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“Why Is It so Easy to Seduce Us?” Young Female Students’ Narratives of Extremist Online Recruitment

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Abstract

The article analyzes the rhetoric of third-year female students of Chechen State University related to the online recruitment of women into extremist organizations. The author analyzes the attitudes of the young women, the levels of their fear/anxiety about online recruitment, and documents the main discourses and rhetoric regarding female departures to Syria and Iraq. Focus groups showed that the rhetoric of unreasonableness is the dominant way that female departures to the Middle East are perceived. “Weak” and “easily manipulatable”, women who are “crushed by housework and domestic violence” are contrasted to “experienced and smart” manipulators-recruiters who pull them into terrorist networks. Given that the problem of radicalization in Chechnya remains acute, the author advocates for greater contributions from gender psychologists and discourse analysis professionals to research the phenomenon of female online recruitment in the North Caucasus context.

Young People in the Chechen Republic

Young people have often been hostages of circumstance of both contemporary and previous generations’ ideological activities and transformations. Young people of the Chechen Republic, in particular, have come of age in a turbulent time in the history of their country—in the midst of geopolitical conflicts, social and economic reforms, and moral and spiritual confrontations. Contemporary Chechen society is characterized by high polarization and social and ideological polymorphism, under which the attitudes and value systems of individuals representing the same ethnic culture have diverged in different directions. The impact of violent extremism on some youngsters, typically exposed through the Internet, is considerable and requires vigorous theoretical and empirical approaches for analysis. In this article the motivations of young people, especially girls, to join extremist organizations, are analyzed through the lens of students’ daily discourses that emerged around this issue.

Explaining Research Methods

The subject of this research are female students, the object—their discourses about other girls who joined violent extremist organizations through online communications. The spectrum of attitudes was determined by the extent to which the “departures to Syria” of their peers were problematized or de-problematized by the respondents. It allowed me to measure the attitudes of the youth, the level of fear/anxiety among the girls about online recruitment, as well as to understand the main discourses and rhetoric regarding female departures and the meanings produced by them.

Before proceeding to the empirical analysis concerning the rhetoric and attitudes surrounding “departure”, it

is important to clarify what is meant by the broader concept of “social problems”, of which departure to Syria is a component. There are two main approaches by which to consider and analyze social issues. The first approach argues that there exist objective circumstances that represent a threat to society. Here, researchers refer to such concepts as “social pathology”, “social disorganization”, “deviation”, “dysfunction”, and “structural contradiction” (Jenkins 2003, 49). The second approach is based on the idea that the “problem” has no ontological basis, that it is a linguistic construction of a rhetoric containing change requirements. It develops within the framework of social constructionism (Jenkins 2003).

There are also researchers who study the ways of constituting a social problem through discourse (Holstein and Gubrium 2008; Polach 2010). The main focus of their attention are the “methods used by people to define (and institutionalize) anything as a social problem, since it is precisely these methods that essentially constitute the phenomenon of social problems” (Ibarra and Kitsuyuz 2007, 55). Despite the multitude of theories offered by media discourse, lived experiences and *reality* rarely come into the view of researchers; in particular, few research projects analyze everyday interpretations of terrorism.

One of the few examples of such research is provided by Klas Borell, which describes the quotidian practices and representations of people living in a territory subject to terrorist attacks (Borell 2008). In his work, Borell does not rely on a constructivist paradigm and does not seek to analyze constructs articulated by his subjects. Instead, his work focuses on providing a description of everyday interpretations of “danger” and “safety” as associated with these phenomena. The data obtained

allows us to trace how public discourse is transformed through the influence of personal experience and how it changes everyday practices. Rhetorical idioms are the means by which public discourse is problematized. Ibarra and Kitsuyuz describe rhetorical idioms such as rhetorics of loss, empowerment, danger, foolishness and disasters (Ibarra and Kitsuyuz 2007, 72–84). In recent years, the constructivist approach has turned towards the everyday realm.

As Ibarra and Kitsuyuz note, “the discourse of social problems is encountered in all kinds of forums and among the widest circle of persons” (Ibarra and Kitsuyuz 2007, 106). Some constructivists are trying to analyze the construction of social problems which are “less visible, disguised in various ways—for example, due to the use of subcultural style—but are no less involved in expressing one’s position in relation to moral ordering or commenting on the positions of others” (Ibarra and Adorjan 2017).

Why Are Young Girls Leaving for Syria?

My goal in this research is to reconstruct the daily discourse of university students related to the problem of “young girl’s departure to Syria” as a result of recruitment through social media and the internet. Two focus groups with 18 and 21 participants, respectively, were carried out involving Chechen State University Law Faculty third-year students. The interview guide included several semantic blocs measuring interests, values, the frequency of online communications, online publications of personal data in social networks, as well as the level of comfort/security and discomfort/danger related to online recruitment and departures.

The focus groups found that female students have neither anxiety while discussing this issue nor use disaster rhetoric. In some cases, they demonstrated elements of bewildered (rather than anxious) rhetoric: “they say they force [women] to marry the militant after the death of the husband, that’s so strange...”

The respondents’ rhetoric was also colored with feelings of pity and concern: “I feel sorry for [their] relatives and moms”, “now, what should be done with the children who were born during the war?”

This kind of rhetoric does not mean that respondents do not recognize the potential danger of online recruitment; they do, but they feel fully confident that recruitment only happens to naive and romantic girls, or those from dysfunctional families, and that it would not affect them personally.

“I think it’s stupid to believe beautiful online stories, although some people are naive, so they lap it up” (respondent, 19 y/o).

Some respondents have personal experience of such recruitment attempts:

“My boyfriend told me all the time that a true Muslim should give their life for the faith. But when he asked if I would go with him [to Syria], I told him it is impossible without our parents’ blessings, eventually he stopped our communication. I heard later that he was gone, maybe he left, I don’t know” (respondent, 18 y/o).

The tension felt during the focus groups was palpable; several factors could explain this, though we believe two are the most important. First, the issue of radicalization is extremely securitized in Chechnya; as such, there is a significant fear to be too frank in judgments due to the security services’ close control over any manifestations of “loyalty” to extremists. Second, “preventive measures” such as lectures and conferences on terrorism and extremism issues are often held in educational establishments; participants may have been suspicious of our focus groups as being connected to official republican programming. Official rhetoric is based on threats, sanctions, and publicly stigmatizing the relatives of the people who left for Syria, blaming them for “allowing this to happen”, “not preventing” the situation, or “raising their kids badly”. Therefore, the students were reluctant to share opinions evaluating any particular cases. It is clear that the risk of sparking the interest of law enforcement or exposing their acquaintances to the special services’ scrutiny was a significant reason for them to be reserved in their comments.

Some statements could be described as deliberate reproductions of official discourse, of “the correct narrative”, in order to protect oneself and avert any suspicion of having sympathy for the girls who had left.

- “I’m sorry for their mothers and relatives” (respondent, 20 y/o)
- “These girls disgraced their families, forefathers, and nation, how could they? I don’t feel sorry for them, they had to think for themselves, how dare they?” “Did the girls really care about their parents or relatives? It seems to me they don’t love the republic or the motherland in general” (respondent, 20 y/o)

“Rhetoric of Unreasonableness”

Focus groups showed that the rhetoric of unreasonableness is the dominant way of problematizing the recruited girls’ departures. As Ibarra and Kitsuyuz posit, the use of this rhetorical idiom depends on the ability to describe the situation in terms that highlight concerns about exploitation, manipulations, and brainwashing. In the framework of this rhetoric, the recruited women were described as “trusting”, “naive”, “easily manipulatable”, “submissive”, “weak”, “looking for a brave knight”, “crushed by housework”, “romantic”, “inexperienced”, “not thinking about consequences”, “fleeing from domes-

tic violence or humiliation”, and “uneducated”. At the same time, a potential recruiter was described as a “smart psychologist” who “knows how to win the trust of a girl” and “capable of brainwashing easily”.

Perhaps the “rhetoric of unreasonableness” in respect to those who left and the description of recruiters as “smart psychologists” whom no one can resist is in fact an attempt to rationalize the recruitment of women to war and to describe them as victims. This is also confirmed indirectly by the respondents in the following narratives: “well, she followed her husband, and what else could she do, he was her husband”, or “[She was] a very smart girl, she was so modest, and these recruiters are very talented, this is how it works”.

Conclusion

In general, the discourse analysis of female students’ narratives shows that they see the following drivers of online recruitment of young women as dominant:

1. willingness to share the fate of her husband and thereby to prove her devotion to her marital and religious duties;
2. gender inequality, which in traditional local communities make women perceive terrorism as a palatable act of “equalization” with men in their struggle “for the purity of the faith”;
3. domestic violence as a factor used by extremists for the recruitment of their victims;
4. search for a romantic hero, striving for a happy marriage is one of the appeals of propaganda;
5. loneliness, the search for a purpose in life, an attempt to diversify one’s daily routine.

This study suggests that gender psychology and discourse analysis professionals should make more contributions in research on terrorism issues. It is important to strengthen preventive work with girls and to involve gender psychologists who are thematically trained as well as familiar with the skills and tools used by online recruiters.

About the Author

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