Rethinking Class in Russia

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Chapter 4

Doing Class in Social Welfare Discourses: 'Unfortunate Families' in Russia

Elena Iarskaia-Smirnova and Pavel Romanov

Introduction

This chapter addresses the relationship between class, family and social welfare policies by analysing the construction of the identity category of 'unfortunate families' (*neblagopoluchnye sem'i*) in popular scientific discourses, governmental policy documents and discourses of social services, and by examining how those labelled as 'unfortunate' negotiate this identity conferred to them. The chapter shows that gender and class are closely intertwined in the production of this identity, as it is single mothers who are primarily categorised as 'unfortunate'. Gender and class also constitute the key axes of the current Russian welfare model, which is strongly geared towards the (neo-)liberal rationality of emphasising individual responsibility and means testing.

In our analysis we draw on multiple sources of data. First, we analyse in-depth and focus group interviews with service providers and clients and participant observation data from a number of Russian cities.[1] The interviewed service providers included social workers, pedagogues, psychologists, youth workers, nurses and administrators of social services. The interviewed clients were predominantly single mothers and mothers of three and more children. Second, we analyse various government documents and social advertisements, mass media materials, social policy and social work textbooks, and popular scientific texts published during the 1990–2010.[2]

This chapter argues that the concept of *neblagopoluchnaia sem'ia*, which translates somewhat awkwardly as an 'unfortunate family', is a 'zombie category' (Beck 2002b) in public discourse with real-life effects on people's everyday existence. The concept refers to socially marginalised families who lack material

1 The cities included are Saratov, Rostov-na-Donu, Izhevsk, Krasnodar, Tomsk, Kostroma, St. Petersburg, Samara and Moscow. We have published some of this data earlier in Iarskaia-Smirnova and Romanov (2002, 2004, 2008).

2 For a more detailed analysis of this data, see Iarskaia-Smirnova and Romanov (2007, 2008). The data was collected in the project 'The public sphere in contemporary Russia: aspects of social inclusion, identity and mobilization' carried out in the National Research University Higher School of Economics, grant number 12-05-0012.

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and cultural resources and to families that do not fit the conservative definition of a 'proper' family structure. In both cases, the symbolic classification as unfortunate has a stigmatising and humiliating effect, depriving families of human dignity.

This chapter begins with a review of Western theoretical discussions of class in the context of family and welfare in order to see how Russia fits into these debates. Western class analysis was considered irrelevant in the Soviet Union due to the supposedly classless nature of advanced socialism, but the transition to a market economy in the 1990s and the new kind of class society it engendered have made these discussions topical in Russia. In the second section of this chapter we offer a brief description of the main principles of the Soviet and post-Soviet welfare ideologies and the policies towards families. The following sections examine how popular scientific discourses, governmental policy documents and social advertisements, and social service providers construct class with the concept of the unfortunate family. The last section preceding the conclusions analyses how mothers labelled as unfortunate negotiate this stigmatised identity.

Class, Family and Welfare

At the core of the politics of class was traditionally the mechanism of the social wage, which included a basic subsistence level guaranteed by the state for temporarily unemployed workers and some provision of health care and education (Green 2006: 609). This system was motivated by the mutual interest of capital and labour: labour sought guarantees of decommodification and capital wished to minimise the class struggle. However, under the policy reforms driven by the neoliberal values of individualism and privatisation, this system of social wage has been disintegrating and the commodification of relationships and communities has increased (ibid.: 614). The growing importance of other than class differences, such as gender and race, and the divisions between workers in the public and private sectors and between those highly dependent and less dependent on public provision have put pressure on the social wage system (Wetherly 1988: 33).

The concept of class based on economic inequality has attracted much criticism in recent decades. Ulrich Beck (2002b: 203) has argued that class, family and household are 'zombie categories': they are dead but still alive, blinding us to the transformed realities of our lives. A traditional class-based sociology has taken nuclear families as its primary unit, but under the conditions of living apart together, divorce and remarriage (Beck 2002a: 24–25), new configurations of families and household emerge, and consequently new forms of collective identities and group interests. Anthony Giddens (1999) has called class a 'shell institution', arguing that people are increasingly reflexive authors of their lives, constructing their biographies actively rather than following structurally determined pathways. However, in recent years a certain renaissance of class has taken place in the sociological scholarship as a reaction to such 'death of class' arguments, with attention to more complex structural divisions, more nuanced social identities

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and multiple moralities. Andrew Sayer, for example, has examined the moral dimension of class experience, which 'creates unequal possibilities for flourishing and suffering' (Sayer 2005: 218). He has shown how the middle class rarely wants to acknowledge its privileged position, but rather displays embarrassment and evasion and denies the significance of class.

Cultural explanations of poverty have contributed to symbolic processes of othering, claiming that the cause of the disadvantaged position of the poor is to be found in their dysfunctional moral practices, including their 'poor commitment to paid work, welfare dependency, criminality, fatherless families and teen pregnancy' (Gillborn 2009: 13). Such images of the 'other' do not simply reflect existing inequalities, but are ammunition in strategies attempting to create or reinforce social distance (Bottero 2005: 27). Lynne Haney (2000) has shown in her research on welfare restructuring in Hungary that the shift from the socialist-era motherhood-centred welfare regime to the (neo-)liberal regime of poverty regulation has meant that all needs are conceived in individual and material terms and social support is reduced to poor relief. New surveillance techniques and disciplinary welfare practices have been introduced and social workers strive to increase the distance between themselves and their clients.

Studies of governmentality have become a valuable theoretical perspective in social policy in attempts to understand the power of such techniques and disciplinary practices (Cruikshank 1999; McDonald and Marston 2005; Clarke et al. 2007). In modern societies, welfare institutions maintain social discipline with social control effects (Rodger 1988) and reinforce economic disparities by cultural means. Dominelli (2004) maintains that clients of social services become subjects of governmentality technologies: they begin to control themselves and treat themselves as fragmented and atomised creatures, isolated from others. Dominelli argues that with the help of differential inclusion, social workers encourage individuals to choose identity models that could be called a limited type of citizenship of the 'deserving poor'.

The family is a major transmission belt for the reproduction of persisting class inequalities, both economically and culturally (Crompton 2008: 134). Walkerdine and Lucey (1989) have shown how mothers' child-rearing practices are differentiated by class in terms of housework and play, and in these practices a classed set of understandings about work, gender and access to resources is constructed. Contemporary discourses on parenting in the UK legitimate and normalise middle-class parenting practices and pathologise working-class ones (Perrier 2010: 18). A common feature of the discourse on 'poor parenting' in the UK, and also in Russia as we will show in our analysis, is that it constructs 'inadequate parenting' as a source of social problems (ibid.: 28). Poverty and other structural conditions such as the lack of access to education, housing and health care are individualised and 'detached from their deep structural roots and explained through recourse to developmental psychology' (Gillies 2010: 44).

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Soviet and Post-Soviet Welfare Ideology and Policy

The communist welfare state combined a broad social security coverage and access to basic social services with stratified provision (Cook 2007: 9). It thus brought together elements from conservative and social democratic welfare systems. While the Soviet political rhetoric appealed to the values of self-government and equality, in reality the system was geared towards paternalism and differential inclusion. The state played a key role in carrying out the double-edged care-and-control task at all levels of social life. Social protection was understood as an essential right of politically loyal workers and their families.

During the Stalin era, social policy was subordinated to the grand industrialisation projects and the collectivisation of agriculture, and its aim was to stimulate labour activity and improve labour discipline and productivity. In the years of late socialism, social justice and the reduction of social inequality became political priorities and the Soviet welfare system was modernised. Although the right and duty to labour determined access to many social services, the connection between employment status and welfare gradually became less pronounced. The principle of a universal welfare regime with domiciliary services available for all district residents was extended and the level of benefits was raised. Progress in house-building, medical provision, welfare and education was intensive. A number of improvements in labour relations were introduced. Working conditions improved, taxes on low-income groups were reduced, salaries were raised, work schedules were reduced, and the length of paid leave was extended. However, as has been customary in Russian history, these improvements were primarily felt by city dwellers, while the rural population continued to be deprived. They had neither passports nor the right to free mobility outside their place of residence.

Under state socialism the need for social work could not be articulated since all social problems were considered to be automatically solved by the party-state. To conceive of social problems as generated by the system would have meant questioning the foundations of the Marxist-Leninist ideology. Consequently, many social problems were not recognised, or they were defined as individual medical and criminal problems. However, the issues of family and child rearing were in the focus of perpetual debates since early Soviet history. Soviet hygienists, nutritionists, sociologists, psychologists and pedagogues developed detailed blueprints for raising a child and educating and advising parents. The term ‘unfortunate family’ was used in literature, for example, in the foreword to the novel *Honour* by Grigory Medynsky in 1959. Research publications employing this concept appeared in the 1970s and especially in the 1980s when ideological pressure was alleviated. Anatoly Kharchev (1974: 119) defined unfortunate families as a form of family disorganisation, accompanied by the ‘tense nature of relations between family members’. Efforts were made to single out indicators of an unfortunate family, including alcoholism, the ‘amoral behaviour of family members, low cultural and educational level’ (*Prikladnye problemy* … 1983: 99), and ‘defects of upbringing’ (Buianov 1988: 11). The criminologist Genrikh Minkovskii (1982)

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analysed sociological and criminological empirical data and elaborated a complex classification system of families according to a so-called upbringing potential. He emphasised conflicts and an aggressive atmosphere in the family as well as alcoholism, 'sexual demoralisation' and delinquent and criminal behaviour as risk factors leading to the emergence of 'unfortunateness' (*neblagopoluchie*). Work was considered a remedy for decreasing this unfortunateness (*Sovershenstvovanie* … 1984: 72). To identify such families was a task of the government-sponsored women's organisations (*zhensovety*), which were to organise individual work with them, appealing to the authorities for help if necessary (Pukhova 1989).

The social transformation of the 1990s brought about a dramatic growth of inequality, poverty and unemployment, homelessness and juvenile delinquency, drug and alcohol misuse, mental health problems and an alarming rate of HIV infections (Stephenson 2000, 2006; Pridemore 2002; Green 2006, Titterton 2006; McAuley 2010). Russia, as did many other post-communist societies, experienced a serious worsening of welfare indicators, including evidence of declining life expectancy, rising morbidity, the erosion of schooling, a lack of social protection and mass unemployment (Standing 1998). The drop in real incomes and the rise in inequality was rapid at the very beginning of the market reforms, at which time a third of the country's population belonged to the category of poor (Ovcharova and Popova 2005). The number of families with children falling into the trap of poverty started to rise (Kivinen 2006: 273).

The Russian government's social policy strategies have attempted to come to terms with both the legacy of social problems inherited from the Soviet era and the new problems brought about by the transition (Deacon 2000). The social policy reforms implemented in Russia have been largely determined by the neoliberal ideas of reducing state subsidies and entitlements and introducing means testing and privatisation (Cook 2007: 2). Social work as a profession had to be created as it did not exist in the Soviet system. During the 1990s a wide network of social services were established under the auspices of the Ministry of Labour and Social Development (currently the Ministry of Health Care and Social Development). This network has been growing hand in hand with the number of universities offering professional education in social work. However, due to low wages the majority of graduates tend to leave the profession of social work once they have graduated, and therefore unqualified employees still comprise the majority of the workforce (Penn 2007).

In the Soviet Union, the state bore the responsibility for many costs related to motherhood and childcare, but today the state's role has diminished and families bear the main responsibility. Pascall and Manning (2000) have suggested that women have become more dependent on family relationships than during the Soviet era because the state-provided benefits and services which supported the working-mother gender contract have diminished (see also Cook 2007: 4). For example, the universal system of child allowances was abolished in 2001 and allowances are now targeted only to children in poor families. Since 2005, the responsibility for child allowances was transferred to regional authorities, which

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deteriorated child welfare in poor regions unable to deliver the allowances. These policies have had negative effects on the socio-economic position of families, since families with children are the largest group amongst the poor in Russia (Ovcharova and Popova 2005). In particular, single parent families suffer from poverty. According to Ovcharova and Popova (ibid.: 8), 80 per cent of single parent families and more than 60 per cent of families with many children are excluded from the social benefit system. Means-tested assistance was supposed to increase the effectiveness of the social welfare system, but on the contrary it has had negative effects on the most vulnerable groups of the population, especially single mothers of low-income households (Romanov 2008).

'Unfortunate Families' in Academic and Popular-Scientific Discourse

An 'unfortunate family' is a significant and powerful concept in academic publications and popular psychological books. It refers to so-called incomplete (one parent) families, families with many children, low-income families, teenage parents, families in a crisis situation or families with a disabled or chronically-ill child. In public discourses, single mother households are frequently singled out as particularly unfortunate; they are immoral and dangerous not only for their children but also for the whole society. Even social work textbooks discuss single mothers from this patriarchal and stigmatising viewpoint (Iarskaia-Smirnova and Romanov 2008).

Academic publications provide a host of classifications and indicators to measure the level of unfortunateness. For example, poverty, an incomplete structure, physical or psychic deficiencies and the lack of a comfortable psychological climate in the family are listed as essential indicators of an unfortunate family (Bineeva 2001: 49). These indicators are driven by negative and medicalised stereotypes of single parent families and people with disabilities on the one hand, and an increasing power of symbolic classification that social workers and psychologists have acquired under the new welfare regime on the other. According to the psychologist Valentina Tseluiko (2003), an unfortunate family is one in which the family structure is destroyed, the main family functions are neglected or ignored, and there are overt or hidden defects in upbringing all of which together result in 'troublesome children'. Unfortunate families, she argues, can be grouped into two categories. The first category consists of families with a manifest form of unfortunateness: conflict families, problem families, asocial, amoral-criminal families and families with a lack of child-rearing resources. Secondly, there are families with a latent form of unfortunateness: seemingly respectable families in which the parents' values and behaviour differ from the 'universal moral requirements' and are reflected in the children's upbringing, for example, 'frivolous families' and 'families oriented to the success of their child'.

Such a classification is an example of the discursive work constructing certain groups as problematic and in need of social work intervention. It also illustrates

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an understanding of social policy not as an income redistribution scheme, but rather as a behaviour modification and regulation scheme. The problems of low-income families are described in medical and moral terms; they are not seen as being located in the broader political economy but in their behaviour and qualities (Schram 2000: 82). This constructs people as passive, dependent, helpless and pathologically childlike. The psychologist Elizarov refers in his article to immorality and suspicious sexual habits when describing unfortunate families. He characterises such families as follows:

> [They] need to engage in tense interpersonal contacts; [there is] an indifference towards studying and work as well as feelings of emptiness and the senselessness of one's own existence drowned out by a) a focus on sex and love relationships, b) the rush after a career and an increase in material well-being, c) social contacts in a group of like-minded people, which often leads to sliding to alcoholism and other types of addictions. (Elizarov 1995)

The unfortunate family is thus a classed category evaluated in profoundly moral and psychological terms, but there is also a cultural dimension to it: the poor are defined as culturally inferior. Such an approach sends out a potentially devastating and alienating message to children: they and their parents are not valued by society. Along with unfortunate families, there is also the concept of 'unfortunate children' (*neblagopoluchnye deti*), which refers both to 'children from unfortunate families' and to juvenile drug users and abandoned children. Such children are stigmatised as 'cultural others' and constructed as objects of state intervention. This is vividly demonstrated in a newspaper article entitled 'Poor means stupid' (*Bednyi, znachit neumnyi*):

> Children from poor families are more stupid than their rich peers. This was pointed out by Western scholars who over several years have been studying the issue of how social environment influences a person's intellectual activity … With this point of view agree those Russian scholars and pedagogues who work with unfortunate kids. (Pozdniakov 2006)

This commentator sees poverty as a self-reproducing fault of the poor, creating social conditions which limit the chances of successive generations due to an impoverished cultural life, few opportunities, and the 'poverty of aspiration' (cf. Gillborn 2009: 13). Such a lens can be seen as reflecting the politics of parenting in which the poor and socially disadvantaged are conceived of as products of 'bad parenting' (Gillies 2010: 44).

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The Contradictory Symbolism of Family

As was indicated above, concern with good parenting was characteristic of Soviet social policy. The logic of contemporary moral judgment in social policy discourses is underpinned by this Soviet tradition. In the official government policy document about young families, a 'fortunate family' (*blagopoluchnaia sem'ia*) is defined as follows: a registered marriage, nuclear structure ('the family should be complete and consist of two spouses (parents) and children'), and the 'successful performance of the reproductive function', referring to the need to reproduce the nation and thus combat depopulation. Furthermore, key indicators of a fortunate family are regarded as the quality of breeding in the family ('promotion of the reproduction of physically healthy and mentally robust offspring') and the 'formation of Russian citizens' consciousness and a continuity of folk and national socio-cultural values in their children' (Kontseptsiia … 2007; for a critical analysis, see Chernova 2010). Implicitly, 'good parenting' is identified here with 'middle-class' and conservative values and practices, while being single or poor, lacking education, living in cohabitation and having a child with a disability or illness are interpreted as indicators of the parents' lack of necessary resources to ensure the well-being of their children (cf. Khlinovskaya-Rockhill 2004: 137).

The post-Soviet public discourses continue the pro-natalist orientation of the Soviet era (Rivkin-Fish 2006). While in the 1990s and early 2000s the gender equality discourse was present due to the implementation of two national programmes aimed at improving the position of women, today the government discourse endorses a neo-traditionalist gender ideology which is manifested in the idealisation of and propaganda for a 'traditional family' and patriarchal gender relations, an emphasis on families with many children and the opposition of abortion. Low fertility is in this discourse explained as stemming from women's emancipation and the social functions of families are reduced to reproduction. Pro-natalism and a family with many children appear as a key political orientation in pro-governmental social advertisements.[3] These advertisements emphasise the number three in a modality of ought ('We must become a bigger [nation]!'). Family and birth are amalgamated with the nation and its strength, while the justification for at least three children is sought from Russia's 'glorious past'. The advertisements, for example, display important historical figures, such as Yuri Gagarin and Anton Chekhov, with a text 'They were born third …'.

Such propaganda for a 'traditional' family model – a nuclear family with three children – contradicts with the extensive problematisation and stigmatisation of families with many children (*mnogodetnaia sem'ia*) in public discourses and everyday conversations. These families are frequently portrayed as immoral, unfortunate and dangerous for society, transmitting poverty through generations

3 These social advertisements are produced by the Charity Fund for the Protection of Family, Motherhood and Childhood. The collection of the advertisements can be seen in http://semya.org.ru/pro-family/info_program/collection/index.html#9.

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and 'multiplying misery', as one of the administrators of social services who we interviewed explained.

The paternalist attitude towards families and the neoliberal logic of control over the poor in Russian welfare policy feed into the everyday practices of social work and social policy. Parents' behaviour is regulated by explicitly defining a middle-class way of life as the norm: giving birth in a hospital, having a permanent job with a high salary, living in a registered marriage in nice dwellings, exhibiting material wealth and 'being a well-educated, self-reliant, conscientious and purposeful individual' (Khlinovskaya-Rockhill 2004: 137). Those families failing to comply with these economic and cultural criteria become subject to pedagogical, medical and societal intervention.

In 2006 in his annual state of the nation address, President Putin called for special measures to increase the birth rate, and so echoed popular discourses on the degradation, depopulation and degeneration of the Russian nation. This address triggered an animated debate in the mass media in which experts and ordinary citizens expressed the fear of an increased birth rate amongst the poor and non-Russian ethnic groups. A cultural construct of the nation in trouble metaphorically connected kinship and country, which should be populated by 'genetically pure' Russians who are Slavic origin (see Rozenholm and Savkina 2009). This highlights how the politics of representation in the mass media plays an important role in the formation of images of welfare beneficiaries and thus contributes to the formation and reinforcement of the symbolic class structure (Bottero 2005: 31).

In 2007 the Putin government introduced a new policy instrument, the so-called maternity capital, according to which women who give birth to or adopt a second child receive a special monetary allowance. This initiative was aimed at raising the birth rate in Russia. However, the social service providers interviewed for this study believed that the 'maternal capital' is not in itself a legitimate motive to procreate. Said one psychologist working in a women's health centre: 'Believe me, a woman who possesses some intellect would never give birth to a child just to get some 250–260 thousand roubles'. Recently, some government officials and the mass media have triggered a moral panic about geographical disparities in birth rates. For example, in Chechnya the average family has five children (*Chechnia* … 2008). One newspaper article even suggested that 'it is possible to uproot banditism in Chechnya with only condoms' (*Iskorenit'* … 2009).[4]

'Unfortunate Families' in the Social Service System

Class as a discursive category is produced in the knowledge production practices of social services. There are several official forms that service providers use in

4 It is important to note here that the Human Development Index in Chechnya is one of the lowest, while neo-natal mortality is one of the highest throughout the country (*Tseli razvitiia* … 2010: 138, 148, 151).

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order to classify their clients. These forms need to be completed in order to receive certain payments or services. For instance, according to one of our informants, there is a particular form in the federal database which requires reporting on the number of 'families with explicit problems', but the listed categories are inconsistent and incompatible:

> Families with many children, incomplete families, families who have children in a socially dangerous situation, parents who do not perform their parental duties. Completely different concepts are listed here as if they were of the same type, but they cannot be, right? (A leading specialist at the department of children's institutions and social services, regional ministry, Rostov, 2008)

The social services also use the following kind of child development assessment chart:

Assessment chart of child development (to be completed by the parents)

1. Surname, Name and Patronymic of the child
2. Date of Birth
3. Family: low income, incomplete, fortunate, unfortunate [*sem'ia: maloobespechennaia, nepolnaia, blagopoluchnaia, neblagopoluchnaia*]

From a dossier of a social worker. Courtesy of Ianina Neliubova, Saratov.

These forms serve as a symbolic learning kit for families for learning how to define their identity. Through such practices public services produce 'truths' and normalise certain families and subjectivities, while other types of families and subjectivities are constituted as pathological and in need of state intervention in the form of experts equipped with specific knowledge (Lewis 2000). Thus, administrative categories become embedded in the everyday existence of clients.

The work of social service providers in Russia is characterised by constant stress because of high workloads and emotional strain. Many professionals play a significant role in the lives of the families that they seek to help to overcome difficult life situations. However, the professional and material resources for public services are very limited. At the level of everyday practice, 'street-level bureaucrats' (Lipsky 1980) develop their own jargon in order to categorise clients into an existing taxonomy. One such jargon term is *sopovskie sem'i* (SOP families), originating from the abbreviation of *sotsial'no opasnoe polozhenie* (families in a 'socially dangerous position'). This term is often used as a euphemism for unfortunate families and readily evokes a powerful image of a group guilty of being poor.

In order to cope with uncertainty at the local level, service providers develop their own explanatory models and classifications to determine the family's 'levels

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of dependency' and 'degree of unfortunateness' in order to distinguish between 'grateful versus thankless', 'nice versus smelly', and 'deserving versus non-deserving' clients. This classification is done according to many criteria, including the client's loyalty and obedience. The interviewed service providers characterised one client as eligible for poor relief as follows: 'more or less takes care of herself' and is 'neat and tidy'. One social worker described the deserving versus thankless clients in the following way:

> We came to her [client] to sign the act of assessment and brought food stuff to her. When you see her eyes you understand – yes, we are needed … But sometimes it happens so that [clients] come [to social services], behave in a rude way, but you should smile, otherwise your bosses will swear at you. [The clients] would take the food stuff, go away and even say that [we] gave little and bad.

In the Soviet Union, dividing the poor into the deserving and undeserving was a way to scientifically rationalise the allocation of resources. Today, with the rationale of saving costs, modern ideologies of control create a gap between clients and social workers. This is how governmentality operates as a mode of power in social work: it seeks to ensure the compliance of clients to the objectives of the state through top-down modes of surveillance and punitive statutory interventions (McKee 2007: 481). Social workers described single mothers as loaded with problems deriving from their 'nature', their deficient upbringing and psychological traits. They understood single mothers' poverty not as a societal problem, but as a psychological and group-specific feature. They tended to interpret complex issues in their life situations as individual faults and placed the responsibility on women for problems that are of societal origin.

Margarita Astoyants' (2009) study about parents who voluntarily place their children into institutional care reveals that these parents' socio-economic status was low; they had poor education, lacked housing and a job, and had weak social networks. They also often experienced territorial exclusion, i.e. lived in remote small settlements with no access to important resources, such as employment or proper housing. The absence of such resources, as well as of well-paid jobs and institutions of higher education, and the long distances to major cities intensify the risk of falling into an 'underclass'. Such structural factors gradually form territorial and symbolic zones of sustainable self-reproducing need, poverty and marginality. However, as Khlinovskaya-Rockhill (2004: 137) argues, the inability of mothers to overcome such structural forces is often interpreted in social services and amongst the general public as 'a loss of "maternal instinct" and a lack of desire to raise their children'.

In Russia, child protection is typically carried out either through semi-formal measures taken by local child protection agencies (*organy opeki i popechitelstva*) or through proceedings to terminate parental rights in civil courts. According to the Family Code of the Russian Federation, 'parents may

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not cause any physical or psychological harm to their children or to their moral development. The means by which parents raise their children must exclude any treatment which is neglectful, cruel or humiliating, diminishing of human dignity, insulting or exploiting of children' (Semeinyi Kodeks 1995, chapter 12, article 65). According to the statistics of the Russian Supreme Court, a dramatic increase in the termination of parental rights took place between 1995 and 2008, growing from 31,403 to 74,492 cases (Deti v Rossii 2009: 111). The rise was especially dramatic in the 1990s, leading the Russian government to suggest that rulings on the termination of parental rights are too restrictive. The excessive institutionalisation of children could be diminished by creating support services for families, but authorities have searched for solutions from the modality of repression, promoting the criminalisation of poverty.

This manifests itself in the fact that children can be taken into custody by local child protection agencies if parents have rent arrears. This has led human rights organisations to suggest that annually many children become 'forced orphans'. Economic grounds for custody cases are, however, used not only against those parents who have accrued rent arrears, but also as a political sanction to discipline and punish civic activists. This was the case with Sergei Pchelintsev from Dzerzhinsk (Nizhni Novgorod region), who regularly participated in protests against unemployment, poverty, the illegal dismissal of employees of the automobile factory GAS and pension reforms. When taking his three children into custody, the officials commented on his home: 'You have it clean but poor here'. A similar situation occurred in the family of the Togliatti journalist Galina Dmitrieva, who published a detailed description about workers' living conditions in the automobile factory VAZ in a local newspaper. The police took her three-year-old son and six-year-old daughter into custody. Although these two cases are quite extreme and exceptional, a great number of families become victims of arbitrary decisions on children welfare by child protection agencies every year. For example, Leonid Galaktionov from the Vladimir region, a Chechen and Tajikistan war veteran, could not obtain proper housing and lived with his wife and three children in a small dormitory room. His attempts to obtain better housing led to a visit by castigators from a child protection agency, who took his children into custody (see Usov 2011). Against these circumstances, the governmental propaganda promoting multiple children and family values seems hypocritical and contradictory, to say the least.

A new amendment to the Family Code is currently under discussion in the State Duma, and the public is concerned that it will provide a legal foundation to take children into custody merely on the basis of poverty. While at the moment Article 80 stipulates that parents can themselves define how they provide sustenance to their children, a new paragraph suggested would emphasise the necessity of 'expenses to satisfy the physical, intellectual, mental, spiritual and moral needs of the child, including expenses for food, clothing, shoes, other necessities … housing, education, health care, recreation, etc.' (see Sukhanov 2011). There are clearly risks involved in this legislation: authorities from child

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protection services, housing services and the police would have the power to decide whether the conditions in the family comply with the arbitrarily defined standards in the code. The criteria for evaluation could be quite superficial. For example, one social worker interviewed in this study evaluated family conditions in the following way: 'When we come and see that she [the mother] has already cleaned the table, made the beds, curtains are hanging in the window – it indicates an obvious improvement in the family.' Instead of providing support to parents who may be temporarily unemployed or experiencing a difficult life situation, the implementation of the new Family Code would lead to the criminalisation of poverty through the termination of parental rights.

'Is My Family "Neblagopoluchnaia"?!'

Low income parents and single mothers, in particular, often grow frustrated with the social service system because they feel they cannot get adequate assistance or real possibilities to improve their life situations (Iarskaia-Smirnova and Romanov 2004). Between 1990 and 2007 the share of Russians who think that single parents cannot raise children properly significantly dropped from 33 per cent to 14 per cent (Krizis braka 2007), but at the same time negative attitudes towards single parents are still evident in everyday communication and in media discourse. For example, recently popular pop-singer Valeriia suggested in a newspaper article that unfortunate mothers in the city of Saratov be sterilised (Pevitsa Valeriia 2009).

Iuliia, a 34-year-old single mother from Saratov described the prevalence of the category of unfortunate in her everyday life:

> Recently I came to school and said "I'm the mother of Misha R." [her son], and the teacher replied: "Yes, yes, I remember you – you are our unfortunate family!"

Additional pressure is felt by those families that raise children with disabilities or in which the parents themselves have disabilities. Dowling (2005) cites a mother she interviewed in the course of her study:

> Seniors, I mean sixty and older, are openly hostile – "how horrid!" is the most frequent comment I'm used to hearing from them. They are pretty sure that if a child is ill, then the parents are either alcoholics or just bad people (…) I also know one lady who tried to commit suicide after hearing bad jokes about her and her child. (Dowling 2005: 4)

Although many single mothers appreciate the support they receive from social services, they also related stories in the interviews about hostile encounters with service providers. A disabled mother in Saratov, when seeking help for her family

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from the social services, was told: 'Nobody forced you to give birth'. Another woman recalled:

> When I was booking a voucher for a rehab centre, they asked me, "What is your occupation?" I answered, "A senior tutor." "How is it possible that you are a senior tutor?!" I could not stand it and asked them how come I cannot have a higher education and be in such a position if I have a child with Down syndrome? (Olga, Kostroma, 2008)

Such a stigmatising attitude influences parents on a deep emotional level and has devastating social implications for them and their children:

> I got already used to that we are told everywhere that we are an "incomplete" (*nepolnaia*) family. Once [we were] even called "inferior" (*nepolnotsennaia*). Or, say, a lone mother. It's so unpleasant, you immediately feel yourself defective, inferior. (Inna, a single mother of three, 39 years, Saratov, 2007)

This is only compounded by the governmental propaganda portraying the traditional nuclear family as the only legitimate and 'full-value' family model. This propaganda is contradicted in the local social service practices in which families with many children are regarded as problematic. Inna, a 39-year-old single mother of three, described her experiences with social services:

> I came to register at the social services and when I told her [the case worker] that I have three children, she looked at me and said, "Oh what a nightmare", you see? I was so hurt that I even did not continue listening, just got up and walked away. I even wanted to approach her bosses [in order to complain], but that would not have made any sense …

The encounters with social service providers to evaluate the personality and behaviour of single mothers are often traumatic, but sometimes mothers may choose to play the submissive role offered to them in the formal administrative ritual:

> My child was detained last summer after curfew.[5] His bicycle broke and he was not able to bring it back home by ten p.m. Now my son is considered "unfortunate". Once a month a social worker comes to our house, she drinks tea in the kitchen and asks about the "atmosphere" in our family. After that she sighs and complains that in her district there are another 20 "unfortunate" mummies. (Malen'kie liudi 2010)

5 In 2009 regional legislation was passed in St. Petersburg that set a curfew: children may not be in the streets without adults after 10pm. Parents of the offenders are fined.

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Many families do not willingly identify themselves with the category of unfortunate that the social services confer upon them, but try to contest and disassociate from it. Oksana, a 32-year-old single mother from Saratov explained:

> I do not consider myself as somebody exceptional, moreover, unfortunate. A family is a family. What humiliation is this [to be a single mother]? I am not drinking, nor injecting [drugs], nor abusing my child. Am I unfortunate? Some families are complete, but they have something [terrible in the family].

The parents are very much aware of the power of negative public opinion and the prejudices of the social services against them:

> I myself always do everything right, otherwise everybody will start pointing at you. You know, people (…) would immediately start: "Yeah, divorced, (…), not very smart because she was left with children without a husband; everything is bad, children are hooligans, abandoned" … I do not need such [treatment], I will do everything for them [children] even if I have to go up to the President. (Single mother Nadezhda, 30 years, Saratov, 2007)

However, in trying to overcome their stigmatisation and social exclusion, single parents cannot always find support from peer groups. As 30-year-old Antonina from Saratov commented: 'It is bad that we don't have any organisations in which we mothers could talk. To get together, unite … Well, maybe such organisations exist, but I just don't know.' Another single parent, Aleksei, voiced a similar concern:

> I wish there were some interest clubs. I think it would be good if we arranged something like that. I'm sure in the West they have them, single parents come and share their problems, and so on. We have so many incomplete families, but no contact between them. (Aleksei, 29 years, Saratov, 2007)

Some single parents have become active on the Internet, on which they can express their feelings and receive feedback. The following comments on a website discussion board reveal the anxiety with which the category of unfortunate family is experienced:

> Recently I heard in a conversation with one woman [the following sentence]: "Ivanov's family is unfortunate. The parents are divorced, and the mum is raising the kid alone". I've been seriously thinking about it … I myself bring up my child without a husband and I'm capable of providing for my child and can afford for her to study in a good school. We have three such incomplete families in her class. Is it possible that they think and speak about us that way, that we are an unfortunate family?! Is it possible that it would affect my daughter? (Post by 'Belaia, no ne pushistaia', 22 October 2010)

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> I cannot understand why those families with limited financial means are called unfortunate. (…) In 1992–96 my own family could have also been called unfortunate. Because military staff were not regularly paid [their salaries] and our mum fed us boiled rice for eleven months, and for four years I was wearing only one sweater and one skirt in school. (Post by 'Lucy-Soprano', 22 October 2010)

Conclusion

This chapter has analysed how the discursive categorisation of families as 'unfortunate' functions as a key symbolic tool to construct class hierarchy with tangible real-life consequences. This categorisation is used to establish a new government of social insecurity and to mobilise a network of police, doctors and social workers aimed at controlling the conduct of women and men caught in the turbulence of economic instability (Wacquant 2009). The ideal, 'healthy' nuclear family is juxtaposed with the 'unfortunate' family, which consists of one parent families and families with many children. They are frequently regarded as immoral and dangerous for society both in popular discourse and amongst social service providers. Families labelled unfortunate are caught in a grip of classed assumptions about parenting and family. The interviews reveal that the families find these assumptions humiliating and unfair, but have limited opportunities to resist them. In their everyday practices, social service providers squeeze complex human realities into compact pre-existing classificatory schemes, categorising clients into deserving and non-deserving. A widespread understanding of poverty shared by many social workers and neoliberal politicians relies on the ideology of placing the responsibility for problems originating from social structures on the individual.

However, opportunities to cope with the consequences of the transition to a market economy are spatially structured. Geographical location plays a key role in the making of class inequalities in Russia. Those living in big cities closer to the benefits reaped from economic growth are advantageously positioned in relation to those living in small towns and settlements with no chance of finding a well-paid job (or any job for that matter) or access to higher education or to the Internet. The voices of those living on the margins of society are extremely rarely present in public discourses, and the existing social policy practices tend to act in ways that cement them into their marginalised position.

The current family discourses in Russia are deeply contradictory. On the one hand, families with many children are regarded as a desirable solution to the 'demographic crisis', but on the other hand, they are deeply stigmatised as unfortunate in the social service system. This contradiction implies that it is those 'right kind of people' – people with a middle class socio-economic and cultural position and with the 'right' ethno-national identity – that are supposed to have more children, while having many children is undesirable and problematic in

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families in the lower tier of the class hierarchy. Thus class, pro-natalism and nationalism all come together in a common symbolic framework and discursively construct certain families and children as 'unfortunate' and thus undesirable for the state.

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