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## Torun Social Science Review

### MAKING SENSE OF THE PAST TRAUMA IN NARRATIVES OF THE SELF: MORAL SPACE OF SELF - INTERPRETATION

OLGA TABACHNIKOVA, NATALIA VINOKUROVA

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#### ABSTRACT

This paper applies modern interdisciplinary methodologies to sociological data in order to enhance our understanding of the silences and distortions inherent in post-traumatic narratives of the self, and the mechanisms behind them, by placing these narratives in historical, as well as psychological, perspective. In particular, we use a narrative psychology approach. In addition, we use gender analysis, as the study is based on a corpus of oral data collected through a series of interviews with divorced men. Our research demonstrates that post-traumatic self-narratives are shaped not only by the attempts of the respondents to conceal their moral failures by creating an alternative version of self in personal terms, but also by their desire to adhere to the norms and standards including gender stereotypes of their historical time and social strata.

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#### INTRODUCTION

Currently, the tendency towards interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary research is gaining momentum. Specialists in such fields as history, sociology, psychology, economics, political science and linguistics are trying to find a common ground, adopting those theoretical and methodological approaches, which in the past were applied only in one particular area. A distinct example of such penetration of one research method into different branches of science is a narrative method. Although the very concept of a narrative emerged relatively recently, a steady growth of interest towards narrative has manifested itself in social sciences already since the early 1980s (J. Brockmeier,

R. Harre, 2000). Of special significance to researchers is an analysis of a narrative interview. A popularity of this method is not accidental, but is determined by the importance of narratives in human life. According to Bruner, "practically we have no other ways of describing the "lived time" except in the form of a narrative" (Bruner, 1987, c.8). A narrative interview is a sufficiently unrestricted story by a respondent, without a limiting intervention by an interviewer, and without any signs of a hierarchy. Nevertheless, the interviewer does control the process and purposefully obtains the required information. From the very beginning, he/she introduces a "narrative impulse." One can say that this is a qualitative method of the highest degree that extends the cognitive abilities of the researcher. Analysing and interpreting an interview is invariably a very intricate craft, which sometimes resembles a work of a detective. The principal studies in methodology of a qualitative analysis of narrative interview materials, which have by now become classic, were accomplished in the 1980s-1990s, and over time, such analysis has become an integral part of practical research. One can list the most famous Western works, such as (Fritze Schutze, 1982, 1984; G.Rosenthal, 1993, 2003, 2004; U. Flick, 2002; J. Bruner, 1987; M. Freeman, 2001; Wortham, 2001; Denzin, Lincoln, 1989, 1994, 2003; R. Kahn R, C.Cannell, 1957; W. Labov, 1972, 2001; J. Brockmeier, 1996, 2000, 2010; Bourdieu, 2002; Rustin, 2002; Burgess, 1982; Bertaux, 1997). P. Thompson deserves a special mention, for he made a major contribution to the development of oral history and study of life histories (P. Thompson, 1993). In Russia, those who were obsessed with narrative analysis include E. Zdravomyslova, A. Temkina, 2004; Trotsuk, 2006; V. Zhuravlev, 1994; N. Evstigneeva, O. Oberemko, 2007; Tsvetaeva, 2000; Iarskaia-Smirnova, 2007. These works present not only the history and methodology of analysis, but also practical research. A large proportion of studies dedicated to narrative analysis are of an interdisciplinary character.

In our approach to the narrative, we followed the ideas of Mishler (1995), who wrote that narrative studies are essentially of three types:

(1) Those in which the research focus is upon the time between when the event occurred and the narrative in which it is discussed;

(2) Those in which the focus is upon strategies used to tell the story and/or the textual and structural elements of the narrative; and

(3) Those in which the function of the narrative is considered along with its contextual, cultural and political elements.

Regarding these three types, Mishler (1995) suggested that more inclusive research strategies should combine these research types, thereby furthering and strengthening developments in the field of narrative study.

Instead of considering a narrative approach in strict disciplinary categories, we are treating it according to Mishler as a problematic research area, which is multidisciplinary par excellence (Mishler 1995).

### Aims of the study

Our aim is to discover the narrative strategies of people who lived through a trauma, to find out what is concealed behind it and what influences their way of self-representation. Another aim is to establish, through narrative analysis, their gender stereotypes and their understanding of family and the roles within it at various levels.

## RESEARCH METHODS AND TECHNIQUES

### Data collection method

Interview is the main research method for obtaining information. At the centre of such research there lie “subjective experience, behaviour and actions of a person” (Rozhdestvenskaia, 2012). The theoretical framework that determined the specific methods and techniques of interviewing was quite broad. In part, the interviews were biographical in character, even though biographical narrative did not play a leading role. Rather, it was something intermediate between a life-narrative and self-narrative. In the process of interviewing, we tried to maintain chronological order, asking about the parents of the respondents, their school years, etc. According to Bruner, “autobiography (formal or informal) can be regarded as a number of procedures for ‘life creation’” (Bruner, 1987). An important feature of a biographical interview, which made us turn to this method, is a “close connection between biography as a subjective construct and biography as a social reality” (Semenova, 1994, p. 9).

This method has been adapted for specific purposes of our investigation. We asked the respondents to talk about their life from a particular thematic perspective. They were asked some leitmotiv questions, which would allow the narrator to move to the topic of interest to us, thus saving time of both the investigator and the respondent. In this sense, these interviews can be regarded as focused. We were building on the work of Merton, Fiske and Kendall (1991), who not only defined the nature, goals and possibilities of focused interviews, but also provided practical recommendations on how detailed answers can be obtained and verbal prompts used. Furthermore, they analysed the typical mistakes made by an interviewer and the ways to avoid them. A number of our interviews can be described as “probing” in Belanovsky’s sense. The latter linked the term “a probing interview” with the concept of probing. This technique forces respondents to complement, explain and elaborate on those issues that had already been discussed (Belanovsky, 1991). During this process, a special attention was paid to respondents’ emotions, and the questions asked were both internal, i.e. following from the respondents’ previous answers, and external, i.e. not connected to the preceding answers.

Our approach towards the analysis and interpretation of the interviews.

Since every qualitative study is unique, so is the analytical apparatus used. Our paper applies modern interdisciplinary methodologies to sociological data in order to enhance our understanding of the silences and distortions inherent in narratives of the self, and the mechanisms behind them, by placing these narratives in historical and psychological perspective. In particular, we use a narrative psychology approach which occupies an important place within contemporary psychology and attempts to decode (i.e. deconstruct and reassemble in a more “authentic” way) a self-myth inherent in self-narratives, especially those which describe life after a trauma.

As narrative research shows, in attempting to make sense of our personal traumatic past we revisit our ‘conceptions of selfhood and its ultimate connection with issues of morality, “rightness” and “goodness”’ (M. L. Crossley, 2003). We thus “create new narratives that help us make sense of life after the trauma” (A. Cento Bull, 2007). In this process, what we might call ‘the moral space of self-interpretation,

and thus the space of autobiographical memory itself, remains very much circumscribed" (M. Freeman, 2001).

An important method for analysing narratives is content analysis. We used the simplest *pragmatic* method which consists of measuring the frequency of particular objects (in our case, particular words) being mentioned in the text of the narrative. In addition, a psychological content analysis was used, directed at scrutinising the emotional colouring of the narrative (understatements, gaps, silences, temp and rhythm of speech, choice of words, etc.), which allows to assess the subtext of what has been said. The methods of content analysis suggested in (Iudin A. A., Rumin A. M., 2010) was used. Not only did the authors describe the theoretical foundations of content analysis, but also stated the general principles of working with the method, as well as the areas and specificity of its applications. However, given the limited volume of data, we did not turn to computer analysis and did not use the software package offered. We also built on the work of Rodionov who described his experience of applying content analysis precisely to interviews (Rodionov, 1978).

When analysing the narratives, we also paid attention to the narrator's belonging to a certain group, since this also affects his/her self-representation, as the works by Taylor and Wagner show (Taylor, C. 1989. Wagner, P. 2002).

Finally, we applied gender analysis when processing our data. This allowed us to clarify our respondents' ideas on gender roles and interactions within the family, their understanding of the reasons for the existence of conflicting tendencies in the field of gender relationships, and to expose their gender stereotypes. We used not only the results of gender research in social sciences (Zdravomyslova, 2003; Temkina, 2002; Kon 2009; Vinokurova, 2007 and 2015), but also in psychology (Gilligan C., 1982; Giddens A., 1997; Shawn Meghan Burn, 2006; I. Kletsina, 2001; Bendas T., 2006; McAdams, 1996).

With respect to the technique of analysis, a preliminary descriptive work that precedes interpretation was conducted at the first stage.

In theoretical terms, we used both holistic and categorisation approach to the interpretation of narratives, even though either one or the other is only considered (holistic versus categorisation approach), as in E. Krukovich, 2000. A categorisation approach implies dividing the texts obtained from different respondents into sections, ascribing separate parts or words to different categories and analysing these categories. By contrast, a holistic approach allows one to view a life story as one whole, where each part of the text is interpreted in the context of the other parts. This makes it easier to understand the meaning of any given fragment in the light of the content of the other parts of the narrative. Similarly, in medicine one can study and treat a particular organ, or to study a functioning of this organ within the entire organism. Researchers can chose any tactics for their analysis, depending on their interests. The categorisation approach in our study is useful, as it allows us to study problems or phenomena inherent in the whole group of our respondents, and to distil the typical. At the same time, we are interested in the personality of each respondent as a whole. It is important to understand their development, change of their views and priorities. That is why the holistic approach in this case is useful as well. This combination results in a more adequate interpretation of the material.

Using Iadov's terminology (Iadov, 2007), we have used two strategies: cross-analysis and case studies, based on his claim that both strategies are mutually complementary rather than conflicting.

While verifying these conclusions in our case study, our research at the same time introduces some important qualifications.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

### Information source

Our sources were oral testimonies obtained through the interviews with Russian divorced men from the milieu of Moscow intelligentsia. This study was carried out during the late Soviet era, or, more precisely, at the start of the so-called "perestroika." At this time, interviewing as a research method had already been incorporated into the range of sociological methodologies. However, it was not until the 1990s with their change of social context that it had stopped being viewed with suspicion by the broad strata of researchers in Russia. We have conducted 19 interviews in total. All our respondents had higher education. Most of them were scientists at research institutes, or university academics. Their age ranged from 25 to 48. The families of all the respondents were of nuclear type (parents with children or couples without children). All marriages were formally registered. All the divorced wives had higher education too, and were in employment. These similarities were discovered during the study. Thus the group studied was quite homogeneous.

At the start of the study, it was presumed that at the second stage divorced women from the same intelligentsia milieu will be interviewed as well. This would allow us to conduct a comparative analysis of the narrative strategies from the gender perspective, and to compare male and female ideas of the family and gender roles. However, due to a difficult economic situation of the late 1980s financial support for such a study could not be obtained.

### Traumatic experience of the respondents

These divorced men had clearly lived through a certain psychological trauma, caused by a variety of reasons.

First, a divorce as such is a traumatic experience, as respondents themselves confirm, "*Generally, a divorced person feels aggrieved.*" This is intensified by the fact that in the majority of cases (17 respondents) it was women who initiated the divorce. One of the respondents answered the question, "*When did you start thinking of divorce?*" with "*I have never had such thoughts. My wife is a different matter... She always has some thoughts.*" Another one said, "*For everybody it is better to be part of a family; but the family, in my books, must be patriarchal.*"

Secondly, the question of a living space was a big issue in Moscow at the time. There were huge queues for obtaining or even purchasing a cooperative flat. Waiting could take many years even in those cases when one was granted the right to join such a queue. Moreover, intelligentsia members did not have enough money to afford buying a cooperative flat. A free market for renting accommodations did not yet exist. After a divorce, the family had to divide their dwelling place by exchanging their flat for two smaller flats. However, this was hardly possible for technical reasons – as their common territory was normally too small for such an exchange. If there were children in the family, then it was usually the man (from the intelligentsia stratum of society) who would leave, "going nowhere", and leaving the flat to the rest of the family. Sometimes adult men had to come back to their parents' place and resume living with their parents, which caused additional difficulties as well.

Thirdly, despite the fact that the number of divorces steadily increased, especially starting from the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when the divorce procedure was significantly simplified, family values continued to play a big part in the life

of society. Those who were divorced were looked upon with considerable regret, if not condemnation. Moreover, parents of divorced men were not in favour of divorces either, and some even attempted to prevent their son's family from breaking up. Our interviews confirm this. Moreover, divorced men themselves, at least in theory, maintained quite traditional values: *"Generally, if the family is created, then it must become the main thing in life of its members. Say, the man lives like a proper family man – without having affairs on the side, giving all his time to raising children – these are the main criteria of the normal family relationships."*

Fourthly, for men with children, a problem of maintaining contact with the children could arise. This was because children in those times would traditionally remain in the custody of the mother, and divorced wives would not necessarily allow their ex-husbands to see the children on a regular basis and to participate in their upbringing. In reality, divorced men often lost touch with their kids, especially if their ex-wife re-married. One of the respondents openly spoke of the effect of his separation from his children: *"My ex-wife forbade me to see our children, and this, of course, aggravated my trauma."*

Thus, we are dealing indeed with the people "after the trauma."

#### A strategy of self-representation of divorced men

What are the ways in which divorced men present themselves? Normally, people try to leave out "a concealed life of suffering and shame" (Bruner J., 1987). Since a single "correct" description of one's life does not exist, men re-write their life narrative in the way they deem favourable.

To this end, various devices are used, sometimes consciously, sometimes not:

1. Stressing their intellectual superiority over the wife.
2. Stressing their role in the spiritual, cultural and similar reasons for their wife's growth.
3. Stressing their generosity of spirit.
4. Downplaying (circumventing) their mistakes and weaknesses, especially those pertaining to morality.
5. Openly criticising the wife's stance and her moral characteristics.

In this process, they chose their statements and justifications to conform to the ideas of their social environment (or their reference group) and historical phase.

Let us justify these claims via specific examples of our respondents.

Our first respondent Aleksandr, is a 38-year-old physicist. At the time of the interview he had been divorced twice. He arrived in Moscow at the age of 17 to study at the university. His parents lived in Kursk, where he graduated from high school. Both of Aleksandr's parents were members of intelligentsia: his father was a theoretical physicist, author of textbooks, and his mother a teacher of literature. After graduating from the university, Aleksandr was commissioned to work in his native city of Kursk, although his dream was to live in Moscow. He enrolled in a doctoral study in Moscow, where he was provided with a student room on campus. At the age of 25, he got married (for the first time) to his study-mate. Both belonged to the same group of friends from the university. This marriage, according to Aleksandr, was formed



“*somehow, by itself*” although he immediately blurted out that registering the marriage or not registering was to do with getting a Moscow residence permit. Registration of marriage allowed them to obtain a room for doctoral students on campus, which at the time was regarded as a very good option for solving the housing problem. Their divorce, in his own words, also happened “*somehow, by itself.*” The wife left for Leningrad, where she soon met another man, by whom she became pregnant. However, her new “boyfriend” abandoned her, but she still decided to have a baby. Aleksandr meanwhile became involved with another woman. However, formally, he remained married to his first wife. Describing the situation of his marriage and divorce, Aleksandr emphasises his generosity of spirit with respect to his wife:

*“But I did help my first wife, when she was discharged home from the maternity hospital; I thought of her difficulties. She wanted her female friends to meet her when she was discharged with the baby, but I thought, there was no need, as she still had me. I helped her with acquiring various little bits, like cots and prams; well, generally – just to help her come around...”* This line takes up a lot of Aleksandr’s narrative. However, later it becomes clear that there were other, more utilitarian, reasons for him to be interested in remaining on good terms with his first wife: if she insisted on a formal divorce at the time, he would lose his room on campus, his residence permit and his right to live in Moscow. The respondent avoids talking about this openly, but his feelings on this issue are transmitted implicitly through other thematic lines. Thus he persistently speaks of how “*boring it is to live in Kursk,*” what “*narrow-minded people*” he was surrounded with while there, and what “*intellectual*” milieu he had in Moscow. He himself is unaware that he slips into talking about Kursk directly after the interviewer’s repeated question about his motives for marrying his first wife: “*There were no clear motives. It’s just that all these long friendships normally end up either in a marriage, or in nothing. And since I had been working for two years in Kursk after I was commissioned there upon my graduation from the university, I felt very bored there...”*

When describing his second marriage, Aleksandr does not forget to mention that his wife had her own room in Balashikha (which is a Moscow suburb). At the same time, he stresses that “*in terms of pragmatic interests there were enough candidates to marry her; I know such people among my friends. I have such acquaintances – decent people, strangely enough...”* Getting married for the sake of getting Moscow residence permit was frowned upon in the intelligentsia milieu, and in this respect Aleksandr adhered to the rules accepted in his environment. Thus he also justifies himself, implying that his reason for getting married was not selfish, because he differs from his pragmatic friends. In general, however, it is evident from Aleksandr’s interview that the issue of residence permit and housing is very important to him. Thus he used the word “residence permit” 5 times throughout his interview, in different contexts, the word “flat” – 4 times, “communal flat” – 5 times, and “hostel” (or “campus accommodation”) – 11 times. Therefore, in total, he mentioned the residence problem 25 times on 25 pages.

Thus the narrative of this respondent reveals clearly his striving to emphasise his high moral qualities, suppressing (softening, or eliminating altogether) the aspects of his own selfish interests.

Such well-known cause for divorce as heavy drinking has not been mentioned in any of the interviews. However, one of the respondents lets this out: “*Any troubles plunge me into depression; after heavy drinking it’s just the same...”* He then contemplates the problem of alcoholism in a detached fashion, giving as an example the family

of his brother, whose wife tried to cure her husband from this vice. *"She was very fond of moralising conversations. They were very naïve, but from her point of view they were fine. It is all correct, yes, but... she really got on my nerves with this."* The acknowledgement that she irritated him (rather than his brother!) suggests that he is really talking about his own family rather than that of his brother.

Let us now move on to another respondent – Leonid, 42-year-old, a programmer. He portrays himself as a person with excellent communication skills. By his own admission, among his programmer friends he was at the centre of the group. Moreover, he was the soul of the tourist club, formed on the basis of the Scientists' Society; he was also part of the amateur song movement, and of the psycho-drama club, founded by the well-known psychologist Vladimir Levi. He also belonged to the community of dissidents, which he regards as a social circle most important for him. He also said that he read a lot of philosophical and religious literature, and that he was fluent in history and literature. Thus, he listed all the fashionable hobbies and passions of the period, socially approved by intelligentsia, and named as his friends a few famous names. The fact that he stressed his involvement in the dissident movement is fully concordant with the spirit of the time. This evokes not only respect, but sometimes even envy among those members of the intelligentsia who regrets their 'Soviet' past. Almost all of our respondents were proud to mention that during Soviet times they listened to Western radio-stations (which were referred to at the time as "hostile voices").

Leonid married a girl from his social milieu: *"She is a programmer, like me. She is very beautiful, and to this day... I have liked her a lot. I was in love with her... it was just a strong, passionate mutual feeling."* Their divorce was initiated by the wife. By Leonid's admission, she just packed her things and moved in with her parents. From Leonid's narrative given at the interview, it emerges that she felt a lack of attention on his part; he could forget to telephone her to notify that he wouldn't be coming home for the night; she would not necessarily *"fulfil her marital duties"* at his demand, whereas he believed that *"the wife's body belongs to the husband, and equally the husband's body belongs to the wife."* However, as the reason for their divorce, Leonid named exclusively his wife's *"low level of development"*: *"the structure of her outlook at life is so primitive, she has such simple interests, even though, as a Muscovite, she takes pleasure in putting herself about in the theatres; but I still failed to teach her to read books... Although under my influence she started gathering books for the home library (she does everything with passionate enthusiasm), and she managed to create a library which is better even than mine in terms of the fiction collection. Yet, she still reads with difficulty (with great reluctance)... One moment she may get carried away with theatre, but the next she can just dump it all, and stop going there."* Leonid clearly wants, throughout his narrative, to stress his own *"high intellectual and spiritual"* level, to demonstrate that he is culturally superior to his ex-wife. This line occupies a significant part of the interview. Its subconscious aim is to alleviate the consequences of the trauma caused by his wife's departure.

Since a large part of social construction of reality happens through linguistic means, one should pay attention to the respondent's language. He speaks of his wife *"putting herself about in the theatres"* instead of the standard phrases, such as *"goes to the theatre"* or *"loves the theatre."* Another of his expressions – *"reads with difficulty"* brings about associations with illiteracy, with the inability to read and write, which clearly in this case does not fit reality.

Another respondent, Viktor, a mathematician, 41, whose wife does love reading, nevertheless also finds an excuse to portray his wife in a bad light and at the same time to praise himself: *“Although she loved reading books, she was never interested in spiritual questions; when we met, she began to feel a bit better, as she started growing spiritually.”*

Here is another example – of Pavel, an engineer of 34, who characterised his wife, also an engineer, thus: *“she is a complex person, with profound and strong emotions; but it’s just that her linguistic and conceptual pool is very small, and also the overlap between me and her in this respect is also small. So, she does not really speak about her feelings and emotions, as she doesn’t even know with which words to express it.”*

The desire of a man traumatised by the divorce to emphasise his role in *“educating his wife”* to stress how much he had done for her, is evident in one form or another in the narratives of many respondents. For example, the aforementioned Viktor whose wife achieved certain success in science, does not forget to mention his role in her achievements: *“I’ve spent a lot of time with the children – so that she had an opportunity to finish her doctoral dissertation. A person with two children who enrolls on a PhD, and especially so late in life, is rare these days.”*

Another respondent, architect Sergei, also tries to assert in his narrative his intellectual-spiritual superiority over his wife, and, just as Leonid above, tries to reduce the cause for the divorce to a low cultural level of the woman. He begins with the critique of his wife’s female friends, but then shifts his criticism to his wife: *“they were not interesting for me in any way. These are the women of the quiet, “mouse-like” type; just as my wife.”*<sup>1</sup> Then he moves on to talking about his wife: *“She is not interested in anything, in particular in religion. She is not stupid and has realised that hitherto she has lived an empty and primitive life. Her interests are restricted to the childcare alone. She has exhausted herself, she stopped growing spiritually. She was unable to give anything to me either.”* He accuses her also of not being able to give *“education and spiritual development”* to the children, who therefore had to *“make up for this “on the side.”*” At the same time, it becomes clear from the interview that Sergei did not provide for his family, bringing in only very occasional, sporadic income, while devoting most of his time to a mythical *“spiritual growth.”*

Contradictions and broken logic are present practically in all the respondents’ narratives. For instance, this is how Pavel comments on the fact that his wife initiated a divorce: *“it is a very big blow for a woman when she is getting divorced.”* Apparently, it is implied that for him it was not such a big blow. In Leonid’s narrative, a clear contradiction occurs in the space of a single sentence: *“When we lived together the house was very tidy and I had delicious meals. This was good. For her it was very important. For me, on the other hand, it is not such a valuable thing.”*

A severe and direct criticism with respect to the wives is calculated to evoke compassion, for in the framework of contemporary everyday narrative, as a rule, that point of view is regarded to be most convincing, which evokes most emotions. The victim is always right.

For example, the youngest of the respondents, electrical engineer Grisha got married at 19, when still a student. To the first question, of the reasons for the divorce, he says, *“it is possible that Asia could not forgive me my lovers,*

<sup>1</sup> “Grey mouse” in popular imagination is a woman with dull, unimpressive appearance, and without the personal qualities, who does not give grounds for love and respect, and does not evoke interest in the people around her. See a forum discussion at <http://www.woman.ru/psycho/medley6/thread/4248717/>.

*this is possible... There are many reasons of which I cannot make sense; however, I won't be able to live with Asia now. It is too late. I have done too much harm to her.* However, the more his story progresses, the more evident his desire to rehabilitate himself becomes, while shifting the blame onto his wife: *"While I fell in love, for her it was just another young man. Her first lover was Vova R, and this occurred after four years of marriage... Asia always loved to be courted, to be admired."* Then the story gradually incorporates some details designed to appeal to the listeners emotionally, to stir their compassion: *"they were kissing for the first time, when I intercepted them. It was in the countryside, during the gathering of the amateur song movement participants. I was lying in a tent, and the tent next door was so white and without the cover over it. And inside this tent, Asia is kissing with Ya., and all this is almost transparent, so that I see it all. Yes, of course I was jealous! It's disgusting and unpleasant. I, for instance, would not allow myself to kiss someone in Asia's presence, whereas she did allow it."*

An explicit criticism of the wife can be caused also by her successes, which the man is trying to explain by the negative characteristics of the woman: *"She enrolled on a PhD, already spent one and a half years studying, achieved some success – started publishing her first research papers; but her vanity was insatiable – and the further, the more so. Now she regards herself as a big cheese in the subject. She has Satan's pride and her scientific success is just a balm for it."* The respondent expects that these words will evoke compassion in the listener, as indeed it is not easy to live with a person who has *"Satan's vanity and pride."*

## CONCLUSION

As exemplified above, the findings of our research confirm that people who live through a trauma attempt to cure themselves by constructing an alternative biography, based on their own templates, which are designed to free them from the feelings of guilt and pain. Moreover, in doing so, they try to enhance their image by making it "moral" and "deserving," thus earning compassion and recognition of the listeners. To this end, they deploy diverse techniques, as considered above.

At the same time, our study suggests an interesting qualification to the above in that the image, which the "post-traumatic" respondents construct through their narratives, corresponds precisely to the historical moment and to the demands of the respondents' social milieu.

Thus, a specific feature of the period in question, when the interviews were conducted, is a low demand in society for representatives of the educated professions and hence their low income. The men of educated professions faced problems of realizing themselves at work and of providing for their family. At that time, the idea of a superior nature of the "spiritual" over the "material" gained momentum, and this found expression in the self-narratives of the men under study through their persistent emphasis on the role of the "spiritual," sometimes understood differently.

In addition, their adherence to the norms and views of their milieu is manifested not only in their peddling their political dissident stance, but also in their stress on the trend for "religion," emerging at the time. Amongst our 19 respondents, there were men who identified themselves as Russian Orthodox, Catholics and Jews. Respect towards religion – which at the time had not yet received recognition from the authorities – can be traced in the majority of the narratives. This is also a manifestation of "dissidence." Similarly, the fashions imposed by the milieu and the epoch are reflected in the hobbies of our respondents, which comprise

philosophy, history, psychology, and so on. It is precisely at that time that a wealth of previously forbidden literature on these subjects was being published, and the intelligentsia began to master it with zest.

Thus, within the framework of the narrative psychology approach, our analysis has revealed a tendency of our respondents – the divorced men – to compensate a certain lack of personal moral ground by other personal achievements that best correspond to the standards of their social medium and historical phase. Therefore, building on the previous results by M.L. Crossley, M. Freeman, J. Brockmeier, A.C. Bull and others, our case study demonstrates that, importantly, self-narratives are shaped not only by the will of the respondents to conceal their moral failures by creating an alternative version of self in personal terms, but also by their desire to adhere to the norms and standards of their historical time and social strata, which, in turn, play a major part in shaping their stories.

With respect to gender stereotypes of our respondents, one could expect that men from the intelligentsia milieu, living in the capital, are sufficiently advanced in their opinions and beliefs, and share the ideas of gender equality. However, it turned out that this is only partly the case. Indeed, while being tolerant enough in what concerns everyday life and gender expectations, they insist on being dominant in the intellectual sphere. In other words, their views on the male-female relationships and gender roles within the family are predicated on their need for expressing their masculine superiority, which for them takes the form of intellectual dominance, and this is what their self-representation portrays. Furthermore, the trauma which they had all lived through aggravates their ideas rendering these more radical than is acceptable in the intelligentsia circles.

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