

Are there only two ethnic groups in Moscow: Slavs and Southerners? Research on vernacular categorization with elicitation methods used

The notion that representatives of different nationalities live in Russia, and that Moscow, being the capital, is the city where one can encounter representatives of all the nationalities of Russia, is an element of the established set of ideas about the ethnic diversity of Russia, as well as a “natural” reality, an absolute fact for the majority of its residents and various experts. However, are nationalities also a framework for spontaneous classifications in urban context? Is or is not the entire diversity of nationalities reduced in the course of spontaneous categorization to two, three or four categories? And is this categorization more important than classification by “official” nationalities, and does it play a larger role in organization of social life? Consideration of the problem from such angle became possible within the framework of the so-called cognitive turn in constructivist studies of ethnicity, proclaimed by Brubaker in his work “Ethnicity as Cognition”. According to this approach, ethnicity is a common denominator in continuous acts of categorization carried out by people and institutions. There are a number of works devoted to state categorizations, however, vernacular measurements of ethnic categorizations are less common - in the modern period, only the work of Roth “Studying Ethnic Schemas: Integrating Cognitive Schemas into Ethnicity Research Using Photo-Elicitation” is known. The general relevance of this study is explained by the fact that people live in vernacular, not ascribed, categories, and it is precisely these categories that are reflexed upon in the course of social life, and that shape their perceptions of the world, thereby determining their behavior. And the cognitive turn, which pays attention to spontaneous categorizations in everyday life, is an important, novel theoretical agenda, the methods for the implementation of which are yet to be developed.

This report presents the results of Group for Migration and Ethnicity Research 2024 study of the construction of ethnicity in Moscow in terms of categories used in everyday categorizations, as well as indicators pointing that people encountered belong to certain ethnic categories. The study was conducted at the intersection of classical and innovative methods, including video elicitation, walk-along, etc. Video elicitation and walks with the informant, which involved demonstrating incentives to the informants (people whose ethnicity needed to be determined), made it possible to turn to the informants’ direct experience of perception and their classification of other people in everyday urban life. During the study, 41 interviews were conducted. Informants differed based on a variety of

characteristics. The selection of informants was carried out on the basis of quotas by gender, age group, place of birth and ethnic category by self-identification (determined during screening). Quotas were “crossed”, as a result of which a final request was formed for the number of informants corresponding to certain characteristics. In addition, during the intermediate discussion of the interviews already conducted and the characteristics of the informants, additional requirements were determined.

The study showed that categorization in everyday Moscow occurs on the basis of two classifications: the official classification by nationality, the roots of which go back to the Soviet national policy, and the vernacular classification, which includes two or three categories: "Slav" and "Southerner", while the latter category includes "Caucasus" and "Asia". The classification by nationalities is, on the one hand, too detailed for "users", and such specificity has no practical meaning, on the other hand, the categories within it lack indicators for it to be used in everyday life. The binary/ternary classification, in turn, while being based on meaningful categories, is too informal and does not have its own imaginaries to displace the classification by nationalities. As a result, each classificatory act is essentially a compromise between these two classifications and uses them both. In addition to these findings, the report provides answers to the question of what thought processes are used in categorization in everyday life, what ethnic imaginaries exist within the Moscow construction of ethnicity, how non-Russian-speaking foreigners who have recently arrived in Russia categorize other people, etc. The report is addressed to everyone interested in the topic of ethnicity and is intended as a basis for an interdisciplinary dialogue on ethnicity between representatives of social and cognitive sciences.