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THE IDENTITY OF THE MODERN ASTROLOGER: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF A RUSSIAN SPEAKING SAMPLE

Framework project on the topic of the dissertation

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Introduction

My work is devoted to studying the biography of modern Russian astrologers. The relevance of this topic is due to several factors. Starting from the 1990s, immediately after perestroika, when the official ban on the study of esoteric teachings was lifted, the intensive growth of various types of alternative spirituality and new religious movements began. Among them, astrology is one of the most prominent phenomena on the Russian postmodern scene.

Over the past 30 years, several generations of practicing specialists have changed - in the period from 1990 to the active use of the Internet, before the advent of social networks, and the period after the advent of social networks. To date, there are over two dozen independent schools, which differ significantly in methodology, philosophical attitudes and practice. Compared to other esotericists, astrologers actively defend their right to conduct professional practice in the social field. This has not been described or understood sufficiently. My research project provides an opportunity to obtain rich material for comparative analysis and partially fill the lack of information. Mainly, I am interested in how people become professional astrologers, what social conditions and how exactly are reflected in their activities, how the process of legitimizing the practice proceeds, what kind of difficulties astrologers experience in this regard (including marginalization, stigmatization and discrimination). The answer to these questions can be provided by studying their biographical narratives.

Modern astrology since the beginning of the 20th century has been characterized by the following specific features (Hammer, 2005). The focus of attention shifts from predicting the future to the personality traits and individuality of a person. This is not least due to the fact that astrology has been integrated into various teachings, among which the depth psychology of C. G. Jung is the most striking example. Thus, the study of the biography of astrologers themselves is completely justified and relevant. The emergence and accessibility of new information technologies has made it much easier for many people to study astrology and subsequently enter the market of esoteric services. Following this, systematic specialized education in this area begins to actively develop. Astrology is represented by many directions, based on both classical ideas and author's innovations. Such a revival of the subject did not go unnoticed: the scientific community began active criticism of the basic principles of astrology. As a result, astrologers began to attempt empirical confirmation by conducting their own research. There is also a clear gender shift, with the majority of practitioners now being women.

Publications in recent years show that various aspects of astrological practice are being studied within the social sciences. Most of the work is devoted to understanding modern astrology (Tesman, 2013), astrology as a social phenomenon (Bukurova, 2019, Shvedova, 2021, Ardashev, 2020), its influence on everyday life (Crockford, 2018) and education (Alison Gwendy Bird, 2006), as well as certain aspects of astrological practice (Lindsey Radermacher, 2011). M. Bauer and J. Durant (1997) conducted a study of belief in astrology, during which they tested a number of

hypotheses: the relationship of belief with the average level of scientific knowledge of the respondent, the need for authoritative guidance, in particular, among those who do not belong to an organized religion. At the same time, the personality of astrologers themselves, their formation as a practicing specialist, is little considered. Considering the widespread prevalence of astrology in Russia, the desire of many people to study and practice it, the lack of research is striking.

D. Pollack (2003) examines religious activity in post-communist countries, including Russia. Among other things, they are provided with information about the faith of people from different countries in astrology (56% of Russians according to 1998 data, this value is above average: from 19% in Ireland to 66% in Latvia). Karine Dilanyan (2018) from Russia conducted her own research using the example of four professionally practicing Russian astrologers for many years. At the beginning of her article (pp. 62-63) she talks about the work of M. Bauer and J. Durant (1997), which analyzed various sociological hypotheses about the prevalence of belief in astrology. The purpose of K. Dilanyan's research was to test the hypothesis of "superficial knowledge", as well as another - the "hypothesis of the fatalistic need for higher power" (in this case we are talking about astrology as a replacement for communist ideology). Its respondents had to meet three main criteria: 1) be residents of Moscow in order to conduct a face-to-face interview with them and be able to contact them if any question needed to be clarified; 2) their astrological practice should have begun during the existence of the USSR, before 1991; 3) at the time of interviewing, the respondent must have had an active astrological practice (consulting, research, teaching - but not in the field of so-called "popular astrology"). The research itself was carried out through unstructured personal interviews lasting from 1 to 1.5 hours, based on the phenomenological position of the researcher. A number of questions were prepared in advance, but their sequence and number could vary. Respondents were able to speak without interruption in their train of thought to make their stories more complete and informative. Further, in accordance with these hypotheses, K. Dilanyan analyzes their viability, based on the information received from the respondents. Both hypotheses were refuted.

As part of my own research, I plan to participate in a larger number of respondents than in K. Dilanyan's research. This is the first difference. The next difference is that my research is focused on clarifying the life trajectory of modern Russian astrologers, its motives, turning points in their biography and the role of the environment on the development of the astrological practice of a specialist.

Russian researchers Dmitry Khoroshilov and Dmitry Mashkov demonstrated in their recent work (2022) the use of narrative life history analysis to study magic in modern society. A distinctive feature of their approach is its focus on a single case - they argue that here qualitative narrative analysis "allows us to reconstruct a model of identity, life history and autobiography embodied in specific social and historical circumstances" (p. 84). At the same time, we are also talking about analytical generalization of data, and not just a description of a unique case. In their article, D. Khoroshilov and D. Mashkov present an analysis of a specific case - a conversation with a professional astrologer about the development of her interest in magic and esotericism, starting from childhood until the moment when astrology becomes not only a profession, but also a matter of life. The resulting story was analyzed by the researchers based on the narrative interview scheme of D. Hiles and I. Chermak (Narrative Oriented Inquiry, NOI). Each story can be considered from the point of view of the plot (the role of the narrator), integrity in content/form and categories. This work is methodologically close to my own research. The way the authors highlight the stages of life's journey provides a good and concrete example. The purpose of the work carried out by D.

Khoroshilov and D. Mashkov also partially coincides, which was to study the meaning of magical practices in the structure of the life history of consultants who position themselves as professional esotericists. The use of NOI is more precise and focused than in the work of K. Dilanyan.

Currently, the sphere of Russian esotericism is a field of complex relationships between various actors. These include: the astrological community, representatives of other directions (tarologists, numerologists, psychics, mediums, etc.), the state, the church, and the scientific community. The Russian Orthodox Church is known for its negative attitude towards any kind of esoteric pursuits. At the state level, the Federal Law on the Protection of Religious Beliefs and Feelings of Citizens was adopted (dated June 30, 2013, No. 136). In practice, this only strengthens the position of the Orthodox Church as the dominant religious institution in Russia. Whereas representatives of alternative views could potentially be stigmatized and suppressed by the application of this law. The market for the services of helping practitioners is so diverse that the boundaries between officially recognized specialists, representatives of occult practices, charlatans and scammers are blurred. In connection, among other things, over the past few years, the draft federal law “On psychological assistance to the population in the Russian Federation” (dated June 24, 2014 No. 553338-6) has been discussed. This law is designed to protect people in need of qualified assistance from the potential harm and consequences of communicating with non-professionals. There is also a negative attitude from the scientific community. The Commission of the Russian Academy of Sciences to combat pseudoscience issued a memorandum “On the pseudoscience of astrology” (dated December 18, 2023 No. 3). In addition to arguments about the inconsistency of astrology with scientific criteria, it also provides recommendations to citizens, the media, officials, politicians, specialists in helping professions, and educational organizations. The essence of these recommendations can be briefly formulated as the exclusion of astrology from the social field. In response to the memorandum, several well-known Russian astrologers made their statements. Among them is M. Levin, an astrologer of the first (post-Soviet) generation and the head of one of the oldest educational institutions - the Moscow Academy of Astrology (LINK). This shows that, unlike representatives of other esoteric disciplines, astrology causes a greater social resonance, and astrologers themselves are trying to defend their right to conduct professional activities.

My research project mainly covers two related thematic districts:

1. Features characteristic of the life trajectory of a modern astrologer. What is the family, social, economic, educational background of these practitioners. Reasons and personal motivation for practicing astrology as a professional practice. What is critical when choosing the path of an astrologer and what role does the world around us play in this - family, friends, professional community and society as a whole. Is there anything common in their biographies and their respective biographical narratives?

2. How the professional practice of an astrologer is organized. Here we are talking about all aspects of legitimation, from obtaining your professional education and certification to creating your own business. The influence of the social environment on the practice of astrology, as well as the social influence of astrological practice - as it is understood by the practitioner himself and presented in his story. Considering the Russian-speaking sample, it is planned to turn to the experience of astrologers who emigrated to other countries. How society reacts to astrological practice. What queries are resolved by astrologers in their advisory work. In the event that there is stigmatization or discrimination against astrologers, it is important to explore the forms in which this occurs and what adaptation strategies they use.

Operationalization of concepts.

Narrative

In accordance with the ideas of narratology (Fludernik, 2009), by narrative I will understand the representation of any image of the world by linguistic or visual means. The world described in the narrative has its own structure and is built around one or more protagonists, whose actions have a specific purpose, direction and sequence in time. Through the story, the narrator expresses the uniqueness of the world in question.

Biographical narrative

Biographical narrative is one of the types of narrative. In accordance with the theoretical ideas of D. Bruner (2004), by biographical narrative I will understand the representation of the respondent's own life experience, reflecting not only various events, but also values, beliefs and desires, presented by him/her verbally within the framework of a semi-structured interview with subsequent transformation of the audio recording into the text.

Modern astrology

Modern astrology means a set of different directions and schools, based on traditions or created in modern times, starting from the 20th century, as it was described above by O. Hammer (2005).

Astrologer

An astrologer will be understood as someone who has completed training in one of the astrological schools, courses, or has independently studied this subject for at least a year with the help of books and/or educational videos and then began his own professional practice. In some cases, an astrologer may be a student who has studied for at least one year and has the express intention of becoming a professional consultant.

Methodological basis of the study

In my work, I mainly rely on the ideas of P. Berger and T. Luckmann (1966), as well as D. Bruner (1991, 2004). They are complementary and represent different levels of theorizing: general categories associated with the sociology of knowledge (such as Symbolic universes; Significant others; Socialization, identification, internalization; Self - objective/subjective; Language; Legitimation; Roles) can be considered specifically through ideas about the narrative construction of reality by a specific person, with his inherent beliefs and theories within the culture to which he belongs. J. Bruner proposes the concept of perception and thinking, where a person's needs and values play a crucial role, and the process of connecting a person's current experience with his past experience is decisive. This methodology allows us to consider the life and work of modern astrologers in previously defined thematic areas

Berger and Luckmann's work on the social construction of reality is the general theoretical framework of this work, which I will refer to whenever I think about one or another aspect of the subject under study. However, in order to move to a narrower and more focused analysis, it is

necessary to turn to other ideas, which will make it possible to specify the issues and move on to operationalization and the development of a detailed plan. An appeal to Jerome Bruner's works "The Narrative Construction of Reality" (1991) and "Life as Narrative" (2004) seems to me logical and justified for a number of reasons. The name of the first of them is consonant with the treatise presented above by Berger and Luckmann. All of these authors are representatives of the constructivist paradigm, but from different disciplines: Berger and Luckmann are sociologists of a phenomenological orientation, Bruner is a psychologist known for the study of cognitive processes. From the latter's point of view, reality, as it is understood by a specific person, is a constantly constructed and reconstructed narrative, in other words, a temporal phenomenon. Events are arranged in time in accordance with a certain logic, which is of particular interest for this study. Individual episodes of a biography accumulate and tend to form a meaningful sequence, where one follows from another. These stories represent reality in a certain way and make reference to it, although not directly, which makes them believable. The connection between narratives and reality is two-way, i.e. they are also a product of culture. An astrologer talking about his development as a professional and practitioner bears the imprint of the environment in which his development takes place. In accordance with one of the research questions, we are interested in how exactly the surrounding reality and events of personal and social reality are presented in the respondents' stories. Narratives, according to Bruner, concern specific events, although some of them may remain general and vague. An event in this case is something that disrupts the usual flow of time and the "normal" state. Speaking about professional and social roles, one cannot fail to mention the process of legitimation, to which Berger and Luckmann pay quite a lot of attention (1966, p.92-128). A practitioner uses various grounds to establish his or her practice as an astrologer. For some, this is related to the learning process at a particular school; It should be noted here that each of them has its own characteristics (inclinations, preferences) to justify what its students and teachers do, implicitly or explicitly. The work of some astrologers is determined by their commercial interests, which provides a completely different basis for legitimation. In other words, in the process of analyzing textual information, these grounds can be determined with greater or less clarity.

All three authors recognize the importance of language and symbolic systems, which is fundamental for our work: the unit of analysis is the transcript of a biographical interview with a practicing astrologer. In the planned study, it is important to preserve the features of astrologers' own language, since it is the key to understanding their biography as professionals.

This methodology allows us to consider the phenomena and processes that interest us, since it addresses issues of identity, everyday knowledge, legitimation, symbolic universes and psychological theories, which meets the needs of our research. Jerome Bruner's works "Narrative Construction of Reality" and "Life as a Narrative" are a good addition, since they allow us to specify the above concepts, and also lay the methodological basis for the use of the Atlas.ti computer program for processing qualitative information. Bruner also talks about the workings of biographical memory, which is entirely consistent with the theme of the entire project, while also planning to address developments in the field of narratology (Fludernik, 2009).

According to these theories, the following can be expected. Respondents will say that at significant moments in their professional development they rethought their reality, understanding of the world, their place and role in it. Such moments include a person's first meeting with astrology, the decision to study it, the beginning of professional practice and the decision to teach astrology to others. The way astrologers organize their professional practice, and the actions they take within

it, will express the subjective and objective aspects of their social reality. And this will be accompanied by changes in language through the use of a specific vocabulary, which is also of interest to me.

Research Questions and Assumptions

The study aims to answer the following questions:

- 1) What features are characteristic of the biographies of modern Russian astrologers? Are there any similarities in their stories and what characteristics are the most important and most often mentioned? Is there a relationship with gender, age, marital status, educational level or cultural background? Thus, attention will be focused on identifying “turning points” in the biographies of professional astrologers and students planning to engage in astrology professionally in the future. But other figures are also interesting for research, which include the creators of astrological schools themselves, the founders of regional branches of these schools and their managers. That is, all the actors who are related to the creation of a professional astrological community. If possible, I would like to include astrologers from all three generations in the study so that comparisons can be made.
- 2) How do the biographical narratives of astrologers reflect what is happening in society? All changes that occur in the life of an astrologer are in one way or another connected with changes in the surrounding reality - political, economic, social and religious. The narratives and memories of astrologers representing their life trajectory will, in my opinion, reflect these changes.
- 3) How does the process of legitimizing the activities and position of a professional astrologer proceed? What kind of difficulties does he face? Is there any marginalization, any stigmatization or discrimination against the astrologer? If so, what consequences does this have for them and what adaptation strategies are used to overcome difficulties?

It can be assumed that the most important points in the personal biography of an astrologer will be the following:

- the moment when a person first encountered astrology
- when did you decide to start studying this subject?
- when I started my professional astrological practice
- when I decided to start teaching astrology to other people.

If we correlate this with the theoretical concepts of Berger and Luckman, then changes should occur at each of these points: respondents will remember that at these significant moments they rethought their reality - their understanding of the world, their place and role in it. This will probably be expressed in reference to specific vocabulary (terms and models of explanation) characteristic of astrologers. The way in which astrologers organize their practice, and the actions they take within it, will express the subjective and objective aspects of their social reality.

I anticipate that the topics that astrologers will cover during interviews will fall into one of the following categories:

- The family in which the respondent was raised and its characteristics (social, economic, cultural), including attitude towards esoteric disciplines;
- Experience of the first encounter with astrology and contact with the carriers of this knowledge;
- Education, its general level (secondary, higher) and focus. This same topic can include teaching astrology independently or in an organized astrological school;
- Work experience and way of earning money. When, where and by whom the respondent worked, including the provision of any esoteric services. Is astrological practice a main or alternative source of income?
- Position in society and status of a person in connection with his astrological practice. Astrologers who have changed their city/country of residence can talk about the peculiarities of their adaptation to a new place as a professional astrologer. Difficulties and dilemmas that a person faces in society.

Research methodology

During the research process, through a semi-structured interview in person or online, a narrative will be obtained from the respondent that reflects his biography as a professional. For the purposes of the study, it is important to preserve his own words and explanations (emic approach). Therefore, the interview will take place in two stages. The first part is devoted to the question of how the respondent became an astrologer. It is important here what the respondent himself says, so a spontaneous narrative will be obtained. At the second stage, additional questions will be asked that reveal various details that relate to values, desires, beliefs, details of social professional life (directed narrative).

The unit of analysis is a biographical narrative obtained through a two-part semi-structured interview. The audio recordings of these interviews will be transcribed into text form, where topics will be highlighted along with the amount of time spent on them. Next, the specified themes will be coded for further processing. The Atlas.ti computer program is the most suitable for these purposes, since it makes it possible to work with heterogeneous high-quality material and flexibly change your strategy when new information appears. In particular, Atlas.ti implements the functions of content analysis and narrative analysis, which corresponds to the objectives of the study. The expected result is the discovery of dominant motives in the stories, the identification of significant connections between different levels of events. These levels include global changes in society, local social events, and individual events of respondents in their private and professional lives. It is beliefs, values, motivations and norms that we will identify both during the interview and when analyzing the text of the biography. Narratives can be classified not only as unique stories, but also as belonging to a specific genre. When accessing the technical capabilities of the Atlas.ti program, patterns can be discovered, the interpretation of which is possible through Bruner's idea of genre.

At the final stage, all the material received will be systematized and processed in order to answer the question posed in the study about the reflection of social context in the life trajectory of modern practicing astrologers.

Research ethics

The sample consists of 12-20 professionally practicing Russian-speaking astrologers in Russia and other countries (Georgia, Poland, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Austria and Great Britain). This will help answer the question to what extent the social environment is represented in the narratives

being studied, and how this environment influences the life and professional trajectory of specialists.

Their age and gender are not of fundamental importance for the study. Preference will be given to those respondents who have longer practice. Respondents will be selected from among the volunteers who responded to the announcement of the ongoing study in the Telegram, VKontakte and Instagram applications. The advertisement will indicate which respondents are preferred, as outlined above. They will then be briefly interviewed to check whether the respondent is suitable or not, discussing the terms of participation and obtaining informed consent from each volunteer. This meeting will be audio recorded and the participant will be made aware of this at the outset. Volunteers whose mental state and adequacy are suspect will receive a polite refusal without a detailed explanation of the reasons. The proposed interview procedure does not involve giving an answer about the inclusion of volunteers in the research sample at the time of the interview itself - they will receive an invitation later via email. Informed consent from each participant will be obtained orally from each adult participant at the end of the first meeting (selection interview) with an audio recording. Informed consent will be obtained orally from each adult participant at the end of the first meeting (screening interview) with an audio recording. Each participant will receive an email indicating whether they were included in the research study no later than 3 weeks after the interview. The participant will be informed that this study is being conducted because the backgrounds of professional astrologers have been little studied and they are a large and socially visible group. The study aims to understand how people become astrologers and what role they play in modern society. The participant is expected to tell everything that he himself considers important and necessary to tell the researcher in order to help achieve the goal of the study. The data obtained during the study does not constitute high-risk information. No one other than the researcher will have access to the audio recordings of the biographical interviews. Interview transcripts will be coded so that none of the participants can be identified. The transcripts themselves will be stored in a place as inaccessible to outsiders as possible. Upon completion of the study, participants will be able to familiarize themselves with the results, which will be officially published and posted in open sources. First of all, we are talking about the text of the dissertation and articles written on the research material and published in open access scientific journals. They will be informed about this at the first (selection) interview. Participants will have the opportunity to address these questions directly to the researcher via email if they wish to do so. In this way, the risk of stress reactions will be leveled.

Since this dissertation project is a continuation of the work begun in my master's degree, at the moment there is a partially formed sample from representatives of different astrological schools, which will be expanded. Among them are those who studied independently, individually or in study groups, that is, they represent a variety of life trajectories that have not been sufficiently researched and described.

Data - audio recordings and transcripts of biographical narratives - will be stored in a place inaccessible to unauthorized persons for 3 years after completion of the study. Only the researcher and his supervisor (if necessary) will have access to them. The data will not be transferred to third parties or exported outside the country.

Participants disclose personal information about their activities as astrologers; they may experience shame and psychological discomfort due to the fact that this activity is not recognized by official science. This may also relate to the participant's illegal financial activities.

Since the astrological services industry is a huge market, some of which is in the shadow financial sector, I have a responsibility to properly treat the information received (the importance of the anonymity of participants, but also the need to understand whether their activities are legal).

The reputation of those specialists who teach astrology may be damaged if some facts from biographical stories are made public. Since the interview process may involve information, the disclosure of which could cause harm to the respondent, my work will be based on the relevant standards prescribed in the NSS Code of Ethics, GDPR and documents that guide Russian ethnologists. My own experience in psychological practice will also be useful in preparing for publication of research materials. Mainly, it is necessary to ensure the safety and inaccessibility of audio recordings to unauthorized persons, as well as encoding the names of these audio recordings so that the respondent cannot be identified. Information provided by respondents may contain data that clearly identifies specific people whose reputations may be at risk if published publicly. For example, we can talk about a specific astrologer, the founder of his own school.

Conclusion

There are many reasons why modern people turn to astrology and astrologers. This may be due to psychological reasons, anxiety and uncertainty, and the need to relieve stress. The results of the study may be useful for understanding the general mechanisms of people's response to uncertainty. People in a modern secular society can believe that not only science, but also esotericism can provide answers to important personal questions. Contacting an astrologer may simply be a fashion among certain segments of the population. The material obtained from a sample of Russian-speaking astrologers and conclusions based on it can be used to analyze other representatives of alternative spirituality movements. This information will be useful to researchers in other fields, for example, anthropology of religion, cognitive religious studies, psychological anthropology, etc.

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