
THE PROBLEM OF ASSESSING THE MORAL STANDARDS BY DIFFERENT SOCIAL GROUPS

**Tatyana Yuryevna Kirilina^{*}, Tamara Ivanovna Buzmakova,
Vladimir Ivanovich Antonenko, Kira Viktorovna Lapshinova and
Vladimir Aleksandrovich Smirnov**

*State educational institution of higher education Moscow region 'University of technology',
ul. Gagarin 42, Korolev, 141070 Moscow region, Russia*

(Received 24 July 2015, revised 16 December 2015)

Abstract

The article analyses the results of the foreign and domestic sociological researches of the relations of different social groups to morality and immorality. Data from the author's study are given. It is noted that pessimistic diagnosis of moral destruction of the Russian society is still premature and not true. Traditional values and meanings, norms, ordinary rules of human coexistence are still relevant for our citizens, including young people.

Keywords: moral norms, immoral behaviour, young people, older people, middle class

1. Introduction

In every society there is an objective need of people's behaviour in certain frequently recurring situations in the same way. In practice, this requirement is implemented by means of moral standards. Moral standards appear in a dual form - as an element of moral relationships and as a form of moral consciousness. On the one hand, it is a standard of conduct, custom, constantly reproduced in similar actions of many people as a moral law, obligatory for each person, and on the other hand - a moral requirement that is expressed in the form of standards and is reflected in the moral consciousness and in the form the relevant rules.

According to E. Durkheim, moral standards tend to vary depending on the changes in social standards. Always society considers the behaviour to be truly moral when a person sacrifices something personal for something public. A society becomes 'moral' only when its members have learnt the content of the normative principles properly [1].

The transformation of the majority of the post-communist societies, as rightly noted by Academician T.I. Zaslavskaya, is accompanied not by creation, but by destruction, especially in the field of spiritual and moral life and culture. This is reflected in the reduction of life quality and conditions of the individual development, the crisis in Science and education, dilution of moral criteria,

^{*}E-mail: kirilina_t@rambler.ru

distribution of illegal forms of social practices [2]. Young people are especially sensitive to these changes. Besides, all this is often happened during the transition period from a teenager to an adult person, which is characterized by the vulnerable physiology of young people, unstable mentality, amazing combination of ambitiousness and infantilism with distorted spiritual and moral criteria and indistinct view of life [3]. In this regard, the analysis of the attitude of the different social groups, including the youth, to moral standards and immoral behaviour becomes especially important.

The primary task of the morality is to have an impact on the behaviour of the individuals and to keep them from showing iniquity. It is intended to form such personal qualities as discipline, teamwork, autonomy of will as the ability to follow moral standards freely, based on the internal desire [4]. There are numerous studies within the Sociology of morality dedicated to the degree of compliance of individual moral principles with public morality.

2. Method

In foreign science a wide experience in the study of the attitude of different social groups to immoral conduct has been accumulated. In the 70s of the last century large-scale studies aimed at assessing different types of immoral behaviour were conducted in England. One of them was carried out by Gallup Inc. for the ABC television company. More than 2 thousands young viewers were surveyed during the study (Social Surveys, 1974).

In the second study, conducted by the British social psychologist D. Wright, there were about two thousand students of grammar schools - boys and girls aged 17-18 years (at this age as a rule people's moral principles have been already formed). A list that includes several types of immoral behaviour was given to respondents, and they were asked to evaluate the behaviour according to the following criteria: 'always bad', 'usually bad, but sometimes excusable' or 'never bad (always good)' [5]. Here are some data obtained as a result of the first study (Table 1).

Table 1. Attitude to immoral actions (in % of the total number of respondents)

No.	Types of immoral actions	Percent of people who disapprove the actions		
		Total	Men	Women
1.	Speeding on the roads	75	71	80
2.	Drinking	90	88	91
3.	Bringing some items or materials from work for own needs	61	57	65
4.	Free ride in public transport	76	74	79
5.	Dishonesty in shop	84	82	86
6.	Skimming	34	30	38

As it is seen from the Table 1, the highest disapproval was aroused by the immoral actions referred to in items 1, 2, 4 and 5 and concerning personal honesty and integrity. At the same time, clearly antisocial actions (paragraphs 3 and 6) caused less unanimity in their disapproval. Women are less tolerant both to the first and to the second type of anti-social activities.

Table 2. Attitude to immoral actions.

No.	Immoral actions	Sex	Percent of people who made assessment				
			Always bad	Usually bad	Sometimes bad	Never bad	Don't know
1.	Gambling games	M	10.7	16.9	57.0	8.30	7.10
		F	19.4	27.1	37.9	3.50	12.1
2.	Drinking	M	30.6	46.5	17.9	2.00	3.00
		F	44.9	44.5	7.80	1.10	1.80
3.	Smoking	M	14.9	10.2	32.4	31.6	10.9
		F	12.3	8.90	36.2	24.4	18.2
4.	Lie	M	19.1	73.9	5.20	0.50	1.30
		F	23.8	72.8	2.20	0.30	0.90
5.	Theft	M	70.8	27.5	0.60	0.30	0.80
		F	71.2	27.8	0.50	0.10	0.40
6.	Premarital sexual relations	M	28.6	27.6	20.5	10.2	13.1
		F	55.2	25.2	6.60	2.40	10.0
7.	Suicide	M	32.0	28.7	13.0	15.2	11.1
		F	33.7	32.7	10.1	8.10	15.1
8.	Race discrimination	M	74.0	16.8	3.20	2.40	3.60
		F	85.3	8.90	1.60	1.50	2.70

According to the second study, the pattern of the moral persuasion turned out to be more differentiated (Table 2). The maximum unanimity of opinion is observed in the actions that violate the rights of ownership and the rights of other people (5 and 8); differences of opinion concerning smoking, gambling, premarital sexual relations are much more obvious. For comparison, similar studies were conducted among the students of several Western countries [6].

D. Wright concluded that there is a very little difference in issues of what actions are considered to be bad, and what is considered to be positive. In order to identify whether changes occurred in the moral convictions and in what direction the studies were repeated seven years later with the addition of issues concerning the attitude to drug use and medical drug abuse (Table 3).

Analysing the results of the studies (Tables 2 and 3), D. Wright writes that the data obtained as a result of the survey can serve as a proof of the decrease and deterioration of moral standards in the English society. The indicators of negative evaluations of almost all kinds of immoral actions clearly decreased. Less unanimity of opinion and growing differences in evaluations were found [5].

The structure of the individual moral consciousness, in our opinion, can be presented in four levels: *real*, *normative*, *desired* and *ideal*. The *real* level includes notion and concepts of good and evil, duty and conscience, and others. The *normative* level is attitude to moral standards and strictures [7]; the *desired* level involves moral beliefs, value orientations, motives and impulses of man, that determine the direction of the moral consciousness. The *ideal* level consists of moral ideals, understanding of the meaning and the purpose of life, happiness, justice, dignity, sense of duty and a sense of conscience [8].

Table 3. Attitude to immoral actions (in % of the total number of respondents).

No.	Immoral actions	Sex	Percent of people who made assessment				
			Always bad	Usually bad	Sometimes bad	Never bad	Don't know
1.	Gambling games	M	8.80	16.4	55.7	11.5	7.50
		F	13.2	24.9	46.5	2.90	12.5
2.	Drinking	M	17.7	35.7	34.5	8.30	3.80
		F	22.4	47.4	24.0	2.00	4.20
3.	Smoking	M	20.9	11.4	21.7	34.5	11.6
		F	18.2	11.5	26.3	30.2	13.7
4.	Lie	M	18.4	70.2	6.90	1.70	2.90
		F	17.3	74.5	6.20	0.10	1.80
5.	Theft	M	65.0	30.5	1.60	1.60	1.30
		F	64.7	32.8	0.70	0.20	1.50
6.	Premarital sexual relations	M	10.3	12.8	30.4	33.7	12.8
		F	14.6	19.5	30.0	17.7	18.2
7.	Suicide	M	28.5	23.6	10.6	19.2	18.0
		F	29.4	26.1	10.2	17.2	17.1
8.	Race discrimination	M	65.6	18.1	3.70	4.90	7.70
		F	76.4	14.7	1.70	1.50	5.70
9.	Medical drug abuse	M	29.3	17.8	18.9	19.8	14.1
		F	41.6	19.6	17.3	7.80	13.6
10.	Drug use	M	65.9	14.0	4.10	7.80	8.20
		F	73.2	14.2	2.60	2.70	7.30

3. Results

To study the attitude of young people to various immoral actions a social research, in which more than 450 pupils and students of the Moscow region participated and was conducted in 2013 by the authors. Table 4 presents the distribution of respondents' opinions regarding various immoral actions.

As shown in Table 4, respondents have clearly the dominated notion that the most unacceptable immoral actions are poor upbringing of children, abandonment, homelessness (90.1%), betrayal of friends (87.5%), drug use (84.7%) and theft (79.5%). This, in our opinion, indicates that such values as family, friendship and health are of the great importance among young people.

Our findings correlate with the results of all-Russian surveys, according to which, Russian people consider abandonment and homelessness of children as absolute taboo. This would never be justified by 97% of the older generation and 95% of young respondents [9].

Table 4. The attitude of pupils and students of the Moscow region to the immoral actions (in % of the total number of respondents).

No.	Immoral actions	Degree of support/disapproval			
		Never can be permissible	Sometimes it is permissible	I don't consider this improper	I don't know
1.	Gambling games	21.2	46.9	24.7	7.20
2.	Drinking, alcohol abuse	63.8	23.9	5.90	6.40
3.	Lie	29.8	55.4	6.50	8.30
4.	Betrayal of friends	87.5	4.0	2.40	6.10
5.	Theft	79,5	10.4	4.00	6.10
6.	Premarital sexual relations	13.8	26.8	48.5	10.9
7.	Marital infidelity	66.7	19.3	5.80	8.20
8.	Speeding on the roads	24.1	54.1	12.5	9.30
9.	Bringing some items or materials from work for own needs	24.8	46.0	19.8	9.40
10.	Free ride in public transport	16.7	46.8	29.8	6.70
11.	Drug use	84.7	7.80	3.30	4.20
12.	Non-payment of taxes	59.1	24.0	7.80	9.10
13.	Betrayal of Motherland	64.8	12.2	9.00	14.0
14.	Public demonstration of hostility towards representatives of other nationalities	49.6	25.2	17.5	7.70
15.	Avoidance of army service	37.2	31.4	23.0	8.40
16.	Prostitution	69.1	17.6	6.60	6.60
17.	Homosexuality	63.2	8.20	17.7	10.8
18.	Poor upbringing of children, abandonment, homelessness	90.1	3.50	4.30	2.10
19.	Discourtesy , rudeness, abusive language	49.6	42.2	4.70	3.40
20.	Giving/taking bribe	45.4	36.7	8.20	9.80
21.	Resistance to police force	40.9	34.6	12.1	12.4
22.	Abortion	62.7	21.4	7.40	8.50

But the declaration of their commitment to one or other spiritual and moral standards is not identical to the actual people behaviour. According to official figures, in Russia every year 50 000 parents are deprived of parental rights, and their children end up in orphanages. 44 000 children have alive parents deprived of parental rights due to alcoholism and drug addiction [O. Pavlikova, *The country abandoned children*, 2013, http://slon.ru/russia/gorod_broshennykh_detey-922352.xhtml].

Respondents were unanimous in relation to betrayal of motherland and marital infidelity. About two-thirds of respondents (66.7%) consider marital infidelity unacceptable and would never commit betrayal of the motherland (64.8%).

At the same time, most of the respondents take many such antisocial actions as free ride in public transport, bringing some items or materials from work for own needs, over speeding on the roads with much less conviction. The least disapproval was expressed by the respondents about premarital sexual relations. Almost half of respondents (48.5%) do not consider it reprehensible.

Loyalty of more than half of young respondents to avoidance of army service must give cause for considerable concern. The fact that more than a third part of respondents consider public expression of hostility towards representatives of other nationalities or racial discrimination, should be marked as negative.

We don't deny that the modern life realities are quite harsh and bring morality of Russians to a serious test. In Russian national surveys, many respondents recognize that the difficulties they have to face in different spheres of life make them 'take stock of' of values seriously.

As a result, most young people (55%) today have to admit that their success in the life depends on the ability to turn a blind eye to their own principles in time, and agree with the thesis that 'the modern world is cruel, and to succeed in life, sometimes you have to overstep the moral principles and standards'. Only 44% of young people hold the opposite view, that it is better not to succeed, but not to transcend moral norms.

Thus, the Russian-wide researches fix moral 'backwardness' of young people.

In modern transformed society young people more and more often lose an understanding of what is possible and what is impossible, what is fair and what is unfair, what is right and what is wrong, what is decency, and what is debauchery. The younger generation has less fear of condemnation comparing with other people, since the criteria of responsibility are indistinct, and the moral notions are more than cloudy. Atrophy of one-valued moral standards often becomes a sign of a modern society. The place of the moral standards is taken by particularism, momentariness, incident. In the atmosphere of axiological and conceptual disorder it is difficult for ordinary young man to tell the difference between what was 'bad' in the historical past, from what was 'good'. When the rules of the game are indefinite, contradictory and optional, it is difficult to measure the degree of insecurity [10].

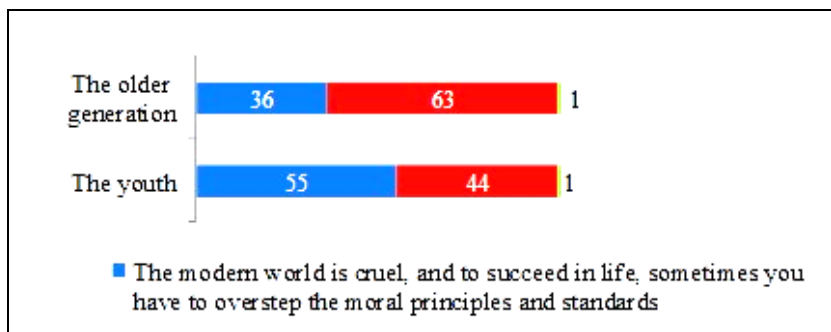


Figure 1. Judgments of young people and the older generation about the possibility/impossibility to transcend moral principles (%).

Among the respondents of older generation the ratio of those who are oriented to norms of morality, and those who believe that it is possible to dispense with them is in the favour of the supporters of the inviolability of the moral statute (63% vs. 36%). At the same time, it cannot go unnoticed that more than a third of the generation of ‘fathers’, who must pass a moral baggage to their children consider it possible to forget moral principles (Figure 1).

4. Discussion

In general, according to the results of Russian-wide researches, Russian people demonstrate a sufficiently high moral level, at least in words. More than half of respondents speak very negatively about most of the actions and events that are considered immoral, and say that they can never be justified.

However, it should be noted that the assessment of some phenomena which are traditionally condemned is revised today; they are denied not so definitely. Sociologists fix noticeable tendency directed from condemnation to justification by young people of non-payment of taxes, giving/taking bribes, as well as abortion, which remain unacceptable for only 34-40% of young Russians [9, p. 126].

Young people and the representatives of older ages demonstrate increasing loyalty to the resistance to police, larceny of found items and money, avoidance of army service, ticketless travel by public transport - all these actions produce understanding and are justified by the majority of Russians (59% to 84% of respondents consider them permissible). Thus, we can say that a critical mass of people, who do not pay great importance to these immoral actions, has already been achieved, and they moved into the category of socially acceptable activities.

Analysis of deviations between the share of respondents who condemn these or those unethical and immoral deeds and actions, in groups of young people and middle-aged people indicates that the current ‘children’ are behind the ‘fathers’, especially in the mastering norms governing interpersonal relationships of people (the unacceptability of enrichment at the expense of other people, rudeness and crudeness, business unreliability, public demonstration of

hostility towards representatives of other nationalities). For all these positions the incidence of moral standards among young people is lower than among older people by 15-23%. Weakness of young people in mastering norms concerning larceny of found items and money, prostitution, homosexuality, drug use, as well as in the sphere of social and economic cleanliness: bribery and tax evasion is noticeable for 11-13%.

For the rest of the tested actions and deeds the positions of young people and older people are closer, the differences in acceptance of these standards by the groups does not exceed 7%.

Of course, the declaration of their commitment to some or other moral and ethical standards is not identical to the way people behave in real life. During the survey the respondents were specifically asked, whether they had to do something that is usually considered unethical, immoral.

According to the analysis of the data of contemporary Russian-wide surveys, the status of 'practical taboo' for young people and older people belong for example, to homosexuality and drug use. Although a part of the population, often young people, demonstrate tolerance even in respect of these seemingly inviolable moral prohibitions, and some even tell us about personal experience of such actions. In particular, 9% of young respondents said that had tried drugs, 1% said they did it often. Another 8% said that they had not tried drugs themselves, but do not condemn others for their use. 4% of people of older generation said that they had tried drugs. 3% stated about their tolerance to other people use of drugs.

Positions of respondents are not so unanimous in other situations and phenomena. Using sexual relationships for self-interested aims, non-payment of taxes and bribery are categorically unacceptable for only about half of the respondents, and are not considered shameful by 34-50% of youth and 20-41% of older people. About the same number of respondents in both groups said about their own personal practice of violations of the prohibitions in the sphere of economic relations, 9% said about non-payment of taxes, and 19% gave bribes [9, p. 127].

At the level of the personal practice 53% of young people and 29% of people of the older generation have premarital sex relations. Let's note that today much emphasis is on the wide spread of premarital sexual life in recent years. It would be logical to expect that in the Soviet period, when the state ideological machine worked on the reproduction of spiritual and moral standards 'there was no sex' in the country. However, as it is seen from the obtained data, a lot of respondents whose youth fell just on this 'forbidden' time, premarital sexual relations were practiced at least as 'trial' (Figure 2).

Attitude to moral prohibition on premarital sexual relations is especially significant when compared to the research of 2007 with the data of a similar survey conducted ten years ago. According to them, over the past decade significant changes in the way of young people behaviour in the sexual sphere, has not taken place, the share of those who had sexual relations before marriage, has not changed.

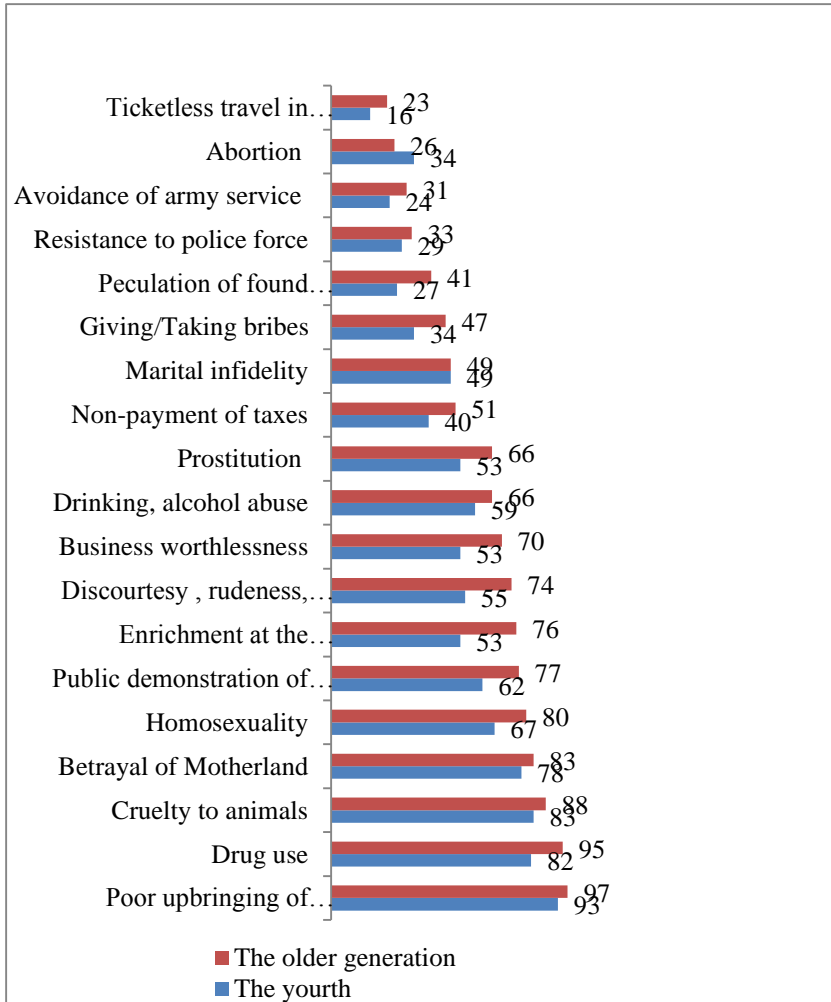


Figure 2. Attitude to immoral and unethical actions of young people and representatives of the older generation (an expanded list, the share of answers ‘never be permitted’, it ordered largest deviations) (%)

In other words, we can talk about an obvious mismatch of society’s perception of the problem of the young people debauchery and its real condition. If in Soviet times it was suppressed, and the citizens pretended that this problem did not exist. Today, on the contrary, the problem of the youth degradation takes an unprecedented scale at the level of the discussions, but in fact no any significant changes in this sphere take place.

Data analysis of Russia-wide studies conducted in the past decade has shown that there hasn’t been a total liberalization of the youth’s attitudes towards drugs. Today, like more than ten years ago, the shares of those who claim that tried drugs, or do not condemn others for their use are 10% and 8% respectively. Moreover, in a number of positions – attitude to homosexuality, the

use of sex in the deceptive purposes, non-payment of taxes, smoking, drinking strong alcohol the area of moral prohibitions spread is even expanded from 2% to 8% (Figure 2).

Table 5. Distribution of the answers of the middle class representatives to the question: “What actions do you think, can never been justified, which actions should be treated patiently, and which ones - depending on the circumstances?” (%)

No.	Action	Variant of answer (%)		
		Never can be justified	Sometimes it is permissible	It should be treated patiently
1.	Drug use	93	5	2
2.	High treason	90	8	2
3.	Suicide	86	9	5
4.	Unjust enrichment	71	25	4
5.	Purchase of stolen goods	70	24	6
6.	Prostitution	63	26	11
7.	Business unreliability	61	28	11
8.	Giving/taking bribes	55	37	8
9.	Marital infidelity	51	35	14
10.	Tax evasion	48	43	9
11.	Avoidance of army service	35	50	15
12.	Peculation of found items, money	35	49	16
13.	Abortion	21	59	20

Table 6. Distribution of answers to the middle class and representatives of other strata to the question: “What actions do you think, can never been justified, which actions should be treated patiently, and which ones - depending on the circumstances?” (%)

No.	Action	Layers of society	
		Middle class	Other layers
1.	Drug use	93	92
2.	High treason	90	89
3.	Suicide	86	84
4.	Unjust enrichment	71	69
5.	Purchase of stolen goods	70	53
6.	Prostitution	63	61
7.	Business unreliability	61	60
8.	Giving/taking bribes	55	54
9.	Marital infidelity	51	49
10.	Tax evasion	48	52
11.	Avoidance of army service	35	40
12.	Peculation of found items, money	35	29
13.	Abortion	21	20

In highly developed Western countries, traditionally the middle class plays the role of the main carriers of social values, norms and behaviour patterns. Thanks to this social group, the society keeps the balance and stability.

The presence of a middle class in the society and its considerable quantitative weight stabilizes not only the socio-political situation in the society, but also its moral atmosphere.

Recently, the Russian middle class often becomes the subject of sociological research. A study conducted by the Institute of Sociology of RAS in 2007 showed that the contemporary Russian middle class takes various immoral actions ambiguously (Table 5) [11].

Generally, the research shows that ethical relativism is not a specific characteristic of the Russian middle class. Comparative analysis of the prevalence of the moral standards among the respondents of the middle class and other social layers shows negligible deviations of the assessments (within 10%).

At the same time representatives of the middle class in some cases demonstrate higher, and in other cases, on the contrary, a lower degree of commitment to some or other moral standards in comparison with other population (Table 6) [11, p. 115].

Representatives of the middle class combine the focus on a more active mastering of norms and rules of conduct in business sphere compared to the rest of the population with less cleanliness in the sphere of private and personal life than in other groups.

5. Conclusions

Thus, the changes occurring in the country transformed many things not only in economics and politics, but also in the everyday life of each person, in the relationships between people, in understanding of what today is a success in life, what goals are necessary to set and what means can we use to achieve these goals. Modern life realities are quite harsh and put morality of Russians serious strength tests. In the course of Russia-wide researches, many respondents recognize that the difficulties they have to face in different spheres of life make them 'inventory' values seriously. As a result, the majority of young people have to admit that their success in life depends on the ability turn blind eye to their own principles in time, and agree with the thesis that 'the modern world is cruel, and to succeed in life, sometimes you have to transgress the moral principles and norms'.

Being under necessity to adapt to the constantly changing conditions of life, many Russians, especially young people, to 'succeed' in life have to go beyond the norms dictated to them by the society and the state. The younger generation is really behind the older one in involvement in the spiritual and moral context of our society, taking many things a little easier, without excessive reflection. Most Russians justify such actions as resistance to police, peculation of found items and money, avoidance of army service, ticketless travel by public transport. It can be stated that these immoral action moved into the category of socially acceptable.

However, according to Russia-wide researches, Russian people demonstrate a sufficiently high moral level, at least in words. More than half of respondents show negative attitude to most of the actions and events that are considered immoral, and say that they can never be justified. Analysis of the results of Russia-wide researches conducted in the framework of the sociology of morality showed that the actions prohibited for Russians are poor upbringing, abandonment of children, drug use, animal abuse, homosexuality, public demonstration of hostility towards other nationalities. Young people demonstrated greater loyalty, compared with older people, towards enrichment at the expense of other people, rudeness, discourtesy and the use of abuse language, drinking and alcoholism, business unreliability and prostitution.

On the basis of own social studies and comparative analysis of the several studies data about the attitudes of different social groups to moral norms, carried out on a representative nationwide sample, we can conclude that in general the pessimistic diagnoses of moral destruction of Russian society are still premature and are not consistent with reality. Traditional values and meanings, norms, ordinary rules of human society are still relevant for our fellow citizens, including young people. As for several issues, the position of young Russians is quite close to the standard one, and they are even more demanding than the generation of 'fathers' to norms of family relationships.

References

- [1] T.Y. Kirilina, Sociological researches, **6** (2013) 17-24.
- [2] T.I. Zaslavskaya, *Modern Russian society. The social mechanism of transformation*, Delo, Moscow, 2004.
- [3] T.I. Buzmakova, *Problems of adaptation of students to the university environment*, Proc. of the Fourth International Scientific and Practical Conference, vol. 2, Smolensk branch of Russian University of Cooperation, Smolensk, 2014, 300-306.
- [4] A.V. Kirillov, Social policy and sociology, **4** (2014) 173-184.
- [5] D. Wright, *Rationalist Annual* L, (1973) 26-36.
- [6] A.K. Tomeh, *The Journal of Social Psychology*, **74(1)** (1968) 137.
- [7] O.Y. Bakhtina, A.V. Kirillov, S.A. Matyash and O.A. Urzha, *International Education Studies*, **8(5)** (2015) 179-190, online at <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/ies.v8n5p179>.
- [8] T.Y. Kirilina, *The formation of sociology of morality as a special sociological theory: a monograph*, MSFU, Moscow, 2009, 264.
- [9] M.K. Gorshkov and F.E. Sheregi, *Young people of the new Russia: lifestyle and value priorities*, Institute of Sociology. Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow, 2007, 592.
- [10] V.I. Chuprov and U.A. Zubok, *Sociology of youth: the textbook*, INFRA-M, Moscow, 2013, 336.
- [11] M.K. Gorshkov and N.E. Tikhonova. *The middle class in contemporary Russia* Institute of Sociology, Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow, 2008, 113.