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# **Lesbian identities and everyday space in contemporary urban Russia**

**by**

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## Abstract

Within the social sciences, the extensive literature on homosexuality as a socio-cultural construct and on ‘queer’ identities and experiences generally focuses on Western European or Anglo-American societies. Sexuality and homosexuality remain relatively unexplored fields of enquiry within Russian studies, even if it is usually acknowledged that the complex transformations undergone by Russian society since the fall of the communist system have deeply affected sexual practices and attitudes to sex and sexuality. This thesis addresses a gap in the literature by exploring how ‘lesbian’ identities, broadly understood as encompassing the whole spectrum of LBT (lesbian, bisexual, transgender/transsexual) women’s sexualities, are (re)constructed and (re)negotiated in contemporary Russia. It draws on data generated through participant observation, ethnographic interviews with sixty-one queer-identified women, and expert interviews with activists in local community initiatives; ethnographic data is framed within a broader analysis of discourses on lesbianism in popular culture and the media.

The thesis critically assesses the centrality of the ‘East/West’ binary in the existing literature on Russian sexualities. Rather than imposing Western-centric categories of identity, it explores women’s own identifications and the meanings they attach to them, framing them within shifting discourses on sexuality, gender and morality across the Soviet and post-Soviet period. The thesis also looks at how sexual identities are performed, negotiated and expressed across everyday contexts such as the home, the workplace, and the street. It interrogates women’s strategies of identity negotiation, highlighting the constraining effects of heteronormative and gendered notions of respectability, but also foregrounding the importance of individual agency. The thesis also maps ‘lesbian/queer’ space in the different urban settings of Moscow and provincial Ul’ianovsk. It explores how ‘lesbian/queer’ space is collectively carved out of the city landscape, while also examining the cultural practices and patterns of socialising attached to specific ‘lesbian’ settings; it also highlights the role of ‘lesbian/queer’ space in validating and performatively producing shared notions of non-heteronormative sexual identities.

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## Introduction

The end of communist power in Eastern Europe represents a historical landmark and an epochal event in popular imagination. In its aftermath, the socialist social order was quite abruptly replaced by a social, political and economic system modelled on Western liberal democracy and market capitalism. The profound political, economic, social and cultural transformations that led to and followed the fall of communism have been the object of a vast body of literature, produced both by scholars based in the region and further afield (see for example Flynn, Kay and Oldfield 2008; Humphrey 2002; Andrusz, Harloe and Szelenyi 1996). This body of work has engaged with disparate aspects of socio-cultural change, and with the impact of these transformations on the lives of different social groups in Eastern European societies. However, sexuality remains a relatively unexplored field of enquiry, even though it is often acknowledged that the region has undergone a sexual revolution of sorts (Kon 1995): communist censorship and prurience on sexual matters has given way to a veritable explosion of sexually explicit images in the media, and sexual practices have been significantly affected by shifting discourses on sexuality.

The present study explores post-socialist sexualities by focusing on the identities and experiences of non-heterosexual women in urban Russia. The research is positioned at the intersection of two multidisciplinary fields of study: Russian /Eastern European area studies and gay and lesbian/queer studies. The study aims to contribute to both these strands of literature. My motivations for focusing on non-heterosexual women are, to some extent, personal and (therefore) political: as a lesbian woman, I found the silence surrounding same-sex relations in the literature on Soviet/post-Soviet Russia very telling, and the invisibility of relations between women particularly striking. Even in the vast literature available on Russian women, sexual orientation is often glossed over or overlooked. Only very recently have sexuality and homosexuality in the Russian context become the focus of academic research (for an overview see Nartova 2007; Temkina and Zdravomyslova 2002). My intent was to put these women in the picture, and explore how their sexuality affects both intimate and public aspects of their lives, from their

relationships, to their sense of self, to their family status, to the ways in which they negotiate the street and the workplace.

This study certainly addresses a gap in the literature, as Russian homosexualities and particularly female same-sex relations have so far remained a neglected field of enquiry, both within national and foreign academic literature. For different reasons, sexuality, and homosexuality in particular, have long remained off-limits topics both for Soviet researchers and for Western ‘Sovietologists’. Research on Russian homosexualities slowly took off in the 1990s, both in Russia and abroad. The first volume published in Russia for a popular audience, and entirely focussed on homosexuality, was released in 1998 (Kon 1998)<sup>1</sup>. Its author, Igor’ Semenovich Kon, a sexologist and sociologist, has pioneered studies on sexuality within Russian academia since the 1980s. His book is considered a classic of homosexualities studies in Russia, and has contributed to the partial ‘normalisation’ of homosexuality both as a social phenomenon and as a legitimate research subject in Russian society (Nartova 2007:315). However, a substantial amount of work on Russian homosexualities has been written by foreign researchers and published abroad (Baer 2002).

Recent publications on Russian homosexualities have focused on ‘queer’ themes in Russian literature and popular culture (Burgin 1993, 1994; Adlam 2008, 2005; Karlinsky 1989); representation of and discourses on homosexuality (Baer 2005, 2002; Nartova 2004a; Gurova 2003; Healey 2001, 1993; Omel’chenko 1999); gay men and lesbians’ rights and social status in post-Soviet Russia (Kirsanov 2005, 2004; Essig 1999; Kon 1998, 1997, 1993; Gessen 1997, 1994; Tuller 1996); and the emergence of gay and lesbian communities and identity politics in post-Soviet Russia (Nemtsev 2007; Zven’eva 2007; Essig 1999; LeGendre 1998; Gessen 1994). Only a handful of studies, however, are based on empirical qualitative data and engage directly with non-heterosexual men and women’s experiences, focusing on topics such as homophobia, lesbian and gay subculture, and ‘queer’ communities and space (Nartova 1999, 2004b, 2004c; Omel’chenko 2002a, 2002b, 2004; Zelenina 2006; Sarajeva 2008). The present study is positioned within this still narrow but growing body of literature, located mainly within the disciplines of sociology and anthropology, which prioritises a micro-level analysis.

The study draws chiefly on ethnographic data, collected during two periods of fieldwork in 2004-05. Primary data, examined in Chapters Four to Seven, include semi-structured

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<sup>1</sup> See also Golod and Kuznetsova 2002 for an annotated bibliography of academic works published in Russia in the 1990s on social aspects of sexuality.

interviews and participant observation; these were carried out within specific 'lesbian' networks in the cities of Moscow and U'ianovsk. The thesis is structured along two separate, but intertwined lines of enquiry; both are concerned with issues of identity, understood as socially constructed, fluid and performative (Butler 1990/1999). The first line of enquiry, explored in Chapters Three and Four, is concerned with the (re) construction and (re)negotiation of non-heterosexual identities in contemporary Russia. Chapter Four explores self-identifications, patterns of socialising and negotiation of same-sex relationships among women from different generational cohorts. Chapter Three outlines shifting discourses on (homo)sexuality across the late Soviet and post-Soviet period, framing women's experiences in a broader historical and socio-cultural context. The second line of enquiry, addressed in Chapters Five to Seven, investigates the ways in which mechanisms of marginalisation and exclusion, perpetuated at the level of discourse, are experienced by non-heterosexual women, and the strategies they employ to manage their identity across private and public settings. The tension between individual/collective agency and structure, embodied in dominant discourses on sexuality and in norms regulating the visibility of sexuality in space, is central to this research project and runs through all the chapters of this thesis. The thesis highlights both the ways in which individual experience is shaped by normative constructions of sexuality and gender, as well as the ways in which individuals and groups respond to these norms, by subverting, reinforcing and/or adapting to them.

## **Setting the terms of the debate: sexuality, identity and terminology**

This study revolves around the key concepts of sexuality, identity and sexual identity. The thesis is informed by interdisciplinary theoretical debates about the social nature of identity and sexuality; these will be analysed in greater detail in Chapter One. A working definition of these concepts, however, is offered here, together with a discussion of the complex and ambiguous relations between sexual identity and language. This is necessary in order to clarify the terminology used in the following chapters.

In this study, sexuality is understood as socially constructed, and as intimately linked with gender. Gender and sex have long been theorised as distinctive notions: while the former is

posited as the domain of the social, the latter is conceived as the domain of the natural and the biological (Valentine 2001). However, recent theoretical developments within queer and feminist studies have tended to collapse these two categories. In Judith Butler's words, gender cannot be seen as "the cultural interpretation of sex, if sex itself is a gendered category" (Butler 1990/1999:7). In the Western world, the ways in which we interpret certain sexual practices as heterosexual or homosexual is filtered through our binary understanding of gender. Therefore,

[G]ender is not to culture what sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which "sexed nature" or "a natural sex" is produced and established as "prediscursive", prior to culture, a politically neutral surface *on which* culture acts (Butler 1990/1999:7)<sup>2</sup>.

Recent developments within the social sciences have highlighted the historically and culturally constructed character of sexuality, highlighting the different interpretations attached to certain sexual practices across space and time (Weeks, Holland and Waites 2003; Lewin and Leap 2002; Jackson 1999; Seidman 1996). Both sexuality and gender are deeply implicated with dominant notions of femininity and masculinity, and concur to 'naturalise' them. The premise that there is a deep and complex link between sexuality and gender is central to this study. The thesis' most immediate concern is for women's non-heteronormative sexual identities and practices; however, while foregrounding sexuality, gender is always present as a subtext throughout the thesis. By exploring how individual experiences are shaped by the regulatory forces of sexuality and gender, it also contributes to our understanding of the post-Soviet "gender climate" (Kay 2000), and how the latter has been shaped by the 'sexual revolution' of the 1990s.

Besides highlighting the culturally constructed character of both sexuality and gender, debates within gay and lesbian/queer studies have also stressed the elusive and fluid character of sexual identities. It is simplistic to reduce 'identity', as a theoretical concept and field of enquiry, to a matter of semantics. However, since identities are expressed through labels and categories, they are deeply implicated with languages and their cultural nuances. It is therefore imperative to define clearly what is meant by categories of sexual identity such as 'lesbian' or 'queer', which will be used throughout the thesis. Seemingly objective labels, such as 'heterosexual'/'homosexual', and 'gay'/'lesbian' are, on closer inspection, far from neutral or universal. A vast body of literature shows that same-sex desire has been conceptualised and perceived differently over time and across socio-

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<sup>2</sup> The emphasis is mine.

cultural contexts (see for example Weeks; Holland and Waites 2003; Lewin and Leap 2002; Foucault 1978/1998). For example, the label 'homosexual' was mainstreamed in Western Europe only in the 18th and 19th century through the medium of scientific and legal discourses (Greenberg and Bystrin 1997; Weeks 1996). This label, however, was soon exported to other parts of the world, owing to the influence of Western scientific knowledge and to the process of colonisation (Binnie 2004; Murray 1995; on Russia, see Healey 2001; Engelstein 1993, 1992). The mainstreaming of the labels 'gay' and 'lesbian' as positive markers of cultural belonging is commonly acknowledged to be a phenomenon originating in 'the West'. The use of these terms was promoted, since the 1970s, by an increasingly vocal gay liberation movement and by new niches of consumer culture. The fact that they have become common currency in other parts of the world is generally ascribed to a broader process of cultural globalisation (Leap 2002; Altman 1996). Terms like 'homosexuality' / 'heterosexuality', 'gay' / 'straight' reflect binary constructs of sexuality and gender, deeply rooted in Western culture but alien to other societies (Butler 1990/1999; Sedgwick 1990).

How well, then, do terms like 'gay', 'lesbian', 'bisexual' and 'queer' translate into Russian language and culture? This is not just an idle intellectual curiosity: indeed, languages reflect heterogeneous conceptual worlds, and represent different social realities (Müller 2007; Besemeres and Wierzbicka 2007). Research conducted in the early 1990s indicated that Russians involved in non-heterosexual practices were extremely reluctant to 'fit' into rigid binary categories such as 'gay' or 'straight'. American sociologist Laurie Essig (1999) argues that Russian 'queers' refuse to identify according to their sexual practices, and that the terms of identification they use are inherently more fluid than Western categories. The literature also suggests that the reason why individuals involved in non-heteronormative sexual practices refuse definite categories of sexual identity should be sought in Russian culture, and particularly in the Soviet heritage. Neither Western-style gay consumer culture, a by-product of market capitalism, nor identity politics, deeply rooted in the liberal discourse of individual rights and freedoms, played a significant part in the construction of Soviet homosexualities (Engelstein 1993; Foucault 1978/1998).

Issues of terminology are not merely a matter of defining the focus of this study; sexual identities, their culturally specific character, and the terminology that defines them, are *themselves* the object of enquiry of this work. In other words, is it possible to unproblematically refer to 'lesbian', 'bisexual' or 'queer' identities in contemporary urban Russia? Debates are further complicated by the fact that categories of sexuality and sexual identities are deeply intertwined with discourses of modernity in the literature on

sexualities (Weeks 1996). Are Russian homosexualities ‘pre-modern’ or ‘post-modern’ compared to Western ones? Are Russian non-heterosexuals unknowingly ‘queerer’ than ‘us’, as Essig (1999) and Tuller (1996) seem to argue? Should Western homosexualities be taken to be “the normative measure of sameness and difference”, anyway (Manderson and Jolly 1997:22, quoted in Binnie 2004:3)?

It should be kept in mind, however, that the ambiguity of sexual identities is a conceptual problem which has long fascinated and puzzled researchers. In the past two decades, research has pointed out the fluid and conditional character of sexual identities, by showing how individuals sometimes resist binary categories of identification (homosexual/heterosexual, male/female), perceiving them as inadequate to describe who they are (Seidman 1996; Rust 2000). Moreover, ambiguities emerge between sexual practices, ascribed public identities and self-identifications, and how their intersections are differently read and interpreted by individuals. However inaccurate, conditional and arbitrary categories of sexual identities may be, it remains a fact that it is impossible to do away with them altogether. As Weeks argues, sexual labels are “necessary fictions”: not only are they needed for the sake of clarity and intellectual rigour in academic work; they also remain consequential in the lives of individuals, who ascribe meanings and importance to them (Weeks 2003).

Throughout this study, categories such as ‘lesbian’, ‘bisexual’, ‘heterosexual’ will be used in describing the Russian context; however a note on the terminology itself, and on its nuances, is in order at this stage. It is important to stress that this account has been put together retrospectively: rather than imposing my own categories, women’s own self-identifications and the meanings they attached to them were recorded and explored through interviews and participant observation<sup>3</sup>. The women involved in this project used a variety of terms to define themselves and others, ranging from colloquial terms such as *tema/temnaia* and *takaia*, to ‘lesbian’, ‘bisexual’ and ‘ex-heterosexual’. For this reason, throughout the thesis, participants are usually referred to as non-heterosexual women, or as ‘queer’ (in inverted commas). Only in the title of the thesis, for the sake of clarity and convention, they are collectively defined as ‘lesbian’; in this instance ‘lesbian’ is used to refer to the whole spectrum of LBT (lesbian, bisexual, transgender<sup>4</sup>) sexual practices and

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<sup>3</sup> For a detailed discussion of the methodological underpinnings implicit in selecting research settings and interviewees, and of the issues arising in the field, see Chapter Two.

<sup>4</sup> The term ‘transgender’ can be used as an encompassing term for transsexual, transvestite and various forms of gender-crossing; hereafter the abbreviation T will be used for ‘transgender’, unless otherwise stated.

identities, although collectively participants are better described by ‘non-heterosexual’. The colloquial terms *tema/ temnaia* and *takaia* have been translated into English as ‘queer’, for want of a better word. The rendition is inevitably unsatisfactory; translations can only strive for equivalence between two languages, but are unable to convey fully the emotional and semantic connotations of the original language (Müller 2007). Both *tema* and *takaia* are neutral words; unlike ‘queer’, they are not a derogatory label which has later been reclaimed, and they are not linked to 1990s queer politics/queer theory. *Tema/ temny/ temnaia* literally means ‘on the theme’, but is better translated into current English as a euphemistic expression such as ‘like that’ (“Ona - tema” translates as “She’s like that”). *Takaia/ takoi*, used more sporadically by participants, literally means ‘like that’. Like ‘queer’, however, these terms are more blurred than the binary categories ‘heterosexual/homosexual’, referring more loosely to both men and women not conforming to dominant gender and sexual norms. Whenever these colloquialisms have been used in interviews quoted, the Russian term is preserved; elsewhere, however, in order to avoid cumbersome and awkward language, they have been translated as ‘queer’, in inverted commas. The reader should keep in mind that ‘queer’ is used as synonym of ‘non-heterosexual’, particularly in the empirical chapters of the thesis<sup>5</sup>. More clearcut labels, such as *lesbiianka*, *natural’ka* and *biseksual’ka* (‘lesbian’, ‘straight’ [literally ‘natural’] and ‘bisexual’) were also widely used by participants. ‘Lesbian’, in particular, was not just the chosen term of self-identification of many women; it was also used to refer to some informal groups (*tusovki*) or community/leisure spaces<sup>6</sup>. My use of ‘lesbian’ (and, more occasionally, ‘bisexual’ and ‘straight’) reflects women’s own use. Women’s uses of the terms discussed above will be analysed in greater detail in Chapter Four.

## Post-socialism and Russian homosexualities

Rather than uncritically using Western-centric categories and terminology, this study attempts to understand Russian sexualities within their own framework of cultural references and temporal-spatial context. In this respect, theories of post-socialism have also informed this study. Post-socialism has had an important role in challenging ethnocentric notions of modernity and development within area studies, notions which

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<sup>5</sup> Queer is also used, without inverted commas, with reference to queer theory/politics in the more conceptual parts of the thesis, such as the literature review and the methodology chapters.

<sup>6</sup> Spaces and networks were referred to as ‘temnye’ or as ‘lesbian’, rather than as ‘lesbian and bisexual’, or LGBT. Bisexuality has recently been recognised as an identity in its own right in Western ‘queer’ politics, and increasingly in academic and mainstream discourses on sexuality (Rust 2000). However, this does not seem to be the case in Russia, where bisexual women are generally subsumed in the category ‘lesbian’ and do not seem to have organised separate groups within existing ‘queer/lesbian’ networks and grassroots groups.

seem to be implied in much of the literature on 'transition'. Particularly in the immediate aftermath of the fall of communism, the social, political and economic transformations occurring in Eastern Europe were framed in terms of 'transition'. The need to elaborate strategies to deal with economic and social instability called for definite and practical answers, from local policy-makers as well as from the international community. However, as Hann argues, the more or less explicit assumption was that the desired outcomes were already known: Western-style market capitalism, liberal democracy and civil society (Hann, Humphrey and Verdery 2002; for other critical views on transition see Flynn and Oldfield 2006; Wedel 2001, Burawoy and Verdery 1999). In its insistence on the need to break with the socialist past, the 'transition' narrative perpetuated the East/West dichotomy inherited from the Cold War, and tended to see the region's socialist heritage as a negative factor that hindered progress towards economic stability and political pluralism. Alternative interpretations of the transformations occurring in Eastern European societies emerged from studies privileging a 'local' perspective, qualitative research and a micro-level analysis. These approaches have been "driven less by the overwhelming metanarratives of transition than the complex, diverse and everyday transformations of people's lives" (Stenning 2005: 998). While the shared experience of socialist organisation of society is understood as a framework for comparison in the region ("post-socialism"), these accounts are more sensitive to local cultures and attuned to regional variation. Rather than analysing socialism as a totalitarian ideology, this body of work has tended to address it in terms of practices and institutions; in so doing, it has problematised the universality of taken-for-granted theoretical concepts such as 'civil society' and 'democracy'. This approach has also emphasised the importance of interpreting Eastern Europe's present in terms of *both* change and continuity with its socialist past.

The importance of locating Russian homosexualities within a historical perspective, exploring their relations with the Soviet past rather than simply dismissing the latter as a 'dark age' when expression of non-heteronormative sexualities was repressed and driven underground, is central to the present study. The narrative emerging from this study is not that of the sudden emancipation of lesbian sexuality from Soviet-era stigmatisation and invisibility, in the context of a 'sexual revolution' promoted by wider transformations within post-Soviet Russian society. The central concern of this thesis is rather with shifting discourses on sexuality and gender, and with how these discourses translate into mechanisms of socio-cultural control that affect women's identifications and everyday practices. This involves looking into how the wide-ranging socio-economic and cultural transformations brought about by the end of communist power have affected private and public expressions of non-heteronormative sexualities. As is customary for research on



post-socialist societies, this thesis includes, to some extent, a diachronic perspective. This dimension is especially relevant to Chapters Three and Four. These two sections deal respectively with public representations and available narratives of gender and sexualities in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia; and with the impact dominant discourses have, and have had, on women's identifications. This diachronic dimension is explored through generational difference: a deliberate attempt was made to recruit participants from different generational cohorts, although with mixed outcomes (see Chapter Two). My concern for exploring different experiences of same-sex relations across younger and older generations of Russian women was in part triggered by political considerations. The invisibility of homosexuality during the Soviet period has been used time and again in recent years to justify homophobic claims that 'other' sexualities are a phenomenon alien to Russian culture, a foreign influence corrupting the country's moral purity (Baer 2008). An example of this kind of rhetoric, which often has both openly homophobic and nationalistic overtones, can be found in the words of writer and nationalist politician Valentin Rasputin:

As far as homosexuals are concerned, let's keep Russia's purity. We have our own traditions. This form of relations between men was imported from abroad. If they think their rights are infringed, let them go and live in some other country! (Quoted in Healey 2001:251)

Although this statement dates back to 1991, such rhetoric is still very much alive in contemporary debates over public morality, demographic issues and family values (Rivkin-Fisch 1999, 2006; see also Chapter Three). Inasmuch as it helps us understanding contemporary phenomena, an analysis of the Soviet heritage is a central part of this study. While it cannot be ignored, the socialist legacy should not be overstated either: indeed, the category 'post-socialist' may become less and less relevant in future analysis of the region, as formerly communist countries move away from their common political heritage through diverging paths (Hann, Humphrey and Verdery 2002: 24-28). An exploration of shifting discourses on sexuality and gender may offer important insights into why in Russia homosexuality, rather than reproductive rights, seems to have become the defining issue in political debates on family values, unlike other Eastern European countries such as Poland (Gal and Kligman 2000). Moreover, cross-cultural empirical research alive to the cultural and linguistic nuances of a given national context can offer valuable insights, useful to problematise ethnocentric theoretical constructs. Binnie (2004) has noted the Anglo-American bias of gay and lesbian/queer studies, and has argued that this "parochialism fails to address different configurations of the relationship between globalisation, nationalism and sexualities" (Binnie 2004:8). In the tradition of ethnographic research, this

study aims to challenge the Western-centric bias of existing theory, and offer insights into the relations between 'global' and 'local' sexualities.

## **Negotiating sexual identities across private/public space**

While the first part of this thesis is concerned with locating and contextualising Russian sexualities and sexual identities, the second part of the study engages with performative notions of identity. In Chapters Five to Seven, sexual identities are grounded in everyday reality by situating them within specific physical and symbolic settings, such as the home, the workplace, the street and the 'gay' scene.

Concepts of structure and agency are, again, central to this part of the thesis: whereas in the first part structure was represented by discourse, in the second part structure is represented by space, and by the discursive practices and socio-cultural norms which regulate its use. The notion of performative identities, theorised by Judith Butler in relation to gender (Butler 1990/1999), has been employed in empirical research within human geography and sociology precisely to bridge the conceptual gap between structure and human agency (for a theoretical discussion see Nelson 1999; for examples of empirical research see Taylor 2007; Valentine, Skelton and Butler 2003; Valentine 1993, 1995; Holt and Griffin 2003). This body of literature shows how gender and sexual identities are performed and negotiated in and through space by examining individuals' negotiation of different social contexts and locations. This approach is also central to the present study, concerned with how regulatory mechanisms of marginalisation and stigmatisation, perpetuated at the level of discourse, are reflected in non-heterosexual women's negotiations of everyday spaces. For example, when and where are 'queer' identities signified and made visible, and which factors limit or enable their expression? What are the risks involved, and what are the strategies women use to safely negotiate everyday situations? How is everyday space appropriated and constructed as 'queer'?

This study is concerned with how cultural norms are embodied in women's strategies of identity negotiation. Rather than focusing exclusively on cases of open discrimination and violence, it foregrounds less overt practices of 'othering' and marginalisation; these often operate on a symbolic level, but are no less consequential or meaningful for the individuals involved. It also explores the ways in which women are *actively* involved in the

construction and negotiation of everyday space, highlighting individual and collective agency.

It is important at this stage to define the difference between space and place, as it is commonly understood in human geography. Whereas 'place' refers to a specific physical location, 'space' is not merely a physical setting, but also "a matrix of social relations" (Valentine 2001: 211). Unlike 'place', space is socially constructed through material and symbolic practices, and it is learned and experienced by individual agents as gendered and sexualised. Thus, a woman walking down a dark street at night may feel vulnerable to intimidation and violence, but she is also likely to be perceived as 'out of place' and be subjected to moral scrutiny for her behaviour, since public space is learned as a male domain, whereas women, the 'weak sex', 'naturally' belong to the private sphere of the home. One of the key dichotomies that is constantly used to symbolically demarcate and construct gendered and sexualised space is the public/private divide. As Gal and Kligman write,

[T]he public/private dichotomy is best understood as a discursive distinction that, once established, can be used to characterise, categorise, organise and contrast virtually any kind of social fact; spaces, institutions, groups, people's identities, discourses, activities, interaction, relations. Public and private are indexical signs, or shifters, always dependent for part of their referential meaning on the interactional contexts in which they are used (Gal and Kligman 2000:41).

Both spaces and identities can be marked as either private or public; at the same time, the boundaries between 'private' and 'public' are malleable precisely because they are constantly (re)negotiated and (re)constructed through social interaction (Moran and Skeggs 2004; Duncan 1996).

The interaction between 'private' and 'public' spaces and identities brings us to another important topic explored in the thesis, that of visibility/invisibility. How much leverage do individuals have in negotiating in/visibility across public and private settings? In addressing this question, this study engages with debates around the strategic value of in/visibility, which have long been central to both LGBT /queer politics and to academic literature on homosexualities. In/visibility can be variously used to appropriate space, to openly challenge heterosexism and homophobia, or to adapt by camouflaging and blending into the heterosexualised landscape. The importance of public recognition and visibility has always been central to Western LGBT politics, and to the consciousness of many non-

heterosexual individuals (Valentine 2003; Fraser 1999; Seidman, Meeks and Traschen 1999).

At the individual level, 'coming out' has been imagined as a way to challenge the oppressive silence surrounding homosexuality and overcome personal isolation and internalised homophobia (Sedgwick 1990). At the collective level, strategies to bolster public visibility of the LGBT community have become increasingly prominent: the global mainstreaming of gay pride parades, understood as a "collective coming out" (Valentine 2003: 231) testifies to this. Recent research, however, has exposed the Western-centric bias of these strategies, which may not be valued or even understood by those not exposed to the discourse of gay liberation (Malanansan 2002, 1997; Johnson 1998). Are 'outness' and visibility, values deeply entrenched in the gay and lesbian liberationist discourse, always sought after by Russian women? Where are 'lesbian' networks and gathering places located in Russian urban space, and how are they created and used? I address these questions with a focus on women's negotiation of everyday space, looking at their navigations across the home, the workplace, the street and the spaces occupied – sometimes temporarily – by 'lesbian' social networks.

Importantly, the study explores women's strategies of space negotiation in two distinct, and very different, urban settings: Moscow, a thriving global metropolis with a lively gay scene, and the provincial city of Ul'ianovsk, significantly smaller and less affluent than Moscow and with no recognisable 'scene' spaces as such. How do the experiences of women from Moscow and from provincial Ul'ianovsk compare, in terms of strategies of identity negotiation and opportunities to access 'lesbian' space? Previous research on Russian homosexualities has largely focused on either Moscow or St. Petersburg, ignoring provincial centres, where expressions of 'lesbian' subcultures, having no institutional base, remain largely invisible (Sarajeva 2008; Zelenina 2006; Nartova 1999; Rotikov 1998). The broader literature on (homo)sexualities also displays a metropolitan bias, while the experiences of individuals and communities from provincial and rural areas are often neglected (Binnie 2004; Knopp and Brown 2003). While trying to address this imbalance, by comparing Moscow and Ul'ianovsk I am hoping to provide a richer and more nuanced account of 'lesbian' life in Russia, and to contribute to broader debates about the relevance of place and space in the construction and everyday negotiation of sexual identities.

## Outline of thesis structure

This study can be roughly split into three thematic blocs: Chapters One and Two outline the theoretical and methodological underpinnings central to the research project, setting the context for the empirical chapters to follow. Chapters Three and Four focus on the interplay between discourse and identity: they explore shifting discourses on sexuality, gender and morality across the Soviet and post-Soviet period, and analyse their impacts on women's experiences and identifications. They also highlight the broad themes running through the thesis, namely the tensions between structure/agency, private/public and visibility/invisibility. Chapters Five to Seven concentrate on the second line of enquiry and look at how identities are performed, expressed or silenced across everyday space.

Chapter One engages with existing perspectives on and theoretical approaches to sexualities, drawing on literature from a variety of disciplines; it contextualises the present study within broader academic debates, with a focus on identity, sexuality and space, the key concepts which will be used throughout the thesis. Given the limited scope of existing literature on Russian (homo)sexualities, the chapter privileges Western theoretical perspectives, which are to some extent also dominant, or implied, in the work done on Russia. These, however, are not approached uncritically: their adequacy in explaining and accounting for Russian sexualities is appraised and interrogated, a process which is continued throughout the thesis. Sexuality is approached as a discourse or system of knowledge actively involved in the production of sexual identities, which are therefore not grounded in nature and biology, but in social history and culture, and bound up with prevailing notions of femininity and masculinity. Following from this, the concept of identity as performative and socially constructed is outlined. This approach to identity is considered particularly productive because of its ability to capture the tensions between structure and human agency, and its sensitivity to historical and geographical variation. Finally, I introduce the concept of space as socially produced and organised, and engage with the literature focusing on the interplay between identity, sexuality and space.

Chapter Two outlines the methodological approach used in the study, providing a rationale for the way the study was designed and researched, and detailing the methods of data collection and analysis used. It describes the urban locations and community settings under investigation, while also giving details about the research population, clearly defining the

boundaries and necessary limitations of the study. Throughout the chapter, I also try to situate myself, the researcher, within the research context and process, reflecting on the power dynamics, dis/comforts and contradictions involved in it and engaging with the ethical issues arising from it.

Chapter Three is based on a review of the literature on sexualities, homosexualities and gender in the Soviet Union and on a discussion of media representation of lesbianism in Putin's Russia. It explores the construction of public lesbian identities in post-Soviet Russia in terms of both historical continuity and change. The category 'lesbian', mostly defined by official legal and medical discourses during the Soviet period, has become a contested site of signification in contemporary Russia, with the emergence of competing and more diverse discourses on sexuality. Although it has recently gained a new visibility, being at once reclaimed as a legitimate social identity and mainstreamed by popular culture, mechanisms of marginalisation and exclusion persist in contemporary Russia. Rather than explaining them with reference to the inherently repressive and homophobic character of Soviet and post-Soviet institutions, these mechanisms are accounted for by drawing on literature which has highlighted how the construction of 'normative' and 'deviant' sexualities is deeply intertwined with the production of masculinities and femininities, and with the harnessing of women's sexuality into reproduction (Bulter 1990; Jackson 1999; Sedgwick 1990). Lesbian sexuality is thus constructed as deviant and 'antisocial' because of its non-procreative character, an argument which is used to delegitimise and constrain its public expressions, portrayed as polluting and potentially dangerous.

Having sketched the key discourses on lesbian sexuality across the Soviet and post-Soviet period, in Chapter Four I consider how these affect and impact on women's own experiences and identifications, drawing on in-depth ethnographic interviews. I seek to historicise, rather than essentialise, Russian sexual identities, and relate them to available social narratives. I examine the ways in which the quality and quantity of lesbian images in the public sphere affected different women's ability to form and access 'lesbian' networks, and how this is related to age and generation. I also analyse women's relationship patterns and marital status, and suggest that the monopolistic status of heterosexual marriage in Soviet society may account for the invisibility of lesbian sexuality in the Soviet Union, while its declining importance in contemporary Russia foregrounds same-sex relationships as an alternative model of family and intimate relationships. Finally, I examine the slang and terms of sexual identification used by interviewees, teasing out the meanings attached to them and relating them to dominant and alternative discourses.

Chapter Five moves on to explore women's identity negotiations within the home. Although the chapter primarily focuses on the parental home, it also looks beyond it, by considering 'home' not only as a socio-economic family unit, but also as a symbolic space associated with the heterosexual family. It outlines the role played by families in the lives of both young and older women in terms of support and in facilitating the possibility to secure an independent living space. It moves on to explore the ways in which women negotiate their relations within the parental home, a space often affording little privacy, and analyses the dis/comforts and consequences of 'coming out' or being 'outed'. Finally, it explores how the conceptualisation of home operates on a symbolic level, and how it affects women's opportunities to move out and form 'legitimate' families of their own.

Moving beyond the realm of the private, Chapter Six explores women's identity negotiations in the public settings of the workplace and the street. Firstly, it looks at the work environment as a formalised context where only specific gender and sexual performances can legitimately be displayed, and identifies women's strategies of self-management, which often involved setting boundaries and playing a difficult balancing act between outness and closetedness. Secondly, it explores women's navigations of the public street, a potentially unsafe environment where visible expressions of lesbian sexuality potentially 'stand out' and may trigger hostile reactions. The street, however, is also analysed as a space collectively inhabited and occupied by non-heterosexual women, who, in both Moscow and Ul'ianovsk, gather and socialise in very public places. The tensions between visibility/invisibility and private/public, explored in both chapters Five and Six, are further discussed in the final section of the chapter, which interrogates theoretical understandings of the gay closet by exploring their relevance in interpreting Russian lesbian and bisexual women's experiences and strategies of identity negotiation

Chapter Seven explores 'lesbian/queer' space by looking at the ways in which urban space is claimed, occupied and used, both collectively and individually, by lesbian women. It maps 'lesbian/queer' space in Moscow and Ul'ianovsk, outlining differences and similarities between them and stressing the temporary and often hidden character of women's claims to space. It also explores women's motivations for accessing 'lesbian/queer' networks, and their importance in allowing the performance of non-heteronormative gender and sexual identities. It also looks at the ways in which 'lesbian/queer' space is carved out from the urban landscape through collective engagement. In exploring women's perceptions and uses of 'queer' space, the chapter also critically examines the notion of 'lesbian/queer' space as neutral, pointing out how

'lesbian' networks and community initiatives crucially revolve around specific sets of social relationships, differentiated along class and gender lines.

The conclusion brings together the different strands and themes of the thesis; it also frames the findings of this study within current debates in gay and lesbian/queer studies and Russian studies, outlining possible lines of future enquiry and proposing new research agendas.



## **Chapter 1**

# **Contextualising Russian sexualities: a review of the literature**

## **Introduction**

The present chapter outlines the key debates, within academic literature on sexuality, that this thesis draws on, engages with, and contributes to. It presents the rationale for choosing a particular theoretical approach to the topic under investigation and positions this study within broader academic debates. It also outlines the central themes running through the thesis, particularly those of identity, sexuality and space, introducing key concepts that will be explored in the chapters to follow.

Central to the chapter is the concept of identity; in the sections to follow, a number of relevant theoretical and methodological approaches to it are discussed, drawing from a broad range of disciplines within the social sciences, including gay and lesbian/queer studies, sociology, anthropology, feminist theory, area studies and geography. Debates around ‘identity’ have had wide resonance within the social sciences in recent years, and the term has become something of a ubiquitous buzzword; yet identity is also a concept much contested and disputed. Both Kuus (2007) and Brubaker and Cooper (2000) lament the inconsistent use of ‘identity’ as a key analytical tool in research on Eastern Europe. Indeed, while often deployed as a commonsensical and taken for granted concept, ‘identity’ still “uneasily amalgamates constructivist language and essentialist assumptions” (Brubaker and Cooper 2000:6). Kuus observes that, within Central and East European studies, there has been a pronounced tendency to reify identities, which are often understood as a ‘cultural layer’ superimposed on “subjects like nations and states” (Kuus 2007:94); thus, “identities functions as a privileged sphere where explanations to complex

political issues are presumed to lie. When all else fails, there is always ‘identity’” (Kuus 2007:90).

Such accounts have often implicitly juxtaposed Eastern Europe to ‘the West’; while essentialising both, they have perpetuated a crude symbolic divide opposing ‘East’ and ‘West’ (Neumann 1999; Said 1978), dating back at least to the eighteenth century (Bova 2003; Wolff 1994). In recent years, this approach to ‘Eastern European identities’ has produced two distinct narratives. The first tends to reify the phenomena under scrutiny into discrete categories (“the Soviet mindset”, “Balkan mentalities” (Hann, Humphrey and Verdery 2002:9), while also presenting Eastern Europe as a ‘pre-modern’ or ‘underdeveloped’ region, trying to catch up with ‘the West’. The second narrative tends to make more of cultural differences, presenting them in a more positive light. However, a superficial recognition of cultural difference may translate into a facile cultural relativism, which romanticises Eastern Europe as the exotic ‘other’, while being unable to offer a critique of the power dynamics and inequalities existing within post-socialist societies (Baer 2002).

Even if there is a growing recognition that the symbolic boundaries between ‘East’ and ‘West’ are constantly re-imagined and reconstructed, avoiding the complex legacy of the East/West paradigm altogether is impossible, both for Western and for Eastern European researchers<sup>7</sup>. Denying or minimising difference under a pretence of universality is unhelpful, and the unavoidable biases and global power dynamics involved in the process of knowledge production certainly need to be acknowledged. However, it is possible to produce a more nuanced account, which avoids reifying East and West into polar opposites, by challenging essentialist notions of identity. Brubaker and Cooper suggest doing this by incorporating “into the core conception of identity the categorically destabilising dimensions of *time, space and relationality*”<sup>8</sup> (2000:11-12). Following Bruebaker and Cooper, the present chapter outlines debates within the social sciences stressing the social, historical, performative and relational character of identity. The chapter focuses in particular on theoretical and methodological approaches to sexual identities; it highlights their fluid and socially constructed character by exploring their spatial, temporal and relational dimensions.

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7 The notion of ‘the West’ as Russia’s imagined ‘other’ is deeply rooted in Russian culture. Alternately invoked as a model of development or rejected as profoundly alien to Russian culture, the ‘West’ has been, and still is, central to debates about the role and geopolitical position of Russia (Tolz 2001; Berdiaev 1947).

<sup>8</sup> The italics are mine.

The first section returns to the symbolic divide between 'East' and 'West' discussed above, and explores its central role in existing research on Russian sexualities. It discusses the factors which have made the 'East/West' paradigm so important, and points out the tensions involved in approaching Russian sexualities through theoretical constructs developed in Western societies. The section discusses theoretical perspectives aiming to complicate two-dimensional notions of 'Western' and 'Russian' sexualities, in order to reach a better understanding of sexual identities as theoretical constructs and as lived experience. In order to challenge the primacy of Western sexualities as the implicit model to reject or embrace, the remainder of the chapter discusses in some detail empirical studies and theoretical approaches to sexualities originating from the Western world. The second section, drawing on social constructivist theory, pinpoints the theoretical approach to 'identity' that the present study draws on. It discusses the relevance of identities debates to sexualities studies, and explores the socially and historically constructed character of sexual identities by briefly sketching the birth and historical development of the notion of 'sexuality', 'sexual identity' 'sexual orientation' and 'homosexuality' in Western societies. It also explores the changing meaning of homosexual identity, from its medicalisation in the 18th and 19th centuries to its reappropriation as a narrative of social identity through gay liberation and feminist politics. The third section outlines the theoretical shift, within Western literature on sexualities, from 'gay and lesbian' to 'queer' subjects, and the ways in which this shift has informed the present study. It discusses some of the methodological implications of moving from essentialist, binary notions of sexual identity, to performative and fluid ones. It also stressed the importance of a relational approach to the topic under investigation, highlighting the importance of shared narratives in shaping collective and individual identities.

Drawing on Butler (1990/1999), the following three sections foreground the performative aspect of sexual identities, and introduce the theme of space. Section Four defines space as both socially constructed and as an entity which is experienced and learned as gendered and sexualised. The symbolic 'private/public' divide is crucial to the ways in which space is organised and learned as ruled by dominant gender and sexual norms. However, looking beyond symbolic constructs of private/ public is necessary in order to foreground how individuals are actively involved in the negotiation and construction of space. Section Five highlights the porous character of space, as individuals constantly move across and between sexualised, gendered, raced and classed locations, and negotiate multiple facets of their identity in the process. It also argues for an approach which does not polarise space a priori as either heterosexual or 'queer', but takes a more holistic view of everyday space as negotiated and inhabited by non-heterosexuals, individually and collectively.

Section Six shifts the focus from the negotiation of everyday space to its appropriation by 'queer/lesbian' networks. Moving beyond taken-for-granted notions of 'community', often equated with the commercial scene and political organisations, the section shifts the focus to space which is less obviously appropriated as 'queer/lesbian' by non-heterosexual networks. The section also highlights the need to engage with individuals' dis/engagement with 'queer/lesbian' spaces and networks, and on the ways in which the latter are constructed through both inclusion and exclusion.

## **Geographies of sexual identities: 'queer Russia' and the 'global gay'**

The issue of how to approach Russian sexualities was, from the very beginning, central to this research project. Was the invisibility of same-sex relations between women during the Soviet period an indication of the fact that Russian sexualities were constructed along different notions of gender and sexual desire? Do Russian women involved in same-sex relations not identify on the basis of their sexual practices, unlike women in 'the West', as Essig (1999) argues? These questions emerged from the exploration of existing literature on Russian homosexualities, undertaken in the early stages of my research. Until very recently, this literature was mainly undertaken by Western researchers and published for an English-speaking audience outside of Russia itself.

In reviewing Western research on Russian homosexualities, Baer argues that the literature tends to be structured along an East/West divide:

When Russia was situated on the periphery of Western Europe, with its modern, egalitarian sexuality (the global gay), the Russian gay community would appear as either in transition or underdeveloped. But when Russia was situated in the East, where sexuality was imagined as premodern and had not yet been institutionalised into gay or straight, (homo)sexual desire there appeared to be radically different, polymorphous, a potential erotic alternative to the Western model of desire (Baer 2002:502).

The first viewpoint (Russian sexualities as 'in transition'), is represented in particular in the literature focusing on LGBT human rights and identity politics (Štulhofer and Sandfort 2006; Noël 2002; Schluter 2002). These texts often implicitly hold up Western 'liberated' sexualities and identity politics as the model oppressed Eastern European 'queers' should

follow in their path to emancipation. For example, in the introduction of a recently published volume on gender and sexuality in post-communist Europe, Štulhofer and Sandfort speculate:

In conclusion, it seems that in many respects postcommunist Europe is following the sexual trajectory of the West, probably with a delay of some two to three decades. Should we assume that in time sexual landscapes of the postcommunist East will become *the mirror image of the West*? If so, will it be the triumph of social and economic development, *the outcome of the successful modernisation of the East*?<sup>9</sup> (Štulhofer and Sandfort 2005:16).

This quote echoes the narrative of Eastern Europe as a peripheral, underdeveloped region, rehearsed in much ‘transitology’ literature. Having gone through an inherently fraught process of modernisation during the Communist period, the region now needed to ‘go West’, or ‘return to Europe’, in order to develop successfully. This narrative is problematic on two accounts: first, it assumes a universal notion of gay identity, lifestyle and politics (‘the global gay’), which can be exported across geographical boundaries, without questioning its culturally specific character. Secondly, in positing ‘the West’ as progressive and tolerant, it fails to acknowledge the conditional and limited progress achieved in the field of sexual politics in Western societies (Brickell 2001; Bell and Binnie 2000; Binnie 2004).

The second viewpoint (Russian constructs of sexuality as radically different and fluid) rejects the notion that Russian ‘queers’ should become, or are becoming, ‘like us’, but is still informed by the ‘East/West’ paradigm. This viewpoint is mainly reflected in the work of American researchers Laurie Essig (1999) and David Tuller (1996), who visited the country in the early 1990s. Both Essig and Tuller emphasise the inherent ‘otherness’ of Russian sexualities; the peculiar fluidity and indeterminacy of Russian sexual practices and identities is juxtaposed to Western binary constructs and their homogenising influence, mediated through the influence of Western activism and consumer culture. Like the previous approach, however, Western sexualities are represented in very stark terms (‘the global gay’, see Phillips 2000), without much acknowledgement of the very diverse sexual landscape that exists within and across Western societies (Binnie 2004). Moreover, as Baer remarks, this approach risks fetishising and glamourising Russian homosexualities as ‘different’ and ‘exotic’, while failing to provide an adequate critical framework to account for inequality, marginalisation and violence:

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<sup>9</sup> The italics are mine.

To imagine Russia as a sexually liberating alternative to the West may in fact disguise some all-too-familiar forms of persecution, discrimination, and violence, which sometimes occur in unfamiliar forms (Baer 2002:514).

A third approach to Russian sexualities is represented by the work of Russian researchers. Gender and sexuality studies are little established in Russian social sciences; the body of literature in these areas is growing, but still small compared to sexualities literature on Western countries (Nartova 2007; Temkina and Zdravomyslova 2003). Russian literature on (homo)sexualities tends to have an empirical focus, and theoretical questions are sometimes touched upon, but rarely addressed in any depth; this reflects both a different academic tradition and the difficulty to access key texts, rarely available in Russian translation and not easy to come by in national libraries. Although 'the West' is often taken as an implicit term of comparison, Russian researchers often seem uncomfortable with Western academic conceptualisations of Russian (homo)sexualities and their 'Orientalistic' undertones (see for example Nartova 2004c). Some of the Russian literature questions, or expresses dissatisfaction with existing theoretical models, either because of their medical origin or (more often) because of their Western bias (see Zelenina 2006 on lesbian subculture; Nartova 2004c on the value of visibility and 'coming out'; Omel'chenko 2002b on homophobia). However, contra Essig and Tuller, supposedly 'Western' categories of sexual identity, such as 'gay' and 'lesbian', are used unproblematically (Nemtsov 2007; Nartova 2004c; Kon 1998).

The centrality of the East/West paradigm to Russian research on sexualities is perhaps unsurprising, given the dominance of Western/Anglo-American perspectives in gay and lesbian/queer studies. Binnie (2004) notes that this dominance invites unwarranted generalisations and a polarisation between Western/global and non-Western/local dimensions. In order to develop more inclusive, insightful and productive theoretical models, a more nuanced understanding of the interaction between local/'Eastern' and global/'Western' perspectives is needed. This study seeks to problematise the notion of Western sexualities as "the normative measure of sameness and difference" (Manderson and Jolly 1997:22, quoted in Binnie 2004:3), while at the same time softening and complicating the juxtaposition between 'East' and 'West'. There are two main ways in which continuities, as well as differences, between 'Western sexual cultures', the 'global gay' and the 'Russian queer' can be brought out. First, as Baer (2002) argues, the "mental mapping East/West", through which Russian homosexualities have so far been constructed, can be challenged by acknowledging the wide diversity of 'Western' homosexualities, as well as the diverse conceptual frameworks emerging from current Western-centric theory on sexuality. This is done mainly in this introductory chapter, devoted to a review of

relevant empirical research and theoretical debates on sexuality originating from Western societies. The present study is inevitably informed by these debates; however, exploring them in some detail at the beginning of the thesis allows me to draw out similarities and diverging paths between Russian and Western sexualities in the chapters to follow. Ultimately, this approach is meant to spell out the tensions involved in approaching Russian sexualities through the prism of Western-centric theory, and to add to our understandings of sexuality by interrogating and querying existing theoretical models (Weston 1993).

A second way in which the binary construct East/West can be queried is by complicating the related dichotomy 'local/global'. It has been noted that some of the literature on globalisation also tends to "reify distinctions between 'indigenous' (traditional, local) and 'imported' (modern, global) elements" (Barber and Waterman 1995:241). Indeed, the globalisation of sexual cultures, identities and lifestyles is often construed as a process of amalgamation and homogenisation, and as a phenomenon spreading from the metropolitan West to the 'developing' world (Altman 1996; for a critique see Binnie 2004). Rather than essentialising 'East' and 'West', Binnie calls for more research into the "hybridisation of identities" (Binnie 2004). Indeed, while the mainstreaming of Anglo-American terminology and sexual culture in non-English speaking countries has been a very noticeable phenomenon (Leap 2002; Murray 1995; Adam, etc.), research also shows that 'Western-styled' and 'indigenous' identities often appear to coexist in rather intricate patterns (Murray 2003; Manalansan 1995, 2002; Johnson 1998; Elliston 2002). The present study explores different spatial dimensions (the national, the metropolitan, the provincial), and, to some extent, also addresses their interaction with the 'Western' and 'global', or lack thereof. In particular, the sections on Russian 'lesbian' popular music (Chapter Three), on the development of Russian 'queer' slang (Chapter Four) and on the 'gay scene' in Moscow and Ul'ianovsk (Chapter Seven) offer some insight into the interaction between 'global' and 'local'.

## **Sexuality as discourse: shifting narratives of sexual identities**

The question of how to approach 'Russian lesbian identities' was central to my own research project, particularly since existing literature argued that Western categories and

self-labels of sexuality and sexual orientation translated uneasily into Russian culture (Essig 1999; Tuller 1996; Heller 2007). The benefits of a theoretical approach that saw identity as processual, flexible and grounded in discourse appealed to me from the early stages of research, although my ideas were shaped as much by my experience in the field as by theoretical literature.

The concept of 'identity' referred to throughout this study is not that of a fixed and unchanging entity, originating in biological or otherwise innate personal features; nor is it equated with the collective interest of a specific social group, defined a priori on the basis of certain characteristics which are assumed to be shared by its members. The present study embraces the notion of identity as constructed within a context of social relations and through a process of interactions between social actors. Following social constructivism, identity is conceived of as fluid, shifting, and negotiated through social relations, rather than as a 'property of the self'. Power is always deeply implicated in the production and negotiation of identities: difference is not natural, but constructed through material and symbolic practices (Foucault 1978/1998; Hall 1996). In this sense, the concept of identity is a lynchpin for understanding the interplay of agency and structure in the human world; as Hall points out, "it seems to be in the attempt to rearticulate the relationship between subject and discursive practices that questions of identity recur" (Hall 1996:2). I refer to Hall's definition of identity:

I use identity to refer to the meeting point, the point of *suture*, between on the one hand the discourse and practices which attempt to 'interpellate', speak to us or hail us into place as the social subjects of particular discourses, and on the other hand, the processes which produce subjectivities, which construct us as subjects which can be 'spoken'. Identities are thus points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us. The notion that an effective suturing of the subject to a subject-position requires not just that the subject is 'hailed', but that the subject invests in the position, means that suturing has to be thought of as an articulation, rather than as a one-sided process, and that in turn places *identification*, if not identities, firmly on the theoretical agenda. (Hall 1996: 5-6)

In Hall's definition, 'identity' is a process, rather than a given, and it is created by the interfacing between discursive practices (structure) and individual subjectivity (agency). Subject-positions are *categories of identity*, and they are constructed by and *within* discourse, through representational and symbolic systems which mark difference and produce inclusion and exclusion. Categories of identity, otherwise referred to by Jenkins as nominal identities, are labels with which subjects are identified from the outside, and as such are deeply implicated with issues of power (2004: 22). The labelling process is



consequential for the individual involved if it is reiterated over time, and it “will be even more effective if that process is endowed with institutional legitimacy and authority” (Jenkins 2004: 77). However, as Hall points out, ‘identity’ is not a one-sided process; it also involves a personal (rational/emotional) investment into a certain subject-position; the articulation of an identity, therefore, requires not only the production of a *category of identity*, but also an individual *identification*. Individuals subsumed under a certain category of identity may not have a personal investment in it, or they may reject it altogether, *dis-identifying* from it. Identifications, referred to by Jenkins as virtual identities, occur when there is an overlap between a category of identity and a subject’s attachment to it; in other words, *identifications* (and *dis-identifications*) refer to the ways in which *categories of identity are experienced* (2004: 22-24). Categories of identity (“nominal identities”) and identifications (“virtual identities”) are not one and the same thing; as Jenkins notes, the same nominal identities may produce very different virtual identifications and experiences in different contexts. To quote Jenkins’ own example, the nominal identity ‘gay’ is likely to be taken up and experienced differently by those identifying as gay in London, with its supportive scene, and by gay individuals living in a small village in Norfolk (Jenkins 2004: 78). ‘Identity’ is therefore understood as the product of an articulation between categories of identity and identifications. Identity articulation is a conditional and never fully coherent process: “There is always ‘too much’ or ‘too little’ – an over-determination or a lack, but never a proper fit, a totality” (Hall 1996:3; see also Jenkins 2004, Brubaker and Cooper 2000). Identities are therefore fluid and flexible, rather than fixed; discourses shift over time, producing new categories of identity, or changing the meaning and connotations of old ones. Individuals’ sense of self is (socially) constructed through the appropriation of existing categories and narratives of identity; while personal allegiances and identifications may change over time, collective engagement with existing categories of identity actively contributes to shifts in their meaning.

Notions of identity as conditional, fluid and socially constructed may seem, at first glance, irrelevant to the study of sexuality. Indeed, sex and sexual practices are commonly thought of as existing outside the domain of the social, and as dictated primarily by anatomy, physiology and personality. This notion has been reinforced, at least in Western culture, by biomedical and psychological sciences: while the former sees sex primarily in terms of anatomical differences and bodily acts, the latter regards ‘sexual orientation’ to be a core part of an individual’s sense of self. The notion of sex as beyond the domain of the social has long informed the ways in which sexuality is conceptualised in the social sciences, where a split has traditionally been posited between sex as the domain of the biological

(‘nature’) and gender as the domain of the social (‘nurture’). More recently, however, a vast body of literature within a variety of disciplines has ‘de-naturalised’ sexuality by showing how it shifts across history and cultures (Seidman 1996; Weeks, Holland and Waites 2003). Historical, sociological and anthropological work has uncovered how, while sexual practices are fairly constant the world over, they have been understood, conceptualised and perceived differently in different social contexts and at different times (Herdt 1994; Lewin and Leap 2002; Caplan 1987). Queer and feminist theory have problematised the notion of (hetero)sexuality as the ‘natural’ norm, and have exposed sexuality as “a site of social regulation and control, in the service of the reproductive family unit” (Segal 1997:185).

One of the most influential works in this debate is Michel Foucault’s *The history of sexuality*; in systematising insights from previous research and theory, Foucault’s work contributed to further developments of new understandings of sex and sexuality, as well as to their establishment as legitimate research topics (Halperin 1995). Foucault famously argues that the very idea of ‘sexuality’ as a discursive practice emerged only in the 19th century in modern Western societies (Foucault 1978/1998). This happened in the context of broader, far-reaching social changes, which determined fundamentally new approaches to sexual matters. In pre-industrial, feudal societies, the Church and its institutions had presided over the regulation of sexual mores and behaviour, locating sexual intercourse within marriage for the purpose of procreation. With the onset of the industrial revolution and the emergence of the nation-state, the power to control and police sexual practices gradually shifted to lay institutions, and in particular to the medical sciences, which experienced an unprecedented growth in 19th century Europe and became the leading authority in sexual matters. It was within medical discourses that the binary categories ‘homosexual’ and (later) ‘heterosexual’ were mainstreamed: homosexuality was classed as a pathological deviance, while the term ‘heterosexuality’ was coined as its antonym, signifying the ‘natural’ and ‘healthy’ norm. It was only after its medicalisation that same-sex desire began to define a distinct psychological type; previously, sexual morals, based on Christian morality, had relied much less on a clearcut distinction between same-sex and opposite-sex desire (Foucault 1978/1998; Greenberg and Bystrin 1997)<sup>10</sup>. Foucault also notes how a discourse that was meant to police and control nonconformist sexualities had the unintended effect of uniting ‘sexual deviants’ under a single identity, and eventually led to the liberationist discourse of the gay and lesbian movement:

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<sup>10</sup> Sodomy had previously been a loosely defined category of forbidden acts, encompassing both homosexual and heterosexual anal intercourse, as well as other ‘deviant’ sexual practices (Foucault 1998; Greenberg and Bystrin 1997).

There is no question that the appearance in nineteenth-century psychiatry, jurisprudence, and literature of a whole series of discourses on the species and subspecies of homosexuality, inversion, pederasty, and “psychic hermaphroditism” made possible a strong advance of social controls into this area of “perversity”; but it also made possible the formation of a “reverse” discourse: homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or “naturalness” be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified (Foucault 1978/1998: 101).

Through the notion of ‘sexual orientation’, established by the medical sciences, the binary categories “homosexual/heterosexual”, and (later) “gay/straight” became rooted in Western culture; moreover, through the influence of Western ‘scientific’ knowledge and imperialistic expansion, these categories were transplanted to other areas of the globe. In parallel with this process, however, ‘homosexual’, an identity category mainstreamed by medical discourse, was also collectively re-appropriated, during the twentieth century, as a *virtual* group identity. Indeed, particularly from the 1970s, in Western societies new social movements such as the gay and lesbian movement and feminism began to question established sexual knowledge and accepted norms. While providing an empowering narrative of identity for those who had been branded ‘sexual deviants’ by medical discourses, the gay and lesbian movement also contributed to give currency to specific identity categories: ‘gay’, for example, gradually replaced the pathologising ‘homosexual’ in common parlance (Giddens 1992; Waites 2005; Weeks, Holland and Waites 2003). The emergence and rise of a consumer culture specifically targeted at a gay and lesbian clientele further consolidated the notion of a stable gay or lesbian identity. The emergence of a “reverse discourse”, aiming to legitimise same-sex desire by claiming legitimate gay and lesbian identities, was crucial in popularising the notion of sexual orientation as a property of the self in Western culture (Giddens 1992). More recently, however, the notion of sexual identities as grounded in fixed, binary notions of sexual orientation has become increasingly disputed, particularly with the emergence of queer theory and politics in the 1990s.

Existing research provides important insights into the social history of sexuality, sexual orientation and sexual identities in Western, and particularly Anglo-American, societies. From the limited body of literature on Russian homosexualities, however, it is unclear to what extent the patterns outlined above are relevant to Russian society and culture. Historic literature on Russian homosexualities has highlighted how medical and legal discourses on sex, so crucial in establishing the very idea of sexuality in Western culture, penetrated into Tsarist Russia in the 19th century, and were absorbed and reshaped by the local scientific establishment (Engelstein 1992; Healey 2001). The literature, however, has also stressed

the inadequacy of the Foucauldian model to account for the ways in which, in Tsarist and Soviet Russia, “these disciplinary mechanisms were adapted to authoritarian power” (Healey 2001:10; see also Engelstein 1993). In underlining the peculiarities of Russian modernity, the literature points to the centrality of the experience of state socialism in shaping notions of sexuality and sexual identity (Engelstein 1993, 1995; Healey 1993, 2001, 2002; Zhuk 1998; Kon 1995; Rotkirch 2004; Temkina and Zdravomyslova 2002). However, available literature about same-sex desire in Soviet Russia remains extremely patchy, and the topic is still waiting to be thoroughly documented and researched (Healey 2001).

The emergence and socio-historical trajectory of Western notions of sexuality and sexual identity, documented in a vast body of literature, has become an established and authoritative narrative. In my exploration of Russia’s own trajectory, outlined in Chapters Three and Four, this narrative is an obligatory point of reference. However, the study aims to problematise and critique, rather than to perpetuate, a Western-centric “globalising discursive truth on sexuality” (Binnie 2004:2). Its aim is not to analyse Russian non-heterosexual women’s experiences through the notion of a normative ‘lesbian’ subject, styled on Western models of sexuality. On the contrary, the study attempts to understand Russian non-heteronormative sexualities in their own terms, within their own frameworks of cultural reference and temporal-spatial contexts. Cross-cultural links are made to other empirical research, particularly to studies conducted in Britain and in the US, in order not to essentialise Russia as radically ‘different’, exotic, or ‘other’. This also serves the purpose of highlighting commonalities and differences in the mechanisms of social control that preside over culturally specific constructs of sexuality and gender.

## **From ‘gay and lesbian’ to ‘queer’ subjects: methodological implications**

In Western societies, scientific and legal discourses, gay and lesbian identity politics and ‘pink pound’ consumerism have consolidated and popularised essentialist notions of sexual identity, grounded in binary notions of sexual orientation. Thus, sexuality is widely regarded as providing a stable core identity for individuals experiencing same-sex desire (Seidman 1996). However, essentialist notions of sexual identity have increasingly come to

be regarded as problematic and contentious, both from a methodological and from a political perspective.

A good example of essentialist approaches to sexual identity is Markowe's study on lesbian women's experiences of coming out (Markowe 1996). Markowe introduces her participants through a fictional character named Clare, "an imaginary lesbian, a composite figure constructed from pilot-study data [...] as well as from something of my own experiences in coming out" (Markowe 1996:12).

Clare feels that she has probably always been a lesbian. Although she had no labels for her feelings until her teens or later, she recalled her first feelings of attraction towards women as a very young child. For some of her lesbian friends such feelings may have begun some years later. [...] From the age of maybe eleven or twelve, and especially during her teens, Clare was becoming more aware of her feelings towards girls or women [...] With all the societal and peer pressure towards heterosexual conformity, Clare might have taken a different pathway and become involved with boys during her teenage years. [...] This heterosexual involvement might have lasted a comparative short time, or might have led on to thoughts of marriage, or marriage itself, in spite of awareness of lesbian feelings. [...] Marriage to a man would not necessarily reflect heterosexual rather than lesbian feelings. [...] For Clare there was already now, during her teens, a definite perception of herself as a lesbian. [...] In contrast to Clare, some other women did not come to perceive themselves as lesbian until a later age, after years of heterosexuality, and then it happened suddenly (Markowe 1996:12-15).

In Markowe's study, participants are assumed to be lesbians because of their attraction to women and because they were recruited through lesbian community settings. However, as this passage suggests, not all of Markowe's interviewees can be easily accommodated into an 'ideal' lesbian type, since their diverse experiences are not necessarily represented by Clare's. Those 'other women' whose heterosexual past may be as real and 'authentic' to them as their lesbian present seem particularly puzzling to Markowe. While her study focuses on women's experiences of formation, negotiation and disclosure of their sexual identity, this sexual identity is assumed to be a lesbian one; no indication is given that women's own dis/identifications were discussed in the interviews on which her study is based.

'Lesbian' is commonly used as a universal, scientific category of identity for all women experiencing same-sex desire. Yet research has shown how terms of self-identification, patterns of socialising and models of community are specific to given social, cultural and historical contexts, a point thus summed up by Farquhar in her discussion of shifting 'queer' terminology in twentieth-century America:

Historically, 'gay women' have been discursively associated with the closet, with traditional butch-femme roles, and with assimilation into heterosexual society, 'lesbians' with lesbian feminism, lesbian separatism and 'political' lesbianism; and 'dykes' with transgressing (and 'queers' with parodying or playing with) both gender and sexuality (Farquhar 2000:223; see also Kennedy Lapovsky and Davis 1993).

Universal, essentialist notions of sexual identity and linear models of identity formation are also potentially exclusionary, as they tend to marginalize those individuals whose experiences and identifications do not clearly fit into the categories homosexual/heterosexual. Individuals involved in bisexual and transgender/transsexual practices have often been stigmatised by discourses relying on binary constructs of sexuality and gender, both within and outside the gay and lesbian community. Bisexuality has commonly been conceptualised as a transitional stage in the process of reaching sexual maturity and/or 'coming out' as gay or lesbian, rather than as an identity in its own right (Rust 1993, 2000)<sup>11</sup>. In making sexual orientation pivotal to its politics, the gay liberation discourse has tended to downplay the importance of gender, stressing the message that gays and lesbians are men and women like any other, except for their sexual preferences. This has marginalised individuals whose non-heteronormative identities revolve primarily around gender, rather than sexual practices; many marginalised identities, ranging from transsexuals to butch dykes, have recently found refuge under the 'transgender politics' banner (Valentine 2002).

Impatience with the limitations of gay and lesbian identity politics and with 'homonormativity' (Duggan 2002), or the emergence of a normative gay/lesbian subject, has found an outlet in queer theory and activism. While drawing on previous debates within the humanities and social sciences, the emergence of queer theory in the early 1990s and its progressive affirmation within academia have represented a significant shift in the conceptualisation of sexuality and sexual identity (Seidman 1996; Weeks, Holland and Waites 2003). Critical of fixed notions of identity based on the notion of sexual orientation, queer theory has challenged binary notions of *gender and sexuality* by deconstructing the categories male/female and homosexual/heterosexual. In doing so, queer theory has opened up new ways of thinking about sexuality, gender and their intersections:

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<sup>11</sup> Although sometimes idealised as the most open form of sexuality and as inherently subversive (for example by queer activism and theory), bisexuality is mostly seen as an unstable, transitory identity. Reluctance to fully embrace either a gay/lesbian or heterosexual identity is variously attributed to internalised homophobia, to the unwillingness to give up the social privileges associated to heterosexual status, or to the hedonistic desire to get the "best of both worlds". Rust, however, argues that "bisexuality is perceived as sexual mutability only because the observer perceives sexuality in terms of dichotomous constructs" (1993:64).

If the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called “sex” is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all. It would make no sense, then, to define gender as the cultural interpretation of sex, if sex itself is a gendered category (Butler 1990/1999:7; see also Jackson 1999).

Queer theory and activism have celebrated gender and sexual performances as a means to subvert dominant sexual/gender norms, and challenge heteronormativity and heterosexism; in attempting to foreground the socially and culturally constructed character of (hetero)sexuality, queer theory has tied in with some strands of feminist thinking (Butler 1990/1999; Jackson 1999). Queer theory and activism have also been influential in shaping identity politics intended to be more inclusive, and to extend beyond the traditional ‘gay and lesbian’ agenda. Notably, in English-speaking countries, the derogatory word ‘queer’ has been reclaimed as a positive and subversive term of self-identification. ‘Queer’ is intended to be a loosely defined identity category, more inclusive of all non-heteronormative sexualities and comprising all the range of the LGBT spectrum. Research informed by queer theoretical perspectives has also emphasised the Western bias embedded in the notion of a universal gay/lesbian subject, and has called for greater attention and sensitivity to culturally specific constructs of sexuality and gender, not based on the Western binary categories (Lewin and Leap 2002; Cruz and Manalansan 2002; Jolly 2001; Binnie 2004).

The present study is influenced and informed by recent debates about the nature of sexual identities outlined above, and particularly by some theoretical perspectives emerging within queer theory, which have re-conceptualised sexual identities as fluid, performative and deeply entwined with notions of gender<sup>12</sup>. The study tries to problematise normative, Western-centric ‘lesbian’ or ‘queer’ subjects; this has methodological implications, which will be explored in more detail in Chapter Two. Notably, research participants were involved in the project not because they were assumed to self-identify as lesbian or queer, but because of their frequentation of ‘lesbian/queer’ spaces and networks. The notion of sexual identity as a process to explore, problematise and deconstruct, rather than as a

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<sup>12</sup> These developments are not accepted uncritically, nor is the ‘subversive’ potential of queer theoretical perspective taken for granted. Indeed, as queer theory and terminology become more established within academia, there is the danger that they may become some sort of ‘new orthodoxy’. As Kulick (2000) notes, in academic literature the use of the term ‘queer’ has become increasingly common, reflecting a desire to challenge binary Western constructs of sexuality. Nonetheless, it remains a fact that queer political activism and academic discourse remain predominantly located within Anglo-American and Western European societies, and are therefore deeply implicated in global power hierarchies. This problematises the notion of ‘queer’ as a subversive and ‘democratic’ category of identity, able to debase the ethnocentric “heterosexual matrix” (Butler 1990/1999) and therefore inherently inclusive of other, non-Western constructs of sexuality.

taken-for-granted, known, stable entity, is central to the present study. As outlined in the Introduction, the women involved in this project are perhaps better defined as non-heterosexual; the adequacy of categories such as 'lesbian', 'bisexual' and 'queer' to describe Russian sexualities has been tested in the field (see especially Chapter Four). For this very reason, these terms are mostly used in inverted commas. The study, however, does not argue for a nihilistic deconstruction or complete rejection of sexual identity categories: as Weeks (2003) argues, it is both impossible and undesirable to do away with sexual labels altogether.

The approach taken in this research project also foregrounds sexual identities as social and relational, rather than individual characteristics grounded in biology or psychology. Jenkins (2004) argues that individual and collective identities exist in a dialectic, dynamic relationship, and should be explored within a unitary analytical framework. Identifications, at both individual and group level, produce shared meaning; they represent "the symbolic construction of relationships of similarities and differences between collectives and embodied individuals" (Jenkins 2004: 118). Other authors have suggested the centrality of shared narratives and meanings in the construction of individual and collective identities. Plummer (1995), for example, highlights the role of the 'coming out' narrative in cementing a sense of shared identity and solidarity in (Western) gay and lesbian communities:

[...] for narratives to flourish there must be a community to hear; that for communities to hear, there must be stories which weave together their history, their identity, their politics. The one - community - feeds upon and into the other - story (Plummer 1995: 87).

The women involved in this project, therefore, were not assumed to be 'lesbian' or 'queer', nor did they necessarily identify as such; they were women who shared the common experience of past or present involvement in same-sex relations, as well as varying degrees of investment in 'lesbian/queer' spaces, networks and subculture. Identifications, dis-identifications and self-identity are seen as "the result of the interpretation of personal experience in terms of available social constructs" (Rust 1993:68).



## Performativity, performance and space

After having outlined relevant debates about identity, in the remainder of the chapter the focus shifts to the ways in which sexual identities are negotiated in and through space. Butler's processual approach to identity has been extensively employed in the social sciences to foreground the spatial aspects of identities (Nelson 1999; Valentine 2001). According to Butler, identity is "performative in the sense that it constitutes as an effect the very subject it appears to express" (Butler 1991:24). In other words, Butler challenges the idea of a foundational, pre-discursive subject expressing identity as a property of the self. Famously, Butler argues that gender

[...] is not a noun, but neither it is a set of free-floating attributes, for we have seen that the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence. Hence, within the inherited discourse of the metaphysics of substance, *gender proves to be performative – that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be*. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed. [...]. There is no gender identity behind the expression of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results. (Butler 1990/1999:33).

For Butler, gender is a script that is constantly rehearsed, and endlessly being constructed; thus, gender and sexual identities (male/female, heterosexual/homosexual) are not 'inborn' and 'natural', but are produced through dominant discourses of gender. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler also famously argues that 'drag' can be used to destabilize the very notion that there 'is' an original, 'natural' gender by showing, through imitation and parody, the innately constructed and performative character of gender:

If the anatomy of the performer is already distinct from the gender of the performer, and both of those are distinct from the gender of the performance, then the performance suggests a dissonance not only between sex and performance, but also sex and gender, and gender and performance. [...] *In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself - as well as its contingency*<sup>13</sup> (Butler 1990/1999:175).

While highlighting the critical potential of 'drag', Butler is wary of attributing intention and agency to the subject, highlighting how resistance is an accidental slippage between the dominant discourse and its articulation. She conceives performance as conceptually

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<sup>13</sup> Emphasis in the original.

distinct from performativity. The former opens up possibilities of subversive repetition to destabilise gendered categories, but the effects of performance are ambiguous and unintended; performativity is conceptualised more narrowly as “that aspect of discourse that has the capacity to produce what it names” (Osborne and Segal 1994).

In no sense can it be concluded that the part of gender that is performed is the ‘truth’ of gender; performance as bounded ‘act’ is distinguished from performativity insofar as the latter consists in a reiteration of norms which precede, constrain, and exceed the performer, and in that sense cannot be taken as the fabrication of the performer’s ‘will’ or ‘choice’; further, what is ‘performed’ works to conceal, if not disavow, what remains opaque, unconscious, unperformable. The reduction of performativity to performance would be a mistake (Butler 1993:234).

Nelson (1999) notes how, within feminist geography, the concept and language of performativity have been widely and productively deployed, producing new understandings of the interaction between place, space, gender/sexuality and identity. Nelson highlights the great potential of Butler’s theory of performativity for geographers, given their concerns with issues of identity and meaning, and with how they are created in and through space. However, she also emphasizes that a critical translation of Butler’s textual theory into geography and the social sciences needs to be more fully theorized, particularly as Butler has theorized “a subject abstracted from personal, lived experience as well as from its historical and geographical embeddedness” (Nelson 1999:331). Therefore, embedding concrete, knowledgeable subjects in space is important in order to make subjective agency more tangible and grounded in everyday reality (Nelson 1999:331). A concern with the interaction between space as socially constructed and embodied subjects is central to understanding social relations and identities:

The spatial organisation of society, in other words, is integral to the production of the social, and not merely its result. ‘The spatial’ then [...] can be seen as constructed out of the multiplicity of social relations across all spatial scales, from the global reach of finance and telecommunications, through the geography of the tentacles of national political power, to the social relations within the town, the settlement, the household and the workplace. It is a way of thinking in terms of the ever-shifting geometry of social/power relations [...] (Massey 1994:4)

Human geographers such as Massey (1994, 1996, 2005) and Valentine (2001) have emphasised how the way in which space is organised, both physically and symbolically, is central to understanding social relations and identities. They point out that social conventions, power relations and inequalities are embodied in, and constructed through space, and how the latter is learned and experienced as raced, classed, gendered and

sexualised (Hubbard 2002; Massey 1994; Valentine 2001; Duncan 1996a). The socially constructed character of space has a profound effect in (de)legitimising the expression and negotiation of individual identities in particular settings.

A common reading of Butler's theory of performativity has emphasized the subversive potential of certain gendered and sexualised performances. Explicitly drawing on Butler (1990/1999), Bell *et al.* (1998), for example, discuss how the hypermasculine gay skinhead and the hyperfeminine lipstick lesbian challenge heterosexualised space:

The excessive performance of masculinity and femininity within homosexual frames exposes not only the fabricated nature of heterosexuality but also its claim to authenticity. The 'macho' man and the 'femme' woman are not tautologies, but work to disrupt conventional assumptions surrounding the straight mapping of man/masculine and woman/feminine within heterosexual and homosexual constructs. The gay skinhead, with his Doctor Marten boots, drainpipe jeans held up by braces, bomber jacket and shaven head; and the lipstick lesbian, with her make-up and high heels, have different historical legacies and have intervened in different debates, from neofascism to feminism, but what unites them is their parodying of heterosexuality (Bell *et al.* 1998:362).

As Nelson notes, this interpretation somehow misreads Butler's theory of performativity, especially in the light of her later work. However, it also foregrounds unresolved tensions within Butler's own theory, and the difficulties of adapting her approach to the social sciences, more concerned with issues of intentionality, agency and reflexivity. Debates about how to use Butler's insights in empirical social sciences research focusing on knowing, reflexive subjects as actors of social change are still ongoing (Nelson 1999; McNay 2004). Nonetheless, the notion of performativity and performative agency have been extensively used in geography and sociology, foregrounding how, while individuals are actively engaged in 'doing' identity, space and context play an important part in structuring and shaping gendered and sexualised performances (Valentine 1993, 1995; Taylor 2007; Skeggs 1997, 1999, 2001). The empirical chapters of this thesis draw on Butler's concepts of performativity and performance, while also benefiting from the insights of empirical studies which have integrated Butler's ideas with more 'hands-on' approaches to human subjectivity and conscious agency.

## **Gender, sexuality and the private/public divide**

As already pointed out, space is not merely “a setting or backdrop, but an agentic player in the game – a force with detectable and independent effects on social life” (Gieryn 2000:466); the interaction between space as socially constructed and space as a constitutive element of social relations foregrounds the complex interplay between structure and human agency. Literature within social and human geography has highlighted how social conventions, power relations and inequalities are embodied in, and constructed through space (Hubbard 2002; Massey 1994; Valentine 2001; Duncan 1996a).

An exploration of the symbolic divide between private and public is fundamental to understand how space is constructed as gendered and sexualised. Feminist literature has pointed out that the liberal state and the social contract, notions which lie at the heart of the political and social order of modern Western societies, crucially revolve around a distinction between the private and the public realm (Landes 1998; Squires 1999; Pateman 1988). This distinction is justified with the need to secure and protect individual freedom, and protect the private realm from the encroachment of state institutions. However, feminist critiques have highlighted how the private/public dichotomy has in actual fact been instrumental to uphold male power over women, albeit in new forms (Landes 1998; Squires 1999). The social contract behind liberal politics established the state (the political, associated with the public sphere) and civil society (the social, associated with the private) as autonomous and independent realms. It also established civil society (the social, associated with the public) as distinct and separate from the personal (the individual and domestic realm, or the ‘private’ proper), and by doing so, also granted freedoms to individuals (Squires 1999:24-26). However, the notion of ‘individual’ is equated with a prescriptive notion of an autonomous, rational individual, born equal and free, attributes which are ascribed as ‘natural’ only to men. On the contrary, women are “understood as subordinate, dependent and emotional, and so excluded from the category of ‘individuals’ within liberal theorizing” (Squires 1999:27). A gendered division between private (female) and public (male) space is perpetuated through the naturalisation of gender roles as biological givens, positing women as primary carers (wives and mothers, in charge of domestic work) and men as wage-earners and actors of civil society. It is also maintained though the association between private and “the domestic, the embodied, the natural, the family, property, personal life, intimacy, passion, sexuality, ‘the good life’, care, a haven,

unwaged labour, reproduction and immanence”, while the public typifies “the disembodied, the abstract, the cultural, rationality, critical public discourse, citizenship, civil society, justice, the marketplace, waged labour, production, the polis, the state, action, militarism, heroism and transcendence” (Duncan 1996b:127-128).

Pateman argues that the liberal social contract, based on the notion of equality and freedom, is premised on the establishment of a sexual contract based on women’s continued subordination to men and perpetuating patriarchal power, albeit in new forms (Pateman 1988). The private sphere, constructed in liberal theory as a realm beyond the political and the social, is considered a “natural foundation for civil, i.e. public life”, but is “treated as irrelevant to the concerns of political theorists and political activists” (Pateman 1988:11). The symbolic divide between private and public realms has been instrumental in perpetuating gender inequalities and controlling the sphere of individuals’ sexuality, particularly women’s (Duncan 1996b). The distinction public/private is rooted in and reproduced by social practices which “demarcate and isolate a private sphere of domestic, embodied activity from an allegedly disembodied political sphere that is predominantly located in public space” (Duncan 1996b:129). In order to challenge gender inequalities, feminists have queried the binary division between public and private, arguing that gender inequalities can only be fully understood and challenged by foregrounding the continuities between the two:

All too easily, the impression can be given that the sexual contract and the social contract are two separate, albeit related contracts, and that the sexual contract concerns the private sphere. On the contrary, patriarchal right extends throughout civil society. The employment contract and (what I shall call) the prostitution contract, both of which are entered into in the public, capitalist market, uphold men’s rights as firmly as the marriage contract. [...] The public realm cannot be fully understood in the absence of the private sphere [...]. Civil freedom depends on patriarchal right (Pateman 1988:4).

Importantly, spatialised social norms are informed by mutually reinforcing understandings of gender and sexuality. Commonly held double standards that assume an ‘active’ and ‘unbridled’ male sexual drive and a ‘passive’ and ‘restrained’ female sexuality have reinforced the notion and perception of public space as the domain of men and as unsafe for women (see e.g. Jackson 1999; Duncan 1996a). There are other ways in which notions of private and public regulate the expression of sexuality. At least in industrialised societies, sexuality is generally regarded as belonging to the private life of each individual, while its public display is restricted by law and generally regarded as improper (Duncan 1996a). In actual fact, spatialised norms have different implications for same-sex and

heterosexual behaviour. Homosexuality is mostly tolerated only as far as it is confined to the private sphere, while its visible presence in the public sphere is regarded as potentially corrupting and polluting, and may elicit hostile reactions (Richardson 2000; Sedgwick 1990, Brown 2003; Skeggs 1999). However, many expressions of heterosexuality are very public, since it is naturalised and institutionalised “in marriage and the law, tax and welfare systems, and is celebrated in public rituals such as weddings” (Valentine 1993:396). Thus, inequalities are legitimised and rendered invisible by upholding “a heterosexist private/public divide” (Richardson 2000:77). In countries where legislation and policies targeting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation have been introduced, the institutionalisation of heterosexuality has, on some levels, been challenged, as rights for non-heterosexuals have been extended “beyond the limits of privacy” (McGhee 2004:360; see also Bell and Binnie 2000). However, changes at the institutional level do not necessarily reflect, or translate into, shifts in societal attitudes; while heterosexual privilege is naturalised and therefore remains invisible, the public visibility of homosexuality is still in many ways perceived as ‘strange’ and out of place. Public displays of homosexuality are commonly reprimanded or repressed both in countries where pro-gay rights legislation has recently been introduced, such as the UK, and in those where it is not on the political agenda, such as Russia, albeit with a different degree of institutional support (Moran and Skeggs 2004; Alekseev 2002a, 2002b; Stella 2007).

The importance of the private/public divide in constructing gendered and (hetero)sexualised space, and their exclusionary implications in setting the boundaries of the ‘respectable’ and the ‘normal’ will be explored extensively in the following chapters, particularly in the chapters dealing with the in/visibility of non-heteronormative sexualities in the public sphere (Chapters Three), and with women’s negotiation of everyday space (Chapters Five and Six). Following feminist deconstruction of the separation between the private and the public, the empirical chapters of the thesis will also interrogate what counts as private/public’ by exploring women’s navigations of their everyday environments, and own perceptions of private/public. Although debates on private and public developed in Western academia will be drawn on, spatial norms are rooted in specific social contexts, and a careful approach to culturally specific notions of private and public is needed. As already noted, critiques such as Pateman’s (1988) focus on the persistence of gender inequalities within liberal Western societies, particularly Anglo-American ones; therefore, these theoretical frameworks may not be suitable to explore the Russian context (Temkina and Zdravomyslova 2003).

Russian notions of private and public need to be understood within their specific socio-historical context. Kharhordin (1999:357-358) notes that the phrase *chastnaia zhizn'* [private life] is radically different in the Russian context from similar expressions in English. He shows how in Russia notions of individualism developed through different 'technologies of the self' which are significantly different from those Foucault proposed for Western Europe. In Russia, these were shaped by practices of self-knowledge characteristic of Eastern Christianity, which, in Soviet times, developed into practices of mutual horizontal surveillance among peers (Kharkhordin 1999); He goes on to argue that notions of individualism and privacy in Russia were shaped by practices of individual dissimulation, used to protect the individual from state encroachment, but also from peer surveillance (Kharkhorin 1999, 1997). Oswald and Voronkov (2004) also highlight how modes of Soviet political socialisation resulted in a configuration of private and public sphere that differed significantly from those of liberal Western societies; while in the latter the private sphere is "strictly separated from the public and protected by law, in late Soviet society the borderline between the private and the public was rather diffuse and informal, not least due to the absence of any proper legal idea and regulation" (Oswald and Voronkov 2004:112). Although the political, social and economic upheavals which followed the fall of communism have contributed to reshaping notions of private and public, the experience of state socialism remains crucial in understanding the Russian context (Oswald and Voronkov 2004; Kharkhordin 1998; Ledeneva 1998). Citizens in Russia do not value the public sphere as an arena of genuine political discussion, offering opportunities for the fair articulation of group interests. Both the experience of an authoritarian form of state socialism and the current mistrust of state institutions and democratic rhetoric affect the devaluation of the public sphere in contemporary Russia (Oswald and Voronkov 2004). By contrast, the private sphere of the home and family life had long represented a site of authenticity and a refuge from the intrusive Soviet state (Shlapentokh 1989; Einhorn 1993), a connotation it preserves to this day. The very notion that "the private is political", central to Western feminist theory and activism, is puzzling to many women in contemporary Russia. This can partly be explained with the fact that feminism was largely inexistent as a broad-based social movement in Soviet Russia, and discourses of emancipation were discredited by their association with unpopular Soviet gender policies. However, Russian women's reluctance to engage with feminist politics can be at least in part explained with the different ways they inhabited and moved across private and public space. The ability to leave the domestic sphere to engage in paid work was not "a symbol of liberation as it is for middle-class liberal feminists in the West" (Sharp 1996:102); paid employment was not an achievement, since it was mandatory for

Soviet citizens of both genders, and in post-Soviet Russia it remains a necessity, rather than an empowering choice, for most women, in a context of economic restructuring and widespread poverty. At the same time, the importance of the private realm of the home and the family as a refuge from the intrusive Soviet state made women reluctant to question power relations within the home and call for increased state intervention in family matters such as domestic violence (Sharp 1996:102).

## **Closet space? Performing sexual identities in everyday settings**

There is a vast body of literature on 'queer' leisure space: while non-heterosexual individuals are more easily identifiable within the gay commercial scene and community organisations, these settings also provide a context where non-heteronormative sexual identities can be safely expressed and explored (Valentine 1993, 1995, 1996; Moran and Skeggs 2004; Nartova 2004c). However, non-heterosexual individuals inhabit and move through other spaces too, which may be more mundane and less glamorous, but which are no less significant and important in shaping their sense of belonging. Recent research has tried to embrace a more holistic notion of 'lesbian' space, by exploring women's navigations of their *everyday* spaces (see especially Valentine 1993; Valentine, Skelton and Butler 2003; Taylor 2004, 2007). In everyday space, non-heteronormative sexual identities may be deliberately hidden, stand out as 'out of place', or just go unacknowledged (Dyer 2002:19). Sexual identities are not necessarily 'written on the body', since "sexed bodies are not fixed, but come into being through social norms" of inscriptions and interpretations (Hubbard 2002:116-117). In heterosexualised space, the performance of sexual identities more explicitly contravening accepted gender norms are more likely to be conspicuous. Specific styles, such as 'camp', or 'butch', may be more immediately recognised as 'queer'; others, such as the hyper-masculine gay skinhead or the 'lipstick lesbian', may be more puzzling to interpret, especially if read outside of a specific subcultural context (Bell *et al.* 1998). Regardless of how obvious their sexual identity may be, non-heterosexual individuals often feel, and are made to feel, 'out of place' in many environments; disclosing one's sexual identity may be an uncomfortable experience or trigger negative reactions (Valentine 1993). Research shows that, in order to negotiate everyday space, non-heterosexual individuals perform different sexual and gendered identities in different settings. Typically, they develop strategies to establish



spatial boundaries between spheres where they feel comfortable expressing their sexuality and environments where such possibility is precluded or unviable (Valentine 1993; Corteen 2002; Moran and Skeggs 2004; Nartova 2004a).

By highlighting the complex interaction between women's multiple identities, sense of place and conflicting sense of belonging, studies such as Taylor's (2007) challenge the assumption that individuals involved in same-sex relations identify solely or primarily with 'queer' spaces and communities. Taylor shows how the British working-class lesbians she interviewed often identify much more strongly with their class origins and their neighbourhoods than with the gentrified lesbian and gay scene, to which they have limited access and where they often feel outsiders because of their class background (Taylor 2007). Working-class neighbourhoods, on the other hand, are spaces where women's sexuality may not always be expressed, or validated; however, their class identity and sense of place, often devalued elsewhere, are strongly tied to these areas and communities (Taylor 2007; 2004). Importantly, qualitative, micro-level studies such as Valentine's (1993), Taylor's (2007) and Moran and Skeggs' (2004) also shift the focus of enquiry from discursive practices constructing space (as 'private'/'public', 'female'/'male', 'queer'/'heterosexual') to non-heterosexual individuals' own perceptions, experiences and negotiation of space. This literature explores in detail how individuals and social groups learn, negotiate, inhabit, use, and actively construct space. In doing so, it highlights the role of individual and collective agency in negotiating sexual identities across space, and not just structural constraints to its expression. The focus on 'everyday space' introduces spatial dimensions other than 'private/public' and 'visibility/invisibility', which has long been dominant in theorisations of gay oppression. Most notably, this primacy is embodied in the notion of the gay closet as a 'negative', a private space of twilight existence, shame and denial (Sedgwick 1990; Brown 2003). Indeed, the closet "refers to a division between a private life where homosexuality can be expressed and a public life where one passes as heterosexual" (Seidman et al. 1999:19). By contrast, 'coming out of the closet' and making oneself visible as gay/lesbian is construed as a positive, affirming and empowering act (Plummer 1995). Instead of assuming the value of visibility and of the public avowal of sexual identity for individuals, the present study focuses on women's feelings of dis/comfort in negotiating their sexuality across different settings, and on the strategic value and meaning they attribute to in/visibility. The exploration of women's negotiation of the home, the workplace and the street, included in Chapters Five and Six, ultimately problematises rigid boundaries between 'private' and 'public' space, and between visibility and invisibility, and allows a critical examination of the notion of "closet space" (Brown 2003). Empirical data also provides a concrete illustration of how the 'private/public'

dichotomy is discursively constructed and negotiated in the Russian context (see Chapter Two and Chapters Five and Six).

## **‘Lesbian/queer’ space in urban settings: comparing Moscow and Ul’ianovsk**

The literature exploring sexuality and space has tended to concentrate on the most visible and ‘territorial’ manifestations of gay and lesbian space, particularly the gay scene and gay and lesbian residential neighbourhoods (Thomas 2004). Both phenomena are indicative of the wish to carve out safe communal sites in urban spaces commonly experienced as dominated by heterosexual norms, and sometimes as hostile and threatening. The scene, in particular, generally defined in the literature as comprising commercial venues targeting a gay and lesbian clientele as well as community organisations, has often been celebrated as a tolerant and open space, a site of authenticity where gay people can be themselves and are free to articulate sexual identities which are often stigmatised and marginalised elsewhere (Holt and Griffin 2003:418; Valentine and Skelton 2003). The literature has also highlighted the crucial importance of the scene for young people as a safe space to explore their sexuality and to ‘come out’ (Valentine and Skelton 2003; Valentine, Skelton and Butler 2002). The value of visible urban queer space, however, goes beyond individual experiences; at least in Western societies, it is often used to claim legitimacy and recognition for the LGBT community as a whole (Skeggs 1999; Moran and Skeggs 2004; Kates 2003).

The scene is often associated with the notion of community, a space of belonging where collective identities are forged, and political claims are made in the name of a whole social group. The notion of ‘community’, however, has been critiqued for overemphasising solidarity and belonging, while glossing over conflict and exclusion, and ultimately offering a romanticised portrait of social relations (Valentine 2001; Rose 1990). The scene is constructed as a space where sexual ‘otherness’ can legitimately become visible; however, it has been noted that it mainly accommodates a white, male, middle class and educated constituency (Barrett and Pollack 2005). In spite of claims to openness and inclusiveness, access to the scene is restricted along class, ethnic and gender lines. For example, it has been noted that women are generally much less visible than men on the scene: exclusively lesbian venues tend to be less numerous and established than gay ones

(Valentine 1993; Moran and Skeggs 2004), while lesbians are often marginalised in supposedly ‘mixed’ venues (Casey 2004; Skeggs 1999, 2001; Taylor 2007). Indeed, lesbians are less targeted as consumers than gay men (Clark 1993, Hennessy 2000), a fact that generally reflects lower income levels and women’s more restricted access to public space in Western societies (Valentine 1995). Issues of exclusion are further complicated by the strong link traditionally forged in Western societies between gay and lesbian political activism, the commercial scene and a specialised market: as Chasin (2000:23) notes, participation in the community has always to some degree revolved around activities such as “attending house parties, drag balls, bathhouses, bars, buying physique magazines and/or reading certain literature such as *The Well of Loneliness* or *Death in Venice*”. Particularly from the 1990s, the niche market targeting gay men and, to a lesser degree, lesbians, has expanded dramatically, while lifestyles built around consumer practices have become increasingly more important to forge a sense of common identity (Chasin 2000; Hennessy 2000). Many individuals have derived a sense of social validation from the accommodation of their needs and into a niche market (Chasin 2000; Kates 2003; Skeggs 1999), and gay consumer culture has often been celebrated as liberatory and empowering, not least for granting visibility and recognition to a traditionally ‘invisible’ minority group (Skeggs 1999; ). It has been argued, however, that ‘lifestyle’ politics, implicated with consumerism and keen to claim cultural recognition, have been co-opted into a neoliberal and individualistic discourse that often conveniently erases gender, class and ethnicity from the broader picture (Chasin 2000; Binnie 2004; Bell and Binnie 200; Fraser 1999; Taylor 2007). Thus, scene space has tended to marginalise individuals from working-class and ethnic minority backgrounds, who feel alienated from the single-issue politics promoted by the gay and lesbian community (Taylor 2007; Manalansan 1997, 2002). In order to highlight the contested and fragmented nature of the LGBT community, Valentine, after Anderson (1991), defines it as an “imagined community” (Valentine 1993, 1995). This definition is useful because it pinpoints ‘community’ as a setting defined by symbolic boundaries which include and exclude, and also as a space which may be contested both from within and from without.

The present study draws on the notion of ‘imagined community’ in highlighting issues of unequal access to ‘queer/lesbian’ space, and in addressing dis-identifications, as well as identifications, with ‘community’ settings and networks (see especially Chapter Seven). However, terms such as ‘lesbian/queer’ networks and spaces are preferred to the more abstract ‘community’, with its political connotations. This choice is based on my experience in the field, where women talked about specific meeting grounds, gatherings and social networks, rather than ‘community’ (in Russian *soobshchestvo*, or *kommuniti*, a

borrowing from English). This was especially the case with Ul'ianovsk, where no formal community associations had been established (for a more detailed discussion, see Chapter Seven). In order to problematise abstract notions of community, it is important to see 'scene' space in terms of both "*geographic location* and the *social relations* that arise within them" (Massey 1994: 39)<sup>14</sup>. When referring to both a specific geographic location and the social networks based around it, the Russian term *tusovka* is preferred to 'community'. *Tusovki* refers to 'in-crowds' existing in all spheres of public life, whose members are linked by common interests and bonds of friendship and solidarity. Zabuzhko (2002), after Keane (1998), sees *tusovki* as "micro-public spheres" within civil society, "in which the elements of everyday life are mixed, remixed, developed and tested ... in which citizens question the pseudo-imperatives of reality and counter them with alternative experiences of time, space and interpersonal relations" (Keane, 1998: 170-172, quoted in Zabuzhko 2002). More specifically, I refer to Pilkington's definition of *tusovka* as a "site of embodied communication" (1994: 236-238). As she notes, *tusovka* blurs the boundaries between spatial and social relations: the term refers both a gathering place ("I have been going to the *tusovki* since I was 15") and a group of people meeting there ("our *tusovka* is very friendly", see Pilkington 1994: 236-238).

Talking about spaces, networks and *tusovki* is also more consistent with the kind of 'lesbian/queer' settings explored. Indeed, 'lesbian/queer' space was not limited to the commercial scene or to community settings. This was particularly noticeable in Ul'ianovsk, where there was no 'queer/lesbian' space clearly signposted and institutionalised. In Moscow too, however, some locations were only temporarily and precariously occupied as 'lesbian'. This approach highlights the role of collective agency in claiming certain locations and constructing them as 'lesbian/queer' space. It also emphasises that 'space' is porous, and may simultaneously carry multiple identities and meanings for the different individuals and groups inhabiting it (Massey 1994, 2005). Exploring spaces which are not openly claimed, or immediately recognisable, as 'lesbian/queer' also serves another purpose. As Binnie (2004) and Knopp and Brown (2003) have noted, there is a noticeable urban, Western and cosmopolitan bias in the literature; not only are the experiences of queers living in rural and provincial areas neglected, but the very concept of queer/gay/lesbian identity and experience is often implicitly equated with metropolitan space:

The queer cosmopolitan is routinely located within the major centres of gay consumer culture. The other to this cosmopolitan is therefore the rural and

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<sup>14</sup> The italics are mine.

provincial [...] Commentaries on queer consumer culture commonly imagine that the world ends at the boundaries of the metropolis. (Binnie 2004:4-5).

The literature about 'queer/lesbian' space in Russia has also privileged metropolitan cities, focusing on the 'two capitals' St Petersburg (Nartova 1999) and Moscow (Sarajeva, 2008), and on their relatively established community initiatives and commercial scene. The present study contributes to developing new perspectives about 'queer' space and networks by exploring how these are created, accessed and experienced both in cosmopolitan Moscow and in provincial Ul'ianovsk.

## Conclusions

This chapter has outlined the theoretical underpinnings of my research project, outlining an approach to identity that foregrounds its fluid, performative and relational aspects. Cross-cultural research conducted within area studies has often relied on polarised and essentialist notions of 'Eastern European/Russian' and 'Western' identities, in order to account for very complex historical, cultural and social differences. The use of rigid dichotomies, however, tends to perpetuate Orientalist notions of Russia as the West's 'other'. The use of 'the West' as a more or less explicit term of comparison is, in many ways, unavoidable, for both researchers based in the East European region and for those based in 'the West', particularly in sexualities studies. Indeed, sexuality and sexual identity have so far mainly been researched and theorised in Western, and particularly Anglo-American, societies. Existing literature, however, has problematised essentialist notions of sexual identities, stressing the need to historicise them and frame shifting narratives of sexual identities within specific socio-cultural contexts. Moreover, recent developments within queer theory and politics have foregrounded the inadequacy of dominant binary constructs of sexuality and gender, rooted in the "heterosexual matrix" (Butler 1990/1999), to account for individuals' personal and often conditional investment in certain narratives of social identity. These theoretical and methodological approaches can be productively applied to the study of East European/Russian sexualities. While largely relying on theoretical constructs developed in 'the West', research on East European/Russian sexualities can contribute to challenging and problematising their Western bias. The chapter has also stressed the importance of exploring performative and spatial dimensions of sexual identities. East European studies have long engaged with the category of 'space', and actively contributed to the conceptual mapping of Europe into 'East' and 'West'

(Neumann 1999; Wolff 1994). However, a more nuanced understanding of how different spatial dimensions interact is needed, integrating 'global/local', 'cosmopolitan/provincial', 'urban/rural' into the traditional 'East/West' matrix (Massey 2005). Within sexualities studies, such an approach would advance a more nuanced understanding of the 'glocalisation' (Robertson 1995) of sexual identities, which would highlight similarities as well as differences across these spatial dimensions.

## Chapter Two

# Researching ‘lesbian/queer’ sexualities in urban Russia: means and methods

## Introduction

The present chapter outlines the methodological underpinnings and development of this research project, from the initial stages of research design and fieldwork to data analysis and writing up. The chapter discusses the process of doing research on sexuality in urban Russia using an ethnographic approach. This account has been pieced together retrospectively, and inevitably offers a much more neatly ordered narrative than the actual research process. In the chapter, research is roughly broken up into chronological stages: research design (section one), fieldwork (section two), methods of data collection (section three), strategies of analysis and writing up (section four), and ethical issues arising from the research process (section five). However, these stages were not experienced as distinct, but overlapped and, to a large extent, occurred simultaneously. For example, text-based and interview data were continuously interrogated, analysed and interpreted as they were collected and accumulated; making sense of the data involved recording reflections and observations in different text formats, from casual notes to conference papers, which gradually took shape into the final draft of the thesis.

This chapter is not conceived as a digression on the researcher’s experiences in the field, but as an integral part of the thesis, which contextualises the chapters that follow. First of all, it points out the inevitable biases and limits of the research project, in terms of access to *specific* urban locations and ‘queer/lesbian’ networks, and in terms of participants’ selection and self-selection. While accounting for the practical constraints shaping the research process, the chapter also offers further detail about the socio-cultural context

explored in the field. Secondly, mindful of the lessons coming from critical ethnography and feminist theory (Ramanazoglu and Holland 2002; Brewer 2000; Lewin and Leap 1996), the chapter reflects on the very process of knowledge production. Rejecting the notion that a researcher's viewpoint can ever be entirely objective and unbiased, the chapter acknowledges the researcher's subjective presence in the process of data collection, analysis and interpretation. As Brewer points out, it is difficult to ignore that ethnographic data is

(...) created in and through the interaction that occur between the researcher and people in the field, and analysis must therefore illustrate the situated or context-bound nature of the multivocal meanings disclosed in the research. Reflexivity is thus a critical part of the analysis [...] the ethnographer constructs the sense-assembly procedures through which the data were created, locating them, and therefore the analysis, in the process that brought them about (Brewer 2000:181)

Reflexivity and transparency about the research process itself are central to good ethnographic practice (Brewer 2000; Burgess 1994:48). In order to acknowledge my role as researcher, the chapter is largely written in the first person, and it reflects on the tensions, dis/comforts and power dynamics inherent in the research process.

## **Research design**

Given my focus on identity, understood as socially constructed through the interaction between discursive practices and individual agency, from the very beginning qualitative methodology seemed the most congenial approach to this research project for a number of reasons. The model of social research at the core of qualitative methodology posits social reality not as a fixed entity, but as a whole constantly constructed, reconstructed and interpreted by individuals living in it (Brewer 2000; Bryman 2004: 278-280; Silverman 2000). Qualitative enquiry also places a strong emphasis on understanding human behaviour within a specific socio-cultural context (Bryman 2004:279-283). Therefore, it is better equipped to explore and describe a complex system of interactions, norms, values and beliefs within a particular social and cultural context, a task I set out to undertake.

Within the tradition of qualitative methodology, an ethnographic approach was chosen because of its traditional association with the study of people in naturally occurring



settings and the use of an extensive period spent ‘in the field’, where the researcher is located within the context studied and participates in it (Brewer 2000; Burgess 1984: 11)<sup>15</sup>. I also found inspiring ethnography’s emphasis on the need to understand individuals’ values, beliefs and behaviours within their own framework of cultural reference. As an Italian living and studying in Scotland, I was well aware of how awkwardly lived experiences and familiar concepts translate into a different culture and language. As the linguist Edward Sapir put it,

Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication or reflection. (...). No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached. (Sapir 1949, quoted in Besemeres and Wierzbicka 2007: xvi-xvii)

The choice to focus on Russia meant that I would deal with a language and culture very different from my own, and with a society which was still going through dramatic and rapid changes fifteen years after the fall of the communist system. I was reasonably fluent in Russian language and had a good knowledge of the country’s history and culture through my studies. However, I had never lived in Russia for an extensive period of time, and was well aware, through my experience of living in the UK, that becoming familiar with its people’s daily reality was of paramount importance to be able to say anything meaningful about Russian sexualities. Conscious (and at times self-conscious) about my position as an outsider, I spent considerable time and energy to acquaint myself as best as I could with the Russian national context. The initial stages of research were spent exploring the socio-cultural context through existing literature on Russian (homo)sexualities and primary text-based sources, such as newspaper articles, reports and websites.

Right from the beginning, however, I envisioned and planned a study chiefly based on participant observation and interview material. I favoured an ethnographic approach because it typically involves the use of complementary research strategies, or triangulation. The use of multiple research methods in ethnographic research “reflects an attempt to

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<sup>15</sup> Ethnography is a disputed term, sometimes taken as synonymous with qualitative methods (‘big ethnography’), sometimes restricted to approaches to fieldwork (‘little ethnography’); my discussion is based on Brewer’s definition of ‘ethnography-as-fieldwork’, a style of research characterised as both method and methodology (Brewer 2000:10-19).

secure an in-depth and all-round understanding of the phenomenon in question” (Denzin and Lincoln 2005:5); it is widely regarded to enhance the quality of ethnographic research by adding new perspectives that may test, refine and ultimately support the researcher’s hypotheses and arguments (Burgess 1984; Coffey and Atkinson 1996; Marshall and Rossman 1999; Seale 1999: 52-72). Although particular relevance was given to semi-structured in-depth interviews with non-heterosexual women, I also collected expert interviews with activists and entrepreneurs, recorded detailed fieldnotes about the community events and social gatherings I attended, and gathered relevant press and text-based material. The flexible, situational and semi-structured approach to data collection characteristic of ethnography allowed me to constantly revise and adapt my research approach as I developed my knowledge of the field. A pilot study conducted in Moscow in May-July 2004 was used both to gain first-hand experience of the field and to ‘try out’ initial ideas and tentative lines of enquiry.

During my first stay in Moscow, I became aware of the great popularity in ‘lesbian’ circles of a few female singers, who were also well-known among mainstream audiences. I was struck by how ‘fashionable’ and visible lesbian themes were in home-grown popular culture in a country which was usually portrayed in the Western press as extremely conservative and homophobic. After my pilot trip, I became very interested in lesbian-themed and lesbian-oriented music, and in the intended and unintended effects of the new ‘lesbian’ visibility in Russian society, a theme explored in Chapter Three. My pilot trip was crucial in narrowing and shifting my research focus in other respects. First of all, the original project was meant to explore the experiences of both non-heterosexual men and women. The study was also geared towards issues of discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and on the role of LGBT activism and politicized support networks in the lives of non-heterosexual individuals. Practical considerations and personal interest led me to focus on women alone. Moreover, during pilot interviews, it became clear that a less directive approach, with a broader focus on women’s personal experiences, rather than on more abstract issues of human rights and discrimination, would produce richer and more interesting data, while also giving participants greater scope to direct the conversation to issues that were important to them. After my return from Moscow, I also came across the literature on sexuality, identity and space outlined in Chapter One, which further influenced my approach and led me to explore how sexuality matters in women’s everyday life.

My first stay in Moscow also forced me to rethink more critically findings and perspectives emerging from existing literature on Russian sexualities. The dominant view, up to that

point, was that Russians did not identify on the basis of their sexual orientation, and that they avoided the labels 'gay' and 'lesbian' (Essig 1999; Tuller 1996). This, however, contrasted quite starkly with the reality I had observed in Moscow. Rather than positing Russia as inherently different, I placed more importance on the historical and socio-cultural factors that inform contemporary constructs of sexuality in Russia, and on how these constructs have evolved and shifted over time. Following my pilot study, a more in-depth exploration of the literature made me aware of its metropolitan bias, both in research on Western societies and on Russia. This strengthened my resolve to conduct a comparative study in two different locations, Moscow and a provincial city. In order to account for the diversity of non-heterosexual individuals' experience and avoid essentialising 'Russia', I considered it important to explore more peripheral urban locations, particularly since I wanted to explore the role of space and place in shaping the construction and everyday negotiation of sexual identity.

## **In the field**

### ***Choice of locations***

Ethnographic data were collected during two periods of fieldwork, conducted in May-July 2004 in Moscow and in April-October 2005 in Moscow and Ul'ianovsk. The choice of these two cities as sites of research was determined not only by the theoretical underpinnings of my research, outlined in Chapter One, but also by practical considerations.

Moscow was quickly identified as a useful first port of contact: because of its relatively established LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender] community organisations, it had the advantage of offering easier and more immediate access to local 'queer' spaces and networks. In this respect, it seemed an ideal location to establish first contacts and become more familiar with the Russian context. I also envisioned that contacts established in the capital city would facilitate access to communities and networks based in other cities. Among the range of other viable fieldwork locations, U'ianovsk was chosen partly because, over the previous months, I had managed to establish contact with both gatekeepers from the local 'lesbian/queer' network, and I knew I could rely on the logistic

support of a local research centre, REGION. Most importantly, however, Ul'ianovsk provided a very different setting from Moscow.

Indeed, the capital occupies a fairly unique position in relations to other major Russian cities because of its affluence and cosmopolitan character; the perception of Moscow as part of 'the West', or as 'not Russia', is fairly common in more marginal Russian cities (Pilkington *et al.* 2002). While similarly affected by severe economic restructuring and socio-economic polarisation after the fall of communism, Moscow has been particularly successful in attracting investment, successfully adapting to the market economy and managing economic diversification and development. The city has become increasingly integrated into the global economy, acting as a gateway to Russia and the former Soviet region for foreign business and capitalising on its role as administrative and political centre (Brade and Rudolph 2004). While attracting the lion's share of foreign investment, it has also become the financial and business heart of Russia, a process facilitated by the city government policies aiming at making the city attractive to business and retail (Kolossoff and O'Loughlin 2004). The industrial sector has progressively become more marginal to the city's economy, and currently over 70% of the population is employed in the tertiary sector, making Moscow a 'post-industrial' city (Kolossoff and O'Loughlin 2004: 417; Brade and Rudolph 2004: 75). Moscow's dynamic labour market and higher living standards have attracted significant levels of in-migration from other regions of Russia and of the former Soviet Union: it is estimated that in 2000 the average income in Moscow was up to four times higher than the national average (Kolossoff and O'Loughlin 2004:418). To be sure, Moscow has also witnessed an increasing socio-economic polarisation between the new middle classes and those strata of the population who have lost out from the transition to a market economy (Humphrey 2002; Kolossoff and O'Loughlin 2004; Rudolph and Brade 2005). However, the rise of average spending power has boosted the growth of a burgeoning service and retail infrastructure, and of a lively leisure industry. The emergence and establishment of a commercial gay scene has to be framed within the broader context of Moscow's general affluence. The capital city also hosts a great number of nation-wide and international NGOs [non-governmental organisations], and some of the most established Russian LGBT organisations are based in Moscow. Moscow is also the most important centre of cultural production in Russia, since most of the media with a national reach is based in the capital city; phenomena and trends originated in Moscow spread to the rest of the country and are influential beyond the boundaries of the capital. The most successful LGBT information resources and glossy magazines, such as the websites gay.ru and lesbiru.com, also have their headquarters in the capital.

Ul'ianovsk's more peripheral position on the national and international map, as well as its much more modest size, partly explain the city's lack of LGBT community spaces or a commercial gay scene. With its ever growing population (over 10 million), Moscow is a huge metropolitan centre and a 'global city' (Brade and Rudolph 2004), besides being the administrative hub of the Moscow region (Moscow *oblast'*). Situated in the Middle Volga region, about 800 km south-east of Moscow, Ul'ianovsk is the administrative centre of the surrounding region (Ul'ianovsk *oblast'*); its population totals around 650,000, a figure more or less stable since the fall of the Soviet Union. Partly as a consequence of the conservative policies adopted by the Goriachev regional administration in the 1990s, the city has struggled to cope with the transition from centrally planned to market economy. Economic restructuring and diversification has been slow to develop, compared to other neighbouring *oblasti* in the Middle Volga region (Konitzer-Smirnov 2003: 192-195), and the local economy has struggled to recover from the shake-ups of the transition period. An important industrial centre during the Soviet era, manufacturing still plays a major role in Ul'ianovsk's economy. The city hosts aerospace, weapons, automobile and food processing factories; manufacturing remains an important source of employment, absorbing 29.1% of the *oblast'*'s working-age population in 1999 (Konitzer-Smirnov 2003: 192-195). The living standards and social fabric of the city have suffered, and compare negatively with other cities of the Volga region, such as Samara, Saratov and Kazan'. The entertainment industry is not very well developed in Ul'ianovsk, and the lack of a commercial gay scene reflects a more general dearth of commercial leisure spaces; demand is low as a relatively well-off middle class has been much slower to emerge.

Although *vecherinki* [parties] for gays and lesbians are organised at local clubs on a one-off basis, access is restricted to the organisers' friends and acquaintances, otherwise a personal 'introduction' is needed. There are no community organisations in Ul'ianovsk, and 'community life' relies more on individual initiatives and personal networks.

### ***Negotiating access***

Considerable time and effort was spent in getting access to the research settings, in negotiating my role as researcher participant and in establishing trusting relationships within the Moscow and Ul'ianovsk communities and networks. Ethnographic approaches stress the position of the researcher as an individual actively engaging with the community studied, and emphasise the importance of establishing trusting and collaborative relationships in the field, particularly when researching a sensitive topic (Brewer 2000:82-87; Lee 1993:119-163). I envisioned my role as overt participant observer, and favoured

an unobtrusive approach, which would cause the least disruption to community activities, routines and events under observation.

My initial points of contact were the Moscow LGBT organisation *Ia+Ia* and the Moscow Gay and Lesbian Archive, with which I established contact during my pilot study in May-July 2004. I was invited to take part in the weekly self-help/discussion groups for lesbian women organised at *Ia+Ia*, and attended weekly gatherings at the Moscow Gay and Lesbian Archive, based in a private flat in North Moscow and open to the public once a week. Attending these venues was invaluable in terms of meeting, hanging out with and befriending people; information about events popular among 'queer' women was spontaneously passed on in these environments, providing an excellent way to acquaint myself with the Moscow 'lesbian' spaces. I also conducted a few exploratory interviews with some of the women and activists met in these settings<sup>16</sup>. Over time, friendly relationships were developed with some activists and some women who attended these spaces on a regular basis.

During my second trip to Russia (April-October 2005), I was able to draw on the contacts established the previous year. In order to recruit potential interviewees, in Moscow I relied on snowballing initially via my initial contacts, and, as my social circle widened, via new acquaintances. In Ul'ianovsk, a city lacking spaces clearly signposted as 'queer', key contacts established in Moscow with women from Ul'ianovsk were even more crucial. Snowballing was facilitated by a few women, met in Moscow but originally from Ul'ianovsk, who were particularly well-known and well-connected in the Ul'ianovsk *tusovka*. In both cities, some women acted as gatekeepers, introducing me to friends and acquaintances or getting in touch with them on my behalf. Particularly given the intimate nature of the research topic, being introduced by trusted individuals seemed a more sensitive way to approach potential interviewees, and a way to overcome initial diffidence or mistrust.

Reliance on gatekeepers and snowballing techniques means exploring specific networks and social relations patterns within particular settings (Burgess 1984:55). In Moscow, most of my interviewees were women gravitating around community organisations and events (self-help groups, concerts, festivals and particularly the GL archive), although some of

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<sup>16</sup> At *Ia+Ia*, I was also allowed to distribute a short questionnaire with open-ended questions, in which women were asked to leave their contact details if they agreed to be contacted for an interview (see Appendix Three). During the six weeks I spent in Moscow, I collected interviews with six women and three key informants.

them were also connected with other settings and social networks (the *Pushka*<sup>17</sup>, internet communities and commercial venues). The age of my interviewees ranges from nineteen to fifty-six, but most of them were in their late twenties and thirties. The age range was in part a reflection of the social networks explored: women in their mid-thirties and over tended to be more heavily involved in the organisation of community initiatives. Unlike the commercial scene or the *Pushka*, which tended to attract young and very young women, community settings were oriented towards a more mature crowd. Most women in my sample had higher education and were in white collar or professional jobs. Levels of education do not necessarily reflect high income levels or social status in post-Soviet Russia; however, the high levels of education found in my sample reflect the fact that the settings explored presented themselves as ‘cultured’ and ‘refined’ (*kul’turnye*), and were more likely to attract women with specific interests<sup>18</sup>. Another point worth noting is the fact that, although all of my Moscow interviewees were based in the capital itself or the Moscow region, most of them are not originally from the area. While the capital city has always attracted a high number of incomers, in the post-Soviet period its population has risen dramatically, because of the work opportunities and higher standards of living it offers and the slightly more relaxed policies of registration. I had initially considered exploring the *tusovki* gathering in commercial venues and the *Pushka* (an open-air hangout for young lesbians in central Moscow); however, my exploration of these networks remained quite marginal. During my second period of fieldwork, I met another Western researcher, Katja Saraeva, who was specifically interested in young lesbian *tusovki*. Moreover, my ability to access these settings, particularly the *Pushka*, was limited: finding women willing to act as gatekeepers was more problematic and, because of the age difference, it would have been more difficult for me to access them as an unobtrusive participant observer and to be accepted as part of the group.

In Ul’ianovsk, most participants belonged to circles of friends and acquaintances loosely connected to a *tusovka* gathering at monthly gay and lesbian *vecherinki* at local clubs, and, more informally, at local cafes and on the *lavochki* [benches] around the central Ulitsa

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<sup>17</sup> A stretch of the central Tverskoi Boulevard, near the Esenin monument, known as a hangout for lesbians.

<sup>18</sup> Women hanging out at the archive usually have a common interest in art; the archive also collects fiction and poetry by amateur women writers, and occasionally publishes collections of fiction. Information about cultural activities such as concerts by lesbian songwriters, music festivals and trips out of Moscow was provided by the organisers and exchanged at the archive. Other crowds, for example the one gathering at the self-help groups, are more mixed; however, the social networks based around community organisations and events overlap, and these settings all share a *kul’turnyi* [cultured, sophisticated] connotation.

Goncharova. As some of the older respondents reported, the *tusovka* was originally a narrower circle of friends, but had gathered momentum when two young women started organising the monthly parties for gays and lesbians. However, since several people within the group had moved to other cities, the original *tusovka* had disintegrated into smaller circles. The organisation of gay and lesbian nights had been handed over to others, but *vecherinki* had proved much less popular, and at the time I was in Ul'ianovsk there were rumours they would be suspended altogether. Many of the older patrons, now in their mid-to-late twenties, felt they had 'outgrown' the *tusovka* and did not fancy hanging out with 'babies' [*maloletniki*], who had become more prominent in the group. The average age of interviewees was significantly lower than in Moscow: with rare exceptions, all the women were in their twenties and thirties, and most were in their early-to-mid-twenties. Only a handful of older women socialized with this group<sup>19</sup>. The Ul'ianovsk *tusovka* was also much more diversified in terms of educational levels and occupation: it comprised several university students, as well as women with higher and vocational education. Occupations ranged from professional jobs to vocational posts and manual labour.

Feminist research has stressed the importance of exploring how different aspects of individuals' identity intersect in shaping their place in society, everyday experiences and sense of self (Brah and Phoenix 2004; Skeggs 1997; Taylor 2007). While sexuality is the main focus of the present study, I have endeavoured to make other aspects of women's identities visible, particularly age/generation and, to a lesser extent, economic and cultural capital: the ways in which these shape women's access and participation in 'lesbian/queer' space are explored in Chapter Four and Chapter Seven. An obvious limitation of this study is that no attention is given to women's ethnic background, and how this may shape women's identifications and experiences. An attempt to explore it was made in interviews and questionnaires; all the interviewees were Russian citizens [*Rossiiskii*], and native Russian speakers. Data collected and observations suggest that the vast majority of the women in my sample were of Russian/Slavic heritage, while those of mixed parentage (e.g. Tatar/ethnic Russian) generally identified as ethnic Russian [*russkii*]. Given the complexity of Russia's ethnic composition, and the intricate links between nationality, ethnicity and citizenship (see e.g. Flynn 2004; Popov 2008), an exploration of women's ethnic background was deemed unfeasible, and is therefore beyond the scope of the present study.

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<sup>19</sup> Unfortunately I could not get access to circles of older women. My main informant, in her 40s, insisted that there were smaller, but extremely private and hidden, networks of older women, although, having lived in another city for several years, she could not access them; another older woman, interviewed at the very end of my stay in Ul'ianovsk, confirmed the existence of such networks.



### ***Researcher's role and position in the field***

Because of its interactive nature, ethnographic research involves a high level of participation and involvement in the life of the community studied (Brewer 2000:82-103). As Brewer points out, trying to 'fit in' is part of establishing trusting relationships, which are so crucial to the successful outcome of a research project, particularly when dealing with sensitive topics (Brewer 2000:85). At the same time, debates in feminist research point out that positing a shared identity between researcher and respondents, based on their common gender (and, in the present case, sexuality), can elide from the picture differences around issues of race, class and age (Kennedy Lapovsky and Davis 1996; Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002:106-107). A pretence of sameness is ultimately delusional if not deceitful, and can be exploitative by masking issues of power intrinsic in the relationship between researcher and researched group. Ultimately differences between the researcher and researched group, and the ways these are handled and perceived, shape and inform the data collected (Brewer 2000:99-101; Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002:116-117).

Like many other researchers, in the field I was confronted with the ambiguity of being at the same time an 'outsider' and an 'insider' (Kennedy Lapovsky and Davis 1996; Sherif 2001). The fact of being myself a lesbian gave me, at least on some levels, an 'insider' status within the community. Particularly in Moscow, where I regularly attended local community organisations and events, I became 'part of the picture', and in some ways I was perceived as an 'insider' by many women. I was willing to emphasise this status by socialising in these environments, by sharing my own experiences and by showing a genuine interest in the way people live. My position as 'insider' was subject to considerably more questioning and scrutiny in Ul'ianovsk: the near-absence of community organisations and events meant that I was intruding directly in personal networks, and as a foreigner I was more conspicuous here than had been in Moscow. Moreover, I spent considerable less time in Ul'ianovsk than in Moscow, which resulted in a more cursory knowledge of its 'queer' spaces and networks. My status as a research student from Western Europe, only temporarily based in Russia, positioned me as an 'outsider', and throughout my fieldwork I was primarily identified as 'our Western guest'. Although I was able to communicate with reasonable fluency, language and cultural barriers meant that I was not always able to grasp culturally specific meanings, or always interact on the same level with 'the locals'. As a foreigner, I was also relatively unfamiliar with and untouched by the economic and social reality of the country, and, particularly in Ul'ianovsk, where

the average living standards are lower, I was perceived as affluent and privileged. Sometimes the power to address or help in particular situations was perceived as part and parcel of my status as a foreigner<sup>20</sup>. My 'outsider' status did not hinder my research, but it most certainly informed people's attitudes towards me and their responses to my queries, as well as my viewpoint on the data. People's interest in me and my study at least initially often reflected a more general curiosity and fascination in my country of origin and in 'the West'; for many women, this was one of the chief motives for agreeing to an interview, and I was asked time and again questions about life 'over there' and how it compares with Russia. Meeting women in informal environments or being introduced by a common acquaintance was often important in overcoming initial diffidence. This diffidence, however, was never completely overcome; both on my part and on my interlocutors' it resurfaced time and again in stereotypical juxtapositions between 'you' and 'us', in little misunderstandings and in defensive attitudes, particularly in the relations that were confined to the interview situation, or remained on a rather superficial and formal level. I did, however, develop genuinely warm and friendly relations with some of the women who got involved, or helped out, in the study; I am lucky to be still in touch with a few of them.

## Methods of data collection and analysis

### *Text-based data*

Over the years, I gathered and read a considerable amount of texts related to the topic under investigation; these ranged from lesbian-themed fiction, to publications from the local gay and lesbian media, to articles in the mainstream press. Only a selection of them was systematically collected and analyzed, and eventually found space on the pages of this thesis; all of them, however, have provided useful background information and have informed the final version of this thesis. The first few months of my PhD were spent working on a press review, conducted on two mainstream publications (the weekly *Argumenty i Fakty* and the monthly *Ogonek*) and a youth glossy magazine (*Ptiuch*). My analysis focused on the representation of sexuality and homosexuality in the Russian mainstream press (Stella 2004). Throughout my research, I also followed quite closely debates around LGBT human rights in Russia; my main point of reference was the information resource gay.ru, a national LGBT website updated daily. News and events of particular interest were then explored more in depth, by gathering additional resources

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<sup>20</sup> For example, in Ul'ianovsk I was approached by a bisexual man who suggested that, as an 'expert', I should speak to the local media and authorities to raise awareness and tolerance towards gay people.

from the national mainstream and LGBT press. This material was analyzed in parallel with key informant interview data. Both Chapter Three and an early article (Stella 2007), focusing on the political initiatives promoted by the local LGBT organizations and on the controversies and debates around homosexuality in Russian political life, draw heavily on this contextual press analysis.

During my time in Russia, I attended a few concerts by mainstream female artists who were particularly popular among 'lesbian/queer' crowds, and collected their records. Texts from official websites and material from both the mainstream and gay and lesbian media were collected in order to understand how lesbian-themed music was marketed to and received by different audiences. Early conference papers focusing on this topic provided an opportunity to analyze this body of texts systematically, and draw out similarities and differences between 'lesbian' performers and their music. The apparently disparate topics of LGBT activism, LGBT rights and lesbian-themed cultural production were later drawn together in Chapter Three, focusing on the 'new' visibility of lesbianism in Russian society.

### ***Participant observation***

My fieldwork experience involved a considerable amount of socialising and hanging out in 'queer/lesbian' spaces. Observing and recording naturally occurring interactions, conversations, impressions and emotions provided rich and complex data, which in many ways complemented interview data. Participant observation was conducted, whenever possible, in an overt manner. As other researchers have noted, however, the role of the researcher in the field is often ambiguous, since "the overt-covert distinction is in practice a continuum with different degrees of openness, and the roles developed in the field vary with time and location" (Brewer 2000:84). My position as researcher/observer was negotiated with the organisations and the people involved; however, in some situations, not everyone may have been aware of my role as researcher, for example in public places such as community organisations and clubs. In other instances, particularly when attending social events or informal gatherings, the women I had friendly relationships with, although in principle aware of my role as researcher, tended to see me as a friend, guest or mate. Discretion was therefore used when handling data collected through participant observation; although personal stories disclosed in these circumstances were recorded as fieldwork notes, they were sometimes 'filtered out' when writing up the thesis. My interpretation of the data, however, is nonetheless informed by my experiences as a participant observer.

Observations were carried out in different locations, such as community organisations, public venues, and private flats. Events observed included both 'routine' events, such as weekly gatherings at the Moscow GL archive, and one-off occurrences, such as community events, concerts, and informal meetings<sup>21</sup>. Observations were recorded in Microsoft word files immediately after the event; fieldwork notes included descriptions of the physical environment, the activities and patterns of socialising and the interactions between the people involved. A deeper insight was gained by comparing themes and issues that had emerged from the more formal interview situations with natural occurring interactions and conversations. Fieldwork notes were also recorded after most interviews, accounting for the physical setting and general atmosphere of the meeting and the interaction with the participant. Records of informal conversation taking place before and after the interview were also written up and provided a valuable source of additional information. Often, after the dictaphone had been switched off, the conversation naturally evolved along the themes and issues that were raised in the interview, allowing me to clarify details and to deepen my understanding of participants' experiences and opinions.

## ***Interviews***

### **Key informant interviews**

In Moscow, eight interviews with community activists, individuals involved in commercial projects and academics were conducted in order to gain a deeper insight into how 'queer/lesbian' space was constructed and organised. Some individuals were involved in several initiatives and were interviewed in their different capacities<sup>22</sup>. Interviews typically revolved around a few areas: reasons for starting or getting involved in a particular project; activities organised; premises and resources available and sources of financial support; targeted audience and feedback received; plans for future development. However, each project was individually researched, and the interview schedule was modified to fit individual cases. Compared to other, mostly survey-based research on grassroots organisations and NGOs (LeGendre 1998; Nemtsev 2007), I had the advantage of building on first-hand knowledge of many services and projects; interviews were used to gain a better insight into these initiatives. Owing to the lack of established 'scene' space, no key informant interviews as such were conducted in Ul'ianovsk. However, the women more actively involved in the organisation of 'community' initiatives (the monthly gay and

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<sup>21</sup> For a discussion of events selection during fieldwork and a distinction between 'routine', 'special' and 'crisis' situations see Burgess 1990:71-73.

lesbian parties, a counselling service, a website) were also asked about their activities in general interviews. Background information and opinions gathered from key informants has informed my discussion of LGBT activism (Chapter Three) and the construction of 'queer/lesbian' space (Chapter Seven).

All conversations were tape recorded with the consent of the interviewee; with the exception of the interviews collected during my pilot trip, key informant interviews were transcribed in full; upon request, the interview transcript was sent to the interviewee for approval and comments. Most public figures in the Moscow LGBT community use pseudonyms or acronyms; I have stuck to this use, unless they specifically asked to be identified with their real names. It should be noted that both the community and the commercial scenes in Moscow are quickly changing environments. Upon my return to Moscow in April 2005, I found that some of the services I had visited the year before had been discontinued, some were struggling and still others were starting out. Rather than as part of a harmonious 'community', my key informants positioned themselves within a particular social network. Contrasting and even antagonistic perspectives sometimes emerged from their accounts, and in dealing with this I had to be mindful of the politics involved, a task that was not always easy for an 'outsider'.

### **Ethnographic interviews**

In selecting interviewees I have relied mostly on snowballing, through gatekeepers, friends and acquaintances. While snowballing is common in ethnographic research, it is even more widespread in research on sensitive topics, "because it often represents the only way of gathering a sample" (Lee 1993:66). Sexual orientation and behaviour is not included in socio-demographic records of individuals, making probability sampling impossible, at least in the Russian context. Moreover, the intimate character of the topic under investigation makes snowballing through personal contacts the most sensitive approach: being introduced to respondents by friends or trusted individuals was a first step to establishing a trusting relationship and minimising discomfort.

My approach to the research of sexual identities was informed by the anti-essentialist debates sketched in Chapter One. As Kulick notes, research dealing with gay and lesbian identity and culture often collapse "symbolic and empirical categories, and reduce sexuality to sexual identity" (Kulick 2000:270). This approach makes non-heterosexual

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<sup>22</sup> For a list of key informants, see Appendix One.

communities and culture “grounded in and exclusive to intentional, self-proclaimed gay and lesbian identities” (Kulick 2000:271). In order to avoid reducing sexuality to self-proclaimed sexual identity, I did not approach only self-identified lesbians, nor did I assume that all the women experiencing same-sex desire fit into a single label or identity. My starting point were shared sexual and cultural practices: if identities are not innate, but relational and performative, what one *does* is key to understanding individuals’ (dis)identifications, and how they interpret their behaviours and feelings in terms of available narratives of social identity. I initially targeted women who hang out in what are identifiable as ‘lesbian’, or ‘queer’ spaces, such as community organizations, the commercial scene, or belong to particular social networks, identified by insiders as *tema*. Through snowballing, I was able to reach older women and individuals who were more loosely associated with these settings, but were also involved in same-sex relations, or experienced same-sex desire.

A total of sixty-one women were interviewed in the two cities of Moscow and Ul’ianovsk. During my first period of fieldwork in Moscow (May-July 2004), I collected pilot interviews with six women. During the main period of fieldwork (April-October 2005), semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with twenty-eight respondents in Moscow and with twenty-seven in Ul’ianovsk<sup>23</sup>. A database of socio-demographic information was compiled (Appendix Seven), based on the data gathered at the end of interviews, when participants were asked to fill in a short questionnaire (see Appendix Six).

Selection through snowballing, however, was far from unproblematic. I was confronted with my gatekeepers’ and my own assumptions about potential interviewees’ sexuality, as well as respondents’ notions of whether they ‘fitted in’ my study. Although I deliberately excluded particularly ambiguous areas of enquiry such as teenage homosexuality, selecting respondents involved dealing with ‘grey areas’ and with the different meanings women attached to their own and other people’s lifestyles and behaviours<sup>24</sup>. Interviewees would

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<sup>23</sup> Two participants, interviewed in Moscow but originally from Ul’ianovsk, were considered part of the Ul’ianovsk network, since they had moved to the capital only a year earlier and were much more well-connected in their community of origin.

<sup>24</sup> Two young women I originally met at a party for gays and lesbians in Ul’ianovsk were subsequently contacted by an informant and agreed to an interview. My informant simply assumed that they were queer because they had attended the party; as it turned out, they were just hanging out with a gay friend, and were led to agreeing to an interview by the informant’s inaccurate account of what my research was about. Another informant in Ul’ianovsk, herself a self-identified lesbian, well connected in the local community, agreed to help me find interviewees by introducing me to two young acquaintances. While one of them refused to be interviewed, the other, a 20 year-old-woman with a particularly androgynous ‘unisex’ style, did; although telling me at length about a

not fit neatly under a single category: they variously identified as lesbian, bisexual, “ex-heterosexual”, *tema*, aligned themselves with notions of transgenderism, or refused to identify on the basis of their sexual orientation altogether, although the categories more commonly used were lesbian or bisexual. Women’s own self-identifications and the meanings attached to them were discussed in the interviews. The latter also reflected a broad range of experiences, in terms of sexual debut, awareness of same-sex attraction, relationships and ‘coming out’; an oral history approach was used in parts of the interview to explore relationship history. Throughout the thesis, and particularly in Chapter Four, the plurality of their different personal identifications and allegiances is made visible. In the same fashion, culturally specific language (e.g. the slang word *tema*) and nuances regarding the use of certain words (e.g. ‘lesbian’ and the different connotations of words such as ‘dyke’) will be discussed and analysed.

Interviews were arranged in different locations; these were chosen taking into consideration respondent preference, and secondly practical aspects, such as convenience and available spaces; interviews were held in cafes, private flats, public gardens, workplaces and, in a couple of instances, in a private room at the Gay and Lesbian Archive. Most women were interviewed individually; however, in some cases it was considered appropriate to interview more than one person at the same time, either because of logistic reasons, time constraints, or because women made it clear that they would feel more comfortable being interviewed with a partner or close friend<sup>25</sup>.

Potential interviewees were briefed about the aims of the project, the ways in which data would be used, and the kind of questions I was interested in asking. They were also thoroughly informed of the ways in which the anonymity and confidentiality of the data collected would be ensured, as well as of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. Following concerns voiced in an early interview, I also produced a written information sheet, including my contact details both in Russia and in Britain, which was

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non-sexual, very intense friendship with a female friend, she was visibly uneasy with defining it as a same-sex relationship. We eventually agreed to end the interview, which was not transcribed or included in my sample. An older woman I met in Moscow through a community organisation, in spite of talking freely about her numerous relationships with women, was puzzled by my request to hold an interview with her. Although I explained that I was exploring different sexualities, she did not see herself as lesbian or bisexual, and, in spite of occasionally hanging out at and even helping out at community events, she did not see herself as part of that crowd, so she did not understand how an interview with her would be appropriate for my study. The interview never took place.

<sup>25</sup> Group interviews were conducted in a few instances with couples who had invited me to their place; both for logistic reasons and to make the most of the interviewees’ valuable time, this seemed appropriate. In two cases, younger participants expressively asked to be interviewed with a sibling or a close friend. In one instance, a couple was interviewed with a friend they had invited to their place specifically to help me recruit interviewees.

given to every participant (Appendix Four). At this point they were given the opportunity to ask further questions and they might give or refuse informed consent<sup>26</sup>. In order to preserve the anonymity of the individuals involved, interviewees are referred to by a fictional name and the city where the interview took place. All the details that may identify the respondents, or other individuals mentioned in the interviews, have been changed or omitted.

The interviews were conducted in Russian, tape recorded with the consent of the participant and later transcribed in full by qualified native speakers. The interviews focused on personal social and family networks; identity management within them; life experiences and relationship history; interaction with community initiatives and with *temnye tusovki*; and attitudes towards 'queer' events and cultural products. The semi-structured format of the interview was meant to allow the interviewee to maintain control over the topics covered (Lee 1993:110); it was also intended to privilege the perspective of the women interviewed and prioritise themes and issues important to them, rather than the researcher's agenda (Brewer 2000; Burgess 1984). For this reason, it was not always possible to cover all the themes indicated in each interview. The length of the interviews varied considerably, from about twenty minutes in the first pilot interviews to over two hours; while some are more concise and fragmentary, others offer very personal and rich accounts of these women's lives. This was dependent on a number of factors, such as women's willingness to talk about themselves, the rapport established with them and their degree of interest in the research. Other crucial factors were the time participants were prepared to spend and the place where the interview took place, which was not always ideal for private conversations. At the end of the interview time was taken to answer any questions the interviewee may have had about the study and about any concerns that may have arisen. More often, however, the interview developed into a more general conversation, with women asking me about my own life and experiences, my reasons for being interested in Russia and about life in Western Europe.

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<sup>26</sup> Participants were not asked to sign written consent forms, as this may have jeopardised anonymity. The use of consent forms has become standard procedure in Western countries, where it is meant as a legal practice safeguarding respondents from possible misuse or undue disclosure of the collected data from the researcher. However, as the experience of other researchers has shown (De Soto and Dudwick 2000), in the Russian context respondents are usually deeply suspicious of signing forms, a procedure which is not rooted in local culture and which may compromise the trusting relationship established with the researcher. This procedure is generally interpreted as an undue interference which may potentially 'give in' interviewees by linking information disclosed confidentially to their personal details, an attitude that partly results from Soviet authorities' arbitrary practices.



## Analysis, interpretation and writing up

The process of data analysis started from very early on, and was, from the very beginning, intertwined with writing up: naturally occurring ideas, new questions, and tentative interpretations were annotated in text form as different sets of data were collected. Text-based data were the first to be systematically collected, analysed and developed into early conference papers and articles. Discourse analysis, focusing on the representation of (homo)sexuality in the Russian press, was conducted on a sample of mainstream newspapers and magazines as material was collected over a five month period (October 2003-February 2004). Sources included two liberal mainstream weekly publications, *Argumenty i fakty* and *Ogonek*, and the youth lifestyle magazine *Ptiuch*; since the latter had been discontinued by the time I undertook my press review, analysis focussed on an earlier period (2002-2003, see Stella 2004).

The analysis of fieldwork notes and interview data from my 2004 pilot study was undertaken upon my return and written up in the form of a report. It helped me to re-think and narrow my research focus, while outlining more definite lines of enquiry. Ideas and concepts emerging from a broad ranging review of existing literature, conducted in parallel with pilot data analysis, were also influential in redefining my focus. During the following stages, I periodically came back to theory and empirical studies on sexualities; this allowed me to frame my preliminary findings within a broader conceptual landscape, and eventually reach a more meaningful and nuanced interpretation of the data. Developing my knowledge of the broader literature also made me think more ‘globally’, and ultimately led me to interrogate existing theory in light of the findings of my empirical study.

During my second period of fieldwork (2005), ethnographic data accumulated and became more cumbersome. Arranging meetings and interviews, spending time in research settings and recording fieldwork notes proved very time consuming, and only allowed for a rather superficial analysis at this stage. I often felt overwhelmed by the amount and richness of the data collected. I got into the habit of listening and taking notes from taped interviews. Particularly in the initial stages, this exercise alerted me to new themes and issues that could be addressed in the following interviews; conversely, questions and themes that didn’t seem to work effectively were rethought and rephrased. The original approach to

interviews was modified as I became more confident about my interviewing and language skills, making the interview situation less structured and more spontaneous.

The exploratory analysis undertaken in the field informed the development of the research process; reflections recoded as fieldwork notes helped me to keep track of these developments. Preliminary thematic analysis of the contents of interviews, based on coding of interview notes, helped me to develop an initial framework of analysis, which was refined at a later stage by using computer-aided analysis. A more in-depth and holistic data analysis was undertaken upon my return to Britain, once most interview transcripts had been returned. Since different sets of data (press material, key informant interviews, ethnographic interviews and so on) were gathered to reflect different aspects of the topic under investigation, they were analysed separately before broader connections between them could be made.

Particular time and care was taken in analysing interview data; the latter were stored, indexed and retrieved using the software N-vivo. The usefulness and implications of computer-aided analysis have been much debated. What appealed to me in N-vivo was its effectiveness in managing, storing and retrieving data; there is widespread consensus that software packages perform more efficiently tasks that used to be done manually, such as coding and searching (Coffey and Atkinson 1996:172; Coffey, Holbrook and Atkinson 1999:172-175; Richards and Richards 1994:146-172). N-vivo also facilitates more comprehensive searches than manual techniques, allowing for a fuller review of positive and negative cases and enhancing analysis by avoiding anecdotalism (Silverman 2000:163; Coffey and Atkinson 1996:171). Ultimately, using N-vivo was productive in coding, structuring and conceptually organising a vast amount of data; it has the advantage of allowing the researcher to go back to a neatly ordered set of data and categories of analysis during writing up. However, teaching myself to use it effectively was a very time-consuming enterprise, involving formal training and learning by trial and error, by using N-vivo in an exploratory fashion on a sample of interviews. Moreover, coding can become an extremely pedantic and painful process, alienating the researcher from the data and making them lose sight of the overall purpose of analysis, of which coding only represents a stage.

Different analytic styles were employed in approaching the data. As Coffey and Corbin state, different analytic strategies can be used “to explore different facets of our data, explore different kinds of order”, thus enriching the interpretation and offering overlapping

or contrasting perspectives on the data (Coffey and Atkinson 1996: 14). I had initially envisioned indexing the interviews according to emerging themes, thematic patterns and developing conceptual interpretations, a 'classic' approach to coding and the first step towards analytical interpretation. In exploring a highly abstract category such as identity, interviews had explicitly aimed at eliciting narratives from interviewees; as the more in-depth analysis of the interviews progressed, it became clear that it was increasingly difficult to analyse people's accounts of their experiences and relationships simply in terms of common themes.

It often seemed inadequate to 'dissemble' stories by fragmenting them into themes, because this meant losing sight of the meaning and temporal structure attached to them, a dilemma similar to the one Riessman was faced with when analysing accounts of divorces (Riessman 1993:vi). It became apparent that language and narrative patterns were part and parcel of the interview texts just as much as the themes raised. I adopted narrative analysis as a complementary strategy to the more traditional thematic analysis of interview contents. Originally associated with life history interviewing, narrative has recently become the object of a broader interest in social science, and has been applied to more conventional interview material (Riessman 2004, 1993; Chamberlayne, Bornat and Wengraf 2000; Plummer 1995; Somers 1994). It offers an approach which is particularly sensitive to language, narrative structures, interviewees' meanings and sense of place, and the evolution of their sense of self and belonging over time. Narrative analysis offers a holistic approach to data, avoiding excessive fragmentation and focusing on the thematic and structural patterns. Ultimately, a broad approach based on narrative analysis was useful in bringing together different thematic strands and sets of data, and allowing me to draw links and connections between them. Narrative analysis also appealed to me because its focus on language and narrative were productive in querying paradigmatic concepts and narratives such as 'lesbian', 'the gay closet' and 'coming out', and therefore in interrogating existing theory (see for example Jolly 2001). Attention to cultural diversity expressed through language and narrative structures is of paramount importance, given the dominance of English in global academia (Müller 2007): indeed, "a monolingual view of the world is also a monocultural one" (Besemeres and Wierzbicka 2007:xiv).

Writing up the final product involved going through countless drafts, and 'translating' earlier notes, graphs and analytical categories into a highly structured text, written in a very formal academic language. As it is customary in academic writing, the thesis privileges the researcher's 'authoritative' viewpoint by focusing on their analysis and interpretation. This is perhaps inevitable; however, an effort has been made to avoid eliding the presence of the

women who took part in this study from the final text. The extensive use of direct quotes from interviews, and of untranslated Russian expression prevented me from detaching myself from the data during the process of writing up. It is also intended to preserve some of the flavour of the original interactions, to bring lived experience back into the text and to provide a validity check for my own interpretations.

## **Ethical considerations**

Ethical guidelines on qualitative methods for sociologists, by emphasising the principle of not harming participants, tend to overlook ethical issues arising from the interactive relationship between the researcher and the researched group (Christians 2005). While few researchers would dispute the importance of establishing standards of ethical behaviour in social research, it is often human interactions in the field that are more sensitive and difficult to manage. A reflexive approach demands awareness of power relations between researcher and research group, and that researchers are accountable for the knowledge they produce (Lee 1993:107-114; Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002:105-122). Ethical practice defies generalisation, and the finer points inevitably have to be negotiated on a one to one basis with the people involved. This section discusses the ethical concerns arising from doing research on a sensitive topic, and the way these concerns were addressed, in the field and beyond.

Given the intimate character of the topic addressed, I sometimes wondered whether interviews were intrinsically an invasion of privacy and an intrusion into participants' lives. Indeed, some women at times clearly felt uncomfortable talking about their personal lives, while others brought up very emotional and delicate issues, potentially distressing for the interviewee, such as sexual assault, domestic violence, attempted suicide and difficult breakups. In order to redress the balance of power between researched and researcher, semi-structured interviews were used to allow participants to retain control over the topics covered. Previous acquaintance with some of the women and exchanges occurring before and after the interview served to establish rapport, minimising the unequal status between researcher and researched. They also offered some degree of reciprocity by providing participants with the opportunity to ask me questions. In several instances, interviewees seemed to welcome the opportunity to talk about themselves, or later told me they had enjoyed the experience. My status as a 'stranger' or an 'outsider' was not always an

obstacle: one woman, reflecting on the interview experience, and referring to her own involvement in medical research, mused that people feel comfortable talking about their sexuality either with close friends or with complete strangers. After the interview, participants were given a souvenir from Scotland: this was by no means meant to be some kind of 'payment', but rather a sign of appreciation for their time, which should not be taken for granted.

Negotiating my roles in the field was not without ambiguities and, as the relationships with some informants and respondents developed into friendships, I found myself slipping between different roles of researcher, participant, and friend. This experience is not uncommon among ethnographers, and raises the issue of the potential exploitation of the trusting relationships established within the community researched (De Soto and Dudwick 2000; Sherif 2001). The close relations I developed with some women were often the most uncomfortable to negotiate. The boundaries between my role as researcher and as friend were sometimes blurred: access to other participants was frequently facilitated by the women I got to know better, while I also obtained a fuller and more personal account of their lives within and outside the interview context. Another source of ambiguity was the use of fieldwork notes, particularly when this concerned unrecorded conversations which occurred during social events, when the people involved may not always have been aware of my role as researcher. In some cases, particularly when dealing with intimate issues, it was apparent that the unspoken assumption beyond particular conversations was that individuals were talking to me as their friend. When the roles of friend and researcher came into conflict, it became natural to set boundaries over what could and should be used for the purpose of my research. Although some information disclosed under these circumstances may not be utilised or quoted, what I was able to observe in the field still informs the analysis and results of my research.

During my fieldwork I have benefited from the collaboration with local organisations and activists, and have tried to reciprocate the generous support received. I translated a few articles into English for the website [gay.ru](http://gay.ru), exchanged information and documentary sources and, like most regulars, contributed books and other material to the Gay and Lesbian Archive's collection. I also strived, whenever possible, to disseminate findings by making publications arising from my research available to the communities studied. I hope that they will be relevant to the activities of local groups and organisations and to those individuals who expressed an interest in conducting further research on the topic. While talent and academic ability are plentiful, sources of financial and institutional support in Russia are scarce, particularly for those doing research on controversial topics like

homosexuality. This has led to the paradoxical situation that empirical and historical research on gay and lesbian topics in Russia has been mostly written by Western academics and activists (Baer 2002).

Presenting a paper on my preliminary findings at a community conference organised in Moscow by the association *Tolerantnost'* [Tolerance] in June 2005 provided an opportunity to feed back to the community; comments and suggestions were valued as a contribution to a more insightful interpretation of the data collected. A recent academic conference, held in Saint Petersburg in July 2008, provided the opportunity to discuss research findings with Russian academics researching sexuality and the body and activists from local LGBT organisations. I also intend to send a copy of my completed thesis to the Moscow Gay and Lesbian Archive, and to a few Russian academics and activists who showed an interest in my work. Both the English language and academic lingo are obvious barriers to the wider dissemination of research in Russia. In order to make research findings available to a non-academic audience, a short, accessible article on women's experiences of the parental home was translated into Russian by a friend and published by the lesbian magazine *Ostrov* (Stella 2008). The article will also be made available to the individuals interviewed who expressed an interest in the research findings and left their email or postal addresses.

## Conclusions

This chapter has outlined the rationale behind the original research design and its subsequent developments, by discussing the choice of research methods, the practicalities and constraints that shaped the process of data collection, the strategies used in analysing data and the ethical issues arising from fieldwork and beyond. These reflections offer a transparent account of how the thesis took shape, and as such are an integral part of it. The chapter also serves the purpose of situating the researcher in the research process itself, rather than implying their viewpoint is objective, omniscient and detached. It provides a reflexive account of conducting research on a sensitive topic in a foreign country, highlighting its difficulties, contradictions, ethical dilemmas and rewards. These joys and pains are related generally to my role as researcher, and more specifically to my position as participant observer and foreigner; my mastery of Russian language and culture, though adequate, remains imperfect. In spite of all these obvious limitations, I remain convinced

of the value of cross-cultural research: if culture is everything that people in a given society take for granted, cultural differences are more likely to stand out as 'strange' to an outsider. These differences need not be overstated or essentialised, but can be used productively to interrogate dominant theoretical models, which are so often implicitly Western-centric.

## Chapter 3

# **“Fashionable love”? The in/visibility of lesbianism in Soviet/post-Soviet Russia**

## Introduction

This chapter provides a context for the chapters to follow, based on ethnographic data, by charting the development of the notion of ‘lesbian subject’ across the Soviet and the post-Soviet period. The analysis provided in this chapter focuses on the in/visibility of homosexuality.

While in Soviet Russia homosexual subjects, lifestyles and subcultures remained largely hidden from public view, since the 1980s and even more so after the collapse of the socialist system, they experienced an unprecedented public visibility. The present chapter outlines the systemic changes leading to this ‘new visibility’, and frames it within shifting discourses on sexuality and gender, foregrounding both continuities and changes with the Soviet past. While scholarly research on Soviet homosexualities remains scant, sources agree on the fact that the Soviet period had a crucial role in shaping Russian notions of sexuality/homosexuality (Healey 2001; Zhuk 1998; Temkina and Zdravomyslova 2002; Essig 1999). The socialist social order was based on specific sexual and gender norms, and these norms were enforced through very different mechanisms from those prevalent in liberal capitalist societies. An appreciation of the significance of the Soviet period and its legacy is therefore essential to understand contemporary Russian notions of sexual identities and cultures. The chapter also questions the extent to which the ‘new visibility’ of homosexuality in the public domain has challenged existing gender and sexual norms and produced real change in Russian society. By juxtaposing the popularity of ‘lesbian’



performances in Russian popular music to the controversies surrounding public displays of sexual identity politics, it reflects on the contradictory aspects of visibility.

The first section of the chapter outlines the specific features of communist Russia's "gender order" (Connell 1987:98-99, quoted in Ashwin 2000:1). This provides a contextual background to understand the stigmatisation and control of (female) homosexuality, and the lack of public spaces where public discourses on non-heteronormative sexualities could be articulated. The Soviet gender order shifted over the 70 years of communist rule; however, some of its features, established during the early Soviet period, remained significant in shaping gender relations until the fall of the Soviet Union and beyond (Temkina and Rotkirch 1997).

The second section focuses more specifically on representations and in/visibility of homosexuality in media and public discourses across the two 'sexual revolutions' (Kon 1995; Rotkirch 2004) which occurred in Russia in the late Soviet and post-Soviet periods. Official Soviet sexual morals found expression in the strict censorship on sexual matters not related to reproductive and family issues. This context hindered the articulation of identity politics based on shared sexuality, or distinctive subcultures based on consumer practices. Only the liberalisation started by *glasnost* and continued in the early 1990s allowed for the emergence of public representations of sexuality and spaces of association.

Focusing more narrowly on lesbian sexuality, the third section assesses the impact of its 'new visibility' in Russian popular culture within the post-Soviet "gender climate" (Kay 2000). It does so by exploring how images of 'lesbian' sexuality are constructed in Russian popular music, and how they are perceived by mainstream and 'queer' audiences. The choice to focus on 'lesbian' themes in popular music stems from a previous exploration of representation of (homo)sexuality in the Russian press (Stella 2004). The press review revealed that at the time lesbianism was most commonly discussed in the press in relation to celebrities from Russian popular music (for a similar point see also Baer 2005; Nartova 2004; Gurova 2003). The emergence of 'lesbian' themes in cultural products designed for a wide audience certainly represents a noticeable shift from the Soviet past. However, my analysis questions the extent to which the 'new visibility' of lesbianism is an indication of the emancipation of the lesbian subject.

The final section draws connections between the post-Soviet gender order, the new visibility of female homosexuality and the emergence of anxieties and 'moral panics' (Cohen 1973) over the presence of homosexuality in the public sphere. The conservative

backlash against the new public visibility of homosexuality is reflected in political debates about family values and the “common good”, and in the limitations imposed on the public presence of LGBT organisations.

## **Lesbian sexuality and the Soviet working mother**

### ***Prologue: homosexuality and Russian modernity***

The categories of male and female homosexual entered Russian culture in the late 19th century, as part of a wider repertoire of medical and legal discourses coming from Western industrialised countries (Engelstein 1992; Healey 2001). As in other modernising societies, such discourses were part of a broader set of strategies designed to manage and control population growth; these were embodied primarily in the medical sciences and in the law:

By deploying discourses of sexuality, societies crossing the “threshold of modernity” achieved greater control over the individual’s body and over the health and growth of the population of which it formed a part. The discourse of sexuality has widely been interpreted by historians of European and American homosexuality as an attribute of modernity, and homosexuality itself has been proposed as a modern invention [...] (Healey 2001:9-10)

Although sexual intercourse between men had been criminalized in 1855, turn-of-the-century Russia was comparatively tolerant of homosexuality. Unlike elsewhere in Europe, neither the Russian criminal system nor Russian medicine showed much concern for the policing of ‘deviant’ sexual behaviour (Karlinsky 1989:354-356; Healey 2001:152-180). Like in most other European societies, however, social mechanisms regulating homosexuality reflected existing gendered hierarchies. In pre-revolutionary Russia, both male and female homosexualities were considered pathological deviances or perversions. However, only same-sex relations between men were forbidden by law<sup>27</sup>, while the legislation remained silent on female homosexuality. The stricter sanctions imposed on male homosexuality were motivated by the greater visibility of homosexual street subcultures in urban centres, as well as by the fact that male homosexuality was perceived as a greater threat to the social order (on Russia see Burgin 1993, 1994; Engelstein 1995;

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<sup>27</sup> Consensual sexual intercourse between two adult men was listed as a criminal offence in the Russian penal code from 1855 to 1922 and again from 1934 to 1993 (Healey 2001).

Healey 2001; on other European countries, see Vicinus 1992, Faderman 1985; Higgs 1999, introduction).

The development of the notion of homosexuality in Russia was shaped in significant ways by the Soviet period, which marked a fundamental moment of the country's trajectory to modernity. Tsarist Russia had been a largely rural country, with an overwhelmingly peasant population and a limited industrial base. The Bolshevik government engineered a large-scale process of industrialisation, urbanisation and bureaucratisation of everyday life, as part of their ideologically driven plan to modernise the country. The establishment of a heavily centralised political and economic system, based on communist principles, significantly shaped the private lives of Soviet citizens, and institutionalised a peculiar "gender order" (Connell 1987). In order to make sense of how female homosexuality was constructed and policed in Soviet Russia, it is important to frame it within broader official discourses on sexuality and gender. The analysis offered in the following section focuses in particular on the links between official discourses on the role of women in Soviet society, dominant notions of femininity and female sexuality, and lesbianism<sup>28</sup>.

### ***Female sexuality, kinship and the Soviet gender order***

In striving for the modernisation of the country and the establishment of a new 'Soviet morality', state policies consciously altered the role of women and notions of family in Russian society. From their ascent to power, the Bolsheviks showed a commitment to the emancipation of women from the yoke of patriarchy. Women were granted political rights and greater access to paid labour and public life. The Soviet state also promoted legislation "directed at breaking the subordination of women to the patriarchal family" (Ashwin 2000:5; see also Issoupova 2000:32): legal provisions introduced in the 1920s on civil marriages, abortion, divorce, maternity leave and alimony were among the most progressive in the industrialised world (Ashwin 2000; see also Buckley 1989). A certain liberalisation also characterised the new state's attitude towards sexual matters, as offences against "public morality", including consensual male homosexual relations and prostitution, were decriminalised (Engelstein 1995; Buckley 1989; Healey 1993)<sup>29</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> The overview offered in this chapter of the complex, fluid and ever changing official discourses and policies on matters related to the "woman question" and to the family is, of necessity, cursory and limited. For a more detailed account of these issues see for example Buckley 1989, 1992; Fitzpatrick 1999; Wood 1997; Ilic 2001, 2004.

<sup>29</sup> However, debates about the sexual emancipation of women, initiated by Aleksandra Kollantai, had a very limited impact on Bolshevik policies (Buckley 1989).

In spite of the regime's claims to having achieved gender equality by the 1930s, however, gender remained a "key organising principle of the Soviet socialist state", and state policies institutionalised a new and distinctive 'gender order' which remained rooted in the traditional family (Ashwin 2000:1). Moreover, Stalinist policies signalled a return to traditional gender roles and an increasing conservatism in sexual matters (Buckley 1989). Marked by legislation restricting access to divorce and abortion, by the recriminalisation of male homosexuality (1934), and by an overt support for middle-class notions of respectable femininity, they unequivocally endorsed the traditional family as the founding unit of Soviet society (Fitzpatrick 1999; Healey 2001; Buckley 1989). The nuclear heterosexual family, however, was coopted into Soviet ideology in a new capacity, namely to serve the needs of the socialist state. The primary loyalty of each Soviet citizens was due to the state, or the collective, rather than to the private sphere of personal relations embodied by the traditional family (Ashwin 2000; Shlapentokh 1989; Kharkhordin 1999)<sup>30</sup>. At the same time, citizens' rights and duties to the state, and their role in the construction of the new communist society, were defined along gender lines. Women's role in Soviet society was defined by the 'working mother' gender contract: they had to contribute to the building of communism both through paid employment and through childbearing and domestic labour. In return for the fulfilment of their duties, the state supported and protected the working mother by providing a vast array of maternity benefits and welfare provisions, which allowed her to comply to her maternal role without having to give up paid employment (Aswhin 2000; Issoupova 2000; Baraulina 2002).

In some respects, the Soviet "gender order" bolstered women's status in Russian society: all citizens, irrespective of their gender, were mobilised into the workforce, while at the same time access to free education and paid employment was, in principle, guaranteed to all. However, men and women's roles as citizens continued to be seen as a direct reflection of their biological differences. Male privilege in the public sphere was largely preserved, as they were imagined as soldiers (defenders of the Motherland) and workers (builders of socialism), and were encouraged to realise themselves through paid work and public service (Kukhterin 2000; Goscilo and Lanoux 2006). Women's unique and most precious contribution to the collective was represented by their duties as mothers, rather than by their paid work, as reproduction and childrearing were framed as duties to the nation

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<sup>30</sup> The primacy of the collective/public over the individual/private was also inscribed in the Soviet Constitution, according to which, in exercising their rights and freedoms, citizens "may not injure the interests of society and the state" (Art. 39 of the 1977 Constitution).

(Goscilo and Lanoux 2006)<sup>31</sup>. Motherhood and childrearing were portrayed as the ‘natural calling’ of each woman; by virtue of their naturally ‘caring’ role, women were expected to be in charge of housework, a task that was rarely equally shared in Soviet households (Einhorn 1993; Crowley and Reid 2002; Reid 2004). Soviet discourses largely failed to address gender inequalities within the home, as women had to shoulder the double burden of domestic work and paid labour (Einhorn 1993; Reid 2004).

Throughout the Soviet period notions of ‘proper’ femininity were strongly associated with the experience of motherhood. Its centrality to women’s lives was further reinforced in the 1970s and 1980s: amidst fears of a demographic crisis and its negative effects on the Soviet economy, Soviet policies encouraged women to return to their ‘natural’ duties as mothers and carers. Arguing against the ‘masculinisation’ of women brought about by previous discourses of emancipation, a polarisation of men and women’s ‘natural’ gender roles was advocated in medical and pedagogical discourses (Buckley 1989; Kay 2000; Attwood 1990). While in official discourses and policies women’s sexuality retained a strong symbolic link with motherhood, it should also be noted that the socialist state had a great amount of control over women’s sexuality and reproductive rights. The amount of control exercised by the socialist state was arguably greater than in liberal capitalist societies, where state institutions’ reach into citizens’ private lives is more limited, and is legally constrained (Zdravomyslova 2003; Kharkhordin 1995, 1999; Shlapentokh 1989; Oswald and Voronkov 2004). Although abortion was legal and easily available to women in the Soviet Union, Soviet reproductive health policies were staunchly pro-natalist. Abortion was discouraged, but almost no alternative means of birth control was available to women, both as a result of state patronage of “compulsory motherhood” (Healey 2001) and as a side effect of the ‘shortage economy’, which made contraceptives difficult to come by or unreliable (Popov, Visser and Ketting 1993; Popov and Davis 1999; Rivkin-Fish 1999)<sup>32</sup>. In spite of pro-natalist rhetoric, however, poor housing provision, cramped

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<sup>31</sup> Discourses on reproduction as women’s responsibility to the nation are not unique to Soviet Russia (Yuval-Davis 1997). However, in 20th century Russia official rhetoric consistently framed motherhood as a duty. In the 1930s pro-natalist and pro-motherhood discourses were explicitly adopted in order to provide an adequate workforce to modernise and industrialise the country (Buckley 1989; Fitzpatrick 1999). Later they were aimed at making up for the huge population losses caused by WWII, and later still they were promoted because the Soviet-type economy was particularly labour intensive, and further economic growth was premised on the availability of an extensive workforce (Buckley 1989, Field 2000; Winecki 1988).

<sup>32</sup> Owing to the scarce availability of other means of contraception, abortion remained the only means of birth control widely available to women throughout Communist Eastern Europe. Indeed, abortion rates were extremely high compared to those of Western industrialised countries (Popov, Visser and Ketting 1993; Popov and Davis 1999). In Soviet Russia, different procedures seemed to apply to women of different age and marital status: whereas health practitioners usually discouraged teenagers, unmarried and childless women from having an abortion, married women

living conditions and the underdevelopment of childcare facilities certainly had an impact on women's reproductive decisions: although multiple births were encouraged in official discourses, in the late Soviet period single child families were the norm, especially in urban areas, and birth rates fell steadily (Baraulina 2002; Vannoy 1999).

Soviet official rhetoric was not only strongly pro-natalist, but also endorsed and supported the nuclear family as the founding unit of Soviet society. Motherhood and childrearing were expected to take place within the nuclear, heterosexual family. Debates over the new forms of family and relations between the sexes in the 'new' Soviet society had found a public outlet in 1920s; however, they were stifled during the 1930s by Stalinist policies, aimed at re-establishing the primacy of the nuclear family (Fitzpatrick 1999; Buckley 1989). Public discussion on family planning and sexual intimacy remained quite constrained even in the late Soviet era (Popov, Visser and Ketting 1993; Temkina and Zdravomyslova 2002; Zdravomyslova 2001). Soviet official discourses did not offer any alternative model of family and intimate relations: support for the traditional family was institutionalised in state policies and symbolically upheld in the official media, while there was very little recognition for intimate relations that did not fit into this model (Temkina and Zdravomyslova 2002; Klugman and Motivans 2001). Being unattached and childless was frowned upon, particularly for women, since single status was considered either "a temporary phenomenon or a sad consequence of the post-war demographic crisis" (Attwood 2004:184; see also Temkina and Rotkirch 1997). The practice of civil marriage was almost universal, and the overwhelming majority of women married in their early twenties (Klugman and Motivans 2001; Motivans 2001: 30)<sup>33</sup>. Demographic data shows how marriage was an almost unavoidable feature of Soviet life: according to the 1989 census, only 3.7% of the male adult population and 3.5% of the female population had never entered an officially registered union. Divorce rates were also very high by European standards; however, it was also very common for people to remarry, sometimes several times (Kaz'mina and Pushkareva 2004:211-213; Bogdanova and Shchukina 2003)<sup>34</sup>. The universality of marriage was not only dictated by social norms, but also by the fact that

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with children were regarded as being somehow entitled to pregnancy termination (Temkina and Zdravomyslova 2002).

<sup>33</sup> Although, like in other industrialised countries, the number of single-parent families grew steadily from the 1960s, late-Soviet Russia was characterised by relatively low levels of cohabitation and childbearing outside of marriage by European standards (Klugman and Motivans 2001:9).

<sup>34</sup> Single parent families result both from childbearing outside of wedlock and from the practice of divorce. Soviet legislation protected single mothers by making it relatively easy for women to divorce and claim alimony, and by granting significant state benefits in terms of child allowances and support for low-income families (Klugman and Motivans 2001:9).

married status was paramount in accessing welfare provision, particularly housing (Motivans 2001: 31-32). Housing was preferentially allocated to married couples with children, and rights of tenancy were intertwined in complex ways with blood ties (Di Maio 1974:134-137). Severing family ties could easily result in losing housing rights, while securing a living space or residence permit in urban areas, where housing shortage was most acute, was sometimes a factor in marital choices, and resulted in the well-known phenomenon of ‘fictitious marriages’ (Stephenson 2006:90-91).

### ***‘Lesbian’ as an unviable subject?***

It is within this context that the marginalisation and invisibility of Soviet same-sex relations have to be framed. Both male and female homosexuality were heavily stigmatised because they transgressed the institutionalised gender order, which valued above all heterosexual marriage as the basis of the nuclear family, celebrated as the founding unit of society. Like in most other European countries, the medical and legal establishments were the authoritative bodies responsible for keeping in check a phenomenon deemed immoral and antisocial. However, official discourses increasingly branded homosexuality as ‘un-Soviet’, and typical of the moral corruption of ‘fascist’ or ‘bourgeois’ societies (Healey 2001).

Sanctions against male homosexuality were particularly harsh: consensual relations between men were recriminalised in 1934, and were punishable with up to five years of jail (Healey 2001). Social control of homosexuality, both male and female, became stricter over the years. In the early Soviet era “women’s deviant sexuality was left to be corrected by ‘life itself’ in the enforcement of compulsory motherhood” (Healey 2001:240); however, from the 1960s, with the revival of Soviet sexological studies, female homosexuality was increasingly framed by medical discourses as a deviance or a mental illness requiring hospitalisation and therapy (Healey 2001:223-244)<sup>35</sup>. Both male and female homosexuality were stigmatized, concealed and symbolically confined to the margins of society. As Zhuk (1998) and Kuntsman (2008) note, a conceptual overlap was

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<sup>35</sup> According to Gessen, women could be committed to a psychiatric hospital on the initiative of parents or relatives, were forced to undergo therapy and, after being discharged had to register with a psychiatric clinic. The label of mental patient involved the loss of some civil rights, such as being banned from some professions and not being able to obtain a driving licence (Gessen 1994:17-18; see also Essig 1999:25-52; Franeta 2004:16-17). Existing literature indicates that the consequences of being “found out” could be very harsh for women involved in same-sex relations. However, a systematic study on prevailing practices adopted by the Soviet medical establishment to ‘cure’ women of their homosexuality has yet to be written. Existing literature suggests the existence of a variety of approaches to deal with female homosexuality, including gender reassignment, reluctant tolerance and psychiatric cures (Essig 1999:25-52; Franeta 2004:16-17; Healey 2001). For further discussion of this topic, see also Chapter Four.

established between sexual deviance and the criminal underworld. Both female and male homosexuality were symbolically confined by official discourses to the Soviet prison camp: while male homosexuality was a punishable crime, all same-sex relations were tolerated in the gulag as a surrogate of heterosexual relations, and justified with the need to satisfy a 'natural' sexual urge in an 'unnaturally' all-male or all-female environment. The prison camp was the only environment where same-sex desire could legitimately be expressed; outside of it, respectability was associated with 'proper' heterosexual behaviour, while homosexuality was surrounded by a "conspiracy of silence" (Kon 1998:358). However, while male homosexuality as a crime was more publicly condemned and prosecuted, lesbianism remained a reality even more hidden from public view, a fact that most certainly contributed to low societal awareness of the phenomenon (Clark 1997; Gessen 1997).

The fact that homosexuality was interpreted as a challenge and a potential threat to the Soviet gender order can also be seen from the ways in which the label of 'sexual deviant' was constructed. Like elsewhere in Europe, gender roles existed within prevailing patterns of same-sex relations; these usually involved an 'active' and a 'passive' partner (Healey 2001; Zhuk 1999; Essig 1999; Kozlovskii 1986)<sup>36</sup>. In female same-sex relations, the passive partner, known in Soviet prison culture as *kovyrial'ka*, was considered a heterosexual woman and took on the traditional 'caring' and 'passive' feminine role, while the 'active' partner, known as *kobel*, referred to herself as a person of the male sex (Zhuk 1998:149-150). As notions of femininity were grounded in biology and 'natural' differences, it is perhaps not surprising that the label of sexual deviant [*lesbiianka*, 'lesbian'] seems to have been applied mainly to the 'active', 'masculine' woman, who was seen to perform the 'wrong' gender role (Essig 1999; Healey 2001). Women fitting into this type were often diagnosed as transsexual by Soviet psychiatrists and were allowed to change their gender identity on official documents (Essig 1999; Riordan 1996; Zhuk 1998). Existing literature also indicates that, from the late 1960s, sex change operations were performed in some Russian cities on women formally diagnosed and willing to undergo the process (Riordan 1996:164; Essig 1999). Thus, it was mostly women who did not comply with their assigned 'natural' gender roles who were forced to fit into them by 'normalizing' their sexual identity (Essig 1999: 45). Similar passive/female and active/male roles also applied to men, both in prison subculture and outside: in the case of male same-sex relations, however, it was the active partner who was able to retain his

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<sup>36</sup> 'Active' and 'passive' roles within female same-sex couples seems to have been prevalent in the Soviet Union both inside and outside prison camps (Zhuk 1998, Essig 1999, Healey 2001).



‘proper’ gender identity (Zhuk 1994:148; Kozlovskii 1986:122; 127). The widespread character of strictly codified gender roles within same-sex relationships is not, in my view, an indication that Soviet ‘lesbian’ subcultures had internalised them as a “faithful replica of heterosexual role relations”, as Zhuk argues (1994:147-149). Rather, it suggests that sexual desire and sexual agency could only be imagined and coded male within the Soviet gender order. Literature on early 20th century lesbian identities in the United States suggests similar understandings of ‘active’ same-sex desire as gender deviance, while also highlighting the classed and racialised associations between the ‘disreputable’ lesbian and the criminal underworld (Vicinus 1992; Kennedy Lapovsky and Davis 1993; Freedman 1996; for a recent contribution on Russia see Kuntsman 2008).

## **Homosexuality, lesbianism and their visibility across the two Russian ‘sexual revolutions’<sup>37</sup>**

According to Anna Rotkirch, an important aspect in which the Russian sexual revolution differed from what happened in most Western countries is the fact that it was articulated in two phases. The first occurred in the 1960s-1970s, when sexual behaviour among the urban Soviet population began to change along the same patterns as those of other industrialised countries, with an earlier onset of sexual life, premarital sex and extramarital affairs becoming more common, greater numbers of sexual partners and increasing divorce rates (Rotkirch 2004:94; Kon 1995). Unlike in most Western European countries, however, these changes were barely reflected in the Soviet public sphere, where sexuality continued to be a legitimate topic of discussion only when linked to marriage and reproduction. Whereas in Western Europe the articulation of a public debate on sexual matters was a big part of the ‘sexual revolution’, in the Soviet Union discussion of sex in the public domain - “whether educational, entertaining, pornographic or philosophical” (Rotkirch 2004:93) - remained seriously constrained. Sexual pleasure and its expressions were considered strictly private matters, and their public discussion was seen as morally reprehensible, decadent and ‘corrupting’ (Kon 1995). Overt references to sex and erotica were considered

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<sup>37</sup> Following Rotkirch (2004) and Kon (1995), I use the popular term ‘sexual revolutions’ to refer to the defining moments in which discourses on sexuality and sexual practices changed in a given society. These transformations indicate a shift towards a ‘plastic’ notion of sexuality (Giddens 1992), where individuals’ sexual practices become largely divorced from the needs of reproduction and kinship.

dubious at best, and were usually heavily censored by Soviet authorities (Kon 1997)<sup>38</sup>. Thus, the late Soviet period was characterised by a combination of “liberalised sexual practices and lack of institutional reflexivity towards these practices” (Zdravomyslova 2001), as sexual practices that did not fit within the Soviet gender contract were not reflected in public discourses (Rotkirch 2004:94-119). It was only in the late 1980s and 1990s, with the progressive loosening of media censorship started by Gorbachev’s *glasnost*, that a more pluralistic and open discourse on sex and sexuality began to be articulated in the public sphere. According to Rotkirch (2004), this phenomenon marked the start of a ‘second’ sexual revolution: while perhaps more noticeable at the level of public representations of sex, these transformations also concerned individual sexual practices, affected both by shifting discourses on sexuality and by the wider availability of consumer goods, including contraceptives and erotica (Kon 1995). Thus, while in many Western European countries open debate has actively contributed to changing in dominant discourses and attitudes towards sexuality and gender since the 1960s and 1970s, the emergence of such a debate was delayed in Russia (Rotkirch 2004).

During most of the late Soviet period, public discourse on sex and sexuality was legitimated only within the medical sphere (Kon 1997, 1998). However, in Soviet medical discourse sexuality was considered worthy of attention only if linked to reproduction, or if ‘problematic’ and ‘deviant’, as was the case with physical sexual dysfunctions and homosexuality (Healey 2001: 240; Kon 1997, 1998). By contrast, ‘normal’ sexuality was considered problem-free by virtue of its ‘naturalness’: it barely needed professional attention, and it was assumed that people did not need to be educated about it (Kon 1995; Zdravomyslova 2001). In reinforcing the notion of sexuality as a biological given, medical discourse also reinforced heteronormativity, while failing to account for the multifaceted dimensions of heterosexual desire, including its non-procreative aspects. Of course, everyday practices did not necessarily match official discourses: forms of heterosexual and same-sex desire transgressing Soviet sexual morality did find expression in the private sphere (Rotkirch 2004; Zdravomyslova and Temkina 2002; Lissyutkina 1999; Zdravomyslova 2003). They are documented in Russian humour [*anekdoty*], sexual lore,

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<sup>38</sup> In the late Soviet era, explicit references to sex and graphic description of sexual encounters appeared only in unofficial literature, i.e. in literature suppressed by Soviet censorship and unofficially copied and circulated [*samizdat*], or in literature published by Soviet writers only in Western countries [*tamizdat*]. Examples of sexually explicit literary texts published in samizdat or tamizdat include Vladimir Sorokin’s *Ochered’* [The queue, written 1983, published in France in 1985] and *Tridtsataia liubov’ Mariny* [Marina’s thirtieth love, written in 1982-84, published in 1995]; Eduard Limonov’s *Eto ia, Edichka* [It’s me, Eddie, published in the US in 1979, first published in Russia in 1993], and Viktor Erofeev’s *Russkaia Krasavitsa* [Russian beauty, published in Russia in 1990].

and ‘unofficial’ literature and popular music (Levitt and Toporkov 1999; Yurchak 2006). There were very significant discrepancies between official discourses and everyday practices; however, the two were not completely polarised. Indeed, bodily pleasures and sexual rights were “officially hypocritically neglected but unofficially acknowledged” by state institutions and media discourses, and “people developed strategies to assert them” (Zdravomyslova 2001:158). Soviet policies’ neglect of the sexed body and institutional censorship of sexual topics did affect the sexual health, sexual knowledge and sexual practices of all citizens, irrespective of their gender and sexual orientation (Zdravomyslova 2001; Popov and Davis 1999; Kon 1995). However, they experienced this impact differently, since dominant discourses institutionalised heterosexuality as the ‘natural’ norm, while heavily stigmatising homosexuality as deviant, perverted and anti-social. The literature suggests that other non-procreative sexual practices, such as extramarital relations, could be more easily accommodated on the margins of the Soviet gender contract than same-sex relations (Temkina and Rotkirch 1997; Kon 1995, 1998).

The institutionalisation of “compulsory motherhood” (Healey 2001) and the equation implied between male desire and ‘legitimate’ sexual agency account for the existence of gendered mechanisms of social control presiding over male and female homosexuality, and for their variable degree of visibility. While men transgressing the heterosexual norm may have incurred harsher punishment, at the same time they enjoyed greater sexual licence, as male sexuality was less strictly tied to reproductive and family roles (Healey 2001). Several studies mention the existence of male homosexual street subcultures in the biggest Russian cities throughout the Soviet period: although they had a distinctively underground and clandestine character, places for male homosexual encounters included public squares and gardens, cruising areas, public toilets, and cafes frequented by a mixed clientele, but known by insiders as gatherings for homosexual men (Zdravomyslova 2003; Healey 2001; Rotikov 1998). Unlike male same-sex desire, it seems that female homosexuality was rarely articulated in public space: the scant evidence at our disposal suggests that in the late Soviet period ‘lesbian’ networks gathered in private flats (Zven’eva 2007) or on the margins of relatively more visible and established homosexual street subcultures (Kozlovskii 1986; Essig 1999)<sup>39</sup>. At the same time, some literature suggests that the trade-

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<sup>39</sup> Only a handful of research projects have so far delved into Soviet homosexualities; the authors of these studies have patiently collected and pieced together the sparse references to this topic available in primary sources (Healey 2001; Zhuk 1998; Rotkirch 2002). This precious work has mostly focused on the environments where homosexuality was confined by Soviet discourses, namely medical discourses and the prison camp (Healey 2001; Zhuk 1998); the question of how and where same-sex desire (and particularly female same-sex desire) was articulated outside these environments, however, remains largely unanswered.

off for public invisibility was low societal awareness of the phenomenon and lesser negative repercussions for women involved in same-sex relations (Clark 1997; Gessen 1997).

Although they had different degrees of visibility, both male and female homosexual lifestyles and subcultures remained very much a clandestine phenomenon throughout the Soviet period. Together with other 'antisocial' and officially nonexistent social phenomena, such as homelessness and prostitution, same-sex relations received no coverage in the media, or in cultural products destined to a popular audience (Kon 1998). It also appears that distinctive homosexual subcultures and identities found much narrower spaces for expression than in liberal capitalist societies, where homosexuality was similarly stigmatised. Particularly since the 1970s, with the rise of the gay liberation movement and lesbian feminism, distinctive 'gay' and 'lesbian' identities could be articulated at the margins of Western liberal-capitalist societies through minority identitarian politics, (Adam 1995; Isin and Wood 1999). From earlier on, 'queer' subcultures had developed on the margins of consumer cultures, for example with the growth of a gay bar scene in the bigger cities (Higgs 1999; Kennedy Lapovsky and Davis 1993). Identity politics and 'queer' consumerism developed as intertwined phenomena (Chasin 2000); both contributed to the emergence of distinctive gay and lesbian identities, and to the growing visibility of a "reverse discourse" (Foucault 1978/1998) on homosexuality, which aimed to assert the legitimacy and 'normality' of same-sex desire. As Engelstein points out, the relative tolerance of these phenomena in Western society should be traced back to Western liberal-democratic political and legal systems, based on the principle that citizens should be protected from arbitrary state interference into their personal lives (Engelstein 1993). Thus, public and semi-public expressions of homosexuality were increasingly tolerated by law enforcement agencies, even if in public this continued to be contentious (McGhee 2004).

In socialist Russia, by contrast, tight state control over resource allocation and citizens' socio-political activities translated into very limited spaces for market consumerism and identity politics; these were mainly circumscribed to the 'second (black market) economy' and 'dissident' circles. Unlike in Western Europe, in Soviet cities 'queer' spaces were not institutionalised into a commercial 'gay scene', and 'queer' *tusovki* were fragmented groupings, rather than organised communities, able to articulate a collective political stance. The first 'queer' political collective, *Gei laboratoriia* [Gay laboratory], was formed in St. Petersburg in 1984 with the help of Finnish activists, but soon disbanded by the

police (Healey 2001); the very limited debate on the repeal of Soviet antisodomy legislation was circumscribed to some 'progressive' intellectual and professional circles, with no input from 'queer' groups (Zinov'eva 2007; Kon 1998:317-318). The implications of the invisibility of homosexuality and of the absence of a public "reverse discourse" will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Four. It is perhaps worth stressing in the meantime that, as many scholars of Russian sexualities have noted, "gay and lesbian identities have no formal history of existence in [Soviet] Russia as in the West" (Heller 2007:197; see also Essig 1999, Healey 2001).

Greater media coverage and more open public discussion of homosexuality in Russian society began with the onset of the second 'sexual revolution' 1980s and 1990s. The new openness and the public's eager interest in the theme of sex and sexuality were reflected in the veritable burgeoning of sex-related items in the media. This phenomenon became even more conspicuous in the early 1990s, with the introduction of market-oriented reforms, as sex and sexually explicit images became a marketable commodity and pornography and erotica a flourishing new line of business. In this respect, the change was so radical that the period is referred to in some of the literature and in the popular press as Russia's 'second sexual revolution' (Kon 1995; Rotkirch 2004; Zdravomyslova 2001). The most disturbing aspects of this phenomenon, such as the ubiquitousness of sexually explicit material, the rise of an unscrupulous pornographic industry and the exploitation of women and vulnerable individuals in the sex industry, in a social context rife with institutional instability, widespread poverty and growing economic inequalities, are well documented in the literature (Goldschmidt 1998; Johnson 2007; Hughes 2000; Štulhofer and Sandfort 2005). However, it also testifies to a trend in Russian society to reclaim the sexed body, once the almost exclusive discursive domain of Soviet officialdom, as a private and individual realm, whose sensual needs and pleasures are valued in their own right (Omel'chenko 1999, 2000).

Within this broader context of sexual liberalisation, homosexuality gained a new visibility in Russian society; this has contributed to raise awareness of its very existence among ordinary people. As discourses on sex and sexuality have become more pluralistic, the Russian public's attitudes towards homosexuality seem to have become more tolerant, although opinion polls also indicate that homophobic prejudice is still rife<sup>40</sup>. During the

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<sup>40</sup> According to a VTsIOM survey conducted for the first time in 1989 and repeated in 1994, the percentage of respondents wishing to 'liquidate' gay citizens fell from 33% to 18%, and those wishing to isolate them from 30% to 23%; by contrast, the figure of those who thought gay people should be 'left alone' rose from 12% to 29% (Kon 1998:319). In a similar survey conducted in 2005,

1990s homosexuality was both decriminalised and demedicalised: antisodomy legislation was repealed in 1993 as part of a broad ranging reform of the Soviet Penal Code, and homosexuality was struck off the Ministry of Health's classification of mental illnesses in 1999 (Alekseev 2002). These changes, however, did not result from an engagement with the general public and with representatives of the emerging local gay and lesbian community; for this reason, they seem to have done little to challenge widespread homophobic prejudice (Kon 1998:318; Alekseev 2002; LeGendre 1998:17). The decision to repeal the antisodomy law, in particular, was rather sudden and unexpected, and seems to have been prompted by the desire to meet the expectations of the Council of Europe and of Western observers rather than by a real commitment to LGBT human rights (Kon 1998:318; Ozerova and Egorova 2003).

The transformations brought about by the 'sexual revolution' of the 1990s have offered new opportunities to Russian non-heterosexuals, in terms of public representation, association and consumption. Since the late 1980s, a handful of LGBT grassroots groups and organisations began to emerge in the main Russian cities; their activities have focused on community building and, to a lesser extent, campaigns for equal rights<sup>41</sup>. Moreover, from the 1990s venues targeting a distinctively 'queer' clientele began to open in the bigger Russian cities, some of which have since developed a vibrant gay scene. The local LGBT media, which consisted of self-produced Xeroxed newsletters and literary magazines in the early 1990s (Essig 1999), also went a long way: by the late 1990s, a network of popular gay and lesbian websites had emerged<sup>42</sup>, and a few sleek gay and lesbian lifestyle magazines<sup>43</sup> have appeared in the last few years. In spite of the liberalisation of post-Soviet discourses on sex and sexuality, mechanisms of social control and marginalisation of 'other' sexualities remain in place. The new visibility of homosexuality has to be framed within the deep political, economic and socio-cultural

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where 'liquidation' was no longer given as an option, 31% of respondents thought gay people should be "isolated", while 49% thought they should be left to their own devices and 10% that they should be helped (Zven'eva 2007:62-63).

<sup>41</sup> See LeGenre 1998; Nemtsev 2007; Stella 2003.

<sup>42</sup> These include gay.ru, which originally went online in 1997, and its twin site lesbi.ru; they are among the most established and long-running Russian internet resources. Another extremely popular lesbian website is lesbiru.com, created in 2002.

<sup>43</sup> Gay glossy magazines include the Saint Petersburg based BF (<http://www.bfmng.ru/>) and the Moscow-produced *Kvir* (first issued in 2004), which in a 2006 survey of commercial sales was rated the second most popular men's glossy magazine in Russia after *Playboy* (<http://www.gay.ru/news/rainbow/2006/10/17-8522.htm>); lesbian magazines include *VolgaVolga* (first issued in 2004, but discontinued after only 3 issues) and *Pinx* (2006, see <http://lesbi.ru/talk/lgbt/pinx/>). Both *Pinx* and *Kvir* are part of a broader gay-owned commercial enterprise, which also produces the websites gay.ru and lesbi.ru.

transformations Russia has gone through since the fall of communism; it does not necessarily represent an indication of the 'normalisation' and legitimacy of same-sex relations.

The 'new visibility' of homosexuality in Russian society is generally associated with a radical change in sexual morals. During the late Soviet period and the El'tsin presidencies, sexual transgression was read as a challenge to Soviet morals and the values it embodied (Levitt and Toporkov 1999; Zdravomyslova 2003). In this respect, homosexuality was perceived as eminently transgressive and anti-Soviet: its new visibility is associated with the civil freedoms introduced by El'tsin and inspired by the 'Western' model of liberal democracy (Baer 2008). The latter, however, is often unpopular among the vast sections of the Russian population impoverished by the transition to liberal democracy and capitalism. While the stability and economic rights guaranteed by the socialist system were lost, the new individual freedoms were often negatively perceived as a sign of moral decadence and criminalisation of Russian society (Turbine 2007; Shlapentokh 2003). Moreover, the 'sexual revolution' of the 1990s is often perceived as resulting from the influence of global and 'Western' popular culture, which strongly affected Russian cultural forms and formats during the 1990s (Baer 2005; Healey 2006). By implication, homosexuality itself is often perceived as a 'new' phenomenon, a novelty which to some is an indication of progress and pluralism, to others of societal decadence and moral corruption. It is significant in this respect that, since the 1990s, homosexuality is commonly referred to in the media as "non-traditional sexual orientation" [*netraditsionnaia seksual'naia orientatsiia*], an expression which is meant to be politically correct but conveys the idea of a phenomenon alien to Russian traditions, and often explicitly associated with the influence of Western popular culture (Baer 2005; Healey 2006; Nartova 2004).

Since the 1990s the mainstreaming of 'gay' and 'lesbian' images in the media and in Russian popular culture has developed in parallel to the commercialisation of sexual lifestyles. However, queer-themed cultural products have not been targeted exclusively at a queer niche market, and have proved extremely successful with mainstream audiences. A press review conducted in 2003-04 revealed that both male and female homosexuality were discussed in the mainstream press mainly in connection to queer-themed cultural products and performances, rather than with 'real-life' stories or LGBT politics/rights (Stella 2004). Female homosexuality, in particular, was most often mentioned in the media with reference to the emergence of 'lesbian' images in Russian popular music (Gurova 2003; Nartova 2004; Stella 2004). The following section, therefore, is devoted to an analysis of these images in mainstream Russian popular music. The analysis foregrounds the politics

and power dynamics involved in the representation of lesbianism, while also highlighting the contradictory and ambiguous aspects of its new visibility<sup>44</sup>.

## **Sexuality and consumer culture: ‘lesbian’ performances in Russian popular music**

### ***Popular culture and the ‘aesthetization’ of lesbian sexuality***

As Baer (2008:5) notes, contemporary Russian discourses on homosexuality often draw a firm distinction between its ‘biological’ and ‘cultural’ roots (see also Nartova 2004). This excerpt from an interview with the sexopathologist Dilia Enikeeva, from an article entitled “Five reasons for same-sex love”, is fairly representative of media debates over the causes and categorisations of female (and male) homosexuality:

Lately in our country there has been an increase in the number of people who practice same-sex relations but who are not real homosexuals. According to my observations, the relation between real and practicing homosexuals is one to ten. Women, in particular, get to this for a number of reasons. First, from unhappy heterosexual relations. [...] Secondly, because of psychological problems, when ladies have a troubled personality, they are not popular with the opposite sex, out of which arise complexes and barriers in socialising. [...] Third, out of career considerations. *Fourth, out of curiosity, arising from the propaganda of same-sex love in the media. Fifth, from the influence of the so-called bisexual fashion, which has appeared in the last few years.* Finally, because of circumstances – for example, in the context of a female prison (Riabinina 2002; see also Enikeeva 2003)<sup>45</sup>.

Enikeeva draws a firm line between ‘real’ and ‘practicing’ homosexuals, i.e. between those for whom homosexuality is an inborn destiny and those who are drawn into same-sex relations by environmental and cultural factors. She glosses over ‘real’ homosexuality, preferring to focus on what she describes as ‘practicing’ homosexuals (see also Enikeeva 2003, especially pp. 69-105). Her categorisation points to several interesting continuities between Soviet and post-Soviet discourses on lesbianism. First, female homosexuality is problematised as a deviance and a case of ‘failed’ heterosexuality, while the latter is upheld as the unwavering norm and the golden standard. Secondly, in spite of its official

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<sup>44</sup> A discussion of the ways in which these images are appropriated in lesbian spaces will follow in Chapter Seven.

<sup>45</sup> The emphasis is mine.



demedicalisation, lesbianism is still framed as a medical condition, resulting from “psychological problems”, “a troubled personality” or a traumatic experience with a man. In this respect, it is interesting to note that media coverage of homosexuality still commonly deploys the opinion of an ‘expert’ with a medical background, an opinion which carries the authority of objective science (Nartova 2004a). A third element of continuity with Soviet discourses is the reference to the female prison, an all-women environment where ‘situational’ lesbianism ‘naturally’ thrives.

The most interesting aspect of Enikeeva’s categorisation, however, is the suggested link between the new visibility of homosexuality in the media, its portrayal as a fashionable phenomenon and the spread of same-sex relations. The link between the increased visibility of (male and female) homosexuality in popular culture, same-sex relations as a trendy and fashionable phenomenon and the alleged increase in same-sex relations is constantly reiterated in the Russian media (Baer 2006; Stella 2004; Gurova 2003; Omel’chenko 1999). This represents an element of change from Soviet discourses on homosexuality, and is indicative of a widespread perception of the recent mainstreaming of ‘queer’ images as evidence of the ‘normalisation’ and ‘legitimisation’ of homosexuality itself. Whereas in some ‘progressive’ quarters this is read as a positive indication of the decline of ‘Soviet-style’ sexual puritanism (Omel’chenko 1999; Baer 2005), in others it is perceived as a threat to traditional values and a sign of Russian society’s moral chaos (Enikeeva 2003; Baer 2005; Healey 2006). In order to appreciate where the new discourse of lesbianism as ‘fashionable love’ originates, it is necessary to appreciate how ‘lesbian’ performances are constructed and used in Russian popular culture, and how they are read by mainstream and ‘lesbian’ audiences. The discussion that follows focuses on ‘lesbian’ performances in Russian popular music; it foregrounds the contradictory aspects of the ‘new’ visibility, and assesses the extent to which it has contributed to challenging dominant gender and sexual norms.

### ***“And suddenly such a breakthrough”: the Tatu phenomenon***

The mainstreaming of ‘lesbian’ performances in Russian popular music since the early 2000s has represented, in many ways, a distinctively new phenomenon. The growing visibility of real-life female same-sex relations in Russia is often associated, in the mainstream press as well as by the general public, to the popularity of lesbian-themed music, particularly with the ‘lesbian’ performances of the duo Tatu. The portrayal of ‘lesbian love’ as a phenomenon made fashionable by popular culture is very common, as journalist Gur’ianova argues:

*Commonplace N. 7. Recently there is a noticeable trend towards the growth of female homosexuality. The duo “Tatu” alone is worth something. The whole world has gone mad about them.*

Here we are talking more about a fashion rather than about real life. There was simply almost no discussion on female homosexuality before, there was no clear specific image of female homosexuality. And suddenly – such a breakthrough [*proryv*]! (Gur’ianova 2004)

Indeed, while during the 1990s male homosexuality had acquired a distinct visibility in Russian media and popular culture, the ‘mainstreaming’ of lesbian sexuality began a few years later. The success and lasting popularity of some pop and rock acts which displayed ‘lesbian’ undertones played a big part in putting lesbianism under the spotlight (Gurova 2003; Nartova 2004; Heller 2007). The duo Tatu were among the first pop acts to top the national charts while explicitly pursuing ‘lesbian’ themes. In spite of the very ambiguous ways in which they toyed with their ‘lesbian’ image, they remained for a time the most visible public face of lesbian sexuality for the mainstream Russian public (Gurova 2003). Indeed, much more than to their catchy pop tunes, Tatu largely owe their fame to their transgressive and ‘sexy’ image, carefully constructed on the themes of lesbian sexuality and teenage rebellion. Although Tatu were not alone in playing with a ‘lesbian’ image, this certainly played a part in their huge national and international success.

Tatu’s controversial image earned them media exposure and endless publicity, as they alternatively intrigued, shocked and amused the general public. The duo, composed of Iuliia Volkova and Lena Katina, who were 14 at the time of their debut, reached national stardom in 2000, and was propelled to European fame two years later, with the release of the English version of their debut album. Their debut single, *Ia soshla s uma* [I lost my mind], was about a consuming teenage lesbian passion, hindered by the prejudices and misunderstandings of adults. The videoclip graphically underlined the song’s lesbian theme: in it Iuliia and Lena, wearing revealing school uniforms, kissed and fondled each other, under the disapproving stare of a group of people, while the refrain obsessively repeated “I lost my mind/I need her”. At the same time, rumours about a real-life relationship between the girls, sometimes confirmed and at others denied by the duo and their manager, were circulated in the media. In a documentary broadcast in December 2003, *The anatomy of Tatu*, Iuliia and Lena declared that their alleged lesbian relationship was just a commercial ploy planned by their manager to attract media attention. However, after the public dismissal of their ‘lesbian’ sexuality, they continued to construct their

image around the shock-value effect of a transgressive female sexuality<sup>46</sup>. To an extent, the duo continued to play on the lesbian theme: the plot of their recent film *You and me* (2007), in which Iuliia and Lena interpret themselves, is centred around the lesbian relationship which develops between the two protagonists, both teenage fans of Tatu<sup>47</sup>. Tatu also took part in the 2007 Moscow gay pride march, in order to advocate love and tolerance and support the local gay community<sup>48</sup>.

The most striking thing about the Tatu phenomenon is the fact that their 'lesbian' gimmick appealed to a very wide audience, and particularly to a young public (Grachev 2002; Kabanova 2003; Golovnin 2003; Paton-Walsh 2003). Interviews with Tatu's manager Ivan Shapovalov strongly suggest that the exploitation of the controversial 'lesbian' theme was designed to target a mainstream audience, rather than a narrower 'lesbian' niche market (Shulinskii 2002; Weitz 2003); the duo, however, may at the same time appeal to a 'lesbian' audience. Clark (1993) points out that market-driven representations of lesbianism in the media are often characterised by an ambiguous duality; this results from a calculated attempt to entice and entertain mainstream (and presumed heterosexual) audiences and a lesbian niche simultaneously:

The sexual indeterminacy of [...] [the] dual market approach thus allows a space for lesbian identification, but must necessarily deny the representation of lesbian identity politics (Clark 1993:132).

Tatu also achieved a controversial fame among lesbian audiences, where their popularity was the object of heated debates. The more politicised sections of the Russian lesbian community tended to dismiss Tatu as 'fake' lesbians, and sometimes decried the negative effect that their popularity may have in reinforcing heterosexist stereotypes about lesbianism (Gurova 2003:197). Some interviewees pointed out that, at the height of their fame, Tatu had a following among teenage girls and young 'wannabe' lesbians, collectively dubbed as *tatushki* ['little Tatus']. While some emphasised that the Tatu phenomenon had opened up spaces to discuss lesbian sexuality more openly in the public domain, many were ambivalent about the association between lesbianism, 'lesbian chic' and sexual experimentation. Indeed, the brazenness with which Lena and Iuliia exhibited their 'lesbian' sexuality did not bear much resemblance with interviewees' everyday lives, where most of them felt under enormous pressure to camouflage their sexual identity or

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<sup>46</sup> Other controversial video clips featured female masturbation and the staging of pregnant Lena's execution by a squad headed by Iuliia.

<sup>47</sup> <http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tatu>, accessed 16.6.2008.

<sup>48</sup> <http://www.tatu.ru/news.html?id=515&l=en>, accessed 23.06.2008.

make it invisible by performing acceptable gender roles<sup>49</sup>. Some women, however, also expressed a degree of identification with Tatu's songs, which, if taken on their own, sounded like 'lesbian' anthems. Ania thus recalled the enthusiastic reception of Tatu's single *Ia soshla s uma* [All the things she said] among her 'queer' friends:

Now you don't surprise anyone. But before, four or five years ago, it was a sensation, when everyone heard about the band Tatu. When they released the song 'I lost my mind, I need her', it was a hit. Everyone was singing it, and all *temovye* ['queers'] were exhilarated by Tatu, because they brought out in the open [*propagandirovali*] something that was close to their heart [*rodnoe*]. They brought it to the whole world. [...]

*Were you also in awe of the band Tatu?*

I was not in awe of the band, I was in awe of the song. [...]

*Did you like the song more, or the performers?*

The song. At first there were just the songs, they didn't show them much. It was only after the videoclip was released that they started to show them. [...] You could only see them on MTV, which didn't broadcast everywhere, and nowhere else. [Ania, Ul'ianovsk]

### ***A 'lesbian syndrome' in Russian rock***

It should be noted that Tatu were by no means the only performers in Russian popular music to exploit, or be associated with, a 'lesbian' image. Indeed, at around the same time that Tatu reached national success (early 2000s), a plethora of female vocalists appeared on the Russian music scene. These performers were collectively dubbed by music journalists as representatives of "the lesbian syndrome in Russian rock" (Titova 2002). The best known representative of this trend is perhaps Zemfira Ramazanova, front woman of the band *Zemfira*, whose first album was released 1999 to huge popular success, and to this day remains a very popular act. The band *Nochnye Snaipery* [Night snipers], which rose to mainstream success in the late 1990s, was also commonly associated with a 'lesbian' image. Both its founding members, Diana Arbenina, still leading the band, and Svetlana Surganova, who started a solo career in 2003, have been commonly listed among the representatives of 'lesbian' rock. Lesser known names in Russian rock music associated with a 'lesbian' image are those of Elena Pogrebizhskaia, aka. Butch, lead singer of the

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<sup>49</sup> See Chapters Five, Six and Seven

eponymous band (debut album released 2003); and Mara, a songwriter fronting a band named after her, whose first album *Otkrovennost'* [Honesty] first appeared in 2003<sup>50</sup>.

There are both similarities and differences between these musicians' and Tatu's 'lesbian' performances. These concern the ways in which their 'lesbian' images are constructed, and how they are received by both mainstream and 'lesbian' audiences. Much like Tatu's, all of these singers' performances had clearly identifiable 'lesbian', 'bisexual' or 'queer' subtexts. In spite of their different musical styles and images, one of the reasons why these performers have been lumped together under the label of 'lesbian rock' is the similar content of their lyrics. While love is a topic that features very prominently, sexual tension between lovers is often described in vivid and sometimes graphic terms, and lesbian undertones can often be read into the lyrics. One of Zemfira's early songs, *Sneg* [Snow, 1999], began with the words:

I burst into your life [*vorvala v tvoiu zhizn'*]

And you were stunned [*obaldela*]

I wanted love [*zakhotela liub'vi*]

And you didn't [*ne zakhotela*]

In Russian, the endings of the verbs in the past tense make it unmistakeably clear that both characters, one pursuing a love interest and the other resisting the other's advances, are women. Homoerotic themes can also be read in the love lyrics of Nochnye Snaipery, Butch and Mara, whose songs are often written in the first person and often addressed to a woman. Although sometimes explained by the need to write love songs "from a male perspective", if read in the context of these performers' image and stage presence they suggest otherwise<sup>51</sup>. The novelty of these lyrics does not lie only in their lesbian innuendos, which can be detected only in some songs. The songs' narratives also in many ways subvert conventional notions of 'passive' femininity and 'active' masculinity. Indeed,

<sup>50</sup> For more details see the websites <http://www.zemfira.ru/>, <http://www.snipers.net/>, <http://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Butch>, <http://www.maramusic.ru/>, all accessed 23.6.2008. For the purpose of my analysis, representatives of 'lesbian' rock are discussed together in this section. There are, of course, noticeable differences among them, in terms of music, image, popularity and career trajectory: these are briefly mentioned, but are beyond the scope of my analysis.

<sup>51</sup> See for example Nochnye Snaipery's *Ty darila mne rozy* [You gave me roses] (2002) and Butch's *Sterva* [Bitch] (2003). Some of Mara's songs are equally explicit about the female gender of the two lovers; see for example the songs *Dlia tebia* [For you] and *Po doroge k Amsterdamu* [On the road to Amsterdam] from *Otkrovennost'* (2003).

while in much contemporary Russian pop music the female body is the passive object of the male gaze, and desire is associated with the male sex drive, in these lyrics the (presumably) female persona has sexual agency, and openly talks about her own desires and bodily pleasures<sup>52</sup>. The bold and independent image of the lyrics' female persona also finds expression in the performers' image, stage presence and musical style. With the possible exception of Mara<sup>53</sup>, these singers downplay traditional attributes of femininity by wearing casual, unisex clothing and short haircuts, as well as piercings and tattoos, projecting an image quite distant from conventional notions of feminine beauty so prevalent up to that point in Russian popular culture (Beumers 2005; MacFayden 2002). Their energetic performances on stage also suggest charisma, strength and 'toughness' rather than gracefulness or sexual innuendos.

### ***Comparing 'lesbian performances'***

The main difference between Tatu and the 'rock' singers discussed above lies perhaps in the differently gendered identities performed. While Tatu's sexy antics may have been perceived as rebellious and liberating by their young fans, the duo also perpetuated the most trite gender stereotypes. Like countless contemporary Russian female pop acts, their image relied on the objectification of scantily clad, 'sexy' and passive young female bodies. Their hypersexualised image, designed and constructed by a cynical and manipulative manager, was hardly an affirmation of young women's sexual agency.

By contrast, women rock performers seem to offer a more substantial challenge to the "gender regime" (Connell 1987) of the Russian music industry. For one thing, they seemed more in control of their image, music and stage performances. All the representatives of 'lesbian rock' were the charismatic leaders of otherwise all-male bands; while the musicians were often considered dispensable by the management, the female vocalists were central to the construction of the band's image, and also wrote most of the music and lyrics. As Titova (2002) points out, the emergence of a wave of these and other 'female' rock performers in the late 1990s represented a turning point in the Russian rock scene, challenging its male-dominated character. Indeed, up to that point, Russian rock had been largely regarded as a 'male' genre: female musicians found little space in the rock scene, and the presence of female performers was largely limited to the pop scene, known as

<sup>52</sup> See for example Mara's *Angel Schlessen*, Zemfira's *Sozrela* [Ripe], and Butch's *Sterva* [Bitch].

<sup>53</sup> Mara stands out from the other representatives of 'lesbian' rock because she often wears sexy, revealing or skimpy clothes which accentuate her shapes, as in the video of *Che na chem* (<http://gay.ru/news/rainbow/2006/06/28-7738.htm>).

*estrada* (Beumers 2005:229-230). Although women formed a consistent part of Russian rock audience, they were often marginalized in these *tusovki*, while the leading rock bands often displayed condescending or sexist attitudes towards women (Cushman 1995; Pilkington 1994). According to Titova (2002), the new wave of female performers contributed, to some extent, to revitalise a music genre that had become somehow stagnant in the 1990s<sup>54</sup>. In its privileging of socio-political themes and lyrical depth, Russian rock had generally neglected sexual transgression, physicality and bodily connections, themes that were powerfully brought to the fore by a new wave of female performers (Titova 2002).

Like Tatu, all of the rock acts discussed are extremely popular both with young mainstream and with 'lesbian' audiences. Their mainstream success is due to the originality of their music and their professionalism, but also to the novelty of their sexualised and gendered performances, all revolving, to some extent, on a more or less explicit 'lesbian' subtext. According to Titova (2002), particularly after Zemfira's success, 'lesbian rock' bands were packaged to respond to a demand in the mainstream market. All these pop and rock 'lesbian' acts can be seen as part of 'new' discourses on sex and sexuality, displayed in media targeting a young 'trendy' audience, such as the TV channels *MuzTV* and *MTV* (Beumers 2005:240) and the youth magazines *Ptiuch* and *OM* (Omel'chenko 1999; Pilkington *et al.* 2002). These discourses celebrated bodily pleasures, sexual experimentation and freedom from the constraints of Soviet morality (Omel'chenko 1999). To a much greater extent than Tatu, however, 'lesbian rock' has been appropriated by the local 'lesbian' community. While more ambivalent about Tatu, the gay and lesbian community and its media have been particularly keen to appropriate performers such as Zemfira as 'lesbian icons'<sup>55</sup>. Partly as a result of this, these bands have acquired a massive following among young 'lesbian/queer' women, and their music has become part of a specific cultural code circulated in 'lesbian/queer' networks<sup>56</sup>. Whatever the intentions of these artists, their music and image have been re-inscribed with their own meaning by

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<sup>54</sup> Deeply intertwined with the anti-Soviet youth counterculture in the 70s and 80s and reliant on the aesthetics of late socialism, Russian rock had lost much of its appeal by the mid-1990s and was undergoing deep transformations (Yurchak 1999; Friedman and Weiner 1999; Beumers 2005). No longer part of the marginalized countercultural fringes, Russian rock moved into the mainstream and became a fully-fledged business, with professionalism, media coverage (including videoclip rotation on the music channels *MTV*) and commercial revenue becoming increasingly more important.

<sup>55</sup> See for example [http://lesbi.ru/art/music/rus\\_singer/](http://lesbi.ru/art/music/rus_singer/), <http://www.lesbiru.com/art/music/>. See also the lesbian magazines *VolgaVolga* and *Pinx*, and Kirsanov 2007.

<sup>56</sup> See Chapter Seven.

lesbian audiences, and have proven important in the construction of lesbian identities. Much like Tatu, however, these bands do not primarily target a 'lesbian' audience: they also operate on the principles of the "dual market approach", and similarly maintain a certain "sexual indeterminacy" (Clark 1993), although this indeterminacy is constructed differently from Tatu's. With the exception of Svetlana Surganova, who has publicly come out as a lesbian (Lepkova 2004; Golko 2005), these performers have been reluctant to be associated with a lesbian image, identity and audience. Repeatedly asked to comment on their 'lesbian' lyrics and real-life relationships, these artists have disavowed the 'lesbian' subtext of their music, and refused to define their sexuality either way, claiming the right to protect their private life from public scrutiny<sup>57</sup>. The band Butch is perhaps the most graphic example of how flirting with a 'lesbian' audience can create ambiguous ties between stage performance, 'lesbian' sexuality and authenticity. In the early stages of their career, before signing a contract with a record company, the band tried to attract media attention by publicising the ambiguous sexuality of its leader, Elena Pogrebizhskaia (Zykina 2001). Elena had an extremely androgynous look, sporting a crew cut and wearing t-shirts and loose trousers, and, like her band, adopted the suggestive name Butch (the English slang for a masculine lesbian). Moreover, the band divulged a press release according to which Elena did not feel like she belonged to either the male or the female gender; although she had relations with women, she pointed out that she did not regard herself as a lesbian (Zykina 2001; VolgaVolga 2001). Butch's image seems to be constructed around Soviet notions of sexuality, according to which women performing a 'masculine' gender role could be cured of their sexual 'deviance' by turning them (symbolically, biologically or both) into men. The band initially exploited the marketing opportunities offered by the endorsement of local lesbian community and business, creating their website with the support of the most popular lesbian website, lesbiru.com. Soon afterwards, however, the band receded its business contacts with lesbiru.com, as Pogrebizhskaia did not want to become a 'lesbian' icon, but wished to appeal to a much more mixed audience (VolgaVolga 2002). Although the band continued to have a very devoted following among young lesbians, Pogrebizhskaia further tried to distance the band from its 'lesbian' aura, which she deemed damaging to the band's prospects of achieving

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<sup>57</sup> Zemfira always answered in an evasive and ambiguous manner questions about her alleged lesbian relations (Bukharin 1999; Polupanov 2000). Both Diana Arbenina from Nochnye Snaipery and Mara have avoided or dismissed similar questions. Arbenina tried to hush rumours about her alleged relationship with Surganova and refused to answer questions about her love life, although she recently spoke about her willingness to find a husband, settle down and have a child (Skriabikov 2007). Mara was happy to discuss her heterosexual relations but never commented on her allegedly 'lesbian' lyrics (<http://gay.ru/news/rainbow/2006/03/30-7059.htm>). Surganova herself, in spite of making her sexual identity public, was keen to stress that she performed for a diverse audience, and did not specifically target a 'lesbian' crowd (Golko 2005).



mainstream success (Pogrebizhskaia 2005)<sup>58</sup>. Finally, in 2007, the band dissolved, and the singer started a solo career as Elena Pogrebizhskaia, dropping her old stage name 'Butch'<sup>59</sup>.

The development of Pogrebizhskaia's career is a powerful reminder of the role played by the market in the construction of public representations of lesbianism. Pogrebizhskaia's promotion and subsequent disavowal of her 'lesbian' image, not unlike Tatu's, plays with the boundaries between the performative and the authentic. Moreover, Pogrebizhskaia's 'queer' performance plays with sexual indeterminacy, rather than affirming a 'lesbian' identity; this play is more explicit, but not dissimilar from that displayed by other 'lesbian' performers, such as Zemfira or Diana Arbenina. The 'lesbian' performances of Russian female rock at once challenge and reinforce the symbolic erasure that has long affected lesbianism in Russian culture. They challenge it by exploring new themes, suggesting the possibility of a sexual 'other', and making a whole new repertoire of potentially subversive gender and sexual roles available to listeners. At the same time, by disavowing the 'lesbian' content of their performance, artists present it as a fictional phenomenon, an exotic occurrence or a 'literary' convention, rather than a fact of life. Thus it is problematic to draw a clear-cut distinction between 'inauthentic' lesbian-themed music, cunningly and rather cynically designed for a mainstream audience, and 'authentic' lesbian-oriented music, created expressively for a 'lesbian' niche market. Authenticity itself can become a commodity in popular culture: it can be literally sold to a niche population hungry for recognition or it can be traded for higher ratings and better profit.

The visibility of lesbian, gay and queer images in popular culture is often seen as liberatory for non-heterosexual individuals, and as a sign of greater societal tolerance and acceptance of sexual diversity. Indeed, visibility represents an affirmation of the very existence of queers, whose denial and stigmatisation has been captured in the image of the closet (Sedgwick 1990; Brown 2000; Dyer 2002). However, as Clark (1993) points out, 'lesbian/queer' visibility, largely driven by market mechanisms, embodies ambiguous meanings, which are variously perceived and interpreted; thus, its effects can be unpredictable and unintended. Rather than being necessarily an indication of the greater social acceptance of 'other' sexuality, the new 'lesbian' performances also point to the still precarious and conditional status of 'lesbian' visibility in Russian society. As we shall see,

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<sup>58</sup> See also [http://erectrofon.gay.ru/news/2005/05\\_may/00-33.htm](http://erectrofon.gay.ru/news/2005/05_may/00-33.htm), accessed 26.5.2007.

<sup>59</sup> See <http://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Butch>, <http://pogrebizhskaia.ru/>, accessed 23.08.2008.

while the new visibility may challenge, on some levels, normative notions of gender and sexuality, it may also incite hostile reactions.

## **Sexuality, moral panics and citizenship debates in Putin's Russia**

The new visibility of sexual diversity, both in popular culture and in everyday life, seems to have fostered anxieties and fears, which are reflected in the political debates of the Putin era. Amidst growing concerns about the country's demographic crisis and the effects of Russia's second 'sexual revolution', homosexuality is often portrayed in political discourses as a 'problem', with potentially undesirable effects on the fabric of Russian society. There are indications in the political sphere of a backlash against the growing visibility of homosexuality; this highlights how Russia is still implicitly imagined as a heterosexual community, while citizenship status for its 'sexual minorities' is conditional and precarious. Nationalist politicians in particular, claiming to act in defence of public morality and traditional Russian values, advanced a series of proposals intended to restrict the freedom of non-heterosexual citizens. In the debates that followed, the expressions of moral outrage seem to be chiefly focussed on male homosexuality, while lesbianism was either ignored or only mentioned in passing. However, the backlash against the 'propaganda of homosexuality' has implications for both non-heterosexual men and women.

In April 2002, four nationalist MPs from the People's Party faction, headed by Gennadii Raikov, submitted to the Russian Duma [Parliament] a proposal to return to the Soviet law criminalising homosexual behaviour between consenting male adults (Braterskii and Mikhailov 2002; O'Flynn 2002). When criticised for advocating a dangerous return to state interference over its citizens' private lives, the proponents of the amendments insisted that they were not so much concerned with homosexual conduct behind closed doors, but rather with taking a strong stance against the danger posed by the growing visibility of gay culture in Russian society (Nikonov 2002):

The important thing is to draw attention to this, to condemn this [*homosexuality*] as immoral... Moreover, if two men have anal intercourse, and we are proposing to introduce legal responsibility only for this, the police won't know and they won't be sent to jail! [...] Our aim was to raise this

question before society: shall we close our eyes on this in the future or shall we do something about it? They are already cultivating this [*homosexuality*] as a new way of life, as some kind of achievement in the field of moral relations. But this is immoral! (Nikonov 2002).

This was not an isolated episode: shortly afterwards, an MP from Zhirinovski's Liberal Democratic Party proposed to outlaw lesbianism as well, arguing that the growing popularity of female homosexuality, popularised by the pop group Tatu, was having a negative impact on the country's birth-rate (*'Deputies add lesbian sex to the list of crimes'* 2002). In September 2003, yet another nationalist politician, Aleksandr Chuev, submitted a draft law against the "propaganda of homosexuality": the proposal, similar to the infamous British clause 28, aimed to restrict public discussion and media coverage of homosexuality (Popova 2003).

These initiatives were largely considered publicity stunts: they were not met with any substantial support, and were often ridiculed both in political circles and in the media (Kon 2004; Gessen 2002; Riurkova 2002). According to some observers, the debates that ensued reinforced the notion that the state should not interfere with the intimate life of its citizens, whatever their sexual orientation may be (Kon 2004; Gessen 2002). However, political reactions also bolstered the principle that homosexuality may be tolerated only as long as it remains confined to the private sphere. Homosexuality was implicitly framed as a moral matter better left for individual judgement, rather than an issue of social justice and equality, requiring state intervention to protect its non-heterosexual citizens. In May 2004, when Raikov's draft law on the recriminalisation of male homosexuality was put to the vote in the Parliament, the Russian Duma hardly seemed to take the issue seriously: the bill was ultimately rejected because over three quarters of the MPs did not take part in the voting (Kirsanov 2004). A similar fate awaited Chuev's bill against the "propaganda of homosexuality" in November 2004: only 94 MPs took part in the vote, while the legal quorum required at least 226 voters (Zven'eva 2007:40). Thus, the Parliament failed to take a strong stance against legislation which would have resulted in the violation of the human rights of Russia's non-heterosexual citizens. An earlier proposal to make incitement of hatred on the basis of sexual orientation a legal offence, advanced as a response to the homophobic initiatives outlined above, was turned down by a Duma Committee before it got to be voted on by the Parliament on the grounds that "sexual orientation is an especially personal matter of each citizen" (Kirsanov 2004). By maintaining that sexual diversity is, and should remain, a fundamentally private concern, and that it is a topic unworthy of political discussion, state institutions in actual fact uphold a heterosexist public/private divide, whereby the appearance of the 'sexual other' in the public sphere is

not legitimised because potentially polluting or problematic. The decriminalisation and de-medicalisation of homosexuality and the ambiguous detachment of Russian political institutions is not indicative of a sympathetic neutrality, but leaves non-heterosexual citizens vulnerable to forms of arbitrary discrimination and institutional prejudice. Far from being confined to the level of symbolic representation, mechanisms of exclusion have very real consequences for gay men and women, particularly when their activities become visible in the public domain. The degree to which the visibility of non-heteronormative sexualities remains contentious in Russian society can be grasped from the restrictions imposed upon the activities of local LGBT community organisations.

Since the 1990s, several grassroots groups and organisations have had problems in obtaining legal registration from local authorities, although no legal provision explicitly forbids the official recognition of LGBT organisations. A typical case is that of *Treugol'nik* [Triangle], the first umbrella LGBT organisation to emerge in Russia in the early 1990s; *Treugol'nik* was denied registration three times and eventually dissolved (LeGendre 1998:22-23)<sup>60</sup>. More recently, the Moscow association *Svoi* [Our people] was repeatedly denied registration, and it was made clear that they would not be allowed to register unless they took out from their statute any reference to the lesbian character of their organisation. Lena Botsman, one of the founding members of the association, thus explained the failure to obtain official registration:

We've been trying for a few years [*to register their organisation*], it is possible to register it without any reference in the statute about women of non-traditional sexual orientation, but there's not much point in registering yet another of the thousands of women's organisations, there's plenty of them in Russia. We needed something with a lesbian symbolism, to position our view and direction. But every time we went there, every time the girls who took charge of this went there [...] they were always told: you just take this out of the statute, and we'll register you.

*Do you mean, the word 'lesbian'?*

Yes, 'lesbian' and all the rest, [*they say*] in that case we'll register you the next day, [*it happened*] in 2003, 2004, 2005, I can't even remember. Sveta [...] last time tried to register us with all the formulas. We didn't care and bought already a second legal address, we wasted money for nothing, it was all useless. I say, well, ok, we'll live outside of the law [*na nelegal'nom polozhenii*], our work continues, and who cares that there's no organisation, so

<sup>60</sup> The letter notifying their third rejection in July 1995 stated that "its [*Treugol'nik's*] creation contradicts social norms of morality and does not correspond to the demands of Article 23 of the Federal Law 'On Public Associations'. However, the law on public associations does not provide justification for this decision, while the generic claim of the immorality of the association does not provide a legal basis for rejection (LeGendre 1998:22-23).

this is how we live, underground [*v podpol'e*] [Lena Botsman, key informant interview n. 4].

In a similar manner, the expectation, based on the experience of other organisations, that plainly stating their aims would result in a refusal of official registration made founding members of the Moscow association *Tolerantnost'* opt for registration as a women's organisation, rather than as a lesbian or LBT one [Ol'ga and Lena, key informant interview n. 3]. However, the event that most emblematically represents the social tensions generated by the public visibility of non-heterosexual communities is perhaps the 2006 Moscow gay pride march. The Moscow City Council categorically banned the event, intended as a peaceful manifestation in support of gay rights, claiming to act in the name of the majority of the city's population, and arguing that the event might incite violence against the demonstrators themselves. In the atmosphere of moral panic created by the media, Mayor Luzhkov repeatedly stated that he personally regarded homosexuality as an unnatural phenomenon potentially dangerous for society, claiming that "if any one has any deviations from normal principles in organizing one's sexual life, those deviations should not be exhibited for all to see" (*'Pride and violence'* 2006:3). When an unpublicised alternative to the planned march went ahead, demonstrators were attacked and beaten by members of ultranationalist groups, with the backing of Christian Orthodox groups and the blessing of their religious leaders; the huge police forces deployed proceeded to arrest both the violent mob and the protesters, guilty of taking part in an "unauthorised" demonstration (Lomovstev 2006; Magovedova 2006).

These episodes all point to the fact that sexual diversity is tolerated when it is confined to the private space; however, by becoming visible in the public sphere, it does not gain recognition but is forced back into the private sphere. According to a survey conducted in June 2006, this view is not confined to the political arena, but seems to be largely shared by the vast majority of the Russian population: asked about their attitude towards gay people, 47% of respondents stated that do not condone homosexuality, while 40% said they had a neutral attitude to it. 53% of respondents (including a third of those who claimed to have a neutral attitude towards homosexuality) believe that gay people should conceal their sexual orientation (Zven'eva 2007:64).

The anxieties surrounding the public visibility of homosexual diversity should be framed within the broader context of the post-Soviet gender climate. Indeed, in the political arena, debates on sex and sexuality intertwine with controversies over reproductive rights, demographic issues and gender roles. Former president Putin's remarks are illuminating in

this respect; asked about his attitude to ‘sexual minorities’, Vladimir Vladimirovich remarked that he respects “human freedom in all its expressions”, adding, however, that:

My attitude to gay pride parades and sexual minorities is simple, and it is linked to the fulfilment of my official duties: one of the country’s greatest problems is the demographic crisis<sup>61</sup>.

Putin’s comments imply that any public endorsement or recognition of ‘sexual minorities’ would be detrimental to the demographic growth of the Russian nation. Concerns around low fertility rates are not new to Russia<sup>62</sup>; however, since the 1990s they have reached crisis proportion. Owing to a falling birth rate, growing mortality rates and poor health indicators, since 1992 Russia has experienced a net population decline, in spite of significant immigration from the former Soviet region (Field 2000; Rivkin-Fish 2006)<sup>63</sup>. The demographic crisis was seen as contributing to Russia’s declining international status as a political, military and economic power (Rivkin-Fish 2006). Low birth rates were blamed not only on economic recession and socio-economic instability; particularly in nationalist discourses, they were linked to the country’s declining moral values and loose sexual mores, often seen as the result of Western cultural influence (Rivkin-Fish 2006; Healey 2006). Such arguments were widely used by nationalist politicians to oppose sexual health education and family planning, limiting women’s choices on reproductive issues. To this day, sex education is not part of Russian schools’ curricula, while state funded family planning remains couched in pro-natalist rhetoric, and access to abortion was restricted in 2003 (Rivkin-Fish 1999, 2006).

As demographic and reproductive issues have gained centre stage in Russian politics, the Russian state has promoted pro-natalist and pro-family policies, using a rhetoric that endorses the value of motherhood and of the nuclear family (Rotkirch, Zdravomyslova and Temkina 2007). As previously, however, official discourses on family, reproduction and parenthood had different repercussions for men and women. The main responsibility of dealing with the demographic crisis was put squarely upon women, since both political and media discourses reiterated the notion that motherhood was part and parcel of women’s ‘natural calling’ (Healey 2006; Kay 2000:65-71). This rhetoric bears striking resemblance

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<sup>61</sup> <http://www.gay.ru/news/rainbow/2007/02/01-9224.htm#opinions>.

<sup>62</sup> They have been voiced at least from the late 1960s, when anxieties over the nation’s declining birthrate, potentially damaging to the Soviet nation’s planned economy and superpower status, were addressed by offering working mothers more generous benefits and childcare support (Rivkin-Fish 2006; Buckley 1989).

<sup>63</sup> The average fertility rate fell from 1.89 children per woman in 1990 to 1.17 in 1999, increasing slightly to 1.25 in 2001 (Rivkin-Fish 2006:158).

to Soviet discourses, which framed motherhood as an essential part of a woman's life and as a 'social mission'. In this respect, the cult of motherhood, which has a long tradition in Russian Soviet history (Kay 2006), has not lost its compulsive moral force in contemporary Russia (Kay 2000; Baraulina 2002). Moreover, pro-natalist and pro-family policies have contributed to reinforce essentialising discourses on gender: indeed, the post-Soviet "gender climate" has seen an even stricter codification of femininity and masculinity as two rigidly defined opposites (Kay 2000:26-33).

However, current discourses on sexuality, reproduction and the family have to be framed within a profoundly different gender order. As the state relinquished its control over the economic sphere and welfare provision, and the Soviet gender contract of the 'working mother' lost its relevance and legitimacy, the power of institutional regulation to harness female sexuality into reproduction also significantly declined (Baraulina 2002). Thus, even as it opened up new possibilities for some, the post-communist transition marked a general return to women's dependence on men and the traditional family (Temkina and Zdravomyslova 2003). Indeed, women's participation in the labour force was no longer safeguarded by state regulation and extensive welfare provision; during the economic restructuring of the 1990s, women were increasingly encouraged to return to their 'purely feminine' role of mothers and carers. Another important difference from the Soviet period is that a more pluralistic discursive landscape on sex and sexuality had emerged. Dominant pro-natalist discourses no longer reflect the reality of contemporary practices and mores, which, compared to the Soviet past, are characterised by higher rates of cohabitation, a rise in the number of children born out of wedlock and the emergence of new forms of 'alternative' family relations (Ushakin 2004). However, the sexual revolution of the 1990s did not constitute a fundamental challenge and transformation of established gender norms. While sexual pluralism and experimentation have been mainstreamed in the media and in popular culture, they have also in many ways been domesticated and coopted into heterosexuality. Public expressions of non-heteronormative sexuality have also been met with apprehension; particularly when difficult to coopt into heteronormativity through a "dual market approach" (Clark 1993), they are perceived as a potential threat to the existing gender order.

## Conclusions

This chapter has charted the development of the notion of the lesbian subject in Russian culture, framing it within shifting discourses on sexuality and changes in the gender order in Soviet/post-Soviet Russia. The ‘sexual revolution’ of the 1990s saw the articulation of a public debate on sex and sexuality, and the pluralisation of discourses on sexuality. These were crucial to the emergence of lesbian sexuality as a narrative of social identity. Indeed, for most of the Soviet period, female same-sex relations had largely been the domain of medical discourses; ‘lesbian’ had remained a pathologising label, and therefore unviable as a term of self-identification. The notion of lesbianism as deviance is by no means unique to Soviet Russia; however, social control of female sexuality was enforced by the Soviet institutions in distinctive ways. In spite of official claims to gender equality, Soviet citizenship remained structured along gender lines, as women were supposed to contribute to the nation’s welfare through both paid labour and reproduction. State endorsement of the traditional nuclear family and of the ‘working mother’ operated on both a material and a symbolic level to reinforce heteronormativity. The Soviet state retained greater control over citizens’ private lives and intimate choices through central allocation of resources. While everyday practices did not necessarily mirror official discourses, Soviet sexual morals were strongly pro-natalist: they discouraged non-reproductive sexuality, which was also heavily censored in the Soviet media. In many ways, the emergence of a lesbian subject in Russia followed a different trajectory from the ones chartered in existing theory, grounded in research on Western societies (Weeks 1996; Foucault 1978/1998; Faderman 1985; Engelstein 1993; Healey 2001). Work on Western societies suggest an intimate link between capitalism and gay/lesbian identities as we know them (Hennessy 2000; Chasin 2000; D’Emilio 1983); as waged labour made individuals increasingly independent from kinship networks, leisure settings and consumer practices provided opportunities to carve out subcultural spaces. A similar connection is also posited between liberalism and the rule of law on the one hand and the emergence of gay liberation, with its emphasis on group rights and the state’s non-interference in citizens’ private lives (McGhee 2004; Engelstein 2003). Neither sexual identity politics nor consumer-based subcultures could find expression in Soviet society, thus hindering the emergence of a “reverse discourse” (Foucault 1978/1998) on homosexuality.



The relaxation of Soviet censorship over sexual matters, and the emergence of a public debate on sex and sexuality in the late 1980s and early 1990s represented an important turning point, enabling homosexuality to acquire a new visibility. The 'new visibility', however, is linked in complex ways with the fall of the communist system, the 'transition' to market economy and liberal democracy, and deep changes to the sexual mores and gender order of Russian society. Greater pluralism in sexual matters, and lesser state interference in citizens' private lives were intertwined with the commercialisation of sexual lifestyles. The popularity of 'lesbian-themed' music among both mainstream and 'lesbian' young audiences is not necessarily an indication of the normalisation of same-sex relations in Russian society. Irrespective of the intentions of 'lesbian' performers, their commercial success is market-driven, and their images designed to be palatable to both mainstream and 'lesbian' audiences. As such, they can be coopted easily into dominant sexual norms, and can subvert them only superficially.

The public and often very graphic representation of 'lesbian' sexuality may be fashionable in Russian popular culture, but it also triggers moral anxieties about the potentially polluting effects of 'queer' visibility. The growing visibility of homosexuality is often read as a threat to the moral order of Russian society, and as evidence of a pernicious 'propaganda of homosexuality' in the media and popular culture. The backlash against the 'new visibility' of non-heteronormative sexual practices thus fits into broader anxieties over Russia's demographic crisis and diminished status as a political and economic superpower, and influence of Western culture. Visibility may be enabling on some levels, but it also incites danger; issues around the public representation of homosexuality and the recognition of the gay and lesbian community has proved extremely contentious in the political arena. Within the more pluralistic sexual landscape of contemporary Russian society, sexual diversity is tolerated when expressed in private; however, mechanisms of exclusion still operate in regulating its presence in the public sphere.

## Chapter 4

### Sexuality as a narrative of social identity

#### Introduction

As already noted, experiences of same-sex relations during the Soviet period are very sparsely documented in existing literature. With rare exceptions, the analysis usually focuses on official and medical discourses on homosexuality, rather than on first-hand accounts and individuals' everyday experiences (Healey 2001; Zhuk 1998; Kon 1998). The present chapter draws on interview material, and partly addresses this gap in the literature by juxtaposing the experiences and narrative of self-identity of women from different generations, some of whom became involved in same-sex relation during the late Soviet period. Although the initial project had envisioned a comparison between women from different age groups, the limited participation of older women (see Chapter Two) does not allow for firm conclusions. However, does permit the examination of some of the preliminary conclusions in the existing literature, and the suggestion of alternative interpretations and directions for future research. Interview material is framed within shifting discourses on sexuality and gender, outlined in the previous chapter. The chapter focuses on how the in/visibility of homosexuality and the changing gender order affected the experiences and identities of women from different generational cohorts. Continuities and change are accounted for in terms of narratives and constructs of sexual identity available to different generations of Russian women.

In the first section, I try to account for the invisibility of women involved in same-sex relationships in Soviet Russia, and their gradual emergence as a distinctive social group by looking at women's relationship histories. Some of the existing literature has emphasised the role of Soviet totalitarianism and its repressive policies in the oppression of 'sexual dissidents' (Zhuk 1998; Gessen 1994; Essig 1999). I propose that heterosexist cultural

norms, embodied in the institutions of marriage and the nuclear family, have been (and still are) crucial in erasing sexual 'otherness' from social life. In the second section, generational differences are examined in terms of sources of information and sexual knowledge; these are linked to opportunities to access 'lesbian' or 'queer' networks. Suggestions are made as to the impact these may have on the ways in which women interpreted and made sense of their experiences, feelings and desires.

The third and final section draws on the previous analysis of the in/visibility of lesbian sexuality across the Soviet/post-Soviet period, outlined in the present and previous chapter. It discusses the language and terms of self-identification in use within the social networks explored, linking these to the presence in public discourses, of 'lesbian' as an un/viable narrative of social identity. It returns to the argument which opposes the 'global gay', based on Western fixed, binary notions of sexuality, to 'Russian queers', with their allegedly more fluid concepts of sexuality (see Chapter One). From the vantage point of 2008, it queries the essentialist implications of studies such as Essig's (1999), whose data was collected in the early 1990s, and offers a more nuanced interpretation of contemporary Russian lesbian identities and their meanings.

## **Same-sex desire and institutionalised heterosexuality**

Early literature on Russian homosexualities has emphasised the role of Soviet repressive policies in controlling and repressing female same-sex desire. Several authors (Gessen 1994; Kon 1998, 1997; Riordan 1995; Essig 1999) have foregrounded the role of the Soviet medical profession in policing lesbian sexuality. Gessen (1994), for example, has stressed the very real consequences that the pathologisation of lesbian sexuality had on the lives of women enacting same-sex desire. Women could be committed to a psychiatric hospital on the initiative of their parents or relatives, were forced to undergo therapy and, after having been discharged, had to register with a psychiatric clinic; being labelled a lesbian also entailed the loss of some civil rights, such as being banned from some professions and from obtaining a driving licence (Gessen 1994:17-18). While the threat of medical treatment should not be dismissed, the extent to which medical practitioners actually interfered with 'deviant' sexual practices perhaps needs to be reassessed.

Interviews conducted for this study suggest that forced treatment was not the unavoidable fate of all the women who came into contact with medical experts. Two participants reported being referred to a doctor in the late 1980s for severe depression (in 1989 and 1987 respectively). In both cases, the practitioners became aware of their patients' attraction to women, and one of them was then referred to a sexopathologist; there were no attempts, however, to "cure" them of their sexual orientation:

*Did you go to the doctor first?*

I went to a psychiatrist first, because if you have depression, I thought that... [...] She referred me to a sexopathologist. She took me to the Psychiatric Institute. I remember there was a laboratory there, with the writing "sexopathology"...

*But they never tried to cure you?*

No, absolutely not. As I understand it, they treated me for depression. They gave me [*names of medications*]. The worst thing is that they never gave you any information. It's impossible that sexopathologists didn't know about lesbians. They didn't say anything. Apart from this nonsense [*gluposti*], like, get on the underground, pay attention to men. In the same way, they mentioned that they had this guy [*presumably a patient*] who liked men, and they supposedly re-educated him, and he started showing an interest in women. [Liuba, Moscow, born 1962]

Interview material collected by Franeta (2004) in Siberia in the early 1990s also suggests that medical treatment may not have always been forced upon 'deviant' women. However, the quotes also suggest that medical practitioners reinforced the notion of lesbianism as deviance and of heterosexuality as the 'healthy' norm, towards which their patients should strive:

There was a time when they wanted to forcibly cure me. But, thank God, I came across a good doctor, who talked to me and calmed me down. Of course, his advice was to get treatment, he gave me an address, he told me that it is possible to heal this. But at the same time he gave me hints [*dal mne poniat'*] that you can live like that too. And for this reason I didn't go anywhere, of course. [Interview with Ol'ga, Novosibirsk, born 1965; quoted in Franeta 2004:17].

Interviews also suggest that, in post-Soviet Russia, the notion of same-sex attraction as a pathology or 'deviance' has persisted within medical circles, even after the official de-medicalisation of homosexuality by the Ministry of Health in 1999 (Alekseev 2002a). Two young women, Nastia (Moscow, born 1981) and Maia (Ul'ianovsk, born 1984), were taken to a psychologist by their mothers, respectively because of their attraction to women and

their unconventional ‘masculine’ behaviour and looks. Maia was advised to stop having sex with her girlfriend and try having sex with a man when “sexual hunger” arose. This heterosexist recommendation sounds strikingly similar to the advice given to Liuba (Moscow, b. 1962), who was told to ‘train’ herself to show an interest in men. This strongly suggests that changes in official protocols are not necessarily indicative of a neat break in the way medical practitioners think of homosexuality. By ‘othering’ same-sex relations as ‘unnatural’, or as inherently inferior to heterosexual ones, several medical practitioners still uphold and perpetuate heterosexist norms.

Essig (1999) also devotes considerable space to the conceptualisation of lesbianism as a mental illness in Russian medicine; she emphasises how female homosexuality was considered as a disease to be ‘cured’, either through psychiatric treatment or through gender reassignment/sex change operation. However, owing to the difficult accessibility of primary sources, a comprehensive review of late Soviet and post-Soviet medical literature on homosexuality has yet to be undertaken (Essig 1999:188, n. 20). Similarly, research has yet to clarify under what circumstances sex change operations and gender reassignment were applied to ‘sexual deviants’ (Essig 1999; Riordan 1995). Importantly, Essig also emphasises that the pathologisation of same-sex desire operated mainly on a symbolic level as a deterrent:

The possibility of being diagnosed as sexually/mentally ill and the resulting forcible interment in a Soviet psychiatric institution worked primarily at a symbolic level. The Cure [...] circulated as a threat. The diagnosis/cure symbolised removal from normal society into illness, perversion, and disease. It kept women on the *straight* and narrow. Even women who enacted same-sex desire generally also enacted – or at least *play-acted* – heterosexual desire. Many lesboerotic women married men and/or had children, sure signs of “health”. If a woman stepped too far out of line, the threat of the Cure could force her to return to the family of man (Essig 1999:28-29)<sup>64</sup>.

Essig argues that fear of being diagnosed as ‘abnormal’ and ill drove non-heterosexual women to conform to the norm; by camouflaging themselves as ‘normal’ women (as wives and mothers), they “play-acted” heterosexual desire, keeping on the safe side even when they acted on their attraction to women.

I propose that the threat of the ‘Cure’ should not be overemphasised, as it represented one of the mechanisms of social control used to enforce compliance to the dominant gender order. As Rich (1980) has noted commenting on lesbian existence in Western societies,

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<sup>64</sup> Emphasis in the original.

“compulsory heterosexuality” is maintained through hegemonic discursive practices, perpetuating the notion of heterosexual romance, marriage and the nuclear family both as the ‘natural’ norm and as social institutions. In a similar vein, Healey (2001:228) identifies in the Soviet state’s attempts to “channel female sexuality into heterosexual and, ultimately, maternal objectives” one of the key elements in making lesbian identities unviable in the Soviet period. Institutional endorsement of marriage and of the heterosexual family may have been more crucial than the “threat of the Cure” in delegitimising same-sex relations and in making them invisible (see also Rotkirch 2002:455).

Essig (1999) also notes that most of the women involved in her research project had been, or were still, married to a man. This observation is echoed in Rotkirch’s article on lesbian relations in the late Soviet period (2002), and in the findings from the present research project. Half of the twenty-two women involved in the project who grew up and came of age before 1990 were either married, divorced or widowed<sup>65</sup>. These data look even more striking if compared to the number of younger women who had ‘tied the knot’. Among those who came of age in the mid-to-late 1990s (thirty-six), only four had been married; two of these women were already divorced, one was in a ‘white marriage’ and one was married to a heterosexual man<sup>66</sup>. These trends need to be set in the context of broader demographic trends sketched in Chapter Three. These indicate that, while heterosexual marriage was an almost unavoidable feature of Soviet life, post-Soviet Russia has been characterised by greater pluralism in sexual and intimate matters, with marriage and parenthood being reframed, to a certain extent, as private and individual choices (Bogdanova and Shchukina 2003; Baraulina 2002).

While heterosexual marriage remained largely unchallenged as a social institution, the unviability of same-sex relations in Soviet Russia accounts for their invisibility. Like other older women, Aleksandra retrospectively rationalised her choice to get married, or moving in with a male partner, with reference to the predominant social norms and lack of foreseeable alternatives:

In general I thought that a heterosexual life had been laid out for me, and I prepared myself for it mentally, rationally. Rationally I understood that you

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<sup>65</sup> Only one of these women had been in a so-called ‘white’ marriage (a fictitious marriage with a gay man); at least two of the women who had never been officially married had lived for a significant amount of time in a common law marriage [*grazhdanskii brak*].

<sup>66</sup> Three other women were planning to get married, two to a heterosexual and one to a gay man. Of course, the higher incidence of married women in the older age group can be partly explained by the fact that some of the younger women in my sample were just too young to consider the option.

have to live a heterosexual life: get married, like everyone else. But even if I had crushes on boys, I wasn't really drawn to them. In my dreams, the most acute feelings of love and sexual arousal were associated with women. [...] I had sexual relations with both men and women. I even got married at 27. Because I understood that you have to prepare yourself for a heterosexual life. You have to have a lover [*drug*], a boyfriend [*boi-frend*]. Perhaps, you have to get married, like everyone else. But at the same time I was drawn to women. It seemed to me that these relations [with women] were absolutely unrealizable [*neosushchestvimy*] [Aleksandra, Moscow, b. 1946].

Indeed, settling down with a female partner was rarely an option: while very few of the older women interviewed had lived with a partner before the 1990s, for most of those who did living arrangements were fortuitous and temporary, involving, for example, sharing a room in a student hostel with a girlfriend during their student years. It should be stressed that living with another woman was an option that economic independence alone could not secure, since housing was centrally allocated and was preferentially assigned to married couples (see Chapter Three).

Findings from the present study seem to confirm the view expressed in other studies that romantic and sexual relations between women often developed in parallel with married life, or with heterosexual relations, rather than being framed as part of a 'lesbian' lifestyle (see Essig 1999; Rotkirch 2002; Tuller 1996). However, interviews also indicate that heterosexual relations and marriage were not simply imposed on women, but that they had a degree of agency in negotiating them. Women gave a variety of reasons for getting married, including the need to obtain a *propiska*<sup>67</sup> and/or to find a living space<sup>68</sup>; the desire to have children; the need to start an independent household and family; a strong emotional or intellectual bond with their husband-to-be; and the caring and pleasant nature of the groom, who would make a good husband and father. Indeed, there is evidence that similar approaches and ways of negotiating the institution of marriage may have been common among Soviet women, regardless of their sexual orientation (Stephenson 2006; Di Maio 1974). Moreover, while some of these relationships may have been purely instrumental, they should not all be discounted as meaningless 'marriages of convenience', as Rotkirch (2002) points out. Even when well aware of their attraction to women, women did have agency in negotiating the terms of their heterosexual relationships, as Katia's experiences of her engagement and marriage indicate:

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<sup>67</sup> Residence permit required in order to settle in the major Soviet cities (Stephenson 2006).

<sup>68</sup> Liza (Ul'ianovsk), a woman in her early forties, got married to a heterosexual man she met through a lesbian friend, in order to be able to stay in St. Petersburg. Her husband was aware of her attraction to women and, although they lived together, their relationship was not sexual. When she moved away from St. Petersburg she voluntarily gave up any rights she had on her ex husband's flat.

- [After a relationship with another woman] I fell for one of my [female] teachers, I lost my mind, I almost quit college [institut], I was jealous of her and thought that somehow I had to put my life in order [ustraiivat' zhiz']. My first fiancé died, he was a film director, he was a very good person. It was difficult for me to imagine a married life with him, but he was a very good person [...]. Then I started saying that, well, I will get married anyway to the first man who comes by [pervogo vstrechnogo]. I just wanted a child. Of course I was just plucking up courage by saying that I would get married to any man. I chose myself a suitable, promising [perspektivnyi] person. I mean, suitable because we had common interests. And promising in the sense that he wouldn't just sit and watch TV, but he would try and make something out of his life. This is how things turned out. I didn't particularly hide from my husband my crushes [on women], but he was ok with it [on normal'no k etomu otnosilsia].

*Did he know about it [her relations with women] from the very beginning?*

- Yes, and so did my closest friends. [...] But the fact that he knew was not a bad thing. At least our relationship was clear. [Katia, Moscow, b. 1956]

While well aware of her attraction to women, Katia retrospectively sees her marriage as a conscious and rational choice, taken in order to settle down [ustroivat' zhizn'] and to have a child. She also managed to negotiate successfully the relationship with her husband, chosen as a reliable family man, but also for his tolerance towards her lesbian affairs<sup>69</sup>. In spite of her occasional and intense same-sex relations, from Katia's narrative it is clear that she perceived her loyalties and responsibilities as lying mainly with her family. Only after her daughter moved out and her mother died she felt freer to actively pursue her love life. Katia's story suggests that, as long as romance did not interfere with family duties and responsibilities, women did not see same-sex affairs and heterosexual relations as being at odds<sup>70</sup>. However, jostling family responsibilities, heterosexual relations and lesbian desires was not always unproblematic, as conflicting loyalties, needs and affections could be a source of conflict and pain. Tania thus described her messy separation from her first girlfriend Masha:

At the time, our relationship reached a deadlock [voshli v tupik], at least, I could not see how to make it work again [vosstanovit']. Anything could happen, beginning with Masha's marriage. We met on Friday, and on Monday I was told that there was some Alesha [a man], who was meeting her after work. I could not understand what was going on. [...]. She got married. And

<sup>69</sup> Husbands and male partners were sometimes aware of their partners' lesbian affairs; evidence suggests that these were often tolerated, perhaps because they were perceived as romantic, rather than sexual liaisons, and as such were considered unthreatening.

<sup>70</sup> For two fictional accounts of the ways in which same-sex relations and heterosexual marriage were negotiated and managed in the late Soviet years, see the autobiographical novel *Sneg dlia Mariny* [Snow for Marina] (Vorontsova-Iur'evna 2000) and Sorokin's story *Tridtsataia liubov' Mariny* [Marina's 30th love] (Sorokin 2004).



then, after twenty-two days, she managed to get rid of her husband [*blagopoluchno vygnala*] (*laughs*). She had ticked the box for the future, so to say [*sdelala galochku dlia razvitiia*]. I don't condemn her for this. I asked her, I pestered her about this, I said: explain to me at least one thing, why, what pushed you to get married in such a rush?!? She told me that people could see through our relations [*nas rasshifrovali*] and so on. But I didn't get an answer that made sense [Tania, Moscow, b. 1969].

The above quote also suggests that married or divorced status could serve as a 'front' to mask same-sex relationships and to reaffirm a woman's 'respectable' heterosexual status. This point is reiterated more explicitly in other interviews: although marriage was rarely pursued with this aim alone in mind, several women stated that their marital status could be useful in keeping suspicion of being sexually 'deviant' at bay and in protecting their intimate lives from prying eyes. Pressure to conform to prevailing social expectations, however, are not unique to Soviet Russia. Particularly among younger Ul'ianovsk interviewees, marriage was often framed as a 'safer' choice, as an accepted social status and as a way to comply to widespread social norms. Zoia, for example, involved in a long-term same-sex relationship, explained her decision to get involved in a parallel heterosexual relationship, with a view to getting married, in the following terms:

I would say that I am socially bi[sexual] [*sotsial'no BI*], but in actual fact I am not. I live in a society where it is acceptable to get married, and for this reason I socially build a relationship with a man, but if things don't work out, I will say that I am a lesbian. I'll reserve a try, and if things don't work out I will turn the page. [Zoia, Ul'ianovsk, b. 1978].

The ways in which prevailing notions of family and femininity still impact on women's transitions from the parental home to an independent family and household will be explored in more detail in Chapter Five. Nonetheless, it should also be stressed that, in some instances, the overlap or switch between lesbian and heterosexual relationships was framed as a matter of personal choice rather than as a social imposition. Indeed, for some women, this may reflect a bisexual orientation, or a particular fluidity and openness in their approach to sexual and emotional relationships.

Findings from this research project point to continuities, but also to important differences in the ways same-sex relations were located and conceptualized in the Soviet and post-Soviet era. Whereas older women considered marriage a 'fact of life', married status appears to be seen as a more individual and definite choice by younger women, who were more inclined to see marriage as incompatible with same-sex relationships (a situation which would limit one's freedom while also being unfair to one's spouse). Moreover, interviews suggest that, unlike in the late Soviet period, cohabitation with a female partner

is fairly common in today's urban Russia. By contrast, same-sex relationships in Soviet Russia seemed to be articulated almost exclusively in the shadow of socially and morally acceptable heterosexual relations. Soviet women were primarily defined by their marital and family status (married/unmarried; mother/childless woman). In the context of shifting discourses on gender relations and sexuality, same-sex relations are increasingly associated with a distinctive lifestyle and identity. It also appears that women involved in same-sex relations are more likely to position themselves according to their sexual orientation than to their marital status.

## Sources of information, sexual knowledge and patterns of socialising

Same-sex relations had very little visible presence or legitimacy in the late Soviet period, as there were few social contexts in which they could be safely and legitimately articulated. While not associated with a distinctive identity or lifestyle, they often remained hidden under a 'respectable' heterosexual façade. Nonetheless, some women from the older generation lived in defiance of dominant social practices and expectations, never getting involved in heterosexual relations. For them, the social stigma attached to their single status was often compounded by the experience of extreme isolation. Galia (b. 1959) regretted the very limited opportunities she had to meet like-minded women until she moved to Moscow in the mid-1990s:

The girl I had a relationship with in [*a city in the Ural region, in 1977*], at the polytechnic [*tekhnikum*] is not a lesbian, she just loved me. After that, I didn't meet anyone, neither gays nor lesbians. Neither in [*her hometown*] nor in [*other Russian cities*], where I have lived. Perhaps there were some, but there was no community, or a way to access the community, even by chance. The first time I came across what I thought may be lesbians was at a theatre show coming from Moscow [*a theatre adaptation of Marina Tsvetaeva's cycle Podruga [Girlfriend], about her affair with the poetess Sofia Parnok*] [...]. After that, I read in the magazine *Ogonek* a letter where Liuba [*who later became a friend in Moscow*] thanked the editorial board for a sensitive article [*on lesbianism*]. It was 1996. In the summer of 1996 I moved to Moscow [...]. [Galia, Moscow, b. 1959].

Galia's experience points to a link between the public in/visibility of homosexuality, opportunities for accessing distinctively lesbian or queer-themed media sources and

possibilities to meet other ‘queers’ and potential partners. Other interview material from this project also suggests a correlation between the two.

The women who took part in this research had uneven access to information about same-sex relations and to ‘lesbian/queer’ social circles. A very noticeable difference emerged between women who grew up and ‘came out’ during the late Soviet years and early 1990s, and the younger generation. This pattern reflects the uneven quality and quantity of information available not just about lesbianism, but about sex and sexuality in general<sup>71</sup>. For older women, references to same-sex relationships were difficult to come by during their formative years. These women often remembered very vividly the episode when they first heard, or were able to access information about same-sex relations. Recollecting her experiences as a teenager, Iana recalls:

She [*the girl she liked*] was very cute, interesting, and in general, I just considered it absolutely normal [*to show an interest in her*], but [...] obviously I was giving her too much attention, as it happens, I wanted to talk with her more, I kept looking at her. And so it happened that one girl even asked me if I was a lesbian. I didn’t even know the word, and once I was back in Moscow I looked it up in the dictionary. [...] There was at the time a Soviet encyclopaedic dictionary, and it said that lesbianism is a perverted attraction between two women. Perverted... Well, of course I noticed the word “perverted”, but the important thing for me was that this existed in nature. So I came to this as a bookworm! [*laughs*] [Iana, Moscow, b. 1966].

Iana’s memories offer interesting clues about the ways in which discourses on ‘deviant’ sexualities circulated in Soviet society. Firstly, it should be noted that she first became aware of lesbian relations by coming across them in everyday conversation. This suggests that the extent to which the topic of homosexuality was taboo in Soviet society should not be overestimated. At least in urban centres and among the more educated strata of the population, same-sex relations may have been an “open secret” (Sedgwick 1990) rather than an “unmentionable sin” (Kon 1997), a topic passed under complete silence, of which unsuspecting Soviet citizens had no awareness whatsoever. Secondly, interviews indicate that medicalised notions of lesbianism as deviance or perversion were widely accessible, through mainstream encyclopaedias or medical literature.

Fiction, poetry and literary works represented alternative narratives of same-sex desire; ‘queer’ authors, such as Sappho, Marina Tsvetaeva, Proust and Colette, offered a different

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<sup>71</sup> Existing literature indicates that sexual knowledge was mainly ‘learned by doing’, or passed on from peers and lovers during the Soviet period, while in the post-Soviet years young people have increasingly had access to ‘second hand’ information, particularly media sources (Kon 2005; Franeta 2004; Rotkirch 2004; Rivkin Fish 1999).

model, affirming in the eyes of their readers the worth of same-sex relations. However, these sources were likely to be the preserve of the educated urban intelligentsia, and still left many women with the impression that sexual diversity was located elsewhere, in an emotionally close, but geographically or temporarily distant dimension, “in ancient Greece” (Liudmila, Moscow, b. 1967), “in the books” (Aleksandra, Moscow, born 1946), “abroad, in the West, but not in the Soviet Union” (Marusia, Ul’ianovsk, b. 1964)<sup>72</sup>.

The marginalisation and censorship of sexual diversity shaped the way in which older women socialised and became involved with other women. For the vast majority, before the 1990s sexual and romantic relations resulted from casual and ‘lucky’ encounters, and involved correctly reading the signs of mutual attraction. For some women, such as Galia, the impossibility of finding other like-minded women resulted in years of isolation. Rarely did same-sex relations take place against the backdrop of ‘lesbian’ or ‘queer’ social networks. Only one of the older women who took part in the project [Liza, Ul’ianovsk] had belonged to a ‘queer’ *tusovka* in her youth: having moved to St. Petersburg as a young woman, she was introduced to a local mixed ‘queer’ network by two women she had met by chance, who had seen in her “a like-minded person” [*svoi chelovek*]. With this notable exception, older women were unaware of the existence of ‘lesbian’ circles, although there is anecdotal evidence that they existed, at least in Moscow and Saint Petersburg (Zveneva 2007; Rotikov 1998). Evidence from the present study suggests that ‘lesbian’ circles were extremely difficult to access for the uninitiated because of their informal and hidden character. According to some informants, in some artistic and academic circles same-sex relations between women were not uncommon, and, although not openly discussed or acknowledged, they were tolerated. However, in the experience of my interviewees, even in these environments distinctively ‘lesbian’ or ‘queer’ networks, bringing together women on the basis of their sexuality, did not emerge.

*Perestroika* and the early 1990s were often mentioned by interviewees as a period that opened up new possibilities in terms of access to information, social networks and more politicised circles. Several women traced back to this period the appearance of the first articles discussing male and female homosexuality in the press, and of the first personal ads. The wider availability of more diverse sources of information also offered new

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<sup>72</sup> In the Soviet period, most Russian literary works touching on the topic of homosexuality were part of émigré or dissident literature, which circulated among a restricted circle in *samizdat*, access to foreign ‘queer’ literature was also limited by state censorship (Kon 1998). Both because of their professions, social environment and cultural capital, women from the intelligentsia were better positioned to access these sources.

possibilities for socialising: personal ads, for example, provided (and still provide) not only a means to find a sexual partner, but also a way of being introduced to ‘lesbian’ networks:

There was this silly personal ads paper. It had a section called “She plus she”. I wrote a personal and got it published. And I got lots of letters. More than a hundred. I made a selection. If there were grammar mistakes, I just replied “no”. I tried to reply to everyone. I wrote, “sorry”. I met four or five of the women who wrote. I understood that there was a *tusovka*. One of these women took me there [Zhanna, pilot study, Moscow, b. 1962].

During the early 1990s, both a commercial scene and various community initiatives gradually emerged in Moscow. Access to queer networks was perceived as an exciting and empowering opportunity, both by women who had previously been involved in same-sex relations and by those who were beginning to explore their sexuality. By the mid-1990s, some women had become involved in the first Moscow community initiatives, an environment portrayed by an informant as “a clandestine conspiracy” [*partizanstvo*] (Alia, Moscow, born 1972).

Since the vast majority of the older women in my sample were either from Moscow, or had settled in Moscow by the early-to-mid-1990s, the data does not offer much evidence about the emergence and development of formal and informal lesbian networks elsewhere. Interviews with women from Ul’ianovsk, however, seem to indicate that these may have been much slower to develop there. Older interviewees from Ul’ianovsk recalled that personal ads, which were instrumental in connecting lesbian and bisexual women into broader networks, first became widely available in the city in the late 1990s, through the general trading paper *Iz ruk v ruki*<sup>73</sup>. This suggests that personal ads may have first become available in the bigger cities, and that the trend only later spread to provincial cities. Moreover, geographic location remains an important factor in constraining or enabling access to lesbian circles and support networks. While an infrastructure of commercial venues and community initiatives was developing in Moscow already by the mid-1990s, any kind of space clearly signposted as ‘lesbian/queer’ was still missing in Ul’ianovsk at the time when research took place (see Chapter Seven). The importance of location in accessing spaces to ‘come out’, and the emotional distance between big cosmopolitan cities hosting a commercial scene and more peripheral centres, is also reflected in the experiences of younger women who grew up in other provincial cities and small towns. Nastia (Moscow, b. 1981), who was brought up in a town in the Kursk region, remembers reading a newspaper article about a Moscow lesbian club when, as a teenager, she was

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<sup>73</sup> See Chapter Two for the reasons I could not access older women’s networks in Ul’ianovsk; see also Chapter Two and Seven for a more detailed comparison between Ul’ianovsk and Moscow.

questioning her sexuality. The article caught her imagination because, although she was beginning to think of herself as a lesbian, she did not know “what lesbians were, what they looked like”; however, the possibility of visiting a similar venue and making contact with lesbian circles remained out of her reach for a long time.

Although this did not always translate into greater access to lesbian circles, a wide range of images and information on homosexuality had been widely available to the younger women in my sample since their teenage years. Women came across lesbian images through a variety of sources, including newspaper and magazine articles, TV and radio programmes, films and specialised literature. This makes a striking contrast with the experiences of older women, both in terms of the sheer quantity and availability of information and of the much more open, and sometimes graphic details, in which lesbianism was portrayed. Inna (Moscow, pilot, Moscow, born 1980) recalled seeing a TV programme on the lives of lesbian women at the age of thirteen, and later telling her mum how she had seen “such a great programme about lesbians!”. Maia (Ul’ianovsk, born 1984) randomly came across the American film *Color of night* (1994), featuring a lesbian subplot, when she was ten; Zulia (Ul’ianovsk, b. 1980) remembered watching a pornographic film featuring a scene of lesbian sex with her friends in her teenage years. The pluralisation of discourses on ‘other’ sexuality is also evidenced by the availability of alternative and more balanced sources of information, including sympathetic books and articles, such as those by the sexologist Igor’ Kon, and newly available community information resources. These sources seemed to play an important role in making some women aware of different lifestyle choices. Being able to contact a community organisation was an important source of support to Masha in her teenage years:

Now there is a [*gay and lesbian*] switchboard, it’s a good thing! There wasn’t anything like that before. When I was finding myself [*osoznala sebia*], some friend of mine found Zhenia Derbianskaia’s address [*a lesbian entrepreneur and activist*]. I wrote to her, and she wrote back. [...] I was 15-16, to me that was great. I wrote that I lived in a small town, and I didn’t know anything, how, where and what. What to do? And I wrote that I was in love. She replied saying that she’s also from a small town, that she understood me very well [...] [Masha, Moscow, b. 1982]

However, the wider availability of ‘lesbian’ images and sources was not always perceived positively, and some women highlighted the ambiguities surrounding public representations of lesbianism. The equation commonly made between ‘lesbian’ chic and lesbianism as a passing phase was often remarked upon by young women. Vera explicitly linked her friends’ perceptions of lesbianism to media representations:

I think it's a good thing, because society becomes a bit more open, in this respect. Because before there wasn't anything like this. On the other hand, if you take Tatu for example, that's terrible, of course. They made it fashionable [*nemnogo vveli modu*]. Now many think this is just a fashion, and they don't take it seriously. Some of my friends also thought that I'm just having fun, I'm just being trendy [*modnichaiu*], that's all. [Vera, Moscow, born 1980].

Vera points out how media representations often perpetuated old prejudices while spreading new clichés about same-sex relations. Indeed, some women were quite critical of the current media hype surrounding homosexuality and lesbianism, which either glamorised sexual diversity as a fashionable trend or portrayed it in scandalised tones.

The increased visibility of lesbian images in the media seems to have made younger women aware of different sexual identities and lifestyle choices from an earlier age. They were also more aware of the existence of lesbian social networks, commercial venues and community initiatives, and were more likely to have had peers identifying as gay/lesbian during their formative years than women from the older age group. Not all of them were equally eager to socialise in 'lesbian' spaces, or had the same opportunities to access these spaces; however, socialising with other women on the basis of a common sexual identity represented a possibility that had eluded altogether women from the previous generations in their formative years. The relationship between available narratives and representations of sexual 'otherness', access to community and individual self-identification is far from straightforward, and I am not suggesting a cause-effect relationship between them. The outset of an individual's active sexual life does not necessarily follow from knowledge about sex, and awareness of same-sex relations, access to information about it, and contact with other gay women do not constitute a pattern of events necessarily leading to one's 'coming out'<sup>74</sup>. However, I wish to draw attention to the parallel emergence in the public sphere of pluralistic narratives of sexuality and access to 'queer' spaces and networks. These are important because they represent a resource that women could tap into in making sense of their experiences, feelings and desires.

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<sup>74</sup> Some women, although aware of the existence of 'other' sexualities from a young age, did not perceive this information as meaningful and relevant until later in life, when they became attracted to women after being involved in heterosexual relations. Others, having a history of being prevalently or exclusively involved with women, showed little desire to socialise in 'lesbian' networks. Medical and psychological models assume that sexual identity formation is a psychic process which typically takes place during adolescence and early youth; however, such models have been critiqued for providing an inadequate explanation of the relationship between sexual practices and personal identifications, which appear to be very fluid and complex. (Waites 2005; Rust 2000, 1993).

## ***Tema, queer, bisexual, lesbian: a reflection on the language of sexual ‘otherness’***

As seen in Chapter One, the literature on homosexualities suggests that languages of identity are fluid, as languages themselves are constantly changing over time. These changes are intimately linked with social transformations and with dominant social narratives through which individuals interpret their own experiences. Plummer (1995) highlights the importance of telling sexual stories in consolidating a sense of community and common identity among people involved in same-sex practices. He points out that the ‘coming out’ narrative weaves together communities and shared identities (Plummer 1995:87). Other literature has also stressed the importance of collective agency and community in reclaiming a stigmatised identity and affirming the ‘normalcy’ and worth of same-sex relations (Foucault 1978/1998; Plummer 1995; Waites 2005). The intimate link between community, shared narratives of sexual identity and individual self-identifications is crucial in making sense of Russian (homo)sexual culture. Some of the literature on Russian homosexualities researched in the early 1990s has argued that Russians do not identify on the basis of their sexual practices, and resist fixed notions of identity such as ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ (Essig 1999; Tuller 1996; Franeta 2004). Essig (1999:174) portrays ‘queer’ Russia in the early 1990s as “a world of multiple desires and flexible identities that was not yet colonised by Western notions of sex and its meaning”, and identifies this fluidity as a peculiarity of Russian sexual culture. I wish to problematise the juxtaposition between Russian sexualities, presented as inherently fluid and ‘queer’, and Western fixed categories of sexual identities. Drawing on findings from previous research as well as on my own data, I propose a different interpretation, which highlights generational differences and relates them to shifting public discourses on sexuality, and to the emergence of sexuality as a narrative of social identity in the Russian context.

Findings from this study suggest that the medicalisation of lesbian sexuality, the lack of alternative public discourses validating same-sex relations, and the difficult access to distinctively ‘lesbian/queer’ social networks did affect the ways in which older women identified during the late Soviet period. Both Tania and Aleksandra associated their reluctance to identify according to their sexual practices to their isolation and lack of contact with other queerly-identified individuals:



We didn't have any contacts with lesbians. We didn't have any of that. I remember that I never pronounced this word [*lesbian*] about myself. I mean, I didn't think anything. I understood that I loved the person, and this person happened to be a woman. We had no organisations; we had no bars, no cafes, nothing like that. [...] I knew, I had read about the fact that these women, who love women, exist. But I didn't rank myself as one of them. Perhaps I was a bit, let's say, dishonest to myself. I didn't think over the fact that I had a particular [*sexual*] orientation. [...] I was in love with the person. For me this was more, how can I say this, other, social... In society there are certain attributes you have to conform to. I never thought about this, that I had to conform to something. [Tania, Moscow, b. 1969].

My permanent [*postoiannaia*] sexual life with women started rather late. Soon after the separation from my husband, at 27-28. With my partner we've been living together for more than 30 years. We never talked about this, we never talked about being lesbians. We just loved each other and started living together, that's all. At the time our social circle was heterosexual, our friends were heterosexual. And then, little by little, some gay men appeared around us, then others. And our friends, our social network, began to change. In general, most of our closest friends are now gays and lesbians. And all the more now. And only later, by degrees, I got to the understanding that I am a lesbian. [Aleksandra, Moscow, b. 1946].

Both Tania and Aleksandra's experiences indicate that, although involved in same-sex relations, claiming a 'lesbian' identity was unthinkable or undesirable for them. This ties in with Essig's findings, according to which women she interviewed in the early 1990s did not identify according to their sexual practices (see also Tuller 1996). The quotes, however, also suggest that, for many Soviet women, same-sex practices existed *outside* of a social context where they were acknowledged and validated, and in the absence of a public 'alternative' discourse, that could challenge the pathologisation of same-sex desire. Findings from this study strongly suggest that women's identifications reflect available narratives of identity, which shifted considerably over the late Soviet and post-Soviet period.

Further discussion of Russian sexualities and sexual identities requires an in-depth analysis of the lexicon commonly used (or rejected) by women to identify themselves and others, and of the semantic connotations associated with it. Again, it is important to explore this lexicon in diachronic perspective: indeed, existing literature on 'queer' argot indicates that this changes over time and across different social contexts (Leap 2002; Kulick 2000; Murray 2003; Murray 1995; on Russia, see Kozlovskii 1986; Krombach.1994; Zhuk 1998). As already mentioned, interview data also points to changes in the ways women from different generations and background interpreted categories of sexual identity, and used them with reference to their sexual practices:

*Do you identify as a lesbian?*

Two or three years ago I started surfing *VolgaVolga* [the website *lesbiru.com*, especially popular with young lesbians] and read a lot of information; I felt like a real extremist [*ekstremal'ka*]. Before that, it was just natural, there were no tensions [*napriazheniii*], but now they started to appear. Reading the forums, you can see that this is a completely different psychology, so it seemed to me, a different social behaviour, different priorities [...] in couples. Sometimes it even seems that there are some clinical cases there, although these are superficial observations. [...] I only use it [the word lesbian] so that men won't crack on to me [*ne pristavali*], I mean, if they go too far, I just tell them straight that I am a lesbian [Katia, Moscow, b. 1956].

Although elsewhere in the interview Katia says she likes hanging out with the younger lesbian crowd, here she contrasts young women's mindset, as evidenced from the website's forums, with her own. She implies that the forum's participants put a much greater, and in her opinion extreme, emphasis on *being* a lesbian, pointing out how, among the younger generations, 'lesbian' had solidified into a particular look and style and a way of socialising, an experience very different from her own, who called herself a lesbian only to ward off unwanted suitors.

Drawing on findings from my research study, the following section discusses two opposite approaches to Russian homosexualities. The first finds expression mainly in the work of Western researchers, such as Essig (1999) and Tuller (1996), and argues, or implies, a pronounced fluidity and fuzziness *as peculiar to Russian sexual identities* (Russians 'queers' as 'queerer' than Westerners) (Essig 1999; Tuller 1996). The second, articulated by some Russian authors such as Kon (1998) and Zhuk (1998), does not question the use of the categories heterosexual/homosexual [*geteroseksual/gomoseksualist*] and gay/lesbian [*gei/lesbiianka*], using them as objective labels which describe individuals' sexual orientation, rather than their identifications. As outlined in Chapter One, however, the present study is concerned with exploring individual self-identifications and their shifting meanings rather than with imposing 'objective' and scientific labels. Such an approach emphasises the inherently ambiguous and performative character of identity as a way to offer important insights into the ways identity categories themselves are socially constructed and constantly shifting. The following section focuses on a critical exploration of the identity categories commonly used by the women involved in this research project, and of the meanings they attached to them. It also explores the interaction between global and local discourses on sexuality by looking at the hybridization of categories of sexual identity, and at the influence of Western-centric narratives of sexual diversity in the Russian context.

## Querying 'queer Russia'

Some authors have read the semantic content of Russian "homosexual argot" (Kozlovskii 1986) as evidence of the peculiar fluidity and fuzziness of Russian sexual identities. Essig, for example, (1999:x-ix; 197, n. 28) has noted the wide use in Russian 'queer' subcultures of euphemistic and ambiguous terms such as *goluboi* ['queer' man, literally "light blue"], *rozovaia* ['queer' woman, literally 'pink'], collectively referred to as *tema/temnyi* [the theme/thematic] or *nashi* [our people]. The particular indeterminacy of the term *tema*, potentially inclusive of different 'deviant' sexualities, has also been noted by Adlam (2005:88-89).

Essig (1999) uses the English 'queer' to designate all individuals involved in non-heteronormative sexual practices; although she notes the troublesome and contested nature of the term, she nonetheless proposes 'queer' to translate the Russian slang described earlier, in order to convey what she sees as its peculiar "fuzziness and inclusiveness". Essig's choice of 'queer', used with no inverted commas throughout the book, is problematic and somehow misleading, because it suggests a direct equivalence between Russian terminology for sexual otherness, with the specific semantic and political connotations of the English language term. A closer look at Russian 'homosexual argot' suggests that the colloquial terms listed by Essig very uneasily translate as 'queer'.

The use of the expression *nashi* [our people] to refer to family, a group of friends, a collective, or social group sharing certain views or characteristics, is not limited to 'queer' subcultures: *nashi* is a very ordinary expression in current Russia<sup>75</sup>. However, the use of the term *tema*, or of the adjective *temnyi*, to designate a 'queer' person or *tusovka* is very much part of a culturally specific slang, and seems to date back at least to the late 1980s - early 1990s (Essig 1999; Adlam 2005:88-89, 105; Krombach 1994)<sup>76</sup>. Interviews and interactions with lesbian circles indicate that *tema* was widely used as a descriptive, 'insider' term. Moreover, material from the mainstream press suggests that this specific use of *tema* may be lost on outsiders. In an article on Moscow lesbian *tusovki*, the meaning of the word is explained in the first few lines:

<sup>75</sup> For example, *Nashi* is the name of a government-funded youth group; an autobiographical story by the writer Sergei Dovlatov, detailing his family history, is also entitled *Nashi* (Dovlatov 1983). For a discussion of common opposition in Russian between *nash/svoi* (ours) and *chuzhoi* (alien/other), to indicate inclusion or exclusion in a given group, see for example Markowitz 1999.

<sup>76</sup> *Tema* is not featured in Kozlovskii's study of gay argot, researched in the early 1970s, unlike other subcultural terms such as *rozovaia* and *goluboi* (Kozlovskii 1986).

The word *tema* has begun to be used with a new meaning in the vocabulary of our compatriots not long ago, but persistently. ‘*Temnye girls*’ means lesbians. (Minorskaia 2004)

The journalist raises two interesting points: first, the term *tema* is reappropriated with a new meaning. Moreover, although less clearcut and explicit than ‘lesbian’, it is not a particularly ‘fuzzy’ and ‘inclusive’ term, but it refers quite specifically to a group sharing a common attraction to people of the same sex. Because of its ambiguous and euphemistic character, and the overlap with other common uses of the term, *tema* was perceived as a neutral and unmarked word, and therefore as a term safer to use in public, as Nastia, a young woman from Moscow, explained in detail:

*In your circle of friends do you use this word [lesbian]?*

In jest sometimes we say: “Hey, girls, we are lesbians”, or I may say to my girlfriend: “Hey, you’re a lesbian and I didn’t know it”. [*Laughs*]. Yes, we use it, of course, but mainly in jest.

*Do you use other words more, like tema?*

Yes, because this is a word that you can use in a public place, and people won’t turn around.

*Do outsiders understand when you say, for example, temnaia girl?*

No, very few people know, maybe 20%. Well, this percentage is rising, I mean people are getting to know the expression, but all the same they won’t react in the same way as they do to the word ‘lesbian’. Because *tema*, let’s say... I know people who are into sadomasochism, and to them *tema* means their *tema*. And, let’s say, there’s people who love hamsters, and they have their own *tema*. I mean, it’s like an interest club, name what you will, and you will have a *tema*. [...] the expression *v teme* means to be in the know [*v kurse dela*], to know what’s going on in a certain group of people, in a certain community. [Nastia, Moscow].

The colloquial term *goluboi* (unknown etymology), whose use is documented since the mid-1970s (Kozlovskii 1986), is still currently used side by side with the increasingly common *gei*, a transliteration of the English ‘gay’; the latter, unlike in English-speaking countries, refers exclusively to men. The English borrowing seems to have gained currency particularly from the 1990s, and is used as a fairly colloquial, but more ‘politically correct’ term. Up to that point, the standard Russian word had been *gomoseksual/gomoseksualist* [homosexual], a term with heavy medical connotations<sup>77</sup>. The feminine equivalent of

<sup>77</sup> A similar process occurred in the West with the popularisation of the term ‘gay’, usually traced back to the birth of the gay liberation movement in the 1970s. ‘Gay’ was used in opposition to the

*goluboi*, the slang term *rozovaia*, whose use during the 1970s is also documented by Kozlovskii (1986), seems to have lost its currency, as it is very rarely used, both in ‘queer’ spaces and in the mainstream media<sup>78</sup>. Another notable change in Russian terminology for sexual ‘otherness’ has been the adoption of English-based words. This is evidence of the global influence of Anglo-American sexual culture (Binnie 2004; Altman 1996); however, it is also part of a broader phenomenon of Anglicisation of the Russian language, which has become especially significant since the 1990s (Gorham 2000). Local gay and lesbian media, such as the websites *lesbi.ru*, *lesbiru.com* and the glossy lesbian magazine *VolgaVolga* and *Pinx*, seem to have an important role in popularising ‘queer’ anglicisms. The terms *kobel* [literally “stallion” the ‘active’, ‘masculine’ partner in a female same-sex relation] and *kovyrial’ka* [from the verb *kovyriat*, “to dig into”; it refers to the ‘passive’, ‘feminine’ partner] have been largely replaced by ‘butch’ and ‘fem’. Another rather common term derived from English slang is *daik* [dyke], which has, however, been adopted with different connotations<sup>79</sup>. Although Anglo-American terminology has been influential, an examination of Russian ‘queer’ slang suggests hybridisation, rather than the domination of anglicisms. Indeed, some of the English borrowings have been appropriated and domesticated into local use with slightly different connotations, spellings and phonetics. Moreover, they often coexist with Russian-based words: this is the case with *goluboi*, a near-synonym of *gei*, and of *klava*, another word for fem<sup>80</sup>. In my view, this does not suggest the imposition of Western stable categories of identity onto more ‘authentic’, fluid and ‘queerer’ Russian notions of sexuality (Baer 2002; Essig 1999; Tuller 1997). With Binnie (2004), I propose that we examine the global influence of Western sexual cultures in more nuanced terms, exploring its mainstreaming in other cultures as a case of appropriation and hybridisation.

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then prevailing “homosexual”, and was intended as a self-conscious and political attempt to mark a break with pathologising and stigmatising attitudes of dominant discourses (see Chapter One). “Gay”, of course, suggests colourfulness, openness and legitimacy, a far cry from the image of homosexuality once held by many practicing homosexuals as well as by the majority of heterosexual individuals.” (Giddens 1992:38).

<sup>78</sup> My suggestion is based on participant observation, interview material and the reading of secondary sources undertaken during my research.

<sup>79</sup> While in English “dyke” was originally an abusive term which was later reclaimed by the lesbian community, its Russian equivalent is perceived and used as a neutral ‘insider’ term, devoid of any negative connotations. It is also more specific than ‘lesbian’, as it defines a particular kind of androgynous-looking lesbian (see for example [http://www.lesbiru.com/style/butch\\_klava.html](http://www.lesbiru.com/style/butch_klava.html)).

<sup>80</sup> [http://www.lesbiru.com/style/butch\\_klava.html](http://www.lesbiru.com/style/butch_klava.html).

***Sexual orientation, sexual identifications and identity politics***

Some of the existing literature argues that Russian non-heteronormative sexualities are constructed very differently from Western ones (Essig 1999; Tuller 1996), or that the vocabulary to describe same-sex desire is “largely borrowed from the West and applied to a rather different reality” (Baer 2002:513). This view is based on the perception, reflected in research from the early 1990s, that Russians appear reluctant to identify on the basis of their sexual practices. Essig also predicted that Russians would continue to resist and challenge clearcut binary identity rooted in Western culture, since Russia has a “long cultural tradition of” not assuming “coherent and stable identities” (Essig 1999:174).

Essig has a point in highlighting the more ‘stable’ and ‘definite’ connotations of terms such as ‘lesbian’, ‘homosexual’ (later ‘gay’), ‘bisexual’ and ‘heterosexual’ compared to more colloquial terms such as *tema*, or *rozovaia*. Indeed, all these categories are much more rigid because they originate from medical discourse, and are based on the scientific notions of ‘sexual orientation’. However, the extent to which these categories are inherently ‘Western’ and therefore alien to Russian culture should perhaps be reassessed.

First of all, as already noted in Chapter Three, the emergence of medical and legal discourses on homosexuality in 19th century Russia followed a path similar to that of other (Western) European countries. Soviet discourses on sexuality suggest that the notion of ‘sexual orientation’ did become established in Russian culture through medical and legal discourse: a person was either ‘normal’ or could be diagnosed as sexually ‘deviant’ (homosexual/lesbian) (Healey 2001). While punitive and stigmatising discourses circulated, the categories ‘homosexual’ and ‘lesbian’ remained unavailable as affirmative narratives of social identity for most of the Soviet period; in this sense, as Heller (2007) points out, “gay and lesbian identities have no formal history of existence in Russia as in the West”. For example, in many Western countries, the terms ‘lesbian’ and ‘gay’ were reclaimed, or substituted to medical terminology, through collective engagement and identity politics (Vicinus 1992; Farquhar 2000; Waites 2005). This happened in the context of broader social movements, such as feminism and gay liberation, which had almost no impact on Soviet Russia until at least the mid-1980s. To this day, in Russia the term ‘lesbian’ does not necessarily prompt specific associations with feminism, a social movement which had not emerged in the country until the early 1990s and whose links to lesbian activism remain tenuous (Temkina and Zdravomyslova 2003). From the work conducted in Moscow, however, it is clear that local community initiatives have worked, and are working very actively to reclaim and ‘normalise’ lesbian identities. For example,

many cultural activities were promoted with the explicit aim of challenging prevailing stereotypes about “other” sexualities by providing more authentic representation of lesbian lives, produced by lesbians themselves. The introduction to the *Antologiya lesbiiskoi prozy* [The anthology of lesbian prose], a collection of short stories edited and published by the Moscow Gay and Lesbian Archive, addresses a hypothetical mainstream reader in these terms:

But if we're the same as everyone else, then why a separate book called *The anthology of lesbian prose*? Why 'lesbian'? Maybe if we lived in a different society and in a different time, there would be no need for it. But for the moment, we think there is such a need. And perhaps, after reading this book, you will agree with us (*Antologiya lesbiiskoi prozy* 2006: 11).

Providing alternative representations of lesbian existence was considered important not only for changing social attitudes, but also for helping other women make more positive and informed choices about their sentimental lives, and for promoting a sense of commonality and community. Not only has a ‘reverse discourse’ emerged in the public sphere, claiming the worth of lesbian lifestyle; the latter has also been mainstreamed in the media and in popular culture (see Chapter Three). Thus, ‘lesbian’ is no longer merely a medical label; it now circulates widely as a narrative of social identity. The influence and role of Western sexual cultures and activism in this process still remains to be assessed; however, from the vantage point of 2004-05, it is hard to agree with the proposition that ‘lesbian’ represents a notion alien to Russian culture, or a manifestation of Western cultural imperialism. Evidence from this study suggests that the notion of ‘sexual orientation’ was central to the way the women interviewed identified themselves and others. This did not just happen in the somewhat artificial context of interviews, where women were expressly asked to name themselves in relation to their desires, emotions, sexual practices, experiences and self-perceptions. Terms like *natural'ka* [straight, literally ‘natural’], *lesbiianka/lesbi* [lesbian/lesbi], *tema* and *biseksual'ka/bi* [bisexual/bi] were routinely used by women in general conversation to describe both themselves and others. Other empirical research indicates that these terms are commonly used as terms of identification and self-identification (Omel'chenko 2002a, 2002b; Nartova 1999, 2004b, 2004c).

Essig (1999) and Tuller (1996) interpreted the common overlap between same-sex and heterosexual relations, and evidence of gender reassignment and sex change operations, as further evidence of Russians’ reluctance to embrace fixed sexual identities. However, the women in my sample who felt their experiences and practices may not fit in with the

binary categories “lesbian/straight”, also described their identity in terms of sexual orientation, or referred to it. Zinaida and Liuba thus discussed their sexual and gender identities:

I am a bisexual perhaps, because a lesbian is someone who has never been with a man. To her, this is unnatural, and it would make her sick [*eto vyzyvaet rvotnuiu reaktsiiu*]. But for me it's all the same, if a man is not unpleasant, if he is nice enough [*priiaten*], then why not? I can't say I've had lots of relations with men. The only thing is, I can't fall for men [Zinaida, Moscow].

Besides being sexually attracted to women, I also have transsexuality [*transseksual'nost'*, *sic*], it seems, because my female body has always been a burden to me [*vse vremia meshalo*]. I've always had the feeling, that I should have had a male body. I had this persistent thought. My breasts hindered me. I used to think I was the only one on earth like this. Then I started mixing with lesbians, and I realised that they are not all like this. Some are not bothered at all [*by their female body*], and this phenomenon, as I found out, is called transsexuality [*sic*]. I feel as if I belong to a third sex, I can't say boldly that I am a man, but at the same time I don't feel a woman either. I don't like it when they call me ‘woman’. [Liuba, Moscow].

Zinaida uses the word ‘bisexual’ to describe her sexuality because, *unlike lesbians*, she has sexual relations with both men and women. Liuba also refers to the notion of sexual orientation: *like lesbians*, she is sexually attracted to women, but *unlike many lesbians*, she also feels a fundamental mismatch between her biological sex and her gender identity. These quotes raise two interesting points: firstly, bisexual and transgender practices were widely seen as continuous and overlapping with lesbian ones<sup>81</sup>. Indeed, ‘queer’ spaces and networks, particularly ‘informal’ and non-politicised ones, allowed for the exploration of different sexual identities and practices. However, interviews also suggested that, particularly in the Moscow community, those involved in bisexual or transgender practices were, to an extent, marginalised. For example, bisexuality was frowned upon in some sections of the community, and considered a hedonistic lifestyle or an ‘easier option’<sup>82</sup>.

<sup>81</sup> A significant number of interviewees from different generations described themselves as bisexual, while two women had questioned their gender identity and read their attraction to women through the prism of transgenderism.

<sup>82</sup> Bisexuality seems to be considered to be more acceptable and less likely to incur in social stigma or negative judgement from peers than lesbianism; indeed, particularly among some young people, bisexuality and sexual experimentation were perceived as ‘cool’ and ‘trendy’, a fact that is likely to reflect new media discourses on sexuality targeted specifically at a younger audience (see Omel'chenko 1999). However, even in these circles relations between men and women and same-sex relations are not likely to be given the same status, as Sasha's experience illustrates:

Now in general among young people it is quite hip and cool to be bi. It is a way to broaden your horizons. But all the same you have to strive to find yourself a boyfriend [*mal'chik*], get married, without exceeding the limits of what is socially acceptable. But still this [*bisexuality*] adds to the excitement, so to show an interest in girls not seriously is considered normal, even cool. [...] With my friends we talked about this stuff all the time,



Secondly, terms like ‘bisexual’ and ‘transsexuality’ are used by Zinaida and Liuba as abstract categories to describe in a rather neutral way one’s sexuality, rather than being embraced as terms of self-identification (interestingly, Liuba says that she *has* transsexuality, and not that she *is* a transsexual). Sexual labels may indeed be resisted as unable to account for the complexities and ambiguities of individual experiences.

To be honest, I don’t like the word ‘lesbian’. [...] I don’t consider myself a lesbian, because to me this is the norm. I always felt attracted only to girls, for me this is the norm. I never thought this was anything other than normal; it was just in the order of things. I never thought about this. I am what I am. [...] I don’t need a word to describe this. I think [*lesbian*] is just the definition of one’s sexual orientation. It is just a way to define yourself in scientific terms, which doesn’t say anything at all about you as a person. It is just a definition. Concise and clear. [Ania, Ul’ianovsk].

However, it should not be forgotten that an impatience with binary categories of sexual identification, perceived as inadequate to reflect the broad spectrum of individual experiences, has also been widely documented in research on Western European countries, particularly since the 1990s (Weeks 2003; Seidman 1996). In contemporary Russia, dissatisfaction with specific terms and narratives is not necessarily an indication that women do not identify on the basis of their sexual practices.

Further discussion of the use of ‘lesbian’, and of the meanings attached to it, is interesting because it points, once again, to the different semantics associated with the same word in different cultures and social contexts. Some of the literature on Russian homosexualities have taken for granted the meanings of terms such as ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’, using them as objective and scientific categories describing an individual’s sexual orientation. However, it is also important to acknowledge that these terms, in everyday use, have specific semantic and emotional connotations.

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and my [male] partner was ok with this. I think that if things hadn’t become serious he would have allowed me to have an affair with some girl, even without him being involved. [...] But when I left Anatolii [*her long-term boyfriend, with whom she was living and was planning to marry*] for a girl, when I fell for her and left, most of my friends turned their backs on me. And my best friend, who had always listened with relish [*s udovol’stviem*] to my stories about girls, told me: “I can’t understand, how can you dump a normal bloke for a woman? You’re mad! What are you doing?” [Sasha, Moscow].

Thus, while bisexuality may be valued in some circles and considered cool, intriguing and titillating, sexual experiments with women are acceptable and palatable if they are subsumed to heterosexual ones. Bisexuality is not accepted in its own terms, but only if it can be coopted into heterosexuality.

Indeed, in spite of community efforts to reclaim the word, findings from this project suggest that ‘lesbian’ is not always perceived as a ‘politically correct’ or neutral word. The quote above suggests that medical connotations are still associated with it: Ania perceives ‘lesbian’ as a scientific, objective term, which still pathologises same-sex attraction: “I don’t consider myself a lesbian, because to me this is the norm. [...] I never thought this was anything other than normal”. Several other women pointed out the emotionally charged character of the term: the word lesbian “sounds harsh” [*gruboe slovo* (Ira, Moscow), *zvuchit rezko* (Aniuta, Moscow)], is “a label” ([*iarlyk, iarlychok*] (Kristina, Ul’ianovsk); “no one likes the word” (Bella, Ul’ianovsk), either phonetically or because it evokes negative associations:

*How do you position yourself [in relation to your sexuality]?*

At first I could not understand who I am. Now I know who I am. But I don’t feel any rejection towards men. They are not repulsive to me, as long as they don’t touch me and don’t harass me, I just talk to them normally, no problem [*spokoino*]. And if they try to crack on to me [*zatashchit’ v postel’*] then I distance myself, because I don’t need that.

*Do you call yourself a lesbian?*

Well, yes. It is not a very good word. But if you use this word to refer to one’s [*sexual*] orientation, then yes. This word refers to a lewd girl, who wants all the girls around her. It is not like that. If you look at it that way, it just means slut. But they are everywhere: among heterosexuals, lesbians and gay men. But if you consider it a definition of your [*sexual*] orientation, then yes [Sonia, Ul’ianovsk].

In describing her sexual identity, Sonia invokes the idea of authenticity by contrasting her past relations with men, to which she referred earlier on in the interview (“I could not understand who I was”), to her current involvement with women (“Now I know who I am”). However, she hesitates to describe herself as a lesbian because of the prevalent associations she perceives are attached to it (a man-hater, a predatory, sexually promiscuous woman), and dissociates herself from these connotations, while at the same time challenging them.

Rarely was the term ‘lesbian’ used as a badge of pride, a fact that is likely to reflect dominant public discourses on lesbianism. In other cultures too “lesbian” is still a category named and defined by the dominant ideology (Maher and Pusch 1995; Duncan 1999). However, the perception of ‘lesbian’ as a term rife with negative connotation may also reflect the relatively recent emergence of a ‘reverse discourse’, promoted by LGBT identity politics, and the little institutionalised status of the local gay and lesbian

movement. It should be pointed out that not all interviewees problematised the word 'lesbian', and some used it as a term of self-identification in a very matter-of-fact way:

*Some people told me that 'lesbian' is a coarse word, what do you think?*

From a purely aesthetic point of view, if you look at the sound, it may be a somewhat coarse word. But you may call it what you like, there is expression: "If you attach a peacock's tail to a crow, you won't get a peacock out of it anyway". I mean, you may call a person what you like, but it makes no difference: they will remain what they are. [Sveta, Ul'ianovsk]

A discussion of the meanings non-heterosexual women associate with 'lesbian' is of interest because it highlights how the term remains contested even as it is being reclaimed as a positive term of self-identification by the more politicised quarters of the local community. This finding is corroborated by Zelenina's study (2006), based on a survey among 100 women belonging to a lesbian online community<sup>83</sup>. Zelenina highlights that 60% of her respondents avoided the word "lesbian" as a term of self-identification, or used it only among a close circle of friends. As Zelenina argues, her respondents seem little inclined to reclaim and 'normalise' the term 'lesbian', preferring to use 'insider' slang terms such as *tema* [literally 'the theme'], *temovaia devushka* [girl 'on the theme'] and *daik* [dyke] (Zelenina 2006). This points to a discrepancy between the cultural politics of the lesbian community, keen to reappropriate 'lesbian' as a collective social and political identity, and the everyday linguistic strategies adopted by non-heterosexual women, who often draw on subcultural resources unintelligible to the uninitiated.

## Conclusions

This chapter has explored the shifting position of same-sex relationships in late Soviet/post-Soviet Russian society by exploring their connections with specific ('lesbian') lifestyles, social networks and subcultural argot. Some of the existing literature has identified the repressive political regime and harsh policing of sexual deviance as the main reasons for the invisibility and unviability of same-sex relations during the Soviet era. The Soviet legacy is still said to have a considerable influence on how Russian sexualities are constructed, and in particular on the indeterminacy of Russian notions of sexuality and

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<sup>83</sup> Respondents were recruited among women taking part in the online community "Russian-speaking lesbians from the (ex) Soviet Union" on the website live journal

sexual identities. At the same time, the 'transition period' of the 1990s, which were accompanied by a 'sexual revolution' and noticeable transformations in intimate relations, are widely presented in the literature as a moment of deep and fundamental change. The analysis presented in this chapter suggests that a more careful consideration should be given to the ways in which same-sex relations were lived, experienced and negotiated across the late Soviet and post-Soviet period. Interview material collected for this study offers a more nuanced and balanced reading of women's experiences by locating them within shifting discourses of sexuality, and by examining continuities and changes across different generations.

Interview material indicates that 'sexually deviant' women were not necessarily subjected to medical treatment to cure them of their desire. Medical discourses and practices, however, were, and to a certain extent still are, instrumental in perpetuating normative notions of sexuality and in marginalising same-sex desire. Soviet and post-Soviet medical discourses, however, have to be examined within the broader context of a shifting gender order. Married status tended to be seen as a 'fact of life' by Soviet women; same-sex relations found expression almost exclusively in the shadow of heterosexual relations and families. While cohabitation with a female partner was rarely a viable choice, same-sex relations did not take place against the backdrop of specific 'lesbian/queer' networks and lifestyles. Interview material also suggests that the dearth of available information sources on sexuality and the lack of opportunities to socialise with like-minded women had an important impact on the ways in which older women lived their relations and interpreted them. The experiences of younger women appear in many respects significantly different. Discourses upholding the primacy of heterosexuality and anchoring normative notions of femininity in motherhood remain dominant; however, a greater pluralism in intimate and sexual matters has allowed the emergence of alternative discourses on same-sex relations. In this context, 'lesbian' is no longer just a medical label, but it is widely circulated as a narrative of social identity. General availability of images and sources of information on 'lesbian/queer' has also facilitated contact with 'lesbian/queer' social network and communities.

The emergence of sexuality as a narrative of social identity does not mean that 'lesbian' has crystallised into a 'stable' and 'fixed' identity that all non-heterosexual women automatically embrace. Indeed, 'lesbian' remains a strongly contested category in Russian society, still imbued with medical and emotionally charged connotations in spite of the

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([http://community.livejournal.com/lesbi\\_su/profile](http://community.livejournal.com/lesbi_su/profile)). Most respondents were in their 20s, and the overwhelming majority were either from Moscow (63%) or St. Petersburg (18%) (Zelenina 2006).

political attempt to reclaim it as a 'positive' identity. Nonetheless, interview material indicates that it has become common for women to describe themselves in terms of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity (be it 'lesbian', bisexual' or 'transsexual'), at least in specific 'queer/lesbian' urban *tusovki*.

Russian terminology for non-heteronormative sexualities reflects culturally specific meanings and the country's peculiar historical development in terms of discourses and notions of sexuality and sexual 'otherness'. However, this does not mean that Russian sexualities are inherently more fluid and 'queerer' than Western ones, constructed on the dichotomy 'heterosexual/homosexual'. Such an interpretation unwittingly portrays Russian sexualities as pre-modern, exotic and intrinsically 'different', perpetuating the notion of Russia as the West's 'other'. An in-depth exploration of the interaction between 'global' and Russian sexual cultures in recent years would be valuable in producing a more nuanced account of the relationship between Europe's 'East' and 'West'. This line of research would probably foreground hybridisation and appropriation, alongside issues around homogenisation or cultural domination.

## Chapter 5

### Family matters: women's negotiation of the home

#### Introduction

While the previous chapter has explored women's relationship histories and identifications, and the meanings they attached to specific sexual labels, the present chapter shifts the focus of analysis to the ways in which sexual identity is negotiated and managed in everyday spaces, a theme which also runs through the following two chapters.

In her work on lesbian women's identity negotiation, Russian sociologist Nadezhda Nartova argues that both in situations traditionally associated with the private sphere, such as family relations, and in more public contexts, such as the workplace, women generally avoided signifying their sexual identity, complying to normative expectations of heterosexuality (Nartova 2004c:5). Nartova emphasises how both in public and private spaces lesbian women's decisions as to whether to hide or signify their sexuality are conditioned by dominant cultural norms, both for the sake of social conventions and for fear of potential repercussions. In doing so, she challenges binary notions of the public as a sphere of surveillance, disguise of one's 'real' identity, and even violence, and the private as an area equated with comfort, safety and authenticity.

Like Nartova's study, this and the following chapter are structured along notions of 'private' and 'public' spaces, while not following a rigid polarisation between the two. Women's strategies for negotiating public spaces, such as the workplace and the street,

will be explored in Chapter Six, while the present chapter focuses on women's experiences of home, a locus traditionally associated with the private sphere<sup>84</sup>.

The importance of dealing extensively with women's experiences and negotiation of home emerged from the empirical data collected. Indeed, the parental home emerged as arguably the most difficult space to navigate, as interviewees often perceived relations with family members to be affected by their sexuality. Interestingly, interviewees were less likely to raise issues of marginalisation in other, more public settings, and often refused to read their experiences in terms of "discrimination", which they equated with the public sphere and with 'stranger danger'.

The private sphere of the home is associated in both the popular imagination and much academic writing with a safe haven, or a space of ontological security and authenticity (Moran and Skeggs 2004; Valentine, Skelton and Butler 2003; Duncan 1996). Research on LGBT youth's experiences of the parental home has contributed to expose the 'myth of the safe home'. Indeed, the parental home is the environment where young people are socialised into normative gender roles, and it is often experienced as a place of surveillance, discomfort and possibly closetedness, where children, particularly as dependents, can become vulnerable to marginalisation and violence (Takács 2006; Valentine, Skelton and Butler 2003; Dunne, Prendergast and Telford 2002; Prendergast, Dunne and Telford 2002).

By contrast, literature on gay men and lesbians' homes of choice has tended to celebrate them as spaces where gay men and lesbians can find respite from societal prejudice and scrutiny, and 'be themselves'. It has also emphasised the new opportunities arising in modern Western societies for 'other' lifestyles, and the importance of individual choice in the creation of alternative patterns of family households (Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan 2001; Johnston and Valentine 1995; see also Giddens 1992). 'Parental homes' and 'homes of choice', however, are not isolated entities, but are connected by both personal and symbolic ties. As Valentine (2001: 131) suggests, the home is not just a physical space, but represents a "matrix of social relationships", relationships which are typically based on kinship and reach beyond the boundaries of individual households. At the same time, the private sphere of the home is typically conflated with the heterosexual, traditional family, a

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<sup>84</sup> Moran and Skeggs (2004) have suggested that notions of private and public, in the personal experience of many individuals, are rather blurred, as they are not experienced as completely distinct aspects of one's life. The uncertain boundary between the two emerging from empirical data will be highlighted throughout this and the following chapter.

symbolism which potentially excludes alternative forms of family relations (Richardson 1998:89-90; Valentine 2001).

The present chapter attempts to explore the complex emotional connotations which make 'home' both a place of comfort and discomfort. Two notions of 'home' are employed: narrative of younger women still living there and retrospective accounts of older women focus on the parental home. The parental home was often juxtaposed in women's narratives to the 'home of choice', the independent living space they have moved into after leaving the parental home. The latter included a range of different living arrangements and household structures, such as flatshares, single occupancy tenancies and living with a partner. Literature about young people's 'transition' to adulthood shows that living independently, whether with a partner or not, entails establishing different household arrangements from those set up in the parental home (Holdsworth 2004; Morgan, Patiniotis and Holdsworth 2005; Arnett 1997; Buck and Scott 1993). For same-sex couples, such arrangements often draw on 'alternative' kinship models, not rooted in heteronormative notions of family (Weston 1991; Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan 2001). For the purpose of this chapter, the concept of home of choice is used to encompass both the notion of transition from the parental home and the notion of non-heteronormative 'families of choice' (Weston 1991).

The fact that more space is devoted to the parental home reflects the priorities implicit in the interview schedule, the issues raised by interviewees and the demographics of the women involved in the research project. The analysis focuses on the relations formed within the parental home, and on the ongoing social, economic and practical relations formed between the parental home and the home of choice. The chapter explores how sexuality affects kin relations, and how sexuality and its expressions are imagined, negotiated and policed within family relations. It also highlights gendered assumptions linking sexual maturity and (hetero)sexuality to adulthood, and their implications for same-sex couples.

The first section frames the chapter within broader cross-cultural debates on the role of family solidarity in securing young people's transition to an independent household, and about the continuing importance of family ties beyond the achievement of adulthood and independence; it also provides information about interviewees' living arrangements. The second section goes on to explore women's strategies of identity negotiation within the parental home; it looks at the process of 'coming out' both as an individual and a collective process, and explores the immediate implications of disclosure for family relations. The



third and final part of the chapter explores the roots of 'everyday homophobia' as it is experienced in the parental home, and links them to gendered expectations about women's 'healthy' developments into adults. It also explores how normative notions of 'family', 'couplehood' and 'adulthood' continue to influence women's negotiations of their identities and relationships within kinship networks.

## **Living in and leaving the parental home**

While this chapter makes use of the distinction between 'parental home' and 'home of choice', the two are not conceived as isolated and self-sufficient entities, but rather as existing on a continuum in a woman's life cycle. Individual choice certainly plays a central role in young people's transition to an independent living space; however, movement within and out of the parental home is also, to some extent, negotiated with family members, as we shall see.

The act of leaving the parental home and setting up an independent household has traditionally been seen as a crucial step in young people's transition to independence and adulthood, together with other life events such as finishing education, entering the labour force, marriage and starting a family (Arnett 1997; Buck and Scott 1993). However, as Arnett points out, "adult status is not merely biological but is socially constructed", since it underpins a "social idea of what it means to be an adult" (Arnett 1997:3). Other scholars have emphasised how "leaving home" is better thought of as a process, rather than a one-off event, as "there can be moves both back and forth from the parental home as well as continuing ties, practical, economic and emotional, between the two households, once the transition has been made" (Morgan, Patiniotis and Holdsworth 2005:98; see also Buck and Scott 1993). The link between adulthood, independence and "leaving home" is certainly not straightforward among the women who took part in this study. Indeed, while it was more common for women in their late teens to mid twenties to live in the parental home, some older women (in their thirties and forties) had moved back in with family members, either because they were caring for an older relative or because they could not afford to live independently.

Cross-cultural research also shows that criteria signifying adult status, as well as the age and ways in which young people are expected to leave the parental home, encounter

significant geographical and cultural variation. There is also evidence that family responsibilities and obligations, and types of support considered appropriate, are understood differently in different national contexts (Holdsworth 2004). While in urban Spain more emphasis is put on parental responsibility in providing for young people's material well-being, in urban England greater importance is given to ensuring that support enables young people to become independent and to learn to be responsible (Holdsworth 2004:921-922).

Culturally specific notions of family solidarity and obligation have also been related to the specific features of national welfare systems. While some welfare regimes, particularly in Mediterranean countries, rely more heavily on the family unit to support young people out of the parental home, others, particularly in Scandinavian countries, are more pro-active in facilitating this passage, which results in less emphasis on material support from one's family (Morgan, Patiniotis, and Holdsworth 2005; Holdsworth 2004). The variation in forms of family support considered appropriate, however, does not mean that family networks are more important in certain countries, as parents play an active role in supporting young people through the transition out of the parental home in all industrialised European countries. Indeed, family support comes not only in the form of financial sponsorship, but also in the form of emotional backing and practical help (Holdsworth 2004; Valentine, Skeggs and Butler 2003). Family support, however, seems to play a particularly crucial role in times of economic recession and personal financial crisis, when individuals tend to rely more heavily on kinship ties (Finch and Mason 1993)

A vast literature on Russia and on the post-Soviet region has documented the crisis of Eastern European economies and the deterioration of extensive welfare provision, resulting from 'shock-therapy' economic reform and strained state budgets (Standing 1996; Field and Twigg 2000). In a context of widespread poverty, high rates of unemployment, and extreme uncertainty in the future, people have continued to rely on informal and personal networks, including kinship networks (Lonkila 2000; Ledeneva 1998; Caldwell 2004; Flynn 2004; Rose 1999). Kinship networks feature prominently in accounts of Russia as a 'society of networks': indeed, the practice of pooling and sharing resources within the extended family has played an important role in the survival strategies of poor Russian households (Bridger 1996; Clarke 1999; Rimashevskaja 2003). It has also been suggested that the family remains, for most Russians, a psychological refuge and a source of stability, amidst a general context of extreme uncertainty and instability (Rimashevskaja 2003). The importance of sharing resources and responsibilities with family members is a theme which emerged tangentially in several interviews, both for women still living in the parental home

and for those who had moved to an independent household. This interdependence suggests that family support, financial, emotional and otherwise, is important not only for those living with their family of origin, but also for those who had already left.

It should also be kept in mind that, in post-Soviet urban Russia, young people's access to an independent living space is restricted by low average living standards, as well as by the endemic scarcity and overcrowding of housing, a legacy of the Soviet 'shortage' economy<sup>85</sup>. While the average floor space per person in British urban households was 38 square metres in 1991 and 44 in 2001 (Boardman, Darby, Killip et al. 2005:29), the average for Muscovites in 2004 was 19.1 square metres pro capita. Figures were similar for the city of Ul'ianovsk (18.8 square metres in 2000), and only slightly higher for the Ul'ianovsk region and the Moscow region (respectively 21.1 square metres and 24.0 square metres in 2004) (Goskomstat Rossii 2005:233-234; Galitskii 2001:398). Although new housing facilities are being built, statistics registered only a very slight improvement in the average floor space per person (in Moscow the average living space was 16.3 square metres in 1980 and 17.8 in 1990; Goskomstat Rossii 2005:233), and it is the scarcity of affordable and social housing that is most acutely felt in Russian urban centres (Klugman and Motivans 2001; Brade and Rudolph 2004; Mozolin 1994). Of course, in Russia as much as in other European countries, young people's access to independent living space and the amount of support given by family members is likely to be influenced by a variety of factors at the individual level; these factors include family wealth, social and cultural capital, as well as interpersonal family relations. Individual routes out of the parental home are also conditioned by factors such as gender, class and ethnicity; they are also likely to reflect economic factors, such as job security, levels of unemployment and welfare provision, and therefore present significant regional variation (Holdsworth 2004; Buck and Scott 1993).

Among my interviewees, different patterns of 'leaving home' emerged quite clearly in relation to location. Unsurprisingly, in both Moscow and Ul'ianovsk, it was mainly younger women who lived in the parental home, either because they were still studying or because they didn't have the financial means to secure an independent living space. In Moscow, however, most of my interviewees were *not* living with their family of origin. All the women from the older age groups were living independently, often with a partner, while many younger women were living in shared accommodation (shared flats, university

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<sup>85</sup> In Soviet Russia it was not uncommon for newly married couples to wait for several years before being allocated a flat and to continue living in the parental home after their marriage (Shaw 1999:167; Di Maio 1974).

accommodation). This can be partly explained by their incomer status: over half of my Moscow respondents were originally from other parts of Russia, and had left their families of origin behind. By contrast, in Ul'ianovsk, irrespective of their age, respondents were generally living in the parental home, with rare exceptions (a married and a widowed woman living in the marital home, one woman living independently with her female partner and two women living in shared accommodation).

## Negotiating sexual identities in the parental home

For most young people, sexuality can be problematic to handle and explore in the parental home. Not having achieved full autonomy from their family of origin, their dependent or co-dependent status still makes them subject, to a degree, to parental authority. Conflict in the parental home may arise irrespective of a young person's sexual orientation: heterosexual children's lifestyle choices and sexual/gender behaviour may also clash with family values and engender tensions and frictions. For example, Lena, a young woman from Moscow, recounted at length about how, as a teenager, her parents' discovery that her relationship with her boyfriend was a sexually active one resulted in a major family feud (Lena, Moscow). However, research conducted in the UK and elsewhere in Europe indicates that non-heterosexual young people are particularly vulnerable within the parental home, and that the home is often experienced by LGBT youth as one of the most difficult spaces to negotiate (Takács 2006; Johnston and Valentine 1995; Prendergast, Dunne and Telford 2002; Valentine, Skelton and Butler 2003). Indeed, the parental home represents a "sexualised location" (Moran and Skeggs 2004:89), the site where appropriate gender and sexual norms are passed on to children, and learned through habit as a natural given. Therefore, disclosure of a child's homosexuality is likely to add another dimension to the conflict, since 'normal' (hetero)sexual behaviour is usually both assumed and expected in the family household.

Findings from this study also highlight that the parental home represents one of the sites where women experienced the strongest pressure to conform to heterosexualised gender norms<sup>86</sup>. This pressure to conform took different forms, which will be explored in greater detail later on in the chapter. These ranged from withdrawal of material and practical

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<sup>86</sup> While several women in my sample had been raised in a female single parent household, none reported having non-heterosexual parents or carers within the parental home; two women had gay siblings.

support, to emotional blackmail, to disapproval and/or lack of acknowledgement for young women's relationships. For both the women who had moved out of the parental home (and were talking about it retrospectively), and for those who were still living with their family of origin, the parental home was generally experienced as an ambiguous place. On the one hand, it was perceived as a space of emotional security and support; on the other hand, it was also seen as a site of scrutiny and control.

### ***Immediate reactions and outcomes***

Women whose sexuality was disclosed or uncovered in the home (either intentionally or accidentally) experienced a variety of immediate reactions from family members, ranging from damning to mixed to accepting. A situation of family conflict, however, was a rather common consequence of coming out, being outed, or being suspected to be gay. In the most extreme cases, disclosure resulted in being taken to a psychologist, being locked in the parental home, being subjected to emotional blackmail, being physically assaulted, leaving the family household. For Dasha, family conflict in the parental home led to a period of homelessness:

I ran away from home a few times, this happened in XXX [*name of city, where she was living with her parents*] and in YYY [*name of city, where she moved to live with her grandmother*]. It was pretty tough, I mean, independence was hard to obtain. At the time I didn't have any qualifications, so I had to work as a cleaner and as a postman. But I stood up for myself. [...] The first time I was 17. It was really horrible, I had to starve, but in the end I got the best of them. [...] In the end my parents said: "Come back, do what you want, we won't hassle you." The first time, when I left home at 17, it was because my dad hit me. I had brain concussion, for this reason I left. I think this is unacceptable [...] In YYY I left home when I met a butch girl [*who became her girlfriend*] and my parents started to object strongly [*ochen' sil'no vozrazhat'*], I left home for five months. I had to leave the music school [*where she was studying*] and say goodbye to this career, because it was tough, I didn't have anything to eat, I was hungry and cold, my fingers didn't bend and I could not play and exercise. I had to leave, and I still regret it. [Dasha, Moscow]

As Dasha's experience shows, affirming one's identity and independence in a situation of family conflict can come at a very high price for young women. Far from representing a 'merely cultural' (Butler 1997) form of oppression and inequality, homophobia within the parental home can have very real consequences on the lives of young women, not only in terms of their healthy emotional development, but also in terms of their material circumstances. Outside of Russia, research in the UK has also highlighted the high incidence of homelessness among gay and lesbian teenagers, stressing how homosexuality

can be an additional ‘risk factor’ leading to vagrancy and social exclusion for vulnerable young people (Dunne, Predergast and Telford 2002; Predergast, Dunne and Telford 2002; Valentine, Skelton and Butler 2003).

Although conflict was a fairly common outcome, not all women experienced this to the same degree. Some family members were more accepting of their loved ones’ homosexuality, although acceptance was often tempered with reservations and a sense of loss:

She [*her mum*] came home, this was when I was still living in [*name of her hometown, a provincial city in Southern Russia where she was living with her parents*], and she was crying. I say, “Mum, why are you crying?”. She says: “I fell out with the woman from the canteen [*bufetchitsa*]”. “What happened?” “She said that you love a woman”. “And what did you say?” “I said, this is my daughter, and I will always love her the way she is”. It was as if a burden fell off my shoulders. I didn’t have to tell her, she told me openly that she accepts it [...]. [Ira, Moscow].

Ira’s mother, who had already had inklings about her daughter’s sexuality, clearly signals her unconditional love for her; this gesture comes as a huge relief for her daughter. However, her mother is also deeply upset by the news: as Ira pointed out later in the interview, she is not just hurt by her acquaintance’s judgemental attitude, but also concerned that her daughter won’t be able to have children and start a ‘proper’ family. Ira’s story highlights two crucial issues in young women’s negotiations of the parental home. First, heterosexuality is both assumed and expected in the parental home. Secondly, family members’ expectations are deeply rooted in normative notions of gender, for example that women must grow up to become wives and mothers; this aspect will be explored in more detail in the third part of the chapter.

Because gendered expectations are so deeply ingrained, the disclosure of a family member’s ‘non-heteronormative’ sexuality is likely to cause tensions and fractures in the parental home. Although in many cases these tensions were eventually overcome, ‘smoothing things out’ often took time. It was not only lesbian and bisexual women who had to ‘adjust’ to their non-heteronormative sexuality: family members too had to come to terms with it. As we shall see, even for women who had moved out of the parental home, sexuality remained an important factor in shaping relations with the family of origin. Instances in which family members did not see homosexuality as inherently problematic were much rarer. Oksana recalled how her mum was always very accepting of her sexuality:

Although, when my mum and I had our first discussion about this... She asked, well, all these men want to marry you, and you keep turning them down, you're so difficult. I told my mum that I love Iana [*her girlfriend*], and that, as they say, I am not interested in men. "Well then [*nu, znachit tak*], the most important thing is that you are happy." Thus we settled the matter. [Oksana, Moscow]

Oksana's experience was fairly unusual among the interviews collected in that she felt safe and confident enough to 'come out' to her mother of her own initiative, and that her mother was open to acknowledge her sexuality. Indeed, because of the high stakes involved, most women did not consider being open about their sexuality in the parental home a safe or viable option.

### ***Strategies for managing the parental home***

Given the high stakes involved, it is not surprising that for most women managing their sexuality in the parental home was perceived as a particularly sensitive issue. It is important to emphasise that disclosing one's sexuality was not always a matter of personal choice: indeed, many women were not open about their sexuality in the parental home, or their sexual identity remained ambiguous by virtue of a complicit "don't ask, don't tell" family protocol. While "coming out" to one's family was not always seen as a desirable and viable option, disclosure of one's sexual orientation was for many a case of being found out, or being second guessed. Often sharing accommodation which afforded little privacy, family members became aware of daughters' and siblings' sexual orientation in different ways: by reading private letters and journals, by observing a girl's nonconformist gender behaviour, 'strange' friends and lack of interest in dating boys, by catching her being intimate with another female, or by being informed by solicitous friends and neighbours. Negotiating one's sexual identity in the parental home involved varying degrees of openness for different women, depending on one's personality, family relations and circumstances. While some women chose to be open about their sexuality, most deployed various strategies of dissimulation and secrecy, often playing on family members' assumptions that they were 'naturally' heterosexual.

Young dependent women, in particular, felt that disclosure could make them vulnerable at home, create discomforts for everyone involved and ultimately curtail their freedom and independence. The expectation that disclosing their sexuality was unsafe, as it represented a potential source of conflict and distress, was widespread, and often based on awareness of intolerance of sexual 'otherness' in the family environment. Fear of being 'outed' was often a source of anxiety, particularly for those women who were acutely aware of family

members' strong homophobic views. Maia had a difficult relationship with her mother, who showed both concern and fear for her daughter's sexuality:

My mum has a very negative attitude to this [*homosexuality*], she doesn't know. She understands, but doesn't want to believe it. She is waiting for me to say that I have a girlfriend, but she doesn't want to hear it. She finds the very idea unpleasant. For her, this is the worst thing that a person can do, it's worse than drug addiction. For her, they [*homosexuals*] are not persons. She said that if she learns something [*about her*], she will disown me and kick me out.

*How do you know she'll do that?*

She often talks to me about this. Because I am 20 and I only hang out with girls, and because of my looks [*very androgynous*]. And when she asks me questions, or tells me about things she's heard, she would always tell me that she doesn't like it. And she takes it out on me. When she abuses lesbians, I defend them, and this upsets her. And it gives me away.

*You stand up for gay people, but don't tell her about yourself?*

Yes. I don't tell her because I don't want to lose my mum. Only for this reason.  
[Maia, Ul'ianovsk]

In spite of hints and suspicions, Maia's sexual identity remains ambiguously suspended between her mother's insight and their common fear of spelling out the obvious. For Maia, still living with her parents, confirming her mother's inklings may trigger domestic warfare and compromise their relationship. This option is therefore ruled out as too risky, both on a material and on an emotional level. Maia is torn between conflicting loyalties: on the one hand, the need to affirm her identity and defend the reputation of lesbians in general, and on the other, love for her mother. Her mother's anxiety over her sexuality, and her demand that she goes to see a psychologist, are interpreted by Maia as maternal concern for her, however misplaced.

The expectation that disclosing one's sexual identity in the parental home may be unsafe was often grounded in previous negative experiences. Family members' intolerant attitudes were either confirmed by their comments on representations of homosexuality in the media, or by their negative reactions when confronted with evidence of a girl's attraction to women. Awareness of negative attitudes to homosexuality in the parental home prompted a cautious and guarded behaviour. For some women, this meant not discussing or hiding their sexuality altogether in the parental home, a process which often continued after they had moved out. For others, it meant 'coming out' to their families only after they had moved out, or had achieved some degree of independence within the parental home.



Still others deferred the exploration of their same-sex attraction (both sexual and emotional) to a later stage of their life, when they had secured a 'safer', independent living space, an event often associated with moving to another city for either study or work, particularly among Moscow respondents. In Alia's experience, for example, the early exploration of her sexuality was conditional upon securing an independent living space:

I had my first girlfriend when I was 21. I was already at college [*in Moscow*], I lived in a student hall [*obshchezhitie*], separately from my parents [...]. It was 1993 [...]. We met at the beginning of my first year [at college], but I called her only a year later. At the time, this was not out of character for me. I was so stressed out, I had left my parents' home for the first time – a serviceman's household, in a small military town [*in the Moscow Region*], where I had finished school. I couldn't see anything apart from these obstacles, I didn't have a social life. I wanted to stand on my feet and quietly finish my first year, get used to my new environment. So that they would not kick me out, they would not know about me, of course I was afraid that there may be consequences. I wanted to establish myself in this new place. When I finished my first year and I started to feel freer, I called this girl. I thought that I would have to explain for an hour who I was, a whole year had gone by. But she recognised me straight away, she was glad to hear from me, and we arranged to meet up. [Alia, Moscow]

Again, Alia's anxieties are based on her previous experiences: when her mother found out about her attraction to women by sneakily reading her mail, Alia was threatened with being disowned and left without her family's material support if she did not change her ways. The decision not to disclose one's sexual identity to family members, however, did not only stem from fear of losing material support, or from women's unwillingness to disrupt the quiet of the family environment. As Maia's story illustrates, concerns about putting a strain on family relations, or about becoming emotionally estranged from loved ones were also prominent. Moreover, women did not necessarily regard themselves as dependents occupying a subordinate position within the family household; from interviewees' accounts it emerged that caring roles and material support were often mutual within the family, where resources and responsibilities were shared. Concerns about causing unnecessary worry and anxiety in family members were also an important factor to take into consideration in women's strategies of identity negotiation. Particularly when living with older, sick or vulnerable family members, interviewees were concerned that their 'coming out' may prove unnecessarily stressful, or painful for their relatives, and did not see any particular gain in revealing their sexual orientation. While very open about her sexuality to friends and acquaintances of both sexes, Lara was positive that she did not want her family to know:

I had a hard time when some girls called home; there was never anything there but they liked me, and perhaps they thought they were in love with me. They called my mum and told her that, you know, your daughter has this [*lesbian*] lifestyle. Well, I tried to demonstrate to my mum that of course that's not true, I have a husband [*although at the time she had divorced him and moved back with her family of origin*], and everything's normal. My mum is just a person of very strict principles, she would not get over it [*ne perezhivet*]. She has a weak heart, I don't want to traumatise her, I don't want her, or my granny, to know. If my dad was alive, I think he would understand me. I think it would be a big problem if my family knew [Lara, Moscow].

Lara's reasons for not revealing details of her intimate life to her family did not only concern quiet living but also a sense of responsibility and protection towards her grandmother and ill mother.

The advantages of 'coming out' to one's family were not always apparent to interviewees, and for several women their sexual identity was shrouded in ambiguity or secrecy in the parental home. However, silence and dissimulation were not the only strategies deployed in the parental home; a few women had 'come out' on their own initiative. It was more usual for them to confide in mothers and siblings, rather than fathers, perceived as more aloof from family life or who had not been involved in their upbringing at all, particularly for women coming from single parent families, or with divorced parents<sup>87</sup>. Some women experienced 'coming out' as a process of personal growth, necessary in order to maintain an open and trusting relationship with their families. Comparing her experiences with those of her girlfriend Sveta, Kristina states:

[...] I didn't have the same tension, because my mum had relationships with different men, while Sveta's mum had a family for family's sake [*sem'ia radi sem'i*]. But I had a family for love's sake [*sem'ia radi liub'vi*], and my family values first of all the feelings that you have for a person, perhaps for this reason they accepted Sveta so easily, and it wasn't just my mum, but my gran and grandpa as well, they know everything too. They are quite open, they were simply presented with the facts [*postavili pered faktom*] and they accepted them. [...] From the very beginning, no one informed them, but they were gradually given hints, you have to be skilful at this. [...] It was all built on honesty and openness. I mean, they were always open and honest with me, and I was always the same to them. [Kristina, Ul'ianovsk].

Kristina's narrative emphasises the importance of agency in the process of 'coming out', and how being open about one's personal life can be empowering in a context where openness and respect are central to family relations. Even for Kristina, however, 'coming

<sup>87</sup> Valentine, Skelton and Butler also note that mothers are more likely to be approached first, while 'coming out' to one's father was perceived as more problematic, as they were seen as more detached and were more likely to have a disciplinarian role in the family (Valentine, Skelton and Butler 2003:487).

out' is a protracted process of negotiation, which involves patience and emotional intelligence, rather than a dramatic, 'one-off' event, or a 'speech act', as disclosure is sometimes conceptualised in the literature (for a critique see Seidman, Meeks and Traschen 1999 ). The conceptualisation of disclosure as a lifelong process ties in with the approach to identity outlined in Chapter One. This approach emphasises the fluidity and socially constructed nature of identity, which is formed through a constant process of redefinition and renegotiation.

It is a commonly accepted wisdom that coming out to one's family is paramount to non-heterosexual individuals' healthy psychological and emotional development (for a critique see Green 2002; Seidman, Meeks and Traschen 1999); findings from this study, however, suggest that this assumption should be questioned. On balance, openness was not necessarily seen as positive and empowering, and interviewees tended to underplay the values of personal authenticity and affirmation of one's identity commonly associated with the act of 'coming out' in the parental home (see also Nartova 2004c; Omel'chenko 2002b:497-498). On the other hand, they often emphasised the importance of skilfully navigating the parental home without unnecessarily disrupting family relations, compromising one's independence and causing discomforts. The choice to be open or not about one's sexuality often emerged out of a realistic and careful assessment of the benefits and dangers for everyone involved.

This suggests a difference, at least in emphasis, between Russia and Western countries, where distinctive 'gay' identities and subcultures have been in the public domain for longer. Indeed, there is evidence that in Western countries such as Britain, young people, who are influenced by the increasing availability of 'alternative' models of gay life, attach great importance to authenticity and 'outness' (Prendergast, Dunne and Telford 2002; Holt and Griffin 2003). However, recent research conducted in the UK also suggests that 'outness' often comes at a price and is not an option for everyone, and that personal strategies of negotiation involve different degrees of openness according to individual circumstances, personal resources and family values (Valetine, Skelton and Bulter 2003; Taylor 2007). The process of 'managing' one's sexual identity remains part of the experience of British LGBT youth, and it often involves a difficult balancing act. The difference in emphasis about the importance of openness and authenticity certainly reflects different discourses about the need and opportunity to make publicly visible one's sexual identity (see Chapter Three). However, public discourses about (homo)sexuality have changed dramatically in Russia in the past two decades, and these changes are also

noticeable in the different strategies available to older and younger women to negotiate their sexual identities and processes of disclosure (see Chapter Four and Seven).

### ***Disclosure as a collective process***

In much of the literature, ‘coming out’ of the closet is typically represented as an individual endeavour: it is framed as a ‘speech act’ which breaks down the repressive silence censoring sexual diversity, or as the personal act of “privately and publicly coming to terms with a contested social identity” (Seidman, Meeks and Trashchen 1999:9; see also Plummer 1995:82-84; Brown 2000). However, the previous section has highlighted how disclosure is not always synonymous with a voluntary act of ‘coming out’, nor is it always a matter of personal choice: in the parental home, sexual identities are negotiated and mediated within and through family relations. It is also important to emphasise that ‘home’, in many ways, extends beyond the boundaries of the domestic and the private (Moran and Skeggs 2004:94-97), as family relations do not exist in isolation from other social actors. Disclosure, therefore, is a process which has to be understood and contextualised within broader social networks, which extend to the one’s community, neighbourhood and hometown.

Indeed, it was not only the parental home as such which was perceived as a site of scrutiny and control; the wider neighbourhood and acquaintances also played a role in controlling and monitoring women’s appropriate gender and sexual behaviour. Women from Ul’ianovsk, or originally from a provincial town, were more sensitive to rumours of their ‘deviant’ sexual behaviour getting back to their family members. The smaller size and population of Ul’ianovsk accounted for the lesser degree of anonymity: Ul’ianovsk was described time and again as ‘a place where everyone knows everyone else’, while bigger cities, such as Moscow, St. Petersburg and Kazan’, were seen by respondents as offering more opportunities for exploring one’s sexuality while remaining unidentified. An equally important factor seems to be the fact that the vast majority of my Ul’ianovsk interviewees had been born, grew and lived most of their lives in the city, while just under half of my Moscow sample were Muscovites born and bred. Ul’ianovsk respondents’ family and social networks emerged as more rooted in their local community, a community where “your neighbour’s opinion still counts” (Klavdiia, Ul’ianovsk), where different or eccentric looks are conspicuous, and rumours are more easily spread to one’s acquaintances and family. On the other hand, Moscow respondents seemed less concerned with scrutiny from the wider community: they often described the more impersonal character of the capital city as an advantage, particularly if they had forged new connections upon moving there,

and seemed to have more leverage in keeping their heterosexual and lesbian personae separate, if they thought it necessary or desirable. Interestingly, among Moscow respondents, scrutiny from the wider community emerged as an issue mostly when respondents talked about their past in the town or provincial city where they originally came from.

Particularly in Ul'ianovsk, the possibility of rumours about one's homosexuality spreading to contexts where they may be counterproductive or damaging was a source of discomfort and anxiety, and often induced young women to be guarded while negotiating public spaces<sup>88</sup>. Many women were concerned that rumours about their sexuality might spread to environments where they did not wish their sexual orientation to be known, particularly the parental home. Being outed by family acquaintances was a very unpleasant experience for Valia:

They [*her parents*] guessed, and some kind people helped, they told them on my behalf. Some of my enemies. I still don't understand who, but that's what happened, someone told them [*her parents*]. And my mum drove me to a corner with this question, is it true or not. I could not say "no". There was no point in denying it.

*What was their reaction?*

Very negative. Well, of course unpleasanties [*nepriiatie*], and tears, and my mum went hysterical: "I gave birth to you and you make me such a gift, I want grandchildren". I tried to explain to her that if I am in a relationship with a woman it doesn't mean that I won't have a family, I won't have children. But she said that she would feel ashamed in front of everyone. [Valia, Ul'ianovsk].

Valia's experience shows that the scrutiny of the wider community affects not only herself, but her mother and her family too. Valia is outed to her family and is subjected to her mother's emotional outburst and condemnation; her mother, however, is concerned not just by her daughter's 'unnatural' behaviour, but also by the assumed negative judgement of the wider community, which would make her "feel ashamed in front of everyone". As Valentine, Skelton and Butler note, children are the 'public face' of a family, and parents are held responsible by the wider community for their 'proper' upbringing (Valentine, Skelton and Butler 2003:484). A daughter's non-heteronormative gender and sexual behaviour may be seen to affect and damage a family's reputation, and be considered a reflection of bad parenting skills. Thus, "homophobia is not only something that affects

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<sup>88</sup> For a more detailed analysis of women's strategies to manage their sexuality in public space, see Chapter Six.

lesbians and gay men, but also it is a process of marginalisation that can be passed on to others”, particularly their families (Valentine, Skelton and Butler 2003:493). What are perceived as the views and values of the wider community may cause feelings of shame, hurt and rejection in a non-heterosexual woman’s family of origin.

Valentine’s observation ties in with Omel’chenko’s study on homophobic prejudice among young people in Ul’ianovsk, involving both young people with no experience of same-sex relations and self-identified young gay men (Omel’chenko 2002). Omel’chenko questions the usefulness of the concept “homophobia” in making sense of negative attitudes towards homosexuality, noting that it is generally defined as an irrational hatred or fear of homosexuality, stemming from prejudice or from one’s own fear of being a closeted homosexual. Faithful to the etymology of the word, Omel’chenko suggests a more nuanced definition of homophobia, indicating that “fear” is central to the way her respondents, both straight and gay, make sense of their encounters with the sexual ‘other’. Following Omel’chenko’s argument, family members’ reactions, and the way in which they responded to their children’s sexuality, may not always be described as homophobic, if homophobia is equated with violence and abuse. According to Omel’chenko’s looser definition, however, homophobic attitudes are compounded by fear for oneself (in Valia’s mother’s case, fear of not having grandchildren), fear of others’ reactions (shame, fear of being judged as a bad parent), and concern for others (fear that her daughter may be going down the wrong path).

In the same way, lesbian and bisexual women’s decision not to disclose their sexuality may not necessarily be prompted by “internalised homophobia”, if this is defined as the inability to accept their sexuality as something inherently shameful. Awareness of one’s homosexuality may, however, involve fears for oneself (fear of material consequences, of loss of emotional support and of rejection), fear of others’ reactions (fear of conflict, violence and rejection), and fears for others (particularly for vulnerable family members) (Omel’chenko 2002:479-500). It is important to emphasise that this fear is not unfounded, but is deeply rooted in cultural norms. Chapter Three has outlined the persistent association between lesbian sexuality and deviance, immorality and the violation of dominant gender roles.

While both young women and their families are affected by the dominant values of the wider community, it has been suggested that disclosure is best understood as both an individual and a collective process, in which family members in particular are actively involved (Valentine, Skelton and Butler 2003). Indeed, disclosure did not always result, in

the long term, in the open acknowledgement of a family member's homosexuality in the parental home. While disclosure generally entailed a process of adjustment by family members, its long-term outcomes were varied. In some cases, a woman's sexuality was ultimately accepted and acknowledged in the parental home, while in others it remained an underlying source of conflict, surfacing from time to time in the form of emotional blackmail or cutting remarks. In many families, however, the topic was 'swept under the carpet' and seldom ever mentioned again, leaving women's identity shrouded in ambiguity. After she fell out with her parents over her sexuality, Sasha's love life remained a taboo topic in the parental home:

In the same way that we [*she and her parents*] stopped talking to one another, we started again... But we didn't talk about these issues [*her love life*], we didn't apologise to each other. We didn't broach the subject. Time had simply passed. And now things have turned out in such a way that my parents don't meddle with my life. Who am I going out with? A guy? A girl? It doesn't matter. It's such a sensitive topic, for them and for me. They used to show too much interest. And now we don't talk about it. [Sasha, Moscow]

For Sasha, silence underlines unresolved conflict and a strain on family relations, and is experienced as hostile and homophobic. Indeed, it wasn't uncommon for family members to "block out" both direct disclosure or subtle hints about an interviewee's sexual orientation. Ignorance can be bliss and help preserve family peace, since "guessing and knowing are very different things" (Zoya, Ul'ianovsk). On the other hand, family members may struggle or refuse to take in a woman's homosexuality, like Maia's mother, who "understands, but doesn't want to believe it", and is waiting for her daughter to break the news, but "she doesn't want to hear it" (Maia, Ul'ianovsk). Where disclosure goes unacknowledged, a grey area of ambiguity and discomfort often remains. This suggests that becoming visible as a lesbian or bisexual woman is not merely an individual choice, but a collective process, in which significant 'others' in particular are actively engaged. As pointed out in Chapter One, identities should be thought of as social, relational and relatively fluid entities, rather than as inborn and unchangeable. Therefore, in order to come into being, identities need not only to be affirmed and made visible, but also to be validated by others (Jenkins 2004).

## **Transitions and beyond: womanhood, coupledness and adulthood within the context of family relations**

The chapter so far has explored the ways in which sexual identities are managed within the parental home, highlighting how disclosure is, in many ways, a family matter, as it is negotiated and mediated through family relations. Identity negotiation within kinship networks, however, is a process that continues well beyond adolescence and young people's transition to an independent living space. The remainder of this chapter continues to explore the interaction between sexuality and identity within family relations. First of all, it analyses the roots of the 'everyday homophobia', and of pressures to conform to normative heterosexuality, experienced by most women in the parental home. It argues that everyday homophobia is deeply rooted in gender norms, the very same gender norms which are perpetuated and learned in the parental home. Indeed, expectations about young women's 'healthy' developments into adults are gendered, and 'naturally' linked to heteronormative notions of coupledness and motherhood. Secondly, by focussing in particular on the experience of cohabiting couples, it explores how the heteronormative symbolism of 'family', embodied in the parental home, is central to understanding women's ongoing negotiations of their identities and couple relationships within kinship networks. These often perpetuate mechanisms of misrecognition and invisibility already highlighted within the parental home.

### ***Family, sexuality and adulthood***

The powerful link between dominant ideals of 'womanhood' and (hetero)sexuality emerged very strongly from my study. It has been noted elsewhere that the transition between dependent status and adulthood/independence is discursively tied to culturally rooted sexual and gender norms (Moran and Skeggs 2004; Valentine, Skelton and Butler 2003; Arnett 1997). For example, young people's transition to adulthood is constructed by social institutions, and typically revolves around a few 'rites of passage', namely finishing education, entering the workforce, marriage and parenthood Arnett (1997). From the narratives of the women who took part in this study, heterosexual motherhood clearly emerges as a symbol of transition into adult life in the parental home. Young women's refusal to go through these 'rites of passage' was often met with painful disappointment and resistance by family members, particularly by mothers. Ania, aged twenty-seven at the



time of the interview, had been under constant pressure from her mother to get married and have children since she was in her early twenties:

She [*her mum*] saw everything [*she saw Ania kissing her first girlfriend*]. But, funnily enough, she didn't say anything at the time. I learned that she had seen us only after three or four years. It turned out she knew everything, but she didn't say a word. But later, when I grew up, [*her mother started to say*], one way or another, you need to have kids, and I want grandchildren. And she began to talk about it with me all the time. She began to push me, to make scenes [*ustrivat' skandaly*]. She was very aggressive. [...] She tried to interfere [*rasstroit'*] in my relationship. She said, it's a game, and it will all end. [...] Childhood will end sooner or later. When will you change your mind? You are getting older [*u tebia skol'ko uzhe let*]. It's time to think about children. You have to have children, at your age you should have children, and so on and so forth. And you just go on playing games. Perhaps she still doesn't understand that it's not a whim, that it comes from the head and I was born with this. There is no way you can change it [*Ania, Ul'ianovsk*].

For Ania's mother, a sexual relationship between women can be tolerated if it represents a passing phase; beyond the threshold of adolescence, however, it becomes a sign of immaturity and reluctance to become a responsible adult. Several other young women pointed out that their lesbian relationships were not taken seriously in the parental home, and were considered "nonsense" [*erunda, pridur', prikhot'*], a childhood game [*igra, detstvo, detskii sad*], a period of carefree fun [*razvlecheniie, eshche ne nagulialas'*] or teenage rebellion [*bunt, pokazukha*]. Lesbianism was often considered in families of origin a passing phase in the transition towards more 'serious' and 'proper' heterosexual relationships, with their corollary of family responsibilities. Some women felt that the representation of lesbianism as 'fashionable love' in popular culture, mainstreamed by Tatu, reinforced the common perception of female same-sex relations as a teenage phase (see Chapter Three). Women typically experienced pressures from family members to 'get over' their attraction to females, pressures which sometimes continued after they had moved out of the parental home. For example, in spite of the fact that Ania had been living for a year with her girlfriend at the time of the interview, her mother still hoped that she would eventually "grow out of it", and was convinced that her girlfriend would eventually leave her to settle down with a man and start a traditional family. Ania's story also suggests that it is primarily motherhood and parenting, rather than heterosexual coupledness, that were regarded by family and acquaintances as an essential part of a woman's life.

As seen in Chapter Three, motherhood and family have long been core values of Russian/Soviet society (Goscilo and Lanoux 2006; Baraulina 2002; Issoupova 2000), and

their importance is in no way diminished in contemporary Russia. Indeed, the notion of motherhood as the ‘natural’ fate of every woman is still deeply rooted in popular consciousness, and is deeply entwined with dominant constructs of femininity. It is lesbian women’s perceived inability to become mothers that positions them as ‘incomplete’ women, as Ira, in a committed relationship at the time of the interview, points out:

Of course, she [*her mother*] knows everything. She knows that we live together, and that we have lesbian friends [*obshchaemsia s takimi zhe*]. But from time to time she asks, “when are you getting married?” [...] I mean, I didn’t have to tell her [*that she is a lesbian*], she told me openly that she accepts this, although periodically she has a fit of hysterics [*ona mne ustraivaet isteriki*]: “give me grandchildren!” She thinks that if I give birth this means I am not a lesbian [Ira, Moscow,].

For Ira’s mother, motherhood ‘naturally’ takes place within a heterosexual relationship (“when are you getting married?”), but the association ‘lesbian+mother’ is simply unimaginable (“she thinks that if I give birth that means I am not a lesbian”). Interestingly, interviewees reported that mothers and close female friends were those more likely to try and talk them into the idea of marriage and parenthood, and worry that they could have an unfulfilled or unhappy life because of their perceived inability to start a family. Lesbian couples’ biological inability to conceive a child without a donor and the ‘natural’ link between motherhood and the heterosexual family made motherhood inconceivable or ‘wrong’ in the context of a same-sex relationship. It is worth noting that the refrain that “You can’t be a whole woman if you don’t have children” [Fieldwork notes, 9.8.2005] resonated among lesbian and bisexual women during interviews and in general conversation. This seems to indicate that women of all generational cohorts and sexual orientations strongly identify with ideals anchoring femininity in motherhood<sup>89</sup>.

Family members could not fathom motherhood within a lesbian relationship, but imagined it within a heterosexual relationship, and preferably within marriage. Interestingly, motherhood seemed to be more central to normative notions of ‘womanhood’ than marriage or heterosexual coupledness. This can perhaps be explained with the fact that a considerable number of interviewees came from single (female) parent households, as they

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<sup>89</sup> Only six of the women who took part in this study had children; five of them children from previous heterosexual marriages, while one, married to a gay man, had conceived with the help of a heterosexual friend and was raising her child with her husband. Although several others expressed the desire to become mothers, conceiving a child within a lesbian relationship was regarded as a very difficult option, first of all because children would have to cope with societal prejudice. Moreover, artificial insemination was considered an expensive procedure applied at the discretion of medical personnel, while Russian sperm banks were reputed as being unsafe and unreliable. For a discussion of motherhood within same-sex relations in post-Soviet Russia see also Gessen 1997 and Nartova 2004b.

either had been born outside of a stable relationship or their parents had divorced<sup>90</sup>. Thus, for some parents, motherhood was not necessarily seen as involving marriage or heterosexual cohabitation:

She understands what kind of relationships I have, but she thinks it will all go away. She hopes that one day I will have a child. Because she herself gave birth to me when she was already 38. And, as far as I know, she never had a stable long-term relationship with anyone. [...] I think she thinks that I'll have fun and then, when I'm approaching forty, I will get married. Or perhaps I won't get married, but I will have a child, and I will be like everyone else. [Varvara, Moscow].

Varvara's mother, who brought her daughter up as a single mum, contemplates the idea that her daughter too may have children without the add-on of a heterosexual relationship. Lesbian motherhood, however, remains an alien concept to her, as giving birth entails for Varvara growing out of her 'adolescent' phase of attraction to women ("she thinks it will go away").

If not considered essential, marriage remained nonetheless the ideal to which young women should aspire in many families, and heterosexual relationships were widely regarded as instrumental in starting a family unit and having children. Moreover, heterosexual relationships were generally regarded as giving women a more secure financial position, social status and emotional support, and were sometimes contrasted to same-sex unions, perceived as immature, sterile and highly volatile relationships. Although Masha's mother was in some ways accepting of her daughter's sexuality, she also tried to talk her into the idea of dating men:

She says that she guessed it [that she is attracted to women], that it's ok, she said that she understands. And she tries, not so much to 'cure' me, but she stresses about it [*napriagaetsia*]. Because my dad, you see, left the family and didn't give me much support. So she thinks that I need to have a man, who can support me, provide for me [*obespechivat'*], love me. That I need a rock to hold on to [*opora*]. She thinks that I won't find this support in a same-sex relationship. And also, she tries to instil in me the idea that I have to go out with guys, get married and so on [Masha, Moscow]

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<sup>90</sup> Although the ethnographic nature of this study does not allow broad generalisations, the family demographics of interviewees reflect, to some extent, broader trends within Russian society, with numbers of marriages declining and rates of divorce increasing from the 1970s. Single parent households and rates of birth outside of marriage also rose, while cohabitation became more common for heterosexual couples, particularly since the 1990s (Motivans 2001; Bogdanova 2003). For example, the number of marriages declined steadily from the mid-1970s to 1996, stabilised in the late 1990s and picked up slightly in the early 2000s (from 11.1 marriages per 1000 people in 1975 to 9.7 in 1985 to 5.9 in 1996, to 6.2 in 1999 and 7.6 in 2003). The number of divorces increased from 1970 to 1980, stabilised in the 1990s and rose in the early 2000s (from 3.0 in 1970 to 4.0 in 1985 to 3.8 in 1996, 3.6 in 1999 and 5.5 in 2003). (Goskomstat Rossii 2005:128).

Gendered expectations about what is 'proper' and best for a woman result in widespread misrecognition and lack of acknowledgement of same-sex relationships. Even when a woman's homosexuality is met with a degree of understanding and acceptance, attempts by family members to 'steer them' on the tried and tested path of heterosexual coupledness and family life continue.

### ***Family support and acknowledgement of same-sex relations***

The parental home was often experienced as an environment where women felt strong pressures to conform to expected gender and sexual norms. In a few instances, such pressures led young women to start heterosexual relations in parallel with lesbian ones, in order to fulfil family expectations or to be able to present a respectable heterosexual 'façade' to the wider community. Kristina explained how her partner Sveta's previous heterosexual relationship, which almost culminated in a marriage and took place in parallel with lesbian affairs, was chiefly motivated by pressure from her parents:

All her actions were directed towards obliging her parents, I mean, she has a very authoritarian mum, who could not accept this [*her relations with women*] in any way, [*she thinks*] nothing else could exist apart from a family made of the union of a woman and a man. [...] Her mum put pressure on her, she kept telling her that in any case she had to get married and be with a man, you may have to put up with him, submit to him, but you won't dishonour your family, because her family is quite well known in the city [...] And if you get married and give birth ... I mean, she was ready to get divorced afterwards [*after having had a baby*], I mean, her motivation was just this: her parents. [Kristina, Ul'ianovsk]

Pressures to conform did not only affect young women who were still living in the parental home, but also those who had left home and were living either independently or with a female partner. Even after Sveta and Kristina moved in together, Sveta's mother kept trying to convince them that they both needed to start a 'proper' family by getting married and having children; this would not prevent them, in her view, from keeping their relationship going 'on the side'.

While pressure could ease after women left the parental home, nonetheless their lesbian relationships were seldom recognised as such by their families of origin. In some instances, as seen in the previous section, this was due to the fact that women's sexuality itself remained an off-limits topic of conversation, and was often shrouded in ambiguity. In other instances, lack of recognition underlined the fact that same-sex unions were not perceived as 'adult' relationships or 'real' families, even for women who had lived together for

several years. Iana humorously described her parents' perception of her long-term lesbian relationship in these terms:

It's not a problem for my mum and dad, they just don't pay any attention to it. Girlfriends, girlfriends... what is a girlfriend<sup>91</sup>? My mum just says that she's not interested in the topic. She accepts Oksana, Oksana is her best friend, and in general the best in the family [*laughs*]. Here go Iana and Oksana, two girlfriends who live together. She does not take it in, that it's a woman living with another woman [Iana, Moscow]

Even though Iana had talked to her mother about the nature of her relationship in unambiguous terms, Oksana is not recognised as her partner, but as her 'friend'. Iana perceives her parents' lack of acknowledgement as unproblematic, since her partner is still somehow accepted as a member of the extended family. What is of interest here, however, is that Iana's long-term relationship is couched in terms of 'friendship', and, in spite of their long cohabitation (ten years), Iana and Oksana are not perceived as a couple. This illustrates how strongly expectations of what constitutes an 'adult' relationship and a 'real' family are rooted in heteronormativity. Lesbians are perceived as 'immature' and 'incomplete' women because of their perceived inability to start a family and become mothers, the benchmarks of the transition to full adulthood. By the same token, same-sex relations are also perceived as immature and sterile, and do not quite qualify as coupledness or family relationships. Lack of recognition for same-sex relationships was felt to have important repercussions on women's opportunities to start an independent household. For some interviewees, emotional, practical and financial support upon moving into an independent household were conditional upon their family's approval of their 'lifestyle' choices. For example, Ul'iana, a young woman from Moscow, who had a very close relationship with her parents and had always been open to them about her sexuality, recalled that her parents offered no material help when she moved in with her girlfriend. When their relationship foundered, they showed no emotional support to the couple, and after a very painful breakup they seemed relieved that their daughter was now free to start a 'proper' (heterosexual) relationship [Fieldwork notes, 29 June 2004]:

I told you earlier that if I lived with a man, things would be a lot easier, and my parents would help, and we'd have a place to live, and perhaps we'd have children, in short, we'd have everything. But they don't want to help [*two*] women, they think it's just a whim [*pridur'*] [Ul'iana, Moscow].

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<sup>91</sup> "Podrugi, podrugi... a chto podrugi?" Like the English 'girlfriend', the Russian *podruga* is potentially ambiguous, as it indicates both a friend of the female sex as well as a lover in a lesbian relationship.

Not all families of origin showed open disapproval of lesbian and bisexual women's life choices, or withdrew material and emotional support. Although some degree of discomfort often remained in family relations as a result of conflict or silence over a woman's sexuality, it should be stressed that families of origin often remained an important source of support and a reference point. Rarely were ties with one's family of origin severed, and often relationships of mutual assistance were established between the parental home and the home of choice ("She [*her partner*] helps my dad chop the wood", Iana, Moscow; "Now her parents accept me, [...] I go and see them and we have a chat", Kristina, Ul'ianovsk).

Moreover, the parental home itself sometimes continued to represent a shelter in time of need: some women moved back in with their family after having lived on their own, in some instances with their partner, although this was usually far from an ideal arrangement:

She [*her mother*] accepted this relationship very unwillingly, but nonetheless she accepted it. She could not stand Nastia [*her girlfriend*] As a person, and because we had a relationship. And this relationship was quite open. We lived together: either at my place [*where she lived with her mother*] or at her parents'. And her parents did not like me because I was her girlfriend. [Varvara, Moscow]

The parental home, however, continued to represent, in the experiences of most, an ambiguous space. It was perceived as an environment providing security, support and emotional closeness, while at the same time it represented an uncomfortable space where women's relationships were sometimes invisible, and sometimes tolerated, but rarely validated or valued.

### ***Invisible families: The comforts and discomforts of invisibility***

Marginalisation of same-sex couples was rooted in the experience and symbolism of 'home' as the site of heterosexual family relations. Indeed, even after women had moved out and established an independent household, their relationships continued to be measured, in the parental home, by heteronormative standards, and be judged as 'lacking', incomplete or immature. The moral power of the symbolism of 'family', rooted in the parental home, exerted its influence within the wider community, where a certain model of family relations was commonly acknowledged to constitute the 'natural' founding unit of society. Indeed, lack of recognition for same-sex relations within one's family of origin was compounded, in the eyes of many women, by lack of legitimisation from wider society. The absence of formal legal status for same-sex families in Russia was seen as

evidence that same-sex couples are not valued as ‘proper’ families and are marginalised from the life of mainstream society. Veronika and Valentina, who, at the time of the interview had been together for twelve years, commented:

- We would like things to be easy. We’d like social status. And not just concerning children. For example, they give you credit more easily in a bank if you’re a family. Of course it is important. As it turns out, we are erased from social life.

- As a couple, we are not morally protected. As a basic unit of society [*iacheika*] we don’t exist. But we’re here [Veronika and Valentina, Moscow].

Heterosexual coupledness, which can potentially be validated by marriage, was perceived to have a monopoly on the moral values embodied by the discourse of ‘family’. Importantly, however, women engaged in long-term committed relationships often appropriated and subverted the symbolism of ‘family’. For example, they commonly referred to their unions as ‘our family’, or ‘our same-sex marriage’; when asked about their marital status in a short questionnaire, they queried the concept and often entered ‘*zhenata*’ (married) as their answer, referring to their lesbian relationship, rather than to their official status<sup>92</sup>.

Although the home of choice could provide a safe space, secure from external scrutiny and prejudice, women in a long-term committed relationship who were living together felt they remained invisible as couples and as families, as Galia’s comment illustrates:

We bought a flat together, we can live quietly here, and society doesn’t meddle in our life. But, as it happens, we have to protect our rights somehow ‘on the side’ [*cherez levoe ukho*]. I mean, when heterosexuals get married, the state rises to protect this basic unit of society [*iacheika*], while, to defend ourselves, we have to think over issues of testament, property, guardianship of children [Galia, Moscow].

The importance of the home as an intimate space offering respite from surveillance and prejudice was underlined by several interviewees, and is perhaps all the more significant in the light of widespread practices of state interference with its citizens’ private lives during the Soviet period (Zdravomyslova 2003; Shlapentokh 1989:34; Kharkhordin 1995). While for Galia the private space of the home of choice offers safety and comfort, it entails no visibility for lesbian households, which are not recognised as family units worthy of state protection.

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<sup>92</sup> For a discussion of the use of the symbolism of ‘family’ in lesbian relations, see also Nartova 2004b.

While the invisibility of same-sex couples was seen as evidence of their social marginalisation, public visibility and recognition were not always seen as desirable. Indeed, in some instances the home of choice was perceived as a space that needed to be protected from the external scrutiny and interference of family members, neighbours and acquaintances, who threatened to disrupt its comfort. Being closeted, not being 'out' about the nature of one's relationship or withdrawing information about one's home of choice were sometimes portrayed as strategies to shelter the private sphere of the home from external interference. For example, one interviewee, who had been living with her girlfriend for almost a year, said she had not revealed the address of their flat to her mum, who strongly disapproved of the relationship, for fear she may turn up unexpectedly and make a scene (Zulia, Ul'ianovsk). Another woman, who, at the time of the interview was expecting a visit from her mother, was planning to hide from view a few objects which may reveal to her mother the 'true' nature of her relationship with her cohabiting partner (Liudmila, Moscow).

For Ira, living with her partner, the home of choice had to be protected in a very physical sense from her own guests, two male acquaintances from her work:

If people know that I live with someone, and they start to flirt, if that's men... Not long ago two men I work with came to visit, they knew that I live with Tania [her partner]. And one of them could not keep his hands to himself [*prodolzhal ruki raspuskat'*]. Hihhihi, Hahahaha. I kicked them out, saying that I have a lover, and I don't intend to cross any boundaries [*perestupat' nichego*]. [...] This was a case when I felt I had to fight for my family and for my home. In my home, in front of my woman, they try and crack on to me! And I told them off. I kicked two men out by force. [Ira, Moscow]

Invisibility, therefore, presented advantages as well as dangers. On the one hand, it was associated with the misrecognition of same-sex couples by family members, as well as in the wider society. Lack of acknowledgement and recognition positioned same-sex couples as unworthy family relations, and made same-sex households liable to marginalisation and isolation. On the other hand, invisibility also represented a strategy of accommodation, and a way of protecting the home of choice from unwanted exposure, scrutiny and interference.



## Conclusions

This chapter has charted how, for non-heterosexual women, the home embodies both ideals of comfort, security, authenticity and intimacy, as well as negative connotations of scrutiny, discomfort and dissimulation. If the home is a 'locus of social relations', sexuality affects the type of relations created both within the parental home and the home of choice, as well as the ties between the two.

Managing one's sexual identity within the parental home emerged as a particularly sensitive issue, especially for younger women, who appeared more exposed to the enforcement of prevailing sexual and gender norms and more vulnerable to potential repercussions, both emotional and material. Within the parental home, sexuality did not represent just an individual concern, but was often very much experienced as a family matter. Indeed, prevalent societal attitudes towards homosexuality affected not only non-heterosexual women, but their families as well, who had to come to terms with their sexual orientation and could be stereotyped and stigmatised in the eyes of the wider community. Moreover, the parental home was experienced as a space which allowed little privacy, and where disclosure was not necessarily a deliberate and empowering choice, but often resulted from family scrutiny and unwanted exposure. Young women often preferred to conceal their sexual identity within the parental home: the choice of 'coming out' was not always perceived as a safe or worthwhile option, for reasons ranging from fear of compromising family relations, to concern about withdrawal of material and emotional support, to a sense of responsibility and protection towards other family members. The invisibility of lesbian sexuality within the parental home, however, could also be the result of denial or lack of acknowledgement from family members, a fact which underlines how sexual identities, in order to be made visible, need to be validated by others. As pointed out in Chapter One, identities are grounded in social relations, as individual identifications are based on existing nominal identities.

Expectations about young women's proper roles and 'healthy' patterns of development into adulthood often made lesbian sexuality an issue too close for comfort in the parental home. Indeed, the belief that the experience of motherhood, preferably within a heterosexual relationship, was central to a woman's fulfilling life and to the achievement of full adult status meant that lesbians were perceived as 'incomplete' and immature

women because of their perceived inability to have children and start a 'proper' family. By the same token, same-sex relations were conceived as a 'passing' adolescent phase, or as a reluctance to embrace the family responsibilities which 'naturally' come from adulthood.

For women who had moved out of the parental home, 'family' continued to matter in two respects. First, the parental home continued to represent an important resource and an emotional reference point, and their sexual identities and relationships still had to be negotiated in the context of their ties with their families of origin. Secondly, an exclusionary discourse of 'family' rooted in heteronormativity remains the yardstick against which same-sex couples are measured. As a result, same-sex couples enjoyed little acknowledgement both within the extended family and within broader social networks, a fact which resulted in their invisibility and potential isolation. It is clear that the lack of recognition for same-sex couples in the public sphere of state-citizens relations represents a continuation of the misrecognition and marginalisation which happen in the private sphere of the parental home.

## Chapter 6

# Going public? Negotiating and inhabiting public space

## Introduction

This chapter continues the exploration of women's practices and strategies for negotiating space, focusing on the public sphere. Cultural norms affect women's behaviour both in the private and in the public sphere, as spatial cultural norms uphold a paradoxical discourse on the place and status of non-heterosexuals in society (Richardson 2000). On the one hand, non-heterosexual individuals are discursively excluded from the private sphere, as this is symbolically conflated with the (heterosexual, traditional) family, a theme which surfaced time and again in the previous chapter. At the same time, societal tolerance of non-heterosexual subjects is "constructed largely on the condition that they remain in the private sphere and do not seek public recognition" (Richardson 1998:89-90).

In most industrialised societies, sexuality is conceived as an aspect of life strictly pertaining to the private sphere; however, the private/public divide does not affect the experiences of all sexual subjects in the same way. While heterosexuality is commonly signified and displayed in public through affectionate behaviour and references to marriage and childbirth, visible signs of homosexuality stand out as 'strange' and 'out of place'. Since it is seen as contravening 'natural' norms and the dominant values of the wider community, references to same-sex attraction are more likely to be perceived as 'unsightly' and to elicit reprimands and aggressive behaviour (Skeggs 1999; Sedgwick 1990).

The present chapter explores women's negotiations of semi-public and public spaces, by looking at their experiences in the workplace and on the street. Most of the literature draws a firm line between 'private' and 'public', commonly acknowledged to be ruled by

different sets of cultural norms (McGhee 2004; Oswald and Voronkov 2004; Plummer 2001; Richardson 2000; Landes 1998). However, some scholars have expressed dissatisfaction with a rigidly binary notion of 'private' and 'public', suggesting that, in the personal experience of many individuals, they are in actual fact rather blurred (Moran and Skeggs 2004). For example, as this chapter will evidence, the workplace is a sphere governed by specific and formalised rules and conventions, but it is also a location where private networks and relations of friendship and solidarity are formed. On the other hand, the public street is perceived as guaranteeing different degrees of anonymity in different city landscapes, and it turns into a familiar and comfortable space when used as the site of recreational activities and the meeting point of informal queer networks. Sociological literature on gay men and lesbians' experiences of public space has often focussed on issues of discrimination and homophobic crime (Morgan and Brown 1997; West and Green 1997; Croteau 1996; Herek and Berill 1992; Comstock 1991). Rather than focusing specifically on exclusion and violence, the present chapter foregrounds women's practices of identity negotiation, and my analysis will highlight the ways in which cultural and spatial norms manifest themselves in their everyday lives.

The discussion will also highlight how feelings of comfort and safety and notions of respectability are deeply intertwined with women's in/visibility as 'lesbian/queer', a theme also raised in the previous chapter. The final section will engage with the ideologically charged value of 'queer' visibility, a topic which has been central to LGBT cultural politics and to scholarly literature, and which has been conceptualised in the twin notions of 'the closet' and 'coming out'. A reflection on women's language of disclosure and identity negotiation will point to the culturally specific character of the 'coming out' narrative. By engaging with existing literature, findings from the present study will be framed within recent debates about the reappraisal of the gay closet.

## **Work performances**

### ***The workplace as a sexualised environment***

The formalised environment of the workplace entails taking up 'appropriate' and 'respectable' roles and performances, which are informed by notions of 'proper' gender and sexual roles. The most obvious manifestation of the ways in which gender operates is

the traditional split between ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ professions, where the latter typically involve caring roles (nurse, teacher etc.), or are subordinated in women’s lives to their ‘primary calling’ as mothers and carers (Skeggs 1997; Adkins 1995). In Soviet Russia, in spite of claims to equality between the sexes, gender remained an organising principle of the labour market (Ashwin 2000; Buckley 1992, 1989). However, culturally ingrained notions of ‘proper’ gender roles have become even more blatant in the deregulated post-Soviet labour market, making women workers more vulnerable and reinforcing sexist practices at the workplace (Ashwin 2006; Kay 2000; Bridger, Kay and Pinnick 1995).

Gender and sexual norms also inform work practices in more subtle ways, and are reflected, for example, in work regulations and dress codes. In her study of the tourist industry, Adkins shows how women, to a much greater extent than men, are expected to comply to very specific criteria relating to their appearances, including being attractive and having a feminine appearance. Proper feminine appearance is treated in the industry as a sexual commodity, “a quality that encourages custom” (Adkins 1995:91); the fact that women are accorded a “subordinate sexual status” at the workplace is reflected in male co-workers’ and male clients’ behaviour, and in women’s attitudes towards unwanted sexual attention (Adkins 1995: 85-102). Thus, while workplace identities are gendered and sexualised, only certain types of femininities may safely become visible at the workplace.

The workplace is also conceived as a space ruled by formal conventions, and where disclosing too much about one’s private life may be considered inappropriate. While in many respects the workplace is a sexualised environment, sexuality is largely constructed as belonging to the private sphere. Therefore, in the ‘public’ work environment, only uncontroversial and ‘natural’ aspects of sexuality may safely be expressed, while same-sex desire is typically censored (Adkins 1995:51; see also Taylor 2007:88-114; Holliday 1999). ‘Other’ sexualities are usually made invisible by a tacit assumption of heterosexuality as the ‘natural’ norm. The act of disclosing one’s non-heteronormative sexual orientation, either verbally or through appearance and demeanour, may be problematic on two accounts. First, it may challenge the range of feminine performances which are permissible at the workplace and ‘stand out’; secondly, it may be considered inappropriate because references to ‘other’ sexualities more immediately evoke associations with sexualised behaviour, a sphere that is potentially taboo in the formal work environment<sup>93</sup>. An exploration of the ways in which non-heterosexual identities are

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<sup>93</sup> Skeggs (1997:131) insightfully points out that in Western culture “the homosexual subject has become the very sign of sex”, since gay identity is signified primarily through sexuality. By contrast,

managed in the work environment, therefore, can shed light on the ways in which cultural norms affect, constrain or enable the expression and performance of specific sexual identities.

While heterosexist expectations generally inform the work environment, it is also important to stress that individual workplaces and work hierarchies within such networks also influence the ways in which sexualities can be signified. Before turning to women's experiences in the workplace, it should be pointed out that the women who took part in this study worked in a range of different jobs and professions: interviewees included professionals, blue and white collar workers, service sector employees and civil servants<sup>94</sup>. Different issues and work codes are likely to be involved in negotiating sexuality in such diverse workplaces; such diversity is a topic that will only be touched upon in passing, and that may well require a study with a more specific research focus, such as Adkin's (1995). The discussion in the two subsections to follow focuses on women's issues in dealing with disclosure and boundaries while managing comfort, safety and respectability in the work environment.

### ***Keeping and crossing professional boundaries***

Being open about one's sexuality at work was perceived as unsafe and potentially risky by interviewees. Given the prevalence of homophobic prejudice, 'coming out' may elicit hostile reactions, compromise work relationships and jeopardize career prospects. As a result, women were usually very guarded in talking about their private life, and careful in choosing whether, when and who to come out to. An interviewee who has been involved for several years in both feminist and lesbian organisations thus summed up the vulnerability and resources available to non-heterosexual women at the workplace:

As long as we don't get organised from a legal point of view, we can't achieve anything. I took part in a conference, and I talked about organisations that protect women. For victims of male violence and rape. [...] They have psychologists and lawyers who deal with concrete issues. Lesbians don't have this, when they get the sack no one will take their side. But I am not obliged to tell anyone about my sexual orientation [Raissa, Moscow, employee in a publishing house].

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sexual signifiers are not perceived to be as central to heterosexual identities, since they are associated with nature and biology and therefore concealed.

<sup>94</sup> A few women in my sample did not work, being full-time university students (5), temporarily out of work (3), or depending on other sources of income, such as invalidity pension or profits from rented properties (2). Among the women in paid employment, most were hired employees, only a handful were self-employed or working freelance, and none managed their own business. For a more detailed profile of participants' occupations see Appendix Seven.

As Raissa points out, Russian work legislation does not safeguard employees from discrimination or unfair dismissal on the basis of sexual orientation, and local LGBT organisations are as yet unequipped to provide legal assistance to non-heterosexuals who have been unfairly treated at the workplace (Alekseev 2002a; Key informant interview N. 2 pilot). Nonetheless, Raissa suggests that, unlike the women who become victims of violence and abuse, lesbians may be able to avoid harassment and unfair treatment by camouflaging their sexuality and/or performing acceptable feminine roles.

A look at the broader picture, however, reveals that the lack of specific antidiscriminatory legislation protecting non-heterosexual workers may not be the main factor putting pressure on employees to abide by official and unofficial work codes. While the Soviet system guaranteed all citizens a secure workplace, the post-Soviet labour market is very weakly regulated, and workers are generally less protected than in most Western European countries, where in the past few decades labour statutes have also become increasingly deregulated. Although legislation guaranteeing workers' rights may be in place in Russia, the lack of efficient means of regulation enforcement, the declining influence of traditional trade unions, almost absent from the new private sector, and the reduction of the state's regulatory capacity, all concur to make jobs less secure (Ashwin and Clarke 2003). For example, while gender (and age) discrimination at the workplace is forbidden by law, women are extremely vulnerable to discriminatory treatment and unfair dismissal (Kozina and Zhidkova 2006:59-61)<sup>95</sup>. While Russian workers generally seem to expect little protection against unfair treatment, research into the gendered segregation of the labour market also points to the importance of culturally rooted notions of masculinity and femininity in perpetuating gender inequality (Ashwin 2006; Bridger, Kay and Pinnick 1996). As we shall see, cultural norms are also crucial in understanding non-heterosexual women's practices of identity negotiation at the workplace. Lack of formal legal provision and scepticism about the effective implementation of workers' protection seem to put greater emphasis on individual agency and responsibility in successfully negotiating the work environment<sup>96</sup>.

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<sup>95</sup> This is compounded by the fact that gender stereotypes inform employers' and employees' expectations and choice of work, and the gender segmentation of the labour market is simply taken for granted; although women may be aware of 'losing out' to male employees, they may not necessarily challenge commonly shared notions of gender-appropriate roles and occupations (Kozina and Zhidkova 2006).

<sup>96</sup> In her study of Russian women's perceptions of human rights Turbine (2007) also highlights how the notion of human rights was often associated with civil liberties claims pursued through the legal system, a process which was perceived to be accessible mostly to the better off. The right to employment was considered the most important of women's rights; however, "the provisions of

Interviewees repeatedly stressed that, rather than seeing themselves as potential victims of homophobic attitudes, they held themselves accountable for avoiding unpleasant or risky situations. Participants emphasised the importance of assuming responsibility by performing appropriate and ‘proper’ gender and sexual roles at the workplace. Indeed, for most interviewees the ways in which they presented themselves at the workplace were linked not only to an assessment of the potential risks and benefits of ‘being out’, but also to notions of respectability. While being completely comfortable and open about their sexual identity at work was a rare occurrence among interviewees, the experience of most women involved varying degrees of disclosure and strategies of identity management. Consider, for example, Varvara’s experience:

No, well, in general at work I don’t broadcast it [*ne afishiruii*]. I always thought that work is work, and personal [*lichnye*] relationships are personal relationships. [...] At the moment I work for a small company, where we have a young team, from twenty - twenty-two to thirty years old. We’re all young, some people are on friendly terms. I didn’t open up to anyone, thinking that work is work and personal [*lichnye*] relationships are personal relationships. [...]. All the rest doesn’t count. They see what I am like. They don’t point their finger at me, as, perhaps, they may do. But I don’t think that I look in your face [*vyzyvaiushche*], in your face in such a way that you could tell from the first glance that I am a lesbian. I don’t blame men for anything. I mingle [*obshchaius’*] with them too. Perhaps, sometimes I flirt [*koketnichaiu*] with them, in a purely friendly manner. I flirt with women and men, just for fun, as you do with nice people. But they don’t ask me about my private life [*o moei lichnoi zhizni*]. Perhaps because of the way I present myself [*ia tak sebia postavila*]. I just don’t want to, I don’t trust these people with my private [*lichnaia*] life.

*Did they never ask anything directly?*

No. When... Perhaps they tried to ask me something, and I hinted that I have someone. But I didn’t specify who. It is tacitly [*po umol’chaniuu*] understood that I have a man. Let them think so. Thank God [*Radi Boga*]. They didn’t give me a straight question. I didn’t give them a straight answer [Varvara, Moscow, bookkeeper].

Like many other women who took part in this study, Varvara draws a line between her private life and her work persona, a contrast stressed by the repeated use of the adjective ‘lichnyi’ (private), a nuance that is partly lost in the English translation<sup>97</sup>. Indeed, the

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human rights were not perceived to be relevant because they were not enforced, and did not override pre-existing gender norms” (Turbine 2007:172).

<sup>97</sup> In Russian the adjective ‘lichnyi’, used throughout the passage, means both ‘personal’ and ‘private’, and the two English terms have been used in the translated passage where appropriate. I would like to draw attention to the way the interviewee, through the repeated use of the adjective ‘lichnyi’, draws a very firm boundary between her private life, from which her colleagues are excluded, and the workplace, understood as a public, formal space.



workplace is perceived as a formal, public environment where appearances and first impressions count, and where disclosing details of one's personal life is potentially unsafe ("I don't trust these people with my private life").

As a result, many women chose not to be upfront about their sexuality in the workplace, a decision that often involved keeping one's distance from co-workers. A common strategy employed to represent 'respectable' femininity was to remain invisible as a lesbian/bisexual, either by 'passing' as heterosexual ("[...]if they ask me I say that I have a common law husband, that we're not officially married. A mythical, imaginary husband.", Alia, Moscow) or, more commonly, by hiding behind co-workers' tacit assumptions of heterosexuality ("It is tacitly understood that I have a man. Let them think so." Varvara, Moscow). Indeed, work performances did not always involve deliberate disguise, but were more often a case of not giving away too much and 'checking what you say'. Galia, for example, remained cautious when talking about her family life at work:

If I was sure that at work they'd be ok with it I would be happy to tell them [*sudovol'stviam*]. They know that I live with Nadia, that we bought a flat together. The whole process of buying the flat was very much in the public view, I researched on the internet different options and I even borrowed money at work. When I tell them something I say, Nadia, Nadia and I, but I don't tell them what kind of relationship we have. Of course, it would be easier for me to dot the i's and cross the t's, but I don't do it, because I am not sure that the reaction would be adequate [*adekvatnyi*]. It would even make conversation easier, but as things are you have to check what you say. [Galia, Moscow, graphic designer].

As already noted in the discussion of women's identity management in the parental home, 'coming out' is, in many ways, a collective process whose outcome may remain ambiguous. Although colleagues may easily have guessed that Galia is a lesbian from what is known about her private life, and from witnessing her handling printouts for a local lesbian group at work, Galia is reluctant to "dot the i's and cross the t's" in order to avoid any discomfort, both her own and her workmates'. Indeed, colleagues, who may or may not be accepting of Galia's sexuality, may also be more comfortable with an arrangement which leaves Galia's sexual identity open to interpretation. Caution and reluctance to be upfront about one's sexuality resulted from an awareness of the risks involved in being 'out', ranging from discomfort in personal relations with colleagues to victimisation and discrimination.

## ***Risks and outcomes***

Some women were very conscious of the possibility that homophobic prejudice may jeopardise their career prospects or compromise their status at work. Women often explained their perceived vulnerability by making reference to the peculiarities of their work environments. Teachers and psychologists, working in settings where homosexuality is still believed to have a corrupting influence on young and vulnerable people, may be particularly careful in avoiding disclosure. A prestigious job in the civil service, where one represents the state, was seen as requiring an “immaculate reputation”, which would be tainted by the disclosure of one’s ‘deviant’ sexuality (Zulia, Ul’ianovsk). Disclosure to clients may be inappropriate and counterproductive for a young associate in a law firm, who was weary of bumping into work acquaintances while socialising with other lesbians (Ul’iana, Moscow). For women working in managerial positions disclosure may involve loss of status (Zhanna, Moscow; Valentina, Moscow); in Zhanna’s experience, her very public ‘coming out’ affected and compromised her position of authority, as well as her working relations:

At the time I was working as president of a trade union. And the trade union has a lot of power. All the financial documents are signed by the director and by the president, which I was. [...] And I dealt especially with social programs. So everyone knew me. Everything concerning flats, plots of land for the dacha, I don’t know, services and utilities... Several people came to see me when they had complaints. Everyone knew me. And then, [...] after the interview which was broadcast on TV [*in which she publicly came out as a lesbian*], everyone knew, and people fitted into three types. Some continued to treat me as they had done before, they continued to socialise with me. Others showed a new morbid interest, with a specific innuendo. Because many people think that if you are gay or lesbian then you must be some kind of pervert [...]. They even made propositions, of the kind “my wife also wants to try it, let’s have a threesome”. But these are not even the most unpleasant propositions, I heard worse than this. And there were other people who simply stopped associating with me; they didn’t even greet me anymore. They stopped noticing me. [Zhanna, Moscow, currently a photographer, previously president of a trade union].

By calling herself a lesbian and losing her ‘respectable’ heterosexual status, Zhanna also lost the respect of many of the colleagues and service users at the trade union. While responses varied from loyalty to marginalisation to stereotyping, her ‘coming out’ brought to the surface commonly held associations between lesbian sexuality, sexual promiscuity and immorality.

The dormant danger of prejudice and stereotyping in the workplace was often signalled by scathing or derisive comments about gay people from co-workers. This was usually interpreted as a reason for caution, although those women whose sexual identity remained ambiguous often felt unable to, or could only feebly challenge homophobic views and jokes. The fact that latent homophobia can become a very real threat is apparent from the experience of Sonia, a nurse, who, while in between jobs, suddenly found herself unemployed:

[...] I didn't get the job because of this [*because her homosexuality became known*], because, as it turned out, when I resigned from my previous job, there was a person who was jealous of me, he just told them at the new workplace and they turned me down on another pretext. I mean, they were ready to hire me [...], but when this transpired they turned me down, and I didn't try again to find work in the health sector. Because this is a small city, all the doctors hang out together, they all know each other. When I was looking for a job it was hard, because I wanted to work in the health sector, I dreamed about it because I had worked in this sector for a long time. But I understood that there is no point [*in looking for a job in the health sector*], because it would be hard to find work, because of the long tail of my reputation, that I am not like everyone else, it would have been difficult for me to live here. So I found a job in another field, it was difficult, because I only have a medical qualification [Sonia, Ul'ianovsk, formerly a nurse and now a manager in a retail unit].

Although she felt powerless to do anything about it, Sonia is positive that her dismissal was linked to gossip that circulated about her after a colleague she had been romantically involved with started to attract undue attention by acting “demonstratively”, in an attempt to win her back. Sonia's experience also highlights the peculiarity of living in a small city, where rumours spread quickly, and “the long tail of one's reputation” is more likely to jeopardise job opportunities, as well as to affect people's lives outside of the workplace (“It would have been difficult for me to live here”), a point also made by others (Zoia, Ul'ianovsk; Elizaveta, Ul'ianovsk)<sup>98</sup>.

Different issues may be involved in negotiating one's sexual identity not only across urban settings, but also in specific workplaces; indeed, work space is constructed through the social relations which are formed within it. For many young women, working with other young people offered some guarantee of a more open-minded environment, where talking about one's personal life and relationships may be more comfortable, whereas working in a more mature team generally involved a higher degree of caution. This perception also seems to reflect different generational attitudes towards sexuality and homosexuality: as

<sup>98</sup> From the data collected it is difficult to gauge whether there is a significant difference between women's practices of disclosure and experience of unfair treatment in Moscow and Ul'ianovsk,

indicated in Chapter Three, young women tended to be more open about their sexuality with friends than women who had come of age during the Soviet period. More generally, older generations were seen as more conservative and puritanical in sexual matters. As already evidenced by some of the interview excerpts quoted earlier, it was not only fear of material consequences that weighed on women's decisions about identity management, but also the possibility that disclosure may result in emotional discomfort. While discrimination and unfair treatment remained a possibility for some, many women envisioned that being open about their sexuality could create tensions with colleagues, arousing suspicions and a lot of talking behind one's back. Standing out as different was in itself perceived as a form of exposure, which could unnecessarily complicate one's worklife. Indeed, getting on with work colleagues was important, and some women were very aware of the fact that specific gender performances, such as flirting with male colleagues (Varvara, Moscow) or going to the bathroom with female co-workers (Galia, Moscow) are expected or important in order to 'fit in' and mingle. Such performances may be disrupted by enacting an identity that does not match others' expectations and assumptions.

Another common concern was that disclosure could result in being stereotyped and boxed in under a label. By making themselves obviously visible as 'queer', women were concerned about being perceived as too 'in your face', and of conjuring up negative stereotypes and irrational fears. For this reason, women were usually selective in how and to whom they revealed their lesbian identity, and disclosure required a certain amount of mediation and negotiation. Nastia reflected that she was more likely to be open about her sexuality in certain work environments, and that disclosure was generally gradual:

I don't arrive and say "Hello, I am a lesbian", of course not. If I go to a new workplace, I look at the team, if there are people of old principles [*zakalki*], there's no need to tell them, they won't understand. But if there are mostly young people, then yes, because they have a more easy-going attitude [*legkii*]. Some understand by themselves, they guess, and I just confirm a fact, is it so?, yes. With some we strike up good relations, and I say, do you remember I told you about Vasia, it is not Vasia, it is Vasilisa. I mean, I usually tell a single person, not a crowd. I mean, I think that if you suddenly tell a big group of people, they will look at each other to see how to react, and as a rule there will be a negative reaction, then jokes, while if you tell each one singularly [...] after a while everyone will know, [...] and they're ok with it, and if someone makes a remark [*about her*] in their presence, they won't dare to do anything, because the majority is already in favour [*za*]. [...] This word, lesbian, first of all it sounds rough, and secondly people get scared, what is that, who are they [...] [Nastia, Moscow, temporarily out of work, previously an admin worker].

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although Moscow residents seemed on average less concerned about "the long tail of their reputation" following them.

Nastia's experience, to some extent, illustrates the ways in which relations and friendships are negotiated at the workplace more generally. Developing friendly and personal relations always involves testing the ground and a selection process. Strategies to manage personal relations, at work and elsewhere, are generally informed by internalised 'commonsense' notions of respectability: one's 'respectable' status can be demonstrated by conforming to unspoken rules of decorum and propriety. Nastia's story foregrounds the powerful link between 'commonsense' respectability, sexuality and the ways in which it is displayed (or not). As Skeggs points out, the notion of respectability, which embodies moral authority, represents "one of the key mechanisms by which groups are 'othered' and pathologised" (Skeggs 1997:1). She goes on to argue that normative notions of femininity are anchored in specific 'normalised' sexual practices: heterosexuality is unremarkable and 'respectable' because "its sexual content is naturalised and thereby concealed" (Skeggs 1997:132). Homosexuality, on the contrary, has no 'natural' moral legitimacy and is therefore potentially disreputable. It stands out as 'out of place' precisely because its sexual content is made explicit: unlike the heterosexual, the 'homosexual' is chiefly signified through their sexuality, although both heterosexuals and homosexuals have a sexuality (Skeggs 1997:130).

In Nastia's view, being too 'honest' or direct about one's sexuality may elicit hostility, while gradual disclosure generally invites loyalty. Indeed, in the experience of many, being upfront about one's sexuality was perceived as 'in your face' and aggressive, in the work environment as well as in other daily interactions. Thus, being 'out and proud' was deemed not only exposing and counterproductive, but also inappropriate. By contrast, "not broadcasting it" [*ne afishirovat*] (Ul'iana, Moscow; Varvara, Moscow; Fieldwork notes 11.6.2004), not putting "everything on display [*vse na pokaz*]" (Sveta, Ul'ianovsk) and "being accepted first as a person, rather than a lesbian" (Oksana, Moscow) were not only strategies to fit in and not be 'out of place', or dictated by fear of repercussions, but also used to make claims to a common notion of respectability. Even though non-heterosexual women are positioned as outsiders by dominant discourses of respectability, they may not necessarily be willing to challenge them: to some extent, 'respectability' remains a desirable status. In a sense, affirming their identity as 'good' lesbians also means challenging stereotypes of lesbians as 'deviant', demonstrative and maladjusted individuals.

As Nastia's experience suggests, although the workplace is constructed, and often experienced, as a formalised and 'impersonal' environment, nonetheless it is also an environment where social relations are formed, as it provides opportunities to socialise and

strike up friendships which may be developed outside working hours. The perception of a work environment as 'friendly' and 'social', and personal investment in social relations developed at the workplace is likely to encourage more intimate and open exchanges. 'Coming out' seemed more likely to take place in workplaces where women felt comfortable and emotionally safe; unsurprisingly, it usually involved telling close colleagues, who were seen as more accepting or capable to see 'past the label'. Some women deliberately kept their work and personal life completely separate; others, however, welcomed opportunities to develop networks of colleagues and acquaintances, as well as more intimate friendships. In such situations, being closeted was perceived as an obstacle to go beyond the niceties and form more meaningful relations, as Nadia points out:

At work I didn't tell anyone for a long time, the problem is also that I am a psychologist, and, since here this [homosexuality] is still considered a disease, it is common wisdom that, how can you, being ill, cure other people? In general, in Russia it is considered a deviance [...]. Then I began to understand that the relationship with my colleagues stopped at my private life. They tell me everything about their private lives, and I don't tell them anything. I didn't want this, I didn't want to only hang out with lesbians. I wanted to have as close friends people that I like, and not necessarily people with the same sexual orientation. At some point I had to tell two of my closest colleagues about myself. [Nadia, Moscow, psychologist]

In instances such as Nadia's, disclosure helped to forge more informal and closer relations with co-workers. Disclosure was safe when women perceived that colleagues valued them first of all for their professional skills and personal qualities. Although some degree of uneasiness may remain, work relations remained unchanged, and sometimes, as in Nadia's case, disclosure helped to forge more informal and closer relations with co-workers. A comfortable work environment emerged as a factor facilitating disclosure: it is perhaps not by chance that the minority of women who reported being completely comfortable in talking about their private lives at work all had particularly informal, relaxed and friendly working relations.

## **How to be streetwise**

### ***Street sexuality***

Public urban spaces, and in particular the street, are commonly associated with personal vulnerability and with the possibility of violence and danger (Valentine 2001; Herek and

Berrill 1992). Urban spaces are also spatialised through notions of class, gender, ethnicity and sexuality: while some areas of town are commonly perceived as ‘gentrified’ and some are considered ‘rough’, being safe is also a matter of belonging and entitlement to inhabit a certain space, of being ‘in’ or ‘out’ of place. Thus, not blending in by being visible as an ‘outsider’ (a dark-skinned man on the street of ‘white’ and ‘slavic’ Moscow, see Roman 2002), or contravening commonly shared cultural norms (a woman walking alone down the street at night) may arouse feelings of insecurity and fear, and make individuals more vulnerable to harassment and violence.

As Dyer notes, unlike gender and race, (but perhaps like class), one’s sexuality is not ‘written on the body’: it doesn’t necessarily ‘show’ and may be invisible or remain unnoticed by the untrained eye. Indeed, what are commonly understood as ‘signs of gayness’ are part of a cultural code, “designed to make visible the invisible” (Dyer 2002:19). Thus, while outsiders may not necessarily be acquainted with this cultural code, specific gender performances are more likely to be recognisable and read as ‘lesbian’. More specifically, the femme (“the lesbian embodiment of femininity”) may remain invisible as a lesbian in the absence of the butch, who, by ‘standing out’ through a non-heteronormative gender performance, foregrounds the femme as a ‘feminine’ lesbian (Skeggs 2001:209). These two categories seem inadequate to describe the whole range of non-heterosexual identities and styles, nor would all the women in my sample necessarily identified as either butch or femme. Looks and styles, however, had a certain currency, and expressions such as “I look like a lesbian” (Ania, Ul’ianovsk), or “You wouldn’t say that about me [*that she is a lesbian*]” (Sveta, Ul’ianovsk; Al’bina, Ul’ianovsk), commonly used to describe themselves and others, suggest that ‘looking like a lesbian’ was commonly interpreted as involving some degree of nonconformity to conventional notions of femininity, by looking ‘masculine’ or ‘androgynous’ – although appearances, behaviours and identifications may not actually be one and the same thing. Women’s experiences also showed that gender nonconformity was more likely to be recognised and interpreted as ‘lesbian/queer’ by outsiders. Some women felt they were made invisible as lesbians by the common equation between conventional femininity and heterosexuality, although performing conventional feminine roles was not necessarily a deliberate strategy used to ‘pass’ as heterosexual. On the other hand, transgressing gender roles made one look conspicuous, and therefore more exposed when negotiating public space<sup>99</sup>. Maia was

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<sup>99</sup> The image of lesbians as women performing the ‘wrong’ gender is consistent with media representations of lesbianism; see Nartova 2004a.

openly confronted in some settings because of her looks, an experience that caused personal discomfort:

*Have you ever had any unpleasant experience because of your sexual orientation?*

No. Not so far. Not from strangers [*s postoronnyimi liud'mi*]. The only thing is, sometimes they say, is that a boy or a girl. This puts them on guard, but I avoid this. I try not to mix with these people and not hang out in these places.

*What places, for example?*

Bars. There are bars that are hangouts for arty [*tvorcheskie*] people, we have some of those. And there are those where they stare, and if you're not the same as them, then they have to beat you up, just so. And I don't go there. [Maia, Ul'ianovsk]

It is Maia's androgynous looks ("is that a boy or a girl?") that make her immediately 'stand out' from the crowd and arouse suspicion and aggressive feelings in strangers, making the threat of aggression a very real possibility. Issues of personal safety and comfort influence her navigation through urban space, which involves avoiding places where she looks 'out of place' and choosing bars where she blends in.

Another visual signal that may reveal to outsiders one's sexual identity is the company of other lesbians, and particularly the unmistakable act of being affectionate with a girlfriend in public. Ul'iana instinctively knew that she had to watch her behaviour when accompanying a girlfriend:

*Have you ever had any unpleasant experience because of your sexual orientation?*

Not major ones. You know, if I can't remember any it means no. If I had had any, I would tell you straight away [*laughs*]. No. [*She pauses to think*]. Perhaps there were some jokes, that kind of thing, but I wasn't particularly bothered. Sometimes I was hurt that I could not go to some places, or behave the way I wanted to. [...] For example, I walk down the street and if, say, I start kissing a girl, this is a bit out of the ordinary [*nenomal'no*]. I mean, people... But if I kissed a man, no one would say anything. [Ul'iana, Moscow]

As Ul'iana perceptively notes, while sexualised behaviour between a man and a woman looks 'normal' and unremarkable, if two girls are involved the same behaviour stands out as 'out of place', 'improper', and 'rude' [*dikost'*] (Elizaveta, Ul'ianovsk), and can



therefore be 'legitimately' verbally sanctioned by passers-by<sup>100</sup>. Thus, managing public space involves not only avoiding certain areas, but also avoiding conduct that may be revealing in spaces where exposure is perceived as potentially dangerous or unpleasant.

### ***In/visibility, anonymity and personal comfort in Moscow and Ul'ianovsk***

Visibility on the street was perceived as a matter of personal comfort and safety by women interviewed in both Moscow and Ul'ianovsk. Important differences, however, seemed to emerge in this respect between the two cities. Although not necessarily more tolerant, Moscow was generally perceived as offering the advantage of anonymity and of passers-by's general indifference; its more 'cosmopolitan' atmosphere was also reflected in the diversity of cultures and lifestyles visible in the urban landscape, which made 'unconventional' looks and behaviour less conspicuous. At least in the city centre, Moscow's diversity was apparent in the range of different styles, looks and clothing exhibited by young people, and by the 'trendy' youth in particular. In the capital, many young women habitually wore casual and 'unisex' clothing rather than conventionally 'girlish' styles. By contrast, in central Ul'ianovsk women usually exhibited the conventional attributes of femininity, such as high heels, skirts, skimpy tops, and lots of make-up<sup>101</sup>.

Issues about comfort and anonymity were raised in Moscow; for example, women expressed concern about being seen in the company of other 'lesbian/queer' women by clients and work colleagues, or were cautious in showing affectionate behaviour in one's own neighbourhood (Ul'iana, Moscow; Vera, Moscow). Moscow interviewees, however, rarely expressed concerns about their personal safety on the streets linked to their sexual orientation, or related experiences of verbal and physical harassment<sup>102</sup>. In Ul'ianovsk, by

<sup>100</sup> In the few instances when passers-by made remarks on the street in my presence, reactions ranged from surprise ("Girls, what are you doing?" at the sight of two women kissing), to jokes to verbal harassment.

<sup>101</sup> Contributors to a comparative study on Russian youth subcultures focusing on Moscow, Ul'ianovsk and Samara also note the much more limited range of styles and *tusovki* and the underdeveloped club scene in Ul'ianovsk in comparison with the other two cities, and particularly with Moscow. Moreover, although the conflict between groups of 'louts' (*gopniki*) and the 'alternative', 'progressive' youth emerged in all three locations, it seemed much more prominent in Ul'ianovsk (Pilkington *et al.* 2002:101-132).

<sup>102</sup> Although the theme of personal safety did not emerge as a central concern in interviews, this does not mean that security and visibility in the public street are to be taken for granted. For example, several Moscow gay and lesbian clubs recommend that patrons stay until closing time (6 a.m.) for fear of gay bashing. Moreover, claims to public visibility and legitimacy from local LGBT groups have been frustrated by local authorities, which have denied official registration to LGBT

comparison, the threatening presence of *gopniki* and the possibility of intimidation or violence was a theme that often surfaced in interviews<sup>103</sup>. The poor attendance at the latest gay and lesbian night, for example, was partly attributed to rumours that *gopniki* had been tipped about the event, and might target patrons, particularly gay men (Fieldwork notes 21.8.2005, Renata, Ul'ianovsk; Viktoriia, Ul'ianovsk). Although women had not necessarily directly witnessed instances of violence, episodes of gay bashing [*remonty*] were brought up both in interviews and in general conversation, including the murder of a gay man, killed because of his sexuality<sup>104</sup> (Fieldwork Notes 13.08.2005; Kristina, Ul'ianovsk; Lada, Ul'ianovsk; Tamara, Ul'ianovsk).

It was gay men who were seen as both more exposed and more concerned about violence and intolerance, either because intimate behaviour between two men stood out more and was less likely to be mistaken for a sign of friendship, or because 'acting' or 'looking' gay posed a more direct threat to aggressors' masculinity and virility. The single major episode of violence involving women that was brought up in interviews, however, points out how 'acting gay' can make women no less vulnerable, although perhaps in different ways. Kristina describes how an episode of attempted sexual violence made her adopt a more guarded behaviour on the street:

I was in Ul'ianovsk not long ago, and it was such a shock, really, I walked down the street and I caught everyone staring, especially *gopniki*. [...] And I

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organisations and refused authorisation for events such as gay pride marches (see Chapter Three). Fieldwork was conducted in Moscow several months before the 2006 gay pride march and the incidents that preceded, accompanied and followed the event, including a very damning media campaign and the violent attacks of far-right and religious groups on two gay clubs and on the pride march itself, as well as episodes of random gay bashings in various parts of the city (Sarajeva 2008). Perceptions of personal safety may have been different, had the interviews taken place closer to these events.

<sup>103</sup> As Pilkington explains, referring to the use of the term among the young people involved in her study, "*gopniki* was not a term of self-identification but one used (mainly by 'alternative' youth) to refer to provincial (or capital peripheral) 'louts' who gathered around the courtyard of their block of flats, close to their school, or in the basement of houses. *Gopniki* were antagonistically disposed toward 'alternative' (*tusovka*) youth, and this often brought the two groups into physical conflict." (Pilkington et al. 2002:253, n. 27). Omel'chenko (2006) also suggests that the term *gopniki* is class-specific, referring to marginalised working-class youth, often engaging in lower-scale criminal activities or in 'antisocial' behaviour; *gopnik* could be translated into English as 'yob', or 'ned'. The Russian term will be preserved in the text, because it reflects interviewees' usage and its class and cultural nuances.

<sup>104</sup> It is worth pointing out that Ul'ianovsk was portrayed by some women as a particularly unsafe city: for example, while in other Russian cities it is common practice to stop private cars and be given a lift for an agreed price, in Ul'ianovsk car owners would not stop for fear of violence [Fieldwork notes 15.8.2005]. Violence and intolerance should perhaps be seen in the broader context of the city's struggling economy and growing social inequalities: one interviewee, for example, related that, while leaving the premises of a city centre club where the monthly gay and lesbian night was being held, her gay friend was assaulted in her presence; according to Liza, however, the attack was a mugging attempt, and it was not necessarily a hate crime.

felt physically sick from this, and I understood that when I walk through Moscow I feel such a grey mouse, because I don't try to stand out, I just wear what I want, I don't try to impress [*ne rabotaiu na publiku*]. But when I come back to Ul'ianovsk I understand that I attract too much attention.

*Did you change your style [since she moved to Moscow]?*

I wear what I want to wear and I feel comfortable with this style, and my behaviour doesn't change, it's just that in Moscow ... I allowed myself the same things in Ul'ianovsk, until I came across some problems. When a man got out of a *marshrutka* [*a share taxi*] and tried to follow me, with a very clear aim, you understand yourself what, I mean, with the clear suggestion that sooner or later he would have me [*menia poimet*], to put it bluntly. Because before this Sveta [*her girlfriend*] and I had been kissing on the *marshrutka*, and the guy was sitting there and you could see from his eyes, he had a maniacal look [*man'iachnyi vzgliad*]. His hands slipped where they shouldn't have, and when I got out at my stop he followed me, and I just ran away from him as fast as I could. Well, until then, I acted freely. As soon as this started, I began to restrain myself [*zazhimat'sia*]. I feel I can allow myself more in Moscow, but I restrain myself because it's a habit, a form of defence [Kristina, Ul'ianovsk].

In Kristina's experience, sexual behaviour among women incites violence by 'provoking' men sexually, rather than by 'threatening' their masculinity. Although this theme was only marginally touched upon in this study, the suggestion that perceptions and experiences of street violence may be gender-specific seems also supported by findings from Pilkington *et al.*'s study (2002:149; 171)<sup>105</sup>.

Having moved from Ul'ianovsk to Moscow, Kristina also highlights what she perceives as the differences between her native city and the capital: in Ul'ianovsk she stood out, felt compelled, after a very threatening experience, to watch herself and still catches 'everyone staring'; in Moscow she goes unnoticed and feels she can potentially behave more freely. Particularly in Ul'ianovsk, behaviour in public space was not only influenced by considerations about personal safety, but also about comfort, privacy and anonymity. For some participants, caution in public space was dictated by the ever present possibility of exposure, since, in a city where a woman knows "what her husband's been up to before she gets home, because her acquaintances will tell her" (Zoia Ul'ianovsk), rumours could easily get back to relatives and acquaintances. It is perhaps telling that monthly gay and lesbian parties were only advertised by word of mouth and operated a strict face control policy, allowing patrons to access the club either by showing a membership card or by

<sup>105</sup> Pilkington suggests that, while 'alternative' young men are more likely to be picked upon on the street for their nonconventional looks and threatened with physical aggression, young women were more concerned about "using public transport and being on their own" (2002:149). Although the present study focuses on non-heterosexual women, and gay men were only very marginally involved in it, perceptions of violence among women seem to confirm Pilkington *et al.*'s findings, and may suggest that patterns of homophobic crime too may be gender specific.

personal recommendation. This caution was dictated not only by considerations about personal safety: some women felt that excessive curiosity from both local media and the general public may turn the event into a ‘freak show’ [Fieldwork notes, 25.8.2005], disrupting the comfortable and relaxed atmosphere and possibly leading to unwanted exposure.

Comfort and ease was often associated with all-‘queer’ networks and environments, where one was not made to feel ‘out of place’ because of their sexuality. Talking about her teenage years in a provincial city in the South of Russia, Ira points out her motivations for preferring to hang out in gay venues:

*And after this you started hanging out with gay people...*

Yes. Because people stared. Because you stand out from the crowd. And I was more comfortable sitting in that bar [*a bar unofficially known to have a gay and lesbian clientele*] and drinking a coffee, a beer, rather than in an ordinary bar. Because at that time hanging out with men already bothered me. You know what our men are like? Like, in your face [*chut’ li v glaz*]. And I was also feisty [*boevaia*], and I was afraid that I would go around with bruises and lumps. [...] I was never beaten up because of my sexual orientation. They threatened me, laughed at me. But I wasn’t particularly bothered, because I already knew where I stood [*uzhe opredeliala dlia sebia*]. [...] I love physical contact. If I am with my girlfriend, I want to hold her by the hand, so we held hands and kissed, and walked in an embrace. Of course, people saw the way we looked at each other. And it was a great laugh: look at those lesbians! As if, I don’t know, we had an elephant on leash. [Ira, Moscow].

Of course, ‘queer’ spaces and networks did not play the same role in the life of all interviewees, and some women experienced them as sites of discomfort, a theme that will be addressed in the next chapter. However, particularly among Ul’ianovsk respondents, ‘queer’ space was seen as an environment where “they’re all our people [*svoi*], and no one judges you, and what you can’t do on the street, you can do there” (Klavdiia, Ul’ianovsk), a place where, for example, one could freely kiss, cuddle and dance with one’s girlfriend.

‘Lesbian/queer’ space covers a variety of places and environments. While, particularly in bigger cities like Moscow, gay and lesbian commercial venues and community organisations may be relatively well established, in other instances public space may only temporarily be used or claimed as ‘lesbian/queer’. This is particularly the case with Ul’ianovsk, where a mainstream venue occasionally hosted a gay and lesbian night and where a couple of bars are unofficially known as ‘queer’ hangouts, although they cater for the general public as well. In both cities, however, ‘queer’ and ‘lesbian’ space does not comprise only enclosed, semi-public locations, such as bars and clubs, but also the public

street. Indeed, specific stretches of the central Tver'skoi Boulevard (in Moscow) and Goncharova street (in Ul'ianovsk) were, at the time when the research took place, popular hangouts for young lesbian women. This is particularly interesting because, while the use of the public street by men is very well documented in the literature, both in Russia and in other countries (Healey 2001; Higgs 1999; Rotikov 1998), 'lesbian' networks have never, to my knowledge, been associated with street subcultures in the literature on Western sexualities (Valentine 1995). Indeed, the literature usually points out that lesbian women's networks and subcultural space, unlike men's, are much less visible because they are located in private space, hidden from public view. This absence is generally explained with culturally rooted gendered divisions of space: while the public is constructed as the domain of men, gender roles confine women to private space (Casey 2004; Valentine 1996, 1995; Adler and Brenner 1992). It is therefore remarkable that in urban Russia, where common patterns of socialising among young people involve meeting friends and drinking alcohol on the street, women-only 'queer' networks are present in open public space. The reason for this may be related to different gendered notions of public/private, rooted in the legacy of the Soviet gender order. In spite of its limits, state-driven Soviet-style emancipation involved recruiting the female population into the workforce, and granting them some level of political representation; at least in principle, public space was equally accessible to men and women (Attwood 2004; Crowley and Reid 2002; Einhorn 1993).

While the street was learned and perceived as a space implicitly dominated by heterosexual norms, it was also appropriated as 'queer' and experienced as a site of belonging. Particularly in Ul'ianovsk, women indicated that their behaviour on the street, even in queer groups, was constrained by the awareness of being in the public eye ("what you can't do on the street, you can do there [*at the gay and lesbian night in a local club*]", Klavdiia, Ul'ianovsk). However, while allowing oneself to behave "in a quite relaxed fashion" [*dostatochno raskovanno*] (Alina, Ul'ianovsk), or even hanging out with a women-only group may prompt suspicion and elicit hostile reactions, numbers seemed to guarantee a certain safety and emotional comfort:

*Sonia: We never came across this problem [gay bashing, which was talked about earlier with reference to men].*

*Zulia: Well, it happened, that we were sitting somewhere with our group of friends, strictly temnye girls only, and it happened, that some bloke said, look, there are those lesbians [lesbiianki sidiat]. I had a verbal skirmish with those blokes, because we were passing by and they said, "oh, the lesbians have come", I turned around and I told them what I thought of them.*

*What did you say?*

*Zulia:* I can't remember what I said, it was very emotional and those poor lads could not talk back. I also howled [*pofyrchala*] like a cat. They were shocked by the fact that I approached them and sorted them out [Sonia and Zulia, Ul'ianovsk].

Although the street could be, for some, a place for hanging out with 'queer' friends and lovers, notions of propriety and respectability still informed women's countenance. As already noted, behaviour on the streets of Ul'ianovsk seemed much more guarded than in Moscow. For example, several women reported being uncomfortable holding hands with a partner in public, and overt 'coupley' behaviour was off limits even in the presence of the 'queer/lesbian' *tusovka*. By contrast, in central Moscow spotting lesbian couples holding hands or being affectionate was not uncommon. Moreover, the *tusovka* gathering at the Esenin monument on Tverskoi Boulevard was very much visible as a lesbian one, with girls sporting crew cuts and unisex clothing, kissing and making playful reference to lesbian sex, seemingly unconcerned by the reaction of passers-by<sup>106</sup>. Nonetheless, concerns about 'proper' behaviour and personal responsibility emerged among both Ul'ianovsk and Moscow residents.

The emphasis on self-reliance and 'responsible' behaviour in avoiding potentially unpleasant situations meant that victims of homophobic attacks were sometimes blamed for acting 'provocatively', or 'carelessly':

Well, if a guy pretends to be a girl... You shouldn't do that, you're a guy. Speak normally [*normal'no razgovarivai*]. Ok, he wants to show that this is what I am, and I have no intention to change. But he knows perfectly well how society is going to react, and then don't come and tell me that they beat you up. You live in this society, and you have to be careful if you want to hold on to dear life.

*Do you know anyone who was beaten up?*

No. There are some I know who were found out [*do kotorykh dokapyvalis'*]. They see that it's a gay boy and they start shouting that they'll do something to him. [Maia, Ul'ianovsk].

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<sup>106</sup> As noted in Chapter Two, I was unable to access the *tusovka* socialising on Tverskoi Bul'var, and for this reason it is not possible to provide a more accurate analysis of lesbian street *tusovki*, their similarities and differences, although the topic will be explored again in Chapter Seven. Information on the *Pushka* is based on casual observation as a passer-by, on reports from interviewees who had in the past socialised with the *tusovka* and on secondary sources (Sarajeva 2008; Krongauz 2005).

Interestingly, Maia, herself attracting unwanted attention on the streets for her androgynous looks, emphasises personal responsibility over societal prejudice and homophobic attitudes. Thus, being streetwise involves being mindful of what is 'permissible' and 'acceptable' and what may elicit aggression. Indeed, being particularly demonstrative in public was deplored by some interviewees as aggressive behaviour, or deemed 'inappropriate', 'in your face' and 'out of place'. 'Posing', 'showing off' [*rabota na publiku, risovat'sia, pokazukha, pokazushnost'*] by overtly performing lesbianism was seen by some respondents as a deliberate attempt to attract attention, an attention that interviewees generally tried to avoid. This behaviour was considered typical of the youngest generation, and motivated by a spirit of teenage rebellion more than anything else. 'Demonstrative' behaviour was associated by many interviewees with a period of self-searching, or by a fascination with 'trendy' images of female homosexuality in the media (see Chapter Three); it was not seen as necessarily indicating a long-term identification with lesbianism. In Moscow, such open and conspicuous demeanour was often quoted as being typical of the *Pushka* street *tusovka*, which had a reputation for being 'rough' and very visible<sup>107</sup>. Some Moscow interviewees simply considered the *tusovka* unattractive or uninteresting because of the young age of the girls who gathered there and their ways of socialising, which involved drinking, chatting and meeting friends as well as potential sexual partners on the public street. Other interviewees, however, were keen to distance themselves from the *Pushka* crowd, whose 'in your face' and 'disreputable' behaviour may give the whole 'community' a bad name, particularly because the *tusovka* had attracted the attention of the local tabloid press, which had portrayed it in negative or scathing terms<sup>108</sup>.

## The 'global closet'? Languages and practices of disclosure

Both Chapter Five and the present chapter have highlighted issues about identity management, in/visibility and disclosure, which are key to debates on sexuality and social exclusion. These debates have centred on the 'gay closet/coming out' paradigm, briefly sketched out in Chapter One (Plummer 1995; Sedgwick 1990). However, recent literature

<sup>107</sup> In 'community' environments, the *Pushka tusovka* was often associated with drinking, swearing, fighting and 'loose' sexual behaviour.

<sup>108</sup> See for example Maksimov 2006; Krongauz 2005; Minorskaia 2004.

has highlighted the need to reassess Western-centric theoretical understandings of the closet and 'coming out' (Jolly 2001; Malanansan 1997), and reappraise their centrality to non-heterosexual individuals' negotiations of everyday space (Taylor 2007; Seidman, Meeks and Traschen 1999). This final section interrogates existing theoretical understandings of the gay closet by exploring their relevance in interpreting Russian women's experiences, strategies and language of identity negotiation.

The use of the term 'closet' as a sexualised metaphor ("being in/coming out of the closet") originated in Anglo-American gay slang, probably in the 1950-60s (although the precise etymology of the term is unknown). From the 1970s, the expression was popularised by the gay and lesbian liberation movement, for which "coming out of the closet" became a political slogan (Brown 2000). Ever since, the closet has become central to both LGBT sexual politics and to gay and lesbian/queer studies; the closet is a metaphor for the symbolic erasure and forced concealment of non-heteronormative sexualities (Sedgwick 1990, Brown 2000). The closet is inextricably linked to the act of 'coming out' of it, understood as both coming to terms with a stigmatised sexuality and affirming one's identity by making it public (Sedgwick 1990). "Coming out" has both private and public connotations, and is imagined as an act of both personal liberation and political significance (Sedgwick 1990:72; Seidman, Meeks and Traschen 1999). At a personal level, the closet is more or less implicitly posed as a place of self-denial, concealment, shame and guilt, while disclosure involves asserting oneself by reclaiming a stigmatised identity. At a collective level, the closet is a metaphor for the oppression of non-heteronormative sexualities, which are policed through silence, denial and pathologisation. Therefore, the act of coming out makes visible the existence of 'other' sexualities while challenging the primacy of heterosexist norm.

Far from being confined only to politics, the coming out narrative has also become "the most distinctive form of les-bi-gay life writing" (Jolly 2001:476), and, more generally, a cultural paradigm, mainstreamed in Anglo-American and Western popular culture. Indeed, genres as disparate as fiction, self-help books and medical literature routinely make use of 'the closet' as a sexualised metaphor, so much so that the expression "coming out", without any need of further specification ("of the closet"), has become a dead metaphor in English, having lost its oddity and newness (Brown 2000:6). The concept of 'coming out' has had a wide resonance beyond the English-speaking world. Through the influence of the LGBT movement and of Anglo-American popular culture and language, it was established in 'the West', where discourses around gay and lesbian liberation, gay rights and non-heterosexual lifestyles have circulated for several decades. More recently, through a



process of globalisation and hybridisation of sexual cultures, the ‘closet/coming out’ paradigm has become influential beyond the Western world (Binnie 2004; Leap 2002; Brown 2000: 116-139; Murray 1995). The expression has gained currency in other languages meaning specifically “the public avowal of one’s identity” (Manalansan 1997:498).

Recent literature, however, has critiqued the “closet/coming out” paradigm on two accounts. First, qualitative research on non-heterosexual individuals’ negotiation of space has highlighted that the “public avowal of identity” (Manalansan 1997:498) is not an option equally accessible to everyone. In some locations and settings, closetedness may indeed be an expression of *both accommodation and resistance* to prevailing social norms (Seidman, Meeks and Traschen 1999). Moreover, it should not be forgotten that the closet and coming out are value-laden and culturally specific concepts. Plummer (1995) reveals how the centrality of coming out as an affirmative and empowering act emerged within a specific social, historical and cultural context:

The most momentous act in the life of any lesbian or gay person is when they proclaim their gayness – to self, to other, to community. [*Since the 1970s*] [t]he full circle of private, personal, public and political tellings has become possible. “Coming out” [...] becomes *the central narrative of positive gay experience* (Plummer 1995:82-84)<sup>109</sup>.

Drawing on the previous discussion of women’s negotiations of space, the remainder of this section examines the extent to which the ‘closet/coming out’ paradigm translates into Russian language and culture. It also engages with broader debates about the need to “come out of the ‘coming out’ narrative” (Jolly 2001), and reassesses the centrality of the closet in the experiences of non-heterosexual individuals, both ‘East’ and ‘West’.

### ***The closet and women’s negotiation of space***

As shorthand for the regulation of non-heteronormative sexuality through invisibility, the closet was a useful theoretical concept in analysing women’s navigations of everyday space. Indeed, interviewees often made clear how successfully managing everyday space involved either avoiding some places altogether (for example, ‘rough’ bars, where one was more likely to be confronted about one’s ‘non-conformist’ looks) or refraining from behaviour that could make one visible as ‘queer’ (for example, kissing a girlfriend in

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<sup>109</sup> The emphasis is mine.

public). The spatial norm embodied in the concept of the closet was central to women's negotiation of public space: interviewees were acutely aware of the fact that displaying lesbian sexuality in public spaces was a potentially unsafe and uncomfortable experience.

However, while public urban space was perceived as dominated by heterosexual norms, perceptions of comfort and danger differed significantly across urban settings, as we have seen in the previous section<sup>110</sup>. This suggests that privacy and anonymity may operate differently, and be differently valued in metropolitan and provincial cities. Moreover, risk and unwanted exposure were not confined to the public spheres of the street and the workplace; indeed, the environment where most women felt more vulnerable was the private setting of the parental home. In many women's experiences, their sexuality was more difficult to negotiate in personal and intimate relations, rather than in more anonymous public settings.

The 'closet/coming out' paradigm is a useful concept to analyse the structural constraints, inscribed in cultural norms, which affect women's spatial navigations. However, it is less helpful in accounting for women's strategies for negotiating these constraints. Indeed, 'coming out', the twin concept to 'the closet', emphasises authenticity, visibility and conscious resistance to normative gender/sexual roles. Findings from the present study, however, indicate that much more importance was placed on managing one's identity appropriately across different social contexts, associated with rules of propriety and risk-assessment, rather than on visibility and authenticity<sup>111</sup>. On the contrary, women often emphasised how self-management was a way of taking charge and being in control.

Decisions as to whether and how to disclose one's sexual preferences were often based on a pragmatic and realistic assessment of the benefits and risks involved, both in public and in private settings. The emotional costs and discomforts of "coming out", and not just the potential risks associated with it, were paramount in women's decisions to disclose their sexuality (or not).

Strategies to negotiate both private and public relations often involve setting boundaries between one's 'public' image and one's privacy, a space where one's sexuality can be safely revealed. Interestingly, such strategies do not always involve denial (deliberately

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<sup>110</sup> Similar differences also emerge from Moran and Skeggs' comparative study of perceptions and experiences of violence and safety in the gay and lesbian communities of Manchester and Lancaster (Moran and Skeggs 2004).

<sup>111</sup> This finding is supported by other research on the experiences of lesbian women in Russia (Zelenina 2006; Nartova 2004c; Essig 1999).

“passing” as heterosexual), but rather exploiting grey areas in order to ‘blend in’ and remain invisible as a lesbian/bisexual woman. ‘Closetedness’, therefore, needs not be associated only with self-denial, but rather with effective practices of identity management. While the closet has been conceptualised as a negative space of concealment, interviews indicate that it also symbolises a privacy that was often desirable, but not necessarily accessible. Indeed, the parental home, where the boundaries of personal privacy receded, emerged as the one space women found most difficult to negotiate.

It has been implied that practices of self-management and routinised division between “gay” and “non-gay” spheres of existence is more typical of Russia than of Anglo-American and Western European countries (Nartova 2004c; Essig 1999). However, the difference between Russia and other countries may be a matter of emphasis rather than a substantial one: the ‘coming out’ narrative, as represented in Western gay politics and popular culture, should not be confused with everyday practices. Indeed, research conducted in Britain has highlighted how self-management remains a pervasive feature of gay men and women’s lives, and that practical considerations are often placed ahead of ideals of authenticity in managing movement across space (particularly public space) (Taylor 2007, 2004; Moran and Skeggs 2004; Corteen 2002; Valentine 1993).

### ***Languages of disclosure***

The issues and strategies involved in negotiating one’s identity across urban space and personal relations may not differ all that much across national cultures. What seems to differ, however, are the language and rhetoric through which they are represented. In English-speaking countries ‘coming out’ and related expressions have become part of common parlance and, as Plummer notes, ‘coming out’ and ‘outness’ have become “the central narrative of positive gay experience” (Plummer 1995:84). Research conducted in Britain indicates that authenticity and visibility emerge as core positive values in the life narratives of LGBT individuals, even for those who find ‘outness’ problematic or unfeasible (because of limited access to ‘gay’ space and consumer culture, socio-economic and cultural capital, or peripheral geographic location) (Holt and Griffin 2003; Dunne, Prendergast and Telford 2002; Prendergast, Dunne, and Telford 2002; Taylor 2007).

The expression “coming out” has gained a certain currency in Russian LGBT media, either in transliteration [*kamin aut*], or in Russian translation *vykhodit’ iz chulana, iz podpol’ia*

[“to come out of the closet”, “to come out of the underground world”]<sup>112</sup>. The most popular gay and lesbian websites, for example, feature a section on ‘coming out’<sup>113</sup>. It is all the more interesting, therefore, to note that the expression, either in English or in its Russian equivalent, was seldom used, if at all, by interviewees<sup>114</sup>. A variety of other expressions were used to describe the process of self-awareness (*osoznat’ sebia, iskat’ sebia*; “to become aware of one’s self”; “to search for oneself”) and attitudes towards concealment and disclosure (*otkryvat’sia, skryvat’sia, neotrytaia, otkrovenno, raskryvat’sia* – “to open oneself”, “to hide”, “not open”, “openly”, “to open up”). When asked about their strategies and practices of self-management, however, a recurring expression used by interviewees was *ne afishiruiu* (“I don’t broadcast it”), or similar turns of phrase (*ne idu s plakatami, ne demonstriruem, ne sprovotsiruiu*; “I don’t go around with signs”, “We are not demonstrative”, “I don’t provoke”). Findings from this study support those of other research projects, which indicate that visibility and authenticity in themselves are seldom prized by Russian non-heterosexual women (Nartova 2004c; Zelenina 2006; Omel’chenko 2002b). More importance seems to be placed on managing one’s identity appropriately across different social contexts, associated with rules of propriety and risk-assessment, rather than on being ‘out’ (See also Nartova 2004c; Omel’chenko 2002b). However, the expression *ne afishirovat’* was not associated with complete concealment and secrecy, but rather with “appropriate” strategies of disclosure and concealment: “I don’t broadcast it and I don’t hide it” (*Ne afishiruiu i ne skryvaiu*, Ul’iana, Moscow), “I don’t broadcast it, but I hold my own” (*Ne afishiruiu, no derzhus’ tverdo*, Varvara, Moscow).

Nartova (2004c) argues that invisibility is, to a great extent, seen as enabling by the lesbian women she interviewed in St. Petersburg: “The condition for the existence of an unproblematic lesbian space is keeping its borders, supported through the non-representation of lesbianism [...] in other spheres [of one’s life]” (Nartova 2004c:4). The peculiarities of Russian women’s “language of disclosure” should not be sought only in institutionalised homophobia and heterosexism; as Nartova (2004c) argues, they also reflect different constructions of private and public spheres, which originated in Soviet modes of socialisation. Indeed, the Soviet state extended its control much deeper into its

<sup>112</sup> It is likely that the expression gained currency from the early 1990s, when Russia became increasingly more exposed to Western culture; neither Krombakh (1994) nor Kozlovskii (1986) mention it in their work on gay slang.

<sup>113</sup> See [http://www.gay.ru/society/coming\\_out/](http://www.gay.ru/society/coming_out/) and <http://www.lesbiru.com/comingout/index.html>, 8.1.2007.

<sup>114</sup> The expression *sovershit’ kaming aut* was used by a single respondent, who is a psychologist by profession (Nadia, Moscow); the Russian equivalent *vykhodit’ iz podpol’ia* was never used,

citizens' everyday lives than in Western liberal societies, a fact that shaped the boundaries of private/public and their daily negotiations:

[...] new means of self-fashioning also developed, characteristic of this informal sphere. The first development was the spread of individual dissimulation, the practice protecting the individual from any interference, which resulted in the creation of a secret sphere of intimate life, available to the gaze of the closest friends and family members, but sometimes kept secret even from them. This proliferation of secret, intimate spheres, created and controlled by the individual, prepared the way to the easy public assertion of the value of privacy after 1991. We must not forget, however, that *the sphere of Soviet privacy originated in dissimulation, unlike its Western counterpart*<sup>115</sup> (Kharkhordin 1999:357).

The fact that authenticity and visibility may not be as prominent in Russian women's narratives is likely to reflect different understandings of privacy, and of the public and private spheres. Practices of self-management are not necessarily seen as problematic, and may not always be the evidence of internalised shame and guilt. While no doubt this strategy involves, to some degree, compartmentalising different aspects of one's life, it is 'playing by the rules', and maintaining a degree of ambiguity about their identity, that allows women to protect their intimate life. For this reason, indictments to 'come out of the closet', based on the notion of visibility as empowering, may ring hollow to Russian non-heterosexual women.

### ***The global closet?***

Findings from this study tie in with those of other research projects on non-Western sexualities (Manalansan 1997, Manalansan 2002; Johnson 1998; Elliston 2002; Boellstorff 1999:496, quoted in Binnie 2004:79) This literature has crucially highlighted the cultural specificity of the 'coming out' narrative, showing how visibility in itself may not be prized and strategies of self-management may involve separating, rather than integrating, different domains of one's life. This is a point worth stressing, since the closet has been theorised as a global form of oppression, and claims to recognition and visibility have been placed at the core of the global politics of LGBT emancipation (Malanansan 1997). This model, however, seems to be largely based on the blueprint of Western-style politics; it often fails to account for cultural differences, and the fact that homophobia and heterosexism come in many shapes and forms. As Binnie (2004) has noted, blanket strategies may unwittingly result in the "globalisation of homophobia", rather than in the emancipation of non-

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although the adjective *podpol'nyi* (hidden, underground) was used with reference to Soviet gay and lesbian networks and to celebrations of same-sex weddings (Tania, Moscow; Sveta, Ul'ianovsk).

heterosexual individuals. This approach also implicitly posits 'the West' as the model of progressive social change in the field of sexual politics. In doing so, it positions non-heterosexuals outside the West as non-liberated, 'pre-modern' subjects, still confined to the repressive depths of the closet, and reinforces the image of a split between a 'progressive' and democratic West and a 'developing' but still repressive 'East' (Binnie 2004).

However, it should also be stressed that the difference between Russia and Anglo-American/Western societies may be a matter of emphasis rather than a substantial one. For example, the centrality of the 'coming out' narrative has also been questioned by research conducted in Britain. Some of the literature has highlighted how self-management is a pervasive feature of non-heterosexual individuals' lives (Valentine 1993; Moran and Skeggs 2004), and how they have long taken responsibility for their own safety and security. While in the past this happened in a context of state hostility and institutional prejudice, more recently practices of self-management are framed within a more inclusive policies and discourses of 'responsible citizenship' (Moran and Skeggs 2004).

Queer theory has problematised previous conceptualisations of the 'coming out' experience, which posited it either as a one-off, 'discrete' event, or as a linear experience, developing through self-awareness and contact with other gay people and culminating in disclosure to others (ref: Seidman, Meeks and Treschen 1999; Rust 1993). Coming out has been re-conceptualised as a lifelong process, in which one's identity has to be negotiated on a daily basis in different and new contexts, and may not always be visible. (Floyd and Stein 2002; Seidman, Meeks and Traschen 1999) Recent literature has also emphasised how 'queer' visibility is mostly confined to specific locations, and particularly urban ones. Much of the early research about homosexualities has focused on very visible expressions of community, notably the commercial scene and 'gay' neighbourhoods. Literature within gay and lesbian/queer studies has traditionally represented queer communities as offering a safe space to 'come out', emphasising the new opportunities arising within these communities for 'life experiments', as well as the importance of individual agency in shaping people's alternative lifestyles (Holt and Griffin 2003; Moran and Skeggs 2004; Valentine and Skelton 2003). A common trope in popular and scholarly literature has been that of queer migration - to a bigger city, to a gay-friendly neighbourhood, to an established gay community, to a 'family of choice' -, where 'home' is a destination and a place of identity affirmation, rather than an origin:

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<sup>115</sup> The emphasis is mine.

[...] most of us are born and/or socialised into (presumably) heterosexual families. We have to move away from them, at least to some degree; and *into*, if we are lucky, the culture of a minority community. "Home is the place you get to, not the place you come from" [...] (Sinfield 2000:103, quoted in Fortier 2001:409).

However, in emphasising the importance of movement across space (whether physical or virtual) and visibility, such discourse often fails to acknowledge that these are not merely a matter of personal choice, but they are inextricably linked to geographic location, class position, socio-cultural capital and financial resources. Visibility and the public avowal of identity may be commodities that not everyone can afford, and they may be more central to the experience of those who have greater access and entitlement to 'queer' space. For example, in her research on British working-class lesbians, Taylor (2007) suggests that coming out is a "class act", since it is easier in spaces, such as universities and the commercial scene, to which working-class women have limited access. She also argues that supposedly desirable 'gay friendly' neighbourhoods and the gay scene may engender dis-identifications in lesbian women who are 'othered' because of their class background, and who feel a stronger attachment to their working-class neighbourhoods (Taylor 2007). By making visible communities the cornerstone of 'gay lives', 'queer' subjectivities are posited as an urban and 'cosmopolitan' phenomenon; non-heterosexuals living in small towns, working-class neighbourhoods or rural areas can only become fully 'gay' by gravitating towards, or absorbing, cosmopolitan gay culture (Knopp and Brown 2003; Taylor 2007). The 'coming out' narrative is not always empowering or liberating; in some instances, it creates a distance between 'out' and 'closeted' non-heterosexuals, where the latter are more or less implicitly represented as repressed individuals who have internalised the homophobia which is said to be typical of their surroundings (Seidman, Meeks and Traschen 1999:10).

It is not my intention to belittle the importance of the closet as a structural mechanism of social control, which operates by making invisible and misrecognising 'other' sexualities, and perpetuating heteronormativity. As outlined in Chapter Three, the symbolic presence of 'other' sexualities in Russian public space and political arena is still precarious and conditional, perhaps unlike in other societies where this public presence has gained a degree of societal and institutional support (see for example McGhee 2004). However, there is, in my view, a real need to reappraise the 'closet/coming out' paradigm. Indeed the celebration of gay visibility tends to erase from the picture gender, ethnic and class difference, and mask issues around access, cultural diversity, inequality and exclusion. This poses serious questions about the subjects that LGBT politics aim to represent (Taylor

2004; Fraser 1999). Moreover, the extent to which visibility alone can undermine heterosexism and homophobia is disputed (Seidman etc 1999:10; Taylor 2004; Binnie 2004). Coming out and 'outness' are not necessarily empowering acts; their subversive potential may be conditional on space and place. Rather than being conceptualised only as a metaphor of oppression and symbolic erasure, the closet can be seen as "a site of accommodation and resistance which both reproduces and contests aspects of a society organised around normative heterosexuality" (Seidman, Meeks and Treschen 1999:10).

## Conclusions

The discussion of women's negotiation of the home, the workplace and the street, conducted over Chapters Five and Six, has highlighted how 'private' and 'public' are experienced as blurred in women's movement across urban space. The wider neighbourhood may have a role in revealing details of women's intimate lives to family members, and extend its reach into the parental home. The workplace is experienced as a formal environment, but also as one where women forge personal relations and friendships. The public street may be dangerous, anonymous or welcoming, depending on whether it becomes a site of violence and intimidation, a setting where one's sexuality goes unnoticed, or a gathering place for the 'lesbian/queer' *tusovka*.

By disrupting normative gender relations and performances, lesbian visibility entails risks of exposure, and repercussions ranging from emotional discomfort to withdrawal of family support, from unfair treatment at work to verbal and physical violence. For this reason, 'lesbian/queer' identities are performed using different degrees of openness, and often setting very definite boundaries in personal relations. However, women's strategies of identity management are not driven only by an instinctive perception of a certain space as 'private' or 'public'. Indeed, privacy may be hard to come by both in private and in public settings; risks of exposure may be higher in private spaces than in anonymous cityscapes. Privacy and anonymity may also have different values and meanings across metropolitan and provincial cities. Particularly in Ul'ianovsk, where the threat of *gopniki*'s aggression was a pervasive narrative and where rumours were likely to spread quickly to family members and work colleagues, women displayed caution in negotiating the street, for example by avoiding certain environments and refraining from overt sexualised behaviour. Paradoxically, while it was precisely the presence of other lesbians/queers that may 'give



away' women in open public spaces, the street was also claimed as a comfortable space of belonging by some street *tusovki*.

As Valentine (1993) points out, lesbian women's identity negotiations are conducted according to complex personal maps of time and space. Visibility was not always perceived as empowering, while women seemed to gain a sense of control over their everyday transactions by constantly drifting in and out of public visibility. Women's navigation strategies across urban space seem to be driven first and foremost by notions of respectability, comfort and safety. Self-management was seen as a way to 'fit in' rather than 'stand out', and of claiming a respectable identity. While aware of the possible risks involved in becoming visible as 'lesbian/queer', women emphasised their agency and personal responsibility in avoiding unpleasant situations.

Findings from this study support the point, expressed elsewhere, about the need to reassess and reconceptualise the 'closet/coming out' paradigm. This dual concept offers valuable insights into how the construction of space as private/public is used to uphold heteronormativity. However, its strong reliance on binary oppositions between private/public, invisibility/visibility and 'closetedness/outness' make it sometimes inadequate to account for the complex nuances of the interaction between structural constraints to identity expression, individual agency and the peculiarities of specific spaces and places.

The last section of this chapter has highlighted the culturally specific character of the 'coming out' narrative, which uneasily translates into Russian and is not at all prominent in the language women use to narrate their experiences. The 'closet/coming out' paradigm seems especially inadequate to analyse women's time/space navigations, not just in the Russian context, but in Anglo-American/Western societies as well. Existing literature on the 'global closet' and on 'closet space' (Brown 2000:117) have rightly emphasised the link between capital, globalisation and visible urban 'queer' space. However, 'the closet' and 'coming out' are value-laden terms: the former is imagined as negative space of invisibility, repression and concealment; the latter as an empowering and liberating act, bringing visibility and recognition. While visibility and outness are not necessarily paramount to individual decision about disclosure, a more nuanced reading of 'closet space' should also account for non-heterosexual individuals' multiple identities and their complex loyalties to, and uses of, urban space.

## Chapter 7

# The construction and meaning of 'lesbian/queer' space

## Introduction

Much of the existing literature has emphasised the central role of the gay scene, understood as a loosely intertwined cluster of commercial venues and community organisations, in the experience of non-heterosexual individuals. Indeed, the 'scene', 'community' and 'coming out' are concepts that are often closely linked in the literature, where frequentation of scene space is considered crucial to the formation of a positive 'queer' identity (Floyd and Stein 2002; Markowe 1996; Plummer 1995):

A central narrative form in the construction of lesbian identity, *the coming out story describe an individual's journeying towards an imagined community*. This narrativized journey invokes the historical migration of lesbians and gay men towards urban centres (Munt, Bassett and O'Riordan 2002: 127)<sup>116</sup>.

Munt, Bassett and O'Riordan highlight three important features of the 'coming out' narrative, as it is understood in Western, and particularly Anglo-American societies. First, scene space, be it physical (the commercial scene, community organisations) or virtual (LGBT community websites, chats and dating services, see Munt, Bassett and O'Riordan 2002), is considered crucial for the construction of one's 'lesbian/queer' identity. Not only does the scene provide a safe environment for exploration and self-discovery of one's sexuality, and a space to meet potential partners; since sexual identities are social and relational, the scene is important to provide acknowledgement and validation of one's identity, an acknowledgement which may not be readily available in other settings, such as

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<sup>116</sup> The emphasis is mine.

the parental home and the workplace. Secondly, in the literature scene space is typically associated with urban *cosmopolitan* space, and in particular with Western metropolitan areas with visible gay leisure districts and residential areas. Research has highlighted the appeal that cosmopolitan cities, as hubs of gay/lesbian consumer culture, exert over 'queers' living in marginal geographic locations, where they are often closeted and isolated from others like themselves (Weston 1991; Binnie 2004; Fortier 2001; Manalansan 2006). Thirdly, notions of 'scene' space and community are typically very closely linked or equated; indeed, scene space is imagined as a site of authenticity and belonging, as well as a place of solidarity, where communities can be forged (Skeggs 1999, 2001; Holt and Griffin 2003; Valentine 1993, 1995). Some literature, however, has been critical of the 'scene-as-community' narrative, which remains dominant in gay and lesbian/queer studies (Barrett and Pollack 2005; Taylor 2007; Holt and Griffin 2003). At the individual level, research has highlighted how many 'queers' are marginalized or disengaged from the scene. At the collective level, it has been noted that both commercial venues and community organisations are usually dominated by white, middle-class, educated people; while claiming to represent all 'queers', 'community' has increasingly become associated with the interests of a restricted constituency.

Taking on board these critiques, this chapter questions the equation 'scene-as-community' by exploring the construction of 'lesbian/queer' space as both a space of inclusion and exclusion. For this reason, the chapter relies on the notions of 'lesbian/queer' spaces, networks and *tusovki*, rather than making reference to more abstract notions of community (see Chapter One). This also reflects women's accounts of participation in 'queer' space and my experience in the field. Among Moscow participants, 'community' emerged as a fragmented and contested notion, a finding corroborated by Zelenina's study (2006). Activists and volunteers pointed to the fragmented and divided nature of the lesbian/LGBT community, while most women who frequented 'queer' space as users were usually more familiar with a specific network, leisure space or initiative. In Ul'ianovsk, a city with no institutionalised 'scene', women usually talked about their personal networks and about the local *tusovka*, rarely referring to the notion of 'community' at all<sup>117</sup>. For this reason, in this study 'lesbian/queer' space is conceptualised more broadly than scene space: unlike in Moscow, in provincial Ul'ianovsk, non-heterosexual women gathered in locations that were only temporarily and unobtrusively occupied and constructed as 'lesbian/queer'. Like

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<sup>117</sup> In Ul'ianovsk, only those who were particularly invested in the local lesbian network and also had access to particular sources of information, such as national and international LGBT websites, engaged with the notion of community. In both cities, the women who engaged more marginally with 'lesbian/queer' spaces and networks usually had limited knowledge of 'what was going on' at the local, national and international level.

other studies focusing on non-metropolitan locations, this study aims to problematise the cosmopolitan bias implicit in much of the literature on gay/queer space (Kirtsoglou 2004; Moran and Skeggs 2004; stuff on rural gays; Knopp and Brown 2003).

The chapter explores individuals' experiences of 'lesbian/queer' space, and the meanings associated with it, as well as the ways in which 'lesbian/queer' space is constructed through collective agency. The first section examines women's motivations for accessing 'lesbian/queer' space and their uses of it. It stresses the relational and performative aspects of sexual identities by juxtaposing women's experiences of (predominantly) heterosexual and 'lesbian/queer' social networks. It also discusses issues around access in the different urban contexts of metropolitan Moscow and provincial Ul'ianovsk. The second section maps 'lesbian/queer' space in both Moscow and Ul'ianovsk; it discusses the geographic locations where 'lesbian/queer' networks socialise. It also outlines the ways in which 'lesbian' space is carved out in the urban landscape, highlighting both similarities and differences between Moscow and Ul'ianovsk. The third and final section looks at 'lesbian/queer' *tusovki* as sites of social relations, highlighting the importance of age, class and cultural capital in the construction of specific 'lesbian/queer' spaces. It discusses the role of collective agency in the construction of 'lesbian/queer' space: the latter is experienced as a site of belonging and connectedness, but also as a site of disengagement and exclusion.

## **Friends and lovers: peers, social networks and sexual identifications**

Interviewees' socialising was rarely limited to 'lesbian' space: most of them were involved in other social circles, based around the workplace, interest groups and previously established social networks (see also Zelenina 2006). Personal networks included friends of different sexual orientation; however, at the level of *tusovki* 'lesbian/queer' and heterosexual social circles were unlikely to intersect. Individual heterosexual friends sometimes socialised in 'lesbian/queer' *tusovki*; however, the latter were firmly constructed and perceived as 'lesbian' or *temnyi*<sup>118</sup>. This division reflects the importance of

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<sup>118</sup> The interaction between queer circles and heterosexual friends was explored to some extent during fieldwork, particularly in Ul'ianovsk, where it became clear from my own explorations of local queer networks that a number of non-queer identified women interacted with the local *tusovka*. The fact that it was heterosexual individuals, rather than wider social circles, that interacted with the *tusovka*, was pointed out by several respondents. For an account of the rationale beyond the selection of respondents, and of the reason not to explore the theme of heterosexual use of queer space, see Chapter Two.

peer groups in reinforcing and policing sexual and gender norms, particularly during adolescence, a pattern highlighted in other research. In her longitudinal study on homophobia in Ul'ianovsk, Omel'chenko (2002a, 2002b) argues that, even in the context of greater awareness and more tolerant attitudes towards homosexuality, particularly among 'progressive' youth [*neformaly*], mechanisms of exclusion and marginalisation towards gay and lesbian young people still operated in peer groups. Research conducted in Britain has also highlighted the important role of peer groups in buttressing and perpetuating heteronormativity (Duncan 1999; Taylor 2007)<sup>119</sup>.

### ***Marginalisation and acceptance among peers***

Findings from this study also suggest that, particularly for younger women, mechanisms of marginalisation often operated in peer groups. Higher awareness and more tolerant attitudes among young people do not always neutralise deep-seated fear of 'otherness' and the prejudices surrounding it, which are bound up with notions of 'proper' gender and sexual roles. Indeed, particularly for younger women, 'coming out' to a close friend was a 'friendship test' of a kind, which may lead to becoming closer or drifting apart. None of the respondents was ostracised or bullied by friends when disclosing their attraction to women; however, not all friends were supportive and accepting:

My friends know who I am, what relationships I have. I have friends from school, with whom I am still in touch. With short intervals, and on the background of different family relations. We were hanging out together when I met my first girlfriend, at the time the four of us met up. My girlfriend and I, and my two [*female*] friends. They knew everything about us. And although for one of them this was all cool [*zabavno*], the other one really didn't approve, she used to say that we had to stop it immediately. That this is horrible, wrong and uninteresting. We are still in touch. But our friendship took a different form... She knows about my relationships, she knows that I have a girlfriend, and she knew both Valia and Nastia [*two ex girlfriends*]. So. The same as my other friend. With one of them we became closer, with the other we drifted apart. But they have been very good friends since school, they are friends. They accept me the way I am. And they don't try to interfere in any relations. Because all this was discussed time and again already from our time at school - the reasons, the consequences, the fact that I may have an unhappy life, that kind of thing. Now they accept me the way I am. Yes, I don't have a husband. Yes, I don't have a child. Perhaps, not yet. But I haven't become a depraved person, an emotional cripple. I am happy, calm, satisfied. And warm [*emotsional'na*]. And I am their friend. And perhaps, they even envy me a bit,

<sup>119</sup> In his research on sexual bullying in British secondary schools, Duncan (1999) frames homophobic bullying within a broader school culture in which conflict among pupils is managed through the use of sexualised words and abuse, such as 'slag', 'bitch' and 'gay'. Interestingly, 'gay' was not used to refer to a pupil's sexual orientation, but to put down male peers who did not comply to 'laddish' standards of masculinity.

because they are bogged down in routine [*byt pogloshchaet*] [Varvara, Moscow].

Reactions from friends and peers to women's disclosure of their sexuality were mixed. Some peers reacted with sensitivity and understanding, often reinforcing young women's sense of personal worth during a period in which they were exploring their sexuality. Others seemed to find homosexuality alien, shocking, offensive or inherently 'wrong', and reiterated common stereotypes on lesbianism. As Varvara's experience suggests, negative or puzzled reactions among peers, particularly among female friends, echoed quite closely those of family members described in Chapter Five.

Disappointing reactions often led to a rift in relationships. In some cases, old friends just drifted apart; in others, things were eventually smoothed out, although some degree of discomfort and emotional distance may remain. Some young women still felt welcome in their old social circles, although their friends would not go as far as making their girlfriends feel included; others felt uneasy talking about their lesbian relationships, as this was met with uncomfortable or disapproving reactions. In the long term, close friends were considered individuals who made no big deal of women's sexual orientation, and who were able to relate to their relationships on the same level. Galia recalled how sharing her feelings about her first same-sex relationship was not difficult:

I moved to Perm' to study at the polytechnic [*tekhnikum*], I fell for this girl and wrote to my friend who remained in Chel'iabinsk, we used to be in the same class and we've been friends for a long time. She replied to my letters and wrote about her feelings for a boy, and after many years she gave me the pile of the letter I had sent her, and I gave her hers. And, after having read both piles, I was astounded by how similarly we wrote about love – she was writing about her love for a boy, and I was writing about my love for a girl, but there were no differences. She wasn't surprised that I loved a girl, and I wasn't surprised she loved a boy, we just shared our feelings and sensations [Galia, Moscow].

Peers' reactions emerged as a sensitive issue for young women, who were exploring and coming to terms with their sexuality; however, interviews also suggest that, after one's sexual identity had been more securely established, it was easier to negotiate friendships and social networks<sup>120</sup>. Close and trusted friends didn't have an issue with homosexuality; new acquaintances who expressed negative views on same-sex relations, or were somehow judgemental about it, were generally kept at some distance:

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<sup>120</sup> Young women were generally more likely to raise the issue of peers' and friends' reactions, although some women dealt with similar issues later in life, particularly if they got involved in same-sex relations at a more mature age.

I could not befriend a girl who said she saw two men kissing and this was disgusting for her [Ol'ga, Moscow].

All of my friends know, I am surrounded by people I trust. If someone has a negative attitude to this [*homosexuality*], I don't particularly befriend them. They're acquaintances, I don't let them close to me [Maia, Ul'ianovsk].

Varying degrees of openness with friends and peers, however, seemed to characterise different generations. For older women, sexuality generally seemed to remain an 'open secret' among friends and peers: while the nature of their relationships and desires was usually left unspoken, friends also seemed reluctant to broach the subject:

I have many heterosexual friends who guessed [*the nature of her relationship with another woman*], but I hang out only with those who could understand this. No one asked me about it [Raissa, Moscow].

I don't tell them especially, there is no need to do it. If people understand themselves, then I answer. Well, they seldom ask me. [Katia, Moscow].

Younger interviewees were more likely to have talked about their attraction for women to peers and friends during the early stages of exploration and questioning of their sexuality. Greater openness in dealing with disclosure and sexual diversity are likely to reflect 'new' discourses on sexuality in Russia, outlined in Chapter Three. While pressures to conform and mechanisms of marginalisation may operate differently for the younger generations, nonetheless a 'healthy' sexual and emotional development seems to be still implicitly linked to heterosexuality even for the younger generations (see Chapter Five; see also Omel'chenko 2002a, 2002b).

### ***Socialising in 'lesbian/queer' space***

The women who took part in this study accessed 'lesbian/queer' *tusovki* at different stages of their lives, and carrying different baggage in terms of previous experiences of sexual relations and friendships with other 'queers'. Young women, who were beginning to explore their sexuality, as well as more mature experienced women, were drawn to 'lesbian/queer' spaces. Moreover, not all interviewees had the same degree of investment in 'queer' spaces and networks. Some women were only very marginally involved in the lesbian *tusovki*; for others, after a period of intense involvement in 'lesbian/queer' circles, in the long term their interest waned, and frequentation became more sporadic. Even those who had made a very personal investment in 'lesbian/queer' networks may eventually

disengage with them, as the *tusovki* themselves changed and the pressure of other commitments became greater.

Interviewees approached 'queer space' with different preconceptions and expectations; 'lesbian' *tusovki* were mainly seen as offering opportunities for socialising and meeting potential partners, as well as providing information and support:

I like having the possibility to go somewhere and meet girls I know and girls I don't know. Clubs, organisations... I like this idea, it's great, it's amazing. I lived for quite a long time in a vacuum, not knowing anyone. At the time [*when she first started going out on the scene*] it was very interesting for me. It was interesting then; and it is interesting now. Now I appreciate the possibility of meeting and interacting with people; then it was the opportunity to get some information and to meet people. I think it's great. [Varvara, Moscow]

I am in favour of these initiatives [*the monthly gay and lesbian club nights in Ul'ianovsk*] for one simple reason, that for gay people it is more difficult to find a partner than for straights. So, if people try to pair up gay people, that's great. We are human beings too, we also want happiness, love, and normal serious relationships [Ania, Ul'ianovsk].

Having the possibility to meet potential partners was high on the list of motivations that brought women in contact with local 'lesbian/queer' *tusovki*. Other social circles offered much more limited opportunities to find a girlfriend; moreover, in other everyday contexts, where the meaning of certain gestures was potentially more ambiguous or perceived as threatening, making a pass at a woman may be an awkward experience. Romance, affairs and endless talk and gossip about friends and acquaintances' romantic and sexual interests were a big part of the day-to-day life of the *tusovki*. Indeed, the topics of lesbian love and sex formed a common narrative structure, possibly also because they were less likely to be openly discussed in other contexts. The importance of sexual activity as the 'hinge' of group interaction should not be overemphasised, since sexual relations are part and parcel of any *tusovka*. However, the perception of sex as the main focus of social interaction in 'lesbian' space was offputting for some:

People get together because they have common interests. There are people who love a particular kind of music: why not get together? It's just that it's not very pleasant when the only common interest is sex, I mean, people are not that interested in getting together, but they can meet someone, they're not interested in the idea. The girls [*the organisers of the discussion groups at the LGBT organisation Ia+Ia*] are great, they do it all for free, and they do it for the sake of an idea. But many of those who go there don't understand, they take it as yet another opportunity to meet someone and start an affair [*zakrutit' liubov'*] [N. 5 pilot, Moscow].



Both in Moscow and in Ul'ianovsk, 'lesbian/queer' *tusovki* were sometimes associated with a hypersexualised environment, where the emphasis was on 'hunting' for a partner, or on casual sex, rather than on genuine interaction. This environment seemed particularly intimidating for young women, and was perceived as predatory and threatening by those engaged in long-term relationships.

While some women showed a passing interest in 'lesbian/queer' space, others were very invested in the *tusovki*; for them, the very opportunity of talking to, getting to know and socialising with other like-minded women was valued in itself. Like Varvara, many women emphasised that they enjoyed socialising in 'lesbian/queer' space because they met people with whom they found a common language and a genuine connection. As previous literature on Russian youth subcultures has outlined, the very concept of *obshchenie*, i.e. interaction, communication, getting together, is crucial to the notion of *tusovka*<sup>121</sup>. Indeed, embodied communication was central to women's narratives of lesbian *tusovki*'s practices and patterns of socialising. A woman in her late twenties who used to be very involved in the Ul'ianovsk *tusovka* thus described its interaction:

*What did you do with your tusovka?*

We had a laugh. Had a chat. Just met up. Found new friends, made new discoveries. There is a magazine called *Ostrov* [*a Moscow-based, non-profit lesbian magazine*], when Sveta was here [...] those who wanted to could order it through her. She distributed it [Zheniia, Ul'ianovsk].

More importantly, 'lesbian/queer' space was seen as offering a comfortable and safe space to explore and express one's sexuality, an option which was not available in other 'everyday' contexts (see Chapters Five and Six). Viktoriia, a young woman from Ul'ianovsk, emphasised how, for many local 'queers', going to the first gay and lesbian club nights had been a liberating experience:

I just remember one of our first club nights, it was simply a masterpiece, because before us no one did anything of this kind, and suddenly everyone gathered, got together, and everyone relaxed; because there's no one [*else*], and you don't need to play any role, many people hide it [*their sexual orientation*], but here you didn't need to hide anything. And it was so comfortable, I don't know, it was a good atmosphere, and there was an emotional and energetic enthusiasm/uplifting, there was such a union [Viktoriia, Ul'ianovsk.].

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<sup>121</sup> In her work on Moscow youth subcultures, Pilkington (1994) underlines the centrality of embodied communication [*obshchenie*] in the construction and practices of various youth *tusovki*, and uses the concept of embodied communication as a framework for analysis.

As the quote illustrates, 'lesbian/queer' space offers recognition and validation of individuals' non-heteronormative sexual identities; within it, same-sex attraction can be safely acted upon, talked about and made visible. Other research has shown how self-expression, communication and interaction are, for many queer-identified individuals, central to the experience of socialising on the scene (Holt and Griffin 2003; Moran and Skeggs 2004; Valentine and Skelton 2003; on Russia, see Nartova 2004c; 1999). Among women involved in this study, embodied communication also emerged as central to their perception of the *tusovki* as a space of belonging.

Particularly for women who had previously had little or no contact with other 'queers', the *tusovki* also provided an important learning space. Interaction in 'lesbian' space also provided a degree of emotional support to those who had been isolated, or had found it difficult to come to terms with their sexuality:

My first thought [*when she first went out on the tema*] was that finally I had met people I wanted to mix with, people who were close to me in spirit. Because I had absolutely no one I could tell, and I could not find people I could share this with [Alina, Ul'ianovsk].

It also allowed women to share their experiences of intimate relationships and offered an insight into other women's lives. 'Lesbian/queer' space seemed to have a special role not only for young women, who were 'coming out' and exploring their sexuality, but also for women who already had a significant experience of involvement in same-sex relations. Marina, an older woman who had become involved in women in her mid-thirties, after a series of heterosexual relations, thus explains her reasons for 'checking out' the Moscow club scene:

When I started having relationships with women, since I have an inquisitive nature, I've already said that I am interested in the dynamics of personal relationships, I was interested in knowing what kind of people they are, how they see themselves, what they do, how they live. And in general, I wanted to observe this community [*soobshchestvo*], and figure out what kind of people they are. Look at what types [*of 'queer' women*] there are. So I asked a friend to take me to a club [Marina, Moscow].

Compared to other social circles, the distinct function and value of 'lesbian/queer' space seemed to lie, for many interviewees, in providing an alternative framework of reference, where non-heteronormative sexual identities can be observed, rehearsed, and appropriated, or dismissed. It should be pointed out that 'lesbian/queer' space often engendered conditional and partial identifications; for some women, frequentation of 'lesbian/queer' space was sporadic or represented a transitory phase. For those who did not find reasons

and motivations to invest in 'lesbian/queer' networks, did not attach particular importance to the frequentation of the *tusovki*. For example, in spite of her exploration of the scene, Marina ultimately distanced herself from other 'queer/lesbian' women; throughout the interview, she does so by referring to them as "they", rather than "us". Nonetheless, 'lesbian/queer' space remained for most a reference point in the (re)negotiation of their sexual identity. Different aspects of non-heteronormative sexual identities and relationships were explored through interaction in 'lesbian/queer space', including specific cultural codes, 'rules of attraction', non-heteronormative gender roles, and a vocabulary to talk about them. Sasha considered her first visit to a 'queer' venue very meaningful:

I remember the first time. I was in a *temnyi* club for the first time, and I saw butch and dykes [*buchi i daiki*] around [...] For me, that was some kind of revelation [*perevorot v soznanii*]. I mean, all my life I was told, "Why are you so unfeminine [*nezhenstvennaia*]?" And everyone tried to make a nice girl of me, beginning from my mum and ending with my fiancé. High heels, skirts, make-up. [...] And I went there [...] and I keep staring and staring. A girl had men's boots and socks. And those boots... I still remember them. They made such an impression on me! I thought, I thought, can it be! They look the same in real life; it's impossible that they, well, they came to a club and wore a mask, and then on the way out they took it off, and became girlie girls... Well, this is just not possible. The next day, I go to a shop [...] I look around, a girl is paying at the till, and a boy is waiting for her on a chair. [...] Then I leave, and they're walking ahead of me. And I see that it's two girls. And then I understood that I just didn't notice earlier what was going on around me. [Sasha, Moscow]

Sasha's visit to the club alerted her to new possibilities, in terms of gender-bending looks and styles; these subverted taken-for-granted notions of 'proper' femininity she had learned from her family and boyfriend; it also made her aware of the presence of same-sex couples, who had previously been invisible to her, in settings other than 'queer' venues. For Sasha, socialising with other young 'queer' women was an important step towards redefining her own gender and sexual identity. Interaction in 'lesbian/queer' *tusovki* could also provide models to successfully negotiate intimate relationships, engendering identifications with notions of family not grounded in blood ties. Vera, a young woman from Moscow who had always felt uncomfortable with the idea of same-sex couples having children, gradually came to accept it by socialising with lesbian mothers:

It wasn't long ago; my girlfriend said, let's go [*to a lesbian gathering*]. I felt that I wanted new social interaction [*novogo, svezhego obshcheniia*]. So we went along. And not even for the sake of meeting these people. I thought: there's grown up people, who have seen life, who have children, perhaps they... [...] And little by little I came to the conclusion that you can live with your girlfriend and have kids. The most important thing is love, that your

children are loved. It's still an open question [...]. I met older women, who have children and this gave me a lot. [Vera, Moscow]

Social interaction in 'queer/lesbian' space emerged as a resource many women tapped into in shaping their identity. While being able to relate their experiences to a broader frame of reference, they also actively engaged with shared meanings and cultural codes. This highlights the performative and relational character of sexual identifications, and the important role of 'lesbian/queer' *tusovki* as an enabling space for the exploration and affirmation of one's sexual identity (Butler 1990/1999; Jenkins 2004).

### ***Cultural practices and the construction of 'lesbian/queer' space***

Group interaction crucially revolved not just around a shared sexuality, but also around particular cultural practices. These were, to some extent, specific to particular *tusovki*, and providing an account of all of them is beyond the scope of the present study. An illustration of the ways in which specific practices are instrumental in constructing a given space as 'lesbian' is the appropriation and use of a particular kind of music, perceived to have a 'lesbian' sensibility, by young women's networks, both in the capital and in Ul'ianovsk:

*Do you have any cult music in your circle?*

Of course. Diana Arbenina, Surganova, Zemfira, among others, I don't know them all, well, Mara and Butch as well. [...] I really like Mara, for example, it's very energetic music, music it's great to get up to, even if you didn't sleep much at night – it's still great to get up to it.

*Do you listen to them especially because they are, in a way, temnye?*

First of all, I like the music, secondly, it's something to talk about, because in the circle of friends I hang out with everyone listens to this music. For example, when a new album is released, we listen to it and then discuss it, whether we liked it or not; when we meet we listen to this music all together. There is music I listen to that is not *tematicheskaya*, but I listen to this more often. [Nastia, Moscow].

It just turns out that people who are in the *tema* [*v teme*] have some kind of interests, they don't just sit around and drink beer. They don't bother you [*ni k komu ne lezut*], with them you can talk about serious things. Of course among straights [*naturalov*] you'll find people like that, but they think a bit differently, they have different aspirations.

*What common interests do you have in your circle?*

Well, it just happens to be like this. Even music, it matches [*nastol'ko sovpadaet*]. What we have in common – it's our [*sexual*] orientation, and secondly we listen to almost the same music, Zemfira, Nochnye Snaipery, Radiohead, Placebo. [Maia, Ul'ianovsk].

Both Nastia's and Maia's experiences indicate that listening to a particular kind of music had a particular relevance and meaning in the interaction of the *tusovka*. The appropriation of some female rock artists as 'lesbian' is likely to reflect, to some extent, discourses in the mainstream and gay and lesbian press, keen to speculate on the lesbian *kudos* of some musicians (see Chapter Three). It is interesting to note that, although 'lesbian rock' was mostly popular among young women, older respondents were also aware of their 'cult' status among lesbians<sup>122</sup>. However, many women rejected the notion of 'lesbian' music, or 'lesbian' culture: they were quick to point out that appreciation for a specific music genre was largely a matter of personal taste, or stressed the fact that some 'lesbian' artists, such as Zemfira and Nochnye Snaipery, were simply hugely popular among young mainstream audiences. Moreover, at least in the Ul'ianovsk *tusovka*, a particular appreciation for representatives of so-called 'lesbian' rock has to be framed within a broader interest in rock music, both Russian and not: Maia, for example, includes British rock bands Placebo and Radiohead among the musicians popular with the *tusovka*. The centrality of a certain kind of music to the life of youth *tusovki* does not mean that everyone could relate to it, or even liked it:

*You say that it was interesting hanging out with these people, do you have common interests?*

Not with everyone, I have less contact, especially with some girls, I get on ok with them, I would say even well, but there are some interests... Some of our interests are different, music, for example, they like heavy [*sil'naia*] music, and I can't talk to them on this topic, because I am not that keen.

*What music do they listen to?*

Surganova, Mara, Nochnye Snaipery, that kind. They go to concerts, I listen to some music, but I am not so keen that I would go and buy a new album, listen to it, and share my impressions [Al'bina, Ul'ianovsk].

Nonetheless, 'lesbian' music emerged as part of a distinctive cultural code that circulated as common currency in the *tusovki* – at once a topic for conversation, a social glue and a

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<sup>122</sup> While among the younger *tusovki* rock was very popular, in more mature circles it was acoustic folk music [*bardovskaia pesnia*] which had a 'cult' status.

focus of common leisure activity. Moreover, socialising in the *tusovka* involved exchanging music as well as opinions on it, and attending events such as concerts and music festivals. During my fieldwork in Moscow in 2004, details about an upcoming Butch concert were exchanged among young lesbians at the Gay and Lesbian Archive and via mobile phone; a large group of women (including myself) arranged to go to the venue together, and the concert crowd seemed to be prevalently lesbian. In U'ianovsk, several women recalled how “our entire lesbi crowd” [Viktoriiia, Ul'ianovsk] had attended a concert by Sveta Sarganova and her band in 2004. Artists such as Zemfira were sometimes mentioned as inspirational models for amateur bands and songwriters performing at local ‘lesbian’ festivals<sup>123</sup>. Together with other cultural practices, such as exchanging copies of the lesbian magazine *Ostrov*, ‘lesbian’ music emerged as part of a cultural code that, to use Butler’s terminology, performatively produces and reiterates lesbian/queer identities, by creating a shared narrative, a script that can become inscribed and integrated into the repertoire of individuals’ performances (Butler 1990/1999).

## Carving out ‘queer/lesbian’ space in Moscow and Ul’ianovsk

### *Mapping ‘queer/lesbian’ space*

As pointed out in Chapter Two, the geographical configuration of ‘lesbian/queer’ space in cosmopolitan Moscow differed significantly from that of provincial Ul’ianovsk. Since the early 1990s Moscow has developed a relatively established and visible scene, comprising both commercial venues and several lesbian/LGBT organisations and initiatives (Essig 1999; LeGendre 1998; Tuller 1997). This phenomenon has to be framed within the broader context of the capital’s relatively quick and successful adaptation to the market economy during the 1990s and its key political, administrative and financial role at the national and international level. A thriving entertainment industry, of which the commercial gay scene is part, has emerged initially for the benefit of the ‘new Russians’, and, as the city as a whole has become more prosperous during the 2000s, of the new middle class. Moscow is also a hub of NGOs and third sector organisations within Russia; nation-wide and international organisations usually have their headquarters in the capital, where many

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<sup>123</sup> See section Two of this chapter for examples of ‘lesbian’ music festivals.

smaller-scale grassroots initiatives have also emerged. The lack of any form of institutionalised 'queer' space in Ul'ianovsk, in turn, reflects the city's smaller size, its more marginal geographic position and its slower recovery from the 'transition' to market economy. This is reflected in the generally slower development of 'third sector' organisations and leisure facilities.

An informal 'queer' *tusovka* existed in Ul'ianovsk; the group was mixed, and included both men and women. However, within the broader *tusovka*, men and women formed somehow distinct groups, which interacted only intermittently, for example when participating in the gay and lesbian club nights. Group interaction revolved around specific sites, all located in the city centre. Crucial to the life of the *tusovka* was an informal hangout on the central Goncharova street; gatherings centred around a specific bench along its gardens, where the local *tema* arranged to meet, or just casually dropped by, with no previous arrangement<sup>124</sup>. Other popular hangouts were located nearby; these included the area near the hotel *Venets*, as well as commercial venues. Indoor hangouts included a couple of cafes on Bebel' street; these were not 'gay' venues as such, but were informally known to be frequented by a gay clientele. Moreover, a closed-doors event for the local *tema* and their friends was organised monthly in a mainstream club<sup>125</sup>. Thus, 'queer' space in Ul'ianovsk lacked any kind of institutional character, and attempts to claim certain sites as 'queer' could only be partial and temporary.

Moscow offered a richer and more varied range of 'queer' spaces, which seemed to be even more markedly segregated along gender lines. Many 'gay and lesbian' clubs were in actual fact very male-dominated, and in some instances the gender division was encouraged and cultivated by the management<sup>126</sup>. Community spaces were also quite separate: although occasionally gay men and lesbians joined forces on individual projects, community initiatives usually targeted either men or women<sup>127</sup>. Unlike in Ul'ianovsk,

<sup>124</sup> It should be noted that meeting on the street to chat, drink and have a laugh is a very common pattern of socialising for young and not-so young people in Russia. In urban areas, some areas of the city centre are popular hangouts for all kinds of different *tusovki* and common gathering spots for friends and acquaintances of all ages (Pilkington 1994).

<sup>125</sup> Over the years, these events were held in at least two different clubs; all, however, were located in the city centre.

<sup>126</sup> According to the listings from *TimeOut Moscow*, in 2005 the club *Tri obez'iany* [Three monkeys] charged women more than men on Friday and Saturday nights. During my frequentation of the club *12 Vol't* [12 Volts], where the clientele is usually 50:50 men/women, gay men concentrated in the area near the bar, while women occupied the next room.

<sup>127</sup> This divide seemed to be spontaneous, rather than motivated by grievances and animosities between gay and lesbian activists. The Moscow Gay and Lesbian Archive had become mainly a hangout for lesbian women, perhaps because it is based in a private flat owned by a woman. In the

where 'lesbian/queer' hangouts were all located in the city centre, 'lesbian' space in Moscow was more geographically scattered. Some venues, such as the gay and lesbian bar *12 Volts*, the LGBT organisation *Ia+Ia*, were located in the very centre of Moscow. Another central hangout for young women was the stretch of Tverskoi Boulevard by the Esenin monument, known as the *Pushka*<sup>128</sup>. Others, such as the club *Udar*, the gay and lesbian archive and the *Klub Svobodnogo Poseshcheniia*, were based in venues outside the Garden Ring, or on the outskirts of Moscow. Still other initiatives were very much 'itinerant': various festivals, and events often took place at regular intervals, but in different venues<sup>129</sup>.

There are both similarities and differences between 'queer/lesbian' spaces in Moscow and Ul'ianovsk. In both cities, men and women often socialised separately, although Moscow 'queer' space was more markedly gendered, and was usually defined as either gay or lesbian. The most conspicuous difference between the two cities is the much more institutionalised character of the Moscow scene, which offers a variety of opportunities for socialising, targeting different age and interest groups. On closer inspection, however, in both cities attempts to carve out and claim space as 'lesbian' ('women-only') or 'queer' were only partial and contingent. This is perhaps more obvious in Ul'ianovsk, which lacks any kind of established scene space as such, nevermind a women-only space. In Moscow too, however, 'lesbian' space seemed to enjoy a rather marginal status. The most established venues seemed to target chiefly gay men: women-only nights were organised on a regular basis in clubs and bars usually targeting a mainstream audience (see also Sarajeva 2008)<sup>130</sup>. Most community initiatives utilised venues which were only temporarily transformed into 'lesbian' space. For example, the weekly social gatherings at *Klub svobodnogo poseshcheniia* took place in a hired room of a mainstream community centre, which was also open to other users. As Sarajeva (2008) notes, 'lesbian' space in Moscow is not clearly signposted or immediately visible. To quote her example, nothing,

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same way, the organisation *Ia+Ia*, although nominally an LGBT organisation, seemed to cater mostly for gay men. The premises of the organisation, however, were used as a base for the gay and lesbian helpline, as well as for some initiatives organised by and for lesbians, such as discussion groups.

<sup>128</sup> Again, it should be noted that, outside this specific context, the colloquial term *Pushka* refers more generally to a broader area near Pushkin Square, comprising parts of Tverskoi and Strastnoi Boulevards, which is a popular outdoor hangout for all sorts of youth tusovki and for Muscovites in general (Pilkington 1994).

<sup>129</sup> The Labrys festivals took place on a monthly basis at the time of my main period of fieldwork in 2005; other events, such as the *Festival' zhenskoi pesni* [Festival of women's music], and the *Festival' lesbiiskogo tvorchestva* [Festival of lesbian art], took place annually in different venues.

<sup>130</sup> See the <http://region.gay.ru/moscow/> and the gay and lesbian/clubbing section of leisure guides such as *Time Out Moscow* and *Afisha*.



from the outside, identifies the private flat in a non-descript Soviet high-rise building in Northern Moscow as the city's Gay and Lesbian Archive. Similarly, although the *Pushka* has recently gained some notoriety as a 'lesbian' hangout through coverage in Moscow-based tabloids, its appropriation by young lesbians may be completely lost to the unattentive or untrained eye of passers-by, since the area is a very popular meeting place for Muscovites of all ages. The venue where the weekly club *Udar* took place, at the time of my fieldwork the site of the most popular women-only night among young women, was signposted as a restaurant – its former use – from the outside (Sarajeva 2008).

In Moscow, the invisibility of 'lesbian/queer' space may reflect, to some extent, the intricate, ever-changing and somehow chaotic character of its post-Soviet urban landscape. However, it also embodies the precarious and conditional character of non-heterosexual women's claims to public space. As previous discussion has pointed out, invisibility may quite openly be challenged, particularly in the case of the young women meeting at the *Pushka*, whose central Moscow location made non-conformist looks relatively inconspicuous, and the expression of one's sexuality relatively safe (see Chapter Six). However, invisibility may also be welcomed, and even sought as a respite from the scrutiny of the wider community. A case in point are the monthly 'queer' club nights organised in Ul'ianovsk, accessible only by invitation or personal introduction, in a deliberate attempt not only to avert the danger of *gopniki*, but more in general to avoid the attention brought by an unsavoury curiosity for 'exotic' sexualities. A certain degree of discretion, however, also characterised some of the events and community initiatives in Moscow: for example, only the telephone number, but not the address of the Gay and Lesbian Archive was publicised in the local media; the location of the archive was disclosed only via a previous phone call. This was not the case with many commercial venues and events, which were publicised in mainstream magazines such as *TimeOut Moscow* and *Afisha*. However, Moscow's lesbian/queer' space was far from being showcased to promote the 'cosmopolitan' image of the capital, as it has been done in the case of other Western cities (see Moran and Skeggs 2004 on Manchester; Kates 2003 on Sydney). Instead, it blended in, rather discretely and unobtrusively, with the city's changing landscape.

### ***Accessing 'queer/lesbian' space***

Patterns of access to 'lesbian' space also seemed to differ between the capital and Ul'ianovsk. For all women, access was sometimes the result of chance encounters, and sometimes actively sought after; it was often mediated through old and new 'queer'

acquaintances, as well as through ‘virtual’ lesbian space, such as personal ads, internet websites and communities, and SMS dating services. In Moscow, venues and organisations targeting a ‘queer’ audience were commonly advertised in the gay and lesbian and mainstream press; this made ‘lesbian/queer’ space easier to locate and access for isolated individuals. Moreover, access to the internet was relatively common among young people, and the internet had assumed a prominent role in providing information about commercial venues and community events. Indeed, for some women personal ‘lesbian’ networks revolved around specific online communities, although their interaction was often not limited to virtual space. For Sasha, online chats were a way into the club scene and the *tusovka* based at the *Pushka*:

I spent a lot of time on *Volga* [the website *lesbiru.com*]. But the chat there is really strict, and zealous [*pafosnoe*], and very serious. And there is no small talk [*legkoe obshchenie*]. There was another website [not a lesbian one] [...], there’s a lot of flirting going on, it’s good, it’s interesting. [...] And we chatted and chatted. And we began to meet. And I started meeting real people already [*poiavilis’ u menia liudi uzhe real’nye*]. We went to all kind of clubs [*vsiakie*] together. [On this chat] there were hardened [*prozhzhennye*] lesbians; and inexperienced ones, like me. There were some girls like me. And we went around looking: where is that public garden, near Esenin [*Esenin’s monument*], at the Pushkinskaia metro station? Where are those girls? The first time we couldn’t find them. But the second time we went out and found them [Sasha, Moscow].

The growing role of cyberspace in breaking individuals’ isolation, providing information and forging virtual LGBT communities has been noted both in Western societies (Munt, Bassett and o’Riordan 2002) and in Russia (Zelenina 2006). In Russia, until very recently, owing to the complete lack of nationally distributed gay press, the internet represented an important resource for the LGBT community, as well as providing a safe and anonymous space to contact other gay-identified individuals (Kon 1998).

While empowering for some, limitations and constraints surrounded access to cyberspace: indeed, internet use was significantly less common – although not unknown – in the Ul’ianovsk *tusovka*<sup>131</sup>. As Alisa points out, access to personal technology could not be taken for granted in Ul’ianovsk, limiting opportunities to access ‘lesbian/queer’ networks:

Here even meeting someone is difficult, some people we met on the street, I mean, someone [*in the local ‘queer’ tusovka*] approached them and asked them, are you tema or not? People still meet through newspapers [*personal*

<sup>131</sup> Some women in Ul’ianovsk did have internet access, and one young woman talked at length about the project to start a local ‘lesbian’ internet community, modelled on similar websites initiated in bigger cities, such as Moscow, St Petersburg and Saratov [Valia, Ul’ianovsk].

*ads*], I mean, there are no places like in Kazan', Moscow, Piter, there you have venues where *temnye* gather, and you can make acquaintances. [...] Not everyone has the possibility to surf the net, even among our *tema* there are people who have no internet and no mobile phone, and how can they meet anyone? [Alisa, Ul'ianovsk].

In provincial Ul'ianovsk, the lack of an established and visible 'queer' scene, together with the more limited diffusion of the internet and mobile phones, make inroads into 'lesbian/queer' networks potentially more problematic than in bigger, more cosmopolitan Russian cities. Geographic location emerged as a crucial factor influencing women's opportunities to access both physical and virtual 'queer' space. Moscow was often taken as a term of comparison, in terms of living standards and access to 'queer' space, to which Ul'ianovsk did not quite measure up. For example, some members of the Ul'ianovsk *tusovka* had travelled to Moscow and other big cities to check out the club scene, go to concerts and buy lesbian-themed films and books. The fame of the *Pushka* and other lesbian hangouts in the capital had reached Ul'ianovsk, and references to these spaces as examples to emulate were quite common among interviewees; two informants commented that, now that a new Pushkin monument had been erected in Ul'ianovsk, the city's lesbians could legitimately claim to have their own *Pushka*. The emotional distance between provincial Ul'ianovsk and cosmopolitan Moscow was also emphasised by pointing to the gap in living standards and unequal job opportunities<sup>132</sup>.

In Ul'ianovsk, access seemed to rely more heavily on personal contacts and gatekeepers and was therefore more restricted. A more conscious effort to expand the network and reach out to isolated people was made, involving, for example, approaching women on the street and asking them directly if they were *tema*, or putting ads in a local paper. Sveta, thus explains the development of the *tusovka* from her network of friends and acquaintances:

Well, they [*her temnye friends*] appeared little by little, I can't say there was a particular pattern to find them. Somehow it all happened by itself. Some people knew each other, with others we just hang out in the same places, and that's how we met. We met through newspapers, through ads. [...] In Ul'ianovsk there is a paper called *Iz ruk v ruki* [*a weekly paper of various classified ads*]. I befriended the girls I met through ads. Nothing much happened with them, but we became friends, hang out [Sveta, Ul'ianovsk].

<sup>132</sup> In their study on youth subcultures in Moscow, Samara and Ul'ianovsk, Pilkington et al. (2002) also point out that cosmopolitan Moscow was often described by participants as 'not quite Russia', and symbolically conceptualised as part of 'the West'.

The importance of collective agency and group solidarity in breaking individuals' isolation emerged much more clearly than in Moscow. The Ul'ianovsk *tusovka* had originated in a group of friends, who had, over time, appropriated certain gathering places, and had started to organise monthly club nights for gay men and lesbians, in an attempt to expand the original group. The underground, informal character of the *tusovka* made it difficult to access, but also more closely knit. In Moscow, by contrast, 'lesbian/queer' space was more likely to be taken for granted, albeit easier to access. Networks were more fragmented, as women tended to go out on the scene to meet with smaller circles of friends; most frequented these spaces as users, and seemed less invested in 'lesbian/queer' space.

## **'Queer/lesbian' space as site of social relations: patterns of socialising**

In spite of claims to inclusiveness and community, 'queer-lesbian' space is not neutral, but is constructed along boundaries of both inclusion *and* exclusion. Age, economic-social background and cultural/subcultural capital were important factors in shaping patterns of socialising and interaction. Different locations attracted distinct audiences, although 'lesbian/queer' *tusovki* were not entirely unconnected, and overlapped to some extent.

### ***Youth tusovki as 'democratic' space***

Age represented an important factor in women's patterns of socialising. In Ul'ianovsk, it was mainly women in their early-to-mid twenties who hung out with the 'lesbian/queer' *tusovka*, although some women were in their late teens or early forties. Older women generally did not mix with the younger crowd; according to some informants, they had their own social circles, and mostly met informally in small groups in private flats<sup>133</sup>. In Moscow, the *Pushka* was also very much a hangout for young women, in their late teens or early twenties; older women rarely socialised in this location, and were usually keen to distance themselves from the *Pushka tusovka*, which was sometimes disparaged as an 'in your face' and 'rough' crowd (see Chapter Six).

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<sup>133</sup> These circles were, however, particular secluded and willing to protect themselves from prying eyes, so much so that not only younger women, but a couple of women in their forties willing to make contact with these circles could not get access to them.

In the Ul'ianovsk and Moscow street *tusovki*, patterns of socialising were strikingly similar, and involved hanging out with friends and new acquaintances, chatting, drinking, having a laugh and meeting potential partners in public city centre locations. This seems to reflect broader patterns of socialising common among urban youth *tusovki*<sup>134</sup>. Moreover, both the Ul'ianovsk and the Moscow *tusovki* were self-styled 'democratic' spaces, in principle open to all young women, irrespective of their class background, education and financial resources:

Well, it was just interesting to socialise in a *tusovka* where people are so different, and had it not been for the *tema* they would not hang out together. Because some people work, some study, some have just finished school, and they all hang out together, it was very interesting [Alisa, Ul'ianovsk].

It [*the Pushka*] is a place without hierarchies, money doesn't matter, that's why it's good. There are places like that in every city [Ol'ga., quoted in Sarajeva 2008:129]

Well, first of all, the people who hang out there [*on the Pushka*] act defiantly, and imagine some business-woman, who has only ever socialised with heterosexuals, and suddenly she understands that she is a lesbian, but even so her material values, her aspirations, have remained the same. What does she have in common with students? Nothing! [...] Although she is a lesbian. But she thinks: I don't want this. Although this is not all, this is just one identity; the rest is all different between them. I think this is just out of pretentiousness, and self-important perception of oneself. Because I have an acquaintance who is a business woman, [...], but when their *tusovki* meet it is in some expensive restaurant. So I say to her: "Tan', if you want we are going out, if you want and don't feel out of place in your high heels, in you Versace clothes." She comes, parks her expensive car nearby, and comes along. [...]. I mean, she is not a pretentious person [Sasha, Moscow].

Both in Moscow and Ul'ianovsk, the street *tusovki* are presented as a democratic space, where everyone is equal, and where the importance of class, education and money is underplayed, or presented as immaterial to acceptance in the group. Sarajeva (2008) argues that, in the case of the *Pushka*, it is those who do not comply to the egalitarian ethos of the *tusovka* who struggle to 'fit in'.

However, this doesn't mean that everyone has equal access to the *tusovki*, or that they not marked along generational and class lines. The informal character of these networks makes them invisible to many outsiders; access to these relatively closed social circles may be

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<sup>134</sup> There is no indication that the Ul'ianovsk *tusovka* developed as a conscious imitation of the Moscow *Pushka*.

difficult, or very uncomfortable, without personal introduction (see also Sarajeva 2008). Moreover, the very term '*tusovka*' has specific class undertones. According to Pilkington *et al.* (2002), *tusovki* are a phenomenon typical of the 'progressive' urban youth [*neformaly*]:

Their members are not necessarily from privileged backgrounds, but their claiming of space in the centre of cities signifies an upwardly and outwardly oriented strategy, and a desire to escape the territorial gang formations of the periphery (Pilkington *et al.* 2002:251)<sup>135</sup>.

The 'progressive' character of the Moscow and Ul'ianovsk street networks is reflected not only in their occupation of city centre space and in their self-styled 'open' and 'egalitarian' ethos, but also in their social composition. It is certainly significant that, in Ul'ianovsk, a substantial part of the 'regulars' were students from the local universities and colleges (for a similar point on the Moscow *tusovka* see also Sarajeva 2008). However, in spite of the prevalence of university students, the *tusovka* seemed fairly diverse, and also included several women in manual or low-skilled jobs<sup>136</sup>. The *tusovka*'s 'democratic' ethos was also reflected in the commitment, shown by some of its leading members, to broadening the network. While differences in social and cultural capital may have been underplayed, they were not altogether irrelevant to the life of the *tusovka*. Indeed, some individuals, through their background and education as well as through their personal investment in 'lesbian' subculture, had accrued a "subcultural capital" (Thornton 1995), which gave them a more authoritative position within the *tusovka*. Access to information resources (particularly the internet), personal networks and the relative freedom from time constraints of student life were important resources to tap into when organising gatherings and club nights. Subcultural capital was also turned into economic resource: an entry ticket was paid at monthly club nights, which covered expenses but also compensated organisers from the *tusovka* for their work.

### ***Community, cultural capital and interest clubs***

The notion of LGBT community organisations is commonly associated in the literature with political claims to equal rights and visibility (Adam, Duyvendak and Krouwel 1999; Richardson 2000; Taylor 2005). However, until very recently, these activities have been

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<sup>135</sup> See also Pilkington 1994, Pilkington *et al.* 2002 and Omel'chenko 2006 for further discussion of the classed difference between interests and patterns of socialising among 'progressive' and 'normal' youth.

<sup>136</sup> My very limited exploration of the *Pushka* does not allow me to draw parallels with the Ul'ianovsk street *tusovka*.

marginal to Russian community organisations, which have tended to focus on the organisation of leisure activities and on community-building (LeGendre 1998; Essig 1999; Stella 2007; Sarajeva 2008). The non-profit initiatives explored in this project were very much the domain of grassroots groups, which often lacked registered status. This kind of community group is very far from the ‘professionalised’ activism of well-funded Western organisations such as Stonewall, with their political agendas and lobbying activities. Indeed, all my key informants, women heavily involved in the organisation of community initiatives, tended to downplay the ‘political’ and ‘human rights’ aspects of local activism. The focus of common activity was “everyday issues” [*bytovye voprosy*] and leisure activities [*dosug*], and activists generally emphasised the importance of providing spaces where women could meet, socialise, exchange information in a comfortable environment, and find support if needed. The reasons given for this ‘hands-on’ approach ranged from lack of resources, to a personal aversion towards politics, to a frank scepticism towards notions of disinterested ‘activism’. Elena Grigor’evna, one of the founding members of the Moscow Gay and Lesbian Archive, thus explained the motivations for her involvement:

Little by little, I became part of this circle. But I never considered myself an activist. I just do things that are interesting for me. I was interested in these books, I was interested in knowing who writes what, how journalists cover these issues, what perspective scientists have on this [homosexuality]. I approach this material as a collector. I collect all this [Elena Grigor’evna, key informant interview N. 1].

The ‘hands-on’ approach of grassroots groups, noted elsewhere in the literature on Russian women’s organisation (Kay 2000), is reflected in Lena Botsman’s comments on the future plans for the association *Svoi*, as yet unregistered:

If we have the means, we will pay for the services of a lawyer, a gynaecologist and a psychologist. But for the moment we just want to create some kind of small-scale communism, a post-Soviet kibbutz [Lena Botsman, key informant interview N. 4].

Offering legal and medical services was out of the reach of the association; however, Botsman talked at length about the leisure initiatives she had been involved in organising. Moscow community spaces were the reference point for a loose but distinctive *tusovka*, bringing together women of all ages; however, both age difference and class/educational background were important in shaping patterns of socialising in community settings<sup>137</sup>. These spaces promoted themselves as an alternative to the commercial scene, and made a

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<sup>137</sup> The commercial scene was explored very cursorily during fieldwork, while participants were recruited chiefly through ‘community’ spaces and initiatives (see Chapter Two).

conscious effort to cater for the needs of those who felt ‘out of place’ in gay and lesbian clubs and bars. Elena Grigor’evna identified the opportunity to socialise outside of the club scene as an important function of the Moscow Gay and Lesbian Archive:

*In your opinion, what impact and influence has your organisation had on the life of the local gays, bisexuals and lesbians?*

I think that, apart from its main function –collecting and storing relevant material, sharing information, and getting visitors to know homoerotic culture and art – the Lesbian and Gay Archive represents a possible alternative to club life, the only [*other*] available form of socialising for gays and lesbians in Moscow. [Email interview with Elena Grigor’evna, 1.7.2003<sup>138</sup>]

Lack of interest and feelings of discomfort in the commercial scene were common among Moscow interviewees; however, older women felt particularly out of place in commercial venues, usually catering for a young audience. It was indeed older women (in their mid-thirties or older) who were more actively involved in organising community events and initiatives; some of them had had a leading role in local gay and lesbian activism for several years. The motivations for starting community initiatives were sometimes very personal. Lena Botsman, an activist very involved in the Moscow *tusovka*, thus explained the motives that inspired her to start several projects:

Yes, in 1999 for the first time I started to surf the net, and I saw all this [*gay and lesbian websites*], I started to socialise, to look for new acquaintances, I mean, meet them in person. And if there had been a social club of this kind [*similar to the Klub svobodnogo poseshcheniia, which she later organised*], I would have been there like a flash, but there was nothing like that, there were only commercial clubs. *Tri obeziiany* [*one of the most established gay and lesbian club in Moscow*], and some other old ones that I don’t even know. Well, I won’t go there, I am a middle-aged woman [*tetka*], I am forty-five, I won’t go to these clubs, it’s awful, what would I do there? Drink, smoke, swear? Dance on one leg? It’s not for me. [Lena Botsman, key informant interview N. 4].

Botsman’s love of the outdoors and interest in songwriting [*avtorskaia pesnia*] inspired her to organise summer gatherings [*slety*] in the countryside, where participants were encouraged to bring their guitars and sing along. The Festival of Lesbian Art [*Festival’ Lesbiiskogo Tvorchestva*] was an offshoot of these gatherings; the festival took place on a yearly basis in rented premises in Moscow; it offered an opportunity for socialising and for listening to both amateur and professional singer-songwriters linked to the Moscow *tusovka*. In the same spirit, Botsman also initiated a social club during the winter months

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<sup>138</sup> The email interview was conducted for my MPhil dissertation, which includes the full text of the email (Stella 2003).



[*Klub Svobodnogo poseshcheniia*], where women gathered to sing, watch films, chat and drink tea.

While older women tended to have a leading role in the organisation of community initiatives, these attracted a very mixed audience in terms of age; a very substantial part of the women who participated in these events were indeed young women, in their early-to-late twenties<sup>139</sup>. Age, however, was not the only factor shaping social interaction in community settings, which had a specific cultural focus. Organisers emphasised the importance of creating environments where visitors could enjoy quality, ‘cultured’ leisure time [*kul’turnyi dosug*]. The idea of community space as a self-styled ‘cultured’, ‘civilised’ space was reiterated several times in interviews with activists. Activities designed to bring women together had a specific *cultural* and *educational* focus, which was meant to go beyond the ‘mindless entertainment’ provided in bars and clubs. Ol’ga and Lena thus explained the aims of the newly formed organisation *Tolerantnost’*:

*Ol’ga*: It [*the statute of the organisation Tolerantnost’*] reads: legal and psychological support, informational and educational events. We need the centre so that people have a place to come to, because clubs alone are not enough.

*Lena*: People need a space where their views [*mirovozzrenie*] are formed, and clubs don’t do this, they are for the part of your body below the belt [*nizhe poiasa*]. They shape your legs, they stimulate sexual arousal, and that’s it. But people, in Russia and elsewhere, do not only enjoy dancing and having sex, they also have brains [*Ol’ga and Lena, key informant interview N. 3*].

Alcohol consumption, smoking and rowdy behaviour were banned from the premises where community events took place<sup>140</sup>. Although happy that younger women were taking the lead in organising ‘lesbian’ music festivals catering for the interests of their age group, Lena Botsman regretted the fact that alcohol, a potential factor in ‘uncultured’ behaviour, was allowed on the premises:

It’s very important that these events are interesting for them [*younger women*], and if we impose our stuff, stuff from the last century, this is useless, they have their own ideas [*predstavleniia*], they want to enjoy themselves in their own

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<sup>139</sup> Young women were particularly prominent in the discussion groups which regularly took place at *Ia+Ia* in May/July 2004, as well as in the *slety* and music festivals. Frequentation of community events by young women, however, was often sporadic; regulars tended to be older, particularly at venues such as the Moscow Gay and Lesbian Archive.

<sup>140</sup> Alcohol, for example, was banned from the Gay and Lesbian Archive, the *Klub Svobodnogo poseshcheniia* and the organisation *Ia+Ia*, where discussion and self-help groups for lesbians took place. Smoking was permitted only outside, and rowdy or undignified behaviour was frowned upon.

ways, if they don't organise a *slet* [*the kind of outdoors gathering she had been organising*], it means they don't want to, it means there is no need for it, you have to think of something else. This is what I think. [...] You are no longer organising events for yourself and for your own friends [*svoikh*], because for me our small club, where we sing and sing among ourselves, for me that's enough. Perhaps for me the festival that now Labrys organises is enough, each month they organise concerts which are no worse than our own festival [*Festival' Lesbiiskogo Tvorchestva*]. [...] The only thing is, people drink at these concerts, this is bad, and they have bottles and everything, this is not right [*eto ne delo*], but we hope that culture will win in the end. [Lena Botsman, key informant interview N. 4].

Community initiatives aimed to create an alternative to the club scene accessible by all; however, social interaction crucially revolved around 'cultured' and 'intellectual' interests and practices. Again, women with high levels of cultural and subcultural capital were the most likely to have accrued prominent positions within 'community' spaces. Not only the organisers, but more generally the women who frequented these spaces (particularly those who met at the Moscow Gay and Lesbian Archive) usually had very high levels of education, and shared a general interest in 'high', rather than 'popular' culture. Women who did not share the same interests and level of cultural capital, however, may be put off by the 'cultured' character of these initiatives, or implicitly positioned as outsiders in 'community' circles. Indeed, some young women were quite critical of community initiatives, whose activities were far from their own interests and whose motives they perceived as patronising. The task of uniting lesbian women into a shared identity, community and culture was perceived as problematic by those more actively involved in community projects. These women were often very aware of the heterogeneous interests and socio-cultural backgrounds of women involved in same-sex relations. An article from the lesbian magazine *Ostrov* about the fragmented nature and different aims of the Moscow gay and lesbian community points out:

Faina Grimberg keeps saying that you can't build a culture, a community, an organisation on sex [*na posteli*] – and it's difficult to argue with that. It is possible to unite around a cultural, spiritual scene [*iavleniie*], not around [*a common*] sexual orientation. [...] People with the same sexual orientation do not look in the same direction, they look at each other, which blocks out the horizon and prevents people to become as one. [...] I only know one thing: people can unite around an idea, not around a problem. Sociologists are able to study lesbians as a social group. But, in order to feel part of a single phenomenon [*obrazovanie*], we have to feel the same values and purposes. (Gert 2005:28).

Another factor that underlines the contested nature of 'lesbian/queer' space as an "imagined community" (Anderson 1991; Valentine 1995), able to accommodate specific social relations, is its commercialisation, which has potentially exclusionary consequences.

Indeed, the boundary between ‘community’ projects and commercial activities was often blurred, as many community ‘leaders’ were also involved in commercial activities targeting gay men and/or lesbians. For example, VolgaVolga (pseudo.), creator of the community website *lesbiru.com*, one of the most popular and established information resources for lesbian women, has also been the brand name behind enterprises such as the lesbian glossy magazine *VolgaVolga* and the lesbian club La Femme (VolgaVolga 2005). Similarly, Ol’ga Suvorova, leader of the lesbian organisation *Pinkstar*, has also been the promoter of the eponymous clubs *Pinkstar*, and also worked as chief editor of the commercial lesbian website *lesbi.ru* [Ol’ga Suvorova, key informant interview N. 5]. The overlap between LGBT community and commercial spaces is by no means specific to Russia (Chasin 2000; Moran and Skeggs 2004; Hennessy 2000). Moreover, in a context where financial support from state institution and local authorities is non-existent, revenue from commercial ventures was often the only way to fund non-profit community initiatives. However, there is some indication of a trend to move from non-profit initiatives to professionally organised events and commercially viable products. For example, the publishing house *Labrys*, a registered business founded at the end of 2004, non-profit initiatives, organised music festivals and sold literary magazine which were similar, in content, to non-profit initiatives such as the magazine *Ostrov* and the *Festival’ lesbiiskogo tvorchestva*. *Labrys* purposefully targeted a ‘certain kind’ of lesbian women, ‘progressive’ and with enough money to spend on its products:

As any other commercial organisation, one of *Labrys’* aims is to make a profit. But this aims cannot be the foundation of our business activities. *Labrys* has a mission. It is the creation of positive representations of lesbians in literature (...). *Labrys* has an additional aim: the development of a networked structure of management and the creation of a model of lesbian cooperative. It has another purpose: the education of ‘queer’ audiences. *Labrys* caters for a ‘progressive audience’. Unlike many other projects, now defunct, *Labrys* is developing according to a long-term plan. (...) But we are not just an internet resource. We publish the almanac *Labrys* (...). We set a rather high price for the first issues of the almanac, so that only those who recognise the value of culture and are ready to pay for it would read it<sup>141</sup>.

*Labrys’* professional approach to ‘lesbian’ events and publications ensured that these were organised on a regular basis, and contributed to their success. Class inequalities are not new to Russian society, as access to the most prestigious educational institution was mainly the preserve of the privileged classes, while the concept of *kulturnost’* was, to a large extent extent, associated with the Soviet middle-class (Millar 1985). However, in a

<sup>141</sup> See the *Labrys* website, accessed on 29.3.2006:  
[http://www.labrys.ru/modules.php?op=modload&name=PagEd&file=index&topic\\_id=35&page\\_id=139](http://www.labrys.ru/modules.php?op=modload&name=PagEd&file=index&topic_id=35&page_id=139).

broader social context characterised by the collapse of welfare provision and an extreme rich-poor divide, the commercial aims of businesses targeting a 'queer' audience may contribute to make 'lesbian' culture a precious good that not everyone can afford.

## Conclusions

The present chapter has charted the profile and geography of 'lesbian/queer' spaces in Moscow and Ul'ianovsk. In both cities, collective agency is crucial to the enterprise of carving out communal spaces in the city landscape; however, claims to public space remain somehow precarious and conditional, as 'lesbian' space remains marginal and contested, and enjoys little visibility in the urban landscape. The most conspicuous difference between the capital and provincial Ul'ianovsk lies in the more established character of 'lesbian/queer' space in Moscow; this reflects broader socio-economic differences, as well as geographical, cultural and emotional distances between central and peripheral urban locations. Greater opportunities to access 'lesbian/queer' space in Moscow are a reflection of its more institutionalised and relatively more visible character, whereas in Ul'ianovsk access to informal 'lesbian/queer' networks is more likely to be mediated through personal connections.

While not entirely secluded from other kinds of social circles, nonetheless 'lesbian/queer' *tusovki* have their own specific function and profile. Indeed, women's everyday social interactions, including those with their peer groups, were ruled by conventional gender and sexual norm, and 'everyday' space did not always accommodate women's intimate relationships, or allow for the open expression of their sexual identity. In this respect, the very existence of 'lesbian/queer' *tusovki* challenges, to some extent, the heterosexualised landscape, by offering a place where 'alternative' models of gender/sexual identities and relationships can be forged and learned. 'Lesbian/queer' *tusovki* offer an alternative framework of reference, allowing women a space for sexual experimentation, social interaction and experience sharing. 'Lesbian/queer' space was experienced as enabling because it allowed women to make informed choices about their intimate lives and provided validation for their non-heteronormative sexual identities. However, 'lesbian' space also engendered dis-identifications: engagement with 'lesbian' *tusovki* may be temporary and conditional, and individuals showed different degree of investment in them. Moreover, allegiances and belonging may give way to a sense of alienation if 'lesbian'

space is not perceived to be the locus of meaningful relationships and interactions, based on a commonality that goes beyond a shared sexual orientation.

While 'lesbian/queer' space has been much celebrated in the literature as a site of community and belonging, the analysis offered in this chapter has shown that different 'lesbian/queer' spaces are constructed around specific cultural practices and patterns of socialising. Thus, street *tusovki* were hangouts for younger women, whereas community initiatives were consciously created as an alternative to the youth-oriented commercial scene, in an attempt to accommodate the interests of a more mature audience. Whereas social interaction in youth *tusovki* revolved around drinking, chatting, smoking and mucking about, community initiatives had a self-styled 'cultured' character. Different kinds of music provided the soundtrack to social interaction in 'lesbian/queer' spaces: Russian 'lesbian' rock was popular among young women, while amateur and professional singer-songwriters perceived to have a 'lesbian' sensibility enjoyed a special status in 'community' networks. In spite of claims to inclusiveness and openness, education, socio-economic background and (sub)cultural capital also shaped social interaction in 'lesbian/queer' space, highlighting the presence of potentially exclusionary and alienating dynamics. 'Lesbian/queer' space is not neutral, or equally accessible to women sharing a non-heteronormative sexuality; a more nuanced understanding of individuals' multiple identities, and how these affect how they situate themselves, is fundamental to grasp how mechanisms of inclusion/exclusion operate within 'lesbian/queer' space.

## Conclusions

By focusing on the still relatively unexplored topic of lesbian relations and identity in contemporary Russia, this thesis contributes to a still limited but growing body of literature exploring homosexuality in the Russian context, both as a cultural notion and as a lived experience (see for example Nartova 2004a, 2004b, 2004c; Omel'chenko 1999, 2002a, 2002b; Sarajeva 2008; Healey 2001; Essig 1999). The thesis has argued also for the need to avoid essentialising Russian (homo)sexualities (and, by implication 'Western' (homo)sexualities) by adopting a nuanced approach to the issue of sexual practices and identities. It has favoured theoretical notions of identity as socially constructed, highlighting its relational, fluid and performative aspects. This approach to identity foregrounds the complex interplay between structure and agency. 'Identities' are not inborn personal characteristics, nor are they purely a matter of individual choice: they are shaped by structural factors, disciplinary discourses and the social contexts where individuals are located. The thesis has also emphasised the need to frame Russian female (homo)sexualities and sexual identities within their own framework of historical and cultural reference, by charting shifting discourses on sex and sexuality across the Soviet/post-Soviet period, and framing empirical ethnographic data within this context. In order to avoid reifying 'Russian homosexualities' by focusing too narrowly on the national level, the study has also engaged with broader literature within gay and lesbian/queer studies, traditionally focussed on 'Western' societies. This engagement allows space for some critical reflections on current theoretical and methodological debates.

In early literature on Russian homosexuality, the use of 'queer' terminology and the emphasis on the inherent fluidity and fuzziness of Russian sexual identities unwittingly perpetuated a conceptual dichotomy between the 'global gay' and the 'Russian queer' (for a critique see Baer 2002). Far from being inherently subversive, however, the conceptual category 'queer' may well be on its way to become the new orthodoxy in gay and lesbian/queer studies, and therefore be imposed by 'Western' researchers on unknowing 'natives' just as much as 'gay' or 'lesbian'. Findings from this study suggest that, while not

all interviewees were willing to embrace 'fixed' labels of sexual identity, they consistently referred to the notion of 'sexual orientation' by using the labels *lesbiianka*, *biseksual'ka*, *natural'ka*. Binary categories such as 'gay' and 'lesbian' are also routinely used in empirical studies on (homo)sexualities by Russian researchers (Nartova 2004; Omel'chenko 2002). This strongly suggests that Russian notions of sexuality and gender are also binary, and may not be substantially different from 'Western' ones, embodied in Butler's "heterosexual matrix" (Butler 1990/1999). Language use, however, suggests not only fundamental continuities, but also important differences: for example, in spite of a partial 'normalisation' of the label 'lesbian', for most interviewees it remains a "harsh word", defined by the dominant culture, which retains strong pathologising undertones. I propose that language use does not reflect different notions of gender and sexuality, but rather a different social history of (homo)sexuality. The pathologisation, criminalisation and public censorship of homosexuality are by no means unique to Soviet Russia: they are well documented also in other industrialised European countries, and have the same socio-historical roots. Other parts of Europe, however, saw an increasing legitimisation of sex and sexual pleasure as a topic for public discussion in the second part of the century. This process saw the emergence of more pluralistic discourses on sexual practices; in this context, 'sexuality' became increasingly an autonomous category, detached from notions of reproduction and kinship (Giddens 1992). This did not happen in Russia until the mid-1980s: the 'working mother' gender contract rooted female sexuality in motherhood, and the 'natural' connection between the two was never seriously challenged throughout the Soviet period. Censorship reflected official sexual morals, and did not allow for a debate on sex and sexuality to be articulated in the public sphere. Despite evidence of widespread non-reproductive sexual practices in the late Soviet period, these were, as a rule, completely glossed over in the media.

Changing patterns of linguistic use reflect shifting discourses on sex and sexuality. Interview material collected for this study suggests that 'lesbian' was not available as a narrative of identity to older women, who came of age during the late Soviet period. The pathologisation and silence surrounding same-sex relations made 'lesbian' an unviable identity; opportunities to meet like-minded women were largely left to chance, and homoerotic relations seldom occurred against the backdrop of a shared subculture, as access to 'lesbian' networks was very restricted. Interview data further suggest that the institutionalised support of motherhood and the nuclear family, embodied in the Soviet gender contract, may have been more crucial in making lesbian identities unviable than medical practices. The relatively small number of interviews conducted with older women allows only for tentative conclusions, and leave many questions unanswered. Anecdotal

evidence, within existing literature and my own interview data, suggests the existence of some forms of private 'lesbian' networks in Soviet cities. Which spaces allowed the emergence of some form of collective agency, based on shared sexual/cultural practices, if not narratives of identity? How did women experience and interpret same-sex erotic practices? To what extent did these relations take place against the backdrop of 'normal', heterosexual family life? Findings from this study do not provide definite answers, but rather starting points for future research. They suggest that we need to depart from arguments positing Soviet repression of homosexuality as 'extraordinary', and tracing it to the totalitarian features of the Soviet political system (Essig 1999; Zhuk 1998) in favour of a more thorough exploration of individuals' lived experiences (Healey 2001). I envision this line of enquiry developing into an oral history project, focusing on the experiences of women involved in same-sex relations during the late Soviet period.

It is no coincidence that, in Russia, the 'new' visibility of homosexuality as a socio-cultural phenomenon occurred in parallel to the transformations that led to, and followed, the fall of the socialist system. The lack of a public and open discussion on sex, combined with other political and economic features of the Soviet social order, had precluded the emergence of both gay liberation identity politics and gay consumerism. The fall of communism in the early 1990s represented a significant turning point, as it marked the emergence of new discourses disrupting the links between sex, reproduction and kinship at the heart of official Soviet sexual morals (Omel'chenko 1999). Interview data suggest that the new visibility of homosexuality, together with its de-criminalisation and de-medicalisation, contributed to the crystallisation of sexuality as a narrative of social identity. This phenomenon is not merely the result of an imposition on Russian culture of "Western notions of sex and its meaning" (Essig 1999:174): it reflects deeper, largely endogenous changes in Russian society and in its sexual culture. The emergence and popularity of a few home-grown 'lesbian' performers in Russia suggests that the dynamics of cross-cultural hybridisation operate in more nuanced ways than Essig suggests. The ways in which Western-style gay consumer culture and identity politics may have influenced the post-Soviet Russian context, and the extent to which they have been appropriated and transformed in Russia, is an interesting topic for future research.

The post-Soviet context opened up new possibilities for individuals involved in same-sex relations, in terms of opportunities for consumption and association. However, the 'sexual revolution' of the early 1990s, embodied in the new visibility and commercialisation of sex and sexuality, should not be uncritically taken as progressive and liberating. It also produced new tensions in the fabric of Russian society. The mainstreaming of 'lesbian'



performances and images in popular culture, embodied in the nation-wide success of Russian pop acts such as Tatu and Zemfira, ambiguously intertwines with a backlash against the 'propaganda of homosexuality'. The homophobia deployed in nationalistic discourses echoes broader anxieties about demographics, changing sexual morals, national identity and Russia's international status. Paradoxically, if the commercially driven visibility of homosexuality is now an established fact in Russian society, political claims to visibility and equality are still highly controversial, and a pluralistic debate on sexual citizenship aggressively silenced. The continued relevance of Soviet cultural practices, sexual morals and institutional context in contemporary Russia partly explain these tensions. Institutionalised endorsement of motherhood and the heterosexual family has contributed to the perpetuation of the link between morality, female sexuality and motherhood, albeit within a changed, more pluralistic gender order.

For non-heterosexual women, the 'new' visibility offers wider possibilities in terms of association, consumption and socialisation in 'lesbian/queer' spaces and networks. The emergence of 'lesbian/queer' community organisations and networks both reflects and reinforces the circulation of 'lesbian' as a viable narrative of social identity. The exploration of 'lesbian/queer' networks, included in Chapter Seven, illustrates how sexual identities are relational, and performatively constructed through shared cultural practices, such as listening to and discussing 'lesbian-themed' music. The experience of socialising in 'lesbian/queer' space can be empowering; besides providing a safe space for the exploration and expression of one's sexuality, it also provides alternative models of sexual/gender identity and relationships.

Through a comparison of 'lesbian/queer' space in Moscow and Ul'ianovsk, I have also argued also for the need to look beyond the most visible expressions of 'queer' subcultures and lifestyles, usually identified with 'cosmopolitan' city space. 'Lesbian/queer' space in the capital is, to a great extent, located in 'scene' space, and therefore is significantly more established and institutionalised than in Ul'ianovsk. However, there are also striking similarities in the patterns of socialising observed in Moscow and Ul'ianovsk; this suggests the emergence of a cultural code' which is circulated nationally within 'lesbian/queer' urban networks.

To some extent, the enterprise of carving out communal spaces in the city landscape represents a spontaneous expression of political agency, and an attempt to forge a collective identity, based on the notion of a common sexuality. Significantly, however, these communal spaces discretely blend in with the city landscape, rather than reflecting

claims to public visibility and recognition. Undoubtedly this is evidence of the conditional legitimacy that lesbianism has acquired in Russian society; the downside of the 'new' visibility is greater societal scrutiny of non-heteronormative sexuality, in a context where lesbianism is dismissed as 'fashionable love' and 'improper' femininity, but also associated with moral deviance. In contemporary Russia, the choice of in/visibility (i.e. ambiguous and limited visibility) is also used as a resource, and as a strategy of accommodation and resistance.

This strategy is also reflected in women's negotiations of their everyday environments, where becoming visible as 'lesbian/queer' is not always considered viable, advantageous or desirable. Women tended to downplay the value of visibility and authenticity, while adopting a pragmatic approach to their day-to-day negotiations of different social settings. This commonly involved colluding with normative assumptions of heterosexuality and keeping details of one's intimate life private, rather than 'passing' as heterosexual. As Nartova (2004c) suggests, in some respects Russian women's scepticism towards visibility can be traced back to Soviet notions of private and public. During state socialism, the private represented a space of dissimulation rather than authenticity: in a social context allowing little privacy to the ordinary Soviet citizen and promoting collective interest over individuality, private space had to be protected both from the arbitrary intrusion of state institutions and from collective scrutiny (Oswald and Voronkov 2004; Kharkhordin 1995, 1999; Shlapentokh 1989). However, findings from this study on Russian 'lesbian' identities also highlight the culturally specific and value-laden character of the 'coming out' narrative, a point also made in research exploring other social contexts (Malanansan 1997, 2002; Taylor 2007; Fraser 1999; Corteen 2002; Moran and Skeggs 2004; Kirtsoglou 2004). Drawing on previous literature, I argue for the need to critically reassess the role of the gay closet, and more generally, of political strategies based on visibility and recognition, within gay and lesbian/queer studies.

The ambiguous value and unintended effects of 'lesbian' visibility is powerfully highlighted by women's experiences of everyday space negotiation. If visibility facilitates access to 'lesbian/queer' spaces and networks, it also incites danger, as Skeggs (1999) reminds us. Importantly, however, *private* spaces and relations, rather than public ones, were considered by interviewees the most difficult to negotiate. The parental home powerfully embodies the ambiguities and discomforts involved in negotiating one's sexual identity in private relations: it emerges as both a site of security, comfort and authenticity and as one of scrutiny, conflict and secrecy. The parental home was experienced as the primary space in which women were socialised into dominant gender norms, and felt under

greatest pressure to comply to heterosexist expectations. Heterosexuality was both 'naturally' assumed and expected, and heterosexual relations, embodying the 'golden standard' of marriage and parenthood, often remained the yardstick against which women's relations were measured even after they had moved out of the parental home. Notions of women's 'proper' development into adults reflected Soviet and post-Soviet discourses on gendered citizenship, rooted in the notion of motherhood as 'natural', 'moral' and contributing to the common good. However, in the experience of most women, heterosexism (and homophobia) began at home; they were first learned in the private sphere of the parental home, and later reinforced by their institutionalisation in the public sphere. Expected compliance to dominant gender and sexual norms was also experienced in other, more 'public' everyday environments, such as the workplace and the street. Disclosure may potentially be rife with unpleasant consequences in more formalised settings; however women felt they usually had greater control in negotiating their 'public' persona in more impersonal settings than in personal relations and private spaces.

The thesis' main contribution to gay and lesbian/queer studies lies in its exploration of Russian homosexualities in light of the theoretical frameworks emerging chiefly from research on Western societies. The thesis inevitably privileges Western theoretical perspectives: within Russian academia, sexuality and gender are undertheorised, and while a growing interest in this topic is reflected in an expanding body of literature, the latter mainly consists of empirical studies. The bulk of existing research on sexualities has so far been conducted in Western societies, and particularly in Anglo-American contexts (Binnie 2004). The undisputed hegemony of certain theoretical models is also deeply intertwined with the institutionalisation of the English language in academia. Particularly at the international level, academic debate mostly takes place through the medium of English, in the most prestigious publications and conferences. As Besemeres and Wierzbicka note, however, a "monolingual perspective of the world is also a monocultural one":

Monolingualism limits people's understanding of the world and of human life in more than one way. It brings about an unconscious absolutisation of the perspective of the world suggested by one's own native language. It is only exposure to other perspectives (those suggested by other languages) which shows us that what we, as native speakers of one language, instinctively take for reality is in fact a particular interpretation of reality (Besemeres and Wierzbicka 2007:xiv).

Through its examination of culturally specific language and narratives of sexual identity, this study has argued that terms and concepts such as 'lesbian', 'queer' and 'coming out' need to be critically interrogated, and that their adequacy to describe a specific context

should be tested in the field. The study has spelled out the tensions involved in translating terms and concepts across English, the global *lingua franca* of gay and lesbian/queer studies, and Russian, the linguistic and cultural context in which research was conducted (Muller 2007). The interpretation of these tensions is inevitably tentative at times; however, these can be re-examined and interrogated in light of future research. In this respect, the present study follows in a long tradition of cross-cultural ethnographic studies, particularly prone and well-positioned to problematise taken-for granted theoretical concepts and interpretations of reality (Weston 1993). With its inherently comparative and relativistic approach, cross-cultural research has been crucial in opening up new research perspectives, and ultimately contributes to advancing our understandings of sexuality, as a theoretical concept and as a lived reality. The study has offered a critical analysis of the binary 'East/West' paradigm, which remains central to academic engagements with 'non-Western' sexualities. It has also argued for a conceptualisation of space that moves beyond the dichotomous categories 'private/public' and 'heterosexual/homosexual', by privileging the notion of space as a site of social relations.

More indirectly, this study can contribute to broader research agendas on sexuality and gender, within both the post-socialist Eastern European region and Russia. In much of the Eastern European region, homosexuality is still a fairly new and unexplored field of academic enquiry within the social sciences (Temkina and Zdravomyslova 2002; Štulhofer and Sandfort 2005). Comparative research across the region would highlight the ways in which the socialist social order contributed to shaping individual experiences of non-heteronormative sexual practices and identities, while also pointing out socio-cultural differences and diverging developments within Eastern Europe. More importantly, the thesis also makes a contribution to the development of academic debates about *sexuality and gender* in post-Soviet Russian society. Both in Russia and elsewhere, 'sexualities studies' are more often than not associated with gay and lesbian/queer studies (Thomas 2004). Within Russian gender studies, several works have addressed issues such as the objectification of the female body, the sexual exploitation of women, and the role of power relations and individual agency in sexual transactions (Štulhofer and Sandfort 2005; Hughes 2000; Johnson 2007). However, work addressing (hetero)sexualities has tended to foreground gender at the expense of sexuality. This is problematic because, with notable exceptions (Omel'chenko 1999, 2002a, 2002b, 2004; Zdravomyslova and Temkina 2002), 'unmarked' sexuality is sometimes unproblematically assumed to be heterosexual<sup>142</sup>. More

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<sup>142</sup> The focus on heterosexuality is often inevitable. However, no qualifying statements are generally offered, giving the impression that assumptions are made as to 'what kind of women' are involved and/or represented in these studies.

importantly, however, this body of work often misses the opportunity to explore sexuality as a legitimate and productive field of enquiry. Yet a research agenda foregrounding sexuality, as well as gender, would offer a complementary perspective to the wealth of debates originated within gender studies. Ultimately, this work could productively break down the excessive compartmentalisation between 'gender' and 'sexuality' by treating sexuality as gendered and acknowledging that sexuality has a big part to play in constructions of gender, in ways suggested by theorists such as Butler (1990/1999), Richardson (2000) and Jackson (1999).

Individuals' lived experiences and identities are shaped by their sexual desires and practices, irrespective of their sexual orientation; dominant discourses on sexuality and morality affect us all, albeit in different ways. It remains politically important to put homosexualities (in the plural) on the research agenda, perhaps even more so in countries like Russia, where the topic is still highly controversial in the public arena. However, a research agenda privileging LGBT rights and discrimination over other issues may ultimately backfire by victimising non-heterosexuals, and indirectly contributing to the creation of social barriers and antagonisms, rather than to their demystification (Stychin 2003; Binnie 2004; Stella 2007; Sarajeva 2008). A broader focus on sexual citizenship (Richardson 2000) may contribute to addressing other issues of social justice related to sexuality, such as prostitution, sexually transmitted diseases and sexual violence, which are also rife in Russian society, while also challenging deeply ingrained prejudices and promoting equality for non-heterosexuals.

## Appendix One: Key informant interviews

Many public figures in the Moscow LGBT community routinely use pseudonyms, and I have stuck to this use, unless they specifically asked to be identified with their real names. In other cases have assumed that informants did not want to have their full details made public; in the interest of anonymity, respondents are referred to by their first name only (Uran and Masha, Ol'ga and Lena), or by their first name and patronymic (Elena Grigor'evna).

### Pilot Study (May-July 2004)

N. 1 pilot: Igor' Semenovitch Kon, academic, author of pioneering work on Russian sexuality/homosexuality (Moscow, 9 June 2004)

N. 2 pilot: Ed Mishin (pseudo.), leader of the LGBT organisation *la+la* and entrepreneur (director of the gay magazine *Kvir*, manager of the websites gay.ru, lesbi.ru, and of the magazine *Indigo*). (Moscow, 11 June 2004)

N. 3 pilot: Ol'ga Gert (pseudo.), editor of the lesbian magazine *Ostrov* (Moscow region, 27 June 2004)

### Main fieldwork (April-October 2005)

N. 1: Elena Grigor'evna, founder and director of the Moscow Gay and Lesbian Archive (Moscow, 5 May 2005)

N. 2: Uran and Masha, representatives of the publishing house Labrys (Moscow, 20 June 2005)

N. 3: Ol'ga and Elena, representatives of the women's association *Tolerantnost'* (Moscow region, 2 July 2005)

N. 4: Lena Botsman (pseudo.), founder of the *Klub Svobodnogo Poseshcheniia* (Moscow, 5 September 2005)

N. 5: Ol'ga Suvorova, leader of the lesbian organisation *Pinkstar* and editor of the website lesbi.ru (9 September 2005)

## **Appendix Two: Key informants interview scenario**

### **a. Structure and management**

1. When, and under what circumstances, was your organisation/association/group formed?
2. How did activists and volunteers get together, how did you meet?
3. How is the organisation/association/group managed?

### **b. Activities and aims**

4. Can you describe the range of activities the organisation/association/group is involved in?
5. What are the main aims of the organisation/association/group, and how did they change over time?

### **c. Registration**

6. Is your organisation/association/group officially registered? If so, is it registered as a lesbian/LGBT organisation? Did you face any problems in the process?

### **d. Resources and collaborations**

7. What financial and human resources do you rely on?
8. Do you get any support from international organisations and/or funding bodies?
9. Do you work closely with other similar organisations/associations/groups?

### **f. Directions for future development**

10. How would you like to develop your activity in future?

## Appendix Three: Pilot study questionnaire

### Анкета

Это исследование на тему дискриминации людей нетрадиционной сексуальной ориентации и также о восприятии идентичности и сообщества у геев и лесбиянок. Если Вы хотите принять участие в нашем исследовании, заполните, пожалуйста, эту анкету. Обратите внимание на то, что собранная информация останется конфиденциальной и не передается третьим лицам. Если у вас есть вопросы об исследовании или по поводу соблюдения конфиденциальности, или просто желаете получить добавочную информацию, свяжитесь, пожалуйста, с Франческой (тел.).

#### Персональные данные респондента:

Имя респондента:
Фамилия (по желанию):
Пол:
Возраст:
Профессия:
Место проживания:

1. Кому Вы обнародовали свои сексуальные наклонности (членам семьи, друзьям, коллегам...)?
  
2. Испытывали дискриминацию по поводу вашей сексуальной ориентации, или возникались неприятности?
  
3. Как, на ваш взгляд, общество воспринимает вообще люди нетрадиционной ориентацией?
  
4. Какие, на ваш взгляд, самые важные вопросы для людей нетрадиционной ориентацией?

Если согласитесь на интервью оставьте, пожалуйста, ваш номер телефона (интервью не требует больше пол часа) \_\_\_\_\_

☺ Спасибо за вашу помощь в заполнении анкеты ☺



## Appendix Four: Information sheet

### Информация о защите личных данных

*Приглашаем Вас принять участие в социологическом исследовании о тематической субкультуре. Исследование основано на личные интервью, в ходе которых предлагаем респондентам поделиться своим опытом и мнением по этому поводу.*

Личные идентифицирующие данные не требуются; собранная информация останется конфиденциальной и не передается третьим лицам.

Как правило, содержание интервью записывается на диктофон. Однако, Вы можете отказаться от этого до начала интервью, и, по желанию, диктофон может быть выключен в любой момент. Вы можете отказаться ответить на определенные вопросы, а также прекратить интервью в любой момент. Будут иметь доступ к записи интервью только исследователь и носитель русского языка, занимающийся расшифровкой.

Результаты исследования будут опубликованы в виде отчета, кандидатской диссертации и, возможно, научных статей. Текст интервью может быть цитированный частично или целиком. При публикации результатов используются псевдонимы и изменяются приметы респондента, а также легко узнаваемые события и людей, упомянутых в интервью.

При желании Вы можете ознакомиться с расшифровкой записи и с результатами исследования (оставьте, пожалуйста, свой email или адрес).

*Если будут вопросы об исследовании, по поводу соблюдения конфиденциальности, или просто желаете получить добавочную информацию, обращайтесь ко мне, пожалуйста..*

Тел. (в Москве): 180-49-97 (дом.),  
8-915-292-19-26 (моб.)  
(до 11-го Июля 2005)

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☺ Спасибо за Вашу помощь ☺

## Appendix Five: Interview scenario

The schedule that follows provided the underlying structure for each ethnographic interview. Given my limitations in conducting interviews in a foreign language, prompts were used fairly consistently; the schedule, however, was used in a flexible manner, following on themes raised by interviewees themselves.

As a way of establishing rapport, I usually started the interview by following on from details that were already known to me about interviewees (e.g. context where we met, or common acquaintances), or from broad questions. Follow-up questions were designed to elicit narratives about concrete experiences.

Labels and categories were deliberately avoided in the early parts of the interview, in order to allow prevailing lexical uses to emerge. Relationship history and exploration of 'queer' networks and spaces were discussed before asking more specifically about women's own self-identifications.

Women were generally alerted about the intimate character of the topic addressed before the interview was scheduled. They were generally prepared, and often willing, to talk about present and past relationships. At times relationship issues and personal relations with close ones (family members, friends etc.) were an emotional or awkward topic; however, women were not pushed to disclose particularly intimate details.

### a. General opening questions

- Can you tell me a bit about yourself?
- Where were you born? Have you always lived in Moscow/UI'ianovsk?
- Can you tell me about your family/education/work?

### b. Relationship history

- How did you meet (current partner/girlfriend)?

Как ты познакомилась с...

- **How did your relationship with (current/previous partner/girlfriend) develop?**

Как дальше сформировались ваши отношения?

- **How did you decide to move in together?**

Как вы дошли до совместной жизни?

- **Can you tell me about your first relationship/affair with a woman?**

Расскажи про свои первый роман/свои первые отношения с женщиной.

- **Did you feel attracted to women before that?**

До этого были ли потребности быть с женщиной?

- **How did you realise you were attracted to women?**

Как ты поняла, что тебя привлекают женщины?

- **Did you try to repress those feelings/desires?**

Ты сопротивлялась с этим чувством/желанием?

- **How did you learn about the existence of same-sex relations?**

Как ты узнала о существовании однополых отношениях?

- **Have you had relations/experiences with men?**

Были ли у тебя опыт/отношения с мужчиной?

- **Do your relationships with men differ from those with women? In what ways?**

Чем отличаются твои отношения с женщинами и с мужчинами?

### c. Social circles

- **Tell me about your family. What do they do? What are they like?**

Расскажи про свою семью. Кем работают родители? Какие они за люди?

- **Do you have close relations with family members?**

Какие у вас отношения в семье?

- **In what circles do you socialise?**

Кто твои друзья, каков твой круг общения?

- **Do family members/friends/acquaintances know about your sexual orientation?**

Родные/друзья знают о своей ориентацией?

- **What is their attitude to your sexuality? How do you expect them to react if they learned about your sexuality?**  
Как они к этому относятся? Какая реакция ожидаешь от них?
- **Do people at work know?**  
На работе знают?
- **Can you behave openly/be open in ... (context or place, e.g. the street).**  
Можешь держаться открыто перед .../ на улице?

**d. Lesbian/queer circles**

- **Do you often go to ... (organisation, club, initiative)?**  
Часто бываешь в ...?
- **Do you hang out in lesbian/*temnye* circles? Have you frequented them for long?**  
Ты вообще общаешься в лесбийских/темных кругах? Долго общаешься?
- **How did you find this network?**  
Как ты нашла эту тусовку?
- **Where do you usually meet? What do you do?**  
Какие у вас места сбора/встреч? Что вы делаете вместе?
- **Are there any cult films/singers/writers in this circle? Which ones do you like/dislike?**  
Есть какие-то культовые фильмы/писатели/певцы в этой среде?  
(Какие из них ты любишь/не любишь?)
- **They say that lesbian sexuality is a fashionable topic now in Russia. Do you agree? What do you think about it?**  
Говорят, что лесбийская тема сейчас модная в России. Ты согласна? Как ты к этому относишься?
- **Do your heterosexual and homosexual circles of friends interact?**  
Разные круга общения, темные и нетемные, пересекаются?
- **What do you think of the lesbian community/lesbian organisations?**  
Как ты относишься к лесбийскому сообществу/организациям?
- **What do you think of the issue of gay rights (for example partnership rights)?**

Как ты относишься к вопросу прав людей нетрадиционной ориентацией (например партнерство)?

e. **Self-identification**

- **How do you identify/call yourself in relation to your sexual orientation?**

Как ты называешь себя? Какие слова употребляешь, чтобы говорить о своей ориентацией?

## Appendix Six: Socio-demographic questionnaire

**Интервью н. \_\_\_\_\_**

### Анкета

Приглашаю вас заполнить анкету. Личные идентифицирующие данные не требуются; собранная информация останется конфиденциальной и не передается третьим лицам.

**Имя**

**Год рождения**

**Место рождения**

**Место проживания**

**Гражданство**

**Национальность**

**Семейное положение**

Чем Вы занимаетесь  
(учитесь, работаете...)

**Образование**

**Специальность**

**Профессия**

😊 **Спасибо за вашу помощь в заполнении анкеты** 😊

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Если у вас есть вопросы об исследовании, по поводу соблюдения конфиденциальности, или просто желаете получить дополнительную информацию, свяжитесь, пожалуйста, со мной (Франческа Стелла, тел., email [zvezdochka75@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:zvezdochka75@yahoo.co.uk)).

## Appendix Seven: Table of interviewees' socio-economic data

Name	Date of interview	Place of residence	Education	Employment	Marital status	Living with a female partner	Date of birth
Lara	24/06/2004	Moscow	Higher	Lawyer	Divorced	No	1981
Nadia	27/06/2004	Greater Moscow	Higher	Psychologist	Not married	Yes	1972
Galia	27/06/2004	Greater Moscow	Higher	Graphic designer	Not married	Yes	1959
Zhanna	29/06/2004	Greater Moscow	Higher	Photographer	Divorced	No	1962
Ul'iana	29/06/2004	Greater Moscow	Higher	Lawyer	Not married	No	1978
Aglaia	02/07/2004	Moscow	Higher		Not married	No	1980
Alia	29/04/2005	Greater Moscow	Higher	Employee in a publishing house	Not married	No	1972
Natasha	04/05/2005	Moscow	Higher	Graphic designer	Not married	No	1978
Dasha	04/05/2005	Greater Moscow	Higher	Book-keeper	Not married	No	1973
Aleksandra	05/05/2005	Moscow	Higher	Teacher/translator	Divorced	No	1946
Lena	07/05/2005	Moscow	Incomplete higher	Programmist	Married	No	1978
Iana	08/05/2005	Moscow	Higher	Physiotherapist	Not married	Yes	1966

Name	Date of interview	Place of residence	Education	Employment	Marital status	Living with a female partner	Date of birth
Oksana	08/05/2005	Moscow	Secondary	Employee in an online shop	Not married	Yes	1969
Kseniia	14/05/2005	Moscow	Higher	Manager in a commercial business	Not married	Yes	1978
Liuba	15/05/2005	Greater Moscow	Higher	Engineer	Not married	No	1962
Veronika	15/05/2005	Moscow	Higher	Manager in a commercial business	Widowed	Yes	1963
Valentina	15/05/2005	Moscow	Higher	Real estate agent	Divorced	Yes	1969
Varvara	18/05/2005	Moscow	Incomplete higher	Bookkeeper	Not married	No	1978
Masha	20/05/2005	Moscow	Higher	System analyst	Not married	No	1982
Vera	25/05/2005	Moscow	Incomplete higher	Employee in an advertisement firm	Not married	No	1980
Nastia	07/06/2005	Moscow	Incomplete higher	Unemployed	Not married	No	1981
Ira	07/06/2005	Moscow	Secondary-specialist	Theatre worker	Not married	Yes	1979
Tania	07/06/2005	Moscow	Higher	Teacher	Divorced	Yes	1969
Sasha	13/06/2005	Greater Moscow	Higher	Assistant in an architect firm	Not married	No	1982



Name	Date of interview	Place of residence	Education	Employment	Marital status	Living with a female partner	Date of birth
Zinaida	14/06/2005	Greater Moscow	Higher	Secretary	Not married	No	1979
Raissa	16/06/2005	Moscow	Higher	Employee in a publishing house	Divorced	No	1963
Liudmila	18/06/2005	Moscow	Higher	Real estate agent	Not married	Yes	1967
Aniuta	22/06/2005	Moscow	Higher	Museum worker	Engaged to be married	No	1978
Katia	24/06/2005	Moscow	Higher	Translator	Married	No	1956
Marina	27/06/2005	Moscow	Higher	Employee in a publishing house	Divorced	No	1956
Ol'ga	28/06/2005	Moscow	Incomplete higher	Employee in a publishing house	Not married	No	1975
Sveta	01/07/2005	Ul'ianovsk	Higher	Doctor	Not married	Yes	1978
Kristina	01/07/2005	Ul'ianovsk	Incomplete higher	Call centre worker	Not married	Yes	1982
Renata	09/08/2005	Ul'ianovsk	Incomplete higher	Lawyer apprentice	Not married	No	1984
Viktoriia	11/08/2005	Ul'ianovsk	Incomplete higher	University student	Divorced	No	1983
Marusia	12/08/2005	Ul'ianovsk	Higher	Lecturer	Not married	No	1964
Zulia	16/08/2005	Ul'ianovsk	Higher	Lawyer	Not married	No	1980

Name	Date of interview	Place of residence	Education	Employment	Marital status	Living with a female partner	Date of birth
Sonia	16/08/2005	Ul'ianovsk	Secondary specialist	Manager in a commercial business	Not married	No	1973
Zheniia	21/08/2005	Ul'ianovsk	Secondary specialist	Nurse	Not married	No	1977
Mania	22/08/2005	Ul'ianovsk	Incomplete higher	Unemployed	Not married	No	1983
Asia	01/07/2005	Ul'ianovsk	Incomplete higher	Student	Not married	No	1988
Zoia	23/08/2005	Ul'ianovsk	Higher	Teacher	Engaged to be married	No	1978
Elizaveta	23/08/2005	Ul'ianovsk	Secondary	Tram driver	Married	No	1978
Valia	01/07/2005	Ul'ianovsk	Higher	Manager in a commercial business	Not married	No	1982
Maia	26/08/2005	Ul'ianovsk	Secondary specialist	Factory worker	Not married	No	1984
Liza	27/08/2005	Ul'ianovsk	Incomplete higher	Janitor	Divorced	No	
Alisa	30/08/2005	Ul'ianovsk	Incomplete higher	Student	Not married	No	1984
Alina	30/08/2005	Ul'ianovsk	Incomplete higher	Student	Not married	No	1984
Al'bina	14/09/2005	Ul'ianovsk	Incomplete secondary	Lap dancer	Not married	No	1984

Name	Date of interview	Place of residence	Education	Employment	Marital status	Living with a female partner	Date of birth
Klavdiia	16/09/2005	Ul'ianovsk	Secondary specialist	Unemployed	Widowed	No	1971
Lada	18/09/2005	Ul'ianovsk	Secondary	Shop assistant	Not married	Yes	1978
Tamara	18/09/2005	Ul'ianovsk	Secondary	Bar worker	Not married	Yes	1980
Avdotiia	18/09/2005	Ul'ianovsk	Incomplete secondary	Builder	Not married	Yes	1972
Eva	20/09/2005	Ul'ianovsk	Higher	University administrator	Not married	No	1965
Ania	23/09/2005	Ul'ianovsk	Secondary specialist	Security guard	Not married	Yes	1978
Bella	23/09/2005	Ul'ianovsk	Secondary	Security guard	Not married	Yes	1982
Lidiia	24/09/2005	Ul'ianovsk	Higher	Teacher	Not married	No	1973
Margarita	27/09/2005	Ul'ianovsk	Higher	Teacher	Widowed	No	1962
Olesia	30/09/2005	Moscow	Incomplete higher	Student	Not married	No	1988
Roza	01/10/2005	Moscow	Incomplete higher	Student	Not married	No	1984
Evdokiia	01/10/2005	Moscow	Incomplete higher	Student	Not married	No	1983

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