

Coping with Incompatible Identities in Russia: Case of Orthodox Gays

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Abstract : The era of late modernity is characterized, on the one hand, by social disintegration, values of personal freedom, tolerance, and self-expression. Boundaries between the accessible and the elitist, normal and abnormal are blurring. On the other hand, traditional social institutions, such as religion (especially Russian Orthodox Church), exist, criticizing lifestyle and worldview other than conventionally structured canons. Despite the declared values and opportunities in late modern society, people's freedom is ambivalent. Personal identity and its aspects are becoming a subject of choice. Hence, combinations of identity aspects can be incompatible. Our theoretical framework is based on P. Ricoeur's concept of narrative identity and hermeneutics, E. Goffman's theory of social stigma, self-presentation, discrepant roles and W. James lectures about varieties of religious experience. This paper aims to reconstruct ways of coping with incompatible identities of Orthodox gays (an extreme sampling of a combination of sexual orientation and religious identity in a heteronormative society). This study focuses on the discourse of Orthodox gay parishioners and ROC gay priests in Russia (sampling 'hard to reach' populations because of the secrecy of gay community in ROC and sensitivity of the topic itself). We conducted a qualitative research design, using in-depth personal semi-structured online-interviews. Recruiting of informants took place in 'Nuntiare et Recreare' (Russian movement of religious LGBT) page in VKontakte through the post with an invitation to participate in the research. In this work, we analyzed interview transcripts using axial coding. We chose the Grounded Theory methodology to construct a theory from empirical data and contribute to the growing body of knowledge in ways of harmonizing incompatible identities in late modern societies. The research has found that there are two types of conflicts Orthodox gays meet with: canonic contradictions (postulates of Scripture and its interpretations) and problems in social interaction, mainly with ROC priests and Orthodox parishioners. We have revealed semantic meanings of most commonly used words that appear in the narratives (words such as 'love', 'sin', 'religion' etc.). Finally, we have reconstructed biographical patterns of LGBT social movements' involvement. This paper argues that all incompatibilities are harmonizing in the narrative itself. As Ricoeur has suggested, the narrative configuration allows the speaker to gather facts and events together and to compose causal relationships between them. Sexual orientation and religious identity are getting along and harmonizing in the narrative.

Keywords : gay priests, incompatible identities, narrative identity, Orthodox gays, religious identity, ROC, sexual orientation

Conference Title : ICSI 2019 : International Conference on Self and Identity

Conference Location : Athens, Greece

Conference Dates : October 21-22, 2019