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*Invisible Visibilities: Strategies for Activism and Daily Life by LGBT
Kyrgyzstanis*
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Research Abstract:

As the government of Kyrgyzstan threatens to pass legislation criminalizing public support of “non traditional sexualities”, LGBT visibility in Kyrgyzstan and the visibility of LGBT Kyrgyzstanis abroad is an important issue. An examination of the community quickly reveals that it is diverse in terms of genders, ages, ethnicities, socioeconomic statuses, religions, and language proficiencies, making a one-size-fits-all approach to activism or support an impractical and ineffective tactic. Rather international funders and supporters must work with local activists to further the best interests of the community. Finally, because of the prominence of violence in the lives of LGBT people, visibility can be both positive and negative and should not be pursued without regard for consequences.

Research Goals:

When I proposed this project, my intent was to examine the use of visibility and invisibility as strategies for political advancement and negotiating daily life by LGBT Kazakhstanis. I sought to gauge tolerance for political dissent through the LGBT community, since they are seen as dissenting both politically and culturally. By assessing the life of LGBT Kazakhstanis and their political actions, policy recommendations could

be formed that fell in line with then Secretary of State Clinton's announcement to pursue LGTB rights abroad.

My project proposal contained the following research questions: [Q1] How do sexual and gender minorities find ways to be visible to each other while maintaining invisibility more broadly? How are visibility and invisibility used as active life strategies to manage both positive and negative elements of daily life? [Q2] How can invisibility be used as a political strategy, and what happens when political actors disagree about the role that (in)visibility should play in political action? [Q3] How do differences in self-presentation and social status impact visibility towards other sexual minorities?

Throughout the course of the project, I maintained the goal of consulting with activists and others as to how to best pursue Clinton's objectives. However the focus of the project changed somewhat. Firstly, I switched my field site from Almaty, Kazakhstan to Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. Secondly, I reduced the explicit focus on visibility and invisibility towards a more general inquiry of the nature of LGBT life in Bishkek. Thirdly, a "gay propaganda law", similar to the one that had been rejected in Kazakhstan, was introduced in Kyrgyzstan, so response to the law became a focus of the project.

While visibility and invisibility remained themes that were articulated either implicitly or explicitly throughout the interviews, other themes emerged as well, in particular that of violence, which will be discussed in more detail below.

Research Activities:

I conducted preliminary research in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in Jan-March of 2014. The results of this study showed that a project of the scale that I had proposed (participant observation in NGO offices, a broad community survey, interviews, and diaries) would not be possible, because the organization that had offered to help me had

effectively collapsed, although it continued to exist in name. This made almost every step of the proposed methodology significantly more difficult – I did not have a physical location in which to conduct participant observation or interview participants, and I no longer had access to a large group of LGBT people.

For these reasons, I decided to switch my field site to neighboring Kyrgyzstan. Cultural similarities exist in terms of attitudes towards homosexuality and gender variance, as well as broader cultural similarities, although differences in the relationship to the government is one possible reason why LGBT activism was flourishing in Kyrgyzstan compared to Kazakhstan. While I knew of one organization remaining in Kazakhstan, I had not made contact with them, and another organization which currently exists had yet emerge. In Kyrgyzstan, however, I had made contact with five organizations and had heard reference to nine others. With this in mind, I decided to switch sites to Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan.

My research proposal contained a variety of methods that I felt could be more realistically achieved in Kyrgyzstan. This included a large-scale survey of 100 participants and a diary project in addition to in-depth interviews and participant observation. In the end, however, neither the survey nor the diary project proved feasible. While some sort of broad survey have been possible, my advisors felt that it was a waste of resources and that more and more reliable information could be gleaned through open ended interviews. The diary project was too time consuming for the span of the grant project, although some people did express an interest in being part of such a project and I will keep it in mind for future research trips.

During the course of the grant, I conducted 19 interviews with 16 gay, bi, trans, and ally men. Two main sets of questions were used, although interviews were open ended enough to allow for a broader discussion on topics raised in the course of individual interviews. One set of interviews focused predominantly on activism, the other on daily life.

While I had hoped for a well-rounded and diverse sample of the LGBT community in terms of gender and ethnicity, I was unable to get interviews with a diverse group in this regard. All of the people I interviewed during the course of the grant identified as men. Twelve were assigned male at birth while four were assigned female at birth. Three of these last four identified as trans, while one no longer identified this way. I interviewed eleven gay men, two bi men, and two heterosexual (one trans, one ally) men. One man did not identify with a sexual orientation. Also, most of the men I interviewed identified as Kyrgyz – eleven total. I also interviewed two Koreans, one Udmort (Russian), one mixed Uzbek, and one mixed Kyrgyz/Korean. While this breakdown was pretty representative of whom I met, I also met some women (including trans women) and some European men.

The primary difficulty with interviews was scheduling. People would cancel interviews last minute or agree to be interviewed but not be available to schedule an interview. Most of my interviews occurred within the last month of the grant. I also had difficulty finding a research assistant. I worked with two men who were both members of the LGBT community, but who were connected to different NGOs that did not get along with each other. This helped me to transcend some of the divisions within the community.

I conducted participant observation in semi-public LGBT spaces – particularly NGO offices, the nightclub, and a summer camp –in cafes and other public spaces not designated as LGBT, and in private residences. This was where the richest part of my data came from. Informal, on the record, conversations proved more illuminating than formal interviews, as people felt more comfortable with the format, although interviews were more targeted. Gender presentation, identity, and expression are becoming important themes in my dissertation. Although these themes were addressed in the interviews, the observation of gender presentation in both LGBT and non-LGBT spaces was essential and adds a richness that could not have been obtained through interviews alone.

Participant observation also helped to me understand the realities of living as a gay and transgender man in Bishkek (and to a lesser extent, elsewhere). I learned how to manage my identity as a mechanism to protect both myself and the people with whom I was working. I did not come out or talk about my project with people outside the community. For instance, I decided not to disclose my status or the full nature of my project to my Russian language instructor (although I did tell her I worked on human rights NGOs), which sometimes created difficulties. I was constantly, largely through trial and error, crafting a story about who I was and why I was in Bishkek that I could tell to strangers. I took taxis often enough that I frequently had the same drivers and I frequented the same cafes regularly so balancing the explicit truth (like I am not married) with the half truths (like I study folklore – which I used to do) was taxing. However, it is a survival tactic that I often observed others doing as well.

Living in constant fear of violence also deeply shaped my understanding of LGBT life. Many people I talked with recounted multiple tales of experience with violence, and I was frequently warned about violence. I found myself living in a constant state of alert – even in my own home. This was one of the most informative aspects of the participant observation and is something I had not fully anticipated or experienced on my previous trips to Central Asia. However, interviews and conversations revealed that this sort of vigilance was something that characterized the lives of many LGBT people in Bishkek.

Important Research Findings:

In the grant proposal, I proposed three research questions. Below I address each question individually, although all three are closely linked. I have included three pictures of me in Kyrgyzstan, although do to the sensitive nature of my topic, only one of the photos relates directly to the themes of my research.

[Q1] How do sexual and gender minorities find ways to be visible to each other while maintaining invisibility more broadly? How are visibility and invisibility used as active life strategies to manage both positive and negative elements of daily life?

Managing visibility was a primary concern for members of the LGBT community. While activists used visibility as a political strategy, even they often maintained a low profile outside of work. There were a few notable exceptions to this – four activists had come out publically (ie on TV). The consequences of personal visibility were severe, however. Visible people, whether out or not, were at higher risk of violence, and many people related both their own experiences with violence and those of friends or acquaintances.

Self-control with regards to gender presentation was a common theme that emerged in several interviews and conversations. In particular, feminine mannerisms had to be toned down in order not to reveal one's sexual orientation and to avoid violence. Men lamented this inability to "be themselves" in public places and often private places as well.

Despite maintaining invisibility more generally, LGBT people do find ways to signal to each other that they are LGBT. While self-presentation in the form of hair cuts, dress, etc. was seen as marking someone as a member of the LGBT community, mannerisms were seen as a more reliable indicator. However, most people said that it was impossible to tell whether or not someone was LGBT. When pressed further on this question, the reliance on body language was the most frequently cited indicator.

However, rather than chance meetings in public places, most people expanded their social circles through NGOs, the club, and online (dating sites, phone apps, and social media). Online meeting was considered the most dangerous way to meet people and several stories of men being lured into violence by heterosexuals or police were in circulation. NGOs provide an important social outlet, allowing people to meet other LGBT people in a relatively safe (two offices had been attacked) environment and to have a space where they could let their guard down in terms of gender expression.

[Q2] How can invisibility be used as a political strategy, and what happens when political actors disagree about the role that (in)visibility should play in political action?

Visibility was a considerable component of LGBT activism in Bishkek. At least four activists had come out publicly (such as on TV), and events such as the Human

Rights Watch press conference in January 2014 drew national attention to the topic of LGBT rights. Activists were also working with police in the form of conducting sensitivity trainings to try to combat the problem of police brutality outlined in the HRW press conference. Activists also spoke with domestic and international journalists about the situation in Kyrgyzstan and produced their own media which they published online or in the form brochures and pamphlets.

The main disagreement about visibility was not between activists, but between activists and non-activists. While many activists felt that increased visibility would lead to long-term systemic changes, non-activists were more concerned with short-term violent repercussions. Some of them criticized activists for putting them at risk or as responsible for attacks they had been victims of. While violence did seem to increase after the HRW press conference, violence was a problem before the press conference as well. However, there did seem to be heightened sense of danger, in particular surrounding internet use and the luring of gay men by straight men and police for purposes of violence or extortion.

The HRW press conference was not viewed as a catalyst for the introduction of the propaganda law. Rather, the law was seen as a way to express solidarity with Russia. The more extreme nature of the legislation was attributed to Kyrgyz culture and the idea that nothing is ever done half-heartedly. Russia was also blamed for the increase in violence following the press conference. One person related being attacked by a group that he believed had been hired by Russia.

Visibility was not the primary dividing issue among activist communities. Other ideological differences, as well as more personal disagreements, were held responsible

for the fissures. Feminism seemed to be one particularly divisive issue, with NGOs that had a strong feminist commitment distancing themselves from the organizations that dealt primarily or exclusively with men's issues. NGOs that viewed themselves as committed to the entire LGBT community were not necessarily viewed that way by other NGOs. Cliental also shaped or was shaped by the politics of the NGOs. Some people were affiliated with multiple NGOs, although many felt a preference for one NGO over others. This divide seemed to map in part along class lines as some NGOs dealt specifically with homelessness.

[Q3] How do differences in self-presentation and social status impact visibility towards other sexual minorities?

Feminine presenting men were among the most visible members of the LGBT community. For this reason, other men distanced themselves from them, largely as a safety mechanism. Because they were legible as gay to people outside the LGBT community, feminine men tended to attract a lot of negative attention in the form of street harassment (by both men and women), unwanted sexual overtures, and physical and sexual violence.

LGBT people could be divided into "visible" and "invisible" populations with respect to NGOs. "Visible" populations tended to be from the middle and lower socioeconomic classes – people who had less to lose and more to gain from involvement with NGOs – whereas "invisible" populations came from the social and economic elite. NGOs did not know how to reach these invisible populations, although they felt that they could potentially be valuable allies in changing social and legal attitudes.

Divisions by age, gender, ethnicity, and primary language were also common, but not necessarily related to visibility. For instance, the group to which I had the most exposure was composed predominately of young Kyrgyz men who spoke both Russian and Kyrgyz fluently. Trans men seemed to largely form their own community, whereas trans women seemed more incorporated into the gay male community. Some trans men were also incorporated into the gay male community, although often at the expense of association with other trans men.

In short, certain forms of visibility increased the risk of violence and therefore had to be managed or controlled. People managed not only their own visibility, but also the visibility of others, because others' visibility could impact their own visibility. Divisions in the community existed based on attitudes towards visibility, but this was less salient than differences in socioeconomic class, ethnicity, age, gender, and language. Violence was a real and constant threat and shaped people's attitudes towards visibility both for themselves and for the community as a whole.

Policy Implications and Recommendations:

Interventions in Kyrgyzstan with regards to LGBT issues should be framed through an international human rights framework, both in terms of pressure put on the government of Kyrgyzstan and in terms of financial and other support provided to the LGBT community directly as supervised by activist organizations. A two pronged approach, with pressure put upon the government to not pass legislation that harms the community and support for local activist activities would improve the situation in a variety of ways.

Activists often felt powerless to change the government on their own and felt that external pressure by foreign governments and organizations like the Human Rights Watch were the most effective means of creating government change. The government of Kyrgyzstan was portrayed by activists as sensitive in the past to their human rights record, although this seemed to be changing. Human rights were inscribed as part of Kyrgyzstan's constitution and many efforts to combat the proposed "gay propaganda" legislation, which would imprison people who demonstrated any form of public support for "non traditional sexualities", focused on how this legislation would contradict the constitution.

Support for activist groups should also be provided, since it is these groups that make the greatest impact in the lives of LGBT people in Kyrgyzstan by providing services (such as homeless shelters, HIV testing, and condoms) and creating community and safe space. This support, however, should not follow a public health model exclusively, especially since these models tend to privilege men's services over women's services as men are viewed as vectors of disease transmission. Support for new organizations, rather than only for ones that have been long established is important to be able to reach segments of the population that are currently underserved. Also, more services, such as shelters that serve the transgender population, are needed. Furthermore, flexibility in how these services are administered is necessary. Local activists have the cultural and linguistic resources need to best serve the LGBT population in Kyrgyzstan and they should always be included and consulted as plans to improve the situation of LGBT people in Kyrgyzstan are implemented.

Finally, the presence of “gay propaganda” laws in some states in the US was occasionally cited as justification for passing such laws in Kyrgyzstan. A commitment to LGBT rights at home furthers the cause of LGBT rights abroad.

Co-Curricular Activity:

I had several meetings with representatives of multiple LGBT and MSM NGOs from both Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Most of these meetings were to elicit information rather than to report back findings, although some synthesis of the results will be reported back to at least one of the organizations. I also met with another graduate student studying bride kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan and will follow up on that connection. Due to the sensitive nature of my topic, I was hesitant to meet with people outside the community or draw attention to my work and thus did not seek out connections to government officials.

My meetings with local NGOs were particularly productive for my work, giving me insight into activism in Bishkek as well as introducing me to activists and community members from Bishkek, Osh, and Karabalta in Kyrgyzstan, and Almaty in Kazakhstan. Most of the interlocutors for my project were recruited through NGOs. My meeting with the other scholar, facilitated by an NGO worker, gave me chance to begin to synthesize my results as well as report some of them to a member of the primary NGO with which I was working.

Conclusions:

Issues of visibility were central to the way LGBT activism is pursued in Kyrgyzstan as well as to the way people lived and negotiated their safety and interpersonal relationships. Lack of international visibility (the idea that no one cares what is happening in Kyrgyzstan) was frequently lamented. The idea that the government of Kyrgyzstan could pass draconian anti LGBT legislation and that the international community would sit by and let it happen without a word of protest was a fear that was being realized.

While there needed to be more visibility surrounding LGBT issues, particularly in a way that normalized, depathologized, and localized LGBT identity, the practical need for the invisibility of individuals and to a certain extent the community as a whole cannot be overlooked. Governmental pressure, the presence of more homeless shelters, and transportation services that would allow for people to travel safely to and from LGBT spaces are all concrete steps that could be taken to improve the lives of LGBT people in Kyrgyzstan. Furthermore, funding to LGBT activists needed to allow them the flexibility to respond to Kyrgyzstan's unique challenges.

In short, Kyrgyzstan's LGBT community is very diverse in terms of gender, age, ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic status, and language. In order to serve this diverse population, multiple organizations with multiple focuses were needed. These organizations, however, were often in direct competition for resources. Acknowledgement of both community diversity and the limitations of a one-size-fits-all model are important when supporting local activists in a way that allows them the freedom to serve the needs of the community as they saw fit.

Plans for Future Research Agenda/ Presentations and Publications:

The study I conducted while on fellowship will serve as the data for my dissertation on the lives of gay, bi, and trans men in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. Framed through the lens of narrative, the dissertation looks at men's gender expression and ethnic identity in relation to sexual orientation at a moment where the LGBT community could be radically changed by the passing of "gay propaganda" legislation.

In addition to the dissertation, which will eventually become a book, my abstract has been accepted for a book chapter in the collected volume *Transnational Queer Activism*, edited by Janice Irvine and Jill Irvine, it will be based on research conducted during the fellowship period as well as the December trip. I will also present at the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies (ASEEES) Conference in San Antonio in November 2014 and hopefully at the American Anthropological Association conference in 2015 as well as at more minor conferences. I am also planning an article titled: "Cartographies of Violence: The narrative mapping of Bishkek" to explore the relationship between violence, space, and narrative that emerged during my data collection. At some point, I do hope to return to Bishkek to further this research and collect more narratives and personal and community histories.