



Managing everyday (in)securities: Normative values, emotional security and symbolic recognition in the lives of Russian rural elders

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A B S T R A C T

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Qualitative studies of ageing have called for attention to be paid to the diverse experiences of older people and to their agency in negotiating opportunities and constraints. A lack of research into the experiences and subjectivities of rural elders has been noted. Yet, the majority of research concerning elderly people in contemporary Russia continues to treat old age as a category and focus on particular practical and material forms of assistance available to pensioners. This article, aims to contribute to the small but growing body of ethnographic studies which shed light on the lives of elderly people in Russia as subjects in their own right. Based on ethnographic fieldwork from rural Siberia, the article explores the ways in which elderly people experience and interpret day-to-day (in)securities, forms of care and social support. In doing so the article explores three key questions: *Firstly*, how do lived realities, both past and present, and normative values of rural life intersect in elderly people's experiences of (in) security in post-socialist contexts?; *Secondly*, what forms of assistance do older people view as legitimate in their everyday lives? In particular, how are emotional exchanges and interpersonal connections interpreted and what securities do they bring?; *Thirdly*, what is the significance of symbolic support and recognition for elderly people and how do these draw on practices and frameworks from the socialist past?

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1. Introduction

Qualitative studies of ageing in a range of international contexts have called for attention to be paid to diverse experiences of ageing and to older people's agency in negotiating opportunities, challenges and constraints (Keating and Phillips 2008: 6–8). Attention has been called to the contributions that older people make as active members of local communities, as providers as well as recipients of care and within networks of mutual support and assistance (Manthorpe et al., 2008; Rozanova et al., 2008). A particular strand in this literature has addressed the question of ageing in rural contexts, pointing out that due to a lack of research 'rural elders may be considered neglected 'others'', (Burholt, 2006: 1097) and that further empirical and theoretical work is needed to develop clearer understandings of the ways in which rurality and ageing intersect in particular contexts (Rowles, 1988; Keating and Phillips, 2008).

In post-socialist Russia, the social and economic implications of an ageing population have been much discussed in both domestic and

international media, political and academic debate (Eberstadt, 2006; Rivkin-Fish, 2003). In rural areas in particular the combination of outmigration, falling birth rates and the epithet of 'dying villages' have compounded a view of the elderly as abandoned, destitute and helpless victims of post-socialist transformations. The elderly have also attracted considerable attention in studies specifically concerned with changes in state provision (Cook, 2007; O'Brien et al., 2004), the majority of which treat old age as a category and focus on particular practical and material forms of assistance: pensions, housing, health care etc. (see for example, Buckley and Donahue, 2000; Velkoff and Kinsella, 2000). Relatively little insight has been offered into the lived experiences of elderly people, their contributions and agency or their understandings and means of negotiating this shifting welfare landscape emotionally as well as pragmatically. Whilst a few ethnographic accounts have begun to address this absence, these have tended to focus on the lives and experiences of urban residents (Caldwell, 2004, 2007; Kondakova and Ivankova, 2002; Harris, 2011), or on the experiences of indigenous populations (Bloch, 2005). With a few notable exceptions (e.g. Shubin, 2007), the perspectives and experiences of predominantly Russian, elderly, rural residents remain significantly under-researched.

This article aims therefore to contribute to the small but growing body of work shedding light on the lives of Russia's elderly

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as subjects in their own right (Bloch, 2005: 538–40). Based on 8 weeks of fieldwork conducted in 2009–2010 in the central village of a rural district of western Siberia, it examines the ways in which elderly people experience and interpret day-to-day (in)securities and the forms of social assistance available to them. Focussing primarily on elderly people's experiences as recipients of support and assistance, but without losing sight of their agency in this role, the article explores the following interrelated questions:

- *Firstly*, how do lived realities, both past and present, and normative values of rural life intersect in elderly people's experiences of (in)security in post-socialist contexts?
- *Secondly*, what forms of assistance do older people view as legitimate in their everyday lives? In particular, how are emotional exchanges and interpersonal connections interpreted and what securities do they bring?
- *Thirdly*, what is the significance of symbolic support and recognition and how do these draw on practices and frameworks from the socialist past?

The article begins with a discussion of the study's theoretical frameworks followed by an introduction to the fieldwork context and methods. Thereafter, the above three questions are addressed in turn, drawing on empirical evidence from the field, before being brought together in the conclusions.

2. Theoretical frameworks: emotional and ontological aspects of social security

The wider research project from which the findings for this article are drawn, seeks to understand the ways in which rural people in contemporary Russia deal with day-to-day insecurities. The study is framed by anthropological theorisations of social security, defined as encompassing the complex ways in which people mitigate risk and produce securities (social, economic, personal and cultural) by drawing on public and private resources and relationships, formal and informal networks and practices, and state and non-state institutions and structures (Benda-Beckmann et al., 1988; Benda-Beckmann and Benda-Beckmann, 2000). This nuanced approach to the concept of social security is helpful in highlighting interdependencies between public and private spheres of activity, the agency of 'ordinary' people as well as professionals and institutions, and the ways in which access to a wide variety of resources and forms of assistance are intertwined. It also points to a view of social security as grounded in relationships (De Bruijn, 2000: 47), which may incorporate varying degrees and combinations of closeness, affection, reciprocity, hierarchy, formality and which are likely to be shaped by locally defined norms and values of behaviour and social interaction.

'Emotional' interactions and exchanges of care, as well as 'symbolic' forms of recognition and support, play an important role in holistic experiences of 'social security' (Thelen, 2007). Feelings of trust and emotional forms of security can be equally as significant as material forms of assistance and support in people's experiences of (in)security and their abilities to deal with difficult circumstances and risks (Benda-Beckmann and Benda-Beckmann, 2000: 7). Studies of ageing have shown that aspects of emotional security, social interaction and interpersonal support are strongly connected to health and well-being in old age (Wenger and Keating, 2008: 33). 'Emotional security' is not only about being embedded in social networks which provide opportunities for social interaction, the development of trust and the 'feeling' of being cared for. It also entails more 'ontological' or 'existential' aspects to do with a person's sense of having an understandable place in the world and that there is a logical relationship between past, present and

future (Hashimoto, 2000: 20; Caldwell, 2007; Thelen, 2007: 36). For elderly people in particular, this means that 'emotional security' relates not only to feelings of love and affection, but also to respect, honour and a feeling that past sacrifices and investments are recognised and rewarded. Such recognition requires an acknowledgement of the active agency of older people and the importance of their contributions, both past and present.

Authors engaging with transnational studies of ageing and care have pointed out, that both are shaped by cultural contexts which can be read at a range of levels (Attias-Donfut, 2001: 14). Hashimoto's (1996) comparative study of elder care in Japan and America, for example, clearly demonstrates that 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. Rural places and notions of 'rurality' also bring particular cultural and material contexts to bear on experiences of ageing (Rowles, 1988). Studies of rural poverty, welfare and care have shown that rural life is often associated with a relative scarcity of formal structures and support services, compensated for, at least at a level of normative values, if not always in practice, by more tightly knit local communities, higher degrees of mutual assistance and greater social intimacy between neighbours and kin (Rowles, 1988; Burholt and Naylor, 2005; Cloke et al., 1995).

Issues of ontological security are also shaped by the particular social, economic and ideological contexts in and through which elderly people have lived their lives. Normative values associated with working the land and reciprocal support between kin present a particular combination of everyday practical and ontological insecurities for rural elders in many contexts.¹ This is perhaps particularly so in those Russian rural contexts where subsistence farming remains a virtually universal practice. Retirement from formal employment may lead to greater expectations and social pressures, particularly on 'younger' pensioners, to engage in subsistence activities to support both their own needs and those of kin households. Rather than enjoying greater leisure time, rural elders often engage in a significant amount of physically demanding agricultural labour (Heady and Gambold Miller, 2006: 38–9). As they grow older and potentially more infirm, elderly people's position and value as members of rural communities and families may be perceived, not least by elderly people themselves, to be called into question. Recognition of past and present contributions to physical and social environments and to maintaining local communities and cultural values can therefore be especially important in maintaining a sense of purpose and value for rural elders (Rozanova et al., 2008). Yet in post-socialist contexts, elderly people have witnessed unprecedented challenges to the legitimacy and value of state-led projects, in which they have invested often enormous physical, emotional and personal resource (Caldwell, 2007: 66). Formalised rituals of recognition from those in positions of authority, once an important feature of the forms of 'symbolic security' offered by state socialism, continue therefore to carry particularly significant value in terms of ontological securities (Thelen, 2007: 46).

3. Social provision for the elderly in rural Russia

In Russia, as in other post-socialist contexts, the relationship between formal structures and informal sources of assistance is

¹ See for example Heady (1999), Eberstadt (2006), Rowles (1988); see also Schwarzc (2012) this volume for a discussion of the impacts of similar normative values in designating deservingness and entitlement to social assistance in relation to the ethnicization of poverty in rural Hungary.

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