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**Children's participation in structured activities in the context of the child-rearing strategies of Russian-speaking women: Class and migration status**

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## Abstract

*This research studies the child-rearing strategies of Russian-speaking women who live in Madrid by focusing on their children's participation in structured activities. The study answers the following questions: what attitudes to structured activities do the women have, what determined the choice of structured activities, are there differences between families that have different resources? The results are based on interviews with Russian-speaking women (26 interviews) whose children attend after- or pre- school programs for Russian children and interviews with the teachers or coordinators of these programs (4 interviews). The findings make it possible to formulate conclusions that the class differences in the activities of children are determined by structural factors rather than the cultural logics of parents. All parents reproduce the idea that organized activity has a beneficial effect on a child's development, although they differ in views on what kind of activities can bring benefits.*

Keywords: child-rearing strategies, structured activities, Russian-speaking migrants, parenting practices, after-school activities, extracurricular activities

## Introduction

Participation in structured, or organized, activities, defined as activities led by adults, occurring on a regular basis and/or having an organizational or institutional affiliation, can have a significant impact on children's educational achievements and aspirations, and it is considered as a mechanism through which social inequality is sustained (Bennett et al., 2012). Researchers wonder what underlies the observed differences in leisure practices of children, ranging from engagement in sports activities to attending a variety of arts, religious and other classes and events, but answer this question in different ways.

Some authors explain this gap in participation by focusing on the child-rearing strategies used by people from different classes (Ilari, 2013; Lareau, 2002, 2003, 2011; Yamamoto, 2016). Major works have been written by Annette Lareau (Lareau, 2003, 2011) who conceptualizes the child-rearing approach of middle-class families as concerted cultivation, and the approach of the working-class and poor families – as accomplishment of natural growth. In Lareau's view, middle-class parents interact more with educational institutions and provide children with structured activities. Children from poor and working-class families lack structured activities and parental involvement in their school and leisure life. Poor and working-class parents care about the safety of their children, but pay less attention to the quality of the content of the leisure of their children than middle-class parents. Children are included in unstructured leisure activities such as watching TV, spending time with other children, inventing themselves what to do, which do not possess the “concerted cultivation” features of structured forms.

An important indicator of child-rearing strategies is the beliefs of parents about what benefits a child can receive from participation in structured activities, and what goals they pursue involving children in this activity. A. Lareau considers

that middle-class parents encourage a variety of talents and skills in their children and share beliefs about the benefits of structured activities for their overall development. Based on the works of A. Lareau, Margaret Nelson and Rebecca Schutz conducted ethnographic research in two-day care centers for children of preschool and school age, serving different social segments of the population (Nelson & Schutz, 2007). Both centers corresponded to the requirements for children's organizations of this type, and had a reputation as institutions that met the highest quality standards in their local communities, however, they had significant differences in the approaches to care of children they followed due to differences in such characteristics as typical ways of interaction between children and adults, the number of organized activities offered for kids, styles of conflict resolution, response to children's questions etc. For example, in the center which was mainly attended by children from working-class and poor families, teachers often used directives when talking to children and often allowed children to be included in unstructured leisure activities as compared to the center that mostly served middle-class children, in which communication in the form of dialogue was dominating, and children were often involved in organized activities. According to this study, child care institutions do not compensate for class inequalities, but reproduce them in spite of meeting the highest quality standards.

Non-material resources, or what Jenny M. Stuber calls «social and cultural resources» (2009) play the leading role in this process. Stuber studies students' participation in collegiate extra-curriculum activities and finds differences in the numbers attended by students from different social classes. To explain these trends, she uses concepts, which are similar in meaning to the terms proposed by Pierre Bourdieu: the concept of «cultural resources» related to the concept «habitus» and defined as «a system of durable, transposable dispositions that structures social action and serves as the basis for perceiving one's experience» and the concept of «social resources» similar to «social capital» and defined as «a resource for social action that inheres in social relations» (Stuber, 2009: p. 881). Upper-middle-class students, getting into college, have the cultural resources that motivate them to participate in extra curricular activities; they share ideas about the benefits of organized activities, while the majority of working-class students perceive them skeptically. This evidence has similarities with the findings of A. Lareau concerning class differences in the perceptions and motivations of parents involving children in various forms of leisure time activity.

However, a number of studies has shown that child-rearing practices and after-school activities vary not only by class but also by race and migration status (Archer, 2010; Bodovski, 2010; Lee & Kao, 2009). A study of middle-class parents in Italy and the United States demonstrates the importance of a cross-cultural perspective to explain the features of the practices of parents from different countries, including their attitudes to organized activities (Kremer-Sadlik & Fatigante, 2015; Kremer-Sadlik et al., 2010). In particular, researchers have identified two types of childhood ideologies that are related to parents' views of child development as described by Halldén (1991): the child as a

«project» and the child as a «being». US parents share the ideas of the first type and consider childhood as a period of preparation for adult life, whereas Italian parents consider it as a period of freedom.

Other studies consider these processes from another methodological perspective and demonstrate that disadvantaged neighbourhood conditions or other structural constraints that working-class families face, as well as the limited resources that the families have, underlie the gap in activity participation and school attendance (Bennett et al., 2012; Chin & Phillips, 2004). For instance, Pamela Bennett et al. explains the gap in the structured activities of children by the number and content of activities which schools offer and which are available in the localities where people live, rather than by the values and beliefs of parents that are now similar for working- and middle-class parents. Studies of the ethnic Turks – the second-generation migrants in different European countries – have shown how the educational paths are predetermined by the differences in educational systems, rather than by the cultural characteristics of migrants (Crul et al., 2012; Crul & Vermeulen, 2003).

This research attempts to make some contributions to analyzing this controversy through studying beliefs, and parenting practices of Russian women living in Madrid, Spain, whose backgrounds are different in terms of class, by the example of the inclusion of the children in various forms of structured activities. The study answers the following questions: What attitudes do the women have to structured activities? What determined their choices of structured activities? Are there differences between working-class and middle-class families in these choices?

## Methods and data

The analysis will be based on semi-structured interviews with Russian-speaking women (24 interviews) conducted during fieldwork in Madrid. The children of these women attend some after- or pre- school programs (including Russian-language schools, the center of Russian culture, and the game zone for Russian children providing regular Russian-language and music classes). Another source of empirical analysis will be interviews with the teachers or coordinators of these programs (4 interviews). The programs were selected, since all of them offer structured activities for children. All interviews were conducted in Russian. In the analysis, I use the approach to the operationalization of social class with regard to parents' occupations, as described in the research of J. Stuber (2009). Both parents in the working-class families have had jobs that require lower level of skills throughout their professional experience (before and after migration), and which are basically associated with manual labor or work in the service sector, and do not require supervisory responsibilities. The occupations of parents from the middle-class families require higher levels of skills: they were usually involved in managerial or professional spheres highly specialized activities at the time of the interview or, in the case of mothers, had been involved in those before they had to cease work due to migration or childbirth. All migrants in our research are permanent, which means that they do not plan to return to their country of origin. However, the official status they have may be different.

For instance, the husbands of two interviewees got jobs in Spain, but still do not have citizenship. In sum, five families out of the sample were defined as belonging to the working class, and the rest fall in the category of middle class.

During the interviews, the parents described all the programs in which their children participated and their typical weekday and weekend. These groups of questions aimed to collect information about participation in structured activities. Additionally, a structured activities participation scenario technique described by Bennett et. al. (2012) was utilized which is a description of the schedule of participation in different forms of activities for a “fictional” child. I have adapted the scenario, taking into account the features of our sample and objectives of our study: I changed the age of the child to be younger, and the types of activities, in which she/he participates. However, the schedule remains intense:

*Some children participate in many school and out-of-school activities and other additional programmes. For example, let's take a 4th grader. She attends extra English class twice a week for 40 minutes after the school lessons. She/he also attends a pool on Saturday afternoon once a week. She/he studies in a music school. This means that she/he attends classes at the music school three times a week for an hour. Sometimes she/he performs from the school - singing as a member of a school choir.*

The parents were asked to describe what they think about the number of lessons and events as well as content of the child's participation in extracurricular and after-school activities. This method made it possible to study parents' beliefs and values about involving children in structured activity participation.

The text data was coded into groups and then into subgroups based on the expressed attitudes of parents and variation in them; the reasons for the stated preferences for structured forms of activities and the resources available for families were also considered. Attention was paid to (1) how parents involved their children in activities and what kind of activities are they, and (2) which ideas about children's participation in activities parents from different families had.

## **Description of the case**

The educational systems in Spain and Russia are very different, both at school and preschool levels of education, in terms of criteria proposed in the framework of the integration context theory (Crul et al., 2012; Crul & Vermeulen, 2003). In particular, in Spain children begin to attend school at the age of four, while in Russia they enter the system at six or seven. There are also differences in what extracurricular classes are offered by schools in Russia and Spain, in levels of education, in barriers to getting into a particular school, in the types of schools available, and in the price of schooling and extra classes.

Madrid is characterized by a low concentration of Russian-speaking migrants. There are few opportunities for parents in Madrid who are interested in cultural or Russian-language education for their children or who want their child to spend

time in a Russian-speaking environment. Only a few Russian-language programs, both commercial and free, are available in the city. They function on the basis of several organizations (the Orthodox Church, NGOs, the Russian Embassy, several commercial organizations), or have been organized by parents on a formal or informal basis.

Additionally, some of these programs are the only opportunity for after-school activities of children whose parents do not speak Spanish or who have arrived in Madrid not long ago and thus do not have a large amount of social capital and language resources except for help and information from Russian-speaking migrants. Some of these programs, as our research has shown, are venues where parents with different backgrounds in terms of class have met. Thus, several of these programs, in contrast to the programs described by M. Nelson and R. Shuts (2007), do not reproduce the practices of education being characteristic of different classes, due to their orientation to all Russian-speaking parents and their children living in Madrid. There were also cases when the courses were closed because there were not enough parents who wanted their children to join. The fact that there is a limited number of potential customers in Madrid also leads existing programs, as shown by interviews with the organizers and teachers, to target at Russian-speaking migrants at large, which gives them the opportunity to open a group and conduct classes.

## **Selection of activities: Goals and attitudes of parents**

All parents interviewed believe that structured activities are an important part of the socialization of their children. They share beliefs that participation in structured activities develops a child. From their point of view, such kinds of activities can develop the qualities that a child does not have, or correct his/her shortcomings. At the same time, they may develop the individual abilities and talents shown by their child, or contribute to the development of specific skills and abilities, regardless of the characteristics their child displays, which may or may not be related to the specific activities in which a child is involved.

Some parents believe that children can also acquire the skills which are necessary for integration into the host country, as well as internalizing normative gender models by attending classes. Female gender socialization involves the acquisition of the qualities associated with femininity, whereas male socialization – with masculinity. The following quotation from an interview with Veronica, who is the mother of a six-year-old boy, reflects both gender and broader cultural aspects: *«The boys in Spain should play football, they should run well, they should swim well, so that's probably why football and swimming have been chosen»* (middle-class). Veronika sent her son to football and swimming classes, as she believed that there were certain normative expectations in Spain as to what sport skills men had to have, and she was guided by them in the choice of the classes for her child.

The desire of parents to realize their dreams and to affect the children's academic performance through these activities is a less widespread reason for selecting a particular program. In some cases, children made the choice of a program independently, and the parents agreed to meet their choice, but often the choice is related to the perceptions of parents about the benefits derived from the selected types of activities. Most parents believe Russian language classes to be a specific type of activity through which cultural transfer occurs.

The selection of programs was not always motivated by goals related to the socialization of a child or the satisfaction of his or her needs. In some cases, these programs serve the purpose of meeting the needs and desires of the parents.

The organized activity programs have the function of taking care of children in those cases when the mothers want to spend time without them. When the child is in class, the mother can go to a store, do household chores, devote time to hobbies and so on. For example, Alexandra had moved to Madrid with a Russian-speaking husband and a three-year-old son a few months before the interview. Two months later, she sent her son to a camp, organized on the basis of the school of Russian language, with the following goals: *"Two goals were to entertain the child and entertain the child's mother. How should I put it, I did it because it is not very interesting to stay at home with the child all the day and night long for several years. So I am very much pleased that it is possible to hand over the child for four hours"* (middle-class). In this example, the interesting point is the fact that Alexandra indicated the reasons for the child's participation in the summer camp, which are not directly related to the objectives of the camp's activities such as the study of Russian language and the child's development. She considers the camp as an opportunity to diversify the child's leisure but simultaneously to find some time for herself and engage in activities not associated with childcare.

Most of the programs related to the study of Russian language and culture are valued by women not only as child development programs, but also as activities that make it possible to create a new network and diversify their leisure. For unemployed women from mixed families, the arrangement of a child's leisure in a Russian-speaking environment is a mechanism for building social capital, especially if a woman does not speak Spanish fluently. Women do not only spend time together while their children are in the classroom: they also sometimes meet informally as families, with their husbands and children, as well as without families, often leaving their children with the husbands. The organizer of a developing program for Russian-speaking children discovered the need to carry out educational activities and develop an entertainment program for mothers for the time when children are in the classroom but also when the mothers want to meet without children:

*«R.: The last meeting we held with the motive that yes, it is good to meet with children, yes, but is it possible to meet without children, only the girls? That is, this is such a moment that they are, they agree to meet with their children, but if someone spends time with the children. That is, if the someone takes the children and will be in there somewhere. When they are far away (Laughter). That is convenient for them. And so it turns out a little bit like a dissonance. We are now deciding what to do with this fact, but.*

*I: That is contrary to the aims.*

*R: Yes, yes. That is, we were going to do something for children, but it turned out that we are doing it for their moms».*

If the immigrant communities are defined in the classic sense of Robert Park as a collection of institutions (Park, 2002), in Madrid the main structure-forming institutions for the Russian-speaking communities are the church, as well as recreational areas for children and groups on Facebook and Vkontakte (Russian social network similar to Facebook). The institutionalization of small communities with weak ties is preceded by the formation of new recreational centers for children, which are informal at the outset, and then grow formalized. For example, during the fieldwork one of the informal groups, organized in Facebook, acquired the status of an association, and the organizers announced the start of regular classes from the beginning of the school year. A mother, who organized another informal center for children in her husband's office on Sundays, has planned to move it into the premises of a Spanish private school located nearby and conduct it as a part of its extracurricular programs. The institutionalization of the communities occurs through the formation of leisure centers for Russian-speaking children.

## **Selection of activities: Structural causes**

Some parents are unable to pick up the children from school after lessons because of their work schedule. Therefore, the only possible strategy in this case is to send the child to the programs offered by the school. There may be no choice in such cases, as all extra-curriculum activities in which children can be involved after the lessons are much in demand. Here we see an analogy with the strategies that the working-class labor migrants pursue in Russia (Akifyeva, 2015). The inability to take and supervise the child after school leads to the fact that many children of migrants in Russian primary schools attend extra-curriculum activities offered by the school. For example, a daughter of a migrant from Uzbekistan started attending a Russian folk dance class, as the school offered only this lesson for children of her age. Similarly, Kolya began to attend a class of flamenco in his Spanish school. Kolya did not really want to join this class that was not popular among other schoolboys, as can be seen from the narrative of his mother, Valentina:

*«R: And so he has attended, so, he has attended the dance for this year, I sent him. He did not want to attend it at school. Yes, Spanish, you know, with castanets, where men waved this way... How's the name of this dance?*

*I: Flamenco.*

*R: Yes, flamenco. He did not want to, did not want that, and there was only one boy» (working-class).*

Not only is Kolya not interested in the class, but also his mother is neither interested in this educational activity nor concerned by her son's lack of interest in it. She cannot even remember the name of the dance, which he studied. The class was selected only because it provided the opportunity to spend time at school after lessons before one of the parents could pick him up, as according to the Spanish laws, Kolya had not yet reached the age when he could leave school unaccompanied by adults.

Some parents use this strategy irregularly, for example, as shown below, they generally prefer their children to stay for the long breaks at school and attend additional classes rather than stretch unstructured leisure time. However, the working-class parents, whose income does not allow them to find any alternatives, rely on this strategy as the only one in the choice of programs for children.

Valentina shares the belief that the organized activities of children contribute to their development. She speaks about her current situation, in which her choice is caused by external causes, with great regret. Some time ago, when her working conditions were different, she used another strategy for choosing programs, based on her own expectations about which activities promote the child's development: *«Yes, yes, but when he was smaller, this is not due to the fact that I did not have time, I had time to come, he went to learn to swim, went swimming for a fee. Then at some point I wanted him to know English well, apart from that there was a paid English school three times a week, which was very good. (...) Because I had no time because of work, I canceled this school. That it has not been for two years, he has slipped in English»*. Thus, in the past Kolya went to a pool and learned English in a language school. The classes were paid, but he stopped attending them - not because of the absence of motivation or lack of financial resources, but because of the specifics of the parents' labor that made it impossible for them to accompany him to the lessons. Studying students' extra-curriculum activity participation, Stuber concludes that nonmaterial resources play the leading role in the choice of activities (Stuber, 2009). Although financial resources can make barriers that limit the chances of working-class students to participate in college activities, the specific features of cultural and social resources explain the fact that the working-class students are involved in a smaller number of activities as compared with the upper-middle-class students.

In the example of Kolya's participation, however, the choice of activities is not so much related to the possession of cultural or social resources. Instead it illustrates well one of the conclusions made by Bennett et al. (2012) according to which the choice of structured activities does not reflect the class culture, but rather the conditions associated with the class of the families. In our examples, the working-class parents also share the value of structured activities. Perhaps the difference between these families and Lareau's families lies in the migration histories of parents that I have studied. One of the characteristics of the child-rearing strategy "accomplishment of natural growth" is strong family ties, in contrast to the weak ties of "concerted cultivation". The working-class and poor families are more likely to live close to relatives, and are involved in the extended family network (Lareau, 2002, 2003). The families of migrants from our research, even if they used to be included in such kinship networks, have lost them after resettlement and do not acquire new ones, because the community of Russian-speaking migrants in

Madrid is rather based on weak ties. The working-class children are not able to engage in unstructured leisure activities before they reach a certain age because their parents are at work when the school lessons finish, and in Spain a child is not allowed to go home after school alone. According to Lareau, the main characteristic of everyday life within the "concerted cultivation" is inclusion in different types of activities under the guidance of adults, whereas within the "accomplishment of natural growth" children mainly communicate with their relatives. Migrant children, from our research, are often deprived of such opportunities and are included in various forms of organized leisure activities in order to be supervised when parents are not able to accompany them. Many working-class migrant families live in the south of Madrid or in its southern suburbs – areas with low rents and housing costs. The absence of a sufficient number of migrant community institutions leads to the situation where migrants are forced to integrate in the institutions of the host society, even if they are rather oriented towards the migrant communities that could perform the function of childcare. Therefore, the programs provided by schools may remain the only form of organized activities available for some families.

For many parents, regardless of their level of income and other resources, extracurricular classes offered by schools in the long break between lessons and lunch are in demand. The Spanish school lunch break can be so long that the parents can take their children home. All mothers who mentioned such breaks send their children to structured activities at schools, because they consider these activities preferable to unstructured ones. For example, an unemployed mother of a four-year-old girl described what classes her daughter visited during the break at school and why:

*«R: Well, here she goes... they have English twice, music twice, and motility once. (...) You can refuse, they will play in the yard there or something else... but I prefer giving her something to do. (...)*

*I: Were there any choices or just this?*

*P: No, just this» (middle-class).*

For most mothers, distance is the key factor that determines the choice of an organized activity for children. Distance plays a role not only because of the lack of time that is required to overcome it, but because of the concomitant complications, such as, for example, the presence of other children in the family, especially younger ones, whom it is necessary to look after.

The women are thus guided by the Spanish pre-school and school education system. This becomes apparent, for example, in the fact that a child begins to attend a school at the age of four, although compulsory education starts at six. Unemployed mothers who explain their own unemployment by the wish to devote themselves to their children, prefer to send their children to kindergartens, sharing a high level of confidence in pre-school education and expressing beliefs that such experiences are more beneficial to the children than just interaction with parents.

## Conclusions

The study of women whose children attend Russian-language educational programs, contributes to the discussion about what the basis of the differences in the structured practices of children is. In the research, I have developed the methodological ideas proposed by Bennett et al. (2012), according to which understanding class differences in children's participation in structured activities can be achieved only by going beyond the consideration of the cultural resources of parents and their child-rearing approaches, and including in the analysis the structural positions of families that determine their differences in access to resources. My findings make it possible to formulate a similar conclusion: class differences in the activities of children are largely determined by structural factors.

All parents reproduce the idea that organized activity has a beneficial effect on a child's development, although they differ in the views on what kind of activities can bring benefits and what benefits they want to receive. In addition, the inclusion of children in different forms of structured activities may be related to the aspiration of parents to gain free time for themselves, and in this case the content of the program can be given less attention.

Some parents, especially the working-class ones, are not able to pick up their children after lessons and to organize their leisure in the working hours. This leads to the situation when the child attends extra-curriculum activities offered by school, which may not correspond to the interests of the child and the parents' beliefs about what activities are preferred. In the examples provided by Lareau (2002, 2003, 2011), communities of neighbors and relatives could take over the function of childcare. In our examples, however, the working-class parents are first generation migrants, who are not included in extensive kinship and neighborhood networks, and the community of Russian-speaking migrants in Madrid is characterized by weak ties and this is also incapable of performing the function of childcare.

Most families, regardless of available resources, have limited opportunities to accompany their children after school. It depends on the parents' employment patterns, and the presence of other children in the family. Thus, for most families, extra-curricular activities offered by schools and kindergartens that are located close to their houses, and that their children attend, are the most preferred programs. Thus, the choice and the number of structured activities in most cases are influenced not only by the choices and preferences of parents and children, but also by the opportunities the local infrastructures provide.

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