Narrative analysis to the problem of information extremism in the student environment

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Abstract. The article analyzes students' narratives by the method of focus groups on the problem of attitudes towards young women who left for Syria. The authors attempted to reconstruct the girls' everyday discourse of "talking to a stranger on the Internet and going to Syria through interviews and focus-group communication". In the context of narrative analysis, the authors see two levels of the problem: the micro-level – the ability to identify the degree of sensitivity to the ideology of Islamic fundamentalism through attitudes to the practical actions of specific girls who have already gone to Syria. Macro-level – "intergenerational conflict" or "intergenerational rift". The result of intergenerational conflict in North Caucasus societies is often a religiously-extremist way of behaving to adults who do not share their "excessive immersion in Islam" to the detriment of traditional normative values. The analysis of youth narratives concerning the "departed" can also serve as an explanatory model for the response to a broader problem, namely the development of intergenerational dynamics in the context of a clash of values between the traditional culture of local societies and Islamic fundamentalism. In this two-level perspective, we see the prospect of further research into the problem of extremism in North Caucasian societies. In this article, we have designated the macro level as the "background site". In our reconstruction of the everyday discourse of university students on the problem of "girls leaving for Syria", we came to the following conclusions. The evaluations revealed the admissibility of sharing the spouse's fate as an attributive understanding of marital duty within the framework of Islamic ideology. In the opinion of female students, the loneliness of girls, domestic violence, and the search for a "real man" can also serve as a possible decision for young women to communicate online with a stranger. The relevance of the problem of analyzing narratives is the need to comprehend the palette of opinions of a part of the youth audience, which is not considered to be young people in the "risk zone".
Keywords: information extremism, narrative, women's motivation

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1 Introduction

At all times, young people are held hostage to their time and the result of the activities of previous generations, transformations of various kinds of processes, where ideology and values play a key role [1]. The generation of young people in the Chechen Republic, whose formation has taken place at the turning point of the country's and the nation's history, geopolitical conflicts, socio-economic reforms, spiritual and moral trials, has found itself in special circumstances. One of these triggers of worldview transformation is extremism. Today, the influence of extremism via the Internet on the minds of some young people is taking on a scale that requires a variety of theoretical and experimental approaches.

Therefore, the object of our analysis was student youth (girls), and the subject was the discourses through which girls commented on young women leaving for extremist organizations via social media. The attitude framework was determined by how much the girls problematized or deproblematized this kind of "going away to Syria" of their peers. First, such information allows to measure the moods in the youth environment and identify the presence or absence of fear and panic among girls about involvement through recruitment Internet channels. Second, to understand what discourses/rhetoric regarding "going away" prevail among girls as well as what meanings they produce, thereby creating a wide range of social problems in society, to which researchers include "social pathology", "social disorganization", and "deviation" [2]. It must be recognized that any "problem" has no ontological status; it is a language construct, rhetoric containing demands for change [2].

Some researchers consider how a social problem is constituted through discourse to be of particular interest [3]. Their main focus is "the methods people use to define (and institutionalize) something as a social problem since these methods essentially constitute the phenomenon of social problems itself" [4]. However, reality outside of media discourse rarely comes to scholarly attention; in particular, very little research has focused on analyzing everyday interpretations of terrorism or involvement in organizations through social media. One attempt of this kind is the work of Claes Borell, which describes the everyday practices and perceptions of people living in an area prone to terrorist attacks [5-9]. Rhetorical idioms represent how they are problematized. Ibarra and Kitsuse describe such rhetorical idioms as the rhetoric of loss, entitlement, danger, irrationality, and the rhetoric of distress [10]. In recent years, the constructionist approach has taken a turn toward the everyday sector. As Ibarra and Kitsuse point out, "the discourse of social problems is found in all kinds of forums and among the widest range of individuals" [4]. Thus, constructionists attempt to analyze the construction of social problems that is "less visible, variously disguised – for example, through the use of subcultural style – but no less involved in expressing one's position concerning the moral order or commenting on the positions of others" [11].

The authors proceed from the methodological thesis that focus group interviews are also a form of constructing social problems. Involving the focus group within a certain problem to record information from each of the participants and their dialogues on the designated questions of the topic allows identifying rhetoric intended not in the public space. That is, dialogue with the interviewer involves rhetoric and counter-rhetoric, making demands and neutralizing them, not in public space, but in everyday life. Since the strict constructionist approach focuses exclusively on the discourse of social problems, leaving aside questions on the existence of grounds in the interviewers' assessments of the presence or absence of a real threat of recruiting girls and young women into extremist organizations via the Internet. Our goal is to reconstruct the everyday discourse of university students on the problem of "girls going to Syria" through the recruitment Internet social media channels.

2 Materials and methods

The study was based on a strict version of the constructionist approach to social problems, which excludes the assumption of girls' existence or potential threat to communicating with recruiters on the Internet. In the context of this theoretical framework, information extremism was seen as one of the "possible conditions-categories" concerning which the discourses of problematization in focus groups unfolded.

The study specifics were focused not on girls' public statements but on everyday forms of constructing social problems ("feeling lonely", "I wanted to communicate with someone who would understand", "there is such routine around, but I want something unusual", "no one understands me at home, no one considers me, they humiliate me", "everyone is lying around, it makes me sick", "Who knows who the extremists are, them or us"), "by the way, I met very good and clever girls, so they left, so what"? "Well, she went to her husband, she wanted to be with him, what does her terrorism have to do with it?") such a narrative was traced during focus-group discussions). The study revealed rhetorical idioms about the girls who went to Syria: "you should have thought about your relatives", "naive, how can you fall in love over the Internet?", "maybe they believe in some higher idea; it happens, right?" There was also dramatic rhetoric "they say there is sexual slavery", "I feel sorry for her mother and relatives". The statements of some of the girls indicated a lack of social distance between those who left and them. "Well, she didn't know, but what if she fell in love?"; "There are decent people there too, even though they are fighting", "It seems to me that they are pushed there by great faith", "People won't give their lives for nothing"; "Well, I don't know, in this world, there are those who want to seek deep meaning, I think so"; "They would not humiliate at home with their suspicions, insults, they would not go anywhere," or else they would go nowhere, like prisoners..." These rhetorical idioms were mediated information material, revealing the attitude of the respondents in the focus group towards the victims of informational extremism. At the same time, it should be noted that the current situation in sociological science [12] is not conducive to an adequate analysis of such complex social problems as the motives, methods, and means of informational recruitment of young people by extremist organizations [13]. This situation greatly limits the researcher in the methods of collecting primary sociological information. The focus group method allows through not direct but indirect dialogue with potential carriers of certain information on this problem, that is, young people, to identify the public sentiment among them.

2.1 The experiment

The article is based on the materials of focus-group interviews with female second-year law students (N=8; N=10) of the Chechen State University. The age range of girls: 18-20 years old. The timing of the study was December 2020. The interview included several semantic blocks devoted to the issues of interests, values, frequency of communication in networks, the type of information posted in social networks, motives of temporality in the virtual world, the degree of comfort/uncomfort.

The rhetoric of danger. The students did not use the rhetoric of anxiety in their communication, conditioning potentially catastrophic in their fate. At the same time, in several cases, respondents commented on elements of similar but also non-dramatic anxiety rhetoric "they say there they make you marry a militant after the death of your husband along with your children, it's so strange..." According to the rhetoric of danger, condition categories are problematic because they pose unacceptable risks to one's health and safety [4]. Some researchers include the terms "pathology", "disease", "epidemic", "risk", "contamination", and "threat to health" in the rhetoric of danger and threat of involvement in extremism by respondents [14].

In our research, the rhetoric of female respondents focused more on terms that included emotional connotations such as "sorry for the relatives, for the mother", "what to do with children born in war?" and "you listen to these husbands, and then...?"

The low prevalence of this type of rhetoric in responses to interviewer questions does not mean that respondents do not identify the situation around recruitment in networks as a danger. However, in the answers, there was a certainty that this happens to naive and romantic girls or girls from troubled families and that this situation will not affect them.

"I think it's stupid to believe beautiful stories on the Internet, although, some people are naive, so they take the bait" (19 years).

Overall, there was a slight sense of tension in the focus groups. This condition can be explained by the ideological background – the topic of online extremism is extremely relevant in Chechnya, so there was a fear of allowing "liberty" or "loyalty" to the topic of extremism in one's judgments.

3 Results

Analysis of the focus group work showed that the dominant way of problematizing the "departure of girls for recruitment" was through the rhetoric of irrationality. The application of this rhetorical idiom, noted by Ibarra and Kitsuse, depends on the ability to describe the situation in terms that highlight concerns about exploitation, manipulation, and brainwashing.

Recruited girls are labeled within the rhetoric of irrationality as "gullible", "naïve", "innocent", "uneducated", "ignorant", "driven to despair", "easy prey" [4]. The respondents in the focus groups mentioned exactly this kind of terminology, suggesting young girls are vulnerable to manipulation. The respondents were asked to describe their experiences of being "easily suggestible", "driven", "weak", "looking for a brave knight", "bogged down by domestic life", "romantic", "inexperienced", "not thinking about the consequences", "running away from domestic violence or humiliation", "easily suggestible", "no education". The focus group participants also described the potential recruiter as a "smart psychologist", "able to gain a girl's trust", "able to easily brainwash".

There is a contradiction here, concluding, on the one hand, with the use in the responses of the rhetoric of irrationality concerning the "departed" and, on the other hand, with the description of the recruiter as a "clever psychologist", someone before whom no one can resist. Perhaps through this explanatory model, the girls are latently trying to rationalize the departure of women through recruitment networks. The respondents indirectly confirm this in the narratives: "well, she went to get her husband, and what could she do, he is her husband?", "very smart girl", "she was so modest", "these recruiters are very talented, that's how it turns out".

Thus, the analysis of the discourse narratives of female students in the focus group under study showed that, in their opinion, the alleged motives for some young women to leave for extremist organizations through the recruitment channels of the Internet may be:

1) the desire to share her husband's fate and thus show her fidelity to her marital and religious duty;

2) the costs of gender inequality in traditional local societies sometimes make it attractive for women to participate in terrorism as an act of "equalization" with men in the struggle "for the purity of the faith";

3) Women's domestic violence at home is one of the factors that extremist psychologists use in recruiting their victims;

4) the search for a romantic hero, a beloved person who will make a marriage happy, one of the motivations of women who become victims of information propaganda;

5) inner loneliness, the search for meaning in life, the attempt to diversify everyday life – this is often the motive for a girl who enters into virtual contacts with recruiters of extremist organizations.

4 Discussion

The high rates of social transformation, Islamic ideological pluralism, and the increased protest potential of young people against this background are often seen in the public consciousness as a means of self-assertion of the young against the traditional pressure of parental authority. This conflict largely determines the dynamics of intergenerational relations in North Caucasian societies. These processes have been pointed out by several researchers of North Caucasian societies [5, 15]. One of the basic triggers of the process is the ideology of Islamic fundamentalism, with its complex of clear, unambiguous, predictable moral imperatives (the truth is only in divine laws, the world must conform to the values of the times of the "four righteous caliphs", you must abandon everything that is not prescribed in the Quran and Hadith). There is little room here for the presence of the traditional basic behavioral imperative of Vainakh societies, where children obeyed their fathers' experiences, values, and beliefs without question. For centuries this has been the main discourse of the moral and ethical, pedagogical matrix of upbringing in the traditional culture of local societies.

Returning to our particular problem, that is, the fascination of the female part of society with the ideology of Islamic fundamentalism, we see an evolution in the behavioral practices of women as well. We see her formal autonomy in making strategic decisions in her destiny: to leave for another country, to have the right to believe in an ideology that is often not shared by her blood family, allow herself the independent choice of a marriage partner fighting in a foreign country cardinally changing her living space. Acts for a woman that are unacceptable in the customs and traditions of ethnic culture of North Caucasian societies.

It appears that radicalism is becoming a form of indulgence for some young women before family and society in presenting their subjectivity under the "umbrella" of "pure Islam". This is a completely new phenomenon in the behavioral pra*ctices of girls and young women.*

Chechen customs and traditions, which were based on the primacy of male worship, the absolute submission of girls to the will of their fathers and elders, and the regulation of their private life, leave no room for independent ideological preferences and do not envisage such independent decisions. We encounter practices in which a young woman decides for herself why, to whom, and in the name of what idea (however false, imposed by someone) she secretly leaves home and travels alone to a foreign country. It is a certain challenge to society, expressed in an act beyond the family's control. Young girls' fascination with extremist ideology through the Internet is part of the general problem of strengthening Islamic fundamentalism through protest and defiance of traditional morality, which lacks female subjectivity: neither legal, social, nor ideological.

5 Conclusion

Our findings, based on the analysis of the discourse narratives of female students in the focus group studied, showed that the attitude towards the departure of young women to Syria does not always fully coincide with public discourse – there is an extremely negative reaction to such "female behaviour". Our findings, based on the analysis of the discourse narratives of female students in the focus group studied, showed that the attitude towards

the departure of young women to Syria does not always fully coincide with public discourse – there is an extremely negative reaction to such "female behaviour". The discourse in the public mind mainly revolves around the following discourse: "go to an unknown person, unknown place, for an unknown reason". Likewise, condemnation of young women's attempts to solve ideological problems ("unladylike business") employing war, all the more on foreign territory. In the youth subculture, the condemnation of the "departed girls", as we have seen from the study, is not so unambiguous.

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