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## **“Thank God, I have a Separate Dwelling”: Restructuring Kinship through Grandmaternal Sidelining in the Heterosexual Families of Russian Natural-Parenting Mothers**

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### **Abstract**

The way mothers parent, and if and why they choose to do something, is significantly regulated by diverse discursive formations and social institutions, such as the state, medicine, law, rooted attitudes, and societal norms. What lies behind these regulations is the idea of a specific relatedness between mother and child – kinship. In this article, I analyse how natural parenting influences kinship and relatedness in the families of Russian mothers who practise it. Based on my original study, and inspired by Marilyn Strathern’s ideas, I show how natural parenting challenges the conventional Russian form of mothering, which is characterised as extended and socially integrated, and results in a certain nuclearisation of the families of self-identifying ‘natural mothers’. The nuclearisation implies the re-definition of the role of elder kinsfolk as secondary to the child, and pushes them to the margins of the Russian natural mothers’ children’s kinship systems. It is brought about by mothers who distance their own parents and who seek, in this way, to disrupt the flow of what they see as ‘old’ and ‘out-dated’, even harmful knowledge on childcare. However, this requires various significant resources from the mothers performing natural parenting.

### **Keywords**

alternative parenting, attachment parenting, childcare, fathers, gender, grandmothers, kinship, mothering, mothers, natural parenting, relatedness, Russian families

### **Introduction: The Promise of Happier Children vs Conventional Kinship Ties**

In this article, I analyse how and why the “creation” of new, happier children who are expected to grow up to be self-confident, successful adults, as promised by the idea of natural parenting, requires and results in the transformation of kinship in the families of Russian “natural” mothers. Natural parenting entails the development of a tight emotional bond between mother and child through long-term, on-demand breastfeeding on the part of the child, co-sleeping, and baby carrying in order to secure the proper psychological development of the child and her current and future well-being

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(Faircloth 2014: 149; Melnik & Chernyaeva 2015: 245; Simonardóttir 2016: 105). These practices, framed by the idea of the vital importance of the mother’s continuous presence in close physical proximity to her child, challenge maternal delegating or sharing childrearing with other female kinsfolk, primarily grandmothers. In this respect, they transform the dominant model of extended mothering in Russia (Chernova & Shpakovskaya 2016; Godovannaya & Temkina 2017). By investigating the Russian ‘natural’ mothers’ way of reasoning and ‘doing’ natural parenting, as well as the ways in which they perceive kinship ties, I show how the practices of natural parenting not only challenge the conventional practice of extended mothering but also lead to the nuclearisation of the family and, consequently, work to re-frame kinship in their families. The analysis of my empirical data demonstrates that Russian natural mothers distance their children from the elder kinsfolk both physically and emotionally in order to limit the influence of the elder female kinsfolk on their children. This prevents full-scale extended mothering which, as Zhabenko points out (in this issue), is widely important in Russian mothering, also within the framework of Russian lesbian families.

My analysis draws upon anthropological literature on kinship as a specific form of relatedness and the conceptualisation of parenting as parents sharing body and knowledge with their children (Strathern 2005). It is based on 51 semi-structured interviews with Russian self-identifying ‘natural’ mothers aged between 26 and 42 (average age 35). The interviews were conducted in St Petersburg (November 2015), Moscow (April 2016) and in the Northeast provincial city of Vologda (April 2018). These three sites were chosen in order to provide a contrasting and comprehensive picture of natural parenting implementation by self-identifying ‘natural’ mothers residing both in metropolitan and provincial areas of Russia. This approach provided a snapshot of the general trends and differences vis-à-vis the phenomenon under study in Russian megalopolises as well as areas remote from them.

The choice of interviewees was not limited by age, race, sexuality or class, as the main recruitment criteria were the women’s self-identification as natural mothers, and having at least one child of pre-school age in their care at the time of the interview. When the interviews were conducted, none of the respondents was in a same-sex relationship, therefore the study discusses natural parenting in heterosexual family constellations in Russia. The interviewees’ higher education, white-collar professions and family income average or higher in the region where they were residing led me to regard them as middle-class Russians, as far as such a category could be applied in Russia<sup>1</sup> (Remington 2011; Melin & Salmenniemi 2012).

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<sup>1</sup> The absence of significant variations between my interviewees’ socio-economic characteristics is arguably due to one of the following reasons: the workings of the snowball method and social network advertising (including the thematic groups) as an interviewee recruitment method, and the resource requirements or identification claims of those who attach themselves to the articulated idea of natural parenting in Russia. First, the snowball method might imply the recruitment of people belonging to the same community, established on the basis of shared values, views, and socio-economic position. Second, the absence of significant variations might indicate that performing natural parenting is available mostly to resourceful women in Russia. The latter correlates with the findings of other research on intensive mothering, which shows that in the USA and Western Europe intensive mothering is generally accessed by middle- and upper-middle class women (Elliot et al. 2015). The representation of women living in heterosexual family constellations in my research sample is arguably due to the cautious attitude of non-heterosexual women towards research carried out by someone unfamiliar to them in their social networks. The recent criminalisation of “propaganda for non-traditional sexuality” in

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In order to inquire how the implementation of natural parenting transforms kinship in the families of the Russian ‘natural’ mothers in this article, I first discuss what natural parenting is considered to mean, and what it involves in Russia. Then, in order to provide a context, I turn to the history and major characteristics of Russian mothering. After that, I present the theoretical framework for the analysis of the empirical data. Finally, I summarise my findings by suggesting that natural parenting in Russia leads to a certain nuclearisation of the families of ‘natural’ mothers in my sample. This nuclearisation results from the ‘natural’ mothers distancing themselves from their elder female kinsfolk, as a result of the intergenerational conflict over mothering knowledge and appropriate childcare practices involving grandmothers. The nuclearisation becomes possible due to the resources possessed by ‘natural’ mothers and their husbands or other male partners in their parenting arrangements.

### **Natural Parenting: What Does the Concept Entail?**

As a mothering concept, natural parenting refers to several core ideas. The first idea is that the mother is the most important caregiver for the child, and the one who has the instinctive knowledge and necessary resources for childcare (Bueskens 2001; Schön & Silvén 2007). Second, the close attachment between mother and child is of fundamental importance for the child’s proper development and health (Bueskens 2001: 78; Schön & Silvén 2007: 103). The role of the father is considered to be secondary: the father is supposed to assist the mother in everyday routine childcare which is mostly performed by her (Avdeeva 2019; Sears & Sears 2001). Therefore, despite its name, natural parenting is first of all about mothering rather than about mothering and fathering or gender neutral parenting.

In order to establish and maintain a close attachment to a child, the mother is advised by the natural parenting ideology to focus “relentlessly on her child’s development and growth, supervise every detail of her child’s day and respond to all the child’s needs and to every stage of the child’s emotional and intellectual development” (Perrier 2013: 657). In other words, within the framework of the natural parenting ideology, the mother needs to constantly orientate herself towards her child in order to secure her child’s physical and mental health, which is seen as forming the basis of the child’s personal confidence, social success, and overall ‘happiness’ later. The mother’s constant orientation towards the child and her response to all of the child’s needs is achieved by the mother’s constant physical and emotional availability for her child through such practices as long-term, on-demand breastfeeding, baby-sleeping, and baby-wearing (Sears & Sears 2001; Schön & Silvén 2007). ‘Long-term’ in this context means longer than the child’s first year (Faircloth 2013: 63).

Initially, the concept of natural parenting was launched and promoted in the United Kingdom and the United States in the latter half of the 20th century by paediatricians and psychologists who adopted the attachment theory presented by British psychiatrist John Bowlby (1951) and his colleague, the

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Russia (Persson 2015) has led to the marginalisation of lesbian mothers, as there is now the potential threat of legal proceedings against them (Zhabenko 2019, this issue). Therefore, lesbians and queer women might have been afraid to disclose their personal lives to an unknown scholar, and participate in my research.

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American-Canadian developmental psychologist Mary Ainsworth (1967). In Anglo-Saxon settings, the emergence and development of natural parenting was enabled by the post-war public and state ideas of the child's need for a family (Lee 2014: 61-62). In the meantime, the family started to be seen by the public and the state as securing the child's well-being, and hence as something that needed to be safeguarded against disruption (ibid). During World War II, many children were orphaned or separated from their parents for long periods of time (Lee 2014: 60). This was considered a traumatic experience and damaging for their psychological health. Framed by the re-established public and state rhetoric about traditional female obligations, namely taking care of the reproductive sphere – home, family, and children (Deem 1981; Santana 2016) – the circulation of the idea of a child's vulnerability and her ultimate need for a family resulted in the steady promotion of the attachment theory and the development of the ideology and practice of natural parenting on the basis of this theory.

### **Natural Parenting in Russia**

In Russia, natural parenting ideas started to be circulated later than in the United Kingdom and the United States, during the 1990s and 2000s by early Russian natural-parenting proponents. This provided a novel model for childcare. Historically, Russian mothering has been extended, as the care of children has been provided through a large network of mainly female kinsfolk (Rotkirch 2004: 174-175). It has not been changed even after the Bolshevik revolution, in the 1920s, 1930s and later, despite the very significant socio-political transformations taking place in society. The Bolsheviks tried to transform the extended family into a nuclear one, replace the intergenerational and kinship networks of economic and affectionate support with state and communal ones, and destroy the authority of older generations for the new Soviet citizens (Tchoukina 2002; Razhbaeva 2004). However, the tight economic bonds and bonds of affection between several generations and lines of a family and the acknowledgement of the authority of elder kinsfolk continued to be a practical norm in Soviet Russia (Olson & Adonyeva 2016). The existence of extended mothering was also upheld by the “working mother” gender contract acknowledged by the Soviet State as the only legitimate one (Temkina & Rotkirch 2002). Within the framework of this gender contract, women were supposed to combine participation in public labour with care for family and children, while the state provided various forms of support and assistance for women in regard to childcare through state benefits, public healthcare, and nurseries (Chernova 2013: 124). Still, despite this state policy and attention to mothering, the quality and availability of public childcare services were insufficient (Zdravomyslova & Temkina 2003; Gradskova 2007: 107-113).

Additionally, the father used to be absent from the Soviet family at all levels: at the level of ideology, family, social policy, and actual practices (Chernova 2007: 147). If women were considered by the Soviet State to be performing both the productive and reproductive functions by participating in the wage labour market and taking care of the family, men were seen as “the constructors of communism”, and encouraged to participate mostly in the public sphere (Chernova 2007: 140). The family and social policy considered fathers mainly in regard to alimony and property issues in the event of divorce (Chernova 2013: 124). At the level of everyday family life, fathers, if present, were usually “emotionally distanced figures of authority”, the highest instance of control and power whose role was reduced to meting out punishment to children, often physically (Semenova & Thompson

2004: 140). In order for Soviet women to be able to fulfil childrearing and working duties under these conditions, childcare was often shared with or delegated to grandmothers (Gradskova 2007: 107-113).

### **Extended Mothering and Grandmothers in Russia**

Grandmothers' involvement in childcare was also a result of the shortage of private accommodation, and the gender imbalance of the Soviet population. Despite the Soviet state's pledge to provide its citizens with private dwellings, there was a significant lack of residential accommodation. Therefore, many families in the Soviet metropolitan areas and countryside lived in extended family households (Semenova & Thompson 2004: 143). In the meantime, male mortality was much higher than female, and the gender imbalance, generally caused by the events of the first half of the 20th century, in which many men were killed (i.e. World War I, the Bolshevik Revolution and the Russian Civil War of 1917-1922, the Stalinist purges, and World War II), had taken hold by the mid-20th century (Goldman 1993: 288; Razhbaeva 2004: 172). Consequently, grandmothers represented for the most part the extension of nuclear families.

After the collapse of the USSR in 1991, the dominance of extended mothering persisted despite various socio-political and legal transformations. In terms of these transformations, the 'working mother' gender contract ceased to be the only legitimate one. Such gender contracts as the 'housewife-breadwinner', the career-oriented mother, and the sponsorship contract, within which "a woman is financially provided for by a man (sponsored), fulfils only a sexual role, has a sexually attractive image and is oriented towards consumption values", were also legitimised (Temkina & Rotkirch 2002). At the same time, new understandings of mothering, such as intensive mothering in its Anglo-Saxon form and intensive-extended mothering, started to circulate in Russia (Utrata 2015; Chernova & Shpakovskaya 2016; Godovannaya & Temkina 2017). The former refers to a time- and resource-consuming, child-centred, expert-guided female parenting. The latter refers to a hybrid model combining the practices of both intensive and extended mothering styles, and implies that mothers perform child-centred labour and resource-intensive care for children by sharing it with the children's grandmothers and by engaging them in it (Chernova & Shpakovskaya 2016; Godovannaya & Temkina 2017). Meanwhile, the share of complex households – consisting of parent(s), her/their child(ren) and other biological or in-law relatives – has been increasing since 1989 and, nowadays, they form one-third of all Russian households (Prokof'eva 2013: 79-80). This process has been conceptualised as "anti-nuclearisation", and its prerequisites are considered to be the deficit of affordable housing, the high real-estate market, and the significant decrease in population incomes (ibid). Under these conditions, grandmothers have continued to play an important role for families with children in Russia (Utrata 2015). Russian grandmothers provide a wide range of support for their adult children and their families: they perform childcare, shopping, cooking and housework, as well as providing financial assistance and emotional support (Utrata 2008: 12).

The different forms of support provided by Russian grandmothers are important both for single-parent families and for two-parent heterosexual families, since fathers' participation in the sphere of

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reproduction and childcare remains insufficient (Avdeeva 2013; Lipasova 2016, 2017). Despite the transformations of social institutions and practices in contemporary Russian society, the ideology and practices of parenting (and especially male parenting) change slowly – many Russian men consider breadwinning their primary task and the major responsibility of the father in the family (Lipasova 2016, 2017). Meanwhile, taking care of children and the household is seen by many Russians, and articulated within the state and public discourse, as the mother’s duty (Shpakovskaya & Chernova 2013; Lipasova 2016, 2017). The vast majority of Russian heterosexual mothers carry the major burden of reproductive labour (Lipasova 2016). At the same time, despite the state’s discursive support for families, the real state support for citizens with children is insufficient: there are low childcare allowances, a shortage of daycare centres and gender inequality in the labour market (Chernova 2013: 154-155). Under these conditions, the grandmothers’ participation in the care of grandchildren remains a significant source of support for all Russian mothers (see Zhabenko in this issue), facilitating their care work and participation in the labour market.

The extended mothering and active participation of grandmothers in childcare within the Russia context are at odds with the ideas of natural parenting. Both the conventional model of extended mothering and natural parenting imply different constellations of kinship and interfamilial relationships, in particular between mothers, their children, and grandparents. To explain this better, in the section that follows, I will present my theoretical framework and turn to the analysis of kinship formation in the heterosexually constructed families of Russian ‘natural’ mothers.

### **Parenting as Sharing Bodies: Theoretical and Methodological Framework**

The way in which mothers parent, and if and why they choose to do something, is significantly regulated by diverse discursive formations and social institutions, such as the state, medicine, law, rooted attitudes, and societal norms. What lies behind these regulations is the idea of a specific relatedness of mother and child – kinship. In order to analyse this formation productively, I draw on contemporary anthropological and gender studies literature on kinship, particularly on Marilyn Strathern’s concepts of kinship, parenting, and relatedness. Following this body of work, I regard kinship as a social construct; but not as something pre-given, consistent, or (entirely or essentially) grounded in biology (Carsten 2004; Strathern 2005; Sahlins 2013).

Research has revealed that kinship could be re-assembled and re-actuated in various situations. Genealogy does not guarantee the maintenance of intensive interpersonal contacts, and nor does the absence of genealogy imply the non-appearance of kinship ties (Weston 1997; Strathern 2005: 16-17; Sahlins 2013). The variety of configurations of kinship, analysed in anthropological and sociological studies of relatedness, reinforces the conceptualisation of kinship as a mutuality of being, which implies practices, knowledge, memories and experience (Carsten 2004: 405; Sahlins 2013: 25). Such mutuality implies people’s belonging to one another, co-presenting in each other, and the interdependence of lives, deaths, bodies, and feelings (Carsten 2004; Sahlins 2013: 27, 33). According to Strathern, in the case of parents and their children, this mutuality of being is exceptional within the framework of many post-industrial societies since parents “shar[e] body with the child twice over” (Strathern 2005: 5):

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First is the body of genetic inheritance, a given, a matter regarded colloquially as being of common blood or common substance. Second is the body that is a sign of the parent's devotion – or neglect – and in this middle class milieu it is above all through the application of knowledge that the parent's efforts make this body (ibid).

While in the first sense, parents sharing body with their children requires some matter or substance (either biological – genes, flesh or blood, or transferred – e.g. food), the second points to the sharing of a social body and knowledge. In more specific terms, it is about the internalisation of knowledge in bodies and its transformative force. For a mother, her child is “not only an extension of herself but also an extension of the world” (Strathern 2005: 6). A mother, knowledgeable both about her child and the surrounding world, applies particular concepts and categories to a child and her parenting, which help the mother to incorporate her child into the outer world (ibid). The application of this knowledge provides both the transformation of a child and her body, and the flow of this knowledge from the mother to the child.

The concept of parents sharing body with their children “twice over” is a productive analytical tool facilitating the study of parenting in relation to kinship. It encourages a move forward from the “top-down” approach to kinship and parenting. The latter implies an analysis of parenting mostly as a contextually specific social institution framed primarily by the complex structure of society, state policies, discursive constellations and global processes. It simplifies family life and personal relationships and does not shed light on how and why such relationships are built up, activated and sustained (Smart 2007). Meanwhile, parents performing care for children – “doing” parenting – share bodies with their children “twice over” daily, constantly, through multiple everyday routine practices. Therefore, the investigation of parents sharing bodies discloses “doing” kinship at the level of everyday practices. The analysis of “doing” kinship through sharing bodies helps to analyse how particular forms of relatedness and/or relationality, including parenting, are created, designed, imagined and sustained in everyday life, and whether they differ (and if so, how) from those imposed by law, culture, and discourse. I call it an “upward” approach to kinship.

Following this idea of an upward approach to kinship, I will now turn to an analysis of natural parenting practices and the reasoning of a number of self-identifying Russian mothers. First, I inquire how my interviewees share body with their children, namely through which practices of childcare and why. I go on to analyse what kind of knowledge they share with their children, and is shared by their own mothers. I investigate whether there are two different types of knowledge specific to each generation and, if so, how they comply with each other. This analysis will allow us to think further, in the latter part of this article, towards grasping the consistency or the possible cracks of “body sharing” among generations, and therefore of kinship.

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## Sharing Body: Breastfeeding

Talking about relations within the family and wider kinship, my interviewees argued that the child has the closest bond with her mother. This specificity of the mother-child bond could be articulated through the terms of centre and periphery, as in Mila’s (aged 29, 3 children) narrative:

It depends on age; at the very beginning, I think the mother is the main [person] – the mother is the centre. Until the child is one, the mother is definitely the centre, but can remain so even longer. Then the mother and the father are sort of equal, but they have different roles. [...] The mother is like a given [...], she is love and everything. And the father is interesting, he appears, brings something to your life. So [there are] different relationships, but equally important.

The other way of describing the specific and superior mother-child bond is more lineal. For instance, Nancy (aged 36, 2 children) defined the mother-child relationship in terms of coupledness: “the mother and the child are also a pair”. Both approaches to the description of the relationship between mother and child imply that the mother and the child are comprehended as the basic unit or entity, while other kinsfolk, including the father, are seen as additional or secondary. The idea of the mother’s primacy for the child comes from regarding her as an essential source of nourishment (breast milk) for the child: “Because the mother gives life and your life depends on her, if you are breastfed. The mother is your nourishment – you get everything from the mother” (Mila, 29, 3 children).

For my interviewees, breastfeeding was a central practice of natural parenting, deeply rooted in the everyday routine care of children. Not all ‘natural’ mothers I talked to practiced co-sleeping or baby-wearing, but all of them breastfed their children. Moreover, for the majority of my interviewees breastfeeding was tightly bound to other practices such as helping the baby fall asleep, treating the child’s distress, and calming the baby down due to its soothing effect. Besides that, it was seen as enormously beneficial for the child. First of all, it was considered the healthiest option for feeding babies, duly contributing to the future ‘well-being’ of the child:

The main point [of breastfeeding] is the health of the child. It was the most important for me. I mean the immunity and some support for the child [her health]. That’s it. I mean it was the primary reason why I definitely did not want to formula-feed. (Sasha, aged 37, 2 children)

The perception of breastfeeding as providing health for the child is based on the findings of research devoted to the investigation of breast milk benefits as well as the short- and long-term breastfeeding outcomes for children and their mothers. Many of these studies state that breastfeeding diminishes the risk of allergies, otitis, respiratory diseases, enteric infections and obesity in children, and facilitates their cognitive development (Faircloth 2013; Jung 2015).

Apart from the benefits for the infant’s health, breastfeeding is also supposed to contribute love and affection to the child: “Aside from the very chemical properties, yeah, it’s about unity with the mother. Aside from feeding, it is a feeling of warmth and the mother’s heart, which you’ve been listening to all this time while you’ve been inside [her]” (Natalia, aged 30, 1 child).



For my interviewees, breast milk was not only a source of physical nourishment, but also an indispensable form of “mother’s love”, to paraphrase Rousseau (1979: 12). For them, the process of breastfeeding was as important as the breast milk itself. Nursing was seen by ‘natural’ mothers as a way of expressing the mother’s warmest feelings, and as a specific form of communication with the child. As a specific form of emotional and physical contact, breastfeeding is supposed to facilitate the attachment between mother and child. This idea becomes apparent in my interviewees’ narratives on the actual and possible situations of woman’s inability to nurse a child with her own breast milk. Many ‘natural’ mothers argued that such cases required a woman to use SNS, a supplemental nursing system consisting of a container and a capillary tube leading from the container to the mother’s nipple. The container can be filled with either breast milk, donor milk or formula. The tube is attached to the breast allowing the infant to suckle while receiving the nourishment from the container. In the words of Larisa (aged 37, 1 child), “There are some systems [devices for feeding babies] existing for giving [nourishment] to a child through a breast. So she [child] is at your breast, you have a tie with her.”

For my interviewees, if a mother cannot practice ‘proper’ breastfeeding, then it can be imitated. Arguably, the idea of imitating breastfeeding in order to perform the specific form of emotional and physical contact with a child allows non-biological or non-gestational mothers to become ‘natural’ parents, too. However, for my interviewees, imitating breastfeeding is supposed to be performed by a mother only, not by a father or other relatives. None of my interviewees discussed if SNS could be used by a person other than a mother.

The perception of breastfeeding as affective communication with the child challenges the idea of actively sharing the duty of baby feeding with other relatives. The vast majority of ‘natural’ mothers I talked with were reluctant to express their breast milk. Only two of my interviewees did this, while only one did it in order for her husband, grandparents and nanny to be able to feed the child while she was away at work. Reflecting on their reluctance to express breast milk, my interviewees often said that they either did not consider it necessary because they spent all the time with the child, or they did not want to, like Irma:

Maybe it [expressing breast milk] works fine if you arrange it well. It may result in interchangeability of spouses or [the mother’s interchangeability] with the grandmother, or the grandfather. [...] so I admit it could be more convenient [for the mother]. However, for some reason it was unacceptable for me. Breastfeeding in particular was obligatory for me, of primary importance. And then I started enjoying it [...]. (Irma, aged 36, 2 children)

While Irma explained her refusal to express breast milk by appealing to breastfeeding’s primacy and joy (“*enjoying it*”), in Katja’s case breastfeeding was a tool for “doing” kinship: “This [breastfeeding] is about this [child] belonging to me. This is my baby, I [breast]feed him, he is mine, mine. So he is attached to me. Yes, this is about attachment” (Katja, aged 36, 2 children).

Awareness of the different benefits of breastfeeding problematised the refusal to breastfeed (Avdeeva 2019) and made the practice a necessary element of maternal care for children for the ‘natural’

mothers I interviewed. My interviewees challenged or ever criticised women who did not breastfeed their children. For instance, Natalia (30, 1 child) characterised “those [women] who formula-fed [their children] as not-enough-mothers”. In the meantime, Larisa puts into question the mothering of those non-breastfeeding women whose breasts were lactating: “If there is breast milk, I don’t understand for what reason to justify, to bring some arguments for terminating [breastfeeding] during the first weeks of breastfeeding. I don’t understand what kind of mother is it” (Larisa, 37, 1 child).

Hence, breastfeeding became the demarcation line between ‘natural’ and other – non-‘natural’ – mothers for my interviewees. For them, non-breastfeeding women could hardly be ‘natural’ mothers and, consequently, ‘proper’ mothers or mothers at all, even if they are biologically related to a child and presumably perform other practices of natural parenting.

The ‘natural’ mothers’ understanding of breastfeeding as a specific form of mother-child bonding, creating and sustaining their relatedness, as well as the contemporary research on the health benefits of breast milk, formed the basis of my interviewees’ maternal knowledge about mothering, children, and the world around them. For my interviewees, breastfeeding became a way of externalising their knowledge. For them, breastfeeding was not just about sharing the body through the substance of breast milk and the process of feeding, but also about implementing their knowledge about the primary importance of the mother for the child. It is reasonable to say that breast milk was the substance of breastfeeding knowledge for my interviewees. The acknowledgement and implementation of this knowledge prevented the avoidance of the mother’s breastfeeding through delegating or sharing the duty of feeding the child with other kinsfolk. In the meantime, the tight bond between breastfeeding and other childcare practices, such as putting the child to bed, limited the participation of the father, grandparents and other relatives in other aspects of childrearing. Consequently, breastfeeding became a tool delineating mother and child from other kinsfolk, and giving prominence to motherhood as a specific form of relatedness.

### **Sharing Knowledge**

As discussed, my interviewees comprehended mother and child as the basic unit, and the long-term on-demand breastfeeding of the child as providing health and affection for the child. The natural mothers I talked to tightly bound this comprehension to the conceptual re-interpretation of the relatedness between grandparents and grandchildren:

Grandmothers and grandfathers should not foster children. They should love them [children], pet, [...], entertain somehow, communicate with them, interact, tell them something, and share some impressions to make the child trust them. Yet the authority, the decision-making on how to bring up a child, what a child can and cannot do, should be [imposed and done by] the mother and father only. (Alba, aged 34, 3 children)

Grandparents are seen as providing “support, rest, entertainment” (Mia, aged 42, 2 children) and affection for the child. Even though grandparents are supposed to share their knowledge with grandchildren (“tell them something, and share some impressions”) and therefore incorporate

children into the world (Strathern 2005: 6), they are kept at a distance, either figuratively – by limiting their responsibilities and authority – or by their living arrangements. For instance, Mia highlighted that she and her partner “are very happy to live separately” since they “would not manage to live together as an extended family”.

Possessing sufficient financial and material resources, the majority of ‘natural’ mothers I interviewed could afford to live separately from their parents. The intention to create distance by limiting the grandparents’ duties in regard to the children was borne out by these natural mothers’ knowledge of “proper” parental care. This knowledge contradicted the expertise and experience of the older generation. For instance, Larisa, whose parents and parents-in-law lived separately, explained that she was satisfied with her kin relationships:

I’m afraid of the grandmother’s and grandfather’s presence near the children. [...] There is a generation difference after all. We have wonderful relations right now because I let them do whatever they wish. Since I know that it will be over the next day, I’m not scared that they will [...] give some freaking sweets, for instance, or do other things I radically do not appreciate in terms of Yana’s [daughter] upbringing. (Larisa, 37, 1 child)

Larisa feels a potential threat (“afraid”, “scared”) with regard to the practices and attitudes of her elder kinsfolk towards her child’s upbringing. She is able to tolerate them, but only for a limited period of time, in case they have an irreparable effect.

While Larisa sees her elder kinsfolk as a source of possible danger, Inga’s narrative reflects how the mother could also be treated as potentially damaging for her child:

Thank god I have a separate dwelling; I have had an opportunity to isolate myself from the pressure of grandparents. I have just done everything [cared for the child] myself. Yes, it has been hard, but it has been better than having to handle a daily hassle. [...] My husband didn’t stand in my way. [...] In the meantime, it [Inga’s childcare style] was a nightmare for the grandparents. (Inga, aged 35., 1 child)

The way in which the elder kinsfolk articulated their opinions regarding natural parenting practices as dangerous or wrong, or their general disagreement over childcare approaches, was represented in different forms during the interviews. Most of the time it took the form of uninvited advice and recommendations, which in some cases were accompanied by downbeat comments on the mother’s abilities and childcare practices: “It was harder with my elder daughter since my mother-in-law was at home and she [told me] ‘You don’t have enough breast milk’. She hassled me.” (Maria, aged 32, 2 children).

In some cases, the intergenerational disagreement over mothering took the form of an open conflict:

I had a big argument with the grandmother about water, about whether the baby needs to be given water. She visited when the baby was 3-4 months old and we argued. [I told her] that the baby doesn’t need water since breast milk contains everything. (Larisa, 37, 1 child).

However, the cautious attitude of my interviewees and their mothers towards each other’s childcare practices does not imply an absolute refusal to receive and provide help with childrearing. Many of my interviewees received some hands-on help from their mothers, yet they regarded it as lacking in emotional support and affection because of disagreements over major practices.

The intergenerational disagreement over mothering in the families of my interviewees, as well as the forms it took, reveals the resistance towards two types of knowledge: one represented by the generation of elder kinsfolk, and the other by ‘natural’ mothers:

All our grandmothers were taught alike: ‘Let her [the child] cry’ [...], ‘It’s nothing serious – she cries and then stops’, ‘Give them [the children] water!’, ‘Don’t cuddle them otherwise they’ll get used to it’, and so on. [...]. I don’t know why they [the elder generation] were taught to hate children so much [...] Therefore they had breast milk only until a child was three months old, and they were, like, prohibited to breastfeed on [the child’s] demand. [...] Actually, the 1970s and 1980s were the clear and proclaimed epoch of misopedia, which was embedded into our consciousness by mothers in particular. As they were taught not to cuddle [their babies] [...]. They were taught to ignore [children] – let them cry, and so on. Starting from ironing the child’s caps and vests on both sides...but who needs caps and vests today? So they tried to instill this into my brain: my mother-in-law hardly tried, but my mother tried hard. (Rita, aged 39, 3 children)

Rita’s narrative aptly illustrates the perception, also common among my interviewees, of the Soviet time being an era of hatred of children. By hatred, Rita was referring to inadequate attention shown towards the child who, according to Rita, needs affection and close physical contact with the mother (“Don’t cuddle them”, “Let her [the child] cry”). From Rita’s point of view, instead of sensitively responding to the infant’s demands, which was seen by my interviewees as the essence of maternal love, Soviet mothers were advised to provide children with routine care of a significantly high sanitary-hygienic standard, requiring a lot of their time and other resources. In some sense, Rita’s argument was quite true as Soviet mothers were indeed recommended to focus on hygiene and to maintain it at a high level. These recommendations were strongly endorsed by early Soviet childcare experts, who subsequently aligned their expertise with that of pedagogues and medical workers in order to decrease the child mortality rates, which were considerably high in the first half of the 20th century (Mironov 2003; Chernyaeva 2004). Soviet mothers were also recommended to breastfeed children not when the child demanded, but according to a schedule, implying breaks of several hours between feeding sessions, which is currently considered by many medical workers and breastfeeding promoters both inside and outside Russia as the wrong thing to do (Furtsev & Galaktionova 2014: 92).<sup>2</sup> Hence, the Soviet recommendations on childcare were significantly time- and resource-consuming as at those times living conditions were characterised by a shortage of household utilities

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<sup>2</sup> The vast majority of natural mothers I interviewed, as well as many participants in Russian internet forums devoted to breastfeeding and/or natural parenting, argued that breastfeeding on schedule was the reason why Soviet women breastfed only for short periods of time. In the meantime, I did not find the actual statistics on the duration of breastfeeding by Soviet mothers. Hence, their claim about the short duration of breastfeeding could not be verified.

and many consumer goods (Temkina & Rotkirch 2002). The implementation of these Soviet recommendations could be regarded as an older form of intensive mothering since it entailed investing an enormous amount of different resources in raising children and securing their welfare (Hays 1996: x).

Nevertheless, the Russian natural mothers I talked with did not regard the implementation of the Soviet recommendations on childcare as intensive mothering. Moreover, they saw these recommendations as potentially harmful, destroying other more important aspects of mothering, such as breastfeeding (“therefore they had breast milk only until a child was three months old”). In my interviewees’ understanding, natural parenting was the only “normal” way to carry out maternal childcare: “This [natural parenting practice] is normal; this is the way it [care for children] should be” (Natalia, 30, 1 child).

Forms of maternal care for children other than natural parenting were seen by Russian natural mothers as unnatural, abnormal, against nature, or simply less ‘natural’, and therefore as wrong. In the meantime, everything natural was considered by my interviewees to be smarter and more perfect in comparison to anything created or interfered with by humans and made for some purpose. The analysis revealed that my interviewees understood the purpose of a mother imposed upon her by nature to be care for her child, while the purpose of her maternal body was to nurture. The ‘natural’ mothers I talked with either explicitly or implicitly assumed that, for instance, female lacteal glands (breasts) have been designed by nature for breastfeeding, and the womb and vagina for giving birth vaginally. According to my interviewees, since nature and its creations are perfect, and nature cannot fail, the inability of a mother to use body parts and organs in accordance with their intended purpose was caused by a lack of knowledge or reluctance to follow nature’s design. Both reasons were understood to be the result of, first, the oppressive culture and resistance shown by those providing unnaturalness (the state, medical workers) and, second, the lack of awareness of natural parenting shown by older generations and contemporary young women. From the point of view of my interviewees, while in the latter case the provision of unnaturalness was mostly unintentional, in the former case it could be driven either by the lack of expertise about recent science-based research (promoting natural parenting), or by the business interest in profiting from the provision of unnecessary and harmful treatments and advice, and making citizens more obedient.

The perception of nature – a cornerstone concept of natural parenting specific to my interviewees – framed their comprehension of Soviet extended mothering as unnatural and therefore as damaging for a child.

I sometimes see neurotic children around me. I myself was a neurotic child, and I don’t want my children to be neurotics. So I try to create psychological conditions for them [Sasha’s children] so that they feel comfortable, and live comfortably in the family. [...] [Neurotisation] is about lack of attachment [...], when a child is given away. I mean I was given away all the time: to nursery school, to daycare, to [after-school] sections. (Sasha, 37, 2 children)

My informants regarded extended mothering as traumatising, as causing distress for children and irreversible harm. References to the term ‘neurosis’ in their narratives indicated their awareness of the vocabulary in the psychological discourse and concepts in the field. According to the research on parenting, the psychological knowledge related to childcare became a significant element of contemporary parenting in Russia, as well as in many other post-industrial societies, at the end of the 20th century (Lee 2014; Chernova & Shpakovskaya 2016). The psychological approach to childcare reinterpreted the child’s ‘well-being’: it began to be seen as requiring the child’s emotional comfort in addition to physical health. Such psychologisation of childcare was part of the bigger process of the psychological knowledge expansion to all spheres of life (Illouz 2007: 31). Psychology expanded its influence “to the ‘normally’ neurotic middle-class people”, and changed the social identity of people consuming psychological services (ibid: 24). In Western countries, the expansion of psychological knowledge was underpinned by the increasing dominance of the ideology of capitalism and individualism, promoting rationality, personal autonomy, and an orientation towards happiness (Illouz 2007; Ahmed 2010, 2013). Consequently, the therapeutic culture has been blossoming (Illouz 2008: 220). Such a culture entails thinking and talking about emotions and relations in terms of psychological assumptions; it also requires the skill of identifying feelings and searching for a solution to a problem (Illouz 2007: 59; Lerner 2015: 350).

My interviewees, born in the late Soviet period (1970-1990s), grew up together with the steady promotion of the therapeutic culture in late-Soviet and post-Soviet Russia. This culture started to be developed in Soviet Russia in the first half of the 20th century. The Soviet State, interested in the creation and production of new quality citizens, saw the family as an intermediate agent between the wider society and the individual, and responsible for children’s upbringing (Tchoukina 2002: 110). In order to secure the ‘production’ of new citizens, corresponding to the social needs and increasing the prestige of mothering, the state started educating and supervising families by implementing educational programmes in secondary schools, for instance, on ethics and the psychology of family life (Issoupova 2000; Chernova 2013: 131). Starting in the 1960s, pedagogues and psychologists came to be regarded as officially legitimate experts on childcare, in the same vein as medical workers (Gradskova 2007: 105). They have discussed and condemned the insufficient attention paid by mothers towards their children, their children’s grades, friends, and ways of spending leisure time (Tchoukina 2002: 110; Gradskova 2007: 96–97). Emotions and other psychology-related issues started to be covered and debated in articles addressing mothers and published in the mass media (Gradskova 2007: 105–106).

I argue that my interviewees reflected on and talked about childhood from the perspective of this therapeutic culture, which developed simultaneously along with them. Seeing the outcomes of the childcare dispensed by their own mothers as negative, the ‘natural’ mothers I interviewed aimed to avoid this outcome for their own children. Hence, they assumed the role of primary caregivers who refused to delegate the care of their children to other kinsfolk, and primarily to grandmothers. However, the fact that my interviewees distanced themselves from their elder kinsfolk did not signify their desire for a nuclear family, but for the proper implementation of natural parenting, seen as the only “normal” form of female parenting securing the child’s health and prosperity. It was the understanding of the natural mothers I interviewed that the child needed to be securely attached to

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her mother primarily, and therefore the active participation of other kinsfolk in childcare was arguably unnecessary and even damaging. Yet the natural mothers I talked to still regarded grandmothers as an important, albeit advanced, element in the child's life, and hence they did not exclude them entirely from the child's network.

It is significant that taking the role of the primary caregiver and implementing natural parenting were also possible for my interviewees as a consequence of the father's role within traditional gender ideology. While some of my interviewees' partners actively provided 'natural' mothers with emotional and practical support, far more fathers took a primarily passive role. Many fathers conformed to the parenting style of their partners, but this conformity was not a result of the men's adherence to the ideas of natural parenting. Arguably, this conformity resulted from the father's recognition of the mother's primary responsibility and expertise in childcare, and did not imply any cognitive labour on the part of the father. According to the vast majority of my interviewees, their partners rarely initiated a search for any information about caring for children. Similarly, they rarely engaged in discussions on childrearing. In other words, within the framework of many families of 'natural' mothers I interviewed, the fathers did not intervene in the process of maternal care for children, and their participation in childrearing could hardly be characterised as active. Such inactive fathers' position combined with mothers' reluctance to express breast milk, which consequently prevents the use of such devices as SNS, transforms natural parenting into natural mothering.

The intergenerational tension over the knowledge difference, and the form this tension takes (especially in cases of overt conflict), reveals how the implementation of natural parenting might prevent kinsfolk from providing practical and emotional support for a mother. Under the conditions of a father's under-involvement and insufficient familial support for a mother, neglecting or sabotaging her parental practices, or active resistance towards her choices and parental determination, in Strathernian terms, my interviewees chose to limit the participation of grandmothers in the care of their children. This led to a certain nuclearisation of my interviewees' families on the level of everyday childcare practices – shifting from the extended family consisting of parent(s), their children and other kin, mainly grandmothers, to the nuclear family represented by a heterosexual couple and their children. By doing so, it allowed them to assume a central, dominant position in their family, in regard to caring for their children.

### **Conclusion: What Natural Parenting Does to a Family**

Natural parenting ideology claims that mother-child bonding and close attachment is of significant importance for a child's proper development and well-being. It promotes the specific practices for creating and maintaining this attachment, one of which is long-term, on-demand breastfeeding. Breastfeeding is portrayed by its promoters, such as breastfeeding counsellors and practising mothers, as well as by medical workers and researchers, as an ultimate need by the child and the main tool for securing her current and future physical and mental health. Russian 'natural' mothers support these ideas and consider natural parenting to be the only appropriate form of maternal care for children.

For ‘natural’ mothers, the core ideas of natural parenting are tightly bound to the perception of everything natural being supreme, perfect, and designed for some purpose, as well as to the therapeutic culture they internalised during their socialisation in the latter half of the 20th century. In their understanding, a mother’s body is created for nurturing children. Ideas concerning nature’s superiority and the nurturing purpose of the maternal body add to ‘natural’ mothers’ reasoning whereby breastfeeding secures the child’s physical health. In the meantime, the internalisation of the therapeutic culture facilitates ‘natural’ mothers’ comprehension of creating a close attachment between mother and child through breastfeeding as an essential element in the child’s mental health. However, the idea of nature’s superiority and the internalised therapeutic culture not only intensify natural parenting suggestions on childcare. Taken together with the natural parenting ideas, they construct ‘natural’ mothers’ ‘knowledge’ and redefine kinship ties within their family.

‘Natural’ mothers consider mother and child as the basic entity. Even though my interviewees admitted the significance of the father for the child, they highlighted the ultimate importance of the mother during the early years of the child’s life. Within the framework of natural parenting, breastfeeding both justifies and reproduces the mother’s ultimate importance for the child. It problematises the delegation of baby feeding, and many other practices tightly bound to breastfeeding, to the father, and thus genders parenting. Moreover, it entails the father performing his connection to the child only through the child’s mother.

Apart from full-scale joint parenting by the mother and father, the commitment to and implementation of natural parenting also prevents or narrows down extended mothering. It limits anything other than the mother’s body sharing with the child by excluding older generations and other kinsfolk from routine childcare. It also impedes older generations from sharing knowledge with the child. My interviewees placed their style of childcare in opposition to their mothers’ parenting. For them, the difference in the approaches to childcare provided by natural parenting as a novel model of female parenting and Soviet-style mothering created a crack in kinship. Having internalised the therapeutic culture, which had been steadily expanding in Russia along with my interviewees’ own growth, the ‘natural’ mothers I talked with considered the Soviet mothering they experienced as children as harmful. Characterised by medical workers’ guidance and mothers delegating and sharing childcare with other people and institutions, they held that Soviet mothering neglected the child’s need for affection and an emotional bond with her mother. Taking the position of the ‘new’ knowledge offered by natural parenting and the therapeutic culture, my interviewees aimed to avoid the similar irreparable harm of neglecting their children. They did not want to transfer or implement the older generation’s knowledge with regard to their children and, consequently, separated their mothers from the immediate care of their children.

Such significant limitation of grandparental participation in childcare abandons the conventional practice of extended mothering and pushes grandmothers to the periphery of kinship. Yet the existing qualitative and quantitative research shows that within contemporary Russian society, grandmothers still play a significant role in many families. They are actively engaged both in household duties and childrearing. Grandmothers’ participation in childcare and family life is underpinned not only by the contemporary Russian structural conditions, but also by the public perception of this as ‘normal’, and

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as grounding and/or consolidating the family and kinship, as Zhabenko's findings (in this issue) show. By participating in the everyday life of families, Russian grandmothers are 'doing' kinship as they share their bodies and knowledge, in Strathernian terms, with the younger generations, including their grandchildren. Meanwhile, the distance between grandparents and grandchildren created by my interviewees, either literally or figuratively, ruptures the straightforward sharing of the body. By appropriating childcare and excluding grandmothers from the everyday life of the family, 'natural' mothers re-assert a new family and kinship order. They affirm the mother-child unit as the centre of the child's kinship system and place other kinsfolk in this unit's orbit.

Yet it is important to note that my interviewees' distancing of grandparents from childcare and, consequently, the nuclearisation of their families, signifies the well-resourced social position and status of the 'natural' mothers I talked with. Separating the older generation from childrearing is possible for my interviewees because they have the resources for it: they can afford to live independently in a separate dwelling and they are not forced to be absent from their children and home during the early formative years. The children's fathers assume the role of the primary breadwinner, and the family's income allows many natural mothers to postpone their return to the labour market after the child's birth.

It is hard to say what the discussed nuclearisation of 'natural' mothers' families and their new kinship order will bring to the wider society in the long run. It definitely provides an alternative to the current conventional cultural and practical kinship constellations but it is hardly available to many Russians in the current socio-economic settings. However, exactly due to its limited availability it arguably has a potential to become a new status marker of middle-class Russians.

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