SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

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EXPERIENCE OF USING THE SEMANTIC DIFFERENTIAL METHOD FOR DIAGNOSTICS OF MARITAL COHESION IN FAMILIES WITH DIFFERENT NUMBER OF CHILDREN

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Large families are currently the basis and main potential for overcoming the demographic crisis and increasing the birth rate. It is in these families that preserve the values of the family-child lifestyle, and the population reproduction occurs in them too. The basis of any family is a married couple, so studying the interaction of spouses in large families is an important task for constructing effective demographic policy measures. In this work, the semantic differential method is used to study the semantics of sociocultural family roles in married couples with different number of children. Based on an analysis of the responses of 48 married couples, it was revealed that spouses from large families are significantly more likely than spouses from small families to form stable, cohesive relationships, they are characterized

by higher assessments of their own partners, a greater manifestation of mutual love, expressed, among others, in the recognition of a partner as corresponding to the main sociocultural roles characteristic of a married couple (husband/wife, mother/father, man/woman). The identified differences are largely due to the position and assessments of wives, who demonstrate significant differences in the semantic field from wives from small families. The results obtained can be used as the basis for the information part of demographic policy aimed at creating an attractive image of a large family. This image should include an idea of the family core - a married couple, in which respect and high assessments of each other prevail, where the interests of the family WE and the married YOU are often more important than the interests of the individual ME.

Marital relationships, semantic differential, family-child lifestyle, marital stability, large families.

Introduction

According to representatives of scientific school of familistic pronatalism, there is a massive rejection of not only large and medium families but also of families with two children in the modern world (Sinelnikov et al., 2023). A large share in structure of Russian population is made up of families with one child (according to All-Russian Population Census 2020, more than half (55.2%) of all families with children under 18 years have only one child[1]), which certainly leads to depopulation and provokes a predominance of the older generation over younger in demographic structure (Rostovskaya, Zolotareva, 2022). The trinity "marriage – parenthood – kinship" is weakening in modern society due to replacing family-centrism with egocentrism or self-orientation. Research shows a general gradual weakening of population commitment to traditional family values amid significant polarization of opinions both regionally and socio-demographically. Despite continued close and emotional generational contacts in Russian families (Sudin et al., 2018) and significant inclusion of older generation in process of raising children (Bagirova, Yan, 2023), analysis of child-parent interaction shows that either care practices or entertainment (Korolenko, 2021; Drobysheva, Voitenko, 2022), while productive family activities are less common and are more associated with housekeeping. However, it should be noted that described trends are less typical for large families, which more often remain committed to values of a family-child lifestyle.

The topic of parenthood with many children is generally not very popular among foreign authors and existing works are focused on three main topics. First, demographic aspects of large families are studied: prevalence, dynamics, impact on fertility rates and population reproduction (Frejka et al., 2008); second, financial situation of families with three or more children, the risk of poverty and general social well-being are studied, along with discussion of measures to support large families (Köppe et al., 2014); third, direction of studying large families as a factor in intellectual development and health of children is highlighted (Lehmann et al., 2018).

Large families are currently the most reproductively active part of population. Large family contains many interactions due to a large number of family members, and therefore it is a system of complex functioning. "Large family has a specific system of value orientations, needs, laws and rules of functioning; it is generally characterized by special image and way of life" (Ananyeva, 2015, p. 101). This system is characterized by high frequency and diversity of intrafamily interactions, presence of special features of lifestyle and value orientations of its members. Large family and family in general is of great value for modern society as new generations are raised in it. In this regard, it seems relevant to study this group in comparison with small family that currently prevails in Russia.

Each family develops a special structure of relationships depending on the number of its

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[1] All-Russian Population Census 2020, 8. Number and composition of households. Available at: https://rosstat.gov.ru/vpn/2020/Tom8_Chislo_i_sostav_domohozyajstv

members and characteristics of interpersonal, role-based interaction between members. The most complete set of intrafamily roles will be present in large family. According to typology of families based on number of children born, a family consisting of five or more children will be considered large. It is necessary to distinguish scientific typology from criteria for large families that are used in Russian legislation, since its main goal is to correctly determine target audience for social policy measures. In a family with five or more children, if children of different sexes are born in it, the most complete role structure will be reflected: roles of father, mother, husband, wife, son, daughter, sons, daughters, brother, sister, brothers and sisters are presented. Families with large number of children are characterized by a high degree of intrafamily interaction. In three-child family number of contacts reaches 26 due to complication of family structure and communication between parents and children. In family with four children number of interactions increases to 57. As number of children in family increases, number of interactions will also increase. Communication in large family can be characterized as enriched due to pluralism of role interaction.

It should be noted that recently there have been certain changes in structure of modern family: size of family and number of children in it have decreased, importance of "elder brother and sister" roles has decreased and roles of various family members have become less differentiated. In one-child family due to lack of representation of most of these roles sociocultural communication occurs in the most simplified form. Number of interactions in such a family is 4: interpersonal communication between spouses, interaction with child of each parent separately, as well as parent-child contact. Members of such a family need to direct more efforts into the sphere of enriching family communication and ensuring high-quality interpersonal communication between family members, which may also affect its stability [2].

Another important factor in stability of marriage and family in general is spouses' ap-propriate understanding of family sociocultural roles that they assign within family life. Many studies show that closeness of partners' views about marital roles and responsibilities play an important role in marital satisfaction (Andreeva, 2009; Lupenko, Stanoeva, 2022) and correspondence of spouses' behavior with ideas about their marriage partner can serve as a factor in increasing possibility of having the second child (Goldscheider et al., 2013).

Most important factors in stability of intrafamily relationships include psychological compatibility of spouses. Family behavior represents one of the most private circumstances of human life. Taking into account specifics of family behavior phenomenon, when resorting to research of this part of human life, it is necessary to turn to measuring means that will not contribute to forming stereotypical and standard answers.

One of methodological means for studying interpersonal relationships in families, in married couples particularly, is semantic differential technique. Semantic differential (SD) method was developed by Charles Osgood in 1952 (Osgood et al., 1957). The classic task of this method is construction of semantic space through scaling procedures for various types of concepts. Within the framework of SD, measured objects are assessed according to a number of bipolar gradual scales, poles of which are specified using verbal antonyms. Osgood used scales formed by the most high-frequency (evaluative) antonym adjectives. In factor analysis, the researcher identified following factors: "strength", "assessment" and "activity". In interpretation of the methodology discussed in this work assessment is carried out on six scales of antonyms: "active – passive", "light – dark", "simple – complex", "warm – cold", "strong – weak", "hard – soft".

Semantic differential has a wide range of applications in various fields of psychology and sociology due to the fact that it simultaneously combines strengths of both qualitative and quantitative methods. Since the last century, interest in SD has been growing in scientific community; in works of representatives of

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[2] Antonov A.I. (2018). Microsociology of the family. Moscow: INFRA-M.

various sciences attempts have been made to theoretically comprehend and search for application areas for the method. The widest range of applications of semantic differential lies in humanities. Works of foreign researchers touched upon stability of factor structure of semantic space, application of the method in sociometry and studied perception features of objects from different spheres of human activity (Heise, 1969; Ploder, Eder, 2015). Today SD method is used in many disciplines, such as psychology (Alexandrova, Dermanova, 2018), sociology (Yanitsky, 2012; Tuarmensky et al., 2022), linguistics (Novikov, Novikova, 2011), marketing research (Pavlov, 2012) and other related disciplines (Shields, 2007). The most interesting area for us from a research point of view is family counseling, which involves comparative analysis of assessments and self-assessments of household members, as well as study of group cohesion and discordance[3].

In the second half of the twentieths century, the technique was modified: it was proposed to use it to study mutual ideas of spouses about effectiveness of their fulfillment of intrafamily roles (Antonov, 1975). Since 1976, SD has been used to study various aspects of family life, from families with different types of children to analysis of marital and family value orientations. Researches from Lomonosov Moscow State University conducted more than 15 studies where set of questions with semantic differential method was used (Antonov et al., 2020; Antonov et al., 2022). In foreign research there are studies with semantic differential method to assess marital relationships (Mattson et al., 2013) and illustrate multidimensionality of marital satisfaction concept.

Our work shows application of semantic differential to family phenomena, in particular to marriage. Marital unity is the most important factor in stability of marital relationships and family keeping. In terms of SD methodology, coordination of all roles is result of successful and appropriate interaction in conflict situations. Each family member should be aware of their role and have a complete understanding of it. In role interaction it is extremely important

to take into account behavior expected from others in accordance with a specific role, since minimizing conflicts in family is possible only in situation where individual and other family members fully understand their role (Obozov, Timoshenko, 2008; Sychev, 2016). In addition, role interaction must be flexible, allowing adaptation to changing conditions of surrounding world and cope with stressful situations. Role interaction of family members is formed throughout family life cycle.

At the initial stages of family life, with birth of the first child, spouses learn to combine gender and parental roles. Idea of other roles, for example conventional ones, is formed at later stages of family socialization (Lyalikova, 2019). Complementarity of all family roles helps to improve role compatibility of spouses, which has a positive impact on forming cohesion and stability of family system, promotes its self-keeping and minimizes risks of conflict situations. Cohesion is the unity of mutual understanding, consistency of feelings and roles of spouses, empathy and sympathy.

Use of semantic differential to analyze performance of various family roles by spouses is based on the following logic: in socialization process each partner forms a certain idea of a particular family role and identifies aspects of role behavior that are important for them. The technique records how satisfied each spouse is with the other's performance of a certain role. This approach makes it possible to detect similarities in partners' individual ideas about each other's roles, as well as draw attention to their differences.

Families with few children and large families represent two systems that differ from each other, both in terms of intrafamily interactions and in value-orientation terms (Emelyanov et al., 2011) and therefore there is research interest in their comparative analysis. Therefore, this research aims to compare characteristics of internal cohesion and assessments of sociocultural roles in married couples depending on number of children. Theoretical basis for research of intrafamily interactions and family roles is the theory

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[3] Serkin V.P. (2008). Methods of psychology of subjective semantics and psychosemantics. Moscow: Pchela.

of symbolic interactionism, since within the framework of marital interaction reaction is not caused by direct behavior of marriage partner but is based on the meaning that spouses attach to such actions. Interaction of marriage partners in family is mediated by use of symbols, their interpretation and giving meaning to actions of the other. Object of research is small and large families. Subject of research mutual perception of spouses of each other in the context of fulfilling the main family roles. It is hypothesized that there are significant differences in the nature of marital relationships, their stability, cohesion of spouses, as well as desire for mutual concessions, mutual altruism and partly even partner idealization in small and large families.

Materials and methods

As a part of the study "Social construction of life strategies of families with different numbers: socio-demographic studies" research team of Moscow State University is working to study the relationships stability between spouses in families with three or more children using qualitative methodology (socio-psychological techniques and biographical interview method). Results presented in this paper were obtained as a part of a study that was an addition to a series of biographical interviews devoted to biographical family history of respondents. Interviews were conducted in the third and the fourth quarters of 2023 among respondents with different experiences of childhood in reproductive and orientation families. Study participants were families with at least one child, half of them had many children. For families where there is only one child or two children, a restriction was introduced on the age of spouse of at least forty years, since for these families new births are unlikely and there will most likely not be a transition to having many children. As part of study, each spouse was also asked to fill out a series of socio-psychological questionnaires aimed at assessing cohesion and closeness of family members, flexibility of family rules, satisfaction with marital relationships and spouses' assessment of sociocultural roles. All

tests were completed by each spouse separately, which made it possible to carry out various comparisons of answers, identify features of husbands' and wives' opinions, analyze general family indicators and correlate answers of husbands and wives about spouse's compliance with sociocultural roles. The following methods were used: FACES-3 test (Olson), test of marital satisfaction and method of roles distribution in family (Yu.E. Aleshina, L.Ya. Gozman, E.M. Dubovskaya), method of semantic differential (Osgood). We will closely consider analysis and results obtained using semantic differential.

To obtain answers using semantic differential method, respondents were asked to evaluate 11 concepts on six bipolar scales: I, You, Husband, Wife, Man, Woman, Father, Mother, Family Man, Housewife, Head of the Family. During the survey concepts and scales were rotated, which made it possible to avoid stereotypical answers and to keep respondents attention.

The final sample population for this research was 96 respondents, who formed 48 married couples. 18 families have 1 or 2 children, 15 families with 3 and 4+ children, respectively. Due to small size of sample population, comparisons were made for families with few children and families with many children (3+ children), although some observed effects were enhanced in the group of families with 4 or more children.

Analysis of research results was primarily based on semantic differential (SD) calculation for various pairs of concepts, as well as comparison of resulting differentials both for entire population of respondents and for individual groups (Antonov, 2018). To calculate SD, Euclidean distance formula was used for the case of six-dimensional space:

$$d_{ij} = \sqrt{\sum_{k=1}^{m} \left(x_{ik} - x_{jk} \right)^2} ,$$

Where:
i, j – define pair of concepts;
m – total number of scales.

Calculation was carried out for following measurements.

First, distance between respondent's "I" and each of the roles was calculated. As a result, SD values were obtained for the pairs: I-Husband, I-Wife, I-Man, I-Woman, etc. for all roles that were tested in questionnaire. Obtained SD values were compared between husbands and wives using a t-test for dependent samples, since responses were compared within a married couple.

Second, difference in spouses' responses was calculated when assessing concept: distance in the six-dimensional semantic space between the same concepts for husband and wife was obtained. The proximity of concepts (the minimum value of SD) may indicate the proximity of spouses' semantic field – the proximity of values system and meanings that spouses attach to the same concepts.

Comparison of spouses' complementary sociocultural roles assessments was carried out in two directions.

First, self-assessments of each spouse were compared with assessment of their performance of sociocultural roles in opinion of their marriage partner. If self-assessment turned out to be less important than spouse's assessment, this was interpreted as a lack of confirmation of role. In other words, spouses' assessment of their marriage partners as corresponding to given roles to a lesser extent than partners assign it to themselves. And vice versa, if self-assessment turned out to be greater than spouse's assessment, then this situation was interpreted as role confirmation. For example, if SD for spouse's pair of concepts "I-Wife" is less than SD for pair of concepts "You-Wife", then discordance is noted. Husband is less inclined to see his wife in the role of wife than she herself assigns this role for herself.

Second, self-assessments of each spouse were compared with the other's performance assessment of the same sociocultural roles. If self-assessments for assigning sociocultural role to respondent are lower (distance to role, SD value is higher) than similar assessments for assigning complementary role to spouse, then consonance is noted. The respondent evaluates himself in this role lower than their spouse in complementary role. This underestimation of one's own assessments relative to self-assessment of another can be called the "formula of mutual love." The reverse situation of higher self-assessment is called dissonance. For example, if SD for I-wife" pair is less than SD of "You-Husband" pair, then dissonance is noted. Spouse considers herself to be more consistent with role of wife than her husband is consistent with role of husband.

Results

At the first stage of analysis, value of semantic differential was assessed for each of respondents in relation to each of sociocultural roles. This made it possible to determine which roles are more and which are less characteristic, assigned to each of respondents. As follows from data presented in *Figure 1,* all studied roles are assigned almost equally by husbands and wives (average differential values range from 3–5 with a maximum of 14.7 and a minimum of 0). Iindicators for husbands are slightly lower for all roles, which may indicate a slightly better identification in each of the roles. However, observed differences are not statistically significant.

The next stage of analysis was a comparison of semantic fields, carried out by calculating SD between responses of husbands and wives for each concept within each married couple. Results showed that, in general, all respondents have a fairly large unity of opinions. With a maximum possible distance of 14.7 for six scales, average distance for spouses in our sample ranged from 3.82 to 4.51. It is curious that the smallest differences in semantics were observed for concepts "Head of the Family" (3.82) and two male roles: "Father" (3.92) and "Family Man" (3.98); the largest – for three female roles: "Housewife" (4.51), "Woman" (4.46) and "Wife" (4.43).

Figure 2 shows comparison of distances between concepts for respondents from small and large families. In almost all concepts opinions of parents with many children are closer than opinions of couples with few children, and, even despite small size of sample population, differences in similarity degree of
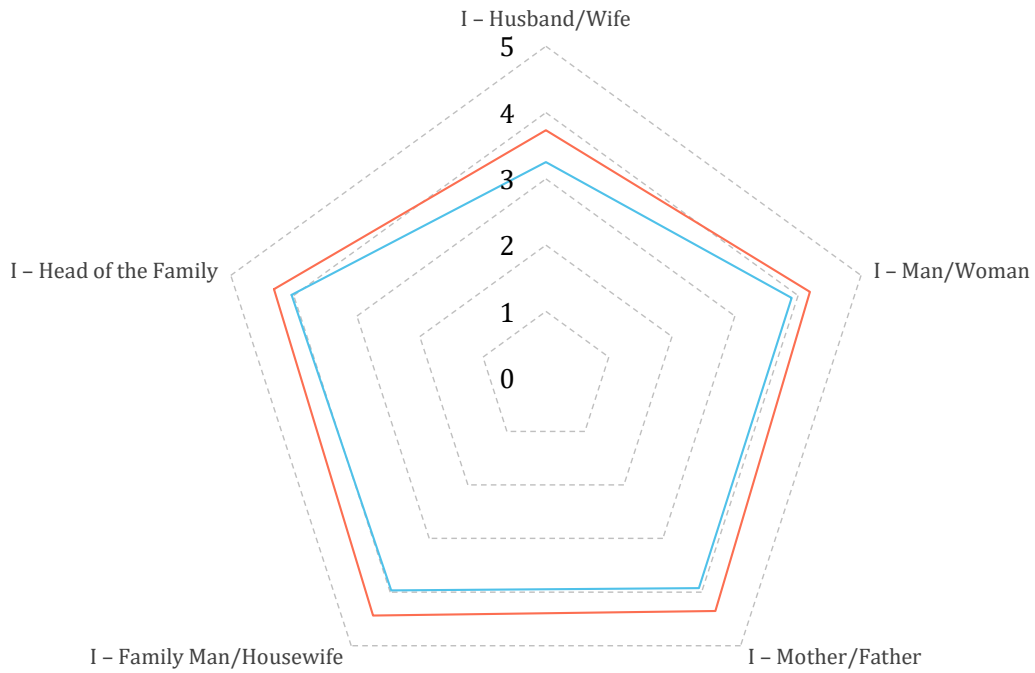
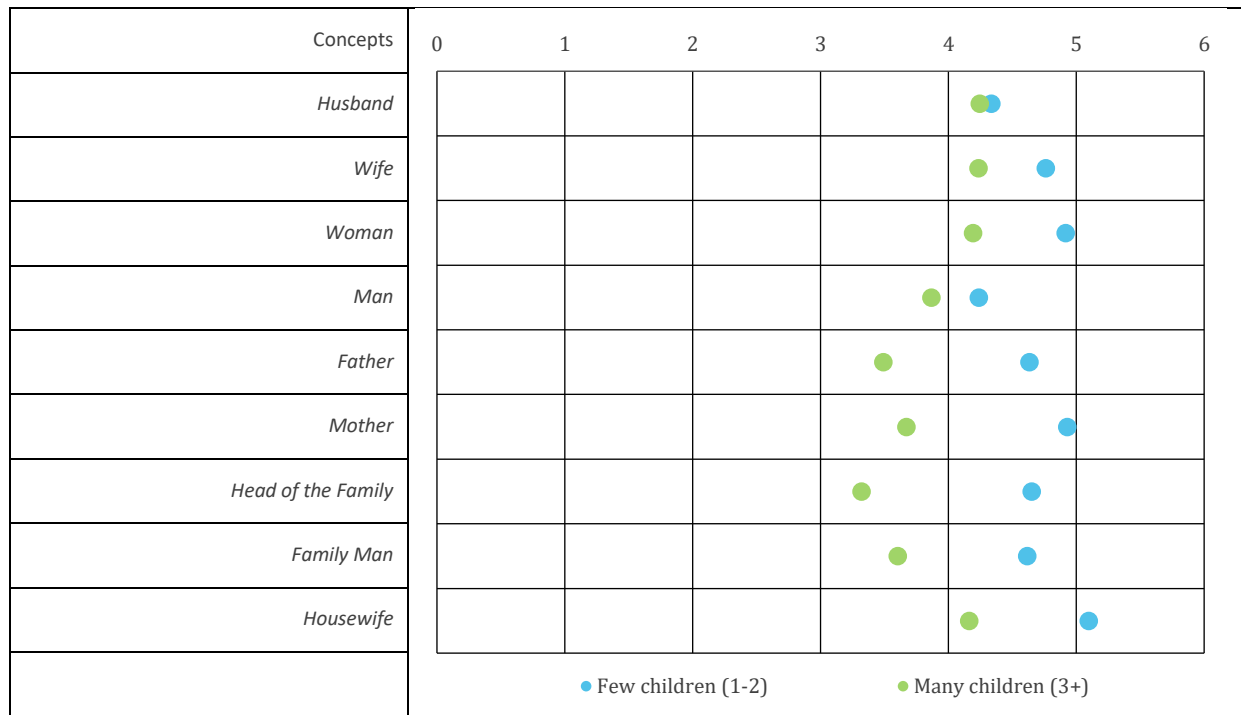**Figure 1. Average semantic differential scores for sociocultural roles, by gender**

Figure 2. Distance between individual concepts semantic field of husbands and wives, by family size

views on concepts "Head of the Family" and "Mother" are statistically significant (according to results of t-independent samples test p = 0.025 and p = 0.029). It is noteworthy that the largest discordance in concepts for parents with many children (for category "Husband") is less in value than the smallest discordance for parents from large families.

The next stage of analysis was to study spouses' assessments of complementary sociocultural roles to identify confirmations/disconfirmations, as well as consonances and dissonances.

In terms of extent to which spouses confirm compliance with sociocultural roles (how much lower self-assessment is than spouse's assessment), an uneven distribution was revealed, with a fairly large proportion of both conflict and cohesive families. The average number of confirmations was 5.54, which is slightly higher than half of all possible confirmations (the maximum number of confirmations is 10). However, proportion of those who had no more than 5 confirmations in couple was over half (56.2%), while that proportion of families with a very high level of confirmation (8 or more) is quite large – 12.3%.

Comparison of confirmations proportion for each role in question in families with few children and large families shows that spouses from large families more often confirm roles of their marriage partners *(Figure 3)*. Statistically significant differences are observed in such roles as "Husband" (p = 0.031), "Man" (p = 0.034), "Father" (p = 0.011), "Head of the Family – Man" (p = 0.009), "Housewife" (p = 0.017). Women in large families, to a greater extent than in small families, tend to see in their spouses almost the entire set of male roles: husband, man, father and head of the family. While the difference

in confirmations that husbands give to their wives in large and small families, although there is a difference, is not so significant. We can conclude that the greater cohesion of large family compared to small family is rather merit of women.

Similar results were obtained when comparing the total average number of confirmations: in large families it was 6.4 versus 4.2 in small families (differences are statistically significant: t (1) = 3.891, p < 0.001). Moreover, the greater contribution of wives from large families is also evident when analyzing the total number of confirmations. The average number of confirmations that wives give to husbands in families with many children was 3.63 versus 2.11 in families with few children (p = 0.002) and for husbands difference is less noticeable: 2.73 versus 2.06.

Analysis of consonances and dissonances number gives similar results. The average number of consonances for the entire sample population is 5.75 (with a maximum of 10), but distribution is not normal, since the proportion of families with a relatively small number of consonances (less than 4) is quite large (16.7%) and distribution in general biased towards larger values: 75% of families have 5 or more consonances.

Examination of individual pairs of consonances shows that when comparing husbands' responses about assigning themselves a cer-
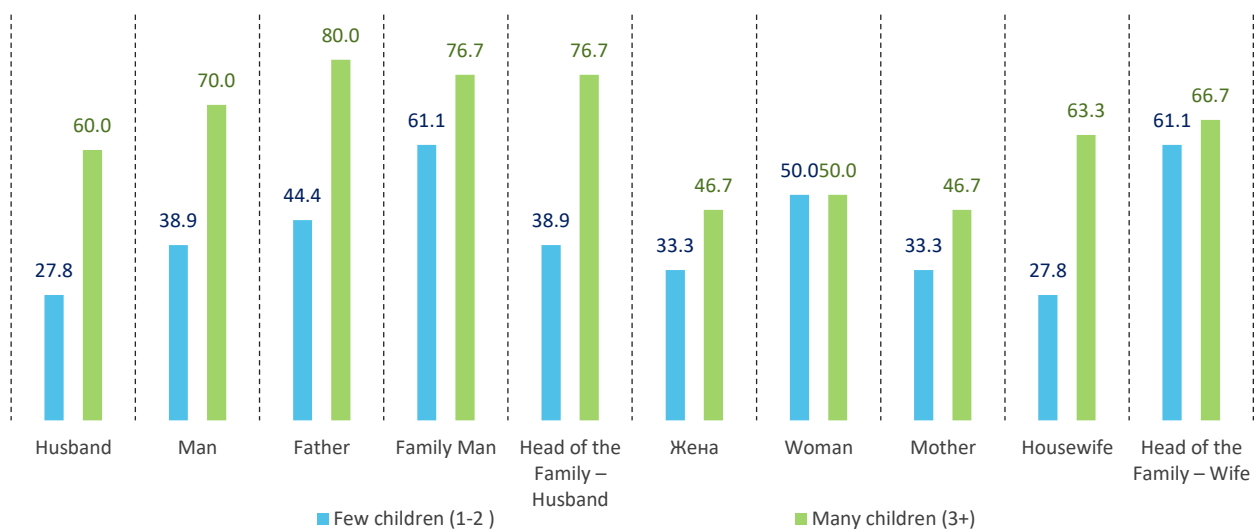

Figure 3. Proportion of sociocultural roles confirmations, by on family size, %
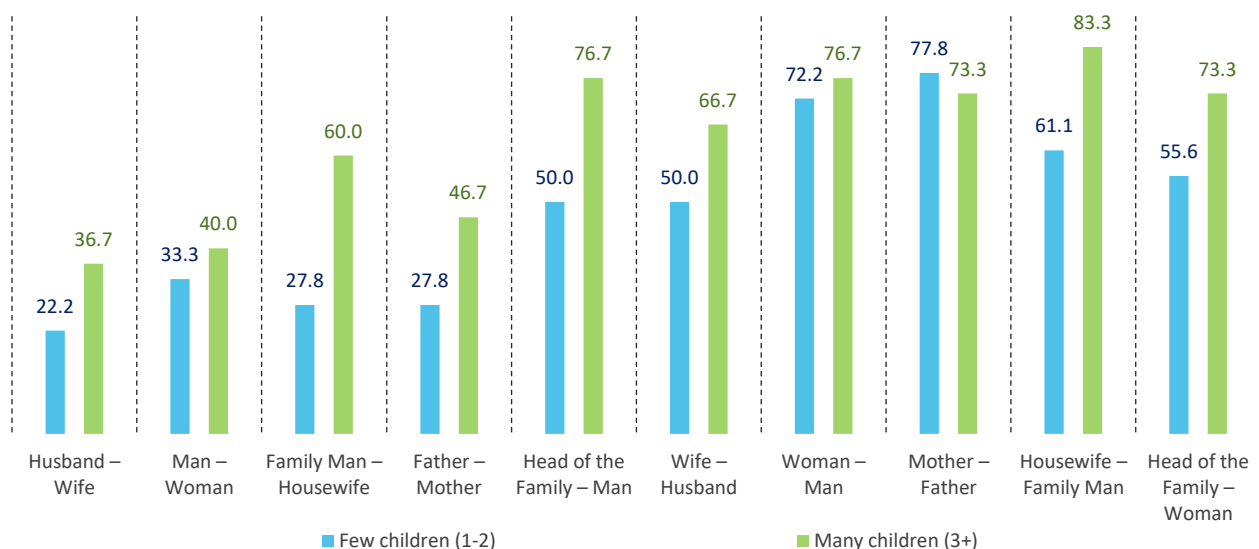
Figure 4. Proportion of sociocultural roles consonances, by family size, %

tain role and extent to which wife corresponds to complementary role, a small number of consonances occur. Consonances for roles "Husband – Wife", "Man – Woman", "Father – Mother" are rated higher by men for corresponding female roles in no more than 40% of cases. No more than 40% of husbands consider their wives to be better mothers, women and wives than they are fathers, husbands and men. Percentage is also quite low for the couple "Family Man – Housewife" (47.9% of consonances). At the same time, women's assessments are significantly higher – women are more likely to have a tendency to underestimate their own self-assessment and overestimate their marital partner. In pairs "Wife – Husband", "Woman – Man", "Mother – Father", "Housewife – Family Man", from 60 to 75% of consonances are noted, which indicates a high degree of support from wives.

Comparison of consonances in families with few children and large families forms a picture similar to the previous indicators: in large families number of consonances is statistically significantly higher (6.33 versus 4.78, t(1) = 2.324, p = 0.025). *Figure 4* shows detailed distribution of consonances for each pair of roles. It was revealed that consonances proportion in large families is higher for almost all pairs, and in the pair "Family Man – Housewife" differences are even statistically significant ($\chi^2(1)$ = 4.68, p = 0.031). Differences in the level of consonance for male

roles (when man evaluates his wife better than himself) are stronger than for female roles. However, this can be explained by the fact that even in small families, a significantly larger proportion of consonances is observed among wives' responses than among men.

Discussion

Semantic differential technique is a paired technique to simultaneously identify coincidences and discrepancies in views, opinions, attitudes, to standardize results and procedure for comparing different groups of respondents. Semantic differential is one of projective techniques that enables minimizing respondent's self-defense and identifying respondents' opinions by appealing to unconscious levels of psyche (Baranova, 1994). Use of this methodological mean makes it possible not only to obtain rational assessments, but also to analyze value orientations and attitudes of respondent. Within framework of testing with SD method, difference in attitude of respondents to the same object is established and not its absolute meaning. When assessing a certain list of roles (parental, marital, gender, conventional family roles and leadership positions), spouses unconsciously invest their personal attitude and personal meaning into assessments, without being subject to "social desirability" effect that arises during traditional questioning (Karpova, 2020).

It is important to note that SD technique makes it possible to measure unconscious and non-verbal perceptions of respondents and in connection with assessment on set of various unexpected scales for respondent, distortions caused by possible translation of socially desirable answers are overcome: respondent cannot know which characteristic is undesirable. Moreover, the very procedure for calculating distances between concepts removes possible distortions in the case of a tendency to overestimate or underestimate assessments, since it examines how far concepts are separated from each other in semantic field of respondent but does not analyze the semantics itself.

Despite stated advantages of semantic differential method and wide possibilities of its application, it has some limitations. Among them is complexity of implementation in the case of assessing sufficiently large number of concepts on a sufficiently large number of scales. Due to the same type of questions (assessment on a bipolar scale) and repetition of scales, there is a high probability of respondents losing attention, as well as stereotyping their answers. Use of the method requires significant motivation and focus of research participants. In our research this was achieved through selection of couples interested in research and willing to pass biographical interview, which requires significant time investment.

To summarize, we can note, firstly, a significant difference in answers of respondents from large and small families: in families with three or more children a more pronounced cohesion effect is observed due to a greater number of role confirmations and a more explicit adherence to "mutual love formula", expressed in a greater number of consonances. Secondly, detailed examination of this effect shows that significant contribution comes from women's answers, while men's answers (both in terms of the level of confirmation and the level of consonance) are closer in families with different numbers of children.

To more clearly demonstrate this effect, we compared respondents' answers for each role on separate scales. Such a comparison is not so much interesting in terms of direct meanings but rather interesting in terms of demonstrating significant differences. For women there were much more statistically significant differences in assessments for almost all roles (Husband, Man, Father, Mother, Housewife, Family Man) and all differences were characterized by a more positive perception of roles by women from large families. While comparison of husbands answers from families with different numbers of children revealed virtually no differences (for 9 concepts assessed on six scales, 54 comparisons, only three statistically significant differences). Therefore, we can conclude that contribution of women from large families to family cohesion, stress resistance and well-being of marital relationships is greater.

In general, we can talk about family-centricity phenomenon, their orientation towards family priorities and family values, prevalence in value system of interests of the family WE over interests of the individual I. Family-centricity is a key to the greatest stability of family. Method of analyzing marital relations using semantic differential enables giving a primary idea of this characteristic. For example, results obtained allow us to conclude that mothers with many children are more family-centric compared to mothers from small families.

Conclusion

Strong family is always based primarily on strong relationship between husband and wife, which contributes to well-being of the intrafamily WE. Cohesion of partners has direct impact on family's performance of its functions and stability of family structure. Family interactions and partner influence (with higher childbearing attitudes) "can shape the overall family need for children, exceeding reproductive attitudes of individuals" (Antonov et al., 2009, p. 360). Therefore, in close-knit family through interaction of spouses a familistic core of life values is formed, which contributes to birth of three or more children. Well-being and sustainability of each family is a priority factor in increasing number of children.

As it was found out during research, large families have greater stability and cohesion

in comparison with small families, which are currently most represented in Russia. Large families meet interests of state in population reproduction and also represent a system that ensures the most complete socialization of new generations.

Families with many children are characterized by a closer semantic field of spouses, a greater number of confirmations of compliance with sociocultural roles of spouses and higher assessments of partner. A kind of functional idealization of partner, often manifested non-verbally, contributes to growth of partner's self-assessment, manifestation of intimacy and love between spouses, which in turn leads to strengthening and growth of stability of the marital core of family. The basis of emotional well-being in large family is primarily wife – the mother. They are more empathic, give their husbands higher ratings in

all male roles, are more likely to confirm their performance as husband, father, family man and in all these indicators they differ significantly from wives from families with few children.

Such families and such marital relationships can and should become the subject of further research (including more significant sample populations); they can build basis for forming image of large family as a prestigious form of family-child lifestyle. Most government support measures should be "aimed at increasing prestige of family and family lifestyle" (Kuchmaeva et al., 2009, p. 29) and work to disseminate patterns of marital interaction based on experience of strong large families may become important component of this demographic policy. This issue is relevant for Russia and allows us to better understand needs and specific problems of families with three or more children.

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