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## **NARRATIVES AND SELF-DETERMINATION: HISTORIES ON PERSONAL SEXUALITY AND THE SEXUALITY OF THE OTHER\***

**Abstract:** This research deals with the sexuality of young males based upon their narratives. Through their memories, they create a history of their personal sexuality. This is how a periodization of experiences related to same sex sexual relations is formed. Personal perception on one's own sexuality is reflected upon the continuous process of construction of one's own gender.

**Key words:** male same sex sexuality, narratives, self-determination

Personal narratives are the source of information on same sex relations of young males - it is a verbalized variant of individual memory on personal same sex relations. In these narratives, based upon personal memories, young males create a history of their personal sexuality. They perceived their sexuality through their every-day activities, as their own experiences. Based upon the structure of narratives one can see how the periodization of the experiences takes place; they see themselves in a time perspective, and build everything about themselves in close relation with their personal biological cycle which, according to the notions, is interpreted as a life cycle. They date certain sexual experiences that they consider important for the sexuality shift, when a *passage* occurs, a change in the personal sexual identity; this is how they perceive and identify their personal sexuality and in this manner they put it in a process of gender construction that lasts indefinitely.

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Personal sexuality contained in the notions is in continuous relation with personal gender. Personal perception on one's own sexuality is reflected upon the gender construction process: "...narratives of personal experience focus on past events, i.e. they are about "what happened" (Ochs and Capps 1996, 24). Such narratives are told aiming to create a certain connection of the events that took place in the past, those which happen in the present and those which will take place in the future, in order to create 'a story' on personal sexuality. Narrations could be related to folk notions on the existence of linear, every-day time.

### **The interview as a social situation**

Social identity of a person can be noted through the social situation in which this person is found. Goffman understands them as "a physical arena anywhere within which an entering person finds himself exposed to the immediate presence of one or more others; and a gathering, all persons present, even if only bound together by the norms of civil inattention, or less still, mutual vulnerability" (Goffman 1977, 301-331). In our research the social situation is realized through the context of the established and the responded/not responded questions, i.e. the interviews between young males from the community included in the process of research, both as researchers and informants. In our research interviews serve as a complex of episodes on different issues related to sexuality of the researcher and the informant. This interaction face to face between the young males enables to illustrate notions on personal sexual experiences, where the personal gender is created through the narratives. "At one level of analysis the study of turns at talking and things said during one's turn are part of the study of face-to-face interaction. Face-to-face interaction has its own regulations; it has its own processes and its own structure, and these don't seem to be intrinsically linguistic in character, however often expressed through a linguistic medium" (Goffman 1964, 136). Thus through narratives on personal same sex sexual relations young males build their personal gender; through interaction face to face during the interview, depending on where the power lies, one influences the construction of the personal gender - especially of the one who at the moment has a certain dilemma; though the interview as a social situation a certain transition is initiated in terms of self-identification. Thus we can agree that "gender itself is constituted through interaction" (West and Zimmerman 1987, 129).

The goal of this text is to "explore how gender might be exhibited or portrayed through interaction, and thus be seen as "natural", while it is produced as a socially organized achievement" (*ibid.*). This was shown by the ethnographic material, through the interviews between the young males when the

subject matter was personal sexuality as a natural pre-condition, versus the notions of others, that considered same sex sexual orientation either as a punishment, or as a disease. The notion on personal male same sex sexuality as natural can be explained if we, for a moment, turn to Zarana Papić, who analyses the core of the term *nature*. She finds that the essence of *nature* presents a certain meaning that "as such is not a knowledge that is derived directly from nature...but is always mediated, culturally constructed knowledge inside a certain historical epistemic form and the 'nets of understanding' of the human and natural world" (Papić 1997, 97-98). Thus, for Papić "each time one tries to understand something that is, or that one thinks lies outside of him, no matter if this is nature.. 'natural condition' or 'nature' of sexes, in fact (in a metaphoric but also in a real sense) every time he is getting to know himself - through himself he gets to know his world in a certain environment. Through this process he in fact never meets nature as such, but his vision and construction on nature, by which he attempts to discover her 'real structure' (*ibid.*). According to this author, "the notion of nature as 'such' does not exist independently - having in mind that it is possible only inside a certain cultural construction of knowledge as a pre-condition of the very term, as well as that a certain term for nature cannot be understood outside the context of the culture in which it exists.., the notion of 'nature' is a relational term which does not exist independently, for itself, but always in a pair, in a relation and in a 'dialog' with another term in which it is "reflected", from which it differs, from which it gets additional meaning, or to which it is contrasted, stands above or under it. And vice versa" (*ibid.*, 99). The most important to get to know this term is to establish "its dynamic place in that context" (*ibid.*). The dynamics of understanding nature is in correlation to reality, which in field-based cases has proven to be a cultural constructed element: "The world at large, nature, the facts of life, whatever they may be, are always parts of man's perception of them as that perception are formulated through his culture. The world at large is not, indeed it cannot be, independent of the way in which his culture formulates his vision of what he is seeing. There are only cultural constructions of reality, and these cultural constructions of realities are decisive in what is perceived, what is experienced, what is understood. In this sense, then, `nature` and `the facts of life` are always a special case of the cultural definitions of things; they have no independent existence apart from how they are defined by the culture.... Reality it itself constructed by the beliefs, understandings, and comprehensions entailed in cultural meanings" (Hanson 1979, 516-517).

The ethnographic materials belong to the context of such analysis of reality, in which besides speaking about personal sexuality as something which is naturally pre-given, male same sex sexuality is treated as an experience as well. In order to analyze the different levels of the notions of sexual experiences, on the part of ethnography we used "narratives of personal experiences"

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(Ochs and Capps 1996, 19), which can be defined as a "verbalized, visualized and/or embodied framings of a sequence of actual or possible life events" (*ibid.*). "Personal narrative simultaneously is born out of experience and gives shape to experience. In this sense, narrative and self are inseparable" (*ibid.*, 20). This is why the narrative gives a plenty of possibilities. When young males speak about themselves they often see themselves through past experiences, when all they speak about is in first person singular, or first person plural, when they try to find their social "I", this is how young males build their self-determination. Such a construction of a notion of oneself, through continuous upgrading of this notion, is simultaneous and mixed with the construction of personal gender. Thus one can say that "Self is here broadly understood to be an unfolding reflective awareness of being –in – the – world, including a sense of one's past and future...and the notion that narrative is an essential resource in the struggle to bring experiences to conscious awareness" (*ibid.*, 21). One can also add that through using narratives young males try to "know ourselves as we use narrative to apprehend experiences and navigate relationships with others" (*ibid.*, 20-21), in this case young male that have an interest to establish certain communication aiming to realize personal sexuality.

### **On sex and sex categories**

Sex lies in the basis of the fundamental code. Social interactions and structures are built based upon it. "... a code which also establishes the conceptions individuals have concerning their fundamental human nature.." (Goffman 1977, 301). Sexuality in Macedonian folk culture "is perceived as a subject of reflection, not only as an instrument for fulfilling certain instinctive, biological function" (Јакимовска 2007, 49). Similarly as sex, sexuality is perceived as a somatic fact created as a cultural effect (Fausto-Sterling 1999)<sup>1</sup>, or more clearly, male same sex sexuality is perceived as a somatic, bio-social fact created as cultural effect. I. Jakimovska tries to define a social line that differentiates the biological aspect of sexuality, in order to clearly perceive its social function. She finds that the "'translated' sexes at the level of society create the social identity of the individual, i.e. his/her social status, that is largely determined by his/her sex background" (Јакимовска 2007, 50). Thus "according to one's own social determination, individuals develop their own feeling on what kind of identity or status they actually have, or what kind of status each of them would like to have" (*ibid.*). Having in mind the need of social exchange between these levels, sex binary system in the frames of cultural understanding, that according to this author in a biological sense exists also as a biolo-

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<sup>1</sup> See: <http://bms.bronjn.edu/faculty/f/afs/afs.html>

gical fact and has been registered by natural sciences that deal with human as species, is spilled over to the social sphere, attaining...a concrete applied social normativity (*ibid.*, 58). In the frames of such normativity people are defined according to heteronormative rules that create sex classes. Regarding this 'translation' of sex at the level of society and its transformation into social identity, Goffman writes: "In all societies, all infants at birth are placed in one or in the other of two sex classes, the placement accomplished by inspection of the infant's naked person, specifically its genitalia, these being visibly dimorphic - a placement practice not dissimilar to that employed in regard to domestic animals. This placement by physical configuration allows a sex-linked label of identification" (Goffman 1977, 302). The process of entering the social frames by the young males according to their sex continues. "From the start, persons who are sorted into the male class and persons who are sorted into the other are given different treatment, acquire different experience, enjoy and suffer different expectations. In response there is objectively overlaid on a biological grid-extending it, neglecting it, countering it-a sex-class-specific way of appearing, acting, feeling. Every society elaborates sex-class in this way, although every society does this after its own fashion. Viewed by the researcher as a way of characterizing an individual, this complex can be called gender" (*ibid.*, 303). Thus "the cultural perspective on gender perceives women and man as natural and unambiguously defined categories of existence".(Булох і Булох 2006, 102-103). Thus, "the accepted cultural perspective on gender views women and men as naturally and unequivocally defined categories of being" (Garfinkel 1967, 18-116 from West and Zimmerman 1987, 128).

As we have previously seen from the ethnographic materials on male same sex sexuality, gender classification exists in the frames of the gay world. This was noticed at few levels, but the most important level seems to be the one where the realization of sexuality is analyzed, when gender roles are created through the very act of a same sex relationship. The gay world is a community with clear norms, in which each one that feels as its member, or has a tendency to become one, should accept the normativity of this community and to apply it. As a reminder, one can mention the part of the ethnography that refers to normativity in the gay world, in which the construction of space and the maintenance of the borders of the gay world is managed. According to what could be seen, there is a tendency to manage the space even 'outside' its borders. There are examples where one can see how gay/bi- young males influence the process so that other young males could create an "appropriate" gender, since they declare themselves in the frames of the gay world, or are still not aware that they have constructed another type of category of gender, due to which they put themselves in an unclear position among the members of the gay community.

Thus it is suggested that one can analyze important but often disregarded differences between sex, the category of sex and gender. "Sex is a determina-

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tion made through the application of socially agreed upon biological criteria for classifying persons as females and males" (*ibid.*, 127). According to authors West and Zimmerman "The criteria for classification can be genitalia at birth or chromosomal typing before birth, and they not necessarily agree with one another" (*ibid.*). If the idea of sexuality in folk culture of Macedonians is put into a function of fertilization/reproduction and continuation of the human kind, among young males that practice same sex relations sexuality is put into a function of social survival through: firstly, self-discovery and self-determination of themselves in the frames of the category of sex, through determination of other young males, of close friends and same sex partners in every day life (community with which the young male is self-identifying with). This means that such "Placement in a *sex category* is achieved through application of the sex criteria, but in everyday life, categorization is established and sustained by the socially required identificatory displays that proclaim one's membership in one or the other category. In this sense, one's sex category presumes one's sex and stands as proxy for it in many situations, but sex and sex category can vary independently; what is, it is possible to claim membership in a sex category even when the sex criteria are lacking" (*ibid.*). Thus, through discovering themselves and the ones whom they find important for them in the categories of sex, young males stabilize a certain sexual identity and start to accept the rules of same sex community. "*Gender*, in contrast is the activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one's sex category. Gender activities emerge from and bolster claims to membership in sex category" (*ibid.*). Authors West and Zimmerman state that "recognition of the analytical independence of sex, sex category, and gender is essential for understanding the relationships among these elements and the interactional work involved in "being" a gendered person in society" (*ibid.*). The gender identity itself is complicated by the fact that the person could present itself in a number of different gender roles, some of which society classifies as abnormal or deviant. Thus, the young male could see himself as any type of the numerous types of males, as an "aggressive male, gentle male, as feminized, and even to imagine himself as a woman" (Булох і Булох 2006, 103).

### **Conclusion**

This text analyzes the notion on sexuality, seen through narratives of young males that have same sex relations, told to oneself and for other young males. Sexuality is perceived through every-day activities, seen as a personal experience. This is how the manner of periodization of experiences related to sexuality is created; they see themselves through a time distance, and build

everything about themselves in close relation with their personal biological cycle which, according to the notions, is interpreted as a life cycle; they date certain life experiences that present a *passage*, and they mark them as sexual experiences that are considered as important for change of sexuality, through which a change of personal sexual identity takes place; they perceive and identify their personal sexuality and in this manner they put it in a process of gender construction that lasts indefinitely. According to the notions it seems that personal sexuality is in a continuous relation to personal gender. Personal perception of one's own sexuality is reflected upon the process of building gender identity of young males. Such narratives are told aiming to create a connection between the events from the past, present and the future, aiming to create a "story" on personal sexuality. The telling of narratives can be related to folk notions on the existence of linear, every-day time. The notion of oneself is built upon certain mythologized notions where young males try to establish a certain date as a beginning. In the narratives where young males are self-identifying as gay/bi- there is a clearer structure of a "story" of oneself as gay/bi- young males. Based upon ethnographic materials social identity of an individual can be noted through social situations in which it finds itself. Empirical material offers a possibility to observe the social situation at two levels, on one side the interview is a moment of interaction between young males from the community, when personal sex/gender identity of the young males is created through narratives.

In the frames of experiences, personal sexuality survives as a natural pre-given phenomenon. The dynamics of the notion of what is natural is in correlation to reality, that in many cases has been confirmed as a culturally constructed category. This is because young males discover the world around them through personal experiences, and the notions related to them are attained in the frames of the culture in which they live.

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### NARATIVI I SAMOODREĐENJE: POVESTI O LIČNOJ I SEKSUALNOSTI DRUGIH

Ovo se istraživanje bavi seksualnošću mladih muškaraca na osnovu njihovih narativa. Preko svojih sećanja, oni tvore istoriju, povest svoje lične seksualnosti. Na ovaj se način formira periodizacija iskustava koja se odnose na istopolne seksualne odnose. Lična percepcija vlastite seksualnosti se reflektuje na kontinuirani proces konstruisanja vlastitog roda (*gender-a*).

**Ključne reči:** muška istopolna seksualnost, narativi, samoodređenje