

Caring for the elderly in rural Altai: emotional support, symbolic security and communities of care



Rebecca Kay
University of
Glasgow



Studying old age, social security and care in rural Russia

- The majority of existing studies treat old age as a category and focus on practical and material forms of assistance
- 'Little research has focused specifically on the everyday lives of Russian elderly [people]' (Caldwell, 2007: 68)
- This paper aims to:
 - contribute to the small but growing body of ethnographic studies which shed light on the lives of elderly Russians as subjects in their own right
(Bloch 2005; Caldwell 2004, 2007; Kondakova and Ivankova 2002; Shubin 2006)
 - examine the ways in which formal and informal forms of assistance and material, symbolic and emotional aspects of security intersect
 - consider how important these different forms of assistance and aspects of security are to old people themselves

Setting the scene: Fieldwork in Burla



- Burla: central village, Burlinskii district, Altai krai, pop. 4800
- Impacts of economic decline include demographic change and outmigration of younger population
 - Over 25% population are pensioners
 - Many left without local networks of kin to care for them
- Rather extensive state structures, offer a range of services and forms of social support and assistance to local residents.
- District Centre for Social Assistance [CSA]:
 - *Uchimsya stareŭ*: Pensioners Exercise Club
 - Home care for elderly people
 - Co-operation with other structures and organizations, e.g. house of culture, veterans' councils, libraries and museums, surviving agricultural enterprises – *Mesyachnik Pozhelykh Liudei*.

Theorising social security and care

- Social security as complex ways in which people mitigate risk and produce securities drawing on:
 - public and private resources and relationships,
 - formal and informal networks and practices
 - state and non-state institutions and structures(Benda-Beckmann et al, 1988; Benda-Beckman and Benda-Beckmann, 2000)
 - Social security as grounded in relationships (close, affectionate, reciprocal, hierarchical, clientelist, formal ...)
(de Bruijn, 2002: 47)
 - Social interactions, involving overlapping networks of private and public relationships impact directly on the production of uneven experiences of social security in postsocialist rural contexts
- 'Local state actors [have] utilized the period of accelerated change to construct a safety net of wealth and power for themselves and their families, and at the same time created patronage networks that constitute the social security arrangements for villagers'
- (Thelen, Sikor and Cartwright, 2008: 11).

Theorising social security and care

- Emphasis on 'relationship' points to 'care as a dimension of social security, which consists of practices that address socially constructed needs [and] that have a giving and a receiving side' (Thelen and Read, 2007, p. 7)
- Experiences and expectations of care and social security are shaped by cultural contexts ... perceptions of deservingness, acceptable degrees of overt interdependency and intimacy and expectations regarding reciprocity are culturally determined, not only between national contexts but also in relation to class, gender and generation (Hashimoto 1996; Attias-Donfut 2001)
- ... and by temporal contexts: remembrance of the past, as well as both prior and contemporary expectations of the present and future, which themselves are culturally inflected (Thelen 2007)

Theorising social security and care

- Emotional and 'existential' forms of security equally are as important as material forms of assistance in people's experiences of security and their abilities to deal with risks
(Benda-Beckmann and Benda-Beckmann, 2000, p. 7)
 - feelings of trust,
 - opportunities for social interaction,
 - sense of having a 'place in the world',
 - logical relationship between past present and future
- 'Emotional security' relates not only to feelings of love and affection, but is also about respect, honour and a feeling that past sacrifices and investments are recognised and rewarded.
- Alignment with prior experiences and expectations, a continuity of rituals and symbolic forms of support have been found to be important to elderly people in postsocialist contexts
(Thelen 2007; Caldwell 2007).

***Obshchenie* and emotional security**

What is the most important thing for an elderly person? Care and attention!

(Anatolii Andreevich, chairman of Burla village veteran's council)

'You know, when you're at home on your pension, everything can start to drag you down. It's all one and the same. You want more opportunities to socialise [*obshchat'sya*]

(Liudmila Fedorovna, chairwoman Mikhailovka veteran's council)

'It's no good living alone. ... it's much better to grow old as a couple. ... [My neighbour] is such a dear person to me. I'm over there day and night. Yes I get plenty of kindness '

(Igor Viktorovich, widower, late 70s, former homecare recipient)

[My homecare worker]'s a lovely woman, we can talk. ... If I've baked something I'll say, 'come on Ira, let's have some' and she'll say, 'oh, you're such a good cook Aunty Nina' ... It's good to sit and chat'

(Nina Gavrilovna, widow, late 70s, homecare recipient)



***Obshchenie*, the *kollektiv* and rituals of sociability**

‘Socialist [elder] care was a complex mix of material and immaterial provision ... which involved a great deal of socializing, face to face interaction, and holistic care’

(Thelen 2007: 46)

We had such parties, you’d laugh yourself silly! They invited us all to the District House of Culture. There’s a room upstairs. We all sat there and it was all done up. They congratulated us and sat us down and everyone had a shot to drink. We had an accordion player, Kolya. And once the accordion got going and we were off. There was dancing and everything. One year I remember we even got together there in the foyer and there was music and we started dancing there. We had foxtrots and waltzes, oh yes. ... It’s not like that anymore.

(Vera Ignatievna, divorced, late 80s, homecare recipient)

Rituals of recognition, symbolic support and 'existential' security

They come every year to see me. They visit the elderly. They always come to see me from the savings bank. Even the boss himself comes. They always buy something. Sometimes they bring me tea, sometimes condensed milk or a packet of sweets. They always bring something nice. They don't forget us.

(Valentina Pavlovna, widow, early 80s, homecare recipient)

What use am I now, I can't see? Nobody needs us! Sometimes you just sit and cry your eyes out. There's no-one even to complain to.

(Vera Ignatievna, divorced, late 80s, homecare recipient)



Communities of care and opportunities for the socially ‘active’

- Uchimsya staret’ offers its members the opportunity to engage in a much more intense and regular form of sociality and one which spills over into other forms of reciprocity and care



We are a very friendly collective who have come together here. As far as I know, we have never quarrelled. There are no problems. Well why should there be problems. We’re old people already. It’s good to get together (*obshchat’sya*). Young people don’t understand us, even our children don’t understand us as well as our friends. That’s how close we have become, like family (*do togo vot srodnilis*).

Communities of care: rituals and participation

- The sociability offered by the club incorporates regular shared celebrations of birthdays, significant high days and holidays
- A degree of ritual in the format of these celebrations makes them familiar and reassuring and is designed to encourage maximum participation and to reinforce the sense of collectivity and togetherness.

Nina Ivanovna will bring along the words, and like it or not, you have to sing! We take well known songs and rewrite the words to be about the birthday girl or boy. We print them out and every own gets a copy, and then, like it or not, you have to sing! And it works out great. We bring along food and for any party the table is groaning.



Communities of care and wider opportunities for support

The most important thing is the chance to socialise (*obshchenie*). Of course we come for the exercises, but the socialising is the most important thing. I'm an incomer (*chelovek priezzhiï*) here, although I've been here 9 years already. And all the same, at the bazaar and on the street when we meet it's like meeting family (*rodnye*). For me the socialising is the main thing.

- Increased socialising offers access to multiple forms of support and assistance:
 - exchanging advice and information;
 - sympathy or moral support for those experiencing personal, family or health difficulties;
 - visiting and providing assistance to those who fall ill

Communities of care: emotional and existential security

I think that everyone of us builds up their emotional (*dukhovnuiu*) and physical strength through our get-togethers here. And by doing physical exercise at least once a week. I really enjoy coming. In my situation it's all the more important to socialise. I will come and socialise for a while yet.

The most important thing that we would all wish for one another is health. Not to get depressed, not to get ill, not to get bitter. Not to give in to your feelings when things are hard. Just to keep control of yourself, to put it simply. If I hadn't known how to control myself, I'd have gone under long ago.



Conclusions

- Importance of 'emotional' security and its relation to sociability, exchanges of care and sense of own purpose and contribution widely acknowledged
- Even those in quite severe material need emphasise these aspects of security, drawing on both a rhetoric and lived realities of lifelong hardship and endurance to explain their ability to 'get by'
- The 'elderly' are a heterogeneous group and access to communities of care differentiated by age, health, gender and class
- Those with best access gain added benefits, becoming part of a virtuous circle of inclusion, active contribution, and wider forms of assistance
- Exclusion of 'others' justified on basis of their 'inactivity' and lack of other cultural and social virtues



People who worked at these kind of [agricultural] jobs, have worked so hard all their lives that by the time they retire their health is usually in shreds. They don't go anywhere much, and often they don't want to. Take a milkmaid for example, she's worked all her life from dawn 'til dusk with hardly any time to see her family even. After she retires, all she is going to want to do is to stay at home and be with her grandchildren.

(CSA staff member explaining the predominance of 'intelligentsia' and white collar workers amongst the CSAs clients)

It is usually women who are the most active. And well there are more women. If there are 180 pensioners in our village, then at least 100 of them are women. Women live longer, men's lives are shorter. Well men don't take care with their lives.

(Chairwoman of village veteran's council explaining relative absence of men from cultural groups and their activities)