

# SOCIO-HUMANITARIAN RESEARCH

DOI: 10.15838/sa.2024.1.41.7

UDC 316.454.52 | LBC 60.54

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## THE ROLE OF SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT IN READING PRACTICES OF MODERN RUSSIAN STUDENTS



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*The aim of the research is to study the role of social environment in the formation of reading practices of modern Russian students. The empirical basis was the data of sociological research in the form of a questionnaire survey, carried out by the Interuniversity Research Group in 2022. Reading through the implementation of accompanying and socializing functions occupies a special place in the processes of self-development of personality, cultural reproduction. Modern reading trends, characterized by diversification, ambivalence of attitudes to reading, digitalization, genre diversity, actualize the need for interdisciplinary and narrow disciplinary study of the influence of parents and friends on students' reading practices. The results of the study indicate that the vast majority of respondents had family reading practices in childhood. It was found that there is no direct correlation between the indicators of reading together with parents in childhood and satisfaction with the amount of reading in adulthood.*

*However, family reading stimulates more reading or brings those who realize that they read little, but it is enough for them into the group. It is noted that students who have a positive perception of family reading practices prefer printed books, have a home library, discuss novelties with close people, often choose fiction as a leisure activity, and in general have a traditional view of reading practices in the life of modern students. It is noted that more than half of the respondents do not discuss issues related to reading practices with their friends. At the same time, almost one in five students often discusses book topics with their peers. These young people read a lot and enjoy reading, prefer to familiarize themselves with the full text of a work in print, and choose traditional formats of book search strategies. The article presents an overview of theoretical and methodological approaches to the study of reading practices, the experiences of sociological research, and gives recommendations for further theoretical and practical study.*

*Reading practices, reading, social environment, parents, family (shared) reading, friends, youth, students.*

### **Introduction**

Reading practices are the types of specialized and purposefully mastered practices necessary for the successful functioning of an individual in society. Reading implements the leading socializing and accompanying functions in the process of life activity of an individual: educational, leisure and recreational, etc. It is the degree of development of reading practices that determines the effectiveness of personality formation. Reading practices directly affect cultural reproduction. The level of reading in society (the share of those who read and the share of those who actively read) and the literacy of the population are closely related: literacy is necessary for reading, and reading develops literacy, primarily the functional one.

Modernity defines new characteristics of the formation and development of reading practices of avant-garde youth as a socio-demographic group – university students: diversification, multichannel reading (Barinov, Petrova, 2016; Askarova et al., 2023; Murashova, 2023); antinomianism of reflection of reading activity, ambivalence of attitude toward reading, manifested in the gap between the declared, recognized and realized value of reading (Askarova et al., 2023; Vikhрева, 2023); the formation of “a new, search-and-reference type of work with information, the subjectivity of reading behavior ... as the ability to independently determine the trajectory of their own reading, to transform traditional reading practices into new communicative

formats” (Vikhрева, 2023); the change in recent years of the dominance of mass literature and a limited number of genres “expressed genre diversity of works of both mass and elite literature” (Murashova, 2023); the formation of digital inequality lines, which are determined by the level of inclusion activity in media communications, the ability to generate creative content, and passivity in relation to reading content online (Askarova et al., 2023).

Not all representatives of modern students are able to creatively process the read information, as well as independently select “useful” and “harmful” literature. In this context, it seems relevant to consider the influence of social environment on the formation of reading strategies of modern students. By social environment we will understand a set of social ties between a subject and other people, forming a relatively integral and stable socio-psychological community (Zlokazov et al., 2022). The social environment of an individual is diverse, its social networks are formed by agents of both indirect and direct influence, both normative-compliant and deviant behavior. Within the framework of the article we focus on that part of the social environment, which has traditionally been very important for the formation of an individual’s personality – parents and friends, i.e. actors of the highest level of social ties – interpersonal relations.

The study of the influence of parents and friends on the reading practices of students in the scientific discourse is fixed in the context of the

hierarchy of actors in the choice of information sources, works of fiction. Thus, according to the results of empirical studies, the role of interpersonal communication agents is usually inferior to the role of Internet venues, although it has been increasing recently (Kargapolova et al., 2022). In the hierarchy of information sources among the actors of social environment among students, recommendations of friends are in the first place (Pimenova, Khakimova, 2018; Kargapolova et al., 2022). That is, the integration of an individual into the community of reading peers is important in modern society. Next are teachers, and parents, relatives, according to some studies, are not informants for modern students about what to read, to the same extent as Internet sites and friends, probably “due to the generational difference, which over time increasingly manifests itself, because of the insignificant amount of free time spent together. Such a distribution of agents of influence indicates a change of authority among students and the increasing role of the Internet in the lives of today’s youth. Thus, book Internet bloggers, peers and friends act as relayers of information about interesting books, communities of interest in social networks become reference groups and sources of information for student youth” (Pimenova, Khakimova, 2018).

In scientific discourse, the influence of parents on the formation of children’s reading practices is studied through the prism of the concept of “family (shared) reading”, which can be understood as literature of interest to all members of the family or a part of it (Petasheva, 2020), or a complex set of sociocultural practices including the following variants: a) an activity in which a child focuses on a text together with another person (usually an adult) for an extended period of time; b) discussion of the reading by the whole family or a part of it; c) reading aloud to members of the family; d) reading aloud to their children. Family reading is also diverse in the ways in which it is mediated, where, for example, parents explicitly communicate the value of reading in everyday conversations; actively listen to their children read and ask questions

about reading comprehension; create a home environment conducive to prolonged reading; encourage reader autonomy; and incorporate reading practices into daily life (Capotosto et al., 2017). Some researchers have noted that family reading practices may differ depending on whether texts are presented in paper or electronic media (Lauricella et al., 2014). Although, other work suggests that almost all examples of shared reading were based on the use of print media (Boyett, 2021).

Family reading is considered in interdisciplinary scientific discourse (sociology, linguistics, psychology, but most often pedagogy) in three aspects.

1. In the zone of research attention is a child – a preschooler or a schoolchild (most often of primary school age). Family reading in this context is positioned as a basis for harmonization of the child’s personality, development of his/her spiritual, moral and socio-cultural values, personal growth; a mechanism for mastering cultural values, formation of reading literacy and culture, a basis for information security of children, etc. (Naumova, 2017; Urazova, Vakhidova, 2018; Chernikova, 2018; Konovalova, 2019; Davydova, Slobodsky, 2021).

2. The research discourse emphasizes not only the child as an object of pedagogical influence, but also the whole family. Therefore, family reading is studied as an element of responsible parenthood, family traditions, a mechanism of transition from edifying to dialogical, positive model of communication between parents and children, a source of spiritual enrichment of the family (Adodina, 2018; Levy, Hall, 2021), its cohesion (Neshpor, 2021; Sharina, 2022), intergenerational continuity (Dubyshkina, 2019).

3. The role of family reading in the context of the functioning of the entire social system (“reading mom – reading country”) has been noted (Fil’, Trifonova, 2019), namely its importance as a helping sociocultural practice (Podkladova et al., 2017; Gorenintseva et al., 2019); a huge role in preserving socio- and ethno-cultural identity (Shastina et al., 2018a; Shastina et al., 2018b; Yengalycheva, 2023); formation of a person’s value attitude to the norms of the Russian language as a

basis for the safety of a linguistic personality (Emelyanova, 2016).

The researchers note that the tradition of family reading is gradually lost as an individual grows older (Szenczi et al., 2023). Thus, empirically, there is a steady decrease in the frequency of reading support activities by parents in high school and age differences in a number of factors affecting it, which leads to the identification of weak correlations between the activities of parents to support reading and the motivation of students to read in the studied classes (Szenczi et al., 2023). On the one hand, the maturation of an individual determines his/her independence in choosing the motivation for learning and reading. On the other hand, a client-oriented model of education can lead to a situation of failure of the retransmission of reading practices by schools and universities. And it is the family that becomes the main channel for the formation of reading practices, which leads to the conclusion that it is necessary to preserve the traditions of family reading as a person grows up. The formation of reading practices and habits through intergenerational reading is becoming particularly relevant due to the shifting priorities of modern youth. Even in conditions of popularization of the phenomenon of self-education, more and more young people choose not literature, which traditionally acts as a source of information and knowledge, but opinion leaders and “couch experts” of the “mobile” online network as a source of developing content. It is an undeniable fact that in the past, through reading, the classical model of interaction and education was implemented, and through intergenerational communication, a system of values and ideals was formed among young people. Therefore, the influence of the older generation (represented not only by family members, but also by teachers) must be supported from the position of preserving the authority of experienced mentors who sincerely worry about the life of a young individual, who are extremely difficult to find in the vastness of social networks.

Family reading loses its importance not only as an individual grows up, but also between

generations. Thus, according to a 2014 study by the Public Opinion Foundation, 76% of respondents read books by their moms, dads, and grandmothers as children, but only 22% of respondents read to their children themselves (Pimenova, Khakimova, 2018). Parents have a gap between declared and realized activities to form children’s reading practices. “Parents knew that reading with pleasure is important for the overall behavioral development of their children. However, less than half of them took any significant action to instill reading habits in their children. Children’s excessive use of the Internet, lack of time, children’s disinterest in reading and parents’ lack of awareness are the major problems in building a reading culture” (Desale, Kumbnar, 2022).

According to the results of a specific sociological study, more than 80% of the surveyed students recognize the importance of family reading in the upbringing of children. About half of the respondents understand family reading as a discussion of what the whole family has read. It should be noted that in the list of recommendations proposed by students for family reading, foreign literature prevails over domestic literature. At the same time, about half of the respondents found it difficult or refused to suggest specific works of fiction for family reading, which “indicates either the absence of significant books in their lives or the difficulty in choosing specific works from what they have read” (Shastina et al., 2018).

Researchers note that reading habits and attitudes of children and youth are predetermined at a very early age. The most important influencing factors are an active home literacy environment with access to books and learning materials at an early age; the practice of reading aloud from infancy; and the kindergarten and school environment. All adults involved in children’s lives – parents, relatives, teachers, librarians, social media influencers – become role models with strong influence (Dimitrova, 2021). Research on literacy development increasingly clarifies the central role of oral language in long-term literacy development, and longitudinal studies reveal continuities between language abilities

in preschool and later reading. The language competencies on which literacy is based begin to emerge as soon as children begin to acquire language; thus, the period between birth and age three is important for later literacy. Constant book reading has the potential to create interactive contexts that promote language development. Researchers, pediatricians, and librarians are drawing attention to the potential of interventions to encourage parents to read with their children (Dickinson et al., 2012).

### **Research methodology**

The analysis of scientific literature shows that the subject area of our research in the context of studying students as an empirical object is presented in a fragmentary way. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to study the role of social environment in the formation of reading practices of modern Russian students. For this purpose we use some results of the author's sociological research, developed by E.V. Kargapolova, Doctor of Sciences (Sociology), Professor of the Department of Political Analysis and Socio-Psychological Processes of the Plekhanov Russian University of Economics, with the participation of Y.A. Davydova, Candidate of Sciences (History), Associate Professor of the Department of Political Analysis and Socio-Psychological Processes of the Plekhanov Russian University of Economics, and implemented by interuniversity research groups in three stages (the first stage took place in February 2016 among the students of Astrakhan universities). The focus of this empirical study is the reading practices of fiction, which, in our opinion, constitute the core of reading culture. This is especially true for Russian society where deep logocentricity is based on the privileged position of the literary Word at least since the times of Alexander Pushkin (Hutchings, 2004).

The method of primary data collection was questionnaire survey. The sample is targeted, the quota characteristic is gender (49% of boys and 51% of girls). Among the participants of the study there were students of different profiles of professional training. The study was of a probing nature, the task of sample

representation was not set, so the operational results obtained by us can be applied only to a targeted sample of surveyed students or used as reference data. However, the total number of surveyed students allows us to make reasonable assumptions and general conclusions. The article will present the results of the third wave of the study, during which the respondents were asked questions for the first time, allowing us to draw certain conclusions about the role of social environment in the formation of the respondents' reading practices.

### **Results of the research**

In this context, it is important to study how family reading in childhood affects the individual's reading practices in their youth. So, 75% of respondents answered the question "Did your parents read books to you as a child?" they answered "Yes, they did, and I liked it", only 6% noted that their parents read to them, but it was not a pleasure, 11% chose the answer "No, they did not read to me", 7% of respondents found it difficult to answer. Thus, the vast majority of the surveyed parents read in childhood, and this caused them positive emotions. It is worth noting that there are more girls among them than boys (79% vs 71%). But at the same time, there is no statistically significant difference in the cities participating in the survey, that is, the intensity of family reading practices in childhood among students studying at both metropolitan universities in Moscow and in regional-peripheral Astrakhan is the same. It is also interesting that in the group of those to whom parents read in childhood, there are statistically significantly fewer respondents with chronic diseases than in the array of respondents as a whole. According to the assessment of the financial situation of the parent family, there are more people in this group who chose the answer options "money is hardly enough even for food" and "money is enough for everything except buying real estate (apartments or cottages)", that is the groups of "poor" and "well-off". Interestingly, students who usually overestimate the self-esteem of the social stratum, in this case, there is a complete correspondence between the material

assessment of the family position and the self-assessment of belonging to the social stratum, in this group there are more those who consider themselves to be the lower stratum and the above-average stratum.

It is interesting to analyze how family reading with parents, which caused positive emotions in childhood, affects reading practices, and the assessment of the volume of respondents' own reading during adult, student life. We have already noted that according to the results of our study, when assessing the volume of their own reading, the largest group (about half) of respondents believes that they read little and would like to read more, about one in five notes that they read little, but enough for themselves. Approximately 15% read a lot or not at all (Kargapolova et al., 2022). On the one hand, this indicates a decline in the value and authority of reading as a practice. Students, even realizing the lack of reading against the background of generally accepted norms, are content with their minimum, which is also a negative trend. On the other hand, there is a significant potential for interest in reading among those who want to read more. The analysis of the conjugacy tables showed that in the group of those to whom parents read in childhood and they liked it, there are no longer those who read a lot, but those who believe that they read little, but enough for themselves, as well as representatives of the largest group of respondents, that is, those who read little, but who would like to read more. Thus, family reading in childhood with parents does not have a direct effect on satisfaction with the volume of reading and does not correlate with the group of the most active readers, but stimulates reading more or leads to a group of those who understand that they read little, but this is enough. That is, the influence of family reading manifests itself more as indirect than as direct, but stimulating reading through repetition of practices that in childhood, the period of non-reflexive socialization, caused positive emotions. There are also more people in this group who read five to ten books a year, that is, they choose the option not with the minimum number of books ("one to five books

per year"), but also not the maximum ("ten to thirty books per year" and "more than thirty books per year"). Among the reading goals in this group, the options "to relieve stress" and "to prepare for study sessions" significantly prevail.

The direct influence of family reading is manifested in determining the following characteristics of the reading groups. So, among the respondents to whom parents read in childhood and liked it, there are more readers in order to occupy their free time, as well as those who like to read and read with pleasure; fewer of those who read out of necessity and do not read at all. The significant role of family reading traditions is also evident when answering the question "Where do you get works of fiction to read?" So, in the group of respondents to whom parents read in childhood, more often than in other groups, they chose the answer option "there is a rich library at home", as well as "I borrow books from friends, relatives". It is also expected that representatives of this group are also more likely to learn about novelties of works of fiction from a significant social environment – relatives, friends and teachers, than from the mass media, including the Internet, which, recall, occupies the first place in the hierarchy of choosing information sources. Representatives of the group, to whom parents read in childhood, prefer the full text on paper to the full text on electronic media, excerpts from the text in the anthology, short content, film and television adaptations, theater productions, audiobooks. Statistically significant preferences of this group in relation to genres of fiction are highlighted, namely, they are more interested in detective stories, psychological and romance novels, comedies, and less often in plays.

When answering the block of questions about the value-reflexive attitude to the book, representatives of the group to whom parents read in childhood "rather disagree" with the fact that the book is "a breath of hope" in a rapidly changing world. Apparently, the book in the minds of our respondents is firmly connected with the image of stability, positive joint pastime with parents and is not associated

with the anxious, unstable world of the present. Probably, through family reading the parental family realized the protective-adaptive function and still retains social significance, which is manifested in the preference of the social environment in reading strategies of book selection and in the attitude to the social world, which with a loving, reading parent in childhood is perceived as relatively stable, safe in youth. There is no need to escape into the world of the book text, realizing escapist sentiments.

According to S. Kurschus, a paper book is not just a technical means of information storage, it fulfills an important role in the formation of identity, national identity (Kurschus, 2015). It is noteworthy that in the group of those who were read to by their parents as children, there are more people who do not agree that the e-book will replace the paper book, i.e. traditional formats of reading practices are preferred to innovative ones, again, probably due to the authority of parents formed at the stage of unreflective socialization. It is also interesting that there are more of them who fully agree that the library is no longer a necessity, but there are also more who disagree that the home library is now no longer a necessity. Thus, the public library is less meaningful to those who were read to as children by their parents than the home library, which correlates with a meaningful social environment in the form of parents. It is also interesting that representatives of this group more often find it difficult to reflect on the expression "In the modern world, books are the domain of the elite". Probably, to those who were read to in childhood, reading practices seem to be an ordinary part of everyday life, without pretensions to exclusivity and elitism.

Representatives of this group to a greater extent support quotes-expressions related to the traditional understanding of the functions and formats of reading, such as: "You can download all the books to the iPad, but the smell of the book is lost, and it is necessary that the pages rustle, not the mouse click" by N. Mikhalkov; "Those who read books will always control those who watch TV" by K. Lagerfeld; "Books are mirrors: if a fool looks into it, one

cannot expect a genius to emerge" by J. Rowling; "People have started throwing away books. This country has not long left" by G. Marquez. Thus, family reading influences the preference for paper books, the awareness of the necessity of understanding reading in the formation of personality, the importance of books in the preservation and progress of the social system.

Meanwhile, the group who were read to as children by their parents are less supportive of quotes that postulate new formats in the author-book-reader system, such as: "In the old days, books were written by writers and read by readers. Now books are written by readers and read by no one" by O. Wilde. They also agree to a lesser extent with the expression "Books are such things with a lot of text, like a VKontakte feed, but they make sense sometimes" by B. Vedensky, in which the author, far from being harmless, in our opinion, tries to interpret a book, a printed text by means of often reduced vocabulary ("a book is a THING") of hypertext formats of social networks, to "take apart" the structure of the text by likening it to the chaos, meaninglessness of hypertext.

Also, to study the influence of the social environment on students' reading practices, we analyzed the responses of respondents to the question "Do you discuss works of fiction with your friends?". Thus, most of the respondents do not discuss works of fiction with their friends. The most popular answer among all respondents is "Yes, but rarely". It was chosen by 60% of the respondents, which may indicate the potential of students' interest in discussing literature, but a lack of resources and opportunities for its implementation. A small (17%) group of respondents actively discusses what they have read with friends, among whom, as expected, there are more girls than boys (20% vs 14). If family reading was practiced equally among students of Astrakhan and Moscow, then the proportion of those actively discussing works of fiction with friends in Moscow is almost twice as large as in Astrakhan (21% vs 11). Interestingly, those who have assessed their families' financial situation as "poverty" most often discuss books with friends. This did not completely coincide with the self-

assessment of belonging to the social stratum, since those who discuss books with friends the most identified themselves with the lower and higher stratum, and the layers above average, average and below average rarely discuss books. As we can see, the discrepancy here refers to the highest level of self-assessment and assessment of the financial situation; 17% of respondents never discuss works with their friends, among them there are more boys than girls (22% vs 12); 6% of respondents discuss only “fashionable” literature.

Discussion of books read with friends is more directly related to the categories of readers than in the case of reading books by parents in childhood. Thus, the most discussants are in the group of reading lovers, i.e. those who read a lot and with pleasure. Among those who discuss books with friends, those who read works of fiction when they have no other way to spend their free time are seldom the most numerous. Expectedly, those who do not discuss books are most likely to be among those who do not read them. Practices of discussing what they read are also directly related to self-assessed reading volume. Thus, those who discuss books the most are those who, by self-assessment, read a lot. Those who discuss books rarely, predominate in the following self-assessment groups, “I read little, but enough for myself”, “I read little, I would like more” and “I read little”. Recall that those who were read to as children by their parents read five to ten books a year. Those who discuss books with friends read more than thirty books a year. Thus, the frequency of discussion is also in direct correlation with the amount of reading.

Those who discuss what they read with friends more often turn to home and public libraries, friends and relatives, and buy books than to the Internet, i.e. they prefer traditional formats of reading strategies of book search. Information about book novelties is more preferable for them from relatives and friends and from newspapers and magazines than from internet sources and television. Respondents who discuss books with friends infrequently are less likely to consult their home library, and they are more likely to learn

about novelties from friends and teachers than from the librarian.

Representatives of the group of respondents, to whom parents read in childhood, clearly preferred the full text of the work on paper, and in the group of those who discuss what they read with friends, the preferences were divided between the full text of the work on paper and the play in the theater. It is also noteworthy that those who discuss only trendy literary novelties with friends or discuss works of fiction with friends rarely have a clear preference for excerpts from the textbook.

Respondents who discuss books with friends often, read “thick” novels-epics, plays (and then watch performances in the theater, as we noted above), works of classical literature, memoirs, psychological and historical novels, humorous literature, poetry, folklore, fanfics, but are less fond of action movies. Those who rarely discuss works of fiction with friends prefer works of literary classics, adventure and humorous literature, historical and love novels, fantasy, plays, action movies, thrillers, folklore. This group is less interested in epic novels, memoirs, humorous literature, fanfics.

Those who discuss books with their friends frequently are more likely to agree that books are a source of spiritual development, a privilege of the elite, a “breath of hope” in a rapidly changing world, and that the art of reading should be taught. But the public library is more important for them than for students who were read to as children by their parents, because they disagree to a greater extent with the fact that the library is no longer a necessity. Representatives of the two given groups are statistically significantly more likely to agree with quotes-expressions “Wherever there is arable land, wherever there is a human mind, there must be a book” by V. Hugo; “Those who read books will always control those who watch TV” by K. Lagerfeld; “People have started throwing away books. This country does not have long left” by G. Marquez.

The group of discussants rarely agrees to a greater extent with the expressions “In the old days, books were written by writers and read by readers. Now books are written by readers

and read by no one” by O. Wilde; “There are worse crimes than burning books. For example, not reading them” by R. Bradbury; “The main disadvantage of new books is that they prevent us from reading old ones” by J. Joubert; “Books are things with a lot of text, like a VKontakte feed, but they make sense sometimes” by B. Vedensky; while the first group disagrees with the last two statements to a greater extent.

### Conclusion

Summarizing the results of the analysis, we can note the following.

The results of our empirical study revealed a significant role of guided practices channeled by parents at the stage of non-reflective socialization (in childhood) on the reading practices of young respondents – university students in Moscow and Astrakhan. Directly, this influence can be traced in the preference for traditional, classical formats and functions of reading – full text, paper books, in the awareness of the necessity of understanding reading in the formation of personality, the importance of books in the development of society. Indirectly, reading by parents in childhood stimulates young respondents to read more.

Despite the fact that friends are in second place after Internet sites in the hierarchy of sources of choosing works of fiction, only a quarter of respondents often discuss what they have read with friends, while the majority of respondents rarely do so. Accordingly, we can say that the transfer of reading experience among representatives of modern Russian students is poorly developed. And although this practice has not completely disappeared, for the largest part of respondents the topic

of reading is very rarely touched upon in the process of interpersonal communication with peers. Students rarely discuss what they have read with their friends and even more rarely can come to new conclusions that are formed in the process of discussion with representatives of identical generational views. Perhaps the development of a network of youth reading clubs, which will not only allow for an open dialog about literature and reading as a practice, but also sponsor reading interest among non-reading and low-reading students, will help fill this gap. All the more so because the results of our study revealed a direct correlation between discussion with friends about reading and the activity of reading practices, preference for traditional reading formats.

Further interdisciplinary research should be carried out with regard to the factors that clarify the difference in the role of social environment in the formation of reading practices of boys and girls. For example, if boys have been read to less and discuss less about what they read, what is it related to: gender specifics of physiological development, family composition, genre preferences and their availability within the family (in childhood, modern children did not have many books on “boyish” topics, for example, or no one popularized them), gender stereotypes (“let him play ball and computer games rather than read”)?

In general, in our opinion, it is necessary to conduct further sociological analysis of the phenomena identified in the presented research, including on the basis of monitoring, which allows differentiating young people by the degree of influence of various agents of socialization on reading practices.

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