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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Motives Behind Post-Soviet Women's Decisions to Become Surrogate Mothers

Natalia Khvorostianov[1]

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Abstract

Russia is one of the few countries, where commercial gestational surrogacy a legal for locals and foreigners. Even though surrogacy in Russia is stigmatized, a sizeable number of Russian women would like to become surrogates. Drawing on SelfDetermination Theory and based on a qualitative content analysis of 656 posts in a Russian-language online forum for SMs, this paper explores how Russian surrogates conceptualize their occupation and what are their primary aims and motivations for surrogacy. They discuss four interrelated motives: 1) Financial: SM is a job, even a profession, that should be properly remunerated, 2) Social: SMs enjoy their unique and indispensable role as carriers of future children that could not be born otherwise, 3) Hedonistic: SMs enjoy the very experience of pregnancy and related body sensations, and 4) Moral: SMs find satisfaction in contributing to common good and ensuring future happiness of a childless couple. Judging by the posts on the website under study, the extrinsic and intrinsic aspects of these motives are closely intertwined.

Keywords Surrogacy · Motivation · Gender · Post-Soviet Women · Digital Community · Grounded Theory

Introduction

Commercial gestational surrogacy (hereinafter, CGS) is an arrangement in which the intended parent(s) pay a third party, the surrogate mother (hereinafter, SM), to carry their externally fertilized embryo. This arrangement has been banned in many coun-

✉ Natalia Khvorostianov
nataliak@bgu.ac.il

[1] Communication Study Department, Ben-Gurion University in the Negev, Beer-Sheva, Israel

tries, with ethical, religious, and legislative considerations at the heart of the prohibition. In Russia and some other post-Communist states (e.g., Ukraine and Georgia), as well as in some US states, however, CGS is legal (Aznar & Peris, 2019). A sizeable number of young Russian women seek to become surrogates. According to Weis (2017), one Moscow-based agency recruits surrogacy workers from all over Russia. The reported selection rate is 10 out of 700 expressions of interest, or 1.4% (Weis, 2017, pp. 120–121).

It is not easy to understand the motives of a person who voluntarily exposes herself to all the perils of pregnancy and surrogacy so that others reap the happiness of becoming parents. It appears even more counterintuitive because along with the "standard" difficulties associated with IVF treatment, pregnancy, childbirth, and separation from the baby, Russian surrogates suffer from stigma and ostracism on the part of relatives, colleagues, and neighbors (Khvorostyanov & Yeshua-Katz, 2020; Yeshua-Katz & Khvorostianov 2021). Additionally, they must depend on the goodwill of intended parents and agency employees and could be subjected to financial penalties for even minor infractions, such as not answering phone calls (Weis, 2017).

This qualitative study is part of a larger project that explored the experiences shared and discussed by surrogates on Kangaroo Island, a Russian online reproductive health forum. The project draws on The Social Support Computer-mediated Communication perspective (Wright & Bell, 2003), which focuses on Internet weak tie networks and facilitates participant similarity and empathic communication due to the characteristics of the medium. However, for this specific study, which aims to complement the scarce existing data on the motivations for surrogacy in the Russian context, I employed Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan 1985).

Self-Determination Theory

STD distinguishes between different types of motivation based on the reasons or goals that give rise to an action. The most basic distinction occurs between intrinsic motivation, which refers to doing something because it is inherently interesting or enjoyable, and extrinsic motivation, which refers to doing something due to external pressures or expected rewards.

SDT points to the interaction between intrinsic and extrinsic factors together forming motivation to achieve a goal perceived as worthy and beneficial. However, it is even more important for an individual to find within themselves the "why" behind the desired goal (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Life goals are long-term objectives people use to guide their activities, and they fall into two categories (Deci & Ryan, 2020): (1) intrinsic aspirations, which include life goals like affiliation, generativity, and personal development; and (2) extrinsic aspirations, which involve life goals such as wealth, fame, and attractiveness.

Intrinsic motivation underlies people's natural inclinations to seek out novelty and challenge as well as to learn, develop, and grow. Unlike extrinsic motivation, it is associated with creativity and vitality (Deci & Ryan, 2017). Extrinsic motivations may be internalized and consequently integrated into the sense of self. This process includes self-reflection and consciously valuing a goal so that action is accepted as personally important (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Motives for Surrogacy

Empirical studies have identified four main motives that women have chosen to be SMs: altruistic, hedonistic, reparative, and financial; the initial three may be considered intrinsic and the last one extrinsic.

Hedonistic and Reparative Motives

Hedonistic and reparative motives for being a SM were found to be dominant in the West. A hedonistic motive implies that women become surrogates because they enjoy being pregnant (Ciccarelli & Beckman, 2005; Imrie & Jadva, 2014; Parker, 1983). A reparative motive suggests that through surrogacy, women wished to repair an earlier loss or sense of damage. This could be a reproductive-related loss such as an abortion, prior adoption, or miscarriage (Parker, 1983); losses ensuing from recent divorce (Samama, 2002); or the untimely death of a close family member or friend (Kanefield, 1999). Some women were led to surrogacy by the sense of "existential emptiness." They considered the surrogacy as a means of "fulfilling themselves" and "filling their lives with something meaningful" (Samama, 2002).

Altruistic and Financial Motives

Altruistic and financial motives of a SM are apparent opposites that sometimes meet in striking unity. Altruistic motives are mostly found in the West. Countries that allow compensation to surrogates, such as the US, reported that helping a childless couple was their main motivation (Ciccarelli & Beckman, 2005; Ferolino et al., 2020; Imrie & Jadva, 2014; Parker, 1983; Ragoné, 1994).

The evidence of payment as a chief incentive among Western surrogates is mixed: 40% of surrogates interviewed by Einwohner (1989) and 21% of those interviewed by Baslington (2002) stated that the fee was their main but not only motivator. Respondents of other studies (Bromfield, 2016; Imrie & Jadva, 2014; Ragoné, 1994; Teman 2009, 2010) downplayed the economic aspect of surrogacy by stressing cultural values like gift-giving or sisterhood.

The surrogates in India seldom gave altruism as their motivation. They view surrogacy as a "God-given opportunity for poor Indian mothers to serve their family." (Pande, 2010a, p. 302). This narrative allows them to reinforce their primary identity as selfless mothers rather than wage-earning workers. In the study of Karandikar et al., (2014), all the participants stated that their primary motivation was the financial compensation offered to them. In Rozée et al., (2020) study, 97% (32 of 33 participants) clearly stated a financial motivation; moreover, they saw the surrogacy contract as a unique opportunity for upward social mobility that offered better working conditions than their previous jobs. In fact, most respondents did not appear to be in desperate poverty. They considered using their reproductive body a better alternative than other wage labor available to women in India.

Financial vs. altruistic incentives for SMs are often hard to disentangle given that subjective motivations may be filtered through the dominant social frameworks of what is deemed acceptable behavior (Peng, 2013, p. 563). Karandikar et al., (2014)

described the dynamics of financial-altruistic motivations of 15 surrogates who participated in their program. Financial gain was the predominant initial response when women discussed their motivation for pursuing surrogacy, but later they added that saw surrogacy as a noble act. The authors considered this switch as a moral justification for a decision already made for financial reasons aimed at coping with an attendant stigma.

Ragoné (1994) pointed out that surrogates may be influenced by social pressure to present their motivations as altruistic because this is more socially acceptable than stating that money is their sole motivation (pp. 71–73). Hovav (2019) described practices of commercial agencies openly stating they are seeking SMs who are not motivated by money, making it likely that some women will hide their financial motivation. The case of 45 Mexican surrogates interviewed by Hovav (2019) was indicative of this mechanism. At the initial contact they described entering surrogacy for monetary reasons, but after discussions with the agency staff, they "realized" or "learned" to view it as an altruistic act. Moreover, the rhetoric of altruism was used to discipline surrogates into quietly accepting an arrangement that put them at a significant disadvantage. Hovav (2019) found that an altruistic rhetoric hinders surrogates' ability to negotiate their wages, thus rendering Mexican surrogacy more affordable for intended parents and profitable for agencies.

Surrogacy in Russia

Surrogate motherhood in Russia developed along with a rise in neoconservative gender ideology, which depreciated women's labor and demanded a return to their "natural predestination" as wives and mothers. This a major reversal of the gender-egalitarian ideology of the Soviet era (Johnson, 2018; Stickley et al., 2008). Thus, in 2014, despite the high educational attainment among Russian women (93.5% of women over age 25 had at least a secondary education), only 64.8% of them were employed (OECD, 2015). The average hourly wages of women comprised 58–85% of men's wages within the same qualification categories. Additional competitive disadvantages of post-Soviet women include a longer job search and higher youth unemployment. The official list of 457 restricted occupations (including many of the highest-paying jobs) perpetuates the stereotypical role of women as mothers and fails to consider their lives outside of child-rearing (Aleksandrova, 2019). Women's high unemployment and limited job opportunities resulted in the feminization of poverty (Silverman & Yanowitch, 2016) and high rates of domestic violence (Johnson, 2018). In more affluent families, husbands took control of monetary resources and wives lost decision-making power in the household (Ibragimova & Guseva, 2017).

Under these harsh financial conditions, surrogacy offers novel opportunities to young and healthy Russian mothers. To be eligible for surrogacy, the intended parents (both married and unmarried) must be unable to have children of their own as corroborated by a medical evaluation. A potential SM need not be married but must be a mentally and physically healthy woman aged 20–35 with 1–3 healthy children of her own (Weis, 2017). Compensation typically ranges between $10,000 and $20,000 (Weis, 2017), while the median annual income of an employed Russian woman is about $4200 (Oshchepkov, 2021).

The public climate surrounding surrogacy in today's Russia is generally friendly. Recent cases of pop culture icons and a well-known businesswoman who openly used the services of gestational surrogates received positive news coverage (Svitnev, 2016). Moreover, according to a 2017 survey (3800 respondents aged 19–56 from 18 cities), 76% considered it acceptable to use surrogacy in cases of infertility (53%), women's health risks (49%), a heavy workload and lack of time for enduring pregnancy (6%), or a principal aversion to pregnancy (7%). However, only 51% agreed with the statement that SMs make an important contribution to the common good (Borisova, 2013). Thus, public attitude toward surrogacy as an idea is seemingly better than toward SMs as individuals, and surrogacy in Russia is perceived as a prosocial although rather stigmatized activity—in line with the notion of "dirty work."

Pande considers commercial surrogacy susceptible to exploitation, much like other forms of labor. She used two related concepts: First, the notion of "dirty work," meaning that all tasks and occupations are likely to be perceived as degrading, physically disgusting, or offensive to moral conceptions (such as prostitution). Second, the concept of surrogacy as sexualized care work that is "similar to existing forms of care work but is stigmatized in the public imagination because of its parallel with sex work" (Pande, 2010b, p. 142).

Russian surrogates represent their occupation as paid work accompanied by high risks of exploitation and stigmatization (Khvorostyanov & Yeshua-Katz, 2020; Smietana et al., 2021). Indeed, they experience significant social pressures. Because of the economic disparity between the SM and the intended parents, the latter control all aspects and stages of surrogate motherhood, from conception to delivery. Rivkin-Fish (2013) found that many of the intended parents keep SMs in their own homes or in nearby rented apartments in order to monitor and control their lives. Moreover, many surrogates are forced to leave their own children for the duration of the arrangement (Rivkin-Fish, 2013). Russian surrogates often cloak themselves in silence regarding their work, fully aware that others might reject them on moral grounds. Their choice of income source is associated with four negative attributes: bad mother, bad wife, pathetic loser, and greedy woman (Khvorostyanov & Yeshua-Katz, 2020). Reproductive agencies and SM clinics do not offer psychological support, either in the form of individual counseling or as support groups. Russian SMs have no organizational framework to rely on, seeking support exclusively at online platforms within the realm of reproductive health.

Surrogates' Digital Communities

The Internet space is in demand by SMs. For instance, Israeli ethnographer Teman reported that almost all her respondents after deciding to become surrogates became connected to a network of other Israeli surrogates who told their stories to one another in the Hebrew language on social media, such as privately on Facebook, WhatsApp (messenger) support groups, and online message boards (Teman, 2019).

Many surrogates use Internet messaging boards in search of social support. All 85 interviewed by Aurelio American SMs have reported the high levels of emotional, informational, and respectful support they received from their Internet community

(Aurelio, 2004). Similar data was found by Fisher (2012) regarding Canadian surrogates who participated in Facebook surrogate support groups.

Additionally, virtual communities may provide surrogates the needed space for working out collective meanings of surrogacy (Berend, 2016). By engaging with, responding to, and contesting each other's posts, members of the largest online surrogacy forum in the US rewrote normative meanings about surrogacy as a commodity exchange or altruistic act. They redefined motherhood (and parenthood) as a matter of intent (and not biology or gestation) and identified themselves as a "community of generous givers rather than professional 'carriers' or service providers" (p. 188). In this light, Teman (2019) emphasizes that digital technologies are narrowing the possible stories surrogates can tell with a single "epic surrogacy story," crowned and disseminated through social media and mainstream media.

Studying the content of Internet communities can tell a lot about their members' opinions and experiences, the problems that concern them and the processes taking place there. Drawing upon this background, my research explored the following question: What are the chief motivations for surrogacy emerging from online discussions on Kangaroo Island, a Russian reproductive forum?

Methodology

Data Collection

To assess the experiences that Russian-speaking SMs communicated online, I chose the Kangaroo Island site (https://www.ostrov-kenguru.ru/board/), a Russian-language discussion platform dedicated to fertility issues. Its motto was "Pregnancy by the Rules or Otherwise: All Moms-to-Be." As of January 2, 2018, the forum had over 8,400 members, 55 sections (sub-support groups), 6,099 topics and more than 1.5 million posts. In addition to discussion boards, Kangaroo Island offered online professional consultations and message boards with surrogacy ads. As an online fertility discussion board, Kangaroo Island had an extensive section dedicated to surrogacy (Donation and Surrogate Motherhood) with 3,082 topics and 222,369 posts. All site contents could be accessed without website membership. Moreover, the website archived all its forums, so data were explicitly public.

Nonetheless, assuming that "online support group members might perceive public digital spaces as private" (Markham & Buchanan, 2012, p. 6), and to mitigate the risk of exposing members' information through an online search (Ess, 2020), I took the following steps: First, I assigned pseudonyms to the user names; second, I translated all posts published in Russian to English and edited the sentences by removing all identifiable information such as the names of people, clinics, and cities mentioned by users; finally, I translated all quotes presented in this manuscript back to Russian, searched for them on the Internet, and verified that none of them was traceable.

From February 2017 to January 2018, I read the forum, collected data, and gained insight into the people and the phenomenon of the research. I did not register; instead, I remained invisible to the participants. I systematized the participants' posts—including those not related to their motivation issue—in order to better understand

their history and life circumstances (Cope, 2014). I also read the sources that the participants talked to or discussed. Throughout my analysis, I wrote a self-reflective journal to record thoughts and feelings, trying to limit perception and subjectivity (Morrow, 2005).

As result of this preparation phase, I choose the following four threads (1,116 posts) that mentioned information about surrogates' motives: "Or maybe just giving up everything?" (663 posts, posted from May 2014 to December 2017), "Tell us how you decided to join the program" (128 posts published from May 2015 to October 2016), "Social motherhood and society" (251 posts, posted from October 2016 to December 2017), and "Who are we, why are we" (74 posts from May 2014 to December 2014). All the posts on these threads were extracted on February 1, 2018, converted to MS Word, and imported into Atlas-T (qualitative analysis software). They were read and reread for detail.

In 2021, the entire site was shut down. I tried to contact the support group administrators to find out the background behind this decision, but no available contact information was left. Informal communication with three former members of Kangaroo Island revealed that the group was initially set up by a fertility clinic and evolved into a place (as this study shows) where SMs could voice their experiences with the funding clinic and complain about the treatment they received there. Eventually, the clinic took the site down.

Data Analysis

To identify the themes emerging from the online discussion group, I conducted an inductive thematic analysis (Pfeil & Zaphiris, 2010a, b). I identified and coded all mention of motives and reasons by analyzing units—words, sentences, or paragraph-long statements—that provided context for the ideas within each post (e.g., "buying your own home" "give better life to kids," "feel needed"). Out of the initial sample (1,116), only 656 posts included expressions of motives. They belonged to the owners of 42 nicknames who introduced themselves as SMs.

In some cases, analysis of comments was based on the comments' latent meaning and not their manifest denotation. For example, L. wrote, "I entered the program in the hope of earning an apartment." K. answered her: "The same story with me." Both posts were coded as "buying your own home." Additionally, 79 posts offered a combination of different motives. For example, I coded the following post as including three motives: (1) a form of employment, (2) enjoying pregnancy, and (3) doing a good deed:

> I can honestly say that, firstly, I don't want to go to work, plus I like the state of B. [pregnancy], plus I want to do a good deed. Surrogacy is a better job than other proposals that I get. I can earn the money I need, but also help people to get their own child.

Through the comparison of the 16 codes generated initially, I narrowed down the overlapping categories and created three coding categories through which forum participants discussed their motives: improving living conditions, looking for meaning-

ful experience, and gaining regular labor contract. Once I identified these primary themes, I reread and coded them.

I employed three steps during the analysis to enhance the study's credibility and trustworthiness (Golafshani, 2003; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). First, I used the equivalency test employed by Hamilton and Bowers (2006) and searched for consistent information posted in different threads of the forum that were active in different time periods. Second, I used peer debriefing by conducting three two-hours sessions with a colleague, a sociology professor with 30-plus years of experience in Soviet and post-Soviet gender studies. She did not have a personal interest in this project, but she did play the role of "devil's advocate" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 38) by asking hard questions about methodology, definitions of categories, and interpretations. Moreover, she sympathetically listened to my feelings, which was very cathartic for me. I followed the advice of Elo et al., (2014, p. 6) who recommended "presenting study results to people familiar with the research topic, who then evaluate whether the results match reality," and I was helped by another colleague, a leading Israeli surrogacy ethnographer. Third, I used member checking, also known as respondent validation. I wrote to 10 members of the forum, and three women answered me and agreed to help with my study. Through email correspondence, I shared and discussed all of the findings of the study with them (Saldaña, 2011).

Findings

Among the reasons that motivated women to become SMs, the following four were prevalent: (1) to solve particular problems with family finances, (2) to use surrogacy as a form of employment or a stage of professional development, (3) to experience an additional pregnancy, and (4) to realize oneself as a person through a socially valuable act.

Extrinsic Motivation: Surrogacy as a Path to Wealth Improvement

Surrogacy as a Financial Project

Most forum members admitted that they joined the surrogacy program for the sake of compensation that would elevate their living standards. Four women expressed that the small monthly amounts issued by the contracting parents for the purchase of clothing and food were significant. R. tells this story:

> I want to join the program again because it improves my living standards for the nine months of pregnancy. You have time to get used to it. To buy good food, to not walk in leaky shoes. And in the end of the program, you get both a substantial financial reward and gratitude. The SM program is pure benefit, beyond the fact that we risk our life and health. But as ever—nothing ventured, nothing gained!

Yet for many other women, the SM program was not a form of supplemental income but rather a mega-financial project aimed at meeting major life goals—like building a new house—when saving money or taking a loan were not viable options. For example, L. said:

> To be honest, I went to SM to improve housing conditions. I am tired of living in a 12 m dormitory room, with bursting sewers and moldy walls. Because of it, my children caught a drug-resistant staphylococcus; this rotten place has been repaired three times to no avail.... I have a good husband, he's never hit me in six years, he's a good father who gets up to a newborn at night, cooks meals, etc., but he doesn't know how to make money. So, I decided to give birth for strangers. Yes, I want to live in decent conditions, to have a separate room for my children, a bedroom, and a living room. I want to breathe healthy air. So, I went through two SM programs, and in May we are buying an apartment in a new brick house.

L.'s husband does not cope with the traditional role of breadwinner but makes other important contributions to the family. Therefore, she takes on the most difficult financial task, obtaining housing. The SM venture allowed her to express her economic support and raise her family status.

All married women emphasized that surrogacy is a joint project with their husbands. Although the initiative to use their ability to give birth for the sake of family well-being always came from the wives, the husbands, once overcoming the initial shock, have fully supported their wives throughout the process. The men participated in negotiations with potential contractors, shouldered a large share of housework and childcare during the pregnancy, attended the birth, and backed their wives during the final financial transaction.

Another personal/family project pursued by the women via surrogacy was having another child of their own after receiving SM compensation, a luxury they could now afford.

> I often fancy going to the pedicure...but it's really a caprice, so I am doing it myself. In the past I dreamt of the Maldives vacation, with half-naked mulattos giving me a massage in the shade of palms. But I don't want this anymore. I'd rather give birth to a daughter after the SM program, breastfeed her, and then pay for stomach and breast lifting. As of now, we cannot afford a third child. (B.)

Surrogacy as a Professional Path

The second group of motives relates to the perception of surrogacy as employment. Some women considered being a SM as temporary employment, some deemed it a steppingstone in their careers, and others regarded it as an authentic profession suitable for them.

Temporary Work During Unemployment. At the beginning of their SM career, women often deemed surrogate mothering as an aid during periods of unemployment: "The first time I joined the program was because the crisis hit, both my husband and I were fired. There was no work at all (G.)." They typically perceived SM as a temporary deviation from their professional path, a kind of "pick-up work":

> I reviewed all my earning options and decided that, with my teacher education and work at school, even if I combine jobs and take on extra work, I won't be able to save for the apartment. Then I decided to be a surrogate mother. I adore my work as a teacher and will never replace it with anything. (N.)

At the same time, women realized that "joining the program" could delay their professional development and career:

> What kind of career can there be if you first give birth to your own kids, then to other people's kids, and, when you're done with all these births, your qualifications are lost? How can one balance her performance at work, decent housekeeping, and childcare, and, so to speak, surrogate mother's business trips? Surrogacy is only possible for housewives. (V.)

Surrogacy as a Stage of Professional Development. For some, the experience of being a SM has become a stage in their professional journey. When Kathy participated in her second SM program, she decided to change her profession to a midwife, helping women to become mothers:

> I plan to support myself with a payment (and give up one of my three jobs) while I study for a midwife. Yes, I decided to change track at my advanced age. I think the first program has influenced me. Now I am an accountant, so I will be such a midwife-accountant ... cool. I realized that childbirth and children are my everything ... in fact, I discovered my true vocation ... one only needs to act and learn. (H.)

H. became a SM in order to open her own business: "Here, I do the program one more time while my business is rising, and then I'll work for myself and not for others…. I dream of managing my small business. And without a start-up capital it's impossible to do it."

Surrogacy as a profession. Women who did not have a profession, or were not strongly attached to one, were willing to consider SM as their main employment, emphasizing its advantages over the alternatives available on the labor market:

> We have a military factory in the city with good wages and conditions, but women are taken there only by pull. Women mostly work at a fertilizer plant outside the city. I honestly say that I simply don't want to ruin my health working 16 hours a day, abandoning my family and children. And I like being pregnant. And I want to do a good job as a SM. If you are fit for SM mentally

> and physically, why not become one? Do you think that during this pregnancy you'll damage your health more than while working hard in three shifts? (D.)
> Truth is, I cannot do anything else well. I dropped out of college when I met my husband; he took care of our daughter and me, and it seemed that nothing would ever change. But when my husband died, I was left with a "bare booty." I thought: "What am I able to do in this life? Apart from giving birth?". So, I went to SM! And as a big bonus in this matter, I will bring happiness to other people's home. Not every occupation can take pride in it. (M.)

The forum's materials shed light on the professionalization process of surrogate motherhood and the ongoing development of the occupational identity of SMs at different stages of their careers, supported by the advice of the more experienced women who practice surrogacy. Participants discussed the essential meaning of bearing children they are genetically unrelated to, relations with prospective parents, reproductive agencies and medics, other SMs, their husbands, and the babies that are eventually delivered to the contractors. They pondered their perceptions of their own pregnant bodies and the health and ethical matters they encounter on this peculiar career path.

Intrinsic Motivation: Surrogacy as a Meaningful Experience

This group of motives was linked to the physical and emotional experiences of a surrogate pregnancy. They included both enjoying the state of pregnancy in general and pleasant experiences linked to its surrogate nature: the pleasure of attention from intended parents and medical staff, the sensation of sustaining something of such value, and the satisfaction of committing a socially significant act.

Desire to Be Pregnant

Many women reported a physical and emotional need to experience pregnancy but were forced to limit childbearing for economic and/or social reasons. Here are some examples:

> Pregnancy and childbirth become a habit. I have two of my own and three surrogates. How not to be pregnant? How to never give birth again? I live when a baby lives inside me, no matter whose baby it is. I don't know how to live after 36 when they do not accept us as surrogates, and my husband doesn't want more children. (S.)
> My body rebels: it wants to become pregnant again! But right now, I have no man to have a baby with, and besides, I can't raise a second child—my flat is too small, and nobody takes care of me during pregnancy... so contracting parents may come in handy. (T.)

Although these same participants reported the difficulties and complications of pregnancy while discussing other topics, they still described pregnancy as a physical and emotional need ("I live while the baby is living inside me").

A Sense of Belonging to Something Important

Another motive is associated with the surrogate nature of pregnancy: Participation in the program fosters strong emotions. Many SMs noted a rise in their feelings of self-worth and the sense of taking on an important mission:

> Surrogacy is "addictive." During the surrogate pregnancy, there is a feeling of being needed. Everyone needs you: the contracting parents, your family, the clinic and obstetrician, etc. During this pregnancy, you become sort of the main heroine of something very important, essential, and even great! And in a short while after giving birth, you suddenly get back from this high to normal, and everything becomes dull, routine. (N.)

Surrogate mothers described their experience in terms of flow and drive, almost an adventure. The experience of being a SM, at first unusual and frightening, soon engendered vivid emotions and a sense of being needed. Surrogates experienced feelings of inclusion and self-realization. All this was in contrast to their daily routine in secondary social and economic roles, making significant achievements unattainable. Thus, the experience of surrogate motherhood allowed these women to become somewhat more than themselves, to expand their personal boundaries while changing the lives of others for the better.

The Desire to Do a Good Deed

An important reason stated for becoming a SM was the desire to help. Forum participants spoke about feelings of empathy toward infertile women, their desire to do a good thing, the need to give, and the aspiration to commit an act that one can be proud of:

> I go for it not because of great need. For almost two years I've been out of work and the desire to spend time not just idling at home, but with the opportunity to do a huge job for someone!!! I realized I can bear the baby and give it away. It seems to me that being SM is a certain type of mindset. My reward is a chance to please myself by doing service for others, and money should come as a bonus for a good deed. (X.)

Note that forum participants do not reject material compensation but consider it a secondary reason ("bonus that does not detract from the value of the act"). Participants emphasized the ethical component: Through surrogacy, they strive to become better people and find self-pride through worthy deeds. They realize surrogacy requires essential physical and spiritual qualities that, according to X., allow them "to bear a child and give it away" and that both deeds are difficult and worthy of respect. Thus, the above-quoted X. considered her two years of maternity leave as "unemployment" during which she was going to remain at home to care for her own baby ("just sitting at home"); surrogacy, on the other hand, she considered "a huge" deal.

Discussion

This study places surrogates' motives in the context of post-Soviet women's social and financial conditions as expressed by those who experienced them.

Previous studies have identified four main motives for SM: altruistic, hedonistic, reparative, and financial. The first three (intrinsic) were typical for the relatively wealthy North/West, and the last one (extrinsic) was found mostly in the poorer South/East. Post-Soviet women differ both from their Western and Eastern sisters. Admittedly, they live in a patriarchal society and are sometimes poor and unemployed like South/East surrogates. However, unlike many South/East women who are denied access to education, contraception and Internet, they are well educated, sometimes unmarried, practice family planning and have Internet access. They can often see themselves as independent units—outside of the family—-just like their North/West counterparts. Perhaps it is their unique social background that caused the differences between the motives identified in this study and those found in previous studies.

Intrinsic motivation was expressed by all forum participants in the study. It was linked to the physical and emotional experiences of a surrogate pregnancy and included enjoying the state of pregnancy and the pleasant experiences linked to its surrogate nature, the special attention received from intended parents and medical staff, the sense of having special value, and the satisfaction of committing a socially significant act. This somewhat hedonistic motive centered on feeling special under the unique circumstances of gestational surrogacy, which increased these women's general sense of self-worth and well-being. I would explain the recurrence of this motive as a reflection of the unique social situation of Russian women, who have a very limited range of self-realization opportunities, both as women and as humans.

As the posts reveal, many participants described enjoying pregnancy per se in its physical and moral aspects and the feelings of completeness that derived from carrying a new life growing inside them. Many forum participants postponed having children due to financial struggles, and surrogate motherhood allowed them to experience pregnancy without the attendant costs of childcare; it also allowed them to earn money for their own (living or future) children. Moreover, the participants' wish for attention and the caring attitude of others (prospective parents, husbands, doctors, etc.) and the sense of being in demand and important may also reflect an unappealing life routine that they wished to escape. The lives of many post-Soviet women are far from exciting. Most work in low-paying, meaningless, or socially useless jobs with repetitive work patterns. Women, especially in remote provinces, rarely engage in sports, hobbies, social activities, clubs, or volunteering. Their lives revolve between work and home and contain little emotional stimulation and entertainment. Entering a SM program entailed an adventure, rife with new experiences, encounters, and emotions.

However, while a hedonistic motive was often present in women's stories, it was seldom the primary one. It usually developed in the course of the program while preparing for a surrogate pregnancy and carrying a child. A woman pondered the meaning of what she was doing, what was happening to her. She enjoyed the pregnancy itself, including communication with the intended parents, and thus realized

her intrinsic motivation: "I do it because I like it." In other words, hedonistic motivation stems from the initial surrogate experience. Each surrogate pregnancy (and most forum participants had more than one) was accompanied by a pleasant excitement, and each pregnancy was a new surrogate "journey." By participating in the SM program, post-Soviet women overcame feelings of insignificance, inferiority, and a diminishing societal role. The altruistic motive mentioned by some participants appeared later in the process as an element of building a "good surrogate" identity and positive self-image.

In contrast to the previous studies, I have not located posts that mention the reparative motive. None of the forum participants ever mentioned her wish to repair an earlier loss or a sense of damage from an abortion or miscarriage, giving a child up for adoption, or losses stemming from a recent divorce or the untimely death of a loved one. This negative finding is not unique: Teman's (2010) respondents who had experienced abortions in the past did not connect them to their decision to become surrogates. A reparative motive casts surrogacy as a female means of psychological problem-solving, but admittedly a rather exotic and extreme one vis-a-vis other acceptable means. I assume that as SM becomes more common and widespread, the reparative motives will fade away from the women's motivational repertoire. Specifically, post-Soviet women had never perceived abortion as a sin, a murder, or generally substantial (Remennick & Segal, 2001). Across the Soviet era, abortions served as a chief birth control method, and this is still true in remote areas and among less educated and poorer women who cannot access modern birth control (Remennick, 1993). For example, in 2018, 49% of all pregnancies in the Russian Federation had been artificially terminated. By the age of 30, half of all Russian women have had at least one abortion (Sakevich & Denisov, 2019). In addition, being a SM is still deemed exotic and often stigmatized in post-Soviet countries, making it an improbable way of coping with divorce or grief for most women.

Extrinsic motives recurred as the primary motivation for choosing surrogacy in most posts. The majority of forum participants became surrogates for the sake of solving financial problems. These women conceptualized surrogacy as a means to an end, a fast and efficient way for essential life improvement. By contrast to most Western and some Indian SMs, Russian surrogates described significant material difficulties; for some women, even the small monthly stipend issued for the purchase of clothing and food was significant. Others began their surrogacy career as a "temporary worker" but during the program developed a surrogate professional identity. Some SMs went as far as deeming it their new profession, terming it a "perinatal nanny." All defined surrogacy as employment, a steppingstone in their careers, or a profession suitable for them. The professionalization of gestational surrogacy seems to be a specifically post-Soviet phenomenon not uncovered in other studies among Western and Asian SMs.

The very choice of occupations for women in Russia is constrained by neoconservative gender norms and "patriarchal expectations of ultimate femininity" (Kolchevska, 2005, p. 215), gendered labor markets, and stifled promotions to managerial levels. Regrettably, higher education no longer works as a mobility vehicle for post-Soviet women: educated women garner much lower incomes than educated men (Oshchepkov, 2021). Today, Russian women mainly work in social services such

as health care, education, and welfare that, on the one hand, require professional degrees, continuous retraining, and skill improvement, but on the other, are driven by the professional ethos of help and selflessness with an attendant justification of low pay (Mal'tseva, 2005). Less educated Russian women work in manufacturing, trade, and manual services, typically monotonous work with poor working conditions, inferior pay, and low social status (Kosyakova et al., 2015).

Under these circumstances, some Russian women reveal rare ingenuity and actually start or invent new occupational niches. A vivid example of such an invented occupation in response to dire economic need was the shuttle trade of the early 1990s, populated mostly by women who had lost their stable middle-class Soviet jobs. Originating in the late 1980s during Perestroika as a way to fill the empty consumer markets with cheap imported clothing and electronics, the shuttle trade extended well beyond the collapse of the Soviet Union. Small-time shuttle traders (*chelnoki*) went back and forth across the borders of Poland, Romania, Turkey, and China, buying goods in small batches and reselling them in Russia's burgeoning open markets. Shuttle trade entailed hard physical work, long absences from home, dangers of violence and theft, and coping with shame and stigma. Yet this trade enabled many industrious and ingenious people to start their own businesses and rapidly improve their material welfare. It was in fact the first women's entrepreneurial venture in post-Soviet Russia (Bazhenov, 2018).

Surrogate mothers have capital to invest in this new, original SM venture: their youth, good health, and proven reproductive ability. Young women who possess these resources invent gestational motherhood as a new occupation, which is rather lucrative despite being entirely feminine. Mies (2014) noted that the concept of labor is typically reserved for men's productive work under capitalist conditions, while women's share in production and reproduction is a function of their biology and feminine nature. "Even domestic and childcare work are seen as extensions of women's physiology, of the fact that they give birth to children, of the fact that 'nature' has provided them with a uterus" (Mies, 2014, p.45). Post-Soviet surrogates, who populate this newly invented occupational niche, manifest their independent economic and social agency even though it is undermined by the current male-dominated labor market. They use the Internet discussion board to share their experiences, wishes, and motives and to represent their activity in bearing children as a deliberate and meaningful social entrepreneurship.

Pande (2010a) defined surrogacy as "sexualized care dirty work," fostering the association with both wet nurses and topless dancers. Mary Douglas's (2003) concept of dirty work refers to necessary but repulsive occupations, and individuals in the SM category are considered dirty workers and socially impure. Ashforth & Kreiner (1999) defined how defense mechanisms transform the meaning of "dirt" and moderate the impact of social perceptions of dirtiness: people performing dirty work tend to retain relatively high occupational esteem and pride. They frequently produce strong occupational and group cultures based on complicity and solidarity and by creating ideologies and practices that subvert pejorative social meanings.

Seen in this light, the development of a more altruistic rhetoric by post-Soviet surrogates can be a strategy to invest this stigmatized in their country work with noble meaning and render it more respectable. Similar rhetoric is often employed by other

parties involved in the surrogate arrangement such as intended parents (Khvorostyanov & Yeshua-Katz, 2020; Siegl 2018) and commercial agents (Hovav, 2019; Pande, 2010b; Siegl 2018). For example, Hovav (2019) found the prevalence of a rhetorical dichotomy between trustworthy, altruistic surrogates and morally suspect, financially motivated surrogates. This spurious dichotomy allows surrogacy agencies to keep surrogate wages low by creating a docile and compliant labor force while maintaining the appearance of a morally sound exchange, which in turn "perpetuates power asymmetries between surrogates and international intended parents" (Hovav, 2019, p. 286).

Russian SMs unite on the online platform to overcome this false dichotomy while promoting an alternative, holistic concept of SM and its underlying motivations. In the forum, they discussed the following four interrelated motives: (1) Financial: SM is a job that properly remunerates; (2) Social: SMs enjoy a unique and indispensable role as carriers of future children that could not be born otherwise; (3) Hedonistic: SMs enjoy the very experience of pregnancy and related body sensations; and (4) Moral: SMs find satisfaction in contributing to the common good and ensuring the future happiness of a childless couple. Judging by the posts on the website under study, the extrinsic and intrinsic aspects of these motives are closely intertwined.

This study contributes to Self-Determination Theory (SDT) by revealing how affordances within social and economic contexts shapes people's capacities to pursue what matters to them and how SDT's motivational variables are influenced by societal and economic affordances. The study sheds light on specific motivations of a new type of work, which, although legal, remains non-institutionalized; the work is also stigmatized and involves the violation of boundaries and control over all aspects of an employee's private life. The study shows how a virtual resource—the Internet forum—allows surrogate mothers to collectively form internal motivations. The forum has also allowed them to internalize external motivations and seek new and authentic meanings for their activities, thereby achieving a sense of self-determination.

Limitations and Future Research

The main advantage of this data is its authenticity; community members did not think their posts would be researched.

The main limitation resides in the relatively small sample size (62 SMs) and an inherent bias in this sample of surrogates who can and were interested in engaging with others in the forum. Further studies should look for ways to promote participation among surrogates who do not participate in online communities. Triangulation with face-to-face or email interviews, focus groups, or discussing motivational issues in private instant messaging chats like Telegram or WhatsApp may increase the trustworthiness of the data.

Because the data set examined in this study does not represent all SM online communities, future research should investigate additional communities, including non-Russian, and explore cultural variations. In addition, reproductive health professionals' awareness and attitudes and their role in shaping SMs motivation should be studied.

Data Availability Data and materials are available upon request.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The author has no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

Ethical Approval Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Review Board of the Ben Gurion University in the Negev. Although the study relied on publicly accessible documents, considering that "people may operate in public spaces but maintain strong perceptions or expectations of privacy" (Markham & Buchanan, 2012, p. 6), the nicknames of all participants in the study were changed. All quotes cited in this study were translated from Russian and were rephrased.

Informed Consent A waiver of consent for authors in the network was obtained from the ethical review board since obtaining permission from anonymous forum participants is not practically possible.

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