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LGBT COMMUNITY IN THE FOCUS OF SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH*

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Abstract. The LGBT community and the attitude towards it became one of the dividing factors between Russia and Europe long ago. This factor quite often creates political precedents and becomes a basis for various provocations. In the Russian mass conscience the topic, which has long been considered tabooed, today has a sensitive character; therefore classic survey methods are hardly suitable for its study; on the other hand, various projective techniques have proved to be more useful. This article presents the data of a number of Russian sociological surveys on the attitudes towards LGBT representatives and of the RUDN University Sociology Chair scientific team research on this subject. The article also presents the results of a number of focus groups aimed at identifying attitudes towards LGBT representatives and based on the application of the vignette method, which is a special type of projective techniques. The high efficiency of vignette method for the study of such a sensitive subject was proved. The method allows overcoming of some barriers in respondents' conscience determined by the 'radical' character of the issues under study, and also reduces the general social pressure upon respondents. The research with the application of vignette method resembled a kind of a narrative game, therefore adapting this method to the focus group research helps to obtain more detailed and interesting data due to the group dynamics.

Key words: LGBT community; vignettes; focus groups; sensitive subject; projective techniques; propaganda

Homosexuality, the rights of homosexuals and even the use of this term are the issues that provoke heated discussions in the contemporary world. American Psychological Association ruled out homosexuality from the list of diseases in 1973, confirming that homosexuality is not a sexual perversion, but a different sexual orientation [3]. This fact has had a considerable impact on the formation of the tolerant attitude towards LGBT community and the creation of a new legislation on this matter. The processes of legalizing homosexuality have begun in the number of European countries and the USA. These processes have influenced the level of tolerance and promoted changes in consciousness of society.

Speaking about the attitude of Russian society to this topic, we present the results of the largest relevant sociological surveys. In March 2015, Levada-Center conducted the research to identify the definition of homosexuality as a phenomenon, during which 800 people aged 18+ in 134 settlements in 46 regions of the country were interviewed [5]. More than a third of Russians (37%) consider non-standard sexual orientation to be the disease, which must be treated (Table 1). This view is shared first and foremost by the informants who have a higher education.

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Table 1

**‘How do you personally think, homosexuality — is...’
(closed question, one answer, in %)**

	February 2013	March 2015
Disease, which must be treated	34	37
Result of ill-breeding, promiscuity, bad habits	23	26
Result of seduction (in a family, on the street, in the closed institution)	17	13
The sexual orientation, given from the birth, has the same right to exist as the heterosexual orientation	16	11
Not sure	10	14

Generally speaking, homosexuality causes a certain degree of wariness and disgust, as towards people who have a serious disease (Table 2).

Table 2

**How do you personally feel about homosexuals and lesbians?
(closed question, one answer, in %)**

	2013	2015
Positive	1	1
Interested	3	2
Calm, neutral	23	26
Alarmed	22	19
Irritated	20	22
Disgusted, frightened	26	24
Not sure	6	5

Turning to the research carried during the last year, let us pay attention to the work of Russian public opinion research center (WCIOM), which studied how the Russians’ values have changed for the last 25 years, regarding the issue of homosexual relations as well [4].

Aversion towards homosexual relations in society not only hasn’t weakened, but has also grown significantly. Furthermore, a more tolerant attitude today is more common among young people (25%) and residents of federal cities — Moscow and St. Petersburg (12%) (Table 3).

Table 3

‘How do you think, intimate relationships, sexual relations between two adults of the same sex (male or female) are worth of condemnation or there is nothing reprehensible about this’ (closed question, one answer, data in %)

	1991	2016
Always worthy of condemnation	57	74
More often worthy of condemnation	14	7
More often there is nothing reprehensible	8	5
There is nothing reprehensible at all	7	7
Other	2	3
Not sure	12	4

The survey of the All-Russian Public Opinion Research Center shows that the majority of Russians — 86% — are ready to support a ban on the promotion of homosexuality, while only 6% faced its manifestations [6].

According to the opinion of the Russian psychologist M. Beylkin, there are two forms of homosexuality: congenital and acquired, which influence the relation to non-standard sexual orientation in their own specific ways [1]. So, in Russian society the attitude towards ‘congenital’ homosexuality is rather tolerant, since it is perceived as a disease, ‘genetic failure’. To such people society might express pity and sympathy, comparable to the way we feel about a disabled person. The situation with ‘homosexuals by conviction’ is crucially different. In this case there is an aspect of a conscious, voluntary choice of the sexual orientation. In this context, the attitude towards homosexuality can be divided into liberal, compromise and conservative. The liberal attitude in this case is characterized by full legal support of homosexuals and their marriages, compromise — delegation of some rights for the self-presentation in public places, conservative — recognition of the fact of existence, but a certain social distance from homosexuals.

In February—August 2016 in the RUDN University the sociological research ‘Realization of personal freedom in the representations of modern youth (on the example of students of RUDN)’ was conducted. The type of sample is quota-sample (quotas — all faculties of the university), 456 people were interviewed. Method — a questionnaire survey. The questionnaire consisted of 26 questions. Students were asked: ‘Imagine that your friend (a male) is planning to marry a man in a country where it is not prohibited. You are’: 1) clearly against such a union, will cut him off; 2) against such a union, but will continue to communicate with him any day of the week; 3) I do not mind, but it will be inconvenient to continue communication; 4) I do not mind, I will fully support his decision; 5) Do not know. 22% of students chose the first answer (Conservatives), one in three chose the 4th answer (interpreted as a Liberal), the remaining 47% expressed compromise views on this issue. It is interesting to note that in response to the same question, but with the projection on the female, only 15% — Conservatives, 34% — Liberals, 51% — are Compromises. So, we can say that female homosexuality is seen a little more loyal.

In March—April 2017 the scientific research team of RUDN Sociology Chair within the initiative research work № 100235-0-000 ‘Features of understanding and realization of personal freedom by modern youth: the cross-cultural aspect’ implemented a field investigation phase in Austria, the Czech Republic, the Netherlands and Russia, where attitudes towards representatives of LGBT community was one of the research blocks. The following methods were used: garfinkeling, participant and non-participant observation. The results of the first stage made it possible to say that, despite the postulated tolerance to homosexuals, the liberal attitude is observed in Austria and the Netherlands, but in the Czech Republic the attitude to LGBT community has a compromise character. The Czech Republic, being one of the first countries of Europe where gay parades were allowed and are still held, isn’t liberal in this regard, and LGBT community in Prague has a character of a closed community. In Russia, the attitude to LGBT representatives is still conservative and is described by formula — ‘it is permissible as long as it doesn’t concern me and my family’. Such results have become possible due to the application of non-polling methods. Regarding polling methods, some special approaches are needed including projections, game techniques, etc.

The vignette method seems to be one of the most effective techniques of studying the attitude towards such a sensitive subject. The vignette represents a brief hypothetical written, oral or graphic (illustrated) description of people in different situations, based on the experimental, flexible variables. The vignette technique gives the chance to research quite an extensive range of social phenomena at a deeper level, more substantially, than when using traditional methods. As well as a method of unfinished sentences, it helps to avoid responses approved by society [7], because questions are projected on a fictional character, but not set directly — answers of respondents display real reactions of people.

In terms of the Russian realities, LGBT community can be characterized as closed and conservative, taking this into account, it is necessary to select a specific method of a research that gives a chance to study a sensitive subject most deeply, while not putting increased pressure on the informant. Such method is the vignette method.

The objective of the study is diagnostics of the efficiency of using the vignette method in researching the subject of the attitude towards LGBT community. The main methods include a focus group research with application of the vignettes method. In the autumn 2016 in the RUDN University we conducted a research to identify the attitudes of students towards LGBT representatives. In the original research was used the technique, proposed by J. Finch, on the basis of which five vignettes (5 steps) were formulated [2]. At each step, the respondent was asked open questions, which gradually plunged him into the core of the story. Such technique allows reducing the level of pressure on the informant, so the participant feels more comfortable. It is particularly important when studying sensitive subjects.

The vignette was a dynamic formation, meaning that the scenario developed at every new stage. The informants were offered to pronounce their judgment on the obtained information, then the new circumstances regarding the main hero of the history were introduced, and the question was asked — ‘What should happen next?’. A special method was used when we asked the following questions: ‘How would they react?’, and then: ‘How would you react?’, so the informant was less focused on their own personality.

At the pilot stage only one type of vignette called ‘Andrey’ was used, in which a young man was the main character:

1. *Andrey is a young man, 25 years old. He has many different hobbies and does not like to sit around: enjoys music, plays the guitar and likes to read. The guy travels a lot. He has a lot of friends. Also, Andrey has a good job, and he has recently decided to get another higher education.*

Question: How do you think, what impression he makes on people around? What impression does he make on you?

2. *Actually, Andrey has a secret — he has a non-standard sexual orientation. He has understood it not so long ago. He likes guys. But he is really embarrassed by it and is afraid to be misunderstood by his relatives.*

Question: How do you think, what a young man should do in this situation — open up to his relatives or keep it to himself? How do you assess this situation?

On the basis of the results, received by means of a pilot study, essential adjustments to the research program were made.

First, it was decided to change the method of an individual interview to focus groups, based on the following arguments:

1) using focus groups takes less time in comparison with an interview, which is an important criterion for the empirical research;

2) having group dynamics, and particularly statements of some respondents, can be a powerful incentive for others, less active participants, to express their opinion;

3) high degree of informants' emancipation can induce spontaneity of their answers;

4) self-disclosure of the individual, that is, the fact that other participants presented have a similar opinion, gives them the feeling of security and confidence in their own statements;

5) circumstances within a focus group can push the person (through questions and statements of other members of the group) to give detailed and reasoned answers;

6) presence of directly opposite opinions makes the focus group more lively;

7) decreased emotional tension among members of the group;

8) opportunity to study the natural vocabulary of informants, when discussing the topic;

9) interaction of participants with each other replaces their interaction with the interviewer, that leads to a bigger emphasis on the participants' points of view;

10) opportunity to create a comfortable situation, which produces perfect circumstances for the direct talk.

Secondly, five more vignettes called 'Christina' were formulated additionally, in which the main character was a girl, as during the interview the respondents were told the following assumption — their attitude towards the hero could be other if it was a male. Example of a vignette:

1. Christina is a young girl, she's 24 years old. She is a very versatile person and always finds what to do: professionally dances, understands painting, reads a lot. Christina travels a lot with her friends. Recently she got a good position in a prestigious company and decided to get another higher education.

Question: How do you think, what impression she makes on people around? What impression does she make on you?

2. Actually, Christina has a secret — she has a non-standard sexual orientation. She has understood it not so long ago. She likes girls. But she hides it and is afraid to be misunderstood by her relatives.

Question: How do you think, what should a girl do in this situation — open up to relatives or keep it to herself? How do you assess this situation?

Four female focus groups were made. It was made because not all the informants felt comfortable, discussing a person of a non-standard sexual orientation with representatives of the opposite sex. At the same time, participants were selected so that they weren't familiar with each other, with the purpose to avoid getting socially approved and expected answers.

Using the vignette method on the focused interview showed the following results. First, regarding the first vignette 'Andrey', where the short description of his personality

was given, the respondents unanimously gave a hero a positive assessment, characterizing him as a positive, purposeful, creative person. For the similar scenario, where the girl was the main character, the opinions of the informants differed. So, some girls supposed that Christina created a positive impression. Others assumed that she was arrogant, could irritate people and be light-minded due to her creative, 'not age-appropriate' hobbies. This reaction is partly connected with the fact, that girls see the heroine as a rival, as she is more talented and successful.

The second step of the scenario gave similar participants' opinions in both focus groups, where vignettes sounded the following way:

1) *During their friendship, his friends have never seen Andrey communicate with girls or go out with them, although his friends were already married.*

2) *During their friendship, her friends have never seen Christina communicate with men or go out with them, although her friends were already married.*

Question: Why do you think it happens?

The respondents assessed this situation neutrally, commenting that young people, due to their qualities, didn't meet a person who would meet their high requirements. Besides, the girls specified that Andrey and Christina, being busy with self-development, just didn't have enough time for any serious relationships at the moment. Such position of the informants is understandable, since the modern youth is focused on self-realization and financial well-being, while the value of a family fades into the background [8].

The third situation, where sexual orientation of the main characters was revealed, didn't cause any strong reaction from the respondents, which shows their awareness about the presence of homosexual people in our society.

To the question 'How do you assess this situation?', the participants of both groups empathized with the heroes, explaining it by the difficulty of finding such people in Russian society. This opinion was supported particularly by such arguments like '*in our country it is strongly judged*', '*Russia is a homophobic country*', '*he simply considers himself not like the others and this must be bad*', '*a lot of kids are instilled that a family can only be traditional*'.

Discussing the dilemma of whether or not a person's homosexuality should be revealed to the closed ones, the respondents expressed the opinion that the main character should share it with relatives as orientation doesn't prevent from being the same good, interesting person as before their 'coming out'. These data indicate a tolerant attitude towards the representatives of sex minorities, the informants reinforced their statements with examples from their life, when they themselves were in the position of this 'close one'. Similar stories were typical for both the first and the second focus groups.

The fourth step became the most resonant. 'Andrey' and 'Christina' reported about their non-standard orientation to a friend who was of the same sex as them. In the first case, the informants thought it was quite possible that a friend wouldn't understand, would take it negatively: 'not really positive', 'I don't know', 'well, in our country it isn't accepted'. Such opinion relates to the fact, that in Russia the attitude towards women of a non-standard orientation is more tolerant than the one towards men. Men see a hidden threat in gay men, which was revealed as soon as the pilot research stage was conducted.

Discussing Christina, the respondents said that they would most likely accept her, but would not understand. The main arguments in favor of this misunderstanding were the peculiarities of the attitude towards the sex minority in the country, and the fear that the heroine might have feelings for a friend, which would lead to the problems in their friendship.

The most controversial part of the story was the final one:

1) *Andrew decided to talk with his parents. He believes that they will understand him, because, regardless of his orientation, he is still their son.*

2) *Christina decided to talk with her parents. She believes that they will understand her, because, regardless of her orientation, she is still their daughter.*

Question: How can parents react? And how do you think the parents should react to such news?

The girls were unanimous that parents should accept heroes. However, the overwhelming majority of the respondents considered that relatives could not understand this and would look for a problem in themselves, as the examples of precipitating factors they named: the high role of religion in the family, patriarchy, conservatism. Also, it should be noted, that many respondents tried to imagine that they turned out to be in such situation, expressing their opinion through the prism of their own 'Me'.

Thus, in spite of the fact that the respondents allowed a possibility of communication with the representative of sexual minorities, expressing positive/neutral attitude towards them, they could hardly accept such child. Disputing, the girls assumed that if they were in a similar situation, they would hide this fact from people around them: *'If my child came and said, that he was gay or lesbian, I probably would not be able to accept it', 'But when it comes to me, I don't know, what I should do', 'Oh, God forbid, if the boy is like that'*. This opinion is typical for both groups. Therefore, the assumption of sharply negative attitude from girls to representatives of LGBT community wasn't confirmed. The tolerance concerning representatives of nonstandard sexual orientation was peculiar to informants. The reasons explaining this position are the following: homosexual friends, liberal views, desire to balance the rights of homo- and heterosexuals.

Participants of focus groups did not show a high social distance to sexual minorities. They are ready to communicate with such people, to let them in the society. Besides, it is possible to note, that girls attitude both to gays and lesbians is almost the same. At the same time, for many, it would become a body blow if their child turns out to be of nonstandard sexual orientation, especially in case if it is a boy. Moreover, girls noted uselessness of the propaganda prohibition because of its ineffectiveness. Supporting legalization of same-sex marriages as an equality measure among all the members of society seems to be one of the arguments in favor of the participants' tolerant treatment of LGBT representatives. Thus, the attitude of student's youth represented by girls towards LGBT community can be characterized as tolerant, the level of participants' tolerance in general depends on the presence of homosexual acquaintances and friends in their lives. Therefore, those who are constantly in contact with gays and lesbians, show more liberal views concerning LGBT community and vice versa, their views allow them to communicate with such people.

Most informants preferred to use positive and neutral terms for designation of LGBT representatives. Only one respondent used a negative formulation speaking about sexual minorities. So, we can see generally tolerant attitude, expressed in showing respect to the feelings of sexual minorities, which reinforces the materials obtained during focus groups.

The most stressful issues were those that affected children of couples with non-standard sexual orientation and issues related to homosexual friends. Here we could see such expressions of non-verbal behavior like linked fingers at the level of a mouth, which means discomfort, protective reaction; nodding and tilting of the head — disapproval; touching lips and a face — insincerity, a sign of critical evaluation; biting a lip — a stress, discomfort. Such reactions were frequently shown by the second group. The reactions connected with the thought processes were more common for the first focus group, e.g. a hand/hand at a mouth, leaning back. No questions caused negative reactions. Also it should be noted that only the youth participated in the research. The older generations have more conservative views (it was illustrated on the example of sociological polls).

The high level of intolerance, which can be seen in the researches on this problem, testifies to the specifics of socialization at the level of social institutes of Russian society and in general. Here it is possible to talk about the features of identity, where the religious and socio-political component has a tremendous influence. But, despite this fact, the modern youth shows more tolerance. Today students incline to have liberal views, expressing the general support to the LGBT community. However, the majority expresses fear in situations where their children turn out to be of a non-standard orientation. This fear is caused by the lack of any idea of how to react correctly in similar circumstances.

In the study of such a sensitive topic as the attitudes towards people of non-standard sexual orientation, the vignette method proves to be a good alternative to traditional methods of data collection. It is more convenient to use, possesses a flexible structure and gives the chance to make amendments quickly. Such projective techniques allow the informant to express their opinion, without putting too many boundaries and restrictions, especially during the studying of sensitive subjects, where it is rather difficult to obtain information as not every respondent can speak their minds freely and directly. The vignette method reduces pressure upon the respondent as much as possible, and allows us to hear one's personal opinion at the same time. It is possible to speak about a high heuristic potential of the vignette method when studying sensitive subjects.

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ЛГБТ-СООБЩЕСТВО В ФОКУСЕ СОЦИОЛОГИЧЕСКОГО АНАЛИЗА*

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Тема ЛГБТ-сообщества и отношения к нему давно стала одним из разделяющих Россию и Европу факторов, который нередко создает политические прецеденты и становится основой для разнообразных провокаций. В российском массовом сознании эта тема, долго считавшаяся табуированной, сейчас носит ярко выраженный сензитивный характер, поэтому для ее изучения слабо подходят традиционные опросные методы, тогда как различные проективные методики оказываются более полезными. В статье приведены данные крупнейших российских социологических опросов последних лет по проблематике отношения российского общества к представителям ЛГБТ-сообщества, а также результаты ряда авторских исследований научного коллектива кафедры социологии Российского университета дружбы народов по этой теме. Также в статье представлены результаты, полученные в ходе реализации фокус-группового исследования по тематике отношения к представителям ЛГБТ-сообщества студенческой молодежи с применением метода виньеток, являющегося разновидностью проективных методик. В частности, авторами доказана высокая эффективность использования метода виньеток для изучения столь сензитивной тематики, как восприятие ЛГБТ-сообщества в российском обществе сегодня. Метод виньеток позволяет «обойти» некоторые барьеры в сознании респондентов, вызванные радикальными взглядами, а также снизить общее давление социальной желательности на респондентов. Исследование с применением метода виньеток воспринимается респондентами как разновидность рассказывания-игры, а вписывание метода в фокус-групповое исследование благодаря феномену групповой динамики позволяет получить более детальные и интересные данные.

Ключевые слова: ЛГБТ-сообщество; сензитивная тематика; пропаганда; проективные методы; виньетки; фокус-группы

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