



# Personal is Not Political? The Sexual Self in Russian Talk Shows of the 1990s

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## Abstract

The changes in the public discourse on sex and the sexual self in post-Soviet Russia are usually referred to as a “sexual revolution”. However, the fast rejection of freedoms with respect to sexual identities, same-sex relationships and withering of the public discussions about intimacies and sex-education already in the early 2000s requires closer look at discourses of the “sexual revolution” of the 1990s in Russia in order to understand better the character of this rapid change. In this paper I am particularly interested in the discursive dimension and historical implications of the new sexual selves as expressed in the public space in a form of TV-show. The article is analyzing discourses around sexuality and intimacy with focus on two talk-shows broadcasted by the Russian television in the 1990s (“Ya sama” and “Pro eto”) and dealing with gender identities, sexualities and intimacies. I show that articulation of the sexual self as a choice that is relatively free from political and material constraints was an important dimension of the public presentation of sexuality. At the same time differences and deviations from the institutionalized and normalized (hetero)sexuality started to be seen as a subject of “personal choice” and “individual responsibility”.

**Keywords** Sexual self · (De)Politicization · Russia · 1990s · Talk-show · Social change

## Introduction

How big were the changes in the media discourse on sex and the sexual self in Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union? Some scholars refer to these changes as a “sexual revolution,”<sup>1</sup> which assumes some fundamental transformations with respect

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Kon and Riordan (1993).

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to sexual norms and practices. At the same time, recent developments, particularly in Russia—adoption of a law making any information about same-sex relationships, non-heterosexual families or LGBT rights subject to administrative punishment (2013),<sup>2</sup> for example, as well as public support for “family values” and restrictions on abortion—indicate that these historical and “revolutionary” changes could easily be transformed into their opposite. Thus study of the processes that took place in the 1990s can help us to better understand the character of these shifts and the controversies surrounding them. In particular, I will show that articulation of the sexual self as a choice that is relatively free from political and material constraints was an important dimension of the public presentation of sexuality. I suggest that it was one of the reasons why conservative reversals could be realized so easily.

This article deals with only one previous and poorly explored aspect of these developments—new ways of approaching the sexual self in talk shows, a TV-genre imported from the West that approximately coincided with shifts in the public discourse about sex. Indeed, in spite of the fact that the discussions on sex norms and practices also happened in the space of more traditional media (see, for example, the newspaper *SPID-Info*<sup>3</sup>) the talk show centered on ideas of “participation” and “personal experience” seemed better suited to the goal of revealing previously “non-existent” sex.<sup>4</sup>

Thus the aim of this article is to explore how Russian TV-show participants spoke about sex and what kind of sexual selves were advocated and performed. This analysis will contribute to a better understanding of the character of change with respect to sexuality and gender in Russia and can help to define Russian historical and cultural specifics.

In order to explore how the new post-Soviet sexual selves were performed, I analyze the discourses on sex and sexual self in two talk shows—*I Myself* (*Ya sama*, 9 episodes) and *About That* (*Pro eto*, 7 episodes).<sup>5</sup> My research is mainly focused on the first years in which these programs were broadcast (1995 and 1997). My choice of episodes was guided by my interest in the diversity of topics that were discussed; I used freely accessible materials on the Internet. *I Myself* aired from 1995 to 2001, while *About That*—presented as “the first talk show about love and sex”—was broadcast between 1997 and 2000.

<sup>2</sup> The so called law “against propaganda of homosexuality” was adopted by the Russian Parliament in 2013. This law seriously damaged everyday life of LGBTQ people in Russia.

<sup>3</sup> *SPID-Info* (that can mean both—information on AIDS and fast delivery of information)—the newspaper for youth that was first published in 1989. This newspaper discussed AIDS prophylactics, but also published a lot of materials on sexuality and pleasure. As time passed the newspaper was giving more and more space to scandals and rumors.

<sup>4</sup> In one of the first TV-bridges between the Soviet and American participants, one of the Soviet ones pronounced the phrase that became famous: “There is no sex in the USSR”. While the TV-bridge participant referred to the lack of discourse on sex in the public space, this phrase later was taken out of context and popularized by scholars, media and ordinary people (see, for example, Borenstein 2008, 26–28).

<sup>5</sup> The episodes are numbered after the first letter of the title of the show (for example, Y1—for episode one of “Ya sama”) from the list at the end of the article. Full title of the episode in Russian and its translation to English can be found at the list at the end.

For my study on the sexual self I use the performative approach developed by West and Zimmerman (1987) on doing gender. According to them, gender can be understood as a “routine, methodical and recurring accomplishment” (West and Zimmerman 1987, 126). At the same time, the sex/gender category links the institutional and interactional levels and thus is connected with social control (147). However, I apply this performative approach to exploring how sexual subjectivities or sexual selves were performed (doing the sexual self) in the context of the TV program. Hence I explore how participants of the shows talk about their sexual life and how they connect it to the moral, social and political conditions that surround them and influence sexual normativity.

I start from a short overview of previous research on post-Soviet sexualities and sexual revolutions in general. Then I discuss briefly the specifics of the genre of the talk show in the context of 1990s Russia and the content and framework of the two programs I have chosen to analyze. I eventually shift my focus to the speech of the shows’ participants, hosts, experts and audience. In doing so, I explore the language used by the guests and how they describe their sexual experiences and beliefs.

## Post-Soviet Sexual Transformation and “Sexual Revolutions”

The changes in sexual practices and public discourse in post-Soviet Russia that are usually referred to as a “sexual revolution” have already drawn a lot of scholarly attention, usually in connection with earlier crucial changes in sexual norms and behaviors. Thus several important sexual transformations in Russia, including those following the Bolshevik revolution of 1917, have been studied by Dan Healey (2001; see also Kiaer and Naiman 2006). Anna Rotkirch explores the sexual biographies of women of the Soviet generation and concludes that the behavioral revolution started already in the 1970s, while she identifies developments in the 1990s as a “revolution of articulation in the public sphere” (Rotkirch 2000, 224). Shifts in the sexual scripts of women have been studied by Anna Temkina, who states that the hedonistic script and the market instrumental script have replaced more traditional procreative and romantic scripts in the biographies of women of the post-Soviet generation (Temkina 2008). Furthermore, according to the well-known Russian researcher of sexuality Kon (2010a), Russia followed what was mainly a universal trend in the transformation of sexual culture and in the late 1980s–early 1990s underwent a process in which sexuality was liberated from its direct connection to reproduction; it was also emancipated from binary oppositions (hetero vs. homo, extramarital vs. marital) later than many other countries. Also, Kon and Riordan (1993) stress that the sexual revolution in Russia in the 1990s was anti-Soviet in nature—attitudes to sex became a symbol of the new, anti-Soviet, hedonistic and pro-Western mentality. This developmental perspective also suggests that Russia was following the Western modernizing path and that it was a gender revolution (change in the structure and content of gender roles and identities, the growing importance of gender equality)

that seemed to be on its way in Russia in the 2000s but still needed some time to be realized (Kon 2010b; see also Kon and Temkina 2006, 154–155). The developmental paradigm was later challenged by scholarship on queer sexualities that problematized both the limits of visibility for queers established as a result of changes<sup>6</sup> and the developmental approach to studies of sexualities in former communist countries. In particular, Kulpa and Mizelinska (2011, 15–17) suggest focusing on the coincidence rather than the sequence of developments in the sphere of sexuality in Eastern Europe.

Later on and in the context of the state's growing authoritarianism, however, sexual and gender revolutions both began to be seen as more problematic and conflictual. In particular, cooperation between the Russian state and the Russian Orthodox Church propagandized “true love” and families with many children, while kindergarten and school curricula started to pay more attention to the Christian ideals of femininity and masculinity (Muravyeva 2014; Gradskova 2015). At the same time, the importance of gender-specific looks and behaviors was also acknowledged by new discourse on gendered consumption and choice. For example, Suvi Salmeniemä suggests that the 1990s could be viewed as a period of development of public discourse centered on gender differences and individual responsibility (Salmeniemä 2010, 134–154, 147). Furthermore, Julia Lerner's study of the “new therapeutic culture” in Russia has also demonstrated that the new discourse on self in Russia is connected with neoliberal ideas and consumerism (Lerner 2011, 134).

If we look at how researchers have evaluated the transformation generated by the sexual revolutions around 1968, it is the politicization of sexuality in Western Europe and in North America that seems to be the most remarkable (Hekma and Giami 2014, 1).<sup>7</sup> This politicization of the personal—“personal is political”—happened in the context of other political mobilizations: solidarity with anticolonial movements, protests against the war in Vietnam, and in the context of a questioning of capitalism and demands for social justice (Gildea et al. 239). This process was developing together with or in some cases parallel to the second wave of the women's movement. According to Rebecca Clifford, Robert Gildea and Anette Warring, the utopian projects of the late 1960s “involved an interrogation of the existing scope of politics, as well as a desire on the part of activists both to change the world and to change themselves” (Gildea et al. 2013, 239). However, the authors of this overview further problematize these aspirations. Based on oral history interviews with activists from several West European countries, they come to the following conclusion about the difficulties of combining these two projects of changing the world and changing themselves: “As women and men pushed their experimentation with gender and sexual identity further, collective projects splintered and were sometimes torn apart” (Gildea et al. 2013, 257). Still, according to these scholars,

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<sup>6</sup> See Stella (2015) and Edenborg (2017).

<sup>7</sup> At the same time in many countries, for example, in Sweden, sexuality became widely discussed already during the first wave of women's activism in the beginning of the twentieth century. The 1920s in Russia was the period when the sexuality was politicized and sexual normativity reviewed (see Kon 2010a; Healey 2001; Bernstein 1998; Kiaer and Naiman 2006; Kondakov 2019, 407) usually are also addressed as sexual revolution.

collective goals and experiences played a crucial role in the movements of the 1960s (Gildea et al. 2013, 250).

Thus it can be said that previous research on developments around 1968 in Western Europe showed that doing a new sexual self at that time was connected with participation in collective actions and alliances with other social movements whose main goals were solidarity and rights. The post-Soviet sexual revolution of the 1990s, however, has yet to be explored from this perspective: to what extent was doing the sexual self in the 1990s a matter of solidarity and collective action and to what degree was it part of the discourse on individual choices and preferences? I therefore consider it important to return to an analysis of media representations and discourses on sexuality in Russia in the 1990s in order to explore more deeply its contexts and unobvious messages. It is also important to analyze how similar or different these discourses and representation were from the politicized sexuality of the 1960s–1970s in the “West.”

## The Talk Show and the “Sexual Self” in the Making

The talk-show genre appeared in USA in the 1960s but came to Russian television only in the 1990s; as Lerner and Natalia Avseenko show, the form of the talk show underwent several transformations on its way to cultural adaptation in the Russian context (Lerner 2011; Avseenko 2003).

Many researchers have studied this genre in the USA context (Brunsdon and Spigel 2007; Shattuc 1997, see also Skeggs and Wood 2012 on the UK) and are mainly agreed that it originated under the influence of the feminist movement. As early as the 1990s for example, Jane Shattuc showed that although most talk-show viewers are women and the origins of the genre could be seen as feminist (the “volatile 1960s and 1970s” left their “stamp on the talk show’s content and structure”—Shattuc 1997, 9<sup>8</sup>), the aspirations of real “participation” are rather utopian (Shattuc 1997, 195). While, according to Shattuc, the US talk show offered a space for differences to be acknowledged and stories about suffering and discrimination to be heard (the result of the early influence of the feminist tradition), at the same time, the talk show’s practice of parading socially marginalized people to benefit the TV companies had to be criticized. The recent study by Skeggs and Wood (2012, 230) stresses in its turn that the intimate connection between moral and economic value makes valuation the central ideology of reality television.

Unlike the well-established American or British talk show, in Russia of the 1990s the genre seems to be more open to experimentation, particularly if we take into account its special emphasis on audience participation dating from the TV of the perestroika period. It was important to make it as different as possible from its Soviet counterpart (Evans 2016, 245). Also, some characteristics of the American talk show seem to be in conflict with the expectations of post-Soviet viewers. For example, the Soviet tradition reserved stories of suffering for special topics

<sup>8</sup> See also Cragin (2010, 154–172).

and occasions, mainly those connected with the Second World War, where it was compensated for with victories (see Hicks 2014, 140). Moreover, the popular psychology approach developed in the US but not in Russia, where in the 1990s it was conquering the public space parallel with the talk show genre. Thus producers and guests of the first Russian talk shows often had to find their own way not only to approach new topics, but also how to maintain conversation in front of the cameras and address each other and the viewers.

The gendered rules of this genre (see above) however, influenced its effect. Usually a talk show included participation of a host, one or several guests who were expected to tell about some episodes of their life (speaking from their “experience”), some representatives of “ordinary people” (the audience) and finally, experts who became involved in the discussion and helped to moderate it. Thus the “personal stories” of the talk show are always mediated and pre-selected; in the case of both the Russian and American shows from the 1990s (see Shattuc 1997, see also Skeggs and Wood 2012), it would have been very difficult to speak of just individual stories reflecting “personal experiences.” At the same time, the possibility of observing “ordinary people” on air most probably contributed to greater trust on the part of the television audience toward everything that was happening in the studio. Although preliminary planning of the program obviously included mediation and careful shaping of the guests’ narrated experience, it is understandable that analysis of the stories, feelings and opinions revealed such allowed presentations of the “self” to be seen as “new” and interesting for public discussion during that period of social change.

In spite of the richness of the material on the transformation of cultural norms in Russia that early episodes of the talk shows may offer, neither show that I analyze in this article has thus far attracted much scholarly attention. Avseenko has explored *I Myself* in comparison with its American prototype *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and shown important differences in communicative style and camera technique (close-ups). Eliot Borenstein (2000, 54), who examines the sexualization of politics in Russia and the use of “sex” to demonstrate Russian superiority, devotes attention to *About That* as an example of the dependency of sexual discourse in Russia on the West. He also considers this talk show in the context of his interest in the intersection of “globalization and sexual anxiety in post-Soviet Russia” (Borenstein 2008, 25). However, neither of these programs has yet been analyzed from the perspective of the content of the stories presented and sexual selves exposed.

The title *I Myself* clearly indicated woman’s agency in taking important decisions and could be read as feminist. This show had a permanent host—the young journalist Yulia Menshova—and usually two commentators who were presented to the public as “a feminist” and as “a supporter of traditional views,” (*storonnitsa traditsionnykh vzgliadov*) respectively. While the role of the “feminist” was usually taken by the same person—the writer Maria Arbatova—the part of the second commentator was given to several different women. In spite of the programmed conflict of

interpretations with the help of two experts, their opinions sometimes coincided. Indeed, Maria Arbatova identified herself as a “feminist,” but provoked some negative reactions both from women’s organizations and from some gender researchers (Gapova 2016).<sup>9</sup> The title of the talk show indicated that it was aimed first of all at a female audience (*sama*). Despite that, men could also appear among its guests and constituted an important part of the studio audience. They were usually given an opportunity to express their opinion about the story told by the main guest.

The topics discussed in different episodes included infidelity, the age difference between spouses, having a professional political career, the lack of desire to remarry after divorce, etc. Thus a majority though not all of the topics dealt at least partly with issues of love, pleasure and sexual subjectivity. The host of the program approached her predominantly female guests as women who knew well what was best for them and what could make them happy. In this struggle for “the best” the guests appeared ready to overcome many obstacles, not least shame and the negative judgment of society. Indeed, many of the participants were breaking patriarchal norms by making their stories public.

*About That* suggested it was possible to discuss previously silenced topics in the public space: the title itself pointed to this silence by replacing “sex” with “that.” These topics included sexual pleasure and non-heterosexual practices and identities, but also such taboo issues as sexual violence and prostitution. Borenstein notes that it was the host of the show, Elena Khanga,<sup>10</sup> who made this show remarkable, together with the fact that although it opened a discussion about sex, including what was considered “deviant sexuality,” most of the program participants avoided the word “sex” (Borenstein 2008, 28). In her later interviews Khanga disclosed that the program producers decided to go for shock effect and chose stories that could provoke a strong reaction among viewers (Malichenko 2013). In contrast to *I Myself*, this talk show had male as well as female guests, but a majority of the participants of the first episodes were still women, most of them younger than 30. The guests’ stories were also accompanied by the experts’ comments. The most frequently asked specialist was the sexologist Sergei Agarkov. Thus the authority of science was summoned to make this program more respectable, as compared with the conversations among “ordinary people” on *I Myself*. Female experts were rare, but in one episode the representatives of an NGO dealing with issues of sexual violence, “Sestry,” commented on the issue of rape.

## Finding Words for “That”—Speaking About Love, Sex and Pleasure in Public

As the introduction shows, the participants of the talk shows found themselves in a quite a challenging and unusual situation. They were expected to talk in front of the camera on topics previously considered appropriate only for private conversations

<sup>9</sup> About importance of Arbatova for starting to approach corporeality while discussing femininity see, for example, Solomatina (2007); see also [https://www.kleo.ru/items/about\\_you/arbatoava.shtml](https://www.kleo.ru/items/about_you/arbatoava.shtml).

<sup>10</sup> Khanga was born in Moscow by parents of African, Jewish and Afro-American origin.



among friends, in gender-separated groups or “in the kitchen,”<sup>11</sup> where the morals and behavior of friends and acquaintances could be criticized and obscenities were frequent. Not infrequently, therefore, “doing” a sexual self in the context of TV caused the guests difficulties in naming particular situations, actions or body parts in public. For example, one male guest on a program dealing with teenage sexuality (P4) seemed very proud of himself when he described masturbating, but at first he referred to his female partner’s inability to achieve orgasm by saying simply “we had many problems,” while a female participant on the program *Sex for Money* (P6) explained that in her opinion, men wanted to buy sex because they “do not get what they want in bed with their wives.” In contrast to *About That*, the host of *I Myself*, Yulia Menshova, often avoided speaking about sexual relationships and referred more to “love” or “courting.” An analysis of the vocabulary used by the participants indicates a special mixture of everyday slang and a lot of medical and scientific concepts and expressions. Indeed, “do not get pleasure” (*ne poluchat udovol'stviia*) was combined with “orgasm,” “masturbation” and “clitoris.”

*I Myself* often built entire episodes around particular stereotypical situations usually discussed among female friends. By doing so, those stereotypical views were at least partly challenged in the program. For example, the female participant of an episode dealing with sex with a married partner (Y1) questioned the established view on love outside of marriage and defended her right to make a new family with a married man. Indeed, she insisted that she was entitled to “take a man from his family” (*uvesti iz semi*) in the name of mutual love and happiness, and she questioned the use of the expression itself. Another episode challenged stereotypical assumptions about a beautiful body as an asset for female happiness—the guest of the program confessed that only after she had learned to accept her own body (“I am beautiful, I have many merits”), could she build trust in herself and relationships with men (Y9).

While the title of the second talk show was a play on the presumed lack of vocabulary in Russian/post-Soviet society dealing with sexuality (*About That*), the host and most of the guests showed themselves to be quite knowledgeable about the language of sexual science, family psychology and medicine. Most of them also demonstrated quite a broad acceptance and tolerance of different sexualities and practices. Indeed, using some everyday substitutes for sexual organs and acts, they talked about the specifics of male and female “orgasm,” proudly discussed their experiences of masturbation, and often referred to “sexual partners” in the plural (*seksual'nye partnery*). This program was practically the first to introduce concepts new to the public discourse such as “bisexuality” (*biseksualnost'*) or “clitoral orgasm” (*klitoral'nyi orgazm*).

Some sexual practices were discussed in detail. For example, in the already mentioned episode on teenage sexuality (P4) a young man rather proudly told about making a list of all the good-looking girls in his class in order to get more pleasure while masturbating. The same can be said about young female guest of the episode “Oral Sex” (P3) who discussed pleasure she experienced. The implication was both

<sup>11</sup> In overcrowded Soviet communal apartment kitchen was frequently the only place for people to meet.



that viewers should assume that younger people have advanced knowledge of sexual techniques and about pleasure, and that negative stereotypes around sexuality need to change.

The female guest in the episode “Hypersexuality” (P7) was an even more convincing proponent of the need to change sexuality norms. While presenting herself as “composer” and “organist” (thus indicating her status of respectful middle-class intellectual) she told about her readiness to engage in sex in parks and participate in group sex. She stated that she understood that “sex is my way to express myself and stimulate creativity”.

It is important to note that the audience invited to participate in both talk shows also seemed to be rather well-educated, knowledgeable about relational psychology and sexuality, and, particularly in the case of *About That*, quite young. Thus the discussions on love and the sexual self often revealed some generational differences, where the young people’s knowledge implied the importance of changes in attitudes toward gender roles and discourse on the sexual self.

## Guests’ Stories About Making Choices and Taking Responsibilities

The talk show genre assumes that the stories that the participants of both programs share should be interesting and convincing. Even if some of the guests had some doubts with respect to their views on sex or sexual practices, ultimately the stories they told had to be coherent enough and they had to show that they were able to find some solution to the problems they encountered. One of the most frequent scenarios of such stories presented by the female participants of both programs had to do with love.<sup>12</sup> While *About That* had more variety, it was narratives about heterosexual love that dominated on both talk shows.

For example, the participant of an already mentioned episode (Y1) was ready to criticize and review the cultural norms and regulations of family life. Quite similarly to the way in which traditional family norms were criticized in the 1960s in Western Europe,<sup>13</sup> she defended the possibility to love, to engage in sexual relationships and to have a child from these relationships without getting married. This female guest and her partner (who also appeared in the studio toward the end of the program) presented themselves as conscious and responsible people: the male partner continued for a long time to share an apartment with his former wife because he was a conscientious father who thought it important to bring his child to the kindergarten himself, and his new partner was willing to respect his decision.

Several other episodes of *I Myself* discussed age issues in connection with (heterosexual) relationships and marriage. For example, the female guest of one episode defended her family upbringing: her mother told her that she should not hurry to get married; first she should “develop her personality” (*stat lichnosti*) and “get some

<sup>12</sup> The episode of “I Myself” with participation of the minister, Ella Pamfilova, is rather exceptional (Y2).

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Florin (2017, 169–126).

social status” (*imet’ kakoe-to polozhenie opredelennoe*). The guest continued that she considered it important to be able to support her husband in everything, including the financial aspects. As a result, she got married when she was 32 (Y5). As in the previously discussed episode, she was presented by the host as happy with her choice (“she got married at the age that was most suitable for marriage”). But her story still indicated that such a choice probably cannot be accepted by some. Indeed, even her relatives expressed concerns about her inability to find a husband for so long, while she often heard that she should not wait because the good husbands will “wither away.” In response to the host’s questions she insisted on the normality of her performance of a sexual self that differed from stereotypical views about the direct connection between happiness and starting a family and having children at a young age.

Another female guest on *I Myself* told about her marriage to her school teacher at the age of 15 (Y3). Although in her presentation of her sexual self when the program was aired she seemed less certain about her choices than did the guests of several other episodes, she tried hard to appear rational, responsible and independent. For example, she proudly mentioned that even if she did get involved in sexual relationships before marriage, she married her lover not because she was pregnant, but just because she loved him. Indeed, she implied that getting married early because of unplanned pregnancy is not a behavior that can be accepted as responsible and respectful. On the contrary, she insisted that her choice of engaging in premarital sex at an early age did not indicate lack of responsibility per se, but again, could be fully justified by her adherence to the script on love between man and woman. In such a way she both challenged and confirmed established views on sex: using the traditional symbolism of heterosexual love, she demanded acceptance of underage sexuality and marriageability.

The guest of one more episode (Y4) also demonstrated that she was able to take responsible decisions that could influence her future. Indeed, after living with her husband for 20 years and having two children together, she decided to divorce him due to his alcoholism. Thus we can assume that this episode suggests the importance of separating from those who are not ready to take responsibility for themselves.

As my analysis shows, the episodes of *I Myself* opened a possibility to articulate practices centered on the traditional scenario of romantic heterosexual love relationships that were seen as problematic from the viewpoint of a gendered morality that praised sex as a part of marriage. And it was the autonomous, responsible and knowledgeable female participant of the program who was able to contribute to changes in the moral norms.

In contrast to *I Myself*, *About That* focused on sexual choices, preferences, and practices, and it rarely hosted couples. Still, similarly to *I Myself*, it featured mainly female storytellers. It dedicated a lot of broadcasting time to problems of love, individual choice and responsibility. Even if “love” seems to have more varied meanings on this program, the issues of choice and autonomy appear to be even more strongly emphasized.

Indeed, the episode on oral sex, for example, focused on the stories of two women and one man who seemed to be well aware of their individual needs for getting sexual pleasure and seemed to be less willing to follow the script on love/marriage as a normative context for sexual relationships (P3). One of the female participants

showed herself to be particularly radical with respect to gendered norms concerning sexual practices and was ready to criticize “male chauvinism”: male expectations of receiving but not giving oral pleasures to their female partners. Her attitude turned out to be in contrast to this particular male guest’s rather limited and one-sided acceptance of oral sex practices. To take another example, the male participant of the episode “Sex for Money” stated that he would not perform oral sex when he gets married (P6). The female participants of the program may be said to have voiced the need to review existing sexual normativity. However, the discussion never moved beyond issues of preferences and informed choices to, for instance, personal opinions about acting collectively to change cultural stereotypes with respect to sex. The discussion did not focus on the material context of sexual practices, nor did it challenge poverty or inequality with discussion of the need for reforms or protests.

One guest on the program dedicated to teenage sexuality (P4), a 16-year-old female teenager from a small provincial town, described sexual activities as the only way to spend time in her city. She calmly stated that she had already had many partners and that the time between getting to know her potential partner and the sexual act itself varied from 15 min to 2 h. While the moderator of the program gave her some expressive looks and asked a few questions implying that this story might be a warning example to parents and educators, the guest appeared to be very sure about the correctness of her behavior and the possibility to separate sex from love and marriage. However, she presented herself as a responsible person—she used oral contraception and was aware of the dangers of HIV/AIDS and other STD—“in our city everybody knows if somebody has some venereal disease”.

Different variants of selling and buying sex were also discussed in several episodes of *About That*. For the most part, the female sex workers on the show insisted that selling their bodies was dictated by personal choice rather than miserable economic circumstances (P6). Hence they tried to convince the public that their choice was responsible and must be respected, and they argued that they proved their respectability by carefully choosing their clients and guarding against sexually transmitted diseases. They also referred to their good income. Indeed, one of them openly revealed class hierarchies, noting that she had no experience of “sex with poor men.”

To conclude, the stories related in both programs highlight the centrality of individual decisions and choices to the new post-Soviet sexual self and its presentation. These individual choices were claimed to be relatively free from economic constraints and social hinders, as if personal efforts could guarantee easy solutions for everybody. The mere absence of thinking about social inequality in combination with some brief remarks about “those poor people,” however, suggests that the participants of these programs associated themselves with those who benefited from the current social and political transformations rather than with those who lacked the economic resources to organize their lives according to their will. At the same time, the stories aired on these talk shows indicate that most of the participants ignored the political and social aspects of gender inequality, heteronormativity, discrimination and violence, and overemphasized a focus on individual strategies and solutions.

## Normativity and Silences in Discussions About “That”

As was stated above, in contrast to the American master copy, the first talk shows in Russia were not centered on suffering, discrimination and vulnerability. However, in this part of the article I want to speak about some episodes where these problems became visible. I am referring first of all<sup>14</sup> to *About That*, some episodes of which focused on sexualities that do not fit the widely accepted—heterosexual, able-bodied and normalizing—scenario. The show also devoted more attention to marginal social groups, queer sexual practices and discrimination.

These stories challenging heteronormativity included an episode called “Lesbian Love” (P5) that introduced several guests who spoke about same-sex relationships and were ready to discuss their benefits. It is important to note here that these relationships were discussed separately as a “special kind” of sexual practice; other episodes, for example, the one on oral sex discussed above, included only persons who were engaged in heterosexual relationships. All the guests of the episode on lesbian love—two individual women and a lesbian couple—were happy to tell the audience about their sexual pleasures and preferences and to present themselves as sexually attractive and skillful lovers. One of them, however, stated that she could be attractive to women who used to think about themselves as heterosexual and even to married women (she described it as “taking” a woman from a man—*otbit’ zhenshinu u muzhchiny*). At the same time, this episode could not avoid discussing discrimination: although some of the participants had their parents’ support, they all encountered negative attitudes on the part of those around them in connection with their non-heteronormative sexuality. For the most part, however, they neither followed the narrative about suffering and discrimination nor considered state intervention or collective actions to be important. Rather, they attributed other people’s negative reactions to ignorance, indicating that the situation could be improved with more education. At the same time, most of them were themselves highly educated.

For example, the first guest, a serious young woman who introduced herself as speaking several languages and having an art degree (thus, claiming her respectability similar to guest in P7 I discussed earlier), told how a friend tried to advise her to see a doctor. She smiled as she said this, and the audience reacted with laughter. Indeed, she implied that only narrow-minded and uneducated people could have such ideas, and that there were no such people in her surroundings. While this approach to the lack of acceptance of same-sex relationships allowed her to avoid appearing to be a victim, it also ignored the issue of discrimination and its connection with the power of the “normative.”

The stories of other guests of this episode indicated that they were trying to avoid too definite or radical presentations. One of the protagonists presented herself as

<sup>14</sup> The episode discussing life after divorce (Y6), for example, included a short story about physical violence that the husband inflicted on the main protagonist. While the protagonist stated that it was one of the important reasons for starting a process to divorce, the topic of domestic violence got some attention only in the intervention of the “feminist” expert at the very end. The importance of divorce is discussed in several other episodes, for example (Y8).

a bisexual woman. According to her interpretation of bisexuality she was a person with some “attractive” (extra) sexual drive that did not endanger the institution of the (heterosexual) family. The protagonist confessed that she might have a “family” (stressing heterosexual family and thus, undermining her queerness) in the future. Two other guests, a queer couple, were ready to speak about mutual feelings as they considered it more important than sexual relationships per se. However, contrary to the second protagonist of the program they were ready to defend their identities as a kind of queer indicating that other people have “the standard orientation” while they did not. It was this couple that most clearly criticized the ideology of the heterosexual family that, according to them, is mainly centered around the “registration (of marriage), parents and children”.

The title of the episode on rape did not contain the words “rape” nor “violence” in the title, but invited the audience to the talk-show on the beginning of sexual life (P1). It aired two female victims that were raped as teenagers by their male acquaintances and both protagonists of this episode talked about the total indifference that the people around them showed. While the protagonists did not hope to change society or find solidarity in some common activism, they seemed to make their personal choices in respect to their future. In particular, one of the protagonists clearly stated that she does not plan to inform her partner about the event of rape. It is interesting to note that one of the experts invited to this program, representative of the Center against sexual violence, “Sestry” (*Systers*), informed the audience on the seriousness of the problem in her short intervention. However she suggested individual help to the victim (calling to the hotline, reworking the feelings with a “specialist”) rather than the need for change of the legislation or male culture.

Another episode had as its main protagonist a wheel-chaired woman whose speech was often disrupted by the convulsive movements of her body (P2). In contrast to the female guests in many other episodes, the main protagonist of this program revealed discrimination and was rather vocal about the need of changing the system and of receiving help from other women (and men) in order to end the discrimination. The protagonist’s story about her (hetero)sexual life as an intern of the establishment (*internat*) for disabled people uncovered the institutionalized discrimination of sexuality of people with disabilities in Russia. Indeed, according to the protagonist, the patients of the specialized medical institutions were prohibited to have sexual contacts on the premises and thus, were deprived of the sexual life as such. The protagonist, for example, told a story about bribing the nurse in order to use the bathing area in the institution for meeting her lover. Altogether, this episode, in comparison to others, sounded more critical towards existing sexual normativities. It contributed further to opening the public space for broader understanding of what doing the sexual self means and challenged norms that connected engaging into sexual activities with embodying the normative body.

Thus the fact that the program offered space for sexualities that traditionally were considered “deviant” and were banned from the public arena was an important achievement. Nevertheless, even in the case of *About That*, this space seemed to be very limited and over-structured because most of the stories only discussed individual strategies of dealing with silences, discrimination and violence.

## Sex, Gender and Choice—The Experts' Opinion

According to the talk-show genre, experts, together with hosts play an important role in every talk-show by using their moral authority and/or education to moderate the discussion (Shattuc 1997, 7–8). Thus, in this section I analyze how the authoritative opinions of the experts contributed to displaying and “doing” the new “sexual self”.

The title of the first program—*I Myself*—indicated that this program saw women as its main spectators and was centered on the experiences and concerns that were coded as “female”. Together with empowering woman through emphasizing her self-presentation as active and through showing respect for women’s choices, the discussion of female behavior reproduced somehow a patriarchal frame of representation where a woman and not a man had to explain and justify her personal behavior and her sexual choices. This framework was often challenged by the “feminist” commentator, Maria Arbatova, although her reactions were soon “pacified” by interventions of the “traditionalist” expert and Menshova as a host herself. As it was said above, the moral authority of these female experts was predefined on the ideological and not so much on the scientific grounds: the supporter of the “traditional views” and “the feminist”. These ideological labels, however, were presented to the public as self-evident and not requiring any explanation. On the other hand, this kind of moral authority left the “experts” a lot of space for projecting very subjective ideas and making examples from personal experiences (it converted the experts into a kind of guests). Arbatova, for example, was commenting on how she is communicating with her former husbands and their wives (Y6). From this perspective it is interesting that the “feminist” expert, Arbatova, not only defended the right of independent income and sexual pleasure for women, but made judgements about “naturalness” of social hierarchies and inequalities. Thus, Arbatova considered a change on the individual level; a woman should accept herself as “equal” and “worth the best” when it comes to relationships with men. A woman should solve her problems (called “complexes”—for example, in Y9) with the help of professional psychologists. The personal change was not supposed to be continued at the level of political and social structures and institutions.

It was much harder to identify the views of the “traditional” expert in comparison to Arbatova. In some cases, like in the case of the episode on divorce (Y6), the expert of “traditional views” implied that in order to correspond to the traditional ideals of womanhood a woman should focus on her family. However, the “traditionalist expert” had a variety of explanations when it came to what it actually meant to focus on your family. In one case, she implied that a woman should not divorce or, in case she did it, not make too many demands while dividing property with her former husband. However, on the other hand, the central role of family for a woman included the need to work in order to provide for the family (in the case of restraints in the family budget). Indeed, the “traditionalist” seemed to mainly approve the Soviet model of the working mother for those who could not follow the scenario of

wealthy people<sup>15</sup> due to different reasons (for example, those who were having problems as a result of their migrant status—Y6).

Unlike the kind of “self-proclaimed” experts from *I Myself* the expertise of Sergei Agarkov in *About That* was grounded in science—psychology and sexology—and thus, the role of the expert in this program reminds more of the role of the expert in “Western” talk-shows. The expert fulfilled an informational role, informing the program participants and the spectators about the current situation regarding sexual education and sexual health. He complained about bad curricula that made pupils laugh and expressed the scientific opinion about the best age for children to be told about sex. At the same time, the role of the expert in this program implied stressing responsibility in respect to choices connected to sexuality and to the sexual health. For example, Agarkov reminded the auditorium about HIV epidemic and warned about the dangers of teen pregnancies. The expert also took a very critical stance in the case of the episode on selling sex, mainly warning about STDs: all who sell sex had some sexually transmitted diseases at some point of their life, according to Agarkov (P6).

Overall, the interventions of the shows’ experts were not always seen as authoritative, in particular in the case of the program *I Myself*. At the same time, the presence of the people fulfilling these functions and speaking in the name of science or experience, contributed to further depolitization of rape, homophobia, sexual exploitation and some other problems through drawing extra-attention to individual choices and responsibilities. Emphasizing personal responsibility, the talk-shows over-shadowed the public character of these problems and, thus, diminished the need of collective actions for their solutions. The same could be said about hindrances to sexual activities. Indeed, the problems with lack of housing that arose after divorce or difficulties with finding work connected to “lack of attractiveness” (in case of being over-weight, for example) were presented mainly as those that did not require special attention of the state and society. These issues were not seen as the reason for collective political mobilization. The solution for all these problems lied in slowly changing the general public views as a result of education, better and more responsible personal choices or, in the worst case, help given to the victims of violence and discrimination by professionals and volunteers of the special centers.

## Conclusion

As we know by now, an emphasis on differences and individual choices constitutes an important component of the conservative campaign in Russia. In this context it is remarkable that the importance of preserving gender and sexual differences was stressed by some cultural figures on Russian TV of the 1990s who could be associated with the transformation of ideas about the normativity of relationships,

<sup>15</sup> The beginning of the economic reforms coincided with the hopes on growth of the new post-Soviet middle-class (see for example, Zdravomyslova et al. 2009). However, these hopes usually ignored the deep process of social differentiation and growing number of the new poor (see Iarskaia-Smirnova 2011).



marriage and sexuality. Indeed, in her recent interview with the periodical *Afisha*, Yulia Menshova, the former host of *I Myself*, stated that she was always convinced that “men and women are made differently.” According to her, as host for the program, she thought it important to air different views of the same problem from the perspective of both the male and female audience: “This world consists of men and women. It (the world) becomes a reality through our views of each other, our evaluation of each other. And the most ferocious acts of feminism arise from a lack of hope and attempts to stop this magnetic interaction” (Menshova 2016).

Together with Menshova, who in this quotation indicates that the program was not aimed to produce changes in society even if it brought up issues of feminism and women’s independence, many of the former viewers of both talk shows consider the 1990s public discussions about gender roles and sexual morals to be just a temporary entertainment. Indeed, it seems likely that unlike the revolutions of the 1960s in the “West,” neither the form of the talk show nor the emphasis on individual choice has contributed either to any further questioning of the social structures and institutions of oppression in the public space, or to political declarations on justice and rights. Indeed, the participants of the 1990s talk shows do not seem to have any plans to change the world. Instead, a recognition of the importance of sex in human life (compared to its silencing during the Soviet period) made performing (hetero) sexuality to be seen as “normal” and worthy of respect. Still, all the differences and deviations from institutionalized and normalized (hetero)sexuality could exist only at “personal cost” or outside the new “respectability,” while the presumed acceptance of the existence of differences did not exclude discrimination.

On the other hand, it is interesting to note that the majority of those who spoke publicly on sexual preferences and pleasures in these shows were women. This could be seen as both a reversal of the Soviet scenario of desexualized womanhood and a confirmation of the higher sexualization of women in connection with a nostalgic aspiration to return to the past and rediscover the “real woman” and the “real man.” Although the women participants seem to have felt no need to act together and fight for public recognition of their rights to do new sexual and gender selves, the framework of the programs and the comments of experts often reminded them about their position as sexual objects.

On the basis of the studied materials, I argue that in contrast to the social discussions and activities in Western Europe and North America during the 1960s–1970s, the radicalism of the Russian “sexual revolution” of the 1990s was quite limited with respect both to criticism of the established social institutions and to collective actions for confronting them. My analysis of the episodes of two TV programs shows that their participants were doing their sexual selves mainly as individuals who were rather free from material constraints and legal regulations. Serious social problems like rape or homophobia that became visible through studio discussions were not addressed as important reasons for organizing and undertaking collective actions. Indeed, in the Russian case of the 1990s, sexuality was not only seen as “liberated,” individualized and commercialized (Kon 2010a), but it also happened to be depoliticized and mainly disconnected from the discourse on both social justice and women’s activism.

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## Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interests.

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## Appendix: TV-programs

Ya sama—televizionnyi videoarchiv. <http://tv-videoarchive.ru/ya-sama/478-ya-sama.html>. Accessed 12.06.2019

Y1—Vot ya i dobilas svoego (*Finally, I got what I wanted*) 1995

Y2—Menia ne izmelila vlast (*The power did not change me*) 1995

Y3—Mne 15 let i ya uzhe..zhena (*I am 15, but I am already a wife*) 1995

Y4—U menia piet muzh (*My husband abuses alcohol*) 1995

Y5—Ya vyshla zamuzh... pozdno (*I got married late*) 1995

Y6—Ya i moi muzh posle razvoda (*Me and my husband after divorce*) 1995

Y7—Ya odna i mne khorosho (*I am alone and feel good*) 1995

Y8—Ya izmenila.. ego privyckam (*It was a betrayal ...with respect to his customs*) 1997

Y9—Ya takaia nekrasivaia (*I am so ugly*) 1995

Pro eto—<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pZUT2q5j7YA>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O42uDtxbC7U>. Accessed 12.06.2019

P1—Pervyi seksualnyi opyt (*First sexual experience*) 1997

P2—Sexualnaia zhizn invalidov (*Sexual life of disabled people*) 1997

P3—Oralni seks (*Oral sex*) 1997

P4—Seks i podrostki (*Sex and teenagers*) 1997

P5—Lesbiiskaia liubov (*The lesbian love*) 1997

P6—Sex za dengi (*Sex for money*) 1997

P7—Giperseksualnost' (*Hypersexuality*) 1997 Mandatory information—which should be.

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