



Social Representations of Family Formation and Parenthood Among Young Adults in Russia

Tatiana L. Shklyar^{a*}

^aPlekhanov Russian University of Economics, Moscow, Russian Federation

ABSTRACT

Contemporary societies are undergoing substantial changes in family formation and reproductive behaviour, accompanied by shifts in socially shared meanings of family, marriage, pregnancy, children, and parenthood. This study examined the structural organisation of five related social representations concerning family formation and parenthood among young adults in Russia. The method of free associations and the prototypical analysis of P. Verges were used. The answers were lexically and semantically standardized and combined into semantic categories. The empirical basis was based on the results of an online survey of 364 students and university students aged 17-25 living in Russia, including 218 women (59.9%) and 146 men (40.1%). Data collection was conducted from December 2025 to February 2026. Each participant named three associations for each of the five stimuli. Ideas about family and marriage had mostly positive content: 44.8% and 47.3% of respondents noted love, respectively. Pregnancy and parenthood with many children were more often associated with responsibility and stress: 14.6% and 31.3% indicated physical and emotional stress, respectively, and 24.7% of participants indicated financial stress with parenthood with many children. Social concepts of family, marriage, pregnancy, child, and parenthood share common semantic elements but differ in their structural positions. The results demonstrate the possibilities of a comparative structural approach to study how young people in Russia organize socially shared knowledge about starting a family and future parenthood.

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***Corresponding author:** Shklyar T.L. – Cand. Sc. (Econ.), Associate Professor, Plekhanov Russian University of Economics, Moscow, Russian Federation, email: tlb@mail.ru

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Ресейдегі жастар арасындағы отбасы мен ата-ана тәрбиесінің әлеуметтік көріністері

Шкляр Т.Л.^{а*}

^аГ.В. Плеханов атындағы Ресей экономикалық университеті, Мәскеу, Ресей Федерациясы

ТҮЙІН

Қазіргі қоғамдар отбасы құру және репродуктивті мінез-құлық саласында елеулі өзгерістерді бастан өткеруде, бұл отбасы, неке, жүктілік, бала және ата-ана болу туралы әлеуметтік ортақ мағыналардың өзгеруімен қатар жүреді. Осы зерттеуде Ресей жастарының отбасы құру мен ата-ана болуға қатысты өзара байланысты бес әлеуметтік түсінігінің құрылымдық ұйымдасуы зерттелді. Еркін ассоциациялар әдісі және П. Вержестің прототиптік талдауы қолданылды. Жауаптар лексикалық және семантикалық тұрғыдан стандартталып, мағыналық санаттарға біріктірілді. Эмпирикалық базаны Ресейде тұратын 17–25 жас аралығындағы 364 оқушы мен студенттің онлайн-сауалнамасының нәтижелері құрады, олардың ішінде 218 әйел (59,9%) және 146 ер адам (40,1%) болды. Деректер 2025 жылғы желтоқсаннан 2026 жылғы ақпанға дейін жиналды. Әрбір қатысушы бес стимулдың әрқайсысына үш ассоциациядан атады. Отбасы мен неке туралы түсініктер негізінен оң мазмұнға ие болды: махаббатты респонденттердің тиісінше 44,8%-ы және 47,3%-ы атап өтті. Жүктілік пен көпбалалы ата-ана болу көбінесе жауапкершілікпен және жүктемемен байланыстырылды: физикалық және эмоциялық жүктемені тиісінше 14,6% және 31,3%, ал көпбалалы ата-ана болудағы қаржылық жүктемені қатысушылардың 24,7%-ы көрсетті. Отбасы, неке, жүктілік, бала және көпбалалы ата-ана болу туралы әлеуметтік түсініктердің ортақ мағыналық элементтері бар, бірақ олардың құрылымдық орналасуы әртүрлі. Алынған нәтижелер Ресей жастарының отбасы құру және болашақ ата-ана болу туралы әлеуметтік ортақ білімді қалай ұйымдастыратынын зерттеудегі салыстырмалы құрылымдық тәсілдің мүмкіндіктерін көрсетеді.

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***Хат-хабаршы авторы:** Шкляр Т.Л. – э.ф.к., доцент, Г.В. Плеханов атындағы Ресей экономикалық университеті, Мәскеу, Ресей Федерациясы, email: tib@mail.ru

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Социальные представления молодежи о создании семьи и родительстве в России

Шкляр Т.Л.^{а*}

^аРоссийский экономический университет им. Г.В. Плеханова, Москва, Российская Федерация

АННОТАЦИЯ

Современные общества переживают существенные изменения в сфере создания семьи и репродуктивного поведения, сопровождающиеся изменениями социально разделяемых значений семьи, брака, беременности, ребенка и родительства. В настоящем исследовании изучалась структурная организация пяти взаимосвязанных социальных представлений, относящихся к созданию семьи и родительству, у молодежи в России. Использованы метод свободных ассоциаций и прототипический анализ П. Вержеса. Ответы были лексически и семантически стандартизированы и объединены в смысловые категории. Эмпирическую базу составили результаты онлайн-опроса 364 учащихся и студентов в возрасте 17–25 лет, проживающих в России, в том числе 218 женщин (59,9%) и 146 мужчин (40,1%). Сбор данных проводился с декабря 2025 г. по февраль 2026 г. Каждый участник называл по три ассоциации к каждому из пяти стимулов. Представления о семье и браке имели преимущественно положительное содержание: любовь отметили соответственно 44,8% и 47,3% респондентов. Беременность и многодетное родительство чаще связывались с ответственностью и нагрузкой: физическую и эмоциональную нагрузку указали соответственно 14,6% и 31,3%, а финансовую нагрузку при многодетном родительстве — 24,7% участников. Социальные представления о семье, браке, беременности, ребенке и многодетном родительстве имеют общие смысловые элементы, но различаются по их структурному положению. Полученные результаты демонстрируют возможности сравнительного структурного подхода для изучения того, как молодежь в России организует социально разделяемые знания о создании семьи и будущем родительстве.

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***Автор-корреспондент:** Шкляр Т.Л. — к.э.н., доцент, Российский экономический университет им. Г.В. Плеханова, Москва, Российская Федерация, email: tib@mail.ru

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1. Introduction

Family formation remains an important social process shaping demographic development and individual life courses. Economic, technological, and cultural transformations have altered pathways to adulthood and the conditions under which young people consider marriage and parenthood.

Demographic indicators describe changes in fertility and family behaviour but cannot fully explain how young people themselves understand family-related phenomena. Decisions concerning marriage and parenthood are shaped not only by material conditions but also by socially shared beliefs, cultural expectations, and collective systems of meaning through which family life is interpreted. Examining these meanings is therefore important for understanding how expectations about future family life are organised before reproductive decisions are made.

Research conducted in Russia has examined reproductive attitudes among young people, regional differences between expected and desired family size, and the influence of contemporary media environments on behavioural models and expectations concerning parenthood (Davydova, 2021; Kamarova et al., 2025; Rozenberg & Ivanishko, 2021). These studies show that family-related orientations are embedded in a changing social environment, but they primarily address attitudes, intentions, and behavioural determinants rather than the internal organisation of socially shared meanings. Related transformations of family and marriage have also been reported in other post-Soviet contexts, including Kazakhstan (Nechayeva & Mussabayeva, 2025), providing a basis for future cross-cultural comparison while not being directly representative of Russian youth.

A life-course perspective provides a rationale for considering several family-related representations together. Family, marriage, pregnancy, child, and large-family parenthood are conceptually related objects associated with anticipated family formation and parenthood. In the present study, their ordering serves an analytical purpose; given the cross-sectional design, differences between the five representations cannot be interpreted as within-person developmental change over time.

These related objects need not be organised in the same way. Emotional meanings, responsibility, anticipated physical demands, financial considerations, and social support may occupy different structural positions depending on the object being represented. The structural approach to social representations makes such differences visible by distinguishing probable central elements from more flexible peripheral components.

International research similarly describes reproductive behaviour as shaped by interacting demographic, economic, cultural, and psychological factors (Zaidi & Morgan, 2017). Digital media also contribute to the circulation of family norms and behavioural models (Davydova, 2021; Kamarova et al., 2025). However, less attention has been paid to the comparative structural organisation of several closely related family representations within the same population.

The theory of social representations provides a conceptual framework for examining this question. Moscovici defined social representations as “a specific way of understanding and communicating what is already known,” emphasising their role in transforming collective experience into common-sense knowledge shared by members of a social group (Moscovici, 1984, p. 17). Social representations organise everyday knowledge, facilitate communication, and shape interpretations of socially significant phenomena.

The structural approach developed by Abric proposes that a social representation has an internal organisation consisting of a relatively stable central core and more flexible peripheral

elements. The central core gives the representation its meaning and coherence, whereas peripheral elements allow adaptation to changing social conditions without altering its essential structure (Abric, 1994). Subsequent work has demonstrated the usefulness of central core theory for examining the stability and transformation of socially shared knowledge across different social contexts (Moliner & Abric, 2015).

Recent Russian research shows that family-related meanings remain socially important but are not internally uniform. Kashina and Kletsina (2021) found that students' images of a desirable family combine elements of traditional and egalitarian models and do not fully coincide with the normative model embedded in state family policy. Rozenova (2025), using semantic-differential and metaphor-based techniques, found idealisation of family among students but more negative, tension-laden meanings among young adults with partnership experience. Studies of reproductive attitudes additionally document discrepancies between desired and expected family size, responses to socioeconomic uncertainty, and the role of media in circulating behavioural models of parenthood (Davydova, 2021; Gorskiy, 2025; Kamarova et al., 2025; Rozenberg & Ivanishko, 2021). Related transformations of family and marriage have been reported in Kazakhstan (Nechayeva & Mussabayeva, 2025), consistent with broader accounts of the pluralisation of family trajectories during the second demographic transition (Zaidi & Morgan, 2017). This body of work demonstrates that family-related orientations are changing, although it primarily examines attitudes, intentions, semantic images, or behavioural determinants.

International evidence confirms that representations of family are both affectively salient and context dependent. In a structural study using hierarchical evocations, Pozzi et al. (2022) found that Italian young adults represented family predominantly through affective meanings, whereas older adults used more concrete and pragmatic terms. Using free associations with 895 adults from Canada, India, Oman, Portugal, and Spain, Sousa et al. (2025) identified culturally differentiated symbolic profiles of family and work. These studies demonstrate the value of examining representational content and structure, but they compare family across age groups or in relation to work rather than across several family-formation objects.

The present study examines five social objects family, marriage, pregnancy, child, and large-family parenthood as components of a broader symbolic field of family formation and anticipated parenthood. Their structural organisation is compared using Vergès' prototypical analysis (Vergès, 1992), which allows probable central elements and peripheral components to be identified on the basis of frequency and order of evocation.

The study therefore addresses a gap in research on the structural organisation of family-related meanings by examining all five representations within the same Russia-based sample. Specifically, it investigates social representations of family, marriage, pregnancy, child, and large-family parenthood among young adults using the structural approach and the free-association method. It also examines whether preferred information sources are associated with negative elements in representations of large-family parenthood. This study examined the structural organisation of five related social representations concerning family formation and parenthood among young adults in Russia.

2. Methods

The study involved a convenience sample of 364 participants aged 17–25 years ($M = 20.67$, $SD = 2.26$), including 218 women (59.9%) and 146 men (40.1%). All participants were enrolled in

educational institutions and resided in Russia at the time of data collection. Most participants were senior secondary school or university students.

Data were collected online between December 2025 and February 2026 using Google Forms. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. The questionnaire included sociodemographic items, questions about preferred sources of information on family and parenthood, and a free-association task. For each of the five stimulus words, participants were asked to provide the first three words or expressions that came to mind. The position in which each association was produced was recorded and coded as rank 1, 2, or 3.

The study employed a free-association task commonly used in research on social representations (Moscovici, 1984; Vergès, 1992). The online questionnaire presented five Russian stimulus words: family, marriage, pregnancy, child, and large-family parenthood. Large-family parenthood was defined as having three or more children.

The stimulus family was presented without further definition. Participants were not instructed to refer specifically to their family of origin, a future family, or any other particular type of family. The resulting associative field was therefore analysed as a representation of family in general rather than being retrospectively assigned a narrower meaning.

The stimulus child was analysed as a representation of the social object child. Both child and large-family parenthood were considered family-related objects relevant to anticipated parenthood. The questionnaire also included an item on participants' preferred sources of information about family and parenthood. For analysis, the reported sources were grouped into digital sources, including social media and Telegram channels, and non-digital sources.

The five social objects were treated as conceptually related representations associated with family formation and anticipated parenthood. Their ordering was used for comparative purposes and does not imply developmental change within individuals.

The free-association responses were analysed using Vergès' prototypical analysis (Vergès, 1992). The responses were exported to Microsoft Excel for initial data preparation. Spelling and morphological variants were normalised, while synonymous or semantically equivalent expressions were grouped into common analytical categories using a formalised coding dictionary developed for the study. The first author conducted the initial coding, which was subsequently reviewed by a second researcher holding a Candidate of Philological Sciences degree. Ambiguous or disputed cases were discussed and resolved by consensus. Because the complete dataset was not independently coded by both researchers, inter-rater reliability could not be estimated. The final analytical dataset comprised 5,460 evocations (364 participants × 15 responses).

The standardised dataset was processed using custom Python scripts. For each semantic category, frequency (f) was defined as the number of evocations assigned to that category. Mean rank of evocation (MROE) was calculated from the original position of each response in the free-association task. Associations produced first, second, and third were assigned ranks of 1, 2, and 3, respectively. For each category, MROE was calculated as $(1n_1 + 2n_2 + 3n_3) / (n_1 + n_2 + n_3)$, where n_1 , n_2 , and n_3 represent the numbers of times the category was evoked in the first, second, and third positions. MROE therefore ranged from 1.00 to 3.00.

Categories occurring fewer than 10 times were excluded before the thresholds were estimated. Among the retained categories, the median frequency served as the frequency threshold, while the arithmetic mean of the category-specific MROE values served as the rank threshold. Categories with high frequency and low MROE were assigned to the probable central-core zone;

categories with high frequency and high MROE to the first periphery; categories with low frequency and low MROE to the contrast zone; and categories with low frequency and high MROE to the second periphery. Frequency was classified as high when it was equal to or above the frequency threshold and as low when it was below the threshold. MROE was classified as low when it was below the rank threshold and as high when it was equal to or above the threshold. The thresholds were calculated separately for each stimulus using unrounded values.

Tables 1–5 report the evocation frequency (*f*), together with the number and percentage of respondents who mentioned each category at least once. Because more than one response from the same participant could be assigned to the same semantic category, *f* could exceed the number of respondents who mentioned that category. Percentages were calculated as $n/364 \times 100$. For the analysis of large-family parenthood, responses classified under “Physical and emotional burden”, “Financial burden”, and “Health and physiology” were treated as negative elements. Respondents were classified according to whether at least one of these elements was present in their responses. The association between preferred sources of family-related information and the presence of negative elements was examined using Pearson’s chi-square test. Statistical significance was set at $p < .05$.

Participation was voluntary and anonymous. All participants provided informed consent before completing the questionnaire. No personally identifiable information was collected. The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki (World Medical Association, 2025).

3. Results

The conducted prototypical analysis revealed differences in the structural organization of five interrelated social representations. Tables 1-5 show the selected semantic categories, the frequency of their mention (*f*), the number and proportion of respondents who named each category at least once (*n*, %), the average rank of the association, as well as its position in the supposed central core or peripheral zones. An analysis of the family concept has shown that its supposed central core has a compact positive structure based primarily on the categories of “love” and “home” (Table 1).

Table 1. Structure of social representations of family among respondents aged 17–25 years.

Structural zone	Association	Frequency (<i>f</i>)	Respondents, <i>n</i> (%)	MROE
Central core	Love	163	163 (44.8%)	1.60
	Home	76	75 (20.6%)	1.61
First periphery	Support	172	156 (42.9%)	2.13
	Family relationships and values	141	125 (34.3%)	2.19
	Warmth and comfort	109	92 (25.3%)	1.98
Contrast zone	Unity	19	18 (4.9%)	1.95
	Responsibility	19	18 (4.9%)	1.84
Second periphery	Family members	69	46 (12.6%)	2.00
	Happiness	56	53 (14.6%)	2.25
	Security	48	48 (13.2%)	2.21

f = number of evocations assigned to the category; *n* = number of respondents who mentioned the category at least once; percentages are based on *N* = 364; MROE = mean rank of evocation (1 = first position, 3 = third position). Minimum retained frequency = 10; frequency threshold = 72.5; rank threshold = 1.98. Central-core classifications are probabilistic rather than confirmatory.

Note: compiled by the authors.

As the data show, the categories “love” and “home” constitute the supposed central core of the social concept of the family. The category “love” was indicated by 44.8% of respondents, and the category “home” by 20.6%. The low average ranks of the association – 1.60 and 1.61, respectively show that these concepts were not only often mentioned but also mostly cited among the first. Consequently, the family is perceived by young people primarily as a space of emotional intimacy, love and domestic unity.

The first periphery included the categories “support” (42.9%), “family relations and values” (34.3%) and “warmth and comfort” (25.3%). Despite the high frequency of mentions, they had higher average ranks and therefore did not enter the supposed central core. It is especially significant that the category “support” was mentioned more often than “love”, but it was usually named later. The contrasting zone consisted of “unity” and “responsibility”, each indicated by 4.9% of participants. These elements may be particularly important to individual groups of respondents, but they are not widespread in the general sample. The second periphery included the categories of “family members” (12.6%), “happiness” (14.6%) and “security” (13.2%). In general, the structure of the idea of the family has a pronounced positive and emotional-relational orientation.

Marriage had a broader probable central core comprising love, responsibility, wedding and formalisation of marriage, family, and unity (Table 2).

Table 2. Structure of social representations of marriage among respondents aged 17–25 years.

Structural zone	Association	Frequency (f)	Respondents, n (%)	MROE
Central core	Love	172	172 (47.3%)	1.74
	Responsibility	82	78 (21.4%)	1.65
	Wedding and formalisation of marriage	58	45 (12.4%)	1.93
	Family	58	56 (15.4%)	1.88
First periphery	Unity	48	47 (12.9%)	1.83
	Family relationships and values	141	116 (31.9%)	2.13
	Support	57	55 (15.1%)	2.18
	Children	47	47 (12.9%)	2.30
Contrast zone	Security	43	39 (10.7%)	1.88
	Family members	24	20 (5.5%)	1.92
	Divorce and conflict	13	12 (3.3%)	1.85
	Physical and emotional burden	11	11 (3.0%)	1.73
Second periphery	Happiness	27	24 (6.6%)	2.11
	Everyday life	11	11 (3.0%)	2.18
	Home	10	10 (2.7%)	2.70
	New life and future	10	10 (2.7%)	2.50

f = number of evocations assigned to the category; n = number of respondents who mentioned the category at least once; percentages are based on N = 364; MROE = mean rank of evocation (1 = first position, 3 = third position). Minimum retained frequency = 10; frequency threshold = 43.5; rank threshold = 2.00. Central-core classifications are probabilistic rather than confirmatory.

Note: compiled by the authors.

Family relationships and values, support, and children occupied the first periphery. Security, family members, divorce and conflict, and physical and emotional burden formed the contrast zone, while happiness, everyday life, home, and new life and future were located in the second periphery.

As can be seen from the data, the supposed central core of the idea of marriage includes the categories “love” (47.3%), “responsibility” (21.4%), “family” (15.4%), “unity” (12.9%) and

"wedding and marriage formalization" (12.4%). The first periphery includes family relationships and values, support and children. Categories related to security, conflict, divorce, and emotional stress are located in contrasting or peripheral areas. Thus, young people perceive marriage mostly positively, at the same time associating it with responsibility, family unity and formalization of relations.

Pregnancy showed a heterogeneous probable central core comprising happiness, children, new life and future, physical and emotional burden, and fear (Table 3).

Table 3. Structure of social representations of pregnancy among respondents aged 17–25 years.

Structural zone	Association	Frequency (f)	Respondents, n (%)	MROE
Central core	Happiness	114	105 (28.8%)	1.94
	Children	111	106 (29.1%)	1.59
	New life and future	74	66 (18.1%)	1.88
	Physical and emotional burden	55	53 (14.6%)	1.76
	Fear	44	41 (11.3%)	1.66
First periphery	Health and physiology	91	78 (21.4%)	2.01
	Responsibility	87	84 (23.1%)	2.13
	Family relationships and values	56	51 (14.0%)	2.29
Contrast zone	Birth of a child	25	25 (6.9%)	1.96
Second periphery	Pregnancy	22	22 (6.0%)	1.73
	Family members	10	9 (2.5%)	1.90
Second periphery	Love	43	43 (11.8%)	2.07
	Family	23	23 (6.3%)	2.30
	Motherhood and parenthood	13	13 (3.6%)	2.23
	Warmth and comfort	11	11 (3.0%)	2.09
	Financial burden	10	10 (2.7%)	2.40

f = number of evocations assigned to the category; n = number of respondents who mentioned the category at least once; percentages are based on N = 364; MROE = mean rank of evocation (1 = first position, 3 = third position). Minimum retained frequency = 10; frequency threshold = 45.0; rank threshold = 2.03. Central-core classifications are probabilistic rather than confirmatory.

Note: compiled by the authors.

As the data show, the supposed central core of the concept of pregnancy is heterogeneous. It includes the positive categories "children" (29.1%), "happiness" (28.8%) and "new life and future" (18.1%), as well as "physical and emotional stress" (14.6%) and "fear" (11.3%). The first periphery includes responsibility, health and physiology, family relationships and values. Thus, pregnancy is perceived by young people both as a joyful event associated with the birth of a child and the beginning of a new life, and as a condition accompanied by responsibility, fear, and significant stress.

The representation elicited by the stimulus child had a probable central core comprising responsibility, childhood and play, and child manifestations (Table 4).

Table 4. Structure of social representations of the child among respondents aged 17–25 years.

Structural zone	Association	Frequency (f)	Respondents, n (%)	MROE
Central core	Responsibility	105	102 (28.0%)	1.65
	Childhood and play	48	44 (12.1%)	1.90
	Child manifestations	29	25 (6.9%)	1.76
	Happiness	152	133 (36.5%)	1.97
	Upbringing and development	80	74 (20.3%)	2.19
First periphery	Love	75	75 (20.6%)	1.97
	Family relationships and values	66	61 (16.8%)	2.17

Structural zone	Association	Frequency (f)	Respondents, n (%)	MROE
Contrast zone	New life and future	49	46 (12.6%)	2.08
	Smallness	24	24 (6.6%)	1.71
	Work	13	13 (3.6%)	1.92
Second periphery	Physical and emotional burden	13	12 (3.3%)	1.92
Second periphery	Cuteness	12	12 (3.3%)	1.50
	Children	22	22 (6.0%)	2.00
	Financial burden	17	16 (4.4%)	2.06
	Security	15	15 (4.1%)	2.20
	Family	15	15 (4.1%)	2.00

f = number of evocations assigned to the category; n = number of respondents who mentioned the category at least once; percentages are based on N = 364; MROE = mean rank of evocation (1 = first position, 3 = third position). Minimum retained frequency = 10; frequency threshold = 26.5; rank threshold = 1.94. Central-core classifications are probabilistic rather than confirmatory.

Note: compiled by the authors.

Happiness, upbringing and development, love, family relationships and values, and new life and future occupied the first periphery. Positive emotional and developmental meanings were therefore highly salient, but they did not occupy the same structural position as Responsibility and child-specific content.

As the data show, the categories of "responsibility" (28.0%), "childhood and play" (12.1%), and "manifestations of the child" (6.9%) constitute the supposed central core of the idea of a child. The first periphery included "happiness" (36.5%), "love" (20.6%), "upbringing and development" (20.3%), family relations, and a new life. Although happiness was mentioned more often than responsibility, it had a higher average rank and therefore did not enter the central core. Thus, the child is perceived positively by young people, but the central place in this view is occupied by responsibility for his upbringing and development.

Large-family parenthood had the broadest probable central-core configuration (Table 5).

Table 5. Structure of social representations of large-family parenthood among respondents aged 17–25 years.

Structural zone	Association	Frequency (f)	Respondents, n (%)	MROE
Central core	Physical and emotional burden	134	114 (31.3%)	1.84
	Financial burden	98	90 (24.7%)	1.85
	Responsibility	76	76 (20.9%)	1.93
	Happiness	63	57 (15.7%)	1.98
	Child manifestations	47	43 (11.8%)	1.96
First periphery	Social support and benefits	47	46 (12.6%)	1.70
	Work	46	46 (12.6%)	1.96
	Support	36	34 (9.3%)	2.42
Contrast zone	Large-family parenthood	18	16 (4.4%)	1.78
Second periphery	Children	15	15 (4.1%)	1.80
Second periphery	Family relationships and values	31	30 (8.2%)	2.35
	Family	28	28 (7.7%)	2.00
	Unity	25	25 (6.9%)	2.08
	Health and physiology	23	20 (5.5%)	2.00
	Love	22	22 (6.0%)	2.14
	Divorce and conflict	11	11 (3.0%)	2.18

f = number of evocations assigned to the category; n = number of respondents who mentioned the category at least once; percentages are based on N = 364; MROE = mean rank of evocation (1 = first position, 3 = third position). Minimum retained frequency = 10; frequency threshold = 33.5; rank threshold = 2.00. Central-core classifications are probabilistic rather than confirmatory.

Note: compiled by the authors.

Comparison of the five matrices revealed related but distinct structural profiles. Family had a compact positive-relational core; marriage combined emotional, relational, and responsibility-related meanings; pregnancy brought together positive anticipation, fear, and physical or emotional burden; Child was organised around Responsibility and child-specific meanings; and large-family parenthood combined perceived demands with positive, social, and work-related content.

Responsibility occupied different structural positions across the five objects: it appeared in the contrast zone of Family, the probable central core of Marriage, the first periphery of Pregnancy, and the probable central cores of Child and Large-family parenthood. The pattern therefore should not be interpreted as a simple monotonic increase in responsibility or burden. Instead, similar themes were reorganised differently depending on the representational object.

The principal comparative characteristics are summarised in Table 6.

Table 6. Comparative structural characteristics of the five family-related representations.

Representational object	Probable central core	Dominant configuration	Structural characteristic
Family	Love; home	Positive emotional and relational	Compact core; relational meanings extend into first periphery.
Marriage	Love; responsibility; wedding and formalisation; family; unity	Emotional, relational, and responsibility-related	Broader core combining attachment, commitment, family, and formalisation.
Pregnancy	Happiness; children; new life and future; physical and emotional burden; fear	Mixed anticipatory and demand-related	Positive anticipation coexists with fear and burden-related meanings.
Child	Responsibility; childhood and play; child manifestations	Responsibility and child-centred	Responsibility is central alongside child-specific meanings; positive affect lies in first periphery.
Large-family parenthood	Physical and emotional burden; financial burden; responsibility; happiness; child manifestations; social support and benefits; work	Demands, responsibility, and mixed affective-social meanings	Broad core combining perceived demands with happiness, work, child-related content, and support.

Note: compiled by the authors.

Because the data are cross-sectional, these differences represent contrasts between conceptually related social objects rather than developmental change across time. The comparative ordering is therefore used as an analytical framework for family formation and anticipated parenthood, not as evidence of a fixed sequence experienced by individuals.

The association between respondents' preferred information sources and the presence of negative elements in representations of large-family parenthood was examined using Pearson's chi-square test (Lemeshko & Postovalov, 1998). Respondents were classified according to their preferred information sources as digital (e.g., social media and Telegram channels) or non-digital. No statistically significant association was found between preferred information source and the presence of negative elements in representations of large-family parenthood, $\chi^2(1) = 0.10$, $p = .75$. The distribution across the two information-source groups is presented in Figure 1.

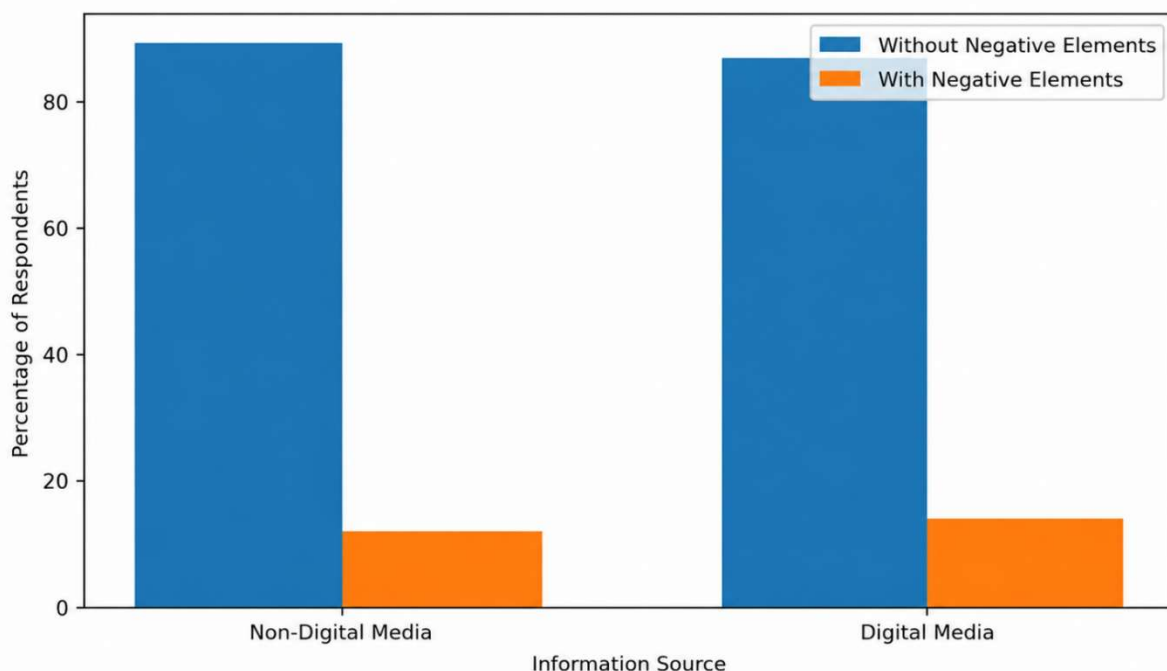


Figure 1. Distribution of negative elements in representations of large-family parenthood by preferred information source.

Within the present sample, the proportion of respondents whose representations contained negative elements was comparable across the two information-source groups. Thus, the presence of negative elements was not associated with respondents' preferred information-source category.

The findings indicate that social representations of family, marriage, pregnancy, child, and large-family parenthood are linked by recurrent themes but differ in their structural organisation. Emotional, relational, responsibility-related, child-centred, and burden-related meanings occupied different positions depending on the object considered. The five representations should therefore be understood as related but distinct configurations rather than as successive stages of a single developmental sequence.

These findings contribute to contemporary research on family formation and reproductive attitudes in Russia. Previous studies have documented changing reproductive expectations among Russian young people, regional discrepancies between desired and expected family size, and the role of media environments in shaping models of parenthood (Gorskiy, 2025; Kamarova et al., 2025; Rozenberg & Ivanishko, 2021). Whereas this literature has largely focused on attitudes, intentions, and behavioural determinants, the present study examines how family-related meanings are organised within representational structures. Transformations of family and marriage have also been reported in neighbouring post-Soviet societies, including Kazakhstan (Nechayeva & Mussabayeva, 2025), providing a basis for future cross-cultural comparison. The empirical conclusions of the present study, however, apply specifically to the Russia-based sample.

From the perspective of Social Representation Theory, the findings are consistent with the view that socially shared knowledge is internally organised and includes both relatively stable and context-sensitive elements (Moscovici, 1984; Abric, 1994; Moliner & Abric, 2015). They also illustrate why central-core classifications obtained through prototypical analysis should be

regarded as probable rather than definitive: similar thematic content may occupy central, contrast, or peripheral positions depending on the representational object.

The representation of pregnancy was particularly heterogeneous. Happiness, children, and new life and future appeared in the probable central core together with fear and physical and emotional burden. Positive anticipation and uncertainty therefore formed part of the same representational structure. The representation of child showed a different pattern: Responsibility and child-specific meanings occupied the probable central core, whereas happiness, love, and upbringing and development, although frequent, were located in the first periphery. These differences show that related family objects may share thematic content without being organised in the same way.

Large-family parenthood displayed the broadest probable central-core configuration. Physical and emotional burdens, financial burdens, and responsibilities appeared alongside happiness, child manifestations, social support and benefits, and work. Burden-related meanings therefore constituted an important part of the representation, but they did not define it exclusively. Positive, child-related, and support-related meanings were also structurally salient, indicating a more heterogeneous representation than an exclusively negative interpretation would suggest.

The information-source analysis found no statistically significant association between the broad digital/non-digital classification and the presence of negative elements in representations of large-family parenthood. This finding should be interpreted with caution because the preferred source category does not capture the frequency, intensity, content, or perceived credibility of actual media exposure.

The study contributes to comparative applications of Vergès' prototypical analysis by examining several related family representations within the same sample. Its main contribution lies in showing how recurrent themes are reorganised across different social objects rather than assuming that related representations share the same internal structure. This comparative perspective may also be useful for studying other groups of interconnected social representations.

Several limitations should be considered. First, the convenience sample cannot be regarded as representative of all young people in Russia; women and participants connected with educational settings were overrepresented. Second, the free-association method captures socially shared symbolic meanings rather than individual motives or actual reproductive behaviour. Third, the cross-sectional design does not permit conclusions about developmental change or causal relationships. Fourth, prototypical analysis identifies probable structural positions based on the frequency and order of evocation rather than providing confirmatory evidence of centrality. Future research should include larger and more diverse samples, complementary structural methods, longitudinal designs, and cross-cultural comparisons.

4. Conclusion

The conducted research revealed the features of the structural organization of the social ideas of Russian youth about family, marriage, pregnancy, child and parenthood with many children. The results show that these representations are connected by common semantic elements, but differ in the composition of the supposed central core and peripheral zones.

The idea of family is based primarily on love, home, and emotional intimacy. Marriage is also perceived positively, but along with love it includes responsibility, unity and formalization of the relationship. In the conception of pregnancy, positive expectations associated with the birth of a

child and the beginning of a new life are combined with fear, physical and emotional stress. The idea of a child is organized primarily around responsibilities and meanings related to childhood and upbringing. The most complex and heterogeneous structure is revealed in relation to parenthood with many children, where happiness, children and social support are combined with financial, physical and emotional stress.

Thus, family concepts that are similar in content have different structural organization and do not form a simple linear sequence. The practical significance of the results lies in the possibility of their use in the development of family and reproductive education programs for young people, psychological support measures and social policy tools. Further research should be conducted with larger, more diverse samples, taking into account gender, marital status, parental experience, region of residence, and participants' socio-economic status.

Overall, the findings show that closely related family and parenthood concepts are organised in distinct ways rather than forming a simple linear progression. Further research could examine whether similar structural patterns are found in other age groups and sociocultural contexts.

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Information about the authors

Tatiana L. Shklyar – Cand. Sc. (Econ.), Associate Professor, Plekhanov Russian University of Economics, Moscow, Russian Federation, email: tlb@mail.ru, ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8262-7584>

Авторлар туралы мәліметтер

Шкляр Т.Л. – э.ф.к., доцент, Г.В. Плеханов атындағы Ресей экономикалық университеті, Мәскеу, Ресей Федерациясы, email: tlb@mail.ru, ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8262-7584>

Сведения об авторах

Шкляр Т.Л. – к.э.н., доцент, Российский экономический университет им. Г.В. Плеханова, Москва, Российская Федерация, email: tlb@mail.ru, ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8262-7584>

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