

Shift-F2: Female-to-Female Intimacy Offline and Online (Krasnoiarsk and Novosibirsk cases)¹

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la nikto—mne mozhno vse.

I am nobody. Therefore, everything is allowed to me.

—Sonia Alevich and Kseniia Narsova. *Devishnik*

Abstract

The major question discussed in this paper is how various social media and environments influence the patterns of cathexis (as used by Connell). The paper is focused on young Siberian women who develop intimate relations with other women and who do not necessarily have a lesbian identity. The online and offline forms of communication and their impact on the patterns of sexual and non-sexual intimacy are discussed. The offline communication sites comprise mass media, clubs and cafes, public shows (concerts, movie shows and festivals), private homes, and outdoor communication pads. It is shown that for leisure providers and commercial media (such as free shopping guides) tolerance towards same-sex intimacy is a part of their consumer-friendly policy. For those women who are reluctant to publicly expose their same-sex intimacy and/or identify themselves as lesbians the public offline communication sites seem to be inappropriate. Therefore, many of them switch to the Internet to look for partners and friends. The Internet communication sites analyzed in the article cover dating sites and individual online mediated resources. The first stages of the Internet communication facilitated anonymity and gender masquerade. However, recent developments show that the efficiency on the Internet communication sites depends on identity exposure. The need for communication efficiency has produced the effect of what the author of the paper calls “virtual coming out.”

Keywords: Same-Sex intimacy, Internet Mediated Communication, Lesbian Identity, Women who Have Sex with Women (WSW), Sexual Fluidity, Virtual Coming Out

Part 1. Subject of Research, Conceptual Frame, and Empirical Data

General Notes on the Object and Objectives of Research and Its Theoretical Frame

The most common scientific perspective on the shifts in gender order is the analysis of changes of its political and economic aspects. However, these changes normally go together with the changes in the section of the gender order that Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell has called the structure of cathexis (Connell 1987). The object of the pilot research presented in this

paper refers to this sphere of gender relations as they are performed in the intimate behavior of young Siberian women. According to Connell, cathexis covers those forms of human sociality that function as social glue. These forms of association keep together communities, families, friends, and intimate sexual partners. They also play a significant role in integrating various organizations such as labor units, religious groups, army sections, etc., and (just as with the political and economic aspects of the gender order) they undergo changes through individual practices that undermine the existing gender order.

There are different approaches to the evolution of cathexis. In the West in the 1950s and 1960s, there began a moral panic of social pessimists, mostly belonging to right-wing politicians who talked about the vanishing of the values of community, family, and friendship, on the one hand, and the growth of individualism on the other. According to *social pessimists*, both in the West and now in Russia, individualism and intimacy are opposed to community. The erosion of communities and families and of unconditional friendship is rooted in the growing political individualism based on particularization of political rights (of all kinds of minorities) and consumerism that devours authentic human relations and turns them into formalized obligations and contracts. According to *social optimists*, one of whom is British sociologist Anthony Giddens, there is nothing wrong with the transformation of intimacy and the growth of individualism. Through these transformations human relations at the end of the 20th century acquired a new quality, argues Giddens. They can be categorized as pure relationship, not constrained by social needs and conventions.² They are essentially based on disclosing intimacy: mutual trust, deep understanding, and knowing “through talking and listening, sharing thoughts, showing feelings” (Jamieson 1998:158). Their climax is so-called confluent love, where the erotic and other needs of both partners are considered to be valuable and important (Giddens 1992). According to Giddens, these attitudes expand the “sector” of same-sex practices and engender the so-called plastic sexuality, which means that sexuality is not tied to reproduction and partners are free in the expression of their erotic desire and do not feel institutional or any other control.

The author of this paper agrees with both social optimists and social pessimists in the identification of the trends: the growth of individualism, expansion of consumption practices, and changes of intimate behavior and sexual relations as one of its forms. However, I follow British sociologist Lynn Jamieson in her notion that there is no contradiction between the values of community, on the one hand, and the values of intimacy on the other. The community standards still guide intimate performance, while intimate performance still remains an element of social cohesion. The new communication technologies (Internet and mobile phones) introduce their own norms of communication. Consumption contributes to the formation of the feeling of belonging and can legitimize marginal social practices, as will be shown below.

The processes discussed above have a gender dimension. One of the premises of this paper is that it is women’s behavior that has undergone more changes over the past century than men’s (Jamieson 1998:25), and therefore, it is primarily women who have contributed to the changes of intimate practices. The complex of these changes has been conceptualized under the

term of feminization of sex, i.e., the emergence of female subjectivity in intimate relations (Ehrenreich, Hess, and Jacobs 1987). The objective of this paper is to look at this trend as it is revealed in the behavior of young Siberian women practicing same-gender intimacy, which is here designated by the “formulaic” *F2*.³

One of the theoretical assumptions of the research presented in this paper is that an important factor of the shifts in intimate behavior is “the growth and proliferation of communications” (Plummer 1995:123). When Ken Plummer wrote about this factor in 1995, he mentioned that the major means of mass communication have “been put into place so to be widely available to most,” such as mass paperback editions, TV, telephones, and videos. He also mentioned the importance of the stories on sexuality that “have been told publicly and circulated freely to reach a critical take-off point” (1995:123). This paper will also deal with the recent developments of communication through the Internet, which has become the locus of many sexuality “stories” and has substantially expanded communication opportunities, including offline encounters. However, the communication torrents, while opening new and interesting opportunities to enjoy intimate relations, at the same time undergo limitations in their performance, as it happens in every sphere of cathexis.

Prehistory of the Research

This paper presents the analysis of the pilot qualitative field research in two big Siberian cities, Krasnoiarsk and Novosibirsk, in the summer and fall of 2007. The research was initiated in a discussion at a seminar on gender studies at Novosibirsk State University between the author of the paper and Oksana Parfenova, then an M.A. student in the Philosophy Department. Oksana, an open-minded and outspoken discussant, suggested that same-gender intimate practices in many cases are a matter of fashion and the impact of the media among bored, well-to-do young people. I suggested that Oksana test her own statement by empirical research. During her vacations in Krasnoiarsk, Oksana took the first interviews and then proceeded to interview our research partners in Novosibirsk. She ended up writing her M.A. thesis on coming-out under the guidance of one of the leading Russian gender sociologists and fellow author in this special issue, Elena Zdravomyslova (European University in St. Petersburg). This paper has been written in close cooperation with Oksana. But she is not responsible for the interpretations offered in the paper.

Research Site, Methodology, Empirical Data, and Context

Novosibirsk and Krasnoiarsk are typical industrial centers with populations of about one million people. Novosibirsk is the center of the Siberian Federal District (*Sibirskii federal'nyi okrug*). The urban social space appropriated by Krasnoiarsk and Novosibirsk interviewees and their network members includes commercial clubs and the so-called *pleshkas*—open places in the centers of cities and public parks, used for cruising for partners and meeting old friends.

Novosibirsk clubs seem to be safer than Krasnoiarsk ones (see www.bluekrasnoyarsk.narod.ru). On a par with Omsk (another Siberian city), Novosibirsk has a program of healthcare and AIDS prevention for homosexual men, called Pulsar (www.pulsarrussia.ru).

According to our preliminary observations, Novosibirsk also seems to be more open for identity-politics actions and seems to be more tolerant to minorities than Krasnoiarsk. It might be connected to Novosibirsk's status as the number-one metropolis of Siberia. Novosibirsk authorities care about the image of the city as space for diversity. Novosibirsk hosts several consulates, a cultural center with funding from Germany, and a number of various educational and scientific international programs interested in the promotion of political rights of various groups. Novosibirsk's relatively tolerant climate can also be attributed to the proliferation of creative initiatives and a number of informal youth movements arranging flash mobs. The most famous of the Novosibirsk flash mobs is the so-called Monstration—an alternative May Day youth demonstration with absurd slogans that involves political parody of the official May Day demonstration and involves carnival dressing and slogans with covert and overt sexual connotations. Over the past two years, the critical attitude of the authorities to Monstration and its current leader have implied a splash of political actions of young people not only in Novosibirsk but also in other cities in Russia.

The atmosphere of Novosibirsk might have been one of the reasons why two years ago, the LGBT⁴ network integrated a group of people to arrange actions against homophobia in Novosibirsk. The common trait of Novosibirsk projects by LGBT and other organizations is that they are always realized by interregional networks, in which both Siberian and international participants are involved. Several years ago, an initiative to organize an independent Novosibirsk-based gay-rights organization failed. The most recent action of the LGBT network in the region (June 2010) was the appeal to the public prosecutor's office of the Russian Federation (*zhaloba v glavnuu prokuraturu*) concerning a homophobic statement by the deputy of the Krasnoiarsk city council, V. Venediktov (Agentstvo... 2010).

However, the impact of single actions on the life of creative alternative youth groups (*neformaly*)⁵ and non-heterosexuals is limited. They cannot outweigh the mainstream governmental politics, which are based on the overt principle of reproductive sexuality. Moreover, it looks as if this principle is getting reinforced by recent governmental projects, such as the so-called maternal capital. In 2010, the government of the Russian Federation announced a national award competition for women called "Women of Russia" (www.woman-russia.ru). Competitions of this kind have been held before. This year, however, only those women who have children can run for the award of one million rubles, which will be given in 2011. By default, the support of families with many children, announced in the competition mandate, is synonymous with the support of heterosexual partnerships.

Single projects and actions against homophobia and other actions for difference and human rights cannot undermine or even slightly shake the official stance. The human-rights awareness and participation in social movements are very low. Let us give an illustration of this. In spring 2010, the LGBT network arranged a film festival, "Side by Side" (*Bok o bok*), in

Novosibirsk. The agenda of the festival included public screenings of Western movies on human-rights initiatives and the lives of gays and lesbians in the West, and some other art events. The festival was approved by Novosibirsk authorities. However, the discussion of the movies has shown that the level of awareness of the rights and human rights in the general public was very low. During discussions of the movies, the general public was quiet. One of the comments was: "Tell us what our rights are about and how they are abused, and we will embark on doing something to protect them." The participants of the discussions also revealed little trust in the ability of human-rights organizations to help them in critical situations. "If I get cancer, no organization will help me, including LGBT. I can rely only on myself and my close friends and kin." This statement reveals a typical situation in Russia: a gap between regular people and political institutions of various kinds. Due to this gap, in order to survive, an individual has to operate in small localized networks and elaborate self-supporting life strategies. This kind of individualism is different from individualism produced by the expansion of political rights and identity politics. It hinders political mobilization and formation of collective identities.⁶ The above-described institutional insecurity facilitates cathectic particularism, highlights the value of individual success and pleasure, and therefore raises the significance of intimacy as a sphere of *jouissance* in the constitution of social environment.

The research methodology was determined by this specific type of Russian individualism and the significance of Internet communication in the installation of intimate contacts. Some research partners were identified through the Internet, others through the "snowball" method. Two of the interviews were completely anonymous, conducted over the internet (ICQ messenger forum), while the others were done in person.⁷ The materials of Internet forums, Internet dating sites, and various Internet and printed materials were also used. A valuable source for relevant narratives and comments was found in casual issues of beauty magazines and shopping guides distributed in Novosibirsk. The application of shopping guides can be justified by the importance of shopping as a constitutive element of lifestyle for many young people now. *Shoping* (Russian spelling) is not an element of subsistence economy as it used to be under the Soviet regime, but a special practice interwoven with other practices.

Our research partners in this project were 12 young women in their twenties (see the list of interviewees at the end of the paper) who recognized that they have had an experience of same-gender intimacy. They do not constitute a group or a network, though some of them know each other. They have high or vocational education. Some of them are trained in management or law. Some of them have education in the so-called creative majors (arts and pedagogy). Economically, we would refer to them as lower middle class.

Most of our interviewees have excellent narrative skills, though some of them were shy and felt constrained in the discussion of sexual issues because love relations are hard to be conveyed in principle (see about that below) and also because of conventions that characterize verbal communication in Russia. The interview guide included such topics as life in the parents' family, first love, sexual debut, and the shift from heterosexual contacts to F2 relations, i.e., same-sex intimacy. We also asked about their attitudes toward social sites (clubs, discos,

conventional urban meeting pads) known as places for people of bi-, hetero-, and homosexual orientation, and also toward categorization into terms such as *butches*, *dykes*, and *femmes* (*fairies*).

Problems of the Research of Female Sexuality and Intimacy

Female-to-female intimacy is not a simple subject of research for many reasons. One reason is an almost complete lack of articulation of this kind of human experience at the everyday and the scientific level (Rotkirch 2002:453). Though *both* male and female same-gender intimacy is the subject of moral and religious taboos, which hinders academic discussion of the variability of intimate practices, female sexualities are much less articulated. Thus, M. Frye once noted:

I once perused a large and extensively illustrated book on sexual activity by and for homosexual men. It was astounding to me for one thing in particular, namely, that its pages constituted a huge lexicon of *words*: words for acts and activities, their sub-acts, preludes and denouements, their stylistic variation, their sequences ... Gay male sex, I realized then, is *articulate*. It is articulate to a degree that, in my world, lesbian "sex" does not remotely approach ... I have in effect, no linguistic community, no language, and therefore in one important sense, no knowledge. (Frye 1990:310-311, quoted in Richardson 1992:187)

Almost 20 years after M. Frye expressed her concerns, Harper et al. in their paper on the impact of the Internet on the development of sexual identity mention that existing theories of sexual identity are primarily "based on retrospective reports of identity development solicited from samples of primarily White adult gay men" (Harper et al. 2009:300). The important collection of papers *The Story of Sexual Identity*, in which the paper by Harper et al. was printed, does not seem to fill in the empirical gap they criticize. The key publications in the collection either address gay male sexuality or speak about gay sexuality without specifying gender, and do not pay much attention to the gender variety. The paper by Harper et al. is also about gay sexuality and bisexuality, though they mention some relevant publications on other genders.

The current situation in the research of female sexuality is similar to that of psychological research in earlier days in general. The American psychologist Lisa Diamond, with a reference to other researchers—Janet Hyde and Brian Mustanski—observed that very often the research of female sexuality has been modeled on the research of male sexuality, without taking into account that parameters of female sexuality may be very different. Therefore, "female same-sex sexuality was 'undertheorized' and probably required an altogether separate explanatory model" (Diamond 2008:18).

Some other writers argue that there is an essential problem for the researchers of sexuality: "the expression of sexual desire seems always to exceed the capacity of language to

represent it” (Vasvari 2006:5). If this is the case, it means that whatever our goals are, the opportunities to expose sexual intimacy will be limited, and sexuality research might be closer to an artistic endeavor that demands a special approach congruent with the experience under research.

The difficulties mentioned above are clearly seen in the state of Russian scientific discourse. The major sociological publication on female sexuality of the past few years is Anna Temkina’s book, in which she argues: “Since we are interested in dominant norms and practices, we are primarily focused on the analysis of heterosexual practices” (Temkina 2008:32). Most research examining Russian female-to-female intimate practices is focused upon the discussion of social exclusion and the representation of homosexuality in public discourse (Gurova 2003; Nartova 1999, 2004b, 2004c; Omel’chenko 1999, 2000, 2002; Stella 2004, 2008). There is very little research looking at female-to-female intimacy as a phenomenon in and of itself (Nartova 2004a; Omel’chenko 2004; Rotkirch 2000, 2002).

The Russian *conceptual basis* for female-to-female intimacy is underdeveloped. The Russian translation of the important book on transformation of intimacy by Giddens (Giddens 1992), printed in 2004, is considered to be inadequate (cf. Apresian 2005b) and cannot provide the relevant theoretical frame for empirical research. This translation, in a sense, shows a dissatisfying level of scientific analysis. Thus, Giddens introduces the concept of confluent love, by which he means a free-floating type of relationship in which the erotic and other needs of both partners are acknowledged. This intimate relationship, according to Giddens, is different from romantic love, which is passionate adoration and fusion of the partners (see also Luhmann 1986). However, the Russian interpreter missed this idea, having translated “confluent love” as “fusion love” (*liubov’-sliianie*), which undermines the original concept of fluidity (cf. Apresian 2005a: footnote 20). There are other inaccuracies that misconstrue the author’s argument (e.g., “S/M” is translated as “sexual minorities”), leading to considerable confusion; but that is beyond the scope of this article. Therefore, an essential component of this research was its conceptual design and interpretive scheme which will be elaborated upon later.

Conceptual Design of the Paper

The discussion of same-sex practices in the 1970-1980s was dominated by the concept of homosexual identity and identity formation. The process of identity formation was regarded as a more or less linear development “complicated by experiences of heterosexism, stigma, and prejudice” (Harper et al. 2009:298). The climax of this process is the coming-out moment, which signals the positive acceptance of self. However, as Margaretta Jolly argues, “Critics after Adrienne Rich, Monique Wittig, Michel Foucault, Judith Butler and Eve Sedgwick have become increasingly sceptical of the notion that sexuality is or can provide an identity in any absolute or knowable sense” (Jolly 2001:475). There are two alternatives to this approach. One is to regard identity not as an essential “stable, enduring index of categorization” but as something that “is contested from within” (Hammack and Cohler 2009:4). In this case, identity is understood as a

process, not as a “task” to be “achieved.” The other alternative approach is to substitute the concept of identity for the concept of desire and its fluidity. Both approaches to sexuality and intimacy are often labeled as postmodern, stressing the notion of continuum, plasticity, and multiplicity.

The identity discourse does exist in the Russian context. It exists both in the political and the everyday context. On a par with formal “homosexual,” “lesbian”/”lesbi,” “gay,” or “bisexual” (*biseksualka*) labels, there is an informal, self-chosen term, “tema.” This term is an insiders’ term for homosocial and homosexual experience and identity in general. It originates from the journal *Tema* (“*The Theme*”), which was printed in newspaper format and then as a magazine in 1990-1993 by the Moscow Association of Sexual Minorities (Essig 1999:59, 90-91). In the everyday speech of our interviewees, *tema* is used as the antonym of *natural* (masculine) or *naturalka* (feminine). The informal term *naturally* corresponds to the English term “straight” (heterosexual), which is also used in Russian. *Tema* has emerged as a response to a need for an “indigenous” term for a queer identity and experience, and it proved to be a productive construction, with its own derivative adjectives: *temnyi* (not to be confused with *tëmnyi*, “dark”) and *tematicheskii*, and the diminutive substantive *temka*.⁸ Though the journal *Tema* itself was oriented primarily to a male audience, the term *tema* has acquired the status of a neutral term. Since its grammatical gender is feminine, it is widely used in reference to women.

Another interesting development in the everyday identity discourse is the classification of lesbians (as generic) circulating on the Internet, which identifies six types of lesbians on the basis of the concept of taste (*klassifikatsiia lesbiianok*, www.marry.ru/texts/view.php?tid=74). This ironic classification takes into consideration ethnicity, age, and public activities (for instance, professional occupation) and pretends to be a practical guide for cruising at a café or bar. Besides differences in alcohol preferences, it covers styles of clothing and elements of intimate behavior.

Though there is a tendency toward categorization and development of everyday identity discourse, scholars have observed that many people who practice same-gender intimacy avoid or completely deny any categorization (Essig 1999). One of the goals of our study was to check whether this was true in our case. Therefore, we had to design a neutral generic term other than “lesbians.” In similar cases, researchers use the term “non-heterosexuals” (see Stella 2007; Weeks, Heaphy, and Donovan 2001). One of the possible alternatives for the research and interpretation of the data was the term “women loving women.” The problem with this term in our case is that it stresses love, which is not always involved. For instance, our interviewee 7 describes her sexual experience as follows:

Well, I [have been] so free and so quiet, but then I got bored and lonely. And here I began to court a girl. We met long ago and for some reason I thought that I would never win her, but for some reason I felt challenged. And [finally] we began to meet up just to have sex. That is, we just slept ... we had an agreement that it is just [for sex] ... (Woman from Krasnoiarsk, aged 22)

Interviewee 12 testifies that:

Let's put it this way: sex with boys does not bring me any moral satisfaction (*moral'noe udovletvorenie*). It brings me only physical [satisfaction]. ... As for the moral ... even with girls I don't have it every time. Therefore, I say: one has to discriminate between those with whom you have sex and those whom you love. (Woman from Krasnoiarsk, aged 22)

Sex for our interviewees is a source of genital pleasure not identical to love; our interviewees can be in love with their partners, but it is not a necessity. Sexual pleasure can have an independent value for them. Thus, we asked one of our interviewees (12):

(Interviewer) And what do you do when you meet up? What do you do together with Masha?

(Interviewee) With Masha? We have sex.

(Interviewer) And besides that?

(Interviewee) That's all.

(Interviewer) Is it?

(Interviewee) Oh, yeah. Well, in summer we went for walks.

Our interviewee 12 discriminates between her true love (a woman), who lives in St. Petersburg, and her sexual partner (*liubov'* as opposed to *liubovnitsa*). These and some other statements by our interviewees to the effect that love is not necessarily the precondition of sexual intimacy have helped me come up with the basic term for our cases: "women who have sex with women" (WSW) formed on the model of the term "men who have sex with men" (MSM).

In Russian, sexual intercourse as a means of socialization, identification, or pure genital pleasure is sometimes euphemistically called intimacy: "*intim*," or "*intimnye otnosheniia*." The concept of intimacy used in this paper encompasses not only sex, but also to some extent other forms of personal relationship, such as romantic reverence and friendship.

Specification of the Research Goals

The subject of this research is the intimate behavior of young urban Siberian women (F2) in the context of new communication and consumption practices. It will be looked at through the prism of what opportunities and constraints are caused by on- and offline practices. The goal of the research is *not* to compare the experiences of different generations of Siberian women. Rather, we look at the intimate/sexual biographies of our interviewees to understand the significance of female-to-female intimacy within one generation and what situations provoke the shift from one type of sexual contact to another.

The next part of the paper will expose some principal elements of the intimate/sexual biographies of our interviewees and their connection to the urban culture.

Part 2. The Continuum of F2 Friendship, Love, and Sex in On- and Offline Formats

Sexual Debut

The sexual debut of our interviewees was, as a rule, quite early (14-16 years) and mostly heterosexual. However, our early debutantes very rarely felt comfortable having sex. Our interviewee 6 says about her sexual relations with her boyfriend:

After sex I always had, absolutely always, a feeling of burning shame, and as soon as everything was finished I could neither talk nor do anything for the next 20 minutes. I just sat and shivered—and it has always been like this. Over three and a half years ... He [her boyfriend] knew me very well; he knows that after sex he should not touch me, or even approach me. I go to smoke and smoke a lot and sit all red. I feel ashamed, awfully ashamed. Not because I did something wrong, not because of that. Not because I do something forbidden, but because I don't like it. I don't like sex with a man. It is ... as if you are used, you are being pulled into something. It is so rough, somehow so stern and crude. (Woman from Krasnoiarsk, aged 23)

Her feeling of shame and emptiness was one of the reasons for trying out sexual relations with girls: "For the first time when I tried sex with a girl ... I felt so relaxed! I felt so good. It was an endless sea of tenderness—that's it, nothing more. I felt no shame at all, absolutely not with a girl, never."

The sexual debut for our interviewees is so early because secondary socialization now involves sexual initiation, which is as imperative for boys as for girls. Virginity is perceived as lack of social expertise and a sign of deficiency (Andreeva 1998). The stereotype of brutal masculinity transferred through media and other forms of public discourse demands corresponding brutal sexual male behavior, and therefore, the first sexual intercourse with vaginal penetration can become a traumatic event for a girl. One of the episodes in the film *All Will Die and I Will Stay Alive* (2008), by the Russian director Valeria Gaia-Germanica, shows a scene of a date rape. However, the heroine cannot even recognize the rape, since she is under strong pressure from her peers, who would not accept her if she confessed her virginity or recognized her first vaginal-penetration experience as a trauma. If the first sexual intercourse is violent and traumatic, girls may proceed with trying other forms of intimacy, and this might be one of the reasons for the development of the Shift F2 scenario.

Public Intimacy/Sexuality Discourse vs. Perception of Intimacy by Our Interviewees

The goal of this analysis is to juxtapose samples of public discourse on sexuality and intimacy, and our interviewees' attitudes. The media addressed to young women that promotes sexualized images of women is enormous. Regular kiosks and supermarkets sell national glossy journals (a Russian generic name for these journals is *glianets*, or *gliantsevyie zhurnaly*) for teenagers and young adults. Besides that, a Siberian version of *Cosmopolitan* is available through the same kiosks. To attract young readers, the local libraries also subscribe to the *gliantsevyie zhurnaly*. There are also free local consumption guides that contain prescriptions for what to wear, where to eat out, and how to deal with other people. For instance, in the city district where I live, there is a special journal, *Academ-City: Akademgorodok in a Glossy Format* (*Akademtsiti: Akademgorodok v gliantsevom formate*). This shopping guide (as well as others) is distributed through snail mail, cafés, and boutiques. The Internet equivalent of these editions is *Novosibirskii gorodskoi sait* (www.ngs.ru), with its special section SHE, addressing young women. The prevailing consumption setting of the sexual discourse in these media cannot fail to be mentioned, though of course it clearly provokes feminist criticism of beauty culture.

Siberian girls' decorative and feminine display proves that in many cases the prescriptions of the media are accepted and followed. However, often they evoke the opposite response, as will be exemplified shortly.

One of the most popular media recommendations in gender relations is complete submission of the woman to the man: "We [women] have to be psychologists, compassionate and all-forgiving, sincere and kind, considerate and responsive to the desires of a man" (Bakulina 2008:21). This recommendation of submissiveness and subordination of women to men seems to be one of the most persistent stereotypes transmitted through media, in spite of profound criticism of these stereotypes by gender researchers and human-rights activists since the 1990s (Voronina 1998:70). In the lives of our interviewees, we see situations where the stereotypical relationship could not be realized and a young woman protested at its imposition as an ideal of intimacy. Interview 2 (with a woman from Krasnoiarsk, aged 20) illustrates this situation:

(Interviewer) What do you want at this stage of your life most of all?

(Interviewee) I want love! I want love all the time (smiling) ...

And it should be mutual, since I am already sick of non-mutual love. This is not love, but madness.

(Interviewer) And what is love for you?

(Interviewee) First of all, this person [*chelovek*—gender-neutral usage] should respect me.

(Interviewer) What does it mean, to respect? To take into account your point of view?

(Interviewee) Sure ... This person should be able to make a compromise. And I should be able to make a compromise as well ... When I give myself to somebody

[the interviewee means both men and women here], I should be able to see the response ... Again: this should be mutual ... I want to drown in this person ... This is classic; it never happens, but still ...

(Interviewer) Does this attitude depend on gender?

(Interviewee) I don't know how it is with men. I think that from men I want even more respect than from women! [*laughing*] ... I am not going to kiss his feet, for instance.

(Interviewer) And what about women?

(Interviewee) And with women it's not a problem [*laughing*]. A woman is the crown of nature's creation [*laughing*] ...

(Interviewer) Why do you think that?

(Interviewee) Because I am a girl—I understand women better than men, I don't know male psychology. I hate it when men put themselves above women.

What our interviewee argues is something quite opposite to the media recommendation. The relationship should be a cooperation of equals, based on mutual respect and reverence. Otherwise it is not love but insanity. Her idea is that in the case of a female partner she is ready to kiss her feet, but with a male partner she is not ready to do this, since in heterosexual relations, she would be placing herself lower than the man in so doing. Our interviewee does not exclude intimate relations with men, but currently she has intimate relations with women. Her attitude is not an open challenge to the stereotype but its indirect subversion.

Media Discourse on Sexual Variability, and Sexual Pluralism

Most of the popular media in Russia (as elsewhere) promotes a heterosexual paradise and contains all kinds of sexist stereotypes about males and females. However, over the past ten years *non-normative* sexuality has also been promoted by media and mass culture, including printed media, Internet publications and forums, movies, and music. On the Russian music scene there are some popular singers who either present themselves as WSW or are known as such (Zemfira, Mara, Butch, Nochnye Snaipery). For the once popular duet T.A.T.U., the normalization of F2 intimacy has been their major PR tool. Most of our interviewees listen to Zemfira or Surganova and often enjoy this music together in a romantic setting or discuss it in the communication ritual of their first date. When these singers play concerts, the halls are full. The audience at these concerts is mixed. Attending them is not only a matter of same-sex communication but also a matter of taste.

The media materials used in this paper are not identified through media monitoring and quantitative evaluations. The majority of the printed materials were found in public places where they had been left by readers, for example at the book-crossing stations.⁹ The important thing in our context is the non-intrusive observation of what people read. This observation can later become a basis for systemic monitoring.

Our preliminary observation shows that discourse on homosexuality in the mass media is used as a sort of spice added to the regular recipes for male-female relations. In 2007, the Novosibirsk version of a Moscow fashion-and-beauty magazine *Expensive Shopping* (*Dorogoe udovol'stviu*) published an article entitled "Attention! A Woman! Or: Who is the Master in the House?" which is a perfect example of such sexist truisms such as: businesswomen are losing the essential qualities as caretakers which are valued by males; males in partnerships with career women lose their vitality; feminists are women who failed in their relations with men.

In this article the homosexual "spice" has been added in a special box and thus graphically emphasized:

The phenomenon of same-sex love is often erroneously categorized as ... a social and psychological problem. It is not long ago that we could hear from perfectly reasonable and adequate people judgments such as: "They should undergo medical treatment and reform!" However, people who can be considered homosexuals are not different from us. They just have a different sexual orientation, i.e. they are interested in people of their own sex. Sometimes this sexual orientation is very clear from childhood ... (Anon. 2007:12).

The passage is illustrated by a picture of two women who appear to be intimate partners. We can only guess how this message is perceived by the readers of mass literature. We interpret it as an attempt by the regional media to follow the trends of metropolitan media. Even though the mass-media discourse on homosexual encounters is a means of commercial attraction, I suggest that it contributes to the subversion of the compulsory heterosexuality norm.

On a par with the homosexuality discourse, there is also a public discourse on bisexuality. In the article quoted above, the author speaks about bisexuality and interprets it as a tribute to fashion and a sign of "healthy curiosity." Bisexuality is represented as a special item in the list of goods worth looking for and purchasing.

The issue of bisexuality is also discussed on the Internet. For instance, www.ngs.ru, one of the most popular Web sites focused on Novosibirsk and surrounding areas, has a special journal, she.ngs.ru. The niche of the journal is consumerist, but it often publishes articles with a focus on gender issues and a slant toward pedagogical or psychological counseling. One of the publications addressed *female bisexuality* (<http://she.ngs.ru/news/more/36121/>). The author of the article (Nezabudkina 2008) makes an attempt to explain the phenomenon and also to give recommendations in the case of homosexual desires. The general attitude expressed toward bisexuality is positive. The bisexual scenario is approached as an issue of individual choice:

Whether to realize the "forbidden fantasies" in life or suppress them is up to the individual. Nobody can give guarantees of the further consequences or predict the results. According to Alexander Fedchuk [a sexologist] this new experience can

uncover a new pleasure for a woman and she will be happy but it is also possible that she will subsequently feel ashamed and suffer from a bad conscience: “In the latter case it will be a problem for her, a cause for suffering, then she would look for a solution—either by herself or with the help of a medical doctor. However, the same situation might occur if she does not even try to fulfill the fantasy and decides to suppress it entirely instead.” (Nezabudkina 2008)

The article propagates some stereotypes, such as the explanation of bisexuality as resulting solely from the failure of heterosexual relations. However, what is remarkable about this article is that it nevertheless encourages tolerance toward a variety of sexual relations:

If one of your female friends proved to be bisexual and you are not comfortable with this, try to be more tolerant and take it with humor. As the famous film director Woody Allen, the king of comedy, once said: “Although I am a practicing heterosexual, bisexuality automatically doubles your chances of a date on a Saturday night.” (Nezabudkina 2008)

In addition to the question of choice, the other subject discussed in the article is the problem of categorization of oneself. The recommendation of one of the psychotherapists quoted in the article is not to give up the sexual drive toward other women but at the same time not to ascribe any labels to oneself and not to consider oneself a “sick person” or “future lesbian”:

What should you do if you are interested not only in men but in women as well? First of all, you should not panic, or stigmatize and label yourself. Unlike men, women tend to pay attention to their own kind, to make comparisons, to admire, to imitate something new. This admiration and desire to imitate can often imply infatuation. “Most of the infatuation can lead only to masturbation fantasies and a desire to be close to the object of admiration, without any sexual intimacies,” reassures [psychotherapist] Igor Liakh. “If something like this has happened to you, you should not think that it indicates a pathology that inevitably will lead to homosexuality.” However, if your relations are more intimate than going together to the cinema, you should not consider yourself a sick person or a future lesbian, the psychotherapist says: “This event in your life might not mean anything at all and pass by.” (Nezabudkina 2008)

These examples of public discourse on homosexuality and bisexuality show that regionally circulating media talk about sexual variability in practical settings of everyday life. According to psychotherapists and sexologists, same-sex intimacy can satisfy one’s “healthy curiosity” and does not imply sexual categorization. These qualifications by medical experts are important in terms of recognition of the variability of intimate experience we see in other types of public

discourse, such as Internet dating sites and in the plurality of sexual experience communicated by our interviewees. It is obvious that same-sex intimacy existed in our region before, but it has not been recognized and, therefore, could not become the subject of analysis. Now one can observe the ways of self-presentation and make attempts to evaluate the reasons for various sexual scenarios, shifting from one type of intimacy, or combining various types of intimate relations.

Thus, from the information of dating sites one can see that a widespread way of self-presentation is bisexuality. Let us give an example. The dating page of the Web site sibgay.ru on 26 April 2008, had 1877 entries. Of those, 956 persons positioned themselves as gay (males), 540 as bisexuals, and among the 381 left there were lesbians, transsexuals, and heterosexuals.

In our interviews, there were some cases of a bisexual scenario. Thus, our interviewee 5 felt that she was more attracted by women but at a certain point in her same-sex intimate relations she began to date a man (because other young women were interested in him) and then married him:

Well, I did not want to date him. [But] my sister told me: ‘Gee, he is such a great guy, why don’t you date him?’ And I thought: If the other gals like him so much and are wild about him, then I should date him right away. We began to see each other. The only thing I liked to do with him was sex. All the rest was a nightmare, that’s it. (Woman from Novosibirsk, aged 24)

In this case the shift *from* same-sex relations to heterosexual relations occurred because of the peer pressure.

To summarize the discussion above, it should be noted that the public discourse on sexuality and intimacy is dominated by stories of heterosexual normativity. The same-sex options are also offered by media writers, but in non-discursive modes of life these options, including Shift F2, are constrained by various factors. At this stage of research we are not able to map the whole range of constraints. A longitudinal research is needed.

Public Space for Leisure and Dating

This section of the paper deals with various urban sites in Novosibirsk and Krasnoiarsk that are appropriated by our WSW for dating and leisure. Currently, communication and dating often involve online communication, which will be addressed below, but this section will discuss the “real” urban space.

Leisure sites are multifunctional. It is well known that restaurants, cafés, clubs, and *dances* (discos) are not only leisure sites but also dating sites: traditional places in which to find life-long and temporary partners, starting with one-night stands and ending up sometimes with a long-term relationship. All kind of clubs, bars, discos, and bowling alleys proliferate in Novosibirsk and Krasnoiarsk. This scene is very dynamic and includes game arcades and

Internet cafés. They open and close down, change their names, move. Some of them have a bad reputation. Of course, the majority of them are commercial fun clubs. Some of them are gendered or have special days allocated for specific target groups. For instance, an art-house-type movie club in Novosibirsk *Cinéma* has regular meetings under the banner “Blue and Rose” (i.e., gay and lesbian). At the meetings of this club, people come to watch movies about gays, lesbians, and transsexuals, such as movies by Almodóvar. This does not necessarily mean that only non-heterosexual persons come to watch these movies; rather, this movie theater is an open space for people of different genders and sexual orientations. The Novosibirsk nightclubs Tochka (“Point”) and Our Zone are for both men and women of “alternative” sexualities.

The local mass media are extremely aggressive in advertising commercial leisure sites, which makes clubbing a new form of “organized leisure.” In Novosibirsk there are two free-access clubs for non-heterosexual visitors, and one club which has an entrance fee—up to 300 rubles.¹⁰ In Krasnoiarsk there are free clubs, but there is also a members’ club with a yearly fee of 6,000 rubles, which makes it an elite club.

The attitudes to the “thematic” clubs displayed by our informants and interviewees range from positive perception, as a space free of suspicion and control, to viewing them as places of violence and aggression. Some of them enjoy clubs more than open-air sites. Thus, our interviewee 6 feels comfortable in “thematic” (*temnye*) clubs:

I like clubs ... only because there I feel at ease, I don’t need to look around and watching out for the old women on the benches and so on, just hug someone, or kiss, or dance in an “obscene” way, etc. That is: you go there, you plunge into this milieu, then you go out and find yourself among absolutely different people, and you have to take that into account. (Woman from Krasnoiarsk, aged 23)

The same point is indicated by interviewee 2 (from Krasnoiarsk, aged 20): “What I like in the clubs is that you don’t need to hide there. Nobody will pester you.” On the other hand, she perceives the “thematic” clubs and other public sites as places of gossip, where all visitors know each other, sometimes very intimately (“everybody slept with everybody”) and consequently every step is observed and interpreted, i.e., controlled.

However, most of our interviewees do not feel comfortable in “thematic” clubs or at public sites. From interviewee 10:

Once we went there [to a “thematic” club] and it was horrible ... the atmosphere there was so depressing. They all sat in corners and shot daggers at you ... They all look at you with such hatred ... Then we went to a different club ... There it was more or less okay. But I don’t like to be there because of fights. Usually, gays begin to argue with waiters and managers, and lesbians start smashing each others’ faces in. (Woman from Krasnoiarsk, aged 25)

One of our interviewees perceives “thematic” clubs and meeting places as sites for one-night-stand dating or an artificial form of communication. From interviewee 7:

I don’t go to the club. In principle, I don’t go there ... Because ... when I was still young, I really did not understand what was going on there, and in fact, it is all just about lechery. That’s it. Well, getting drunk, then making a pass at someone and I don’t know what ... picking someone up and then waking up in a stranger’s bed the next morning. It’s horrible. I think that’s why I don’t like it. (Woman from Krasnoiarsk, aged 22)

Many of our WSWs stress their desire to stay away from the “thematic” parties and sites, though when they are single they are compelled to go to public leisure sites for cruising and spending spare time. Says our interviewee 2:

In any city there probably is this place, which is called by my most hated word, this ‘tema,’ this little narrow circle, this group of, let’s say, partygoers (*tusovka*). I have never belonged to it before ... I admire those couples that don’t give a toss about anybody and just live together. But now, since I am alone, I did go there, and now, in fact, I know lots of people here, and I don’t care ... (Woman from Krasnoiarsk, aged 20)

These “thematic” public meetings are contrasted with informal friendship ties. Says our interviewee 4:

To tell the truth, I am not interested in them [“thematic” gatherings]. I prefer to spend time with people who have similar interests and, say, similar spirit, while “thematic” meetings are about absolutely different people. Of course, I have friends among them—gays, lesbians—but ... I don’t like to hang around the clubs. The people who come there are generally very ordinary, and I am not interested in them at all. (Woman from Novosibirsk, aged 22)

Here is a very similar comment on female city sites from our interviewee 6. She appreciates public sites only as a forum for the expression of a collective identity, which she finds a dubious enterprise: “All those gatherings ... I don’t like them in principle ... I don’t understand their meaning: why come together at all? Maybe to feel part of a flock?” ... The concept of collective identity is invoked to explain and criticize lesbian display. It is also criticized as a means of identification of those who belong to the lesbian scene. From interviewee 6 again:

And what are these “markers” for? Who needs one earring or a ring? Pendants and asymmetrical haircuts—what is it all for? Just to be able to recognize “your own” in a crowd—that’s all, to pick someone out on an elementary basis. There are girls who don’t mark themselves out, and I like this in people because I like a person for who they are; what’s there to shout about, “he’s [*sic*] a such and such?” It’s because if a person decorates themselves, dresses up [and puts on the] status of a lesbian, it shows whether he [*sic*] is playing or not playing [an identity]. (Woman from Krasnoiarsk, aged 23)

Through denial of “lesbian” display and the appropriate “markers,” this interviewee actually denies the value of sexual identification. According to her, a person is valuable not because of his or her identity and “belonging” but as an individual.

The negative attitude toward public communication sites is well reflected in the names of major meeting sites in Novosibirsk. One of them is called Plakha. In Russian this means “Executioner’s Block,” and it is also the nickname for Lenin Square in Novosibirsk. The most popular “thematic” café is called Nasha Zona (“Our Zone”; one of the meanings of this phrase in Russian is “our prison camp”). The two sites are age-differentiated. Plakha is for younger people, while Nasha Zona is for people up to 50 years old. Both names have criminal connotations.

As we have seen from the interviews, the attitude toward the public urban sites of communication for our WSW varies. Some of our interviewees perceive them as places free of suspicion and surveillance, while others see them as sites of aggression and compulsory identification.

Non-Public Modes of Communication: Love-Friendship Continuum

Intimate friendship relations as an alternative to communication through public leisure sites is considered to be a very important sphere of human relations. Claude Fischer argues that “Urbanism may engender public estrangement but not private estrangement” (quoted in Jamieson 1998:83). As sociological research has shown, the cooperation and trust that are the basic elements of friendship often stem “from undesirable social conditions; sharing the same insecurities and the same lack of alternatives, all equally isolated from help or resources outside the locality” (Jamieson 1998:81). This can be the reason why our interviewees are keen on finding friends, especially when they move.

One of our WSWs (interviewee 5) related to us that when she moves to a different place, first of all she begins to look for friends. “When I moved to the East Coast region I decided that I am a Cheburashka who is looking for friends. And I went on the Internet and began to look for a female friend ... an acquaintance with whom I could have fun ...” The image our interviewee is using here is strong and ironic. Cheburashka is a popular symbol in the Russian public discourse. It is a hero of a very popular cartoon based on a story for children by modern writer Eduard Uspenskii. Cheburashka is a strange creature who was first lonely but later acquired friends and

became happy. Our interviewee's identification with Cheburashka does not seem to be accidental. It is a toy that represents an animal of indeterminate species, with big eyes and ears and indeterminate gender. It could easily be a token of queerness. One of the journalists even asked the author of the story what gender Cheburashka was, and though the writer responded that Cheburashka is male, the journalist's question testifies to the ambiguity of the image.

Our Cheburashka has also acquired lots of friends who are very important to her in various ways. When Weeks, Heaphy, and Donovan discuss the importance of friends in same-sex intimate relations (on the basis of interviews conducted in Britain in the 1990s), they stress that for their interviewees it is important that a friend is somebody chosen, unlike the family, which is given (Weeks, Heaphy, and Donovan 2001:62). We have discovered this attitude in our interviewees as well: "A friend is somebody whom I never forget, with whom I talk on the phone often. I chose him from a mass of other people. He has been 'tested' over the years and I always want to communicate with him" (Interviewee 4, a woman from Novosibirsk, aged 22).

Sexual links and friendship in the lives of our interviewees acquire very complicated configurations. Thus our interviewee 7 (from Krasnoïarsk, aged 22) currently has two best friends: a man and a woman. The woman initially was her rival in a love triangle with this man, and our interviewee hated her. But since the woman could not find a place to live, they lived all together. Later, when the love relation was over, they became friends. Now they are planning to live together in a different city. From the interview: "She is like my younger sister ... She knows when I feel bad. She knows what to do with me when I am depressed. She knows me so well that I can't even lie to her ... I'm also attuned to her; I know when she feels bad, when she is in pain."

Sometimes former lovers constitute the circle of close friends. Thus, in one of the narratives the relations developed through the stages of being neighbors to intimacy to sexual contact and ended up with friendship (interviewees 8 and 9, aged 26 and 25, both from Krasnoïarsk). Weeks, Heaphy, and Donovan consider such cases of continuity of different forms of intimate relations typical for the non-heterosexual milieu (Weeks, Heaphy, and Donovan 2001:63ff).

Internet Sites As the Alternative to City Communication Sites

It has already been mentioned that the Internet is one of the essential communication media for our WSW. There are general and particular reasons for that. Computer networking technologies provide freedom "to play, explore, and discover in ways that one might not (or cannot) in everyday life" for anybody (Waskul 2006:268). The use of the Internet for sexual/intimate activities is multifaceted. It includes "flirting, dating, reading and viewing erotica, seeking information and education, seeking partners for love and/or sex, and buying sexual materials" (Daneback 2006:3). Some people also are engaged in cybersex, i.e., "two or more people engaging in mutual sex talk while online for sexual purposes, sometimes including masturbation" (2006:3). Our WSW use the Internet as an alternative to "real-life" urban non-heterosexual sites for seeking partners for sexual and/or intimate relations and dating. The

anonymous communication beyond “real space” allows our WSW to realize their “healthy curiosity” for same-sex relations without assuming a stigmatized identity through the relevant display and/or entering the stigmatized social space of a “thematic” club or a disco. Online encounters help people to avoid the insiders’ and outsiders’ aggression and expand their social network. Similar advantages for online communication have been mentioned in the preface to a collection of prose by Russian lesbian writers (Tsertslikh 2006:12).

Every Russian Internet dating site (including regional ones) that the author of this article found has a section for “alternative” sexual preferences. Our interviewees meet their partners and friends on the Internet. They also use the Internet for free discussions. “Thematic” Internet forums are very popular. When we launched an anonymous discussion on sexual fluidity, i.e., on shifting from WSW to heterosexual intimacy (*tema* girls to *naturaly*) and back in the nation-wide forum vkontakte.ru (<http://vkontakte.ru/board.php?act=topic&tid=6644724>), the responses were passionate and illuminating. The opinions expressed by forum participants sometimes sounded like aphorisms: “Love has no gender”; “If you are happy, then it is the right orientation.” The discussion in the regional forum sibdating.ru was not as wide as it was in vkontakte.ru but was very lively. The participants shared their experiences and also told stories about their friends who switched from same-sex intimacy to heterosexual scenarios. They also shared their experiences of partnerships, of their longevity and problems, of negotiations of roles. One of the lively discussions launched on sibdating.ru was about the efficiency of Internet contacts in terms of establishing long-term contacts.¹¹

One of our interviewees told us a story that is the same-sex counterpart of a heterosexual love story described in a recent novel by Polish writer and scientist Janusz Wiśniewski, *Loneliness on the Net* (2001). The writer tells us a story about a biologist who meets a lady on the Internet. Through their virtual communication they learn a lot about each other and become attracted to each other so strongly that they decide to meet in the “real space,” which they then do.¹² One of our WSW from Krasnoïarsk—let us call her Lena—has not read the novel, but similarities between her story and the major plot of the novel are striking.

Lena met Lisa on the Web and fell in love with her through virtual communication. Later on, Lisa moved to the Lake Baikal region and invited Lena to come and visit her. Lena did not have money for the trip, but she had a female friend, Katia, in Krasnoïarsk, who once had had a crush on Lena. Katia offered to pay for Lena’s travel. Lena and Katia ended up traveling to Baikal together, which added a very dramatic accent to the whole story. The travel was dramatic because Katia made a decision to accompany Lena at the last moment, so she had with her neither the identification documents that the railway ticket office demands from travelers, nor enough money to travel. Though the distance they covered was much shorter than the distance covered by the heroes of Wiśniewski’s novel (who traveled to Paris from New Orleans and Warsaw), it was no less adventurous. When the women met at Lake Baikal, Lena was overwhelmed by both her fascination with the “real intimacy” with Lisa and by the faithfulness of her admirer Katia. When the *virtual* lovers met in *real* space at Baikal, it proved to be an

exciting experience for them both. What made this whole situation very special is that Katia was present on the scene all the time.

The Polish and Siberian narratives have one similar structural trait. The heroes of both stories at the online stage of their relations communicate as individuals *devoid of social connections* or they present their social connections as insignificant: they are two “monads” looking at each other through electronic windows and enjoying each other. At a certain point these monads want to meet offline. The offline communication reveals the social connections that cannot be cut off. This discovery implies crisis. In the novel this crisis ends with the suicide of one of the heroes, whereas the Siberian narrative is open-ended. The offline social structure gets interwoven with the virtual reality. Of course, situations in which everything works out fine do take place. People meet online and enjoy each other, sometimes in a long-term partnership. Therefore, online dating practices thrive in spite of various risks with the offline encounters.

The other advantage of the Internet—an opportunity *to communicate anonymously*, or under a fake name—is also constrained by the offline communication. As our informants relate, at the initial stage of the development of the Internet dating sites, there were more fake names used for self-representation. However, later the Internet users realized that the lack of “real” picture and the fake name are inefficient in terms of communication. An anonymous entry on the dating site would be suspicious and nobody would contact you for an offline encounter. To contact an anonymous person is dangerous. Therefore, now, the common practice is to give a “real” photo, which annihilates anonymity and implies (in the case of homosexual communication) what can be called a *virtual* coming out.

Concluding Remarks

We have interviewed 12 young women in Novosibirsk or Krasnoiarsk who have intimate relations with other young women. The goal of this endeavor was to understand some mechanisms of cathexis mediated by various environments. The intimate relations that were identified through interviews and conversations with informants range from friendship to mutual social support within a rented home to pure genital pleasure experiences.

For our interviewees (who have more or less ongoing relationships), sexual relations have their own value and can constitute an experience separate from romantic love. Some of them practice sex without having a romantic attraction to their sexual partner. In some cases intimate contacts are situational; for instance, our interviewees develop erotic friendships because they have to share an apartment. I find this very interesting in terms of changes in the system of cathexis. Our interviewees find it socially acceptable to recognize the separation of love and sex in their lives.

In their sexual biographies, most of our interviewees usually proceed from initial heterosexual relations to F2 (female-to-female) relations, which they see as more intimate and romantic and also more sexually satisfying. Some of them continue to regard female-to-male sex as a possible option and switch back and forth. This kind of behavioral pattern is called sexual

fluidity (Diamond 2008; Hawkes 2007). The concepts that refer to similar phenomena are Zygmunt Bauman's "liquid love" (Bauman 2002) and Anthony Giddens's plastic sexuality (Giddens 1992). Though the intimate practices of our interviewees are fluid in a sense, nonetheless their fluidity is constrained by gender stereotypes, communication formats (meeting points and sites of communication in the "real" urban space or online), and various life circumstances such as housing or a particular political or social environment. Some of our WSWs deny any categorization: they are reluctant to identify themselves as lesbians and are reluctant to classify WSWs into butches, dykes, and femmes. However, when it comes to Internet dating sites, one of them says: "I go on the Internet as a lesbian," since without this self-categorization and the *virtual coming out*, the online communication is inefficient. However, as one of our informants has noticed, this online coming out can be valid for the offline situation.

The relations between the parental family and our WSW are different. Some of them have a high geographic mobility and prefer to live outside parental homes. That makes them relatively free of the normative control of the family. However, sometimes the relations with the original families can be tense.

Consumerist mass media and public show culture contribute to the growth of liberal attitudes to same-sex relations and the expansion of the range of sexual pleasures. However, the recommendation of the media is to avoid assuming a lesbian identity and approach the new experiences simply as an element of a new lifestyle. This politics of desire promoted by the mass media seems to be a compromise between existing practices and heterosexual normativity.

Consumerist media and local leisure providers promote specialized club cultures, which both men who are interested in men and women who are interested in women can use as dating sites and for having fun. However, our interviewees have ambivalent attitudes toward club culture. Though they themselves visit urban sites appropriated by "alternative" gender groups, they are very critical about the atmosphere there.

Our suggestion is that since many of our interviewees want to avoid categorization as lesbians, they dislike the spaces where you have to present yourself as such. This is why they criticize the self-labeling and the overt "alternative nature" of the urban space. For the same reason they dislike identification displays. The (excessive) symbolic self-identification is perceived as an imitation of "authentic nature." These attitudes are probably rooted in the protest against the regulatory regimes, which are normally grounded in categorization (Butler 1991).

The switch to the Internet does not necessarily help to avoid categorization. Further questions arise: to what extent does online communication help to avoid the marginalization and stigmatization related to lesbian identification and to escape the aggressiveness of insiders and outsiders in the "real" space? To what extent does the Internet change the whole dating ritual and reinforce the Shift-F2 scenarios? How does the Internet change heterosexual dating rituals? What is the difference between same-sex and different-sex social rituals?

In the West, the research on online mediated sexual activities began at the end of the 20th century.¹³ In the Russian context, this kind of scientific analysis is complicated, because research of intimate practices and forms of coupling beyond family ties are still perceived as a

legitimization of perversion and decay. Even the threats of sexually transmitted diseases and the precarious shadow of AIDS do not outweigh this attitude and do not imply governmental funding for pertinent research (Kon 2004:30-31). Therefore, a lot has yet to be done not only in terms of empirical research but also in terms of academic and social justification of the importance of our subject.

Notes

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² For a detailed analysis of the social optimism vs. social pessimism, see Jamieson 1998.

³ “Shift F2” stands for a shift in female intimate practices. The choice of this formula is also inspired by computer-based communication. Shift F2 is different from WSW (women who have sex with women), which I am introducing later in this article. WSW refers to the identification of the type of experience that unites these women.

⁴ LGBT stands for lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender.

⁵ *Neformaly* (“Informal Ones”) is a Russian term for young people who see themselves as distinct from the mainstream (for a more detailed description, see Pilkington et al. 2002).

⁶ This kind of individualism also increases tactical plasticity, which, as one of the first Russian radical queer activists mentioned in her interview with Laurie Essig, is considered to be impossible in a democratic society (Essig 1999:142).

⁷ For a justification of validity of online interviewing, see Daneback 2006:48-53.

⁸ See an Internet discussion on the ironic article “Classification of Lesbians” (*klassifikatsiia lesbiianok*): <http://lizi.ucoz.ru/forum/23-17-1> (accessed October 1, 2010).

⁹ Book-crossing stations are public sites at libraries, book-stores, super-markets, where people leave the books they do not need any more and take other books left by other people.

¹⁰ At the moment of our research, 300 rubles amounted to approximately US\$10.00. A regular governmental students’ stipend was about 1,500 rubles.

¹¹ See, for instance, the discussion at <http://www.sibdating.ru/forum/viewtopic.php?t=931&postdays=0&postorder=asc&start=30> (accessed 15 February 2008).

¹² In the Russian academic discourse, as far as we know, there are only casual references to cases of Internet dating that are followed by stable intimate relations (see for instance Apresian 2005b: footnote 19).

¹³ A review of these researches can be found in Daneback 2006: 17-21.

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List of Interviewees (All Female)

- Int. 1: 28 years old (via ICQ) (19-20 June 2007)
- Int. 2: 20 years old, Krasnoiarsk (1 July 2007)
- Int. 3: 25 years old, Krasnoiarsk (1 July 2007)
- Int. 4: 22 years old, Novosibirsk (26 July 2007)
- Int. 5: 24 years old, Novosibirsk (26 July 2007)
- Int. 6: 23 years old, Krasnoiarsk (31 August 2007)
- Int. 7: 22 years old, Krasnoiarsk (31 August 2007)
- Int. 8: 26 years old, Krasnoiarsk (1 September 2007)
- Int. 9: 25 years old, Krasnoiarsk (1 September 2007)
- Int. 10: 25 years old, Krasnoiarsk (2 September 2007)
- Int. 11: 22 years old, Novosibirsk (via ICQ) (24 November 2007)
- Int. 12: 20 years old, Krasnoiarsk (5 February 2008)

About the Author

Tatiana Barchunova is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Novosibirsk State University. She received her PhD from the same University in 1991. Currently she teaches gender studies and political philosophy. Her primary empirical research focus was on the Post-Soviet gender system, in particular gender stereotyping in the media. She conducted a number of individual and collective research projects supported by the MacArthur, Ford, Soros, and Carnegie Foundations. Barchunova edited a collected volume *Potolok pola* (Gender Ceiling) (Novosibirsk, 1998) and translated several texts for *Khrestomatiia feministskikh tekstov: Perevody* (An Anthology of Feminist Texts: Translations), ed. by Elena Zdravomyslova and Anna Temkina (St. Petersburg, 2000). Currently she is interested in religious and consumption networks and leisure activities (such as historical and martial games, classical and historical dancing clubs) and Internet mediated communication. She also participated in a number of

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