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HOW HARD IS IT TO COME OUT IN RUSSIA?

***Abstract:** Coming-out is a complex structure that requires psychological readiness. The study is devoted to the problem of the social attitude to individuals with non-traditional sexual orientation after the coming out. The article provides a content analysis of the interviews with the five respondents aged from 18 to 22 years old. The author comes to the conclusion that the coming-out and the response of the society have had an impact on the respondents' wellbeing.*

***Keywords:** LGBT, coming out, outing, bullying, self-identification.*

Introduction

Russia is considered to be notorious for its negative attitudes towards people with non-traditional sexual orientation. This was proved by the results of the Pew Research Center survey, conducted in 2013 in 39 countries among 37,653 respondents. It was revealed that 74% of Russian respondents believe that society does not accept homosexuality. Russia's policy towards LGBT

communities, also referred to as the gay community, differs from European policy. 2013 was marked by the fact that Russia's parliament (State Duma) enacted a Federal Law № 139-FZ prohibiting the propagation of information accessible to children aimed at "promoting non-traditional sexual relations". Furthermore, the Government Decree prohibiting the adoption of children by countries with legalized same-sex marriage was issued in 2014 [3]. To some extent, neutral and at the same time restraining policy of our country may generate intolerance of modern Russian society towards people of non-traditional sexual orientation.

The expression 'coming out' comes from the shortened English expression 'coming out of the closet' referring to lesbian, gay and bisexual people's disclosure of their sexual orientation, and to transgender people's disclosure of their (trans)gender identity. "Coming out can involve revealing sexual orientation to oneself, family members, friends, colleagues, and wider communities" [8].

If we consider the full concept of 'coming out of the closet', a metaphorical comparison with *'the closet'* is associated with 'skeletons in the closet', which means something shameful. This comparison reflects the impact of heterosexism on LGBT people. As Eve Sedgwick, an American scholar in the field of gender studies, queer theory (queer studies), and critical theory stated, "*the closet is the defining structure for gay oppression in this century*". This is one of the reasons why coming out is perceived negatively. However, coming out usually occurs more than once: when joining a new team, a person makes a public statement, and each time the result may differ from the previous one. Judith Pamela Butler, an American philosopher and gender theorist, supports this position [2].

While coming out may be defined as a conscious voluntary decision, outing has a slightly different meaning. Outing is the act of disclosing an LGBT person's sexual orientation or gender identity without that person's consent [10].

In terms of its content, outing and coming out are interrelated concepts, but not identical. Both concepts imply telling people about your sexual orientation. Nevertheless, outing leads to bullying, aggression, as outing raises the issue of the person's privacy.

Vivienne Cass, a clinical psychologist, sexologist, sexual orientation theorist, proposed 'The Cass Identity Model', a model of sexual identity formation which also includes several stages. Before making a decision about coming out a person goes through several stages, or the process of self-identification:

- identity confusion (a premonition that you are different from others, sometimes with a feeling of anxiety);
 - identity comparison (a person accepts his or her homosexual feelings);
 - identity tolerance (a person is trying to find a reference group);
 - identity acceptance (external recognition, internal struggle);
 - identity pride (a person affirms his or her orientation);
 - identity synthesis (a person identifies orientation as part of personality)
- [7].

Following the awareness of orientation, recognition enters, if a person makes a decision to do so. Public reaction is an extremely relevant issue. What factors influence the social attitudes towards LGBT communities? Based on the assumptions of modern social psychology, we can identify several characteristics that form the basis of attitudes towards social groups (in this case, LGBT minorities are considered a separate social group): certain personality characteristics (tendency to rely on stereotypes), ethnic and racial identity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, etc.

Studies conducted in the United States, Latin America, and some European countries can serve as evidence of the assumptions of social psychology. It was found out that high religiosity is one of the causes of negative attitudes towards homosexual minorities. Negative attitudes are more

expressed in men than women, in older people than young people and in people with a low level of education [3]. As stated above, the country's legislation serves as the basis of either positive or negative attitudes.

Aggression and intolerance towards people with non-traditional sexual orientation becomes the cause of an intrapersonal conflict, which leads to depressive states or even more serious consequences. Recent research conducted in the United States showed that teenagers of non-traditional sexual orientation are more prone to suicidal acts and depressions than heterosexual ones due to discrimination, violence and pedophilia [4].

Materials and methods

Data were collected through interviews conducted with the five respondents positioning themselves as individuals belonging to a social group, which can be referred to as LGBT community: all of them had experience of non-traditional relationships. The questions ranged from the interviewees' willingness to communicate with the researchers to the sensitivity of the topic. The respondents' names were replaced with pseudonyms *Kate, Dakotta, Santa, Elizabeth, Anastasia* for the anonymity of the research.

Results

Taking into account the signs of a change in the state of the somatic nervous system and emotional state, i.e., intonation and the pitch of the voice, obscene expressions and emotions, we made the following conclusions [6].

The respondents were calm and had noticeable speech retardation. According to the recent studies, slow speech can act as an indicator of depression, which was manifested in the interviews with Kate, Santa and Dakotta.

During the interview Kate confessed that she indirectly mentioned her outing in the family, which shows that she considers her mother's behavior as intervention into her personal space, the violation of personal boundaries: *“I can't say that it was a voluntary confession. My mother read my correspondence*

on social networks, and then decided to intervene into my life”. The reaction was violent, both psychologically and physically for Kate. “I was a teenager (16-17 years old) and therefore was restricted in freedom, locked up. Probably, I wanted to get support, but there was only pressure instead. They said that it was a disease and I had to get treatment. <...> Probably the most terrible thing is when parents beat you because you are different”.

Psychological or moral violence entails psychological trauma, depressive states [5]. As can be seen from the interview with Anastasia, she was also subjected to emotional violence and aggression (this type of violence includes humiliation, undermining self-esteem) from the society, which resulted in a defensive reaction in the form of a non-standard appearance and anger: *“People, who do not know me often do not understand what my orientation is. I hear some unpleasant phrases about myself. I try to respond to them with aggression <...> But of course there were moments when I was reproached for my orientation”.*

A special attention in each interview was given to the actions of parents. In the case of Santa and Kate, there is a fear of recognition. There is a reference to violent acts by Kate’s mother: *“Probably the most terrible thing is you’re your parents beat you because you are different”.* Santa comments on this: *“No one from my relatives knows about it, because everyone treats it negatively. The worst thing is not non-acceptance by the society, but non-acceptance by parents. When they start insulting or even refuse communicating with their child”.* It means that Santa finds it impossible to tell his parents about his sexual orientation because of the fear of a negative reaction.

However, Anastasia and Dacotta witnessed a positive or neutral attitude. Anastasia reported: *“Yes, my mother knows it all. My parents are divorced. I think she doesn’t like it very much, but she doesn’t say anything to me when I invite someone home”.* Dakotta said *“I was lucky, and the people whom I told about my orientation (family, friends) accepted it”.*

Nevertheless, Elizabeth refuses to answer the question about her parents. The manner in which Elizabeth answered the questions was somewhat aggressive: she used obscene language, tried to give answers sharply: *“People, who soberly evaluate everything, will not say that this is bad. Close people said, “Be with someone who you like, gender is not important”*. But at the same time, Elizabeth argued that this topic does not cause her any discomfort. Judging from the obscene expression, it was used precisely in relation to the people with a negative response to the respondent’s sexual orientation: *“Everyone’s reaction was normal, otherwise I wouldn’t communicate with them ... (obscene expressions)”*. It shows Elizabeth’s desire to protect herself from any aggressive statement about her sexual orientation. All this is a protective mechanism, which can lead to negative consequences as well [9]. Additionally, obscene expressions have not only a defense mechanism, but can also show the level of honesty, or attempts to ease pain, gain self-confidence, and improve psychological health. However, obscene expressions help people not to feel themselves as a ‘victim’, but a strong and confident person [1; 2].

The use of the particle ‘not’ was typical for all the participants, which is a negation. The frequent use of the pronouns ‘me’, ‘myself’, ‘everything’ can also be noted throughout the dialogue. Summarizing these characteristics, we can conclude that all the respondents used a method of psychological protection, as can be seen from the interviews. These defense mechanisms act either unconsciously or consciously, and this indicates that the respondents felt social aggression, experienced disapproval from the family or the reference group.

Conclusions

According to the results obtained, we can see that in some cases people of non-traditional sexual orientation are defenseless, they are easy to hurt. They have internal problems, doubts, and they seek family support and parental understanding. Sexual orientation is a cause for discrimination and bullying in many countries. According to the respondents, coming-out is a difficult

psychological step, which cannot be undertaken by everyone. The results of this study showed that the consequences of coming out can be contradictory.

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