

(E)THNO)METHODOLOGY IN AN AUTO REPAIR SHOP: CATEGORIZATION PRACTICES OF “ETHNIC MEMBERSHIP.” *Summary*

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INTRODUCTION

This paper presents the results of an ethnomethodological study of practices of ethnic categorization in a group of Uzbek migrants working in an auto repair shop. Ethnicity here is treated as a subject, rather than as a research resource. The topic/resource shift is a central theme of ethnomethodology’s program (Zimmerman and Pollner 1970). Sociology deals with phenomena that are already structured and described in everyday discourse, but these commonplace formulations and descriptions are used in sociological research as an unproblematic, taken-for-granted resource. In the same way, social phenomena are perceived as a given by the participants themselves, which, in the words of Alfred Schütz, is the “natural attitude of everyday life” (Schütz 1945:533). Ethnomethodology considers this “everyday perception” not as a problem that requires a methodological or theoretical solution but as a subject for study. Based on these principles, this article offers a description of everyday practices that make possible the existence of the social fact of “ethnicity.”

MECHANICS OF SACKS'S CATEGORIES

The article is anchored in Harvey Sacks’s concept of membership categorization analysis. The focus of studies of this kind is on the categories used by participants to identify people (Sacks 1974; 1992). Sacks calls a set of categories that are commonly used together the *membership categorization device*. Membership categorization devices include not only lists of categories but also the rules of their application. For example, the “family” device might include the categories of “mother,” “father,” and “child.” Sacks’s work on this topic is ambiguous. In some lectures he distinguishes

between “natural” and “thematic” categorization devices, where the former take on qualities of pre-existing structures. In other lectures, Sacks talks about the use of categories in different contexts, which can serve as a starting point for the reorientation of his ideas. Consequently, the ethnomethodological approach proceeds from the *indexicality* of usage of any category (Hester and Eglin 1997; Housley and Fitzgerald 2002). Ethnomethodology studies not just categories or any other linguistic formulations alone but the methods used to achieve the “accountability” of these formulations. Ethnic categorizations presuppose actions that create a context in which participants may understand linguistic formulations as *ethnic categorizations*. I call this interrelationship of linguistic formulations and practical actions (*ethno*)*methods*.

PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

The empirical study on which this article is based was conducted in April–May 2009 in an auto repair shop in Saint Petersburg employing migrant workers from Uzbekistan. My research used participant observation of the activities of the shop’s workers, customers, and staff, as well as visitors to the teahouse attached to the workshop. The methodology of the study, which presumed my fullest possible integration into the social life of the body shop, precluded the use of a voice recorder or in situ note taking. Therefore, I developed the following alternative: using short quotes, key words, and phrases, I used my mobile phone’s diary function to record any interaction with the study’s subjects regardless of whether at the moment it seemed relevant to the study or not.

A man, presumably one of the repair shop’s owners, who was well respected by the other workers introduced me to them as his countryman and an apprentice who would learn the craft of an auto mechanic at the shop. Participation in joint labor allowed me, as a researcher, to observe the routines of participants’ everyday life. I came to the shop almost every day, always wearing my work clothes; delved into the intricacies of car repair; assisted with work that did not require special skills; and ate with the workers in the teahouse next to the workshop.

ACCOMPLISHMENT OF “UZBEKNESS”

Homeland. The concepts “homeland” and “home” were invoked by the workers frequently, often in comparison with Russia or neighboring Central Asian countries. Informants used different material objects to signify boundaries between “home” and elsewhere: natural gold deposits, large cotton crops, a Daewoo assembly plant, and recreational drugs. The existence of the subway system in Uzbekistan was used to distinguish it from other post-Soviet countries, especially those in Central Asia. In the general popular imagination, the presence of subway often serves as an index of development for provincial cities, but in the Uzbek case the metro is also given “ethnic” attributes. It becomes an object of *national pride*. The body shop workers’ stories about the homeland almost always followed a certain pattern. They would

reproduce views, which, in their opinion, Russians held of Uzbeks, and then mocked these views and described how things “actually were.” In such cases, the conversations frequently revolved around famous people from Uzbekistan. For me, it turned into a constant test of knowledge about historical figures, and for them it was a way to disprove stereotypes about their countrymen’s low intellectual abilities. During one such conversation, a workman formulated and then tried to disprove a stereotype by using the following phrase: “We too have many great people, while you here in Russia think there is only wilderness and the people are stupid.” In one of his spring 1996 lectures, Harvey Sacks examines the functioning of “stereotypes.” If there is a collectivity of people A, B, C, and so on who represent Y and they are also X, by no means it makes acceptable to say in a conversation that “Y are X.” The sociogrammatical possibility of such remark already presupposes the circulation of “Y are X” as a common-sense knowledge (Sacks 1992:333–340). Sacks shows that liberally minded sociologists, who try to identify and debunk stereotypes empirically, miss the target—Y is not a countable set of people. In fact, we are dealing with categories. Therefore, in everyday discourse the following statements will not contradict each other: 1) women are bad drivers, and 2) my sister drives well. More likely, such a stereotype will be formulated as, “Women are bad drivers, but my sister is an exception.” Moreover, everyday usage makes possible even the following statement: “Women are bad drivers, but all women-drivers I know (1, 2, 3 ...) are an exception.” In Sacks’s terminology, this is called *protection against induction*. However, in my example, we have an attempt at an inductive disproving of a stereotype: 1) the Uzbeks are stupid, and 2) some Uzbeks are great people. The expression “great men” was occasionally used as a category in order to refute such “stereotypes,” therefore the rule of protection against induction does not work here. This example shows that categories are indexical phenomena; applying a rule does not work for the analysis of everyday talk.

Sin (haraam). The informants did not talk about the religious component of their lives directly, but it came up as part of their habitual actions and gestures. For example, during a game of backgammon, the body shop workers offered their renderings of the board game’s religious significance, which led them to a general discussion of the concept of *haraam*. In the workshop’s teahouse, there is always a group of Uzbek customers playing backgammon—it is the tea room’s defining attribute. However, one of the mechanics from the shop noted that, while he knew how to play backgammon and, if wanted, he could make time for the game, he never partook of it. For a long time, he had considered backgammon to be a traditional Oriental game, but he had subsequently read in religious literature that backgammon was banned. If, with respect to board games, references to religious texts were used, in relation to smoking, alcohol, and drugs the concept of *kaif* (from Arabic *keif* for “pleasure, enjoyment”) was applied as an evaluation criterion. The following logic was employed: drugs and alcohol bring fun but smoking does not, therefore the latter does not fall under the category of *haraam*. A certain portion of the shop workers claimed that they did not drink alcohol at all, regretfully nodding at those colleagues who *in Russia* allowed themselves to get drunk. Thus, we can point to the informants’

ability to differentiate between “ethnic” and “religious” practices. Backgammon may be an *ethnically* traditional game but it is unacceptable from a *religious* point of view; the *religious* prohibition of alcohol consumption, for some, is enforced in their *ethnic* homeland but not in their new country of residence.

Food. The teahouse was located next to the body shop; at lunchtime it was mostly frequented by the workers from the shop that I studied and a few other neighboring auto service stations. During joint lunches, local dishes, specific food products, and particular ways of handling and consuming food allowed the workers to accomplish and highlight their “Uzbekness.” If under ordinary circumstances all of these things were not ethnically marked practices for workers, they are recognized, described, and explained when “others” are present. During meals workers gave accounts of some of their actions. At one lunch, I was tested on my practical ability to deal with a *national dish* called *samsa*. Samsa are medium-sized round pies of unleavened dough stuffed with juicy chopped meat, onions, rump fat, herbs, and spices. When the dish arrived, I was jokingly quizzed on how I was going to eat it. I turned the samsa upside down, cut the bottom with the knife, took a sip of juice from the filling, and only then began to eat it. I was told I passed the test—I had done everything right, “like an Uzbek.” If the initial steps are skipped, the fatty liquid from the filling will spatter around; this usually happens to those who taste the dish for the first time. No recipe for Uzbek food mentions this practice as an element of the *national cuisine*, but it has become established as such in the local context. Describing the phenomenon of an ethnic cuisine as a set of ingredients or recipes, we miss this “practical” element of cuisine. It is always recipes-in-use.

RECONSTRUCTION OF “SOVIETNESS”

Passport. In conversations with me, informants often raised and discussed the topic of the transition from the Soviet passport system to the current situation, in which one needs a special permit to come and live in Russia. One of the workers recounted an argument he had had at the police station, where we can observe the close socio-grammatical connection of things and practices with the notion of *Homeland* in the context of interactions with police.

Policeman: What are you doing here? Go back to your home country!

Workman: Which home country?

Policeman: Uzbekistan is your homeland; you have an Uzbek passport.

Workman: And how do you know it is my homeland? For three years, I breathed radiation on a submarine guarding this country so that you can sleep peacefully; I still have my red Soviet passport; my grandfather was killed near Petersburg [during World War II]. Did he fight for the Uzbeks, who’re far away from here? It is for you and your family he died. So now, where is my homeland?

It should be noted that in the struggle to redefine the notion of homeland both men agreed that the passport was its material embodiment. In this case, these changes were not purely symbolic or bureaucratic; in people’s everyday reality, the

changing of the passport system has caused real-life difficulties. As a rule, passport and *ethnicity* are bundled together in ways that are inconvenient for workers' management of practical situations, such as their interactions with the police.

Language and the army. In conversations about *Soviet multinationality*, almost all older informants at some point began to recollect their experience of military service. They had no difficulty formulating and expressing the importance of this experience to their lives. For many of them, the army was the first place where they had practiced speaking Russian, the main attribute of "Sovietness." For example, one of the workers recalled that his language skills had helped him greatly in being promoted within the army ranks. For others, use of the Russian language in the army was perceived as only a secondary skill and was subsequently lost, a fact keenly felt in their dealings with customers now. For example, one of the informants surprised even himself when he was able to reproduce, without a hitch, army drill songs—but he complained about his current difficulties with the Russian language: in communicating with clients, he could formulate sentences only after first carefully thinking them through.

Holidays. Two official Russian holidays happened during the study: May Day (May 1st) and Victory Day (May 9th). The life of the shop is organized in such way that local holidays are not observed. Days off are not given for Russian public holidays, only for Muslim holidays. However, holidays in the month of May are perceived by the workers either as part of the common Soviet past (May Day) or the common present (Victory Day). On the morning of May 1st, a worker from the shop congratulated me as soon as he saw me. The second mechanic began to talk about the celebration of May Day in Uzbekistan in the Soviet era, recalling in detail the demonstrations and the red flags. He noted that May Day is not really marked in Uzbekistan today, as the current government has a more than cool attitude toward the Soviet past, and he believed that there would be no public celebration in Russia as well. To my response that demonstrations with red flags continue to be organized and staged by leftist activists and trade unions, he expressed genuine surprise. In the case of the Victory Day holiday, the reverse situation should be noted. A few days before the holiday, one of the workers spoke of his desire on that particular day to take a walk around the city and to watch the parade and fireworks. Since the shop does not give everyone that day off, he requested a personal day off. Shortly before leaving work he had the following conversation with a client:

Client: Do you celebrate Victory Day over there [in Uzbekistan]?

Workman: Sure we do!

Client: With fireworks?

Workman: Of course with fireworks!

In this conversation we can see that the interactants check and confirm their shared practices of celebrating Victory Day by referring to fireworks. Thus, with respect to the holidays of May 1st and May 9th, we could observe repair shop workers' differing logics in describing practices of the *Soviet multinational*. If May Day—with its bygone demonstrations and red flags—denotes the *Soviet multinationality* as a

thing of the past, the holiday on May 9th—marked with fireworks and parades—manifests itself as a marker of the surviving commonality.

CONCLUSION

This article has shown the participants' work to accomplish the meaningfulness of everyday actions as *ethnic* phenomena, that is as (ethno)methodology. In practical situations, the body shop's workers and customers associated a variety of activities (cooking pilaf, playing backgammon, smoking tobacco, checking passports) with categories of ethnicity. It should be noted that the practices described in this article should not be considered as particular examples of a general phenomenon. I do not claim that the practice of cutting off the bottom of a pie is an inherently ethnic practice but rather that such practices can "become ethnic" on occasion, through the work of participants. In ethnomethodology, the word "is" always has a procedural meaning. If something indeed has an immutable quality, it is the very ability to use ordinary methods to achieve meaningfulness of action under the conditions of infinite indexicality "each another next first time." My depiction is, of course, also an (ethno)methodology. When I designated some of the practices as "the attainment of Uzbekness" or "reconstruction of Sovietness" and structured the text accordingly, I myself gave descriptions of the informants' practical actions and linguistic formulations as manifestations of *ethnic categorization*. But this is only part of the issue. Depictions presented in this article are not just (ethno)methodology but also ethnomethodology. In this study, (ethno)methods are not just used to establish the meaningfulness of observed practices, but the very accountability of practices is shown to be a consequence of (ethno)methods.

Authorized translation from Russian by Anna Paretskaya

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