

The ambiguities of self-governance: Russian middle-aged middle-class women's reflections on ageing

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ABSTRACT

In a youth-centred culture, where ageing is associated with physical and mental decline, investment in a youthful appearance promises access to socially valuable resources. The need for regular care for the self, primarily through consumption, constitutes part of the narrative of successful or positive ageing. Due to its emphasis on self-reliance and efforts to remain healthy, productive and youthful, the discourse of successful ageing has been seen as intersecting with a neoliberal rationality, or a shift of responsibility for risks associated with ageing from the state to the individual. While some authors criticise an emphasis on individual effort to maintain personal wellbeing for a lack of attention to structural factors, others view such an approach favourably as a way of transcending state paternalism. In this paper, I engage with the discourse of 'responsibilisation' drawing on the interviews with middle-aged, middle-class women from Moscow about their experiences of ageing. I employ the theoretical framework of 'governmentality' to demonstrate how the interviewed women's attempts to make sense of what it meant to age 'appropriately' within their milieus informed both their awareness of a need to improve and reinvent the self constantly through consumption in the context of post-Soviet Russian society, and their questioning of and resistance to this pressure.

KEY WORDS—ageing, women, Russia, governmentality.

Introduction: ageing, self-care and status

In youth-centred cultures, ageing is associated with physical and mental decline (Calasanti and King 2007; Katz 2001/2; Twigg 2006) and, by extension, a potential loss of status and authority (Calasanti, Slevin and King 2006: 18). Middle-aged and older people who invest in their appearances and 'pass' as young can improve their chances in the competition for socially valuable resources. So-called anti-ageing products and services can thus promise a return to an idealised state of youthfulness that embodies

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the qualities of an ideal modern capitalist subject: self-sufficiency, productivity and the ability to engage continuously in consumption (Neilson 2012: 50).

The need to care for the self constantly, primarily through consumption, constitutes a part of the narrative of successful, active or positive ageing. These notions have been central to ageing-related policies in the United States of America (USA), Canada and some European countries since the 1960s (Flood 2002; Katz 2001/2; Katz and Calasanti 2015; Laliberte Rudman 2006: 184–5). According to Tulle (2017: 128), active ageing is understood mainly in terms of economic productivity and bound with expectations to adopt healthy lifestyles and construct a never-ageing appearance.¹ While initially devised as a response to ageist attitudes, the concept of successful (or active) ageing has itself come under fire, not only for glossing over the social differences between older people (in early and later life), but also for ‘feed[ing] the fear of ageing [and] creating a surrounding culture of age denial’ (Twigg 2006: 46). Moreover, due to its emphasis on self-reliance and efforts to remain healthy, productive and youthful, the discourse of successful ageing has been cautioned against due to its intersection with a ‘neoliberal rationality’ or a shift of responsibility for risks associated with ageing from the state to the individual (*e.g.* Laliberte Rudman 2015: 11; Polivka 2011).²

Such an emphasis on individual responsibility and risk aversion is questioned as a basis for a false dichotomy between older people who are viewed as living up to ideals of successful agers (mainly due to their access to necessary resources) and those considered morally irresponsible, or ‘unsuccessful agers’ (Rubinstein and de Medeiros 2015: 37). Individual efforts to work on the self also appear to have their limits, and respondents tend to admit to experiencing a sense of failure, guilt and anxiety (Laliberte Rudman 2015). In other words, an emphasis on individual efforts to maintain personal wellbeing is generally critiqued for its victim-blaming undertone. However, some Russian sociologists, on the contrary, call for more attention from local specialists and academics towards the significance of individual behaviour and lifestyle in matters of health and ageing (Grigorieva 2005, 2006; Shilova 2000, 2007). In the latter case, a greater reliance on the self and community (family and not-for-profit organisations), for instance, in European countries like France is championed as a desirable shift from state paternalism (Grigorieva 2005: 134–5, 138).

In this paper, I explore how the discourse of ‘responsibilisation’ in relation to ageing is lived through by middle-aged, middle-class women from Moscow, Russia. The analysis is based on the interview excerpts in which the participants reflect on their attitudes to and experiences of ageing (*star-enie*). I employ a theoretical framework of governmentality that enables the

consideration of the links between technologies of political government at the macro level of the state, and technologies of governing the self at the micro level of everyday practices. I demonstrate how the interviewed women's discursive constructions of desirable or undesirable older subjects informed their own practices of bodily care as well as their questioning of the need to improve the self constantly as part of ageing 'appropriately'.

The paper begins with the overview of the theoretical framework of governmentality and the outline of its relevance to the issue of ageing in Russia. In the second part of the paper, the governmentality approach is used to examine the interviewed women's engagement with dominant discourses on bodily ageing.

The governmentality of ageing

Drawing on Foucault's lectures from the late 1970s (Foucault 1994), Mitchell Dean (2010: 20–1) proposes to view governmentality as a perspective that seeks to link: problems of government (as a form of power concerned with optimising the capacities of the population by bettering its existence), politics and administration (*i.e.* health, welfare of living individuals) to bodies, lifestyles and selves (*i.e.* questions of identity). As such, the notion of governmentality helps to understand the ways that techniques of governing others correlate with practices and processes through which individuals act upon themselves (Foucault 1991; Lemke 2001: 204). It is about conflicts and mediations between techniques of coercion and techniques of modifying the self or becoming a particular kind of subject.

From the governmentality perspective, in liberal western societies, the state does not diminish, but rather employs additional, *indirect* techniques of population management (Lemke 2001). The state seeks to shape citizens' conduct in ways that align the responsible exercise of freedom and governmental objectives (Dean 2010: 200–1; Rose, O'Malley and Valverde 2006). For instance, cultural messages regarding successful ageing disseminated through the media, public policies and academic texts promote an idealised image of older people capable of personally managing social, financial and bodily risks of ageing (Laliberte Rudman 2015: 11–12). Alternatively, older people might be viewed as in need of 'stimulation' to avoid social stigmatisation and exclusion, for instance through engagement in socially beneficial work as part of a community where they can participate in decision-making (Grigorieva and Chernyshova 2009: 187). Discourses of activation or stimulation of otherwise passive or vulnerable groups can arguably be considered one of the soft techniques of power through which social issues such as illness become redefined as matters of

self-care that require adjustments in individual behaviour and habits (and not in social policies, government regulations or business conduct) (Lemke 2001: 202).

To what extent do these ideas, regarding the reconfiguration of political governance and the use of indirect or soft techniques of population management in liberal societies, apply to Russia? To narrow down the inquiry, I shall focus on two specific points. Firstly, the use of indirect techniques of government is based on the assumption that a population consists of rational actors who exercise their free will in choosing how to conduct themselves (Lemke 2001). Secondly, in liberal societies individuals are invested with power to govern themselves in ways aligned with the goals of the state (Dean 2010). What governmental goals can be identified and which groups are highlighted through these goals? While some of these groups might be controlled through more direct techniques such as persecution (*e.g.* gay people), others might be ‘empowered’ to govern themselves through the discourse of ‘responsibilisation’ (*e.g.* pregnant women, young mothers or parents).

Defining ageing subjects

According to Rose, O’Malley and Valverde (2006, 84–5), in practice, a researcher who uses governmentality as an analytical perspective would pose the following questions: Who or what is to be governed (*e.g.* the soul or flesh)? How should they be governed (*e.g.* through surveillance or spiritual practices)? Who individuals are when they are governed – their ‘mode of subjectification’ (*e.g.* a victim of carnal desires in Christianity; a rational, responsible and active jobseeker in social programmes)? Why should they be governed and what aim should be achieved? (Dean 2010: 24). In this section, I shall consider the question of ‘who the governed are’ by drawing on the literature on public health and support for pensioners in Russia.

In the course of the economic reforms in the 1990s, health care in Russia was gradually commercialised (Rivkin-Fish 2005).³ Medicine was no longer part of the Soviet state’s care for its citizens, channelled through medical professionals (Borozdina 2011: 18). Nonetheless, research results demonstrate that various social groups continue to view the state as the main guarantor of the nation’s good health (Nazarova 1998; Shilova 2000, 2007; Varlamova and Sedova 2010).⁴ An analysis of the discussion of the National Project ‘Health’ (2006/7) in the Russian media, for instance, reveals that, at least in the early stages of the project’s implementation, ‘the prevailing policy orientation was to shift responsibility for health to the government not to individuals’ (Bondarik 2010: 112). A more

middle-way position is advocated by the researcher at the Russian Academy of Science, Lyudmila Dartau (2003), who argues that for public health reforms in Russia to be successful, responsibility for individual and national health has to be shared by individual citizens and the state.

Those health promotion campaigns that do construct citizens as informed and engaged consumers appear to address primarily more affluent and younger families and individuals (Chudakova 2017: 2). Of concern here is a likely exclusion of those citizens who lack financial and institutional resources such as older people. At the same time, the concept of active or successful ageing has not been incorporated into social policies in Russia (Sidorenko and Zaidi 2013).⁵ Due to declining birth-rates, the Russian state tends to prioritise pronatalistic policies that traditionally overlook older citizens (Sidorenko and Zaidi 2013: 10). More specifically, women of reproductive age become key objects of relevant policies or policy proposals (Rivkin-Fish 2013; Temkina 2015: 1530), which leaves older women and their bodies outside the realm of the state's biopolitical priorities.⁶

Older citizens are constructed in popular and academic discourses as a group that requires and deserves support from the state, while concerns are raised regarding low living standards of the majority of pensioners (Rumyantseva 2009: 159). The Russian sociologist Grigorieva (2006: 35) argues that this might be partly due to the fact that before withdrawing, the state had failed to create opportunities for citizens who lived and worked under Soviet socialism to become more self-reliant.⁷ This claim is to an extent supported by research on financial literacy that demonstrates a relatively low level of financial planning among the Russian population; for instance, while the respondents (future pensioners) of a 2005 survey tended to believe that state pensions would be insufficient to cover their expenditures in retirement, they saw their future earnings and not savings as the main source of financial resources (Kuzina 2007). That is, while people might have little hope in the state's support in retirement, they have not yet adopted financial strategies deemed most effective in the context of the market economy.

The popular discourses that construct Russian citizens as in need of the state's care and unprepared to govern themselves constitutes a discursive field which individuals can draw on when making sense of bodily ageing, in terms of both health and appearance. In the three data analysis sections, I tease out some overlaps between these discourses and women's individual reflections on ageing. In addition, a distinctive feature of the narratives that I shall focus on is a shift in social attitudes towards personal bodily care in the 1990s and 2000s and, related to this, an uncertainty about how the interviewees were to attend to the self as part of a transition to 'old' age.

Method and data

The analysis in this paper draws on the larger project that was based on the interviews with 21 women aged 41–59 at the time when the data were collected in 2010 and 2012.⁸ The participants were recruited in Moscow using ‘snowball’ sampling whereby participants tell people they know about the study and invite them to participate (Ritchie, Lewis and Elam 2003: 94). The use of personal contacts helped attract a sufficient number of participants, but they comprised a relatively homogeneous group. They were predominately ethnic Russian, heterosexual, with higher education and mainly in white-collar jobs. In this paper, I focus on the experiences of women aged 50–60, interviewed both individually and as part of a group. Table 1 provides an overview of the socio-demographic data of the participants whose stories form the basis for the analysis in this paper.

The data were collected through semi-structured individual and group interviews.⁹ The data were analysed using a combination of inductive and deductive thematic analysis (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006; King and Horrocks 2010). While thematic analysis is a method for analysing the data rather than an approach to qualitative research, data collection and interpretation for the present study were guided by several fundamental assumptions (Braun and Clarke 2012: 58). For example, knowledge generated in a study is not a totalising truth but ‘a partial and situated account’ (Allen 2005: 17) inseparable from ‘particular social, political and intellectual conditions and situations’ (Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002: 14, 66). Moreover, in presenting their stories, participants in groups or individual interviews engage ‘in particular constructions of themselves’ (Allen 2005: 18). These constructions of the self through narrative are performed by drawing on discourses available to the participants within their cultural milieu.

The two sets of interview data were transcribed verbatim in Russian.¹⁰ The combination of inductive and deductive thematic analysis presupposes that the researcher derives codes from the data as well as draws on existing theories to conceptualise the links between core themes (Braun and Clarke 2012: 60). After several readings of the interview transcripts, I generated codes and subsequently arranged parts of each transcript under these codes (*e.g.* self-presentation at work, sources of advice on beauty care) (King and Horrocks 2010: 152–3). In the large research project, parts of transcripts were eventually grouped into five overarching ‘first-order’ themes: consumption, work, intimate relations, mother–daughter relations and bodily ageing (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006: 90). In the sections

TABLE 1. *The socio-demographic attributes of the participants*

Category	N
Age:	
50–55	13
56–60	3
60–65	1
Education:	
Less than high school	0
High school	0
Vocational college	2
University	15
Marital status:	
Currently married	7
Divorced/single	7
Widowed	3
Occupation:	
Financial director	1
Senior economist	1
Senior manager	1
IT engineer	1
Accountant	2
Public servant at a local government	2
Speech pathologist	1
Secretary (part-time)	1
Private tutor	1
Freelance artist	1
Receptionist/seamstress (part-time)	1
Maid	1
Retired	3

below, the analysis of the selected interview extracts is organised into the following thematic categories: maintaining a youthful appearance, negotiating responsibility for health and abject older femininities.

Maintaining a youthful appearance

Most interviewees expressed a degree of worry about ageing as they transitioned between the life stages. Some of them were particularly concerned about visible changes in their appearances that would accompany such a transition. The following comments from Lyuda (58) and Eva (59), interviewed in the same focus group, and Maria (57) interviewed individually, provide examples of such concerns.

When I was young ... I was slim. But now I always suffer, I look – my legs are not right, this is not right, that is wrong. [I'm] suffering [*stradayu*]. (Lyuda, 58, pensioner)

[In response to Lyuda]: To suffer is a bit wrong because it's natural, no one has ever escaped it ... The only thing is that when we were 30, 40, we didn't think

[about ageing] ... But now it comes to me a bit, I don't want to age. (Eva, 59, pensioner)

Now it's still okay but later ... it's not fair when a woman is a beauty and then a granny ... I don't want [to enter] that last stage [of ageing]. (Maria, 57, senior economist)

These comments echo the narratives of women in another qualitative study who tended to refrain from expressions like 'ageing gracefully' and focused instead on themes of injury, pain or visible changes like wrinkles, which conveyed a sense of objectively judging their own bodies or body parts (Paulson and Willig 2008: 119).

The participants of the present study, however, also spoke of a need to make sense of, and adjust to, changes in both their own bodies and social expectations. This focus on the twin processes of change serves to underscore the connection between the macro-level events (*e.g.* a shift from socialism to capitalism) and the micro-level events (*e.g.* retirement, bodily ageing). For instance, when asked to reflect on changes in beauty ideals and women's beauty care in Russia in the last two decades, Alina chose to respond by recounting her recent job-hunting experience. Attending job interviews, Alina had learnt that a carefully constructed appearance was essential to win a competition for top positions in her professional field:

When I recently had a job interview, the CEO said that he had chosen me because he ... wanted a [mature-age] woman [with more experience]. But all the women he had met had a 'Soviet-like' appearance [*savkoviy vid*], not pleasant. So, I received a compliment that I looked better and so was chosen. (Alina, 52, financial director)

Another participant, Marta, who spoke of her recent *unsuccessful* job interview, tried to pinpoint what had made her less competitive, including changes that have occurred in attitudes towards appearances of prospective employees since the fall of socialism:

[A] 'healthy lifestyle' has always been propagated, but [during the Soviet time] it was on the state level and it was easier, because then there was that crowd instinct [*massovost'*], collectivism – everyone does this, so will I. And I think now there is a fight for image, you're fighting ... If you don't look OK, if your health is poor – you can't occupy the best spot under the sun. (Marta, 50, IT engineer)

Both Marta's and Alina's reflections suggest that healthy looks were indicative of regular work on the self and had become important for one's competitiveness in the labour market. As Alina's story demonstrates, despite the appreciation of work experience that older employees could accumulate over time, such experience had to come with a look that was distinctly non-Soviet. In Marta's evocative phrase, the maintenance of a (non-Soviet) appearance in the context of heightened competition becomes 'a fight for image' that is distinct from the 'crowd instinct' of the Soviet time. This

distinction can be read as a metaphor for a broader shift in Russia from state socialism to a market-oriented economy and public health system. As part of this shift, Alina and Marta came to view their faces and bodies as objects of self-governance requiring adjustment and improvement. This is further illustrated by another quote from Alina where she elaborated on her use of professional skin care.

Unfortunately, [beauty care] requires time and money and nerves, because I don't feel like spending time on it. But I [do get] the whole course of ten [facial] procedures. [I have to do it] every week: if you miss one week, the effect from the previous week is wasted ... [I do it] for myself and people around me, so it's not disgusting for them to look at me ... and plus work. If I look bad everyone will [judge me] ... I'm almost the oldest at work. (Alina, 52, financial director)

Alina did voice a critique of the need to engage regularly with resource-intensive beauty procedures to avoid provoking disgust in her younger colleagues. However, like for some of Clarke and Griffin's (2008: 666) participants in Canada who sought to deal with ageist attitudes at work through the use of various beauty products and services, for Alina, a less regular performance of cosmetic procedures was out of the question. Alina can be compared to an exemplary subject in a liberal society who 'rationally assesses the costs and benefits of a certain act as opposed to other alternative acts' (Lemke 2002: 59). In this case, her desire to secure high-paid employment outweighed any reservations she had regarding the pressure to invest money, time and energy into anti-ageing skin care.

Moreover, both Alina's remark regarding a Soviet appearance and Marta's binary of collectivist healthy lifestyles and capitalist competition for status arguably reveal a particular discursive construction of an *ageing* subject as a locus of self-governance. Ageing bodies and faces are cast as something belonging to the Soviet era where appearances could not be as easily manipulated as they can be today with cosmetic services available on the market. Soviet-looking middle-aged women thus fail to uphold these aesthetic responsibilities in late-capitalist Russia. They lack the desire, will and resources required to maintain an appearance that can increase one's chances of winning 'the best spot under the sun'.

How do 'ageing' subjects manage expectations to care for their bodies and health in post-Soviet Russian society? The next two sections focus on the themes of responsibility for health and uncertainties in regards to how one should attend to one's body as part of ageing appropriately.

Negotiating responsibility for health

When asked to recount their regular beauty routines, seven out of the 12 women interviewed individually spoke at length about their attempts to

lose weight. In general, dieting seemed to be primarily a matter of bodily aesthetics, rather than physical health, even when they discussed matters such as healthy eating.

I'm not very fat, but plump. But I don't think I can be thinner because it's my individual [body type]. It's because of my breasts, of course. If I could remove them, then I'd be slimmer. But what could I do with them? [The dietician whom I was referred to by my older daughter who worked in a clinic in Geneva] thinks that women like me are simply cows. He doesn't say that but I saw what he likes, horribly skinny ones [*dokhodyagi*]. But anyhow, I sat there listening to him ... You can easily lose weight [if you follow his advice], but I couldn't. (Maria, 57, senior economist)

When I sweat [at a fitness club where I do swimming and go to the sauna], I believe I lose weight a little bit ... I started having issues with joints – the slimmer you are the easier it is. Firstly it's for health, but also it's not nice when you meet with people, and everyone is thin and you are fat (laughs). That's why I liked it in Spain [where] everyone was fat and nice ... There I felt I was quite alright. (Tamara, 50, private tutor)

I like when a woman is normal, when she doesn't have bones sticking out ... [A]ccording to a poll [cited in a television show], out of 100 per cent of men only 5 per cent like skinny [women] ... I started dieting but then my boyfriend said ... 'I don't like it, stop it ... so you have some bum and tits, not just a pile of bones to hug.' So I am [good] as I am. I think: 'Oh, I've overeaten again ...; no, I should refrain from it.' But I don't care about it that much. (Irina, 50, part-time receptionist/seamstress)

Maria's and Tamara's quotes about the fear of fatness were clearly reframed as a need to maintain good health. While they did express concerns about health issues and the need to make changes to their 'lifestyles' (e.g. problems with joints), they generally spoke of minimal changes to their daily diet such as the exclusion of bread or other types of 'fattening' foods. In addition, only four participants aged 45 and older, interviewed individually and in groups, combined dieting with regular exercises such as dancing or swimming. This corresponds to the findings of a quantitative, cross-cultural study: while the female respondents from Finland used dieting and exercise as the main means of watching their weight, their Russian counterparts (from St Petersburg) relied primarily on clothes and make-up to achieve a desirable visual effect (Haavio-Mannila and Purhonen 2001).

Viewed through the discourse of 'responsibilisation', the three interviewees' discussion of weight loss indicates that they are fearful of appearing as immoral citizens who are unable to control their weight and appetite and, by extension, their life circumstances (Blaxter 1997; Bordo 1993; Moore 2010). Yet, their comments contain discursive shifts from shame to self-acceptance and back again. A similar negotiation of cultural constructs of ageing is revealed in a study with older female participants in the United Kingdom (UK) where narratives of guilt are mixed with acceptance and the

perception of older age as a time when one can finally let go and enjoy the food they love (Tunaley, Walsh and Nicolson 1999: 747–52).

In relation to the three comments cited above, despite an implicit sense of shame or guilt, the women actively searched for external or ‘natural’ factors that could help them feel better about their own bodies as they were (supposedly too large breasts that cannot be changed; some men actually like plumper women; being among other ‘fat and nice’ women who appear content with their bodies). I would suggest that this balancing of uneasiness about their body shapes with the recounting of factors beyond one’s control and situations where larger bodies are normalised indicates an externalisation of responsibility for the self in which the normative messages of commercial and public health actors have a role. While it is in the state’s biopolitical interests to manage and maximise the population’s health, the arrangement whereby citizens are to scrutinise and manage their daily practices does not seem to have been fully adopted in Russia, and ‘discourses of health ... are still largely focused on the role of government as primarily responsible for public health’ (Pietilä and Rytönen 2008: 1070).

Abject older femininities

The analysis in the previous two sections builds on the idea that the identification of ‘who the governed are’ enables the tracing of particular techniques of self-governance as well as their connection to currently dominant discourses (Dean 2010; Rose, O’Malley and Valverde 2006). In this section, I focus on the difficulties individuals might face when seeking to identify for themselves which techniques of self-care are deemed appropriate and what they are to become as a result of their use, when ‘the governed’ are their own ageing bodies. To do so I use the interview excerpts regarding a supposed inconsistency between some women’s appearances and their chronological age.

When an old granny made pig tails, put on a décolleté top and high heels, you think she’s ‘a crazy town woman’;¹¹ you feel sorry for her and think ... she might have had a nervous breakdown or something ... I think sometimes to myself, I can’t afford to lose that edge, [can’t] fall into the category of a town’s crazy woman – when you dress like young people – because you just look ridiculous. What can be worn by young people cannot be worn by an ageing madam. (Anna, 54, part-time secretary)

Recently, I saw two aunties around 35 wearing leggings. Gosh, it’s such ugliness! Can’t people see? They’re youth clothes, leggings. You can wear them up to 18 or 20 ... but not 35! (Nina, 50, freelance artist)

There are also moments that we, at our age, want to wear something that’s [fashionable but not suitable for our age group], something girlish, and it strikes one’s eye. And you look and think, No, something is not right, like you’re emulating a lass [*kosish pod molodukhu*]. (Eva, 59, pensioner)

As can be noted from the quotes, an abstract notion of a 'normal' older person acquires here the meaning of a sane person who can understand and meet social expectations towards appearance and one's conduct. Anna's comment about sanity can be linked to the historical pathologising of women's mental capacities. Drawing on secondary accounts, Liz Frost (1999: 118), for instance, writes that certain ways of applying make-up, grooming and dressing are the socially constructed attributes of the sane woman as well as the means through which a woman can 'construct a sane identity'. In the UK, Frost (1999: 118) maintains, 'too much' make-up or outfits that are 'too girlish or too sexy' can be interpreted as symptoms of a woman's 'hysterical well-being expressed in over-beautification'. This negative appraisal of appearance/mental health is one of the consequences of the perceived transgression of moral boundaries related to ageing and femininity that Nina outlines in her harsh judgement of the two strangers.

While the women in the above comments desired to experiment with styles and look cared-for and fashionable, the realisation of these desires were constrained by the cultural conceptions of how a normal older women should dress. Critical remarks about middle-aged and older women whose choices of make-up, hairstyles or clothing are supposedly out of sync with their age are cited in other studies, for instance, from Canada (Clarke and Griffin 2007; Dumas, Laberge and Straka 2005). As for the Russian cultural context, a recent study of two key Soviet women's magazines demonstrates that in these publications from the 1970s and 1980s young women were commonly presented as slim and women aged 45 years and older as 'plump' (Davidenko 2016). Texts on fashion routinely reminded the latter group what kind of clothing and fabrics they had to avoid wearing – clothing that, according to the logic of the age–body shape binary, was appropriate only for slim young girls and women (*e.g.* skirts above the knee, trousers). The three quotes cited above suggest that such cultural attitudes had to an extent influenced the interviewees' ideas regarding 'proper' appearances of women aged 45–50 and older. Thus, women in today's urban Russia have to be attentive to trends in fashion and anti-ageing skin care to avoid appearing Soviet-like and 'unpleasant', or girlish and insane.

In general, the interviewees' comments reveal anxieties that can be attributed to the ongoing process of identity-production in late capitalist societies. That is, the promise of endless reinvention of the self requires consumers constantly to navigate and bear personal responsibility for choices that are linked to aspects of their identities (Maguire and Stanway 2008; Thompson and Hirschman 1995). However, the above excerpts also point to 'shared vulnerability' (Shildrick 2001) in the face of ambiguous expectations of how to age properly. This is particularly apparent in Eva's

use of pronouns ‘we’ and ‘you’, and in Anna’s switching from strong disapproval to sympathy towards those peers who had supposedly lost touch with social reality (‘you feel sorry for her ... I think sometimes to myself, I can’t afford to lose that edge’). As such, an older feminine subject figures in the comments above as a ‘liminal being’ that escapes a clear-cut definition (Shildrick 2001).

Liminal or ‘monstrous’ beings might appear different from ourselves, but what is particularly confronting about them is that their presence serves as a reminder that the boundaries of normative subjecthood that we believe ourselves to embody are much more unstable than we image them to be (Shildrick 2001: 4–5). For the middle-aged participants, the expectation of ongoing self-development could be hard to satisfy since many of them seemingly struggled to grasp what this developed or perfected self ought to be. Their comments reveal concerns that while engaged in practices of self-improvement, they could, like the women they critiqued, easily ‘lose that edge’, transgressing the vaguely outlined boundary of normative ageing subjectivities.

Conclusion

This paper examined how middle-aged Russian women face and engage with new uncertainties in a later-capitalist era that pathologises ageing. Focusing particularly on the question of ‘modes of subjectification’ or how the governed are constructed, I have identified the two themes that arguably constitute a discursive field which individuals can draw on when making sense of growing ‘old’. These were the constructions of citizens as requiring the state’s care (public health, pensions) and unprepared to practise self-governance suited to a social environment where citizens are expected to regard social problems as a matter of individual responsibility. Although the notion of active ageing has not been incorporated into government policies aimed at older people in Russia, its main tenants such as one’s efforts to remain economically productive and physically active as well as maintain a youthful appearance were traced in the narratives analysed in this paper. For instance, in some participants’ comments, a middle-aged woman with a ‘Soviet’ appearance – with no obvious signs of regular use of beauty services – emerges as a symbol of inability to practise self-governance in ways suitable for a society valuing individual responsibility and competition.

The data shed light on the women’s engagement in daily mediations of a heightened social pressure to attend to one’s appearance through consumption. While at times frustrated with the need to use anti-ageing products regularly or lose weight, they were also ready to conform to such

expectations to avoid being perceived as disgusting by younger colleagues or unworthy of a job by a prospective employer (*see also* Davidenko 2017). As per Calasanti and King's (2007) definition of age relations, working on the self through consumption of anti-ageing care promises urban middle-class women a competitive advantage, for instance in the field of employment. But the data also provide a glimpse into peculiarities of the urban, middle-class women's navigation of social expectations regarding personal bodily care. For instance, the discourse of the Russian state's obligation to care for the nation's health seems to have created a space for resisting the idea that one is an immoral and irresponsible individual merely because one's body or body parts are considered larger than a slim 'norm'. This can be understood as one of the ways practices of self-governance might be connected to certain regimes of knowledge and authority (Rose, O'Malley and Valverde 2006: 90).

The data thus suggest that while the women were aware of and sought to satisfy the pressures to maintain certain appearances to avoid losing access to valuable resources or being ill-perceived, their experiences also revealed the limitations of individual work on the self (*see also* Laliberte Rudman 2015). This was evident, for instance, in the combination of their critique of and sympathy for other women who had supposedly violated the age-specific dress code. That is, the data indicate that even for those individuals who have access to necessary resources, the governance of their ageing bodies through consumer practices is far from a straightforward process of simply choosing and applying techniques available on the market to embody a certain construct of a perfected self. For middle-aged, middle-class women from Moscow, this process was fraught with uncertainties about how not to appear either too old, creating an impression of personal irresponsibility, or too young and hence a poor imitation of youthful femininities.

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NOTES

- 1 Meredith Flood (2002: 107) contends that despite a variety of definitions, the concept of successful ageing can be operationalised 'by measuring the ager's achievement of a desirable outcome, ability to cope with cumulative changes that have resulted in physical and functional decline, and a sense of meaning in life'.

- 2 In a popular discourse, neoliberalism is generally understood as a set of ideas propagating unregulated markets and privatisation, and hence a gradual withdrawal of the state from the provision of public education, health care and welfare services in countries like the USA, Canada, Australia and the UK, starting in the last two decades of the twentieth century (Rubinstein and de Medeiros 2015: 36). At the level of social or monetary policies, it has been described as a coherent ideology hostile towards state regulations of business and organisations. A number of scholars, however, have critiqued a lack of understanding of the historical development of 'neoliberal' ideas that date back to Europe of the 1920s and 1930s (Mirowski and Plehwe 2009). For instance, Collier (2011: 18–19, 24) proposes to understand neoliberalism as 'a form of reflection' on the problems of governing, or a series of pragmatic responses to what particular actors (*e.g.* technocrats, policy makers) identify as problematic and requiring solution, in specific situations. For instance, in the 1990s, neoliberalism came to be associated with the so-called structural adjustment (or more specifically its 'marketisation' form), namely economic reforms focused on stabilisation, price liberalisation and privatisation. Collier (2011: 124) points out, however, that these features emerged only in response to specific problems, namely economic crises of the 1970s in the UK and the USA. Similarly, Stedman (2014: 13, 17) demonstrates that despite the scepticism with which politicians treated ideas of economists like Milton Friedman up until the mid- to late 1970s, the shift from a Keynesian-inspired focus on employment and government spending towards a focus on inflation and deregulation did occur because at the time it began to be perceived as the only vital alternative offering an answer to existing economic problems.
- 3 An ethnography into reproductive health (conducted in St Petersburg) by Michele Rivkin-Fish (2005) reveals the shift to 'consumerism' in public health in the 1990s when expecting mothers could 'choose' to pay an inflated (deregulated) price for a nicely decorated, individual room in a hospital but still had to fully entrust their bodies to doctors who administered their labour.
- 4 This seems to apply even to some Russian-speaking immigrants who left Russia or Ukraine as adults but continued to believe that if procedures such as routine breast cancer screenings were of any importance, their general practitioners would suggest them (Team, Manderson and Markovic 2013). The authors note that the group of older Russian-speaking women residing in the state of Victoria, Australia had relatively low rates of participation in voluntary breast and cervical cancer screening. The main reason identified by the authors was that in the Soviet Union, where these women grew up and lived as young adults, cancer screenings used to be part of annual, compulsory check-ups for students and workers and therefore were viewed by the women as a responsibility of the doctor (Team, Manderson and Markovic 2013).
- 5 While the notion of active ageing has not entered the sphere of social policies in Russia, it has had currency among local social scientists (Al'mukanov 2014; Zelikova 2013). Even academics who do not use the terms successful or active ageing explore issues on which this concept is centred (*e.g.* Flood 2002), such as an ability to maintain a positive outlook on life despite health problems, and an ability to adapt to life changes related to ageing (Kadyrova 2012; Sapozhnikova 2015).
- 6 Thinking through the question of governmental goals and groups singled out *vis-à-vis* these goals, it is possible to reflect on concerns other than declining birth rates. The Russian state's preoccupation with the restoration of the country's geopolitical power has arguably turned the rhetoric of 'moral values' into a

legitimate technique of population management (Makarychev and Medvedev 2015; Rodin 2015; Shpakovskaya 2015). In this regard, multiple others (*e.g.* migrants, individuals identifying as non-heterosexual, political dissidents) have become central objects of regulation since they threaten the nation's imagined integrity in terms of borders, mores and unified support for the regime.

- 7 Available data do not permit a decisive conclusion to be drawn in regards to whether financial support for pensioners was better in the Soviet period than in the past 25 years since the fall of socialism. In the Soviet period, there existed an official grading of pensions that aimed to minimise the discrepancy between pensions received by different social groups: substitution coefficient was set at 55–65 per cent (Akbulatov 2010: 162) or in a range of 50–85 per cent in the 1980s depending on the level of salary (Osipov 2012; Pudovkin 2015: 218). But real ratios of an average pension to an average salary ('substitution coefficient') differed from the official prescriptions: for instance, 28 per cent in 1970, 30 per cent in 1980, 38–40 per cent in 1986 and 1990 (Pudovkin 2015: 221). It is important to note that the 'averages' obscure the fact that social categories, such as military employees, received higher pensions or that in different regions pensioners could not get access to the same commodities due to shortages. Some authors argue that the reforms of the pension system in the 2000s (especially, a new law introduced in 2004 dubbed the 'monetisation of social benefits') have significantly decreased the level of pensions, *i.e.* 20–30 per cent of the average salary (Osipov 2012; Soldatova 2007). But the numbers cited in Pudovkin (2015), Soldatova (2007) and Osipov (2012) suggest that the average 'substitution coefficient' in the 2000s did not differ significantly from this same indicator in 1970 and 1980.
- 8 The retirement of women whose teenage years fell in the long and relatively stable period of the mid-1960s to 1970s ('socialist consumer modernity') in the Soviet Union can be compared in its significance to the retirement of baby-boomers in western societies, to which critical discussions of notions such as successful ageing commonly refer. In the affluent 2000s, most participants were in their forties and fifties and participated, to various degrees, in the post-Soviet consumer culture that celebrates competition and glamour (Davidenko 2017). This included their negotiation of the need to use anti-ageing procedures: while questioning the need to re-shape their bodies radically, they admitted that their attitude to both surgical and non-surgical interventions might change if they feel their appearances fall behind the youthful standards established within their milieus.
- 9 For the larger project, in 2010, I conducted 12 one-to-one interviews with women in their forties and fifties; and in 2012, I complemented these data with five separate focus groups divided by age: three groups with women in their late thirties to fifties and two groups with women in their late twenties. Three women aged 50–62 were interviewed with their daughters in 2012 (one of these three women had been previously interviewed individually).
- 10 All translations of interviews from Russian are mine.
- 11 An expression that became a colloquium and originated from the title of a debut album of a famous Russian pop singer, Masha Rasputina, released in 1991.

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