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HAPPINESS AND JUSTICE - INTERRELATED OR INDEPENDENT INDICATORS OF THE SOCIAL WELL-BEING?²

ABSTRACT: Since 2017, the Sociology Chair of the RUDN University has conducted the research project to identify the possibilities of the sociological conceptualization and measurement of happiness. At the first stage of the project, we revealed a contradiction between today's dominant objectivist discourse that reduces happiness to the objectively measured social well-being and everyday interpretations of happiness based on its subjective perception that usually does not go beyond the close social circle. We identified two conditional traditions in the sociological study of well-being, which require different methodological approaches – based either on objective indicators of the quality of life (living conditions, annual vacations, etc.) or on subjective indicators (satisfaction with life, family relationships, work, hobby, assessment of educational opportunities, etc.). The second stage of the project started in 2020 and shifted its focus to the concept of justice – as connecting subjective and objective aspects of social well-being (for instance, if the place of residence is a criterion of life satisfaction, then the 'quality' of the place of residence, including fair urban planning and social differentiation of the urban space, cannot but influence the social well-being). In 2021, we developed a strategy to provide clear conceptual definitions for complex concepts with multiple connotations such as happiness and justice. This strategy consists of two steps: focus on the macro-sociological dimension and identification of objective and subjective indicators. The results of the representative all-Russian online survey enabled making both substantive (dominant interpretations of happiness, self-esteem in

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terms of happiness, etc.) and methodological conclusions (pressure of social desirability, gender and generational 'dimensions' of happiness, etc.). In 2022, we conducted the second representative all-Russian online survey to supplement the earlier identified interpretations of happiness with the assessments of justice – in order to provide a more correct interpretation of the social well-being identified in the Russian society. The article presents the results of the second online survey.

KEYWORDS: (social) well-being, generational analysis, value orientations, happiness, (social) justice, (social) injustice, online survey.

Intergenerational dialogue is the basis of all forms of social interaction, which has always been in the focus of social sciences – from both theoretical and empirical perspectives. The Russian scientific tradition tends to use the concept 'generational crisis/conflict' when comparing the social status and value orientations of different generations. In the post-Soviet period, two fields of the generational analysis developed: some authors use the concept of generation to study the reproduction of the social structure (generations are defined as age cohorts) and the life trajectories of different generations; other authors focus on the youth as a special social-demographic group and the main agent of social changes, "including its intellectual and organizational alternatives to the existing worldviews, values and life styles" (Voronkov, 2005, p. 170); namely, the second approach prevails.

The Sociology Chair of the RUDN University represents the second approach – focuses on the student youth: we conduct monitoring studies to compare the value orientations of different 'generations' of the Russian youth and the worldview priorities of students from different countries. As a rule, our surveys focus on educational and professional values, interpersonal interaction (family, friends, close social circle, love relationship, etc.), family and demographic values, political values (participation in elections, interest in politics, assessment of the country's foreign policy, patriotism, trust in social institutions, etc.), religious beliefs, criteria for identifying success in life, etc. In particular, we identified the pragmatic attitude of the student youth to the higher education in terms of career prospects, the strong reliance on the family support, and a high level of anxiety which, however, does not lead to pessimism (see, e.g.: Narbut, Trotsuk, 2017; 2018a; 2018b).

There are generational differences in all above-mentioned and other value orientations, but they do not seem to be as significant for the general social solidarity as different perceptions of such fundamental values as (personal) happiness and (social) (in) justice. In December 2021, we conducted the first representative online survey on happiness (see, e.g.: Trotsuk, 2019a; 2019c; Trotsuk, Grebneva, 2019; Trotsuk, Koroleva, 2020) and, in April 2022, the second survey on justice (based on its interpretations presented



Fig. 1. The most common ideas about happiness (%)

in: Layard, 2005; Prodi, 2017; Rawls, 1999; Sen, 2009; Sztompka, 2017; Trotsuk, 2019b). The surveys were conducted on the online panel of the Tiburon company: the sample of 800 respondents represented four age groups – 14-19-year-olds (teenagers/teens), 20-29-year-olds (youth), 30-49-year-olds (adults), 50-69-year-olds (older generation).

According to the survey data, in the Russian society, the personal interpretation of happiness prevails, i.e., the idea that the person is “a creator of one’s own happiness”: if he knows how to find joy in life (91%) and people who understand him (82%); does not pursue happiness as something external but looks for it in himself (80%); defines happiness not as a goal but as a way of life (78%) – with a chosen job/profession (77%), life path (77%), and loved ones (76%). Therefore, “most people are as happy as they decide to be” (75%) – with what they have (70%) and without the tormenting envy of others’ happiness (70%). And there are no fundamental generational differences (fluctuations are within the limits of the statistical error), and some differences are quite predictable (Fig. 1).

Every second respondent (50%) believes that some people/events/emotions can make us happy, and every tenth respondent (11%, more often after the age of 30) insists that happiness is rather a personal decision/opinion/state, i.e., no one can be made happy. There is a significant generational difference (Fig. 2): in the older group, there is a smaller share of those who believe in the possibility of making a person happy due a larger share of those who are convinced that happiness is a personal decision. This difference can be explained by the objective factor – a decrease in the older generations’ income and quality of life, which makes the feeling of happiness a personal choice under such circumstances.

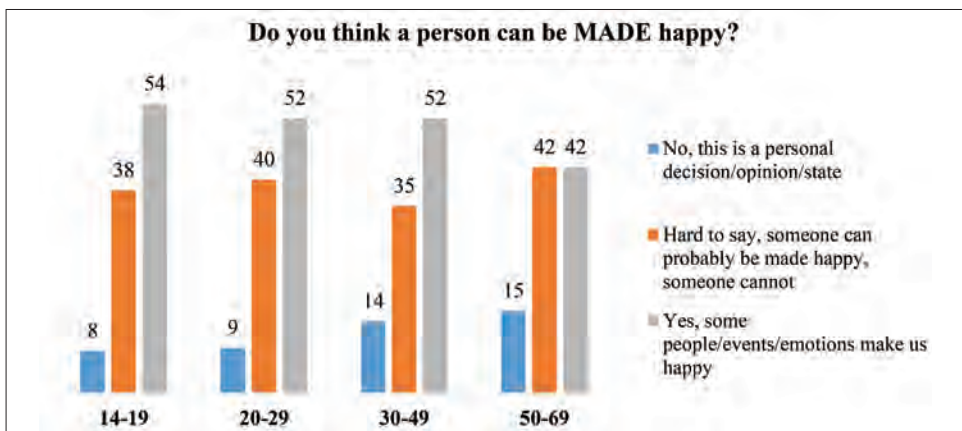


Fig. 2. Ideas about the possibility of making someone happy (%)

With age, there is a decreasing share of those who consider happiness shareable (from 60% of teenagers to 39% of the older respondents) due to an increasing share of

those who believe in the impossibility of sharing happiness (from 9-8% of the youth to 17-21% after the age of 30) (Fig. 3).

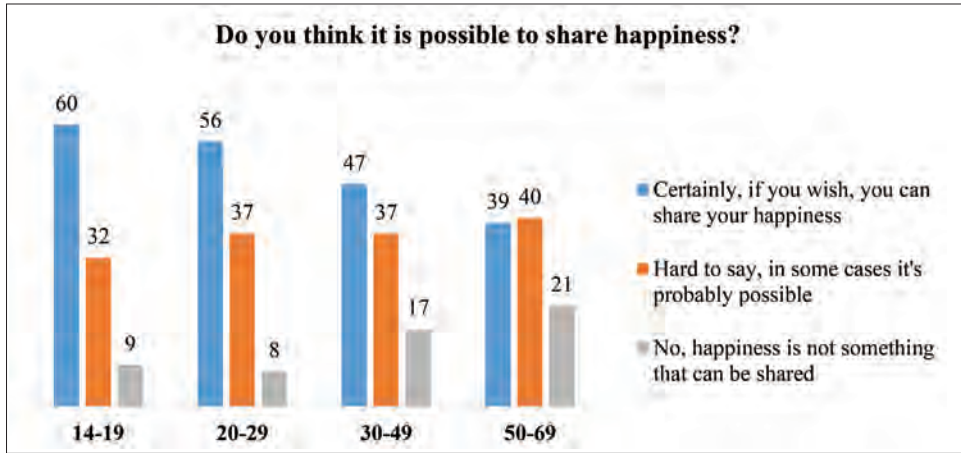
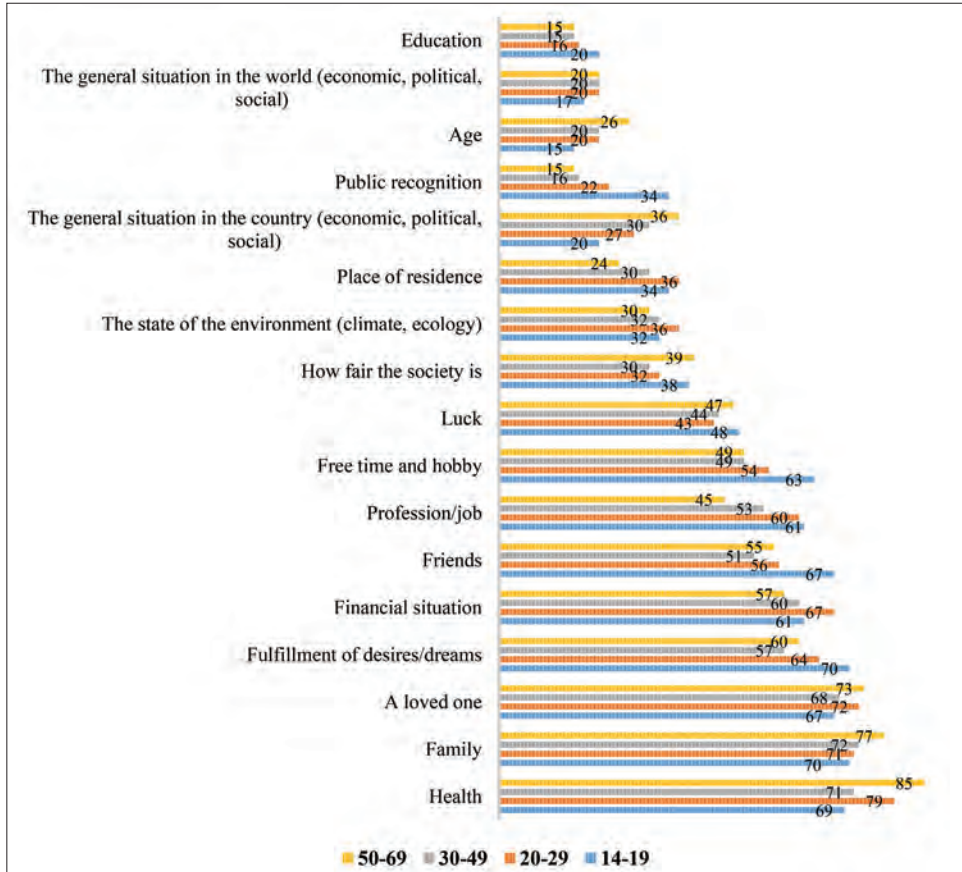


Fig. 3. Ideas about the possibility of sharing happiness (% , age groups)

The answers to the question what determines whether someone is happy or not can be grouped into several segments, and we consider as the most significant factors those mentioned by more than 45% of respondents: 1) health (76%), family (72%) and a loved one (70%); 2) fulfilment of desires/dreams (63%), financial situation (61%), friends (57%), free time/hobby and profession/job (54% and 55%); 3) luck (45%), i.e., ‘personal’ aspects of life – preferences, well-being and close social circle. Only then comes social justice, i.e., “how fair the society is” (35%), the state of the environment (32%), place of residence (31%) and the general situation in the country (28%), i.e., ‘external’ aspects of personal life. Finally, almost every fifth respondent mentions the general situation in the world and public recognition, age and education; and the least significant factors of happiness are religion (6%), date of birth (zodiac sign, etc.) (5%), gender and political views (4% each). Generational differences in the factors of personal happiness are insignificant and predictable (Fig. 4).

With age, life limitations determined by the health condition become more pressing, so the importance of good health increases; while teenagers show traditional maximalism and idealism by emphasizing the fulfilment of desires/dreams, having friends, free time and public recognition. With age, the importance of the profession/job, place of residence and public recognition decreases under the pressure of the situation in the country. Social justice seems to be more important in the youngest and oldest groups as probably the most dependent on the external support and circumstances in comparison to the most economically and socially active group of 30-49-year-olds (the least mentioned factors are not presented in Figure 4).



Fi4. 4. Factors of happiness (%)

In general, the distribution of happiness factors corresponds to the hierarchy of life values, at the top of which we see good health (69%), strong family (58%) and the well-being of loved ones (56%), which means having a loved one (54%) and a good financial situation (51%); then come children and inner harmony (43% each), job/profession (38%) and hobby (28%); one in five mentions social justice (18%), global peace (20%) and optimism (19%); the least significant are the faith in God (8%) and public recognition (6%). Generational differences are again insignificant and predictable: the oldest group less often mentions the financial well-being and having a loved one, job/profession and hobby, but emphasizes the well-being of loved ones; after the age of 30, the importance of good health increases; teenagers less often mention a strong family and children but more often public recognition, perhaps because the latter is a more ‘realistic’ (for teens) factor of happiness (due to the media influence) than the former (Fig. 5).

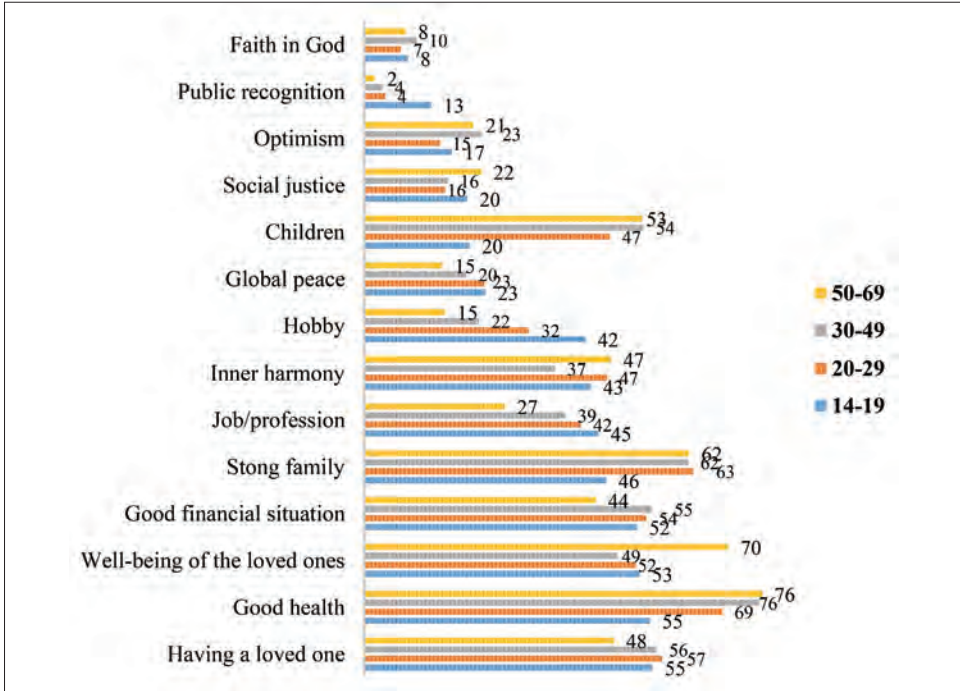


Fig. 5. Hierarchy of value orientations (%)

Despite some differences in the interpretation of happiness and its factors, every second respondent considers himself/herself a happy person, and the distribution of self-assessments in terms of happiness is similar by age if we turn a four-response scale into a dichotomous one – ‘happy’ (75%) and ‘refusing to define oneself as happy’ (25%). The majority of the respondents of all ages consider themselves happy, especially in the group of 20-29-year-olds, but after the age of 30, the share increases of those who deny such a self-assessment (every third respondent) (Fig. 6).

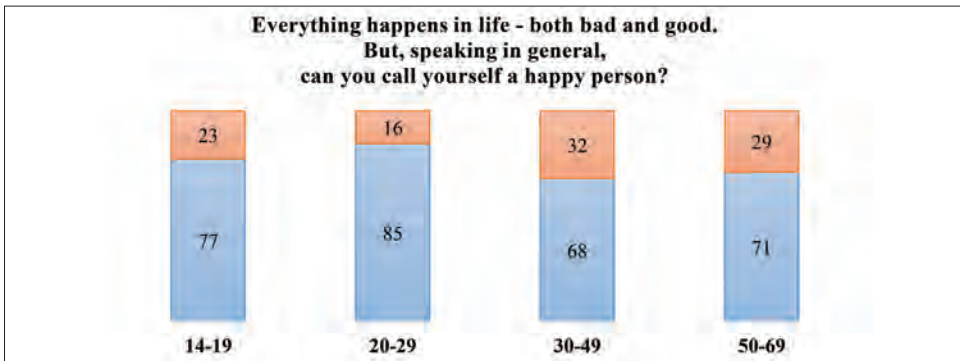


Fig. 6. Self-assessments in terms of happiness (%)

We used two questions to explain the above-mentioned generational differences – about what helps the respondents to feel happy and to feel unhappy. Among the reasons for personal happiness, the family well-being (56%), good health of the loved ones (61%), having a loved one (52%) and enjoying one’s life (56%) form the leading group of “happiness factors”. This group is followed by the group consisting of good friends (39%), good financial situation (32%), satisfying job/studies/profession (29%), finding joy in children/grandchildren (28%), and creative activities (24%). There are some generational differences (Fig. 7) with the exception of a good financial situation, family well-being and good health (although they are less significant for teenagers): teenagers more often mention creative, interesting activities and good friends, 20-29-year-olds – having a loved one; while for the older generation, good friends, a good financial situation and an interesting job are less significant, which can be explained by the objective limitations the oldest Russians face, i.e., they are truly deprived of many social benefits and tend to “be happy just by being still alive”.

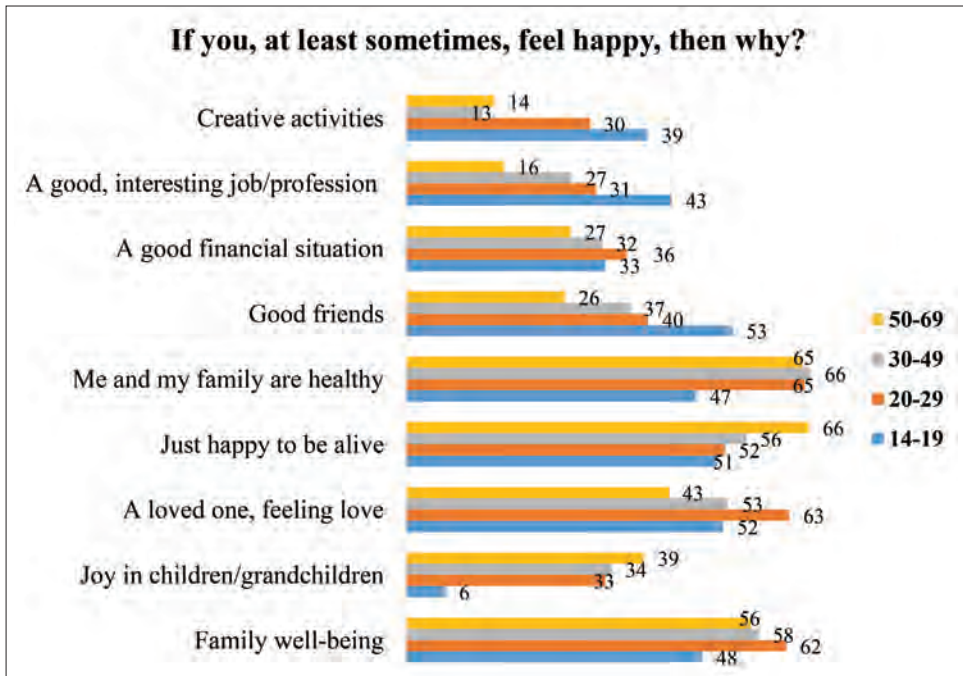


Fig. 7. Reasons to feel happy (%)

What makes the respondents unhappy is not only the lack of the above-listed ‘happiness factors’: primarily, it is the lack of money (50%) and anxiety about the future (47%), illnesses and poor health (43%), which deprive us of confidence in tomorrow (42%); accumulated fatigue that does not allow to enjoy life (40%) in difficult circumstances (37%), one of which is the feeling of social injustice (37%). Every third respondent mentions the feeling that things are not working out, family problems, an alarming

situation in the country and the world, loneliness; every fourth – not having a good job; every fifth – the lack of time for rest.

There are generational differences in the ‘factors of personal unhappiness’ except for the feeling of social injustice – most of the reasons for being unhappy change with age (Fig. 8). Thus, the older the person, the less he/she cares about the level of income, accumulated fatigue, difficult life circumstances and personal failures, family problems and the lack of time for rest, and the more he/she is concerned about illnesses and poor health (especially taking into account the decreasing demands and pessimistic fatalism of the older Russians). The teenagers seem to stand out by being more worried about the future, exaggerating their accumulated fatigue and difficult circumstances, fears of not succeeding in life, beliefs in being lonely and suffering from the lack of time for rest (which seems to be a typical description of conflicting teens’ aspirations and self-esteem). And again, we can see a generational difference in responses at the 30-year milestone: after it, the respondents are less likely to feel unhappy due to the accumulated fatigue, family problems or the lack of time for rest, but are more concerned about the uncertain future.

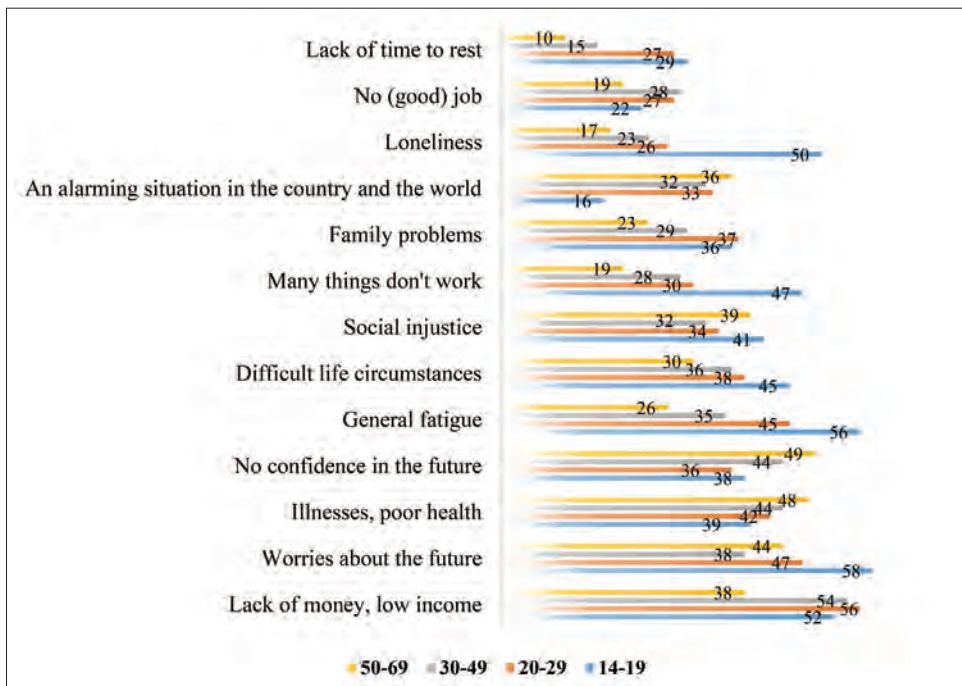


Fig. 8. Reasons to feel unhappy (%)

If the feeling of social injustice is the only factor of unhappiness that is equally significant for all generations, we have to compare generational interpretations of justice and manifestations of injustice. According to the survey data, the respondents define social justice as primarily a legal phenomenon – the equality before the law (71%); more

than half of the respondents clarify this interpretation as the equality of rights and the compliance with laws (58% each), equal social opportunities and guarantees of security (56% each), fulfilment by the majority of moral standards (53%), freedom of speech and non-discrimination (50% each), social guarantees (49%); every third respondent insists on social equality and income equality (31% each). Despite quite a unanimous interpretation of social justice as the equality of rights, fulfilment of moral standards and non-discrimination, there are some generational differences (Fig. 9): with age, people are more concerned about the equality before the law and compliance with laws, guarantees of security and social guarantees; and, in contrast, they are less concerned about freedom of speech and income equality. Thus, in many respects, the 30-year milestone serves as a watershed which increases the personal importance of the equality before the law, compliance with laws and guarantees as the elements of social justice.

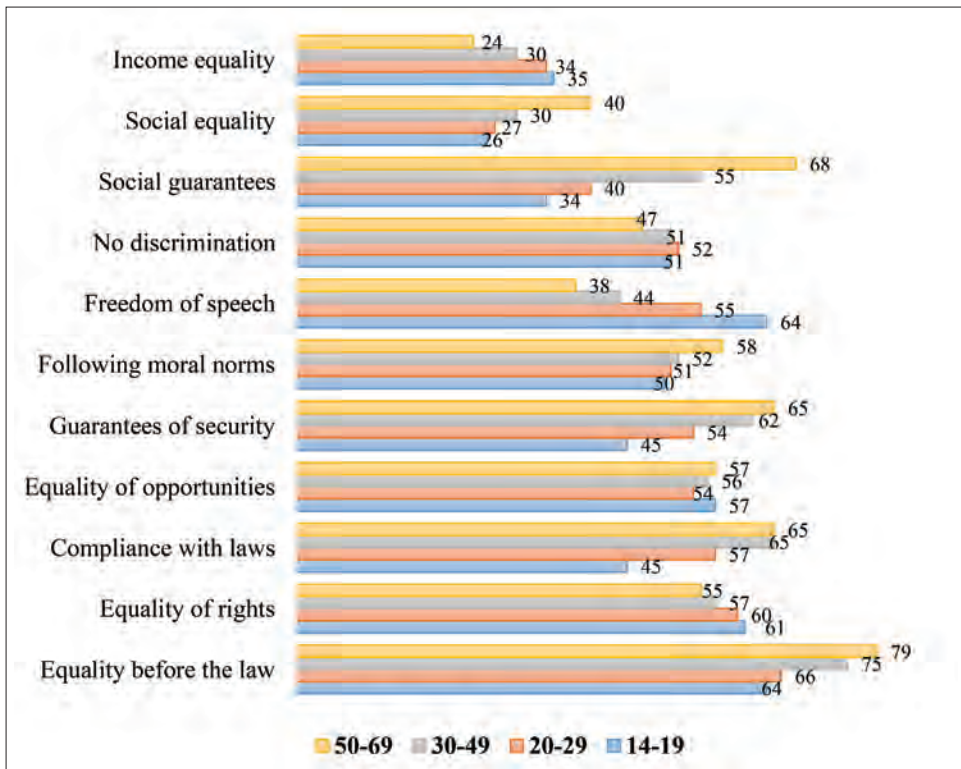


Fig. 9. Interpretations of social justice (%)

However, assessments of life in the contemporary Russian society in terms of social justice did not show significant generational differences: almost every second respondent believes that life is sometimes fair and sometimes not, from 15% to 19% – that life is rather fair (“I think that life is fair” + “I think that life is mostly fair”), every third respondent says that life is rather unfair. We used the following question: “Imagine stairs,

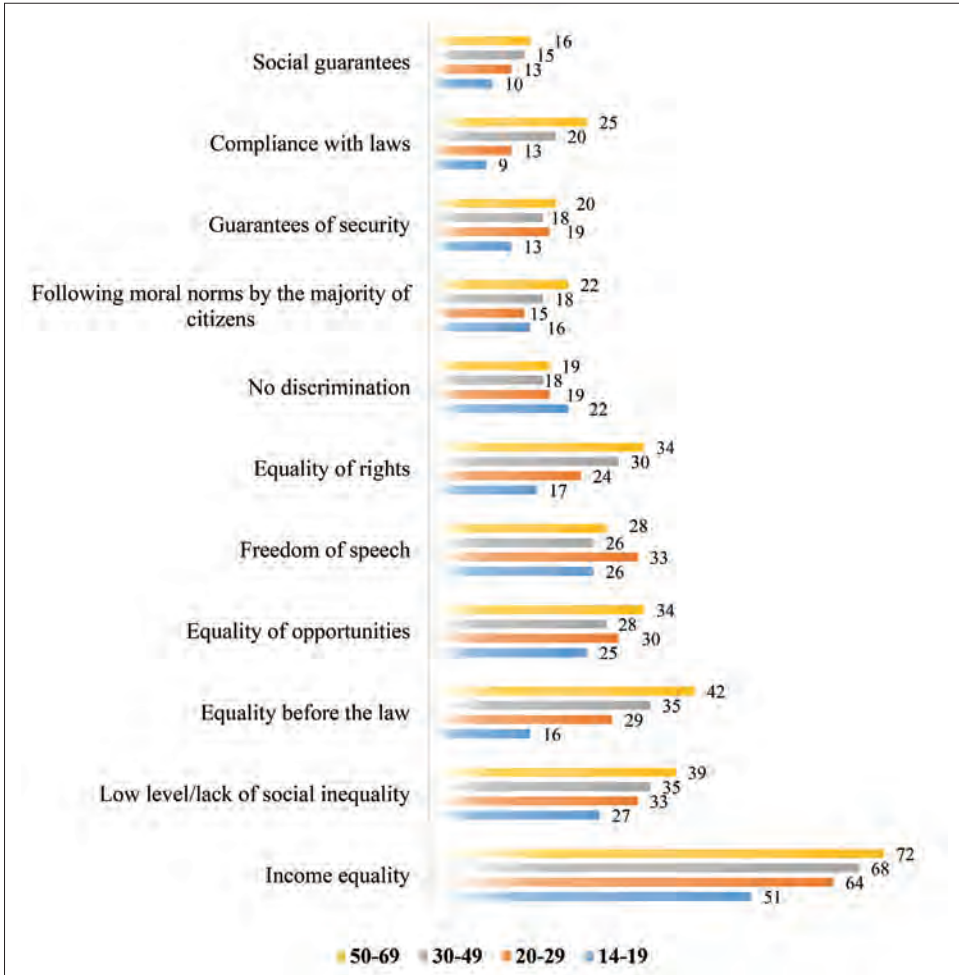


Fig. 10. Elements of social justice that Russia lacks (%)

on which the first step means the most unfair life possible, and the tenth step means the fairest life possible. On which step between the first and the tenth would you place the contemporary Russian society? Most respondents chose steps between 3 and 7 (with the average of 5), i.e., avoided the most positive and negative assessments. Nevertheless, the sums of three ‘steps’ at each pole of the scale are indicative: the highest estimates (the achieved social justice) were given by about every tenth respondent (12% before the age of 30, 16% of 30-49-year-olds, 10% – after the age of 50); the lowest estimates (the most unfair social life) were given by 14% under the age of 30, by every fifth respondent in the group of 30-49-year-olds (20%), and by every fourth respondent older than 50 (25%). Such assessments can be considered sustainable social representations, because there are almost no generational differences in the perception of changes in the position of the Russian society on the ‘social-justice stairs’ under the pandemic: more

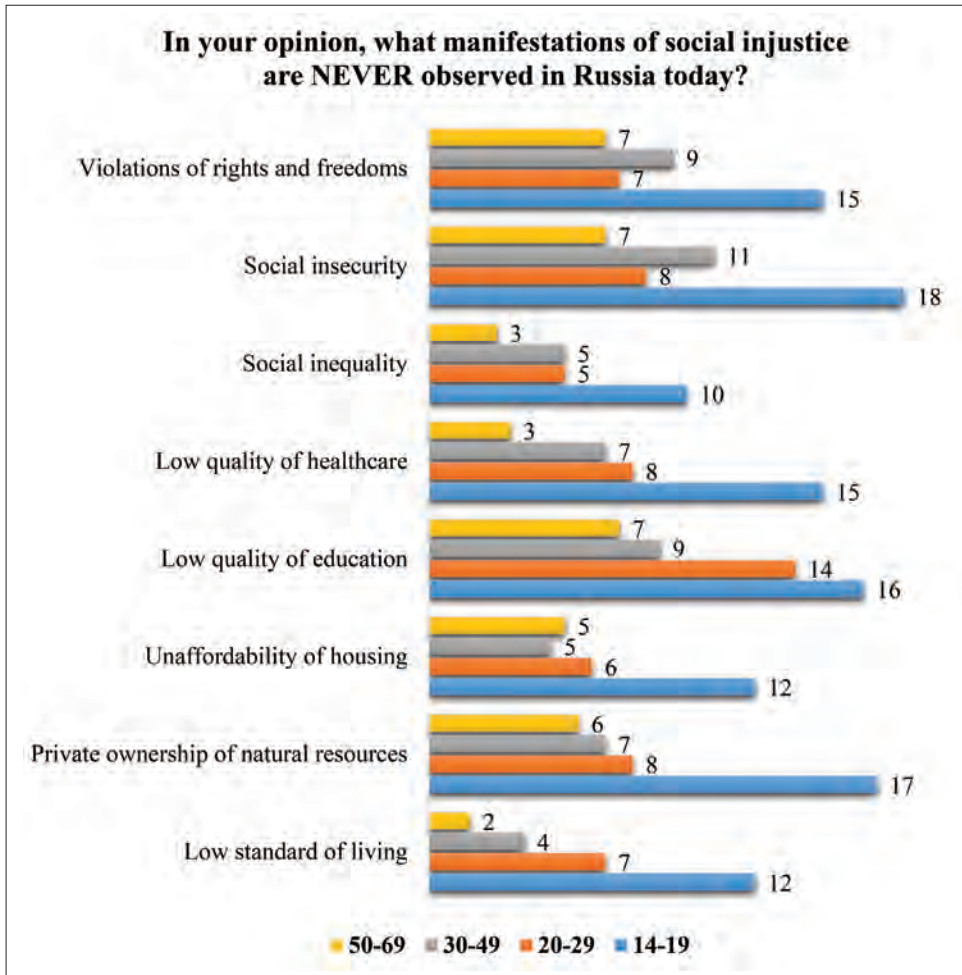


Fig. 11. Elements of social injustice that Russia lacks (%)

than half of the respondents did not notice any changes, every third respondent believes that the situation regarding social justice has worsened, every tenth respondent (15% of teenagers and 5% of the youth) believes that, on the contrary, the situation regarding social justice has improved.

To clarify the criteria for such assessments, we used a question about the elements of social justice in the contemporary Russian society (present in full, in part, or missing). The respondents consider the income inequality as the main violation of social justice in the country; with a significant lag, it is followed by social inequality – before the law, in rights and opportunities, and by the lack of freedom of speech (from 26% to 33%); the least mentioned (less than 19%) manifestations of social injustice are discrimination, immorality, high social risks, non-compliance with laws and the lack of social guarantees. Except for some teenagers’ responses that break a kind of a general generational

concord, we can say that with age, the share of those who claim the lack of almost all elements of social justice (with the exception of freedom of speech) increases (Fig. 10).

To validate the data, we added a question about those manifestations of social injustice that respondents observe in the contemporary Russian society. The answer “I never observe” is the most indicative: for instance, from 10% to 18% of teenagers claim to have never faced any of the listed manifestations of social injustice (Fig. 11). In general, with the exception of this indicator and of the increasing share of those who mention the low quality of Russian education after the age of 30, the least observed manifestations of social injustice are social insecurity and violations of rights and freedoms (Fig. 11).

Given the more significant differences in the interpretation of social justice and its manifestation in the Russian society than of social injustice, the respondents seem to refer to sustainable social ideas and media representations rather than to express personal opinions based on their life experience. This assumption is confirmed by the distribution of answers to the question whether the Russian society has become less or more socially just in the last 2-3 years (Fig. 12). After the age of 30, the share of the respondents who find it difficult to answer this question decreases; after the age of 20, the share of those who believe that nothing has changed increases; every fifth teenager thinks that the Russian society has become more socially just, but from 1/4 to 1/3 of all other age groups believe that, on the contrary, the situation has changed for the worse.

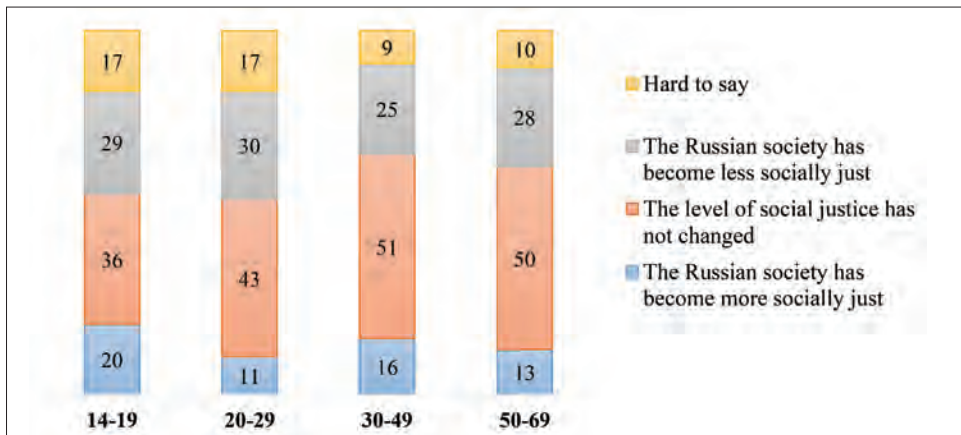


Fig. 12. Changes in the Russian society in terms of social justice (%)

Unlike happiness, which the majority of the respondents consider a rather immeasurable phenomenon/abstract concept (with significant differences at the 30-year milestone) (Fig. 13), social justice is defined as measurable (over 60%) but only compared to the past (over 52%), and there are almost no generational differences (Fig. 14).

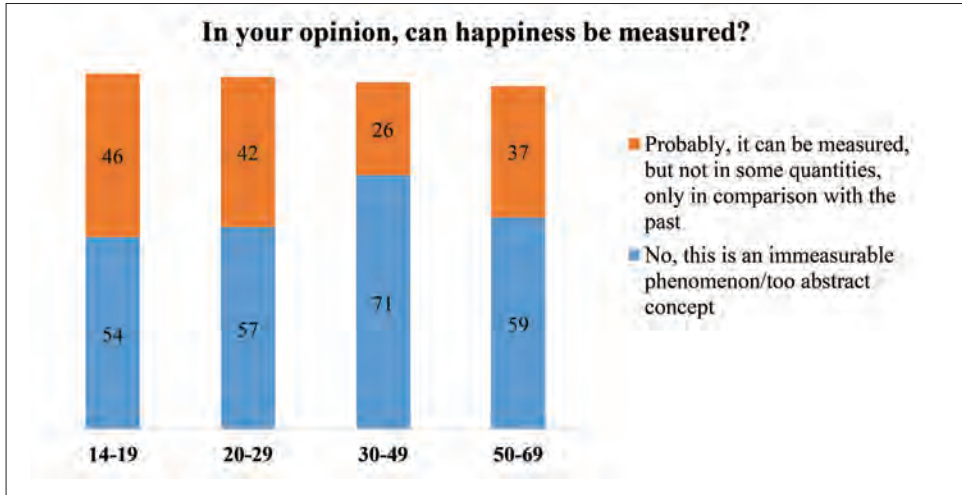


Fig. 13. Estimates of the 'measurability' of happiness (in %)

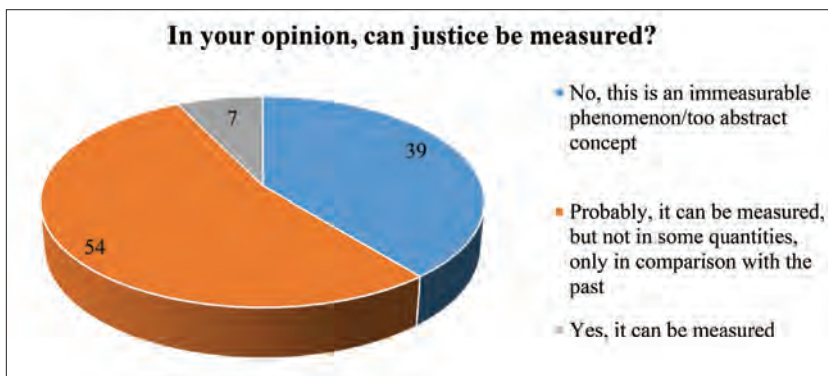


Fig. 14. Estimates of the 'measurability' of justice (in %)

Thus, in the Russian society, a 'personalistic' interpretation of happiness prevails – as something a person is responsible for in order to ensure one's social well-being: one is to define happiness for oneself, to choose a right (leading to happiness) professional trajectory, life path, close social circle and other aspects of private life (personal well-being) – this is a kind of a 'core' in the definition of happiness. Its 'periphery' is more fragmented: there are both additional 'personalistic' interpretations of happiness that reinforce the 'core' (rational choice, state of mind, decision to live according to own opinions and in happiness, etc.), and external factors (social justice, general situation in the country and the world, public recognition, etc.). Moreover, there is a generational consensus on the interpretations of happiness and justice as the two basic foundations of the social well-being, i.e., social solidarity and social order. All generations provide 'personalistic' definitions of happiness, i.e., regardless of age, Russians believe that a person makes a decision to be happy or not. Some generational differences in the interpretations

of happiness and its factors are predictable as determined not by the value priorities but by an objective decline in the older generation's quality of life: with age, it is increasingly difficult to find reasons for happiness in the external circumstances; therefore, people focus on their family and social circle, inner harmony and personal responsibility for one's happiness.

Nevertheless, among the factors of happiness, quite 'external' to the personal decision prevail – good health, good family, having a loved one, good financial situation, fulfilment of desires/dreams, good job/profession and free time, although these are also 'personal' aspects of life. The distribution of happiness factors corresponds to the hierarchy of life values headed by good health (one's own and of the loved ones), a reliable social circle (family well-being), having a loved one and good financial situation, i.e., by the factors contributing to the feeling of happiness regardless of the interpretation of happiness. However, with age, the importance of financial situation, love and friendship, job/profession and hobby decreases, while the importance of the well-being of loved ones and good health increases. The majority of the respondents claim to be happy, but after the age of 30 the share of such self-assessments starts to decrease.

Accordingly, the lack of 'happiness factors' is considered as the main reason for feeling unhappy (low income and poor health), but it is supplemented by the anxiety about the uncertain future, which prevents people from enjoying their lives. With the exception of social injustice, there are generational differences in 'unhappiness factors': with age, people become increasingly concerned about low income, accumulated fatigue and illnesses, difficult life circumstances, personal failures and family problems.

In general, when interpreting happiness, Russians prefer 'personalistic' definitions supplemented by the family and close-social-circle ties; when interpreting justice, Russians tend to define it as a legal rather than a moral category, although every second respondent admits the necessity to ensure the common moral standards and non-discrimination. There is a kind of generational concord in the interpretation of social injustice as a factor of personal unhappiness (negatively affecting the social well-being), and some insignificant and predictable differences in other definitions of justice. With age (in general and especially after the age of 30), the importance of the equality before the law and of the compliance with laws, social security and social guarantees increases, while freedom of speech and income equality become less valuable.

However, there are no fundamental generational differences in the assessments of life in the contemporary Russian society in terms of social justice – every second respondent finds it hard to answer the corresponding question, while every third claims the increasing social injustice. The reason is the conviction of the majority of the respondents in the sustainable income inequality, from a quarter to a third of the respondents speak of social inequality (before the law, of rights and opportunities) and of the lack of freedom of speech; with age, the shares increase of those who declare the lack of almost all elements of social justice in the contemporary Russian society.

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