



Enhancing the Capabilities of Young Russians

Ksenia Kuzmina, Bielefeld University

Russia is a country with high regional differentiation, where higher incomes are increasingly concentrated in the largest cities, while the transformation of the economic structures in the 1990s in smaller settlements is impeded by the underdevelopment of the necessary infrastructure (Mikhalev, 1998). In fact, the place of residence in Russia defines economic opportunities of people (Ovtscharova, Popova, 2005), as well as educational opportunities, diversity of leisure activities and choice of social services and medical care. So it is obvious that only taking into consideration the regional particularities could make the social policy effective. That is why the doctoral research project takes into account the interregional aspect. For the research it has been chosen North-West region with aged population, low-income employment and with average poverty among families with children (Ovtscharova, Popova, 2005) and Saint-Petersburg as developed industrialized centre.

The income and resource-based indicators still are predominant measures of child poverty and child well-being in Russia, but such areas of child and youth life as: love and care, relationships in family and between relatives, time spent with the child by family members, feeling of safety, and relationships with friends, leisure activities and the quality of the social environment are hardly analyzed in the connection to the well-being. That it is why focusing on the well-being of adolescents with different socio-economic backgrounds and from different regions of Russia, and on their expectations at the stage of transition to adulthood the research is conducted in the framework of the Capability Approach, which is a broad normative framework for the evaluation and assessment of individual well-being (Robeyns, 2005). The Capability Approach has become a central concept in the multidimensional measuring of the well-being. The core characteristic of the Capability Approach is its focus on what people are able to do and to be, on their capabilities. According to capability approach, the ends of well-being, justice and development should be conceptualized in terms of people's capabilities to function, to have the effective opportunities to undertake the actions and activities that they want to engage in, and be whom they want to be (Robeyns, 2005).

The aim of the research is both to find out if there is a difference in the capabilities state of young Russians at the age of 15-18 and to analyze their well-being under the conditions of the socio-economic and socio-political transformation in the Russian Federation.

The general research question is: What life chances do the young Russians at the age of 15-18 see in their lives under the conditions of the socio-economic and socio-political transformation in the Russian Federation? Among the specific research questions the researcher will try to analyze the differences in young people's capability states between the small and big city in Russia; and between low income and better off families.

The focus of the research is on 15-18 year olds adolescents who are at the stage of taking important decisions: the choice of profession, the way of living, and the acquisition of independence. The adolescents are from better off families and low income families, living in small cities and in the big economically developed cities. Opportunities in small cities are fewer than in big cities due to badly developed social and transport infrastructure, fewer opportunities to study so well-being and the expression of “good life” between cities could differ.

The problem-centred interview (PCI) as a theory-generating method (Witzel, 2000) will be used in the research to bridge the individual constructions of meaning on the one hand and the influence of societal conditions on the other hand (Scheibelhofer, 2005). The research on the well-being of young Russians made in PCI will try to take into account the specific structuring conditions (socio-economic and socio-political transformation in Russia, living in better off families or low income families, in diverse geographical conditions, with different educational attainment), under which interviewees gain experiences, incorporate them into their action orientations (their way of living) and reflect on them. So the PCI gives “insights into life choices and life chances from the point of view of a person at the specific moment of an interview” (Scheibelhofer 2005, p. 26).

Reformulating the idea that the child’s capabilities are at least partially affected by the capability set and achieved functionings of their parents (Briggeri et al., 2006), to the young people’s capabilities are at least partially affected by the situation of the family and their interactions with their parents, the young people are selected from 2 kinds of families: low-income families (Saint-Petersburg and regions; with restricted living conditions; with unemployed parents or parents with low wage) and better off families (from Saint-Petersburg and regions; with good living conditions; long-term stable employment of parents on well-paid jobs; average or more than average wage of parents). Characteristics of parents are important to the decrease or increase of a young people’s life perspectives.

On the stage of collecting data the centres of family support of the different regions (Saint-Petersburg, the Leningrad region and the Novgorod region) as well as the schools have been contacted by the researcher to further select the interviewees. Two main tendencies of the behaviour of the social work agencies and schools with the external researcher have been found out:

1. to provide “the best respondents” who can give the “correct” information from the perspective of the schools or family support centres;
2. to follow their own perspectives in order to resolve the problems of the most “difficult” clients with the help of new researcher from outside, so to give to the researcher the most difficult clients in order to pursue the goals of organization.

Moreover, the difficulties of conducting research without the permission of all agents of the controlling levels from the “top” (for example, the Committee of the Education) to the “bottom” (the social pedagogue at school) played a negative role in the data collection. So, organisational context of the social work agencies, institutionalised as public agencies plays enormous role in the success of the conducting research.

Interview guideline is:

- to find out the needs of young people today;
- to concentrate on the values of adolescents, to analyze what they want to achieve and what it is for them the “good life”, life they have reason to value;
- to investigate what they really can achieve.

The main topics are childhood (biography); accommodation; health, security; education; expression of emotions; family relationships; friends; approval, recognition by peer group; partnership; membership in the different organizations(sport, political youth organization, theatre group etc.), free time; future (work, education, fears).

Several subjects which are very important for adolescence have been highlighted: peer approval, need of self-expression, developing sexuality, achieving emotional independence from parents. Peer acceptance and social adjustment is important in any age, but it seems particularly crucial during the adolescent’s years.

Working in the framework of the Capability Approach the analysis and the coding of the text is done partially in the terms of Martha Nussbaum list of the Central human capabilities (Nussbaum, 2000): 1. Life. 2. Bodily health. 3. Bodily integrity. 4. Sense, imagination, and thought. 5. Emotions. 6. Practical Reason. 7. Affiliation. 8. Other species. 9. Play. 10. Control over one’s environment.

So in the research there is an emphasis on the social contexts and the place of living in the terms of mobility and accessibility of goods because due to asymmetry of the opportunities individual capability set could be distributed not fairly. And this unfair distribution could limit the opportunities of the young people to exercise self-determination and to choose the way of life they have reason to value.

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Author's Address:

Ksenia Kuzmina
Bielefeld University
Research School „Education and Capabilities“
P.O. Box 10 01 31
D-Bielefeld
Germany
Email: ksenia.kuzmina@uni-bielefeld.de

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