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Research Article

LIFE TRAJECTORIES OF PARENTS WHO'S PARENTAL RIGHTS WERE TERMINATED: THE SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH**Olga A. Volkova ^{1*}, Oksana V. Besschetnova ², Elena I. Mozgovaya ¹, Valentin P. Babintsev ¹, Mihail S. Zhiron ¹**¹Belgorod State University, 78 Preobrazhenskaya Street, Belgorod, 308000, Russia²Balashov Institute of Saratov State University, 29 K. Marx Street, Saratov, 412315, Russia**Abstract**

The article presents the results of a sociological research conducted in 2016 in the Belgorod, Saratov regions and the Trans-Baikal Territory and includes two stages. On the first stage there was the expert survey (n=25), where the informants were employees of the guardianship authorities; social services; education, health care and law institutions. The research could examine the most typical causes which reproduced social orphanhood such as poverty, unemployment, mass labor migration from rural areas to big cities; increasing number of families at risk; placement of children in out-of-home care, and as a consequence, the termination of parental rights (TPR). On the second stage there was a survey of parents whose parental rights were terminated (n=350) in the above regions in order to identify the main causes of TPR, as well as the parents' attitude to TPR preceding and their life trajectories after it in the context of life course theory. The vast majority of parents lost custody on their children due to substance abuse (80.0 %); inappropriate parenting (12.0 %); child abuse and neglect (6.0 %); poor health and voluntary refusal. The results of the survey could help to divide all informants into four main groups referring to their life trajectories after TPR: (1) in the first group most of parents (87.1 %) did not have clearly articulated goals for the further life perspective and did not make any attempts to change their life style and return the custody of their children; (2) parents of the second group showed the intention to change the situation in the next marriage, parenting other children; (3) in the third group informants demonstrate the potential to return their children, making positive personality changes; (4) respondents of the fourth group, whose children were in kinship care had very low motivation to restoration of their parental rights.

Keywords: *life course; life trajectories; termination of parental rights (TPR); children left without parental care; sociological research.*

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INTRODUCTION:

Over the past few years, the life course theory has gained considerable popularity in sociology, which was initially developed in humanistic psychology in the 1930s. Nowadays the term “life course” is viewed in some different ways: as an individual life story [1,2]; as time or age of human life [3-5]; as a life strategy [6,7]; as life-span human development [8-10]; as events, transitions and trajectories of an individual [11-13].

Life course is a phenomenon limited by an individual's lifetime from birth to death, which has temporal, historical, and sociocultural frameworks. The main content of the life course includes trajectories, events, transitions, turning points, associated with the individual's developmental stages, changes in social status and roles, and is caused by external and internal factors. Transitions are made in time in a particular age according to the social and cultural norms and expectations are often associated with the personal success, and, conversely, the deviations from it are viewed as negative, unsuccessful.

Life trajectory as one of the main element of the “life course” concept is treated differently in social and behavioral sciences. From the life-span psychology perspective it is viewed as changes of genetically and organically based capacities, whereas in the life course sociology it is the outcome of institutional regulation and social structured forces [14]. According to G. Elder, “life trajectories can be charted by linking stages across successive years ... each trajectory is marked by a sequence of live events and transitions, changes in state that are more or less abrupt” [15]. In addition, each life course transition is included in a trajectory, which gives it a specific meaning and form [16]. Also the life trajectory in contrast of transitions involves a longer view of long-term patterns of stability and change in individual's life, including multiple, intersecting trajectories in different spheres, for example, in health, education, family, work, etc. [17].

Studying stratification and social reproduction, scientists consider that social agents of socialization such as family, education, environment, etc. are influencing on the individual's life trajectories, but the role of individual abilities is reduced and limited by structural barriers. It gives the opportunity to analyze the contribution of the social environment and personal abilities to individual's achievements [18]. For example, low family income can be an obstacle to the child's academic achievements, which will not allow him/her to get a high-quality education in a prestigious university and fully realize his/her personal potential.

G.A. Matsievskaya notes the importance of patriotic education of children brought up in families and orphanages. She writes that over the last decade and a half, the Patriotic idea went from “unclaimed” to «national», implemented the Program of Patriotic education of citizens, developed and adopted a Strategy for the development of education for the period up to 2025 [19].

Comparing the children's and parents' educational levels, S.D. Rodionova and N.I. Skok have come to the following conclusion: 61.0 % of parents from low-income families have primary or incomplete secondary education, compared to their children, 39.0 % of whom have primary, 53.0 % – secondary vocational education [20].

Russian researchers A.G. Uvarov and G.A. Yastrebov found a correlation between children's school performance and the social and economic family status: children from families with higher income, higher level of parents' education, and more stable employment status, demonstrate more significant academic successes than children from low income families with less educated parents [21].

In longitudinal research, based on twelve surveys conducted from 1991 to 2011 (n=21639) by Higher School of Economics (Russia), the significant impact of parents' social status on the education, future profession and income of their children was found [22].

On the basis of the results of the focus group conducted by sociologists deals with the problems of structuring and functioning of the public sector in the system of social protection of children of the region, the prospects for integration of commercial structures in the system of social protection of the children, the factors that promote and prevent the development of cross-sectoral social partnership in the social protection system [23].

DATA AND METHODOLOGY:

In order to study the causes of family break down due to termination of parental rights (TPR) and the life trajectories of those parents, in 2016 the research was conducted in Belgorod, Saratov regions and the Trans-Baikal Territory (the Russian Federation). The study included two stages. In the first stage, the expert survey (n = 25) were conducted to identify the main conditions that lead to disintegration and dysfunction of modern Russian family, to placement of children in out-of-home care as well as to examine the main reasons of TPR in the above regions. Experts were recruited from representatives of social services, health, educational institutions, juvenile affairs, courts, and guardianship authorities, who were working with families and children at risk. The average working experience of the participants was 13.7 years. All interviews were organized at participants' offices and lasted on average for two and a half hours. The eligibility requirements for experts were: a) the working experience must be five years and more; b) higher professional education (not low than master's degree or specialist diploma); c) age at least thirty years.

In the second stage, parents whose parental rights were terminated, took part at the survey (n = 350). The list of respondents was formed from the regional data base of social services and guardianship authorities. Two-thirds

of interviews were held in participants' homes, one third – in public places (social services, cafes, parks, etc.). Parents received a brief overview of the research by phone or during the preliminary visit, organized together with a social worker. Of those contacted, 87.5 % agreed to take part at the survey (n = 350) and 12.5 % declined (n = 50). The main reasons for declining were not interested, alcohol intoxication, aggressive behavior or health problems. Respondents were guaranteed full anonymity and confidentiality of information. The main method was a semi-formalized interview. The questionnaires included 17 questions with multiple choices as well as open questions. The average time of one interview was an hour and half. The length of the period of TPR was from eight months to five years. The research was conducted with the financial support of the Russian Foundation for Basic Research (The life trajectories of children and their biological parents restored their parental rights, project 16-03-00057).

EMPIRICAL RESULTS:

Under the Russian legislation, the main reasons of TP Rare: substance abuse; child abuse and neglect; poor parenting; the refusal of the child; non-payment of alimony; criminal behavior, threats or crimes against family members [24]. According to the research, alcohol abuse is one of the key causes of termination of parental rights.

“The cause of orphanhood is mostly alcoholism of parents. It's about 95.0 %” (Employee of the Department of custody and guardianship, Saratov region).

“Alcoholism, infantilism, immaturity, pedagogical incapacity, a certain subculture that has developed in these families” (Social worker, Saratov region).

In addition to that, experts note the latency of alcoholism in modern Russian families:

“Now the problem of alcoholism is hidden in families. It does not break through the family boundaries. It is covered by close relatives, spouses or partners. Children also hide their parents' alcoholism. Some of them are accustomed to live in these conditions and it has become the norm for them” (Leading Specialist on Juvenile Affairs, the Trans-Baikal Territory).

According to parents' opinions, the termination of parental rights is a consequence of alcoholism in 80.0 % of cases; in 6.0 % – child abuse and neglect; in 12.0 % – inappropriate parenting.

From experts' point of view, another reason for TPR is parent's physical and/or mental health that does not

allow him/her to fully take care of their children due to long-term stay in hospitals, which is strongly associated with a high risk of deviant behavior and social orphanhood for children.

“Some parents have tuberculosis and may stay in a hospital for several years. They are not able to take care of their children due to health problems. Other parents suffer from mental health disorders, they can also stay in medical institutions for more than six months, and after that they may not be recognized as incompetent” (Director of the Center for Social Assistance to Families and Children, Belgorod region).

From experts' opinions, among other reasons for TPR may be named the second marriage; the birth of another child; conflict parent-child relations; child physical or sexual abuse; the voluntary refusal of the child:

“The mother gave birth to another child in a second marriage, so the child from the first marriage is no longer needed. We had such cases” (Head of the Department of custody and guardianship, Belgorod region).

“... his mother has beaten him [her son, note], and he began to steal and drink alcohol. So she came to the guardianship authorities and wrote a refusal of the child voluntarily, saying: “I can't maintain it any more” (Head of the Department of social rehabilitation programs, Trans-Baikal Territory).

According to the survey, 64.8 % of parents tend to blame others (spouses, relatives, guardianship and law enforcement agencies) in TPR, much less themselves, only in 15.1 % of cases.

The main reasons of family breakdown from parents' point of view are the following: poverty; unemployment; the lack of housing or its unsatisfactory conditions (the lack of electricity, gas and heat supplies) due to debts and low income; problems in parenting and marital relations; conflicts with the nearest social environment (spouses, members of the extended family, neighbors); the refusal to cooperate with social services, guardianship authorities, and law enforcement agencies. During the survey, almost one-third of parents whose parental rights were terminated (28.0 %) had a hypothetical intention to restore their parental rights, motivating it by “love to their children”.

The statistic data, contains in the Table 1, indicates the stable number of parents who have restored their parental rights during the last five-year period (Tab. 1).

Table 1: Parents who have restored their parental rights in Russia (2010 -2015)

Year	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Total number of parents who have restored their parental rights	2 126	2 227	2 256	2 341	2 569	2 632

Table 2: Parents who have lost custody of their children in Russia (2010-2015)

Year	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Total number of parents whose parental rights are terminated	64 584	58 891	52 206	46 753	42 532	40 213

Table 3: Parents whose parental rights are restricted in Russia (2010-2015)

Year	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Total number of parents whose parental rights are restricted	7 857	8 451	8 827	9 067	9 143	9 369

According to Russian legislation, the termination of parental rights is the last resort to protect children against criminal encroachments of parents or legal care takers. Since 2012, there has been a reorientation of the child protection system from deprivation to restriction of parental rights (Tab. 2-3).

The comparison of data in Table 2 and Table 3 has shown that the reorientation led to the decreasing the number of parents whose parental rights are terminated and increasing the number of parents whose parental rights are restricted for the last five years.

Thus, the analysis of national statistics indicates disappointing facts: for the last several years the number of parents who has restored their parental rights is three times less, than the number of parents who has lost custody of their children [25].

Answering the question: “What have you done to return your child/children?”, only 4.9 % of parents can name the real actions (“cleaned up the house”, “received drug treatment”, “got a job”, “visited the child in a social rehabilitation center”, etc.), the rest of the respondents could not clearly articulate the barriers of getting children back, appealing to difficult life circumstances; waiting for changes for

better life in the near future; disbelief in the possibility of children’s return.

Over 48.0 % of the interviewed parents did not maintain contacts with their children for more than six months, 12.0 % more than a year due to low family income; the long distance between the residence of the child and parents’ house; remarriage; caring for minor children. In the case of kinship care (especially when the child lives with grandparents or other relatives), we indicated the very low motivation of birth parents to return children due to the “normalization” of the situation.

Nevertheless, more than a half of parents (57.2 %) do not exclude the possibility of further communicating with their children after they will reach adulthood or leave foster care. Around two-thirds of former foster leavers have come to their parents who were terminated in their parental rights because of the lack of money, education, housing, skills of independent living, social support, and poor health.

CONCLUSION:

Thus, the expert survey can identify the most typical social risks that contribute to family breakdown and social orphanhood in the above regions: poverty;

unemployment; mass labor migration from rural areas and towns to cities; substance abuse; the increasing number of families at risk; the lack of special government social services, which help parents to restore their parental rights.

According to the analysis of parents' answers, they could be divided into four main groups: the first group includes the majority of respondents (87.1 %) who does not have clearly articulated goals for the further life perspective or they seemed unrealistic. They did not make any attempts to change their life style and return the custody of their children. Participants of the second group show the intention to change the situation in the next marriage, parenting other children. The third group of informants expresses a potential desire to return children, making real positive change in their life style. The fourth group of respondents, especially regarding parents whose children are placed to kinship care, demonstrates the very low intention to restoration of parental rights, considering the situation has been resolved.

SUMMARY:

The issue of termination of parental rights cannot be treated exclusively as a private, isolated social phenomenon, provoked by the immorality of parents. Social orphanhood must be seen in the larger context, including the social structure of the society.

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