CLUES TO NON-HETEROSEXUALITY: EXAMINATION OF ONE'S OWN SEXUALITY IN BIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVES

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Abstract: This article considers how non-heterosexual people look for supposed signs of their sexual otherness in their past and display them in biographical narratives. This search for clues of a particular sort resembles an examination: the informants choose events and details from their childhood and adolescence which they suppose to be connected with their present sexual identity. Among such clues are memories of sexualised children's games, gender otherness manifested in childhood, and a childish interest in or indifference to the topic of sexuality. Non-heterosexual people's strategies for self-description are examined on the basis of biographical interviews and written autobiographies. Carlo Ginzburg's evidential paradigm was chosen as an instrument of conceptualisation, but in this case it is not the researcher but the informants themselves who are engaged in the search for clues. The methodological foundation of the discussion is the biographical approach and narrative analysis. The informants used clues to non-heterosexuality discovered in their past to confirm the stability of their sexuality and at the same time to collect elements of their biographies into a single story The coherent biographical narrative allows the narrator's non-heterosexuality to be normalised, providing an explanation and prehistory for it. At the same time, it is constructed in opposition to the heterosexual norm.

Keywords: homosexuality, bisexuality, sexuality, sexual identity, biographical narrative, rhetorical strategies, evidential paradigm.

To cite: Kislitsyna P., 'Clues to Non-Heterosexuality: Examination of One's Own Sexuality in Biographical Narratives', *Forum for Anthropology and Culture*, 2023, no. 19, pp. 72–94.

doi: 10.31250/1815-8870-2023-19-19-72-94

URL: http://anthropologie.kunstkamera.ru/files/pdf/eng019/kislitsyna.pdf

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This article considers how non-heterosexual people look for supposed signs of their sexual otherness in their past and display them in biographical narratives. This search for clues of a particular sort resembles an examination: the informants choose events and details from their childhood and adolescence which they suppose to be connected with their present sexual identity. Among such clues are memories of sexualised children's games, gender otherness manifested in childhood, and a childish interest in or indifference to the topic of sexuality. Non-heterosexual people's strategies for self-description are examined on the basis of biographical interviews and written autobiographies. Carlo Ginzburg's evidential paradigm was chosen as an instrument of conceptualisation, but in this case it is not the researcher but the informants themselves who are engaged in the search for clues. The methodological foundation of the discussion is the biographical approach and narrative analysis. The informants used clues to non-heterosexuality discovered in their past to confirm the stability of their sexuality and at the same time to collect elements of their biographies into a single story The coherent biographical narrative allows the narrator's non-heterosexuality to be normalised, providing an explanation and prehistory for it. At the same time, it is constructed in opposition to the heterosexual norm.

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The genre of the biographical interview, like the genre of autobiography, assumes that the informant or the narrator will address her or his own past. However, which particular details of their past they will bring to light depends on a multitude of factors. Among the most significant one may identify the task of communication (how a person views the purpose of their story) and their idea of themselves (e.g., how they see themselves). My informants, non-heterosexual people, knew that I was interested in them in that capacity, and therefore when they told their stories they reconstructed in detail the process of the development of their own sexuality as they conceived it. They undertook a sort of examination of what traces of non-normative sexuality could be found in their past and what these traces might mean for their actual present: when, under what circumstances and in what form they first noticed something in themselves that they interpreted as a manifestation of non-heterosexuality. The corresponding hermeneutic procedures need not necessarily have been applied at the point when the narrative came into being: frequently the narrators were producing the results of discursive work that had taken place earlier (in their own reflections,

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in conversations with friends or partners, in their diaries, in blog posts, and so on). One informant, in describing episodes from her childhood, remarked: "When you analyse the past, you think... 'Hm, now it's all clear'," meaning that she could see distinct indicators of her present lesbian identity in events of long ago. What is more, it may be understood from the modality of her words that such a semiotic self-analysis is usual for her, and not improvised at the moment of the interview.

So what details and events do non-heterosexual people interpret as signs of their sexuality? And why do these elements have an important place in their biographical narratives? My anthropological research aims to answer these questions, being devoted to the means of narrativisation of homosexual and bisexual experience. In the article I look at my informants' stories of their past as a search for clues to non-heterosexuality in accordance with Carlo Ginzburg's evidential paradigm [Ginzburg 1986], in combination with Eva Illouz's concept of the therapeutic narrative [Illouz 2007] and theoretical approaches to the analysis of biographical narratives.

The research follows the path of social constructivism: gender and sexuality are considered as products of social construction, and any naturalisation of these categories is subjected to analysis [Butler 1990]. Ideas of what one's own life story should be are likewise socially constructed [Rosenthal 2003; Savkina 2007; Rozhdestvenskaya 2012; Kalugin 2015]. The trajectory of life is set by models rooted in social institutions, and exists even before the genesis of the biographical narrative, and organises it. This article not only develops the rather thin field of research into the narrativisation of non-heterosexual experience using Russian material,[1] but also expands our academic knowledge of the structure of the biographical narrative.

My research material consisted of forty-nine biographical interviews and thirty-seven written autobiographies collected from non-heterosexual people.[2] The interviews (twenty with men and twenty-

[1] As pioneers in this field we may name Anna Rotkirch and Sergei Mozzhegorov [Rotkirkh 2002; Mozzhegorov 2013; 2014].

[2] I use the term "non-heterosexual people" as an umbrella concept including homosexual, bisexual and pansexual people, and also those who do not identify themselves in a definite manner, but have homosexual experience in their past or present. This term may be criticised in that, being a negative derivative from *heterosexual*, it serves to make the latter normative, and also deprives us of a positive basis for uniting those to whom it is applied [Browne 2003; Clech 2018]. However, I follow F. Stella's choice of terminology [Stella 2015]. In my view, "non-heterosexual people" is the most successful term to comprehend my informants, who do not have a common means of self-identification, but do have a shared experience and means of describing it, and moreover does not force an alien identity on anybody. The latter is particularly important, and it is for this reason that I do not use the terms "queer" or "LGBT". For more detail on the choice of terminology and its relevance to my informants' practices of self-identification see [Kislitsyna 2021]. It is also worth pointing out that among my informants there were no transgender or non-binary people.

nine with women), conducted with informants who were found by the snowball method, took place in 2018 in Moscow and St Petersburg. The written autobiographies (twenty-two by men and fifteen by women) were obtained by means of a competition organised with the support of the Colta.ru website, which took place in July and August 2018.[1] Both the interviews and the written texts aim to cover the informants' whole lives from early childhood to the point when they were recorded, focusing on their sexual biography. Anna Rotkirch used a similar approach, and like me she analysed written autobiographies collected by means of a competition [Rotkirch 2011]. The ages of my informants ranged from eighteen to sixty-four. The average age of those interviewed was thirty-six, and of the authors of the written autobiographies twenty-eight.[2] They are mostly people with higher education and average incomes who live for most of the time in Moscow or St Petersburg.

Retrospective prophecy in various genres and contexts: a theoretical apparatus

Ginzburg describes his evidential paradigm as an epistemological model based on the decoding of insignificant details, unnoticed attributes, and hidden signs, symptoms and clues [Ginzburg 1986]. He calls this method "profezie retrospettive" [retrospective prophecies], adding: "Quando le cause non sono riproducibili, non remane che inferirle dagli effetti" [When causes cannot be reproduced, you can only infer them from the effects] [Ginzburg 1986: 184]. Furthermore, he considers that this paradigm may be a research tool in those cases when reality is opaque and only signs or clues allow it to be deciphered.

To illustrate the concept of the evidential paradigm, Ginzburg compares the methods of Giovanni Morelli, who distinguished forgeries from original canvases by means of small details, Sherlock Holmes, who investigated crimes through clues, and Sigmund Freud, who uncovered hidden aspects of the human psyche through their almost unnoticed unconscious manifestations. This last figure is particularly important in the context of my research, since, firstly, Freud accomplished a significant revolution in research into sexuality, and homosexuality in particular, denying that a sexual interest in the opposite sex was self-evident: in his thought, both homosexual and heterosexual attractions are formed through the effect of a series of factors, and are not innate [Freud 1953; Kon

[1] 'Homosexuality in Russia: A Competition of Your Stories', *Colta.ru*, 2018, July 10. <https://www.colta.ru/articles/society/18544-gomoseksualnost-v-rossii-konkurs-vashih-istoriy>.

[2] Since the authors of the written autobiographies determined for themselves the extent of the information that they were prepared to give about themselves, the ages of only twenty such informants are known, and only twelve of them divulged exactly where they live.

2003; Savoia 2010]. Secondly, although my informants' self-analysis was not essentially psychoanalysis, it did bear a certain resemblance to Freud's approach. Thirdly, his was a name well known to my informants, and some of them mentioned his ideas in their considerations of sexuality. Finally, Freud is the link between the evidential paradigm and the concept of therapeutic narrative in my theoretical construction.

As Illouz writes, psychoanalysis, like popular psychology and self-help literature, has had a great influence on modern Western culture [Illouz 2007].[1] She describes how therapeutic culture and the therapeutic narrative, with the self and self-realisation at their centre, are formed under this influence, reinforced by evolving consumerism. Thanks to mass culture and the development of a market in the services of psychotherapists, the therapeutic narrative is becoming the dominant way of talking about oneself. Its basic peculiarity is the organisation of the story around trauma and psychological suffering, which are obstacles along the path to the true self: the narrator recounts the shocks that s/he experienced in childhood, and then describes their effect on her or his present. This method of self-analysis fits the evidential paradigm: the subject discovers particular signs in the past in search for the hidden reasons for the present condition.

If we look at the theoretical expositions of the biographical method in the social sciences, we may find traces of "retrospective prophecy" in the conceptualisation of any biographical narrative. Elena Rozhdestvenskaya, considering past and future in autobiographies, writes of a dual temporal horizon: "In the dual horizon of the past and future, the past is changeable, it is subject to reinterpretation to the extent that the current ego-concept requires it" [Rozhdestvenskaya 2012: 17]. In other words, the events of the past become clues for the autobiographical subject to the extent that s/he intends to explain her or his current position. Besides causal links (which may be illusory), the biographical narrative is characterised by continuity, which to some extent is the other side of the same coin. Life events arise consequentially one after another and are correspondingly linked by connexions of cause and effect. To provide this integrity of the story, the narrator uses particular narrative strategies united (within a single narrative) by systems of ideas. Charlotte Linde designates them as coherence systems, "a cultural device for structuring experience into socially shareable narrative" [Linde 1993: 63]. One such system, in her research into American life-stories about the choice of profession at the end of the 1970s, is indeed

[1] How therapeutic culture is evolving and forming a new language to describe emotions and feelings in the post-Soviet contexts has been written about by P. Aronson, Yu. Lerner, A. Shadrina and others [Lerner 2011; Shadrina 2017; Aronson et al. 2022].

popular Freudian psychology. The search for hidden causes in early childhood typical of it allows fragments of biography to be connected in a single narrative and serves as a rhetorical strategy for their collection.

The construction scheme for biographical narrative is universal and may be realised in completely different contexts: the narrator, who knows how the story ends, ties together events from different times using signs and features that turn the narrative into a "prophecy being fulfilled" [Dubin 2001: 118]. When Dubin speaks of such vaticinations in biographies, he recalls the "Napoleonic myth" and the romanticised biographies of "geniuses", the authors of which pay special attention to their subject's childhood, parental home and first memories, loading them with additional meanings. Such techniques are also found in the tradition of hagiography, where the saint's fate is predestined, and therefore, in recounting it, the author alleges various signs and foreshadowings of the future, trying thereby to show "the extra-temporal meaning of the events" [Likhachev 1979: 251].[1] It is possible to find prophetic signs in the memoirs of Soviet dissidents, who depicted themselves as born dissenters, recounting the episodes of their first "clashes" with the Soviet regime in their childhood [Natans 2018].[2]

As for research into the biographical narratives of non-heterosexual people, there is not so much of it. Although qualitative research into sexuality is for the most part conducted using biographical material, the focus is rarely on the actual means of narrativising non-heterosexual experience. A key work in this field is Ken Plummer's research examining coming out stories (that is, narratives by gay and lesbian people about how they accepted their sexual identity and told the people around them about it) as a particular genre [Plummer 1995]. In such texts he identifies persistent elements, which are articulated in a particular order: (1) a search for the beginnings of their homosexuality in early childhood; (2) a sense of their own otherness in childhood; (3) the key moment of the discovery of their own homosexuality, accompanied by shame and fear; (4) solving their personal problems connected with their homosexuality, most often

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1 What is interesting here is the connexion not only with the vita as a genre of Old Russian literature, but also with religious narrative taken in a broad sense. Illouz juxtaposes the therapeutic and religious narratives, since in both "everything […] has a hidden meaning and purpose" [Illouz 2007: 47]. In addition, both are directed simultaneously towards the past, which is still relevant in the present, and the future, in which salvation is possible (atonement for sins or deliverance from psychological suffering). This juxtaposition may be refined by drawing a parallel between therapeutic and conversion narratives in which the believer re-evaluates their biography, describes their road to faith, and discovers in the past the prerequisites for its attainment [Snow, Machalek 1984; Jackson 2012; Poplavskiy, Klyuyeva 2013].

2 This rhetoric is reminiscent of the "born this way" rhetoric used by LGBT activists (and not only by them), in which the innateness of homosexuality and its biological basis serve as an argument to defend LGBT rights [Walters 2014].

through meeting other gay or lesbian people; (5) acquiring a sense of their own gay identity and at the same time of belonging to the gay community. This conceptualisation, like the concept of coming out itself, was later criticised for its excessive linearity, unsubtlety, ethnocentricity, obsolescence, and inapplicability to many sexual identities, and to experience outside Western culture [Seidman 1999; Jolly 2001; Stella 2015]. Notwithstanding, the scheme proposed by Plummer bears a direct resemblance to the therapeutic narrative,[1] and the first two points are the "retrospective prophecies" of the evidential paradigm. The kinship between American coming out stories and my material is evident in precisely this turning to childhood experience to provide clues of non-heterosexuality.

Clues to non-heterosexuality: from games to sexual interest

I shall examine all the narrative elements described below in their interconnexion and their inclusion in the overall canvas of the story of the development of a person's sexuality (or her or his gradual recognition of it). The structure chosen for the article may create the illusion that all elements are presented in the narratives in chronological order from early childhood to adolescence. However, in describing the material I have followed what Russian Formalist theory terms the *fabula* (overall content) rather than the *syuzhet* (the storyline); the biographical narratives (especially the oral ones) are much less linear. My informants might return to episodes of their early childhood at different points in the narrative, or, by contrast, run ahead. These shifts in narrative time reflect, directly or indirectly, connexions of cause and effect that the narrators draw between the past and the present. At the end of the article, I shall demonstrate how different details (sometimes contradictory) may be combined in a single narrative and be interpreted according to the chosen viewpoint and the point from which the analysis is being conducted.

In the article I address stories of sexualised children's games, gender otherness manifested since childhood, and children's interest in, or indifference to the topic of sexuality. The format of the article constrains me to choose only three kinds of clues found by my informants, and to examine the process of the identification and function of these elements in the narrative in detail, but this does not exhaust all the possible variants of discursive work on one's past that are encountered in my material. As signs of their own non-heterosexuality during childhood and early adolescence informants also described their physical reactions associated with sexual arousal (or its absence in situations where "normally" it should have occurred), erotic and aesthetic impressions, emotional and sensual

[1] And also, indeed, to conversion narratives, particularly if compared to the stories of believers involved in the church and included in the religious community.

experience evaluated (or subsequently re-evaluated) as being in love. On the one hand, they are all connected with the supposed divergence from the heterosexual norm: the informants believe that heterosexual people do not have such experience or find it inconsequential, whereas for the non-heterosexual narrators it is an important part of their self-identification. On the other hand, all these clues arrange themselves into a coherent chain of events making up the prehistory and explanation of the narrator's sexual identity. Both the biographical narrative and the sexual identity around which it is built thus prove integral, well founded and stable.

By demonstrating the coherent, "natural" development of their sexuality, the narrators normalise it. In this process, informants' ideas about the nature of sexuality in general, and non-heterosexuality in particular, inevitably make themselves manifest. Non-heterosexuality is presented in the narratives as essentialised and innate. It seems at once to be present in a person's body or subconscious and gradually to make itself felt, independently of her or his will. The narrator himself or herself, as it emerges from the narratives, may not at first notice or understand these phenomena, but may later discover them, reinterpret them, and give them the necessary meaning. The goal of looking for these signs in childhood and early adolescence follows the post-Freudian psychological tradition and the rules of the therapeutic narrative, according to which the roots of any personality traits may be found in childhood.

It may seem that clues to non-heterosexuality are connected only with homosexuality, while bisexuality falls outside the proposed analysis. I will qualify this by saying that there are indeed differences between homosexual and bisexual biographies, and that most of them remain outside the scope of the article. However, the focus on non-heterosexuality affected what bisexual people stressed in their life-stories, and they were inclined to relate precisely the non-heterosexual part of their experience (particularly in the written autobiographies, the content of which I was less able to influence than the interviews). They may also have been influenced by the fact that heterosexual experience is unproblematic in a heteronormative culture: homosexual experience, which transgresses the norms, being problematic, creates a subject and a need for explanation, while heterosexual experience remains in the area of things that need not be mentioned. Besides, the bisexual informants, like homosexuals and those who identify themselves differently, were anxious to stress their otherness, their difference from the norm. Therefore, the selected narrative elements, except for those concerning a rejection of heterosexual experience, are also relevant for bisexual people.

Also outside the scope of the article are the gender distinctions of non-heterosexual biographical narratives. In the text I trace those

regularities that belong both to male and female examinations of sexuality. Nevertheless, there are substantial differences between them, the details of which are a subject for a separate investigation. Overall, it may be said that sexual attraction, arousal and the physiology of sexuality play a greater role in men's narratives, while in women's stories physiology, sensual experience and sexual fantasies take up less space or are put into words differently. Female narrators speak more about their emotions and feelings. In addition, in women's stories homosexual pornography and erotic products are hardly ever mentioned (and only negatively, as unrealistic portrayals of lesbian sex). For this reason, where memories of childish interest in homosexual pornography or erotica are mentioned, male references predominate.

Sexualised children's games

Before proceeding to the description and analysis of narratives about same-sex sexualised children's games as a sign or harbinger of non-heterosexuality, I shall offer a short introduction with a survey of the literature on such children's games. I find this essential in order to show how widespread such practices are, and among heterosexual people as well. In the 1940s the American sexologist Kinsey found that 57 % of the men surveyed and 48 % of the women had experience of sexualised games before the onset of puberty, involving the display of genitalia and manual interaction with them [Kinsey et al. 1948; 1953]. Kinsey regarded these practices as the result of a healthy interest in sex and sexual anatomy. Further American research focused on girls found that 85 % of respondents had had similar experience during childhood [Lamb, Coakley 1993]. Moreover, the number of those whose partners in such games had been girls was greater than that of those who recalled cross-gender interactions of this kind (56 % against 46 %). On the basis of their material the authors drew up a descriptive typology of such games: "'playing doctor', where one participant plays the doctor or nurse and "examines" the other; 'exposure', direct display of genitalia to each other; 'experiments in stimulation', when the participants study their physical reactions when they touch each other; kissing games; 'fantasy sexual play's, during which the participants, pretending to be grown-ups, imitate the sexual act.

Such games between children of the same sex have been studied (but as qualitative research) from Russian material also [Borisov 2002; Rotkirch 2011]. Igor Kon explains the preponderance of same-sex over opposite-sex sexualised games by gender segregation, the greater physical accessibility of people of the same age of the same sex, and a less severe taboo on physical contact with them [Kon 2003]. Researchers agree that sexualised children's games have an educational function: this is how children assimilate and disseminate

what has been termed an embodied knowledge of sex [Csordas 1993; Mauss 1996]. Such experience is thus not specific to non-heterosexual people and is widespread. The question is, what interpretation and rhetorical expression it receives in biographical narratives.

The typology of sexualised children's games described above is also applicable to my material. There are stories in both the interviews and the written autobiographies of games of doctors and nurses, during which the participants took their clothes off; "happy family" games, which ended with an imitation of the sex act; kissing games; the simple display of genitalia to each other; and one case of the imitation of animals' mating rituals. Some people describe the direct imitation of the sex act, which they knew about by hearsay from their peers or which they had seen in a film, as in this quotation:

Oh yes, I'd seen a man in a film touching a woman and lying on her in a strange way, kissing her. What pleasure was there in that?! I thought I had to try. But who with?! I'd try suggesting it to a friend who lived on the ground floor. Why not? He was a whole two months older than I was, he might already know what it was all about. Today he called me to a secluded place behind the garages. […] We took off our trousers and lay on top of each other, imitating the bodily movements in the film. We both tried hard, and breathed heavily, but we didn't try to do anything else (homosexual man, born 1990).

My informants dated such games to ages between four and eleven. Their partners in the games were close friends, male or female, or relations (cousins or second cousins) of about the same age. Sexualised games took place in closed rooms in the narrators' or their partners' homes, at kindergarten (often in bed at nap time or in the lavatories), and sometimes even in playgrounds behind the blocks of flats.

If the players of sexualised games were of the same sex (as was the case, with a few exceptions, in the majority of cases), stories about such games had a marked function: to describe the earliest manifestations of homosexuality or bisexuality, to stress their natural and frequently unconscious nature, and also the naïvety of childish perceptions (as in the passage quoted above, for example). During interviews, stories of such games were often introduced with words such as "It will be interesting for the subject of your research..." or "On that subject..." In other words, the narrators drew a direct connexion between their own non-heterosexuality (which they thought of as the object of my immediate interest) and their experience of same-sex sexualised games, which turned out to be a significant clue in the examination of their own sexuality.

The informants stressed their active role in these games, their own initiative.

In my childhood I preferred playing games with girls that girls probably prefer playing with boys. I was always the ringleader, meaning that from the age of five or six, I used to get my friends to play sexualised games. Happy Families. Or I would invent games where we had to get undressed and show ourselves (homosexual woman, born 1986).

In this quotation my informant shows what she imagines the norm to be: she supposes that "usually" girls play such games with boys. Her own experience is distinguished and becomes a marker of non-heterosexuality. Her heightened interest, which moved her to inventiveness and to persuading her friends, serves as further evidence of her otherness. This great interest, emerging from the logic of the unfolding of the biographical story, confirms that homosexual attraction was characteristic of the narrators from an early age or even innate.

It is interesting that at the same time some of the narrators note that their partners in the games afterwards turned out heterosexual. Thus, one female informant doubted whether her childhood friend would remember this experience at all: "I think that if you ask her she won't remember it" (bisexual woman, born 1970). Another also supposed that his friend would have forgotten what they experienced together: "We didn't raise the subject when we were older. He may have forgotten" (homosexual man, born 1997). Consequently, even from the narrators' own point of view these games do not have the same meaning from the perspective of a heterosexual biography.

Gender otherness in childhood

Another clue to non-heterosexuality might be called my informants' gender otherness, discovered in childhood. The desire to change one's gender, "to become a boy" (or a girl) may be called the extreme manifestation of an inability to fit in with gender norms in childhood, which was often stressed by my informants. This desire is an important element in their biographies, and the narrators connect it with their present homo- or bisexual identity. One informant, speaking of an episode of this kind in her childhood, stressed that it might be interesting for the researcher, and significant in the overall context of the development of her sexuality: "I remember very well a moment in my childhood that will probably interest you. I wanted to be a boy when I was a child. I even called myself by a boy's name" (homosexual woman, born 1974). The narrators recalled that this sort of desire expressed itself in calling oneself by another name, or by changing clothes. Thus the informant quoted above laughingly related: "I did funny things, I put my mother's nylon tights on, stuffed a mound of lint down the front of them, and danced in front of the mirror saying I was in the ballet."

She also explained her actions and desires like this: "If a girl was like this, I was a boy. Particularly if you like girls. […] Probably, if you don't like playing with dolls, but you do like playing *nozhichki*,[1] then you must be a lad too." Thus the narrative explicitly associates the desire "to be a boy" both with homosexuality and with infringing gender prescriptions.

Gender otherness or nonconformity may also be expressed in how the informants describe their habits, interest and characters. Women drew attention to the "masculine" qualities manifested in their childhood: initiative, fondness for active games, protest, fighting, preferring boys in their choice of friends. For example, one narrator describing her childhood, spent in the country, spoke of the boys who swore and smoked from the age of seven, and then remarked: "At that time, that is at the age of five to seven, I also swore like a trooper, cheeked my elders and made 'a scene', as my grandmother put it, if I was displeased with something or didn't get what I wanted" (homosexual woman, born 1986). Some people stressed that they were not interested in "girly" toys or cartoons; quite the reverse, they always chose what boys usually prefer:

To be fair, back then the choice was often a choice in name only — between Barbie and Batman, not counting animal programmes. And it had to be Batman you liked, because there was nothing real about Barbie — no shades of grey, no strong characters, no stories that you could sympathise with. […] Looking at the cartoons for girls during the commercial breaks or zapping through them, I usually felt only indifference and irritation: the people who made them must think I've got no brains at all if they think I can be taken in so easily... (bisexual woman, born ca. 1993).

The men too noted that as children they had mostly socialised with girls, and had not been interested in typical "boys'" occupations: "I can hardly have had more than a couple of friends who were boys. But all the girls (except those who were real little bitches) were my friends. I wasn't interested in races, war games or shooting games" (homosexual man, born 1997). In one of the written autobiographies the author draws an opposition between himself and his father, who embodied a gender model that was alien to him: "My father was my complete opposite: for him the key things in life were playing sports and smashing people's faces in, that was all he thought a 'real man' was for. But I liked books, piano music and poetry, and I was completely uninterested in sport or fighting" (homosexual man, born 1985).

Gender nonconformity during childhood serves in the narratives as a proof of the narrators' otherness, their dissimilarity from their

[1] A game whose object is to win the whole area of a circle drawn on the ground by dropping a knife so that it stands upright in an opponent's section of it. [Transl.]

peers, and equally from adult gender models. It was important to my informants to show that as children they already did not fit in with gender norms, even before the first manifestations of sexuality in their lives. At the same time this way of telling one's story corresponds to existing stereotypes of lesbians being masculine and gay men feminine. These stereotypes, which have become commonplaces of our culture [Kon 2003], have also received another expression in the biographical narratives of non-heterosexual people. Some narrators, by contrast, entered into a polemic with these assumptions, stressing that there had not been any manifestations of gender otherness in their past, and that they had been entirely gender-conformant. Thus one narrator mentions the existence of the stereotype of lesbian masculinity and demonstrated at length how this did not apply to her. The girl systematically looks for manifestations of gender transgression in her childhood and does not find any:

By the way, one important detail. In my childhood, at school, at college, I always only socialised with girls. Only girls were my friends. I had long hair, wore dresses and skirts and jewellery. There is a stereotype that "real lesbians" are inclined to masculinity from childhood, but this is not me at all. I have always done things that are in principle understood as traditionally feminine: I've adored handicrafts (sewing, knitting and crocheting) since childhood, I went to a school that specialised in music and art, I used to read girls' magazines about fashion and beauty, I knew how to make a hundred different kinds of plait and so on. I've always read a great deal. The only nonconformity was that I took part in competitive swimming, where I was the only girl in the group (homosexual woman, born 1993).

It may be that such a strategy of speaking about oneself is a means of self-justification: normative femininity helps to fit in with the existing social order. (Nadezhda Nartova writes about similar motives in her analysis of Russian lesbian online forums [Nartova 2008]). By drawing attention to her own gender normativity, the narrator seems implicitly to persuade the reader that her homosexuality does not infringe social norms. At the same time this fragment could be seen as an extended unsuccessful search for clues, which is in itself significant, among other things in that it casts doubt on the stereotype, the normative story of female homosexuality.

Interest in versus indifference to sexuality in childhood

Contradictory details discovered by the narrators in their past can be interpreted by them as confirmations of the same thing — their non-heterosexuality. Thus, informants regarded as clues to non-heterosexuality both a juvenile interest in things having to do with

sexuality (the physiology of reproduction, erotica, pornography, their own sexual fantasies, etc.) and a complete indifference to this aspect of life until a certain time, frequently connected with their discovery of their own non-heterosexuality. Both, despite the antinomy between them, are included in the narrative in the same way. It should be noted at once that if the informants' interest was in any form of sexuality, including heterosexuality (although episodes connected with an interest in homosexual erotica, for example, were recounted with greater enthusiasm by the narrators), informants' indifference was specifically towards heterosexual sex and questions of reproduction: as long as sex was understood exclusively as an interaction between a man and a woman, it aroused no interest among the young subjects of the biography.

A heightened interest in the sexual sphere during childhood and early adolescence is found in many biographical narratives by non-heterosexual people. Some of them contrast themselves with their peers: their own curiosity seems to them much more significant than that of other people of their age, perhaps even excessive. In this way, one author of an autobiography, describing his absorption in erotic and pornographic material at the age of eleven or twelve, remarks that it replaced his social relations with real people and other activities: "Once I had the opportunity of going onto the internet with the door of my room closed, I would study human bodies, their interactions, the language of the body. In a word, I was interested in sex. Instead of looking for frequent social relationships and whatever they might lead to in real life, I was content with that convenient alternative — watching erotica" (homosexual man, born ca. 1993). He says that at first he was interested in any pornography, but later, when he had access to different pornographic genres on the internet "I gradually started looking at members of my own sex." Another informant, who draws a direct connexion between the physiological changes in his body and the appearance of sexual fantasies about men, stresses that he "grew up" faster than his contemporaries. "It is strange, but puberty began for me a bit earlier than it did for my contemporaries. While they were only just coming to the age when the body readjusts itself, at twelve years old I was already masturbating to the full and imagining that I was kissing Igor" (homosexual man, born 1985).

An absorption in the topic of sexuality during childhood and early adolescence is interpreted by the informants as a significant difference from other people, and also as an anticipation, the first sign of their real homosexuality or bisexuality, which would develop later, or even as its beginning or as a consequence of it. Thus the man quoted above informs his readers that at the age of twelve, unlike his "innocent" and "immature" peers, was already fantasising about someone he knew, as a natural continuation of his interest in

male nudity, which, he says, he noticed in himself at the age of eight. Moreover, his interest in the male body at the age of eight is described as something that the child himself did not understand — "For some reason I liked the sight of the naked male body and nature" — but by the time he was twelve his fantasies and desires are described more as a marked expression of homosexuality than as its foreshadowing.

Another narrator reflects that the reasons for his enthusiasm for pornography were not clear to him, although even then he already felt that it was something shameful, that needed to be concealed:

Did I understand that my interest was so profound that it would determine the course of many subsequent events in my life? Did I understand my desires as I can understand them now? Of course not. It was an overwhelming interest which I could not explain to myself, still less even hint at to anyone else, because I had known for a long time that a man who looks at other men is absurd, completely taboo (homosexual man, born ca. 1993).

An inexplicable interest in pornography (particularly gay pornography) in childhood is described as part of those significant hidden, subconscious processes that become manifest later. Accordingly, this episode is more of an anticipation of the narrator's non-heterosexuality.

An acute interest in sexuality is not confined to homosexual erotica. Here we can also include both men's and women's memories of reading books on popular sexology such as *An Encyclopaedia of Family Life* or children's encyclopaedias on reproduction, looking at pornographic magazines discovered at home, and also an interest in the process of pregnancy and childbirth, and the reproductive behaviour of animals. The narrators' efforts, described above, to stress their juvenile interest in sexualised games with their peers also correspond to this rhetorical strategy — demonstrating their heightened attention toward sexuality from the beginning. Moreover, in the narratives children's acquaintance with pornography or erotica sometimes led to their acting out what they had seen or read:

When we were in the top class of the juniors [my friend and I] found a magazine in my house left behind by my cousin, Like That*, a silly title, a silly pornographic magazine, in short. There were silly stories in it and pictures. We read some of the stories. And so, in the juniors we were already acting out stories about people, not animals. But these were hetero-scenes. This was not perceived as homosexual experience* (homosexual woman, born 1991).

One way or another, people construct their own otherness in the narratives with the help of their early interest in the sexual sphere.

This interest turns out to be the clue that leads to their subsequent non-heterosexuality.

Indifference to, or a lack of interest in (hetero)sexuality, including questions of reproduction and human anatomy, are also presented by the narrators as an important difference from their peers: "I wasn't even interested. Unlike other people of my age, I never tried to find out where babies come from, what a man does with a woman in the bedroom, or how 'that' all happens. And there you have my late development" (homosexual man, born 1991). The author of the autobiography just quoted stresses that he knew nothing, and did not want to know anything about sex (or heterosexual sex at any rate). The comparison with other children that he introduces reflects his assumption that it is normal and natural for an "ordinary" child to be interested in questions of sexuality. This idea of the norm is repeated several times in other narratives. The lack of this "natural" interest is for the author a sign of difference, a divergence from the norm.

A lack of interest in the sexual sphere during childhood may be continued at a later age as an unwillingness to enter into any romantic or sexual relationships with people of the same age. Thus the author quoted above notes that during his adolescence he did not have any relationships with girls and did not experience any physical need for it. "I only began to think that things were getting delayed when I was eighteen or nineteen. Until then, if I had wanted a romantic relationship is was only so as not to feel lonely, and not for the sake of any physical pleasures." One informant said in his interview that unlike other adolescents he was not interested at all in beginning his "sex life". "Some sort of sex life was beginning for people in the same class, so-and-so had slept with so-and-so, and I was not enjoying all this, it was complicated, hard to understand, linked to some extra worries. I wanted things to be enjoyable" (homosexual man, born 1985).

Thus, both an acute interest in sexuality and its complete absence figure in the biographical narratives as significant markers of difference from the people round about. Many stories make a direct comparison with other people of the same age. The narrators compare their childhood experience with what they conceive to be the "norm" and discover their otherness at an early stage of their lives. The subjective experience of being unlike the people round about them (whether at present or in their childhood) results in the basis for distinguishing their own experience from everyone else's being completely opposite in different narratives. Irrespective of its content, the pragmatics of the narrative element are the same: to bear witness to their otherness, thereby affirming their non-heterosexuality. As they investigate the first causes of their own

sexuality, the informants are concerned to find clues that support their suppositions, and different episodes from the past, even those that at first sight contradict each other, may serve as those clues.

At the same time, otherness has various characters depending on the means whereby it is constructed. It may be created from the narrator's postulating again and again that their alienation from heterosexuality in any form, and their indifference to reproductive physiology, are a particular example of this type. Another strategy for constructing one's own otherness is the uncovering of one's own non-heterosexuality, in particular homosexual attraction, and an acute interest in sexuality during childhood becomes an important element in this rhetorical construction. The two strategies do not, in the end, contradict each other and may be used by the same narrator in different parts of her or his narrative (as I shall show below with an actual example).

Reinterpretation in action

To give a clear illustration of how informants look for clues in their past, weave them into a single story and interpret them, I shall examine a written autobiography by a young homosexual woman in her early twenties. It is interesting because from different perspectives (depending on the point from which the narrator chooses to conduct the narrative and what clues she discovers in the process) her past is described in different ways. I shall systematically trace the appearance of non-heterosexual clues in her narrative, holding to the subject of the autobiography, and identify the change in rhetoric.

At the beginning of the autobiography she writes that she was immediately aware of her otherness, her unlikeness to other people: "From childhood you grow up with the feeling that there is something 'wrong with you'." During childhood, in her words, she did not become "fixated" on this feeling, but as she grew up this difference from her peers became more noticeable to her: "When you're children, you don't feel the distance. When you grow up and become an adolescent, a chasm opens up between you and heterosexual people." The difference is gradually formulated by her as a total lack of interest in heterosexual relations, and this difference is felt as "shameful" and is experienced painfully. The author writes that the general enthusiasm around boy-girl relations was alien and incomprehensible to her, this made her feel inadequate and she was ashamed of it: "Until I was sixteen I simply thought of myself as someone who for some reason was quite incapable of experiencing romantic or sexual feelings, because I didn't experience them for boys, and, therefore, couldn't experience them towards anyone. I simply couldn't understand why everyone around me was so

interested in that. I experienced this as some inner flaw, as if there were a piece of me missing, and I would never have talked about it to anyone."

In this way, at the beginning of the text the reader is presented with a heroine who experiences no sexual or erotic feelings, who suffers as a result of her asexuality, and feels a social stigma on account of it. She describes her feelings as a lack of something, an absence of wholeness, as if metaphorically portraying her absent, missing sexuality. However, these words contain a hint that the supposed absence of sensual experience concerns only heterosexual interactions. The informant says more than once that she found heterosexual relations incomprehensible and unpleasant, and stresses her otherness, her difference from heterosexual people.

The narrator goes on to turn round her idea of herself, addressing that part of her adolescent experience that was, following her logic, "unconscious": "Briefly, until I was sixteen I was simply without any conscious romantic / sexual experience. But there were feelings that were not associated with the label 'being in love', although that is precisely what they were." In other words, she shifts from the external level of description of her past to the description of her subconscious thoughts and feelings, which were unclear to her at the time, but which she can notice and interpret now that she knows about her non-heterosexuality. She says that at that time, as an adolescent, she did fall in love with girls, but she did not know that her feelings were romantic and contained an erotic component. Then she speaks of her first relationships, up to the moment when the text was written, describing them as happy and entirely reciprocal.

Having reached the description of her present, the author again returns to her early childhood and begins to describe growing up from a completely different perspective. "When I remember my childhood, I can say that I always felt this way." It turns out that she was not devoid of sexual and erotic sensations, and an attraction to girls had been with her throughout her life. She describes sexualised games with her friend at a young age, and also her markedly expressed childish interest in the physiology of reproduction: "When I was a child, I had a book that explained where babies come from. It said there that babies are made when a man and a woman love each other. I also had a detailed medical encyclopaedia for children, and I had learnt it by heart while I was still at primary school." To all appearances she kept returning to the children's book on human anatomy, which excited a sexual as well as an investigative interest in her. The narrative elements described above and used as clues of non-heterosexuality in many other stories are successfully inserted into this autobiography.

The narrator herself is not inclined to contrast her interest in sexuality with other children's. She thinks that children's heightened curiosity relating to sexuality is a usual phenomenon: "All children are interested in the subject of sex because it is taboo." This statement about all children expresses the informant's idea of the norm: children should be interested in sexuality, and a lack of interest, and of any manifestations of sexuality, is described as a flaw, a deviation from the norm.

The narrator thus depicts her childhood and adolescence from two opposite perspectives. Looking at her past from a heteronormative perspective, and expecting heterosexual behaviour from the heroine (and this is the viewpoint that she ascribes to herself in her youth), her past appears completely devoid of any manifestations of sexuality. This is described as a deviation from the norm which was a painful experience. However, after the age of sixteen, when the girl already knew that she was homosexual, she takes a new look at her past and discovers previously unnoticed clues, and her story turns out completely different: there is a place for erotic and sexual sensations in it. The author seems to supply what was lacking in the first version of her story, recovers her missing sexuality and places herself back into what she thinks of as the norm, where everyone has sexual experience.

In my view this case is an excellent illustration of how differently one and the same experience may be described and interpreted. The narrator conveys in the text an evaluation of the events and of her past self, when she did not suspect that she was homosexual, and her present self, when she looks for traces of her otherness in her early childhood. This intersection of two temporal horizons gives a clear depiction of the process of reinterpreting past events.

Conclusion

When they describe themselves and their lives, non-heterosexual people find signs in their childhood that they interpret as evidence of their non-heterosexuality. This allows them to display the stability and immutability of their sexuality, and at the same time serves as a device for assembling the biographical narrative, knitting the various details into a single story. It is important that memories of childhood in themselves do not become a reason for suspecting their own homo- or bisexuality, but only become relevant when people are convinced that they are not heterosexual. This is not following fresh tracks, but retrospective prophecy, as per Ginzburg [Ginzburg 1986]. Accordingly, these episodes from childhood are fitted into the narrative with specific pragmatics: to legitimise one's identity by means of a coherent history, giving it both an explanation

(I have always been like this) and a confirmation (illustration with examples).

When they discover and exhibit clues to non-heterosexuality, the informants exoticise their experience, stressing their otherness. The non-heterosexual biography is the biography of the cultural "other", and in many ways is organised in opposition to normative heterosexuality. It is important for the informants to show that they have been different from the (heterosexual) people around them since early childhood, and that their otherness is *a priori* characteristic of them. At the same time they are anxious to normalise their sexuality, demonstrating that it is not a malfunction, a deviation or the result of a harmful influence or "propaganda",[1] but on the contrary, it has its history of development and emergence, and this history may be traced.

It may be noted that my informants' narratives, which I regard as therapeutic, do not for the most part correspond to the psychoanalytical concept of sexuality or to the position of Freud, which assume that any form of sexuality is not innate, but develops under the influence of many factors. Paradoxically, the psychotherapeutic narrative turns out to be a convenient framework for the biological view of sexuality. The narrators' stress on the primary, innate nature of their otherness and non-heterosexuality reveals an essentialisation of sexual identity which is explicitly expressed in some of the narratives. In this way the informant, a homosexual woman, who was quoted in the introduction, adds after the story of how she wanted to be a boy during childhood "I consider myself gay from birth, that's why I am tracing all this." These words may be understood in two ways. On the one hand, and this is probably what my informant meant, because her homosexuality is innate, it is possible to discover manifestations of homosexuality in her early childhood. On the other hand, the words can be understood as meaning that because she is convinced of this she is able to discover traces of homosexuality in her childhood. This is the constructivist position that my analysis of non-heterosexual biographical narratives leads to. The aim of explaining and normalising oneself, of bringing one's life-story together, of demonstrating the stability of one's identity, results in a biological view of non-heterosexuality.

[1] As imagined by the authors of the law forbidding propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations. For more detail on this law and its effect on the lives of non-heterosexual people in Russia see [Soboleva, Bakhmetiev 2014; Kondakov 2017; Kondakov, Shtorn 2021].

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