

## **How Personal Networks Influence the Personal Belief in Contemporary Legend: Ego-Network Analysis of the Moral Panic on Obesity Propagation on the Interpersonal Level in Russia**

In this presentation, preliminary results of the research project that aimed to reveal the connection between personal social networks and moral panic propagation on the interpersonal level are discussed within the framing of Goode (2017): “The moral panic is an intense, heightened sense of exaggerated concern about a threat or supposed threat posed by deviants or ‘folk devils,’ a category of people who, presumably, engage in evil practices and are responsible for menacing the physical safety or the culture or way of life of society or sectors of society.” Social psychologists who address the topic of moral panic indicate a “missing dimension” in moral panic research (Critcher & Pearce, 2013; Pearce & Charman, 2011). It was argued that public predisposition to “panic” has not been studied by scholars, so there is a lack of theoretical explanation for the public’s receptivity to moral panic discourses. Media is used as a proxy variable for measuring public opinion (Pearce & Charman, 2011). However, personal factors, such as the emotional appeal of folk devils, could also influence the propagation of moral panic (Critcher & Pearce, 2013). For instance, children lie in the core of many contemporary legends, not only because they are easy to portray as innocent on the ideological level, but also because child exploitation provokes an emotional reaction. Though concerns about the need for measurement of public receptivity have been raised, few works have been produced on this topic.

Following the acknowledged need for the analysis of public involvement in moral panic analysis, I researched people who are involved in moral panic because of their belief in contemporary legends. Contemporary legends are rumor stories that disseminate by oral communication and mass media during moral panic (Victor, 1993). These stories “communicate shared anxieties about a newly perceived threat” and a “moral-political message conveyed in the form of age-old recurring motifs and metaphors” (Victor, 1998, p. 543). Contemporary legends could provoke false crime accusations, destroy people’s reputations, and cause many other harmful consequences (Victor, 1998). The personal social networks in this research are operationalized as ego-networks. An ego-network consists of the social actor (ego) and the other actors related to the ego (alters) (Crossley et al., 2015). Sometimes, these networks include information about the relations of alters between each other. I concentrated on the personal connections within ego networks, because these connections could function in addition to media explanations of people’s adoption of contemporary legends. How these connections are formed was not clear, because in the network science literature, there are contradicting explanations of the linkage between a person’s personal attitudes and social connections (Lazer et al., 2010); therefore, it is questionable

which of these phenomena better explains the formation of social connections among the people who believe in contemporary legends.

The goal of this study was to reveal the connection between personal social networks and beliefs in the contemporary legend. To achieve it, I took the case of the obesity moral panic as the object of investigation on which the connection between personal social networks and the belief in the contemporary legend will be measured. Obesity moral panic could be characterized as an exaggeration of risks connected with being “fat.” Fatness is considered as an analogy to disaster, and the social anxieties that underpin this social panic are projected onto fatness (Campos et al., 2006). The online pro-ana community is a group of people who are against recovery from anorexia. Such communities offer weight-loss tips, provide support for their position, and spread non-negative images of anorexia (Boero & Pascoe, 2012). Members of the online pro-ana community could be defined as those who perpetuate the contemporary legend of obesity. Such people project fatness as the root of all of a person’s problems. Although the medical/psychological model of self-starvation neglects the existence of moral meanings behind anorexic practices, studies of pro-ana communities show that these practices are understood within their community as the moral duty of a good citizen. This means that people who are anorexic suppose that they are enforcing social health (Boero & Pascoe, 2012). This case selection is motivated by the existence of social media data (diaries) used in my study. Since the first application of the term “moral panic” to obesity by Campos and colleagues, many papers have been produced on the topic. However, these studies looked at the construction of such panic by media, entrepreneurs, and “ordinary” people, who carry it were not taken into consideration (Friedman, 2015; Monaghan et al., 2010, 2019; Patterson & Johnston, 2012).

The empirical basis of this study consists of 50 semi-structured biographical interviews with Russian-speaking women who are past or present members of the online pro-ana community and have public diaries on the social network “Vkontakte,” along with materials from the online diaries of these women. This data was collected in August–September 2020 by one interviewer. Informants were recruited using a purpose sampling method. Informants differ in terms of age, phase (pro-ana or in remission), length of the diaries, and cities of origin. The informants were aged from 14–25 years and came from more than 30 different Russian, Ukrainian, Kazakh, and Belarussian cities. Of the participants, 35 women claimed to be pro-ana, while 15 were in the remission phase. The length of diaries ranged from 1 to 41 months. The average interview length was 67 minutes. Interviews consisted of several parts: biographical narrative, clarification questions, questions devoted to the process of belief in the contemporary legend on obesity acquisition, and questions about participants’ personal networks and how the people who surround them are connected with their eating practices and views on food. The network data was retrieved

using the concentric circles method (Van Waes & Van den Bossche, 2020). Based on the gathered data, ego-networks were constructed and analyzed. In addition, interview narratives were examined using thematic qualitative content analysis. Methodological aspects of the research are discussed, and the influence of the personal network on the degree of belief in contemporary legend on obesity are described. Future studies plan to build quantitative models of the propagation of obesity moral panic.