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The Health in the Value System of Russian Youth: Contradictory Discursive Practices

Abstract

The axiological aspects of the self-preserving behaviour of Russian youth are considered on the basis of the data of sociological studies. The contradiction between the high value of health in the minds of modern youth declared and the underdevelopment of daily practices aimed at its preservation and strengthening is revealed. The probable causes of the contradiction are listed; they are related as to the specifics of this socio-demographic group, to its hedonistic orientation, to situational orientation of thinking, and also to the limited capacity of youth in relation to receiving medical and preventive services. Conclusion was made that it is necessary to form the axiological-and-motivational foundations of self-preserving behaviour of Russian youth as one of the most important directions in the implementation of the state policy to protect public health in general.

Keywords: Activity in the Field of Health. Declarative Values. Self-Preserving Behaviour. Value of Health. Values.

Introduction

The problems of self-preserving behaviour, which is commonly understood as a system of actions and relationships aimed at maintaining and strengthening health, are becoming increasingly important in modern Russian society. A new stage of social transformations in Russia, including those related to raising the retirement age, entailed the formation of a request for better health and related professional

longevity, thereby bringing the problem of health preservation into the sphere of not only demographic, but also socio-economic public safety (Gruzdeva and Korolenko 2018; Shapovalova et al. 2019).

Despite the intensified efforts of the state in implementing programs and projects to protect the health of citizens, including those aimed at creating motivation for a healthy lifestyle, the self-preservation activity of Russians is still quite

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low, and the morbidity and mortality rates of the population (especially against similar indicators developed countries) remains high (Vishnevsky et al. 2016; Lebedeva-Nesevrya and Eliseeva 2018). Many domestic researchers note the low standard of living inherent in most Russians as one of the main reasons for this state of affairs, which does not allow them to fully use the opportunities provided by the state in terms of improving health, and which often require significant material costs. Thus, according to Shilova (2012), it is the incentive factor that plays a key role in the formation of strategies for self-preserving behaviour in modern Russian society: "The lower the level of income, the less opportunity to choose behaviour even when self-preservation and the value of health are of a high level". This conclusion is also supported by the results of a number of foreign studies, the authors of which, based on the theory of social production of health (Galobardes et al. 2006), indicate a direct correlation between the level of well-being and individual health characteristics (Wilkinson and Pickett 2006; Fedotova 2019; Gafiatulina et al. 2019; Malamiri, et al, 2016).

But there is another group of reasons that lie in the plane of the axiological attitude of Russians to their health, mediated by "cultural tools" that an individual receives from society (Cole 1996; Wertsch 2009; Sazanova et al. 2019) and if not neutralizing, then significantly reducing the effectiveness of any program activities in this sphere.

Objectives

Based on this, the main goal of this paper was to identify the value foundations of self-preservation behavior of Russian youth as the most active socio-demographic group of the population, which determines the path of development of society in the long term, including in relation to their health.

Material and Methods

The total data set used to achieve the target goal was obtained in a series of studies conducted by the authors in September-November, 2018. They included a mass sociological survey of the population living in the Central Russia (N = 1067) and, including, young people aged 17 to 30 years (N = 375), as well as a series of focus group interviews with youth from the Belgorod region (N = 30). The data obtained were supplemented by the results of the study "The Life World of Russians" (N = 1750) and an interregional sociological and demographic study of the values of a child-family lifestyle (N = 2500) (Lebedeva-Nesevrya et al. 2017; Grigoryeva et al. 2019; Kohestani, et al, 2016).

The results of a survey conducted by the authors in 2018 with the participation of young people from the central regions of Russia (N = 375) demonstrated the fact that, as a proclaimed value, health is among the priorities of young Russians, being the second only to the family. (56.3% of the young people surveyed indicated having their own family as the main value; 51.7% of respondents spoke in favor of health as the main value; young Russians put in the third-place large income (35.2%), which would allow them deny nothing).

Convincing evidence of the high importance of health at the normative level declared, can be the fact that, choosing from a corresponding list of statements regarding health, almost half of young Russians chose the option "health is the most important thing in life (Sedova et al. 2018; Kramskoy et al. 2019); all important decisions must be made so as not to harm health." About the same number of young people has placed their health on the same level of importance as work, study, leisure, entertainment, social life, and only one out of six respondents admitted that they could sacrifice their health for extra income, hobbies, etc. (Table 1).

Table 1.

Distribution of answers to the question "Which of the following statements most closely reflects your opinion?", % (N=375)

Answer options	% of the number of respondents
Health is the most important thing in life, and all important decisions must be made so as not to harm health	41.6
Health, of course, is very important, but sometimes we can sacrifice it for extra income, hobbies, etc.	14.7
Health is important to me along with work, leisure, study, entertainment, social life	38.4
Even if it is harmful to health, I prefer to live without limiting myself to anything	5.3

At the same time, the results of the study revealed a rather low rank value of health in the system of real values, which, as a result, determines the low behavioral activity of young people in relation to maintaining and strengthening their own health. It turned out that young people tend to take care of their health, mainly in the event of illness, and at that stage when "they feel so bad that it is no longer possible to postpone a visit (to the doctor - author's note)" (44.5%). Answering the question "What do you do when you become ill?" the largest number of respondents (N = 375) chose the answer options "I start to treat myself, and if there are no improvements, I go to my doctor" (41.6%) and "I go to the municipal city clinic hospital" (25.6%). Another 13.6% of young

survey participants said they prefer to be treated on their own, without resorting to a doctor (Senatorova et al. 2019).

It should be noted that many domestic and foreign studies emphasize the predominant role of the environmental factor as one of the main determinants of public and individual health (Frohlich et al. 2001; Diez Roux 2004; Huber et al. 2020). This was confirmed by the results of a survey conducted by the authors in the fall of 2018, during which, when answering the question "Who do you think are the healthiest people in our country?" the largest number of respondents from youth in the central regions of Russia (N = 375) chose the answer "Residents of ecologically clean areas" (Table 2).

Table 2.

Distribution of answers to the question "What do you think who are the healthiest people in our country?", % (N=375)

Answer options	% of the number of respondents
Residents of ecologically clean areas	44.2
People without bad habits	33.6
Cheerful people, people with a cheerful character	33.3
Those who constantly pay attention to their health	32.0
Athletes	22,4
Financially secure people	20.0
Those who live for themselves	16.0
Those who work hard, they have no time to get sick	11.2
Politicians, deputies, officials	6.4
Other	1.9

Results

According to young Russians, the healthiest people in our country, along with residents of ecologically clean areas, are "people without bad habits" (33.6%) and "those who constantly pay attention to their health" (32.0%). Despite this, answering the question "Why don't you do anything to live longer?", a third of young people surveyed (36%) chose the answer "there is no time for myself; work and home take a lot of time". 29.6% of the people referred to a lack of money and 14.6% explained their inactivity as having good health and being in good physical shape, which did not require additional efforts. Only 13.8% of the youth surveyed admitted that laziness and lack of willpower interfere with their health.

Thus, we can state the existence of a contradiction between the high declared value of health in the minds of young people, on the one hand, and the underdevelopment of daily

practices aimed at preserving and strengthening it, on the other.

According to Ershtein (2008), the specificity of the declared values as a mechanism of an individual's interaction with the environment is that they often do not coincide with real values, and their main function is to "bring the value system into visible compliance with environmental requirements". Since in modern society the problem of maintaining health is declared as one of the highest priorities, the majority of Russians also declare the priority of health in the system of individual values.

Analyzing the reasons for the discrepancy between the real and the declared values, Leontyev (1996), among others, singles out an insufficiently established and structured system of personal values (which, to a large extent, is just characteristic of young people), as well as the existence in the individual mind of

heterogeneous value ideas that impede work concerning four groups of reasons for the mismatch between “the declared value constructs of consciousness and personal values that really stimulate human activity”. Of these, it seems especially important (and not only in relation to youth) to us the lack of opportunities for the practical implementation of the declared values. With regard to the problem of health preservation, it is precisely the lack of

“adequate reflection of one’s own values”. opportunities (primarily material) that often appears as one of the biggest obstacles.

In particular, when answering the question about the main reasons for the low life expectancy of people in Russia, the largest number of respondents from the central regions of Russia indicated “low living standards, low salaries, wages and pensions” (31.5%), as well as “poor-quality medical services, paid medicine” (27.3%) (Table 3).

Table 3.

Distribution of answers to the question “What, in your opinion, are the main reasons for the low life expectancy of people in Russia?”, % (N=1067)

Answer options	% of the number of respondents
Adverse environmental conditions	25.6
Poor social policy, lack of government concern for people	12.5
Constant stress caused by living conditions in Russia	15.8
Unstable situation in the country, lack of law and order	13.8
Low living standards, low salaries, wages and pensions	31.5
Poor medical care, paid medicine	27.3
Poor quality drugs	13.4
Irresponsible attitude of people to their health	25.8
Poor quality food	15.8
Domestic disorder, housing problems	11.2
Difficult working conditions, harmful production	13.8
Lack of tradition in Russians to take care of their health	8.9
Don't know/No answer	4.1

The same was confirmed by the data of the focus group studies conducted by the authors in October 2018 with the participation of young people from the Belgorod region (N = 30). During the interview, informants focused on the fact that, despite the expansion of the volume of medical and preventive services provided by the state to the population, the wherewithal of most Russians to receive these services remains extremely limited: “In order to monitor your health, you need to be checked every six months. A complete blood test costs 8,000 rubles ...” (woman, 21 years old, student); “If you are a state employee, then it’s hard for you to buy vegetables all year long. Yes, in the summer you can dig something up by the season, and the rest of the time it is very expensive ...” (woman, 20 years old, student); “And besides vegetables and fruits, you need some more protein. And protein is, first of all, meat. And meat is very expensive” (man, 24 years old, unemployed); “The rich have more opportunities because medical care is expensive” (woman, 24 years old, administrator of a shopping centre); “The poor have no money for chemotherapy (if he has cancer). Both rich and poor can get cancer, but

the rich are more likely to be cured” (man, 21, student).

That is why we cannot agree with the conclusion by Ershtein (2008) that the task of uniting real and declared values in an individual mind is one of the main tasks of the education system. In our opinion, overcoming the contradiction between these two groups of values in the individual consciousness should be the primary task of the state and a logical consequence of the social policy aimed at narrowing the gap between the richest and poorest part of Russians and increasing the population’s real ability to maintain and strengthen their health.

Another possible explanation for the revealed contradiction between the high declared value of health in the minds of young people and low behavioral activity in terms of its preservation and strengthening may be the fact that ontologically the idea of health develops in persons as a result of illnesses, ailments, thereby motivating them to their preventing and overcoming. The majority of young people did not yet have such significant experience, which follows, inter alia, from the analysis of such an

indicator as self-esteem of their own health, traditionally measured using the question “How do you assess your health?” As the results of our study showed, evaluating their health, only 14.1% of the young Russians surveyed (N = 375) chose the answer “Average health (I often get sick or feel unhealthy)”, while 32% rated their health as good, and another 46.7% as satisfactory. These results correlate with the data obtained in the course of studies conducted in 2013 and 2014, and which allowed Toshchenko (2016) to draw a conclusion about social optimism as one of the main features of modern youth.

Nevertheless, it is possible, precisely because of good health (or, rather, its perception as good) that a healthy lifestyle in the minds of young people is associated exclusively with physical activity. This can also explain the fact that, during conducting the surveys of focus groups, young Russians (N = 30) noted an increase in the number of gyms, sports grounds, etc. first, giving a positive assessment of the state’s activities in the field of public health, “Now there are more conditions [to maintain health]. Wherever you look, the exercise rooms are within walking distance everywhere. And, besides, people began to develop themselves more and invest in improving their appearance and health” (man, 20 years old, student); “Now the desire for a healthy lifestyle is laid from a very young age. [...] Many sites are created, primarily for children. After [the children] get used to spending time on their playground, they will go to the adult group: push ups, pull ups ...” (man, 31 years old, security officer).

This was also confirmed by the data of the interregional sociological and demographic study of the values of the child-family lifestyle conducted under the direction of Antonov (2020) in 2018-2019 (N = 2500), according to which the expression “healthy lifestyle” in 42.8% of respondents under the age of 29 years is associated with playing sports and maintaining optimal physical fitness (Values of child-family lifestyle ... 2020, p. 387). Based on this, it seems logical that when answering the question “What do you mean by the term “care about your health”, what do you do exactly?” the largest number of young Russians chose the answer “do sports” (58%).

Conclusion

Summing up the analysis of the results of the mass survey and qualitative interviews, we can conclude that there is a contradiction in the minds of modern Russian youth between the high declared value of health and the underdeveloped daily practices aimed at maintaining and strengthening it. Possible reasons may include the low material capabilities

of the majority of Russians in terms of strengthening and restoring their health, as well as the hedonistic orientation of modern youth, identified by a number of sociological studies setting it to “here and now”. This does not imply painstaking efforts to maintain health; their results are delayed for an indefinite period. Proceeding from this, work with young people in the field of shaping the value of health preservation should be tied to sensory experience (as compensation for insufficient experience of negative physical conditions), and on the other, to values important for young people such as energy, attractiveness, success which directly correlate with a state of health. Answering the question about the reasons for living as long as possible, more than half of young Russians indicated a desire to experience and see as much as possible in life, and therefore we see the formation in the public mind of a connection between an interesting, eventful life and caring for one’s health as one of the most important areas in the implementation of the state policy to protect the health of the population as a whole, and the formation of value-motivational foundations of self-preservation behavior of Russian youth, in particular. However, the extent to which this will be realized depends not only on the youth’s readiness for changes, but, to a much greater extent, on the coordinated interaction of the Russian state and civil society institutions in the implementation of a unified policy aimed at improving the quantitative and qualitative characteristics of the Russian population.

Recommendations

In this study, the axiological aspects of the self-preserving behavior of Russian youth are considered on the basis of the data of sociological studies. Future works can further investigate the matter using a more complete database, also other aspects of self-preserving behavior problems can be investigated.

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