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**The construction of romantic relationships by young women in Germany and
Kyrgyzstan**

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Abstract: *The article considers the preliminary results of the comparative qualitative study of romantic relationships of young women in the context of two countries – Kyrgyzstan and Germany. The research question is how young women in these countries understand romantic love and construct their romantic relationships today. The present study is aimed at exploring what kind of changes women are experiencing in this sphere nowadays, and how the realization of romantic relations varies in different cultural and social contexts. Some of the preliminary findings of the study are consistent with the view that individualization process characterizing the modernity, has caused dramatic shifts in the understanding of romantic relations. The influence of this process is increasing at the present time, but it is manifested differently in different modern societies.*

Keywords: romantic relationships, love, social transformations, individualization, democratization

Introduction

The topic of this article is the perception and the formation of romantic relationships by youth in different modern societies. Earlier it was considered that romantic love and romantic relationships is the sphere for psychological studies. At the present time the social nature of these phenomena is not doubtful, and this topic acquires more and more attention from the side of sociologists.

According to different theoretical perspectives, in the beginning of the adulthood when youth develop their individuality and specific capacities to adapt and take part in social life, love and romantic relationship becomes one of the main aspects which determines their future biographies (Arnett, 2000; Hurrelmann, 2012; Liebsch, 2012).

It is commonly recognized that social transformations lead to crucial changes not only in the interpretation of romantic love, but also in the process of constructing romantic relationships. That is why it is interesting to study how modernization and globalization makes impact upon this sphere.

Many scholars consider different changes in the perception and the formation of private life including romantic relationships by youth in modern societies. For example, Blossfeld, Klijzing, Mills and Kurz (2005) argue that uncertainty caused by globalization makes young people use quite different strategies nowadays: "These strategies include postponement of entry into

adulthood (remaining in the education system, postponing labor market entry and entering more flexible partnership)” (p.429).

This research makes attempts to identify which factors make impact upon the perception and construction of romantic relationships by young women. They include different sources of information, people who surround them, traditional values of previous generations and some other factors. It is important to investigate how young women understand and form their relationships in the beginning of their adult life, what role feelings play in them, and what place romantic relationships take in women’s plans for the future.

In keeping with the theoretical perspective which identifies romantic love as culturally and socially constructed (Luhmann, 1982/2012), it is interesting to consider this topic in the context of two countries with different cultural ideology, different history and different social conditions. That is why Kyrgyzstan and Germany are chosen for comparison.

The main research question is “How do young women in Germany and Kyrgyzstan perceive romantic love and construct their romantic relationships today?”

The Definition of Romantic Relationships: Literature Review

At present the concept of romantic relationships continue to be controversial, and there are numerous definitions and classifications which are far from being in line with each other (Felmlee & Sprecher, 2006).

There are various definitions of romantic relationships which are used by sociologists. For example, W. Furman, B. Brown, and C. Feiring (1999) identify the following features which can be included in the definition of romantic relationships. First, romantic relationships imply a continuing pattern of interaction between two people. Second, romantic relationships are usually constructed as a voluntary process. And the third characteristic is attraction which consists of different elements, and sexual is one of them.

Anthony Giddens (1992) defines the term “relationship” as “a close and continuing emotional tie to another” (p. 58). He introduces the term “pure relationship” for the description of this concept: “The romantic love complex helped carve open a way to the formation of pure relationships in the domain of sexuality” (1992: 58). Giddens (1992) considers sexual and emotional equality to be the basis for pure relationship. Among the ideals of pure relationship he mentions the participation of each partner in the process of deciding what kind of terms will be the basis for constructing their union. And according to him, the involvement of individuals into this common process makes up the main difference between relationships in traditional and modern societies (Giddens, 1992).

In spite of the fact that scholars suggest different definitions of romantic relationships and describe various components that constitute this concept, some studies show that youth often associate romantic relationships with romantic love, and use these notions interchangeably (Manning et al, 2008; Felmler & Sprecher, 2006). Taking into account that the given study is aimed at the perception of youth, in this paper there will be no focus on the differentiation of these concepts, and there will be the discussion of romantic love and romantic relationships.

Romantic Love and Romantic Relationships in Sociological Theory: Theoretical Background

Niklas Luhmann (1982/2012) in his book *Love as Passion. The Codification of Intimacy* considers the evolution of the semantics of love beginning from the 17th century to the modern times; and features and dimensions of romantic love presented by him are used as the basis for considering some findings of the study. Luhmann (1982/2012) argues that in the process of transformation of the social system from the stratified to the functional form, we can observe crucial changes in the interpretation of some concepts. According to him, the meanings of words and phrases can change, and “with it the way in which they pinpoint a specific referent, encapsulate particular experiences and open up new perspectives” (Luhmann, 1982/2012: 8). Further he explains that the same words are passed on to the next

generations, but as a result of evolutionary transformations “a shift occurs in the pivotal point from which complexes of meaning direct actions so that as long as the conceptual resources are rich enough, they can pave the way for and accompany profound changes in social structures...” (Luhmann, 1982/2012: 8).

Seeing romantic love as a phenomenon which is dependent on each particular historical period of time, Luhmann (1982/2012) defines this notion differently for various times.

Referring to Medieval love poems and growing aristocratization of the Medieval structure of stratification, Luhmann (1982/2012) explains why love was formulated as ideal- it was dictated by the requirement to separate love from vulgar sensuality. He writes: “The great love semantics of the Middle Ages focused on the difference between loving God and loving a woman with respect to make a distinction in view of the mystical unity promised in both cases” (Luhmann, 1982/2012: 49). Because of this, the definition of love included the religious component. And the author of the book comes to the conclusion that such interpretation of love was in line with social hierarchy and understanding of moral of that period. The idea of service and duty was characteristic of aristocratic norms, and it made up the basis for the notion of love as well.

But the semantics of love changes in the 17th century. Love is not contrasted any more to common sexual needs; vice versa sexuality is seen now as one of integral elements of love. And describing this transformation, Luhmann (1982/2012) defines love during this period as “emotion preformed

and indeed prescribed, in literature, and no longer directed by social institutions, such as the family and religion" (p. 45). Speaking about significant changes in the semantics of love in the 17th century, the author of the book points out another very important aspect – the woman got the ability to make her decision and to choose if she wants to be involved in romantic relationships with a certain partner (Luhmann, 1982/2012).

Observing the development of the semantics of love during Romanticism, the author argues that at that time the interpretation of love incorporates "a relationship between the individual subject and the world" (Luhmann, 1982/2012: 133).

As for romantic love of the contemporary period, the author admits that it is more complicated to define it. Romantic love is seen by the author as a phenomenon of the modern age which is a product of the evolution. He comes to the conclusion that compared to the past, contemporary society provides more opportunities for developing personal relationships (Luhmann, 1982/2012). He emphasizes that at the present time the question of equality of men and women in sexual relationships is not disputed any more. At the same time, analyzing the contemporary intimate relationships of youth, he points out the following characteristics: "Skepticism vis-à-vis high spirits of any kind is combined with a demanding, highly individualized set of expectations. The alternative to breaking off the relationship and instead going it alone is taken seriously as a course of action for life..." (Luhmann, 1982/2012: 155).

Luhmann (1982/2012) believes that in the modern society the autonomization of intimate relations is observed. In the discussion of love and

marriage at the present time, he admits that the “tie to marriage appears to be in the process of loosening” (Luhmann, 1982/2012: 157). More than that, he argues that people tend to choose living together instead of marriage, and this becomes a socially accepted option. So, it must be recognized that during different historical periods the marriage plays different roles in the semantics of love: “A semantics for love developed to accommodate extra-marital relationships, and was then transferred back into marriage itself...” (Luhmann, 1982/2012: 5). And according to the author, these variations in the interrelation of love and marriage are determined by socio-structural developments of particular historical periods. For example, explaining why in the 18th century love is still not used as the only basis for choosing the spouse, the author refers to the fact that at that time “the family was still seen as the unity which survived the change of generations...and had to be controlled as the means of reproducing one and the same family” (Luhmann, 1982/2012: 129).

This study makes focus on changes that social transformations in modern time bring to love and romantic relations. The discussion of romantic love as the phenomenon of modern age leads to the necessity to consider the concept of modernity and its characteristics which influence the changes in personal relationships, emotions and romantic love. In order to discuss how modernity offers specific conditions for love, the theoretical framework for this work includes the perspectives of Giddens (1991, 1992) and Beck, Beck-Gernsheim (1990/2004).

Anthony Giddens (1992) in his work *The Transformation of Intimacy. Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies* comes to the conclusion that the possibility of people to travel and cross borders, the development of technologies and mass media and many other innovations resulted in the rejection of tradition in social life. He relates modernity with the socialization of the world and the domination of socially organized systems. According to Giddens (1992), all these changes led to the transformation of the concept of love. He writes: “The transmutation of love is as much a phenomenon of modernity as is the emergence of sexuality; and it connects in an immediate way with issues of reflexivity and self-identity” (Giddens, 1992: 34). He differentiates between “romantic love” and “amour passion”, and when identifying this difference, he emphasizes that romantic love is “much more culturally specific” (Giddens, 1992: 38). So, like Luhmann (1982/2012), Giddens (1992) also refers to romantic love as a culturally specific phenomenon. He speaks about the emergence of romantic love from the end of 18th century. According to Giddens (1992), romantic love appeared in modernity as a result of denying traditions of the past, growing equality between genders, restoration of such notions as home and maternity, and the democratization of personal life. When identifying distinctive characteristics of romantic love, Giddens (1992) names the following: the association of romantic love with freedom, implication of immediate attraction, and the domination of sublime feelings over sexuality.

Among different changes that occur in personal life of people in modern age, and that can characterize romantic relationships of nowadays, Giddens (1992) points out the process of democratization: “A democratization

of the private sphere is today not only on the agenda, but is an implicit quality of all personal life that comes under the aegis of the pure relationship” (p.184). He compares democratization of personal life with promoting democracy in public life. But he thinks that when it concerns personal relationships between people, this process is not so open and noticeable, still its consequences can be equally significant. Giddens (1992) believes that the democratizing of personal relations and the same process in public life are interconnected and can affect each other. This goes in line with his main conclusion related to what pure relationships determine and what they are determined by: “There are structural conditions in the wider society which penetrate to the heart of the pure relationships; conversely, how such relationships are ordered has consequences for the wider social order” (Giddens, 1992: 195). Considering romantic relations in this theoretical context makes the study sociologically significant.

Speaking about the formation of romantic relationships in the modern world, it is important to consider the changes introduced into this sphere by individualization process. The individualization process is mentioned by many scholars as one of the main factors which have influenced the perception of romantic relationships and has made impact on their realization today (Illouz, 2012; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1990/2004; Giddens, 1991, 1992).

Giddens (1991) introduces the concept of lifestyle into his description of individualization process. He explains that the notion of lifestyle cannot be used in the context of pre-modern reality, because it contains the idea of making a choice. And he believes that the term “lifestyle” is important for

understanding self-identity in the world of late modernity. When describing the fundamental characteristics of the individualized contemporary world, Giddens (1991) writes that “in conditions of high modernity, we all not only follow lifestyles, but in an important sense are forced to do so— we have no choice but to choose” (p. 81).

Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1990/2004) also emphasize the changes of romantic relationships caused by individualization. Comparing the attitude to love and family in the modern society with how it was before, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1990/2004) describe a big shift from family and marriage to free relationships which do not imply home in its traditional understanding. The scholar comes to the conclusion that individualization process has caused dramatic changes in the perception and understanding of the whole sphere of private life and relations (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1990/2004).

So, this discussion leads to the conclusion that under the pressure of individualization many crucial changes were brought into private lives of individuals. But, according to many scholars, individualization can produce controversial effect. For example, Giddens (1991) believes that the availability of choices for individuals in modern social conditions brings certain difficulties and uncertainty. These controversial sides of individualization influence romantic relations as well. On the one hand, individuals experience more freedom, and are not restricted by traditional patterns of the past, and this could contribute to the further development of romantic relationships. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1990/2004) confirm this: “While men and women are released from traditional norms and can search for a “life of their own”, they

are driven into seeking happiness in a close relationship because other social bonds seem too tenuous or unreliable” (p. 24). But on the other hand, many scholars share the opinion that the construction and maintenance of romantic relationships today has become more complicated than earlier (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1990/2004; Giddens, 1992; Illouz, 2012).

Considering these contradictions of modern times, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1990/2004) describe them as “the pros and cons of a life of one’s own” (p. 52). They argue that the possibility to have a choice and to make a personal decision can lead to certain difficulties and challenges even for one individual who is not restricted by any commitments. When we speak about romantic relations of couples, these challenges increase by twice, and “..all the issues which affect the partner directly or indirectly...have to be fed into the decision-making process as ideas and wishes, habits and norms of two different people” (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2004: 52). And this threatens the construction of relationships of two individuals. According to Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1990/2004), the effect of individualization is revealed in internal consequences for people, and he comes to the conclusion that these collisions can lead to the breakup of relations.

In the age group of 18-25-years-old youth the focus of the present research is made on women, not men. It is believed by many scholars that women take a special place in relation to these transformations. In the historical context it becomes understandable why ideas of romantic love were associated predominantly with women. Giddens (1992) writes about “influences which affected women from about the late eighteenth century

onwards” (p. 41-42). By these influences he means the reconstruction and reinforcement of such notions as home, relations with children, motherhood. The development of the notion of romantic love led to the idea that women, not men, performed the difficult job of constructing love; and on the one hand, this role connected women with home, and on the other hand, it empowered women. Giddens (1992) argues that “ideals of romantic love have long affected the aspirations of women more than those of men...” (p. 2). Describing the democratization of pure relationships, the sociologist once again emphasizes the main role that the woman plays in this process.

In spite of the fact that both men and women have come across the changes, Giddens (1992) believes that men and women experienced them differently and not to the same extent: “Men, like women, fall in love and have done so through-out the recorded past. They have also over the last two centuries been influenced by the development of the ideas of romantic love, but in a different way from women” (p. 58). Giddens comes to the conclusion that all transformations concerning romantic relationships, were important for people of both genders, but they made especially significant impact upon women. What makes the effect of these transformations so dramatic specifically for women?

As it was said above, the individualization process has produced a significant impact on people's private lives and the construction of romantic relations. It also influenced certain social institutions, such as marriage. According to many scholars, in pre-modern conditions in women's lives the major focus was made on family and marriage (Giddens, 1992; Beck & Beck-

Gernsheim, 2004; Illouz, 2012). For example, Giddens (1992) writes: “In contrast to those in younger age-groups today, the experience of older women was almost always framed in terms of marriage... Marriage was to them the core experience of a woman’s life...” (p. 53). So, the opportunity to leave the parents for the woman was usually associated with forming romantic relationships and marriage. It was the most common reason for a girl to enter a new outside world. “It is only over the past generation that striking out on one’s own, for women, has meant leaving the parental home. In previous periods, for all but a small proportion of women, leaving home meant getting married” (Giddens, 1992: 53). In the process of social transformations, as the result of women’s strife against domestic ties, women get freedom and they are no longer restricted by home and family tasks. “Women have protested against, and broken free, their confinement to a domestic milieu and the limitations of self-development that went with it” (Giddens, 1992: 149). The way young women construct and plan their life today is very different from the way the generation of their grandmothers did. At present the woman enjoys the freedom to decide if she will marry, when she will marry and whom she will marry. Having more choices, young women today see more options how to construct their romantic relationships. Referring to these dramatic changes for women in modern societies, Giddens (1992) points out that this process is not completed yet, but has a strong tendency to develop in this direction.

Speaking about changes that have influenced the women during the past decades, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1990/2004) introduce the notion of “whole new areas of freedom” (p. 21). According to them, women have found new areas of freedom in law, education, sexuality, career and job. And this has

brought significant changes into lifestyles of young women today. According to Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1990/2004), modern young women have more rights and chances to get education, to develop their careers, they enjoy more freedom in making decisions concerning different spheres of their private lives, including romantic relations and marriage.

All these arguments allow us to put women in a special position compared to men. It is generally recognized that during social transformations women come across more significant changes concerning their private lives than men. At the same time sociologists argue that freedom and equality which women have got, is still insecure from many points of view and characterized by different contradictions. And that is why from a sociological standpoint it makes sense to put accent on women in this study. The controversial position of women caused by social conditions in the modern world makes them relevant for the research. It seems important to investigate if this kind of contradiction is disclosed nowadays when young women begin to form their romantic relationships in the beginning of their adult life. In addition to this, it is interesting to find out if this is similarly observed in both Asian and European contexts. And this comparative study of young women in Germany and in Kyrgyzstan makes an attempt to explore this.

Study Design and Methodology

This is a comparative qualitative study, and in order to get appropriate data for answering the research question semi-structured in-depth interviews are used as a research method. This method seems to be the most appropriate for this investigation. Qualitative interviews as a research method itself make it possible to get the respondents' reflection of the reality concerning different subjects (Folkestad, 2008). The in-depth interview is considered to be a method that allows the researcher to display the information which is not so explicit, which is under the surface. Many researchers believe that in-depth interviews suit studies in the field of relations because of its characteristics which make it possible to obtain comprehensive qualitative data about particular processes or phenomena from the point of view of individuals (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). It is also underlined by many scholars that in-depth interviews are helpful if we want to explore personal experiences, opinions or attitudes, feelings, and personal background (Esterberg, 2002).

The structure of the interviews in the given research is rather open. A special interview guide with a particular set of questions has been prepared. These questions allow the researcher to follow a specific system of the interview and help to focus on topics and categories which might be essential for answering the research question. At the same time additional questions are

asked to help a respondent to go into details and provide much deeper answers to specific questions.

According to the research question and the dimensions which were developed during operationalization process, the interview guide for the given study is divided into several sections, namely: introduction, warm-up, definition of romantic relationships, the first experience, other relationships, the role of family and environment, plans for the future and conclusion.

Not to miss any important information during the interviewing process, all interviews are recorded with the help of the audio recorder.

Mostly the use of qualitative interviews as a research method is associated with face-to-face communication between the interviewer and respondents. But in this study during data gathering process an additional research medium– Skype– was used for conducting some interviews. This medium was chosen because it was necessary to conduct interviews in two countries which are thousands miles away from each other. Traveling to Kyrgyzstan in order to conduct interviews there was an expensive and time consuming option. In this case conducting interviews with the help of Skype turned out to be a non-expensive and easy solution. Besides, the presence of the respondent and the interviewer at the same place is not an essential point for the interviews in this study. Vice versa, the first couple of Skype interviews showed that being located far away from the interviewer helps the participants to feel at ease. So, the screen of the computer in this study is not an obstacle, but a protective screen which creates a kind of private zone for the interviewee. And this privacy is necessary because of the topic of the

discussion. The subject is not what can be easily discussed by everybody in the café or the club, even if it is a talk between two. Some girls who were interviewed during face-to-face individual meetings would look around to check if anybody heard what they said. Skype interviews allow the respondents to sit alone in their own room and feel enough privacy to share some girlish thoughts. Through Skype they speak only with one person and see this person's response, but at the same time they have some protection from the interviewer- the screen of the computer and their home environment around them.

For the researcher Skype provides enough interaction which is necessary for the talk with the respondents, but at the same time allows the interviewer not to interfere with their privacy. So, on the one hand, the researcher speaks to the respondents face-to-face, can respond easily to their feelings and concerns, can notice their facial expressions and gestures, but on the other hand – feels like an observer, outsider, who can obtain the information but does not influence its integrity.

So, if in the very beginning Skype was chosen because it provided the solution for the problem of a long distance between Germany and Kyrgyzstan, later in the process of the work, its advantages contributed to the effectiveness of the interviews.

Besides, according to some researchers (Sullivan, 2013), interviewing through Skype is considered to be appropriate for interviewing young people. Unlike a certain proportion of older generation, youth likes to use new technologies for different purposes. This was one more reason why the use of

this medium meets the objectives of the given research, and why Skype can be used for conducting interviews with young women.

Before starting the official data gathering, 2 pilot interviews were conducted: one- by Skype, and the other– during the individual face-to-face meeting. This was done in order to test a newly prepared interview guide and to understand which questions are totally appropriate for getting the information to answer the formulated research question. It was also very important to check whether girls of 18-25 years old are ready to talk with the interviewer about their relationships with guys.

Preliminary Findings and Discussion

The research is going on at the present time. The data gathering process and the analysis is not finished yet. So, this article presents just some preliminary findings and some ideas that still require further analysis and interpretation.

From the discussion of love semantics development it becomes obvious that romantic love is understood and interpreted differently at different times depending on historical and cultural contexts. Luhmann (1982/2012) argues that in the process of transformation of the social systems we can observe crucial changes in the interpretation of some concepts, including the concept of romantic relationships. This study is considering the

transformations that the concept of romantic relationships is going through nowadays. That is why during the interview it was important to ask the question: “How could you explain the concept *romantic relationships*?”

Concerning the definitions and understanding of romantic relationships, the answers of the respondents in Kyrgyzstan and in Germany do not reveal considerable differences between two countries. The significance of feelings in relationships was mentioned many times by the respondents in the sample group. All the respondents from both countries referred to feelings and romance as the most essential components of romantic relationships.

Another common point between two countries which was noticed in many responses is the importance of sharing interests and attitudes to life with the partner. The respondents expressed their strong belief that mutual hobbies and the common way of thinking play an essential role in constructing relationships. For example, one girl said: “You know, romantic relationships for me is when 2 people have mutual feelings and ideas. In my opinion, romantic love is when the man takes care of me.... when we have the same hobby...” (Interviewee #3, August 3, 2014). And similar ideas were mentioned by the respondents from both countries.

There is one more similarity among the answers of the young women in Kyrgyzstan and Germany. When they were asked to bring an example of perfect romantic relationships, all of them showed readiness and provided lengthy stories about such relationships. Some of them referred to the union of their parents or grandparents as the best example, others were telling about relatives or friends. Many of the respondents pointed out that in the future

they would like to have romantic relationships which are similar to those which they saw as a model. For example, one girl spoke about the relations of her parents: "In my opinion, they (parents) really have perfect relationships, because they are together for a long time, they brought up such wonderful children as we are (laughing). I've never seen them fighting or scolding, they always have some kind of a dialogue. They understand each other well... that is why these are real relationships for me, which are strong and which can exist not only one - two days, or just one hour as it is sometimes shown in the movies" (Interviewee # 5, August 22, 2014).

So this can bring me to the conclusion that in general, when describing the perception and definition of romantic relations, and giving examples of ideal relationships, the respondents from both countries reported many similar characteristics and shared common understanding.

However, more detailed discussion of how they interpret romantic relationships, provided certain data indicating some variations between the countries. For example, the girls in Germany, when describing their understanding of romantic relationship between two partners, spoke about equal obligations from both sides. They did not mention any specific obligations of men, while the girls from Kyrgyzstan, when explaining their expectations from their partner, often used the word *must*: "The man must always take care of his woman..." (Interviewee # 1, July 20, 2014); "My boyfriend must prepare surprises for me... bring flowers, gifts..." (Interviewee # 6, August 30, 2014); "My future man (I don't have a boyfriend now) must have a good education, because in the future, when I am going to have kids... I hope

to have kids someday...and when I am staying at home taking care of my kids, I want to be sure, that we have everything we need..." (Interviewee # 8, September 10, 2014).

It can be assumed that in spite of many changes in gender roles in Kyrgyzstan nowadays, still cultural peculiarities and local traditions make impact upon the perception of romantic relationships by Kyrgyz girls. And it is still strongly believed in Kyrgyzstan that the traditional role of the man as a bread-winner obliges him to be stronger than the woman, to keep moral and financial responsibility both for himself and for the woman.

While the definitions and interpretation of romantic relationships did not show many differences between two countries, the question about the influence of family and environment upon the construction of relationships revealed a considerable gap between Kyrgyzstan and Germany.

A strong dependence on the judgments of the family and surrounding community turned out to be noticeable from the analysis of the responses of girls from Kyrgyzstan. All the respondents from Bishkek reported not only the importance of their families' opinions, but they also spoke about the significant role of attitudes which are believed to be acceptable by the society and traditions. All the interviewees from Kyrgyzstan said that their parents knew from the beginning about their dating and about the boys (4 girls mentioned particularly their mothers). Some girls mentioned mothers and elder sisters as a support and source of advice in romantic love questions.

This is what one respondent from Kyrgyzstan said: “In our family girls should be at home at 8 p.m. My mom trusts me, she knows that I am aware about our tradition not to have sex before the wedding. The trust is the most important thing. Without trust to me, she would never let me go with my boyfriend somewhere at night” (Interviewee # 1, July 20, 2014). Another girl said: “I said to my mom that there was nothing between us. I always tell her about the boys and she tells me what is better in this or that situation” (Interviewee # 6, August 30, 2014). One more response: “Before dating with me, he asked for the permission of my mother” (Interviewee # 3, August 3, 2014).

So, the preliminary findings of the study allow me to assume that the impact of national traditions and societal values on the construction of relationships in Kyrgyzstan is quite significant. Many of the respondents reported that it was important for them what the family and relatives say about their dating and about their relationships with boys, and how it can influence the reputation of their family. Just one example: “It is our custom and our tradition that we do not think about ourselves, but we should care about our parents. And I always think first of all about my parents. I do not want other people to say something bad about my parents, I do not want my parents to worry about this. It is the most important thing for me!” (Interviewee # 8, September 10, 2014).

This finding about the significance of other people’s opinions seems to be interesting because it indicates some cultural factors which influence and form girls’ perception and practice in Kyrgyzstan. The research suggests that

girls in Kyrgyzstan often correlate their practice of constructing romantic relationships with the ideas and beliefs which are commonly spread in the society, their environment, community. The participants of the study spoke openly about the importance of national traditions and societal views for them.

At the present stage of the study there are not enough data to make any conclusions about the influence of this factor in Germany. But so far the respondents from Germany have not reported the importance of such things for them. Two girls mentioned that they tell their mothers about their boyfriends, but at the same time they pointed out that they always take decisions independently. For example, one respondent from Germany said: "It's me, but not my parents who will live with this man. That is why I listen to myself" (Interviewee # 2, August 1, 2014).

As it has been emphasized by many scholars, while in the past marriage and family was seen as an integral part of the woman's life story, at the present time the woman has more freedom to choose if she will marry or not, have children or stay childfree, combine job and family tasks or concentrate on carrier only (Giddens, 1992; Beck, 1990/2004; Illouz, 2012). That is why it was important for me to investigate in the present study what young women in Germany and Kyrgyzstan are going to do further, and how they integrate their understanding of romantic relationships in their life planning. For this reason one of the questions to the respondents was about their plans for the future and about the place that romantic relationships take

in these plans. The girls were asked to describe how they see themselves in one year, in five years and in ten years from now.

In the responses to this question all the respondents spoke about the importance to finish their studies, to find good jobs. Three girls from Kyrgyzstan mentioned that they plan to travel and to study abroad. Two respondents also pointed out that it is important to be financially independent on their partners in the future. Among their strategies for the future many respondents reported their intentions to combine career and studies with the construction of romantic relationships and marriage. But in choosing different roles for themselves, the young women did not always place the formation of romantic relationships in the list of priorities. Among the main goals for the future the girls were more likely to name traveling abroad for studies, diplomas, good jobs, and financial independence. It was interesting to find out that all the respondents in Kyrgyzstan and in Germany who have romantic relationship with a man now, didn't mention this particular partner in their future plans. They did not obligatory relate their present relationships to their future marriage.

So, the responses about plans for the future in this study go in line with the theoretical perspectives, which argue that young women in the modern world enjoy more freedom in making decisions concerning different spheres of their private lives and have more opportunities for professional growth (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1990/2004; Giddens, 1992). When discussing the transformation of the concept of love in modern times, Giddens (1991, 1992) expressed his expectations that these changes would develop further in

modern societies. And as possible trends for the future he named growing equality between genders, democratization of intimate relationships and individualization. The diversity of choices for an individual is considered by Giddens (1991) and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1990/2004) as one of major features of individualization.

This perspective finds extensive support in the preliminary findings of the present research. When speaking about the problems which they have in their relations or about the reason why they broke up with their former partners, the girls always mentioned other options and priorities which were available for them or their partners and which they preferred to the relations. Among these options they spoke about going abroad for studies, moving to another city to accept good job or other reasons. For example, one respondent from Kyrgyzstan recollected the situation when she broke up with one boy: "Till today I feel sorry for this. Well, not really sorry. I just think that I was stupid to do this. I feel sorry for losing that boy-friend. But on the other hand, instead of this, I managed to make a career for myself!" (Interviewee # 4, August 17, 2014).

And two respondents from Germany at the time of interviewing were in the so-called long-distance relationships. One of them has a boyfriend who lives and studies in a different city in Germany; and the second respondent maintains relationships with the partner who went abroad for studies and lives now in a different country. This is how the girl described these relationships: "Unfortunately we don't see each other very often, because we are in long-distance relationships. But we constantly keep in touch with each other, every

day. And of course it means 100% of trust. By now we have many connections within our families. And when we see each other, yes, we do a lot of things together..." (Interviewee # 7, September 6, 2014). These two girls mentioned in the interview that their relationships differ from those that their friends have. They realize themselves that such types of relationships bring some peculiarities and even threats to their unions with their boyfriends. But this was the choice of their partners. And they accepted this type of relationships as an option, and consider this as an alternative to traditional attachments. And among Kyrgyz respondents there was a girl who spoke about the plan of her partner to travel abroad for the purpose of continuing his studies. And during the interview the respondent expressed her intentions to continue the relationships with the boy in spite of the long distance. More than that, the respondent did not show any disagreement with the decision of her partner to be separated for a long period of time. Though she expressed some regret about this, still she also accepted this as the right of her boyfriend to choose his career and a possible option for their future life plan (Interviewee # 9, September 19, 2014).

These findings do not seem surprising if we recollect what scholars write about the influence of modernity on romantic relationships. Giddens (1992) pointed out that the sphere of private relations in modern times is characterized by denying traditions of the past. Giddens (1991, 1992) and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1990/2004) argued that individuals began to see a lot of other options and alternatives to traditional attachments and ties. The individualization process has produced a significant impact on people's private lives and the construction of romantic relationship. The changes lead to a wide

variety of lifestyles and, correspondingly, types of attachments and relationships. Discussing the effect of individualization, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1990/2004) wrote that individuals in modern conditions have “to build up the life of their own by way of the labour market, training and mobility, and if need be to pursue this life at the cost of their commitments to family, relations and friends” (p. 6). These are situations when individual interests and personal priorities dominate and defeat the relationship of two individuals. According to Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1990/2004), the logic of individualization “leads to a ‘battle over space of one’s own’ in the literal and figurative sense, in a search for oneself and for fulfilling of one’s own potential” (p. 53).

And the research does reveal such a “battle over space of one’s own” (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1990/2004: 53) almost in all responses of the participants. For example, the interview includes the question “Would you give up your hobbies if your boyfriend doesn’t like them?” There was only one person who told me that she might consider such a possibility, but all the rest said that their boyfriends have to accept them as they are. They are not going to give up what they like to do, even if the partner chooses something different.

Many respondents from both countries spoke about the lack of time for dating because they devote a lot of time to other spheres of their lives. The girls mentioned that because of their studies, work, and hobby they cannot see their partners every day. One German respondent told me that earlier her understanding of good relationships was different. She wanted to see her

boyfriend every day, and her feelings were hurt when he could not come. But now she accepts that they spend time together only once or twice a week, because both of them are busy with studies and other activities. "Earlier it was important for me, that when 2 people are in relationships, they spend a lot of time together. And now... I know that this does not obligatory determines good relationships... That is why... now I would prefer that he does a lot of things by himself" (Interviewee # 10, September 23, 2014). Striving for freedom to take their own decision was heard in many responses during interviews. Sometimes it was very explicit, like in the words of one girl from Kyrgyzstan: "How do I see myself in a year? In a year, I think, we will continue our relationships. And none of us will hurry up the other, and we will not press or force each other to take any steps" (Interviewee # 9, September 19, 2014). Such responses allow me to assume that in modern societies young women consider many choices in their lives, and at the same time they show respect to the choices of their partners. These findings clearly indicate changes of lifestyles of young women and transformations in their understanding of romantic relationships.

Conclusion

This study makes an attempt to study how social transformations in the world influence young women's understanding and realization of romantic

relationships, and to detect societal, cultural similarities and varieties in romantic relationships in different modern societies.

As it is generally recognized by many scholars, modernity offers specific conditions for romantic love, and it is more difficult for youth to form romantic relationships at the present time than earlier (Luhmann, 1982/2012; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1990/2004; Illouz, 2012). Discussing crucial shifts which are observed in the realization of romantic relationships by women in modern societies, Giddens (1992) argued that these changes would continue in the same direction. And some preliminary findings of the given study allow me to assume that at the present time there is a further development of the processes which were pointed out by Luhmann (1982/2012), Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1990/2004) and Giddens (1991,1992).

One of the main conclusions of this discussion is that individualization and a wide variety of choices observed in modern societies has made multiple and non-homogenous effects upon women's lives, including their romantic relationships. Considering romantic relationships in the context of individualization, it is necessary to underline the availability of different options for young women nowadays. The responses of the study participants clearly show their freedom to decide what they wish to do in the future, reflect their new approaches to romantic love and new features of their romantic relationships such as flexibility.

It is especially interesting to observe some similar shifts in such different societies as Kyrgyzstan and Germany. This allows me to assume that these changes could be caused by dramatic social transformations of the latest

decades in such countries like Kyrgyzstan. At the same time other results of the research indicate that there are still many differences between the perceptions of romantic relationships by young women in these two countries. And the conclusion about the continuing influence of cultural traditions and national values on this sphere goes in line with the perspectives of Luhmann (1982/2012) and Giddens (1992) who emphasized that romantic love should be considered as a culturally specific phenomenon.

These are some of the thoughts raised by the preliminary discussion of the data obtained in the study. Hopefully the further work will provide more interesting findings related to the transformations in the perception and construction of romantic relationships by young women in different modern societies.

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