

Striving for LGBTQ rights in Russian psychology and society: A personal narrative

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Background. Based on a long personal story of dealing with LGBTQ rights in Russia, the author reviews several transformations in the psychological approach and research to gender and sexual identity. The author describes his professional growth as a psychologist. First his interest was in child sex-role development and then transformed to prevention of sexual crimes, AIDS prevention and sexual education among adolescents. The author shows how his area of expertise in human sexuality brought him to professional ethics for psychologists.

Discussion. In the second part of the article the author reviews changes in social attitudes towards same sex- relationships from their criminalization and medicalization to acceptance and respect. The author emphasizes the pioneering role of Professor Igor Kon in changes of mass attitudes towards sexuality and same sex relationships. The author sees Kon's legacy in his statement that "As long as gays and lesbians are objects of bullying and discrimination, everybody who considers himself/herself as a thinking person must support LGBTQ people's fight for their human rights." At the end of this part of the article, the author describes a recent hate crime based in homophobia, and its victim, the talented St. Petersburg journalist, Dmitry Tsilikin. Tsilikin was involved in sex education in the 1990s and published a book about these issues. His murder was not considered by the court to be a hate crime against an LGBTQ person, despite enormous protest from progressive-minded people all over Russia.

Conclusion. The author recommends the Russian Psychological Ethics Code as a way to help psychologists support and advocate for people regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity.

Keywords: Russia; LGBTQ; Ethics Code; Kon; Tsilikin; psychology

In memory of Dmitry Tsilikin

Introduction (Personal history of LGBTQ)

In 1972, when I was 16 years old, my parents suspected me of being "homosexual." They accused my friend, who was 10 years older, of sexually abusing me. They initiated criminal prosecution against us both and at the same time started attempts "to

cure” me of homosexuality. As “proof” of my homosexuality in the criminal prosecution and in conversion therapy they subjected me to, they used some of my love poems that they stole from me addressed to somebody in the male gender. Their vision of me and my friend’s relationship was strange to me. I did not know about homosexuality until their accusations. I saw my mother in terrible sorrow and my father in deep distress. I did not feel guilty or that I had done anything wrong, but I learned very fast about Criminal Article 121 on “Muzhelozhestvo,” which is an archaic word that means “lying with a man.”

I was confused and scared. I lost my best friend. I lost communication with my parents. I was forcefully put into therapy — first with a psychologist, then with a psychiatrist, and when the psychiatrist emigrated to the West, again with a psychologist. I had sessions with the psychiatrist during my summer holidays. He had rented a house in a village near Leningrad, and my parents rented me a room at another house in the same village, so I could see him on a regular basis. The psychiatrist asked me strange questions about anal penetration that I was not aware of; I did not understand what he was talking about. But one example of his “therapy” deserves description. I lived in a house where another room was rented by a family with a beautiful blonde girl who was 12 years old. She and I took walks together on a street in the village and the psychiatrist saw us. In one of our meetings he suggested that I should have intercourse with her. I had enough sense to reject such a “treatment” recommendation. Because we became friends, I continued to meet her for the next five years. When she was 17 years old we undertook the “prescribed” treatment. The girl became pregnant. I was frightened that she was not at the legal age of marriage yet, and having sex with her could be considered rape. I had to marry her and stayed in this marriage for 20 years.

When I was accused by my parents of homosexuality, I was a senior in high school. I wanted to be a Mathematician as my older friend had become, but the year with a Psychologist turned my interests to psychology. I was accepted into the Department of Psychology at Leningrad State University. During my student years I got acquainted with Professor Igor Kon, who familiarized me with the English-language literature on sex differences, sex role development, and human sexuality. During my student years, and with Kon’s recommendation, in 1977, I received training at the Moscow Psychiatric Institute at the Departments of Endocrinology and Sex Pathology. The first one was headed by Dr. Aaron Belkin, who was a pioneer in the study and treatment of transsexuals in the Soviet Union. The Department of Sex Pathology was headed by Dr. Geogriy Vasilchenko. He had his own theory of sex pathology based on male sexual reactions. His main concern was male’s erection and its role in copulation. This theory was not applicable to women. Dr. Vasilchenko considered sexuality only from medical and biological points of view, but at that time even this approach seemed progressive in the context of the asexual Soviet science.

In 1980 I studied sex-role development in Abhazian families. This study was done in collaboration with Galina Starovoitova, who was the head of an ethnographic psychological research study in Georgia. It was a big Soviet-American project on research into longevity. This was during the era of the USSR’s invasion of Afganistan and all international cooperation with the Soviet Academy of Science

was banned by the US Government. This project was the last. The idea of Kon and Starovoitova was that longevity is a complex process rooted in childhood. The hypothesis was that the rural Abkhazian population had a more strongly polarized structure of gender roles than that of the urban population. We later published an article based on this research in the book *Ethnic Stereotypes of Men and Women's Behavior* (Lunin, Starovoitova 1991). In 1989 Starovoitova became a democratically-oriented political leader and was murdered in 1998 by professional killers hired by her political opponents.

In 1988, I wrote my Ph.D. Thesis about family influences on normal and pathological sex role development in children. In opposition to the medical model of sex development, I tried to show social and psychological factors in gender construction. I tried to implement my findings with preschool children, but a few years later, the Soviet Union collapsed, and there was no interest in supporting such research for several years.

In 1991, I started working with children and adolescents who had been sexually abused, and as part of this work I was involved in AIDS prevention among adolescents. For three months in 1992 I worked at the Center for AIDS Prevention Studies (CAPS) of the University of California, San Francisco. This was my first visit beyond the Iron Curtain. For the first time in my life I saw respected professors who openly informed students that they were gay. I was able to see gay establishments as well as gay people dying from AIDS. I was impressed by the gay rights movement and was deeply personally affected by all the stories I saw and heard. These experiences inspired me to work on psychological measures for AIDS prevention, such as sex and AIDS education. During this visit I was able to design a study of knowledge and attitudes of adolescents about AIDS (Lunin et al, 1995). Also, I learned about various sex education programs through SIECUS (The Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States) and the Institute of Advanced Studies in Human Sexuality. I came back to Russia with strong impressions regarding the huge cultural gaps in gay rights between Russia and the USA.

During the next 4 years I was deeply involved in sex education, AIDS prevention, helping victims of sexual abuse, and research into sexuality (Lunin et al, 1997). I helped my friend, journalist Dmitry Tsilikin to publish weekly pieces about various aspects of sexuality in the popular St. Petersburg newspaper "Chas Pick" (Rush Hour). These materials have been published in the book *Questions from the Waist Down* (Tsilikin, 2002). Tsilikin conducted several interviews with Igor Kon about homophobia. In 2016 he published several articles against the conservative politicians Vitaly Milonov and Yelena Mizulina. Milonov, who was a deputy in the St. Petersburg regional Parliament from 2007 to 2016, was behind the infamous campaign against so called "gay propaganda" that began in 2012. Mizulina, as a deputy of the Russian Duma (Russian Parliament), identified herself as an antagonist of any and all gay rights. Tsilikin's articles about them were written in an ironic tone and showed their viewpoints to be aggressive and out-of-date.

On March 27, 2016, Dmitry Tsilikin was murdered by a man who, after being arrested, explained that he considered himself a "Cleaner." He killed Tsilikin because he considered him to be gay. The investigation defined this crime as a murder. There was a petition to consider Tsilikin's murder a hate crime against an LGBT person, and not simply murder by a stranger. More than 6000 people signed

this petition. Among them were deputies from the regional government, scientists, journalists, and artists. One of them was the famous movie producer Alexander Sokurov. This petition was dismissed by the court.

In 2014 Tsilikin edited my article in Russian about the Ethical Code of the Russian Psychological Society (RPS) and its humanistic aims to promote respect for all people regardless of their sexual orientation. At that time, soon after the establishment of the law against “the propaganda of homosexuality,” some professional psychologists expressed concern that the RPS’s Ethical Code’s call for respecting people regardless of their sexual orientation was not congruent with the new law. I tried to initiate a discussion about this on Facebook in groups for psychologists. The ensuing discussion, however, was not productive. Several respected psychologists with whom I had email communication about these issues advised me that they do not think gay issues are relevant in Russia at the present time. So the Ethical Code of RPS continues to declare respect towards people with various sexual orientations. But in practice many do not care about the existing paradox. I consider the fact that the RPS recently joined the International Psychological Network on LGBT issues a positive step. And I hope that this special issue of *Psychology in Russia: State of the Art*, will help inaugurate a new humanitarian and scientific vision of Russian Psychology on the LGBTQ+ situation.

In 1995 I received a Fulbright scholarship to study possibilities for using the internet for sex education. I conducted this research at SUNY Geneseo. After the end of my Fulbright scholarship, the conditions of the scholarship preventing me from remaining in the US. I chose not to return to Russia either, for a number of reasons, including the lack of contemporary sex research, the topic that I had already been involved in for many years. Since 1997, I have lived and worked in Toronto as a Psychologist. During my licensing as a psychologist I worked under the supervision of Carol Synclair, who was one of the creators of the Canadian Code of Ethics for Psychologists. She provided me with numerous insights about the history, logic, and basic principles of the Canadian Code of Ethics. Still, my attempt to discuss ways of improving the situation of gay rights in Russia with my Russian colleagues, based on their Code of Ethics, failed. In 2013 I wrote a letter to RPS Ethical Committee about LGBT rights and Ethical principles of Russian Psychologist, but received no response.

Objective (Background of LGBTQ rights in Russia)

There are various ways of in which social change occurs . One is when the social order changes everywhere and all at once, for example, with the Arabic Spring events. More often, social change happens gradually: sometimes after moving forward we do see movement backwards, but over the long term, changes happen in a progressive, positive direction.

One of the main steps in the deconstruction of the Soviet Union was the repeal of Article 6 of the Soviet Constitution, which had been introduced by Stalin to proclaim the sole leadership role of the Communist Party in the Soviet Union. Communists (Bolsheviks) usurped power by forbidding the existence of other parties — even those who had had alliances with the Bolsheviks. The Nobel Prize

winning physicist Andrey Sakharov was the most prominent voice demanding the cancellation of Article 6. Sakharov had advocated for this for many years, but only during the period of Perestroika and the First Convention of People's Deputies was his call finally taken seriously. Soon this article was removed from the new Russian Constitution and other parties could be created.

Dr. Igor Kon did the same thing for LGBTQ rights as Sakharov did for civil rights. Kon was the first to introduce issues related to homosexuality into scientific discourse. More specifically, he shifted the terms of discussion about homosexuality away from medical issues and into the context of history and contemporary global social science. For this reason he was the main person who advocated the repeal of Article 121 of the Soviet Union Criminal Code, which criminalized homosexual relations. He undertook extensive efforts to convince Yeltsin's government to listen to his arguments (Kon, 2008, pp 337-338).

The decriminalization of gay relationships opened up opportunities in Russia for Western ideas of gay liberation to be explored and adopted. After removing the threat of criminal prosecution for gay sexual relationships, AIDS prevention started to play a significant role in establishing increased tolerance towards gays. AIDS prevention programs strove to create acceptance in the medical system, community based organizations, and in new NGOs that were beginning to be established at that time. Gay rights and gay organizations received support from many Russian medical doctors. Giving support to gays at that time was possible without the need for anyone to come-out personally. Gay issues became a legitimate scientific topic. At the same time, several gay mass media publications appeared, such as the *Kvir* magazine, and organizations began mobilizing for gay rights.

The global AIDS epidemic emphasized the need for sexual education to be part of AIDS prevention and the promotion of safe sex behavior. These trends facilitated the introduction of sex education in Russia. In the beginning of the 1990s these social changes and new understandings seemed necessary because of the global AIDS epidemic and the illusion that Russia was experiencing a sudden and unexpected sexual freedom that could continue with the next generations. But these progressive tendencies in human rights, and accompanying ideas of sexual rights and gay rights, were immediately confronted by counter reactions from the emerging conservative opposition, gaining strength through the rejuvenation of the Russian Orthodox Church in the late 1990s. (Kon, 2005)

These conservative trends soon became stronger than the progressive ones. In 1998 The Ministry of Education refused to include sex education in the national school curriculum. A heterocentric ideology prevailed and shut down the discussions on LGBTQ people and gay rights that had just begun to develop.

It is important to note that before the beginning of Perestroika in 1985, the situation with gay rights was much worse than it is today. Gay people were considered both criminals and mentally ill at the same time. Any interest in gay issues in literature and art was considered suspicious. Gays could be treated either from a medical perspective, as people with pathologies who needed to be cured of their perverted interests and behaviors, or from a legal point of view, as criminals who needed to be punished for their behavior and isolated from society with up to 5 years in prison.

Igor Kon had the courage to mention homosexual people outside of both medical and legal contexts. He was the first person in the Soviet Union who described sexual relationships in general and homosexual relationships in particular, from psychological and sociological points of view (Kon, 1989). To be able to do so, he had to teach himself about unknown areas of human behavior. He was close friends with John Money and John Gangon, two titanic figures in the psychology and sociology of sexuality. Igor Kon, by his education, training, and life was a multidisciplinary scientist and thinker. His book, *Faces and Masks of Same Sex Love*, which includes the poetic subtitle, *Moonlight at Dawn*, was devoted to the description of same sex love from all possible angles (Kon, 2003). Though published in 1998, it has not been superseded in its importance by any other book in Russian published since. It is also a unique work that does not have analogues in English scientific literature, because it places same sex relationships in broader cultural, historic, and scientific contexts. The book describes perceptions of same sex relationships from medical, psychological, and sociological points of view. Also, the book is full of ethnographic and anthropological data.

For the last 20 years of his life Igor Kon was a strong proponent of healthy sexuality, LGBT rights, and sexual education. He was one of the courageous fighters against conservative moral attitudes and perceptions toward sexuality promoted by the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). On April 29, 2011 two days after Igor Kon passed away, one of the highest placed leaders in the ROC hierarchy, Dmitriy Smirnov, blogged about his opinion of the deceased (<http://www.dimitrysmirnov.ru/blog/cerkov-5279/>). Smirnov told of his joy at Kon's death, calling him a "pederast" and "pedophile" and stated that he hoped he would end up in Hell. The fact that a highly placed Church authority would express such aggressive and cruel statements reveals the strong fear the ROC had of Igor Kon as a critic of Church policies in the life of society.

On the last page of his book about same sex love, Igor Kon expressed his credo towards LGBTQ people, a statement which could be considered his legacy: "As long as gays and lesbians are objects of bullying and discrimination, everybody who considers himself/herself as a thinking person must support LGBTQ people's fight for their human rights." The second edition of the book was published in 2003. At that time making this statement took extreme courage in the blunt and harsh homophobic context of Russian culture. To say these words in Russia in 2017 is illegal due to the 2013 anti-progaganda bill on non-traditional relations. But there are no restrictions on quotes from dead people, yet. So Igor Kon continues to fight from his grave for what in many places in the world is the simple and obvious truth-- that LGBT people deserve equal rights. This has not yet been realized in Russia.

Conclusion

It took more than 45 years for me to share my personal story. It has not been easy to revisit painful memories and make them public. I spent all my life working in Psychology, which, as I thought, was the most humanistic social discipline. I still believe that psychologists in Russia have the greatest capacity of all the helping professions to promote scientifically supported data about human equality. I am a great supporter of the existing Ethical Code of the Russian Psychological Society, be-

cause it calls upon psychologists to respect people regardless of sexual orientation. The Code reminds us that psychology is a profession committed to safeguarding people's well-being, and it can therefore serve as a touchstone for practical efforts by Russian clinicians to contribute to the well-being of LGBTQ+ people, a promising step forward for justice.

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