men (14 people employed in the field of conventional working professions in industry, construction, repairing, maintenance, and mining, 7 people employed in the trade and other types of customer service), and 10 women employed in the service sphere. Interviews' sections were selected for the study including discourses on relationships in the parental family as well as on the informant's own family, existing or planned. The reflexive analysis based on the categorical field of phenomenology and social constructivism together with the coding and data quantification procedures has been used as the main research tool.

ANALYSIS/FINDINGS

The conventional pattern of "the breadwinner" remains the major value orientation for male informants working in both industrial and service sectors. In emphasizing men's responsibility for the well-being of their families they connect readiness for the family creation with factors such as social normativity, including the "right" age, stable work, and an income sufficient to provide for the wife and children:

Vitaliy, 22, a guardian, single: *"I don't think about making family and I won't think about this until I become independent. The question is: can you provide for a child and protect him from drunken dad, missing mom and a current possibility to grow in the orphanage? You need to know you can do that financially and physically. I cannot do this. Situated as I am, if I spare the time for my family, I will lose my money."*

In Dmitry's statement, 21, a radio technician (single, has a girlfriend), in addition to the above-mentioned words concerning marriage, one of the options for gender normativity of our society regarding the age of marriage is reflected. It means a man has no reason to rush as he can acquire a home and family with a young woman and become a father at any period of his path of life under condition of financial well-being: *"There is no ideal age, only your financial status ... You can get married at 18 if you have a good job ... Responsibility plays a greater role. That is, even if a man earns a lot of money, but he is irresponsible, then a girl should realize and think about what kind of family she will get ... So I think your social status is the most important thing. You can live without a family until 50, and then bang, you will get married, have three children, and a young beautiful wife."*

Thus, the words of A. Tolson, one of the first researchers of working-class masculinity in the late 1970s, are relevant and still expressed in the collective attitude of working youth: "In our society, the main focus of masculinity is the wage" (Tolson, 1977: 58).

Among our informants, almost all unmarried girls expressed a desire (without any legitimate judgments) to get married and have children as a normal state of things in their lifeworlds. Only one of them mentioned her current career intentions, financial, and social status. Others were already married at the time of the interview or expressed their intentions using phrases such as: "One day I want to get married and have children as everyone wants". In comparison with men, girls' marriage intentions are expressed not so clear, in a form of a dream-goal than a real plan which can be interpreted as a conviction that there is no way to influence that process. In the patriarchal social world, the marriage proposal traditionally comes from a man. In this case, women still keep their fingers crossed and believe in fate while men are guided by more rational motives.

The gender order functioning in the working-class culture was analyzed by studying the relationships in the parental informants' families. The data analysis methodology included coding of answers to questions in the section about parents and family history: *"Who was/is the head of the family? How were responsibilities allocated in the family?"* The following features were selected as variables:

- The parent social status at the time of the interview based on professional and official status and educational level (higher for a father or a mother / the same status);
- The financial status of spouses and their role in supporting the family (financial dominance / financial dependence);
- Domestic work (more responsibility for the routine work / periodic doing of certain kinds of domestic work);
- Family structure (two-parent / single-parent family).

Depending on the gender regime and micro-politics of power all families have been divided into three types conventionally: patriarchal, egalitarian, and matriarchal. Thirty interviews were selected for analysis (in one of them the

question was not voiced due to the death of the informant's father). Families with financial or status dominance signs of one of the spouses were placed into one group; single-mother families were also separately identified.

Although informants declared the leading role of the father in their family in almost half of the interviews, only seven out of thirty families can be called patriarchal in the conventional meaning. Half the time, father's dominance is based not on his financial or status supremacy, but collective stereotypes of class culture requiring recognition of the man's dominant role regardless of his real status. Besides, informants' families of the patriarchal type at the time of the interview belonged to the middle class or the cross-class. Mostly, these are families of workers with upward mobility of one or both spouses; mother is a housewife in only two cases out of thirteen (table 1).

Table 1: Gender regimes of the biographical interviews informants' parents (number of cases)

	Many cases, where:	where:			
		A father has a higher status and/or has financial dominance	The same father's and mother's status	A mother has a higher status and/or has financial dominance	A single mother
Patriarchal family	13	7	4	2	0
Egalitarian family	10	0	4	6	0
Matriarchal family	7	0	0	1	6
Total:	30	7	8	9	6

Most informants from patriarchal families used a confident tone of speech and rhetorical techniques convincing an interlocutor of the sacrosanctity of this gender regime (*"sure, my father"*, *"certainly, dad"*, *"like everyone else"*, *"the ordinary family"*, etc.). Such categorical and absolute normalization is strongly pronounced in the judgments of women from secured families close to the middle class:

Alena, 24, an administrator in a clothing store: *"My father, he is a principal earner. My mom, certainly, does all the household chores. The father spends more time at his work, but also he is engaged in building. My mother does everything at home – cleaning, cooking, the domesticities in general. The father comes home late; he lies down in front of the TV and that's all"* (upward mobility of the working-class family: the father is a bank officer, the mother is a medical record administrator).

Additionally, the father's involvement in routine domestic work among patriarchal families can be interpreted as helping a woman fulfill her duties, even if the woman's social status is higher

Most working young women in prosperous patriarchal families do not have career ambitions. And even they do, they are ready to refuse in a case of favorable marriage and absence of necessity for earning a living. For example, Alexandra, 24, a shop assistant in a clothing store, describes a dream-goal:

Informant: *Well, probably, I'd like to get married, just have a baby, and just be happy and sure that the future is secure. Find a husband I can rely on, he will earn money, but I hope his work will not be difficult and he won't have any problems with health. Have a baby, celebrate a glamorous wedding – all women want this. Have a baby, and then one more, I guess.*

Interviewer: *Theoretically, would you like not to work at all?*

Informant: *Yes.*

The numerous repetitions present in the statement together with the judgments that legitimize the normative gender order (*"all women want this"*), the desire to protect yourself from life's problems (*"his work will not be difficult and he won't have any problems with health"*), leave a job and stay in the family sphere (*"be sure that the future is secure"*) are the interview's keynotes of most young women employed in the service sector.

Negative connotations in the description of the patriarchal regime of power and dominance in the family were noted by informants in two interviews only. One family was torn apart; a mother from another family has a higher social status than a father has. So, Ksenia, 22, a hookah-maker, unlike most of the young women from nuclear families, describes living with her father as follows: *"My father was a policeman, my mother was a housewife for many years because my father did not want her to work. Then he agreed that she could work next to him as a secretary ... Now my mom is the head of the family because they are divorced. Before that my dad was the head. Hmm ... mom cooked, cleaned, washed, dad sometimes could strike the nail into the wall by request, and so, in fact, he had only his job, and he did not do the housework"*. The same experience was reflected in her answers to questions regarding her plans in the family sphere.

Ksenia's statements do not show a desire to be a mother or wife, as compared to the cases discussed above of young women from secured patriarchal families: *"I believe that it's not worth getting married early, so I'm single now... I'm not trying to start a family and I don't have any plans to do that"*.

Yuri, 26, a railroad worker, points out the existence of family conflicts because of the need for absolute obedience to the father's will: *"The father... because what he says goes. Now I can come into conflict with him. So I do something in one way, he does it in another"* (the father is a guardian, the mother is the head of the fish wholesale base). At the same time, the informant did not have his own family. He got married at the age of 21, and at the time of the interview he was already divorced: *"Well, she didn't like that we lived in the parents' apartment, and I was at work throughout the day"*.

Another situation where families were assigned to the egalitarian gender regime is considered by informants. The received data indicate the presence of double gender standards in the assessment of capability for being the head of the family. The financial and status dominance of a man does not raise doubts about his leadership. However, when a woman takes a higher career position or plays a critical role in family provisions, informants tend to talk about "equality". So, despite the real dominance of women in the so-termed egalitarian families (6 out of 10 cases), their statuses in the hierarchy are not articulated in informants' narratives. In semantic structures of the working-class youth worldview, a woman can't play the role of a leader; her task in family micro-politics is a skillful game aimed at maintaining the illusion of conventional or egalitarian gender order.

Subject to the existence of financial and status grounds for man's dominance in the family, none of our informants described the parental family in terms of equality recognizing the leadership of the father categorically. In cases of a more successful mother's career, the statements were not well-defined and frequently contradictory. For example, in the case of Egor, 29, a leasing manager, the family status in the 1990s changed to cross-class. The reasons were the downward mobility of his father (a physical education teacher, a construction worker, a stoker, and a pensioner) and the upward mobility of his mother (a primary school teacher, a deputy director for educational work): *"My father hasn't ever wanted to climb the career ladder, my mother gradually moved up and eventually became the deputy director for educational work at school. The father was always the head of the family outside the house, and mom – at home. The duties were always allocated somehow among my parents quickly, without shouting, and dissatisfaction"*.

Even for relatively egalitarian families with an equal level of responsibility and duties allocation in response to the question about the "head of the family," informants often called their fathers. In an interview with Diana, 22, a bank sales consultant, whose parents have approximately the same social status, two contradictory statements are observed in assessing family leadership. There is a firm belief in the need to preserve the gender role of the woman as the "homemakers":

Interviewer: *And who is the head of your family?*

Informant: *Dad.*

Interviewer: *And how are responsibilities allocated?*

Informant: *Well, since both mother and father earn money, both are at work every day. That is, well, I can't say that my dad is the head of the family. Probably our family is democratic in the sense that if dad has a rest, he can cook or clean without any problem, well ... Nevertheless, mom still tries to make our life at home comfortable as she is a mother and woman.*

In an interview with Ruslan, 20, an agent middleman in the electronics, there is also a metaphor of "democracy" and a contradiction in assessing the degree of influence of his parents on decision making. On the one hand, he says that in his family *"everything is democratic; there are no words 'I'm a man, I'll manage everything, and you are a woman, you don't have a word'"*, but at the same time, *"the father's opinion is dominant in serious deals"*. The declared "democracy" of his family is a derivative of the current situation when the father can no longer play the conventional and desirable leadership role fully: *"Now my father is just retired, he is sick ... he does housework. My mother is working. And before that like in everyone's family my father earned money, the mother also worked, but her work was, so to say, in pleasure. Well, she always found time to household chores"* (the father is a pensioner, the mother is a primary school teacher).

Obviously, in most cases of declaring family equality, informants keep the idea of a man's dominant role. A woman has "decision-making power" and the opportunity to influence deciding in a panel family discussion. The reallocation of domestic work is interpreted as a desperate measure. It is related to circumstances when a father cannot play his gender role fully by reasons of illness, retirement, or career failures. The idea of an egalitarian family is described using the metaphor of "democracy" and the image of "family council", where "people" (the wife and children) have the opportunity to take decisions approved by "the government" (the father).

Female leadership always has negative connotations in informants' narratives. In our selection, there is only one case where the mother is recognized as the head of a nuclear family:

Tatyana, 21, a cloakroom attendant: “... *she fulfills most of the duties, she keeps our family financially, and, in principle, does what men usually do in families ... since he [the father] is an entrepreneur and he is engaged in his business as a hobby, it doesn't give us a lot of money*” (the father is an individual entrepreneur, the mother is an accountant economist).

In other observations, the dominant role of a woman is due to the family breakdown. Many informants emphasize that when they lived with the father, the mother played the dominant role. It does not exclude the possibility of interpreting the fact of the father's inability to be the head of the family as one of the reasons for the breakdown. It is worth noting the difference in the language tools used to describe female leadership: the narrative about the types of families discussed above included detailed answers and descriptions, while in the case of families with woman's dominance, informants preferred to state the fact of this situation only, and didn't discuss the details. Stanislav's answer can be considered as an example. Stanislav is 25, a non-ferrous metal receiving operator.

Interviewer: *Can you say that your mom was the head of the family?*

Informant: *Yes. She solved the matter.*

Inherent in childhood the matriarchal model of family relationships has influenced the perception of the informant's own life, professional, and career prospects. He admits he dreams of his own family as motivation for professional and career growth. A lonely young man has “*no one to take care of*” and a woman, refer to Stanislav, can inspire him to achieve goals:

Informant: *I don't have a soulmate and there is no incentive to live ... it seems to me that I tread water and make no progress ... no one who can force my hand to do something.*

Interviewer: *Who do you think should force your hand?*

Informant: *Hmm ... everything depends on me, generally. But I would like to have a person next to me ... who will, how shall I say, will motivate me. This person can give incentives to me and, therefore, the meaning of life.*

We did not find a pronounced trend for the correlation between the type of the informants' parental family and their sector of employment. Families of the conventional working class and service workers can be attributed to all three distinguished types. However, at the same, time there is a difference in the perception of conventional gender roles: young people employed in the service sector demonstrate qualities associated with hegemonic masculinity to a lesser degree. Young men who describe the gender regime of the parental family as egalitarian do not hide that they often focus on the opinions of women and accept their help in matters of education and employment.

CONCLUSION

Thus, the analysis of qualitative data has shown that conservatism and patriarchal family attitudes, which are attributed to the working class in the mass culture and remaining dominant in minds of young people, nevertheless, have little in common with real-life situations of our informants. Due to the extremely low income of most working families, the conventional patriarchal model of the family (a man is an earner, a woman is a housewife) in Russian realities is available only to the middle class. Poverty, career failures or lack of ambition, and early serious men's health problems make necessary the redistribution of gender roles in the family, turning the woman into the breadwinner and the head of the family. In the case of man's dominance in the parental family, informants eagerly talk about this in detail. Situations of female leadership are assessed as forced and interpreted in terms of family “equality”, or are articulated in an extremely concise form.

The working-class men and women with the same status who are engaged in routine work still have not equal financial opportunities. Salaries in the service sector are much lower than in the industrial one, and two-thirds of service workers in Russia are still women. Economic factors consolidate the conditions for the reproduction of practices of men's structural dominance in the family sphere. These factors preserve a positive attitude to the man-breadwinner normative pattern having power in the family based on control over economic resources. Young women from the service sector are striving for a patriarchal model of the family and demonstrating a desire to be a part of the middle class through successful marriage and do not work. Young men also support the patriarchal model as a normative reference point but their own life experience and the experience of parental families do not always correspond to the ideally typical design of the dominant gender order.

LIMITATION AND STUDY FORWARD

The survey identified the most common trends, but this problem requires more in-depth analysis to understand how the revealed patterns of legitimation function in everyday interaction and on the level of mass culture. Therefore, on the next stage of our research, the explanations should be given how the masculine and feminine models of behavior have been produced, transmitted, and changed in everyday practices using such methods as conversational analysis and participant observation. The representation of gendered normative patterns of working-class youth is planned to study with the tools of discourse analysis and quantitative content analysis of traditional and new media.

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