

Documentary Constructivism as a Special Form of Constructivist Folk Sociology: Evidence from Dagestan

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Abstract

Drawing on literature concerning folk theories of ethnicity, this paper introduces and substantiates the concept of documentary constructivism. Documentary constructivism conceptualizes ethnicity primarily as an administrative category—that is, a status acquired (rather than inherited) through interactions with the state. This framework is developed through analysis of 130 interviews conducted in Dagestan, a region where, over the course of the 20th century, the state repeatedly revised ethnic classifications and reassigned entire communities from one nationality to another. The findings show that the documentary constructivist view is significantly more prevalent in communities that experienced such re-categorizations. These results are situated within a broader scholarly discourse that typically defines folk constructivism as the belief that ethnic identity is acquired rather than innate. This study argues that the prevalence of distinct folk theories of ethnicity is shaped both by features of the social context and that folk theories are collective representations themselves.

Keywords

ethnicity, folk sociology, Dagestan, constructivism, classification, documents

Constructivism is currently the dominant paradigm in research of ethnic phenomena. It has emerged in opposition to primordialism and essentialism—approaches largely advanced by researchers working within the constructivist framework. The essence of both primordialism and essentialism is rarely defined directly. Conventionally, they summarize a set of views in which each person is “assigned” a particular ethnic category at birth, and their ethnic category is a constant. The world, thus, is divided into ethnic groups that are important actors in social and historical processes. In some studies, the genesis of these views is reconstructed in detail (Wimmer 2009), based on which an assumption is made that, in essence, they arise from everyday ideas (Gil-White 2001) that migrated to the academic field and for some time became its paramount (Varshaver 2022b, 2025c).

Simultaneously, with the empirical studies challenging various primordialist and essentialist ideas, and theoretical works focusing on the dynamics of scientific views on ethnic phenomena, a

new direction in research has emerged. The focus of this direction is on how ordinary people imagine ethnicity. The relevance of such studies lies, among other things, in the consideration that mainstream ideas about ethnic phenomena significantly affect attitudes toward strangers, marital attitudes, the degree of involvement in conflicts, and other equally important issues. The most famous work in this area is the article by Francisco Gil-White (2001) focusing on how residents of the Mongolian steppes classify children raised by representatives of an ethnic category different from the one to which their parents belonged. Following the pioneer of the new direction L. Hirschfeld, who studied the perception of race by American children aged three to four years (Hirschfeld 1996), and using the results of his research as its basis, Gil-White formulated the thesis: a person is inherently a primordialist/essentialist. Other studies, however, question this thesis and demonstrate that in some contexts (e.g., Madagascar (Astuti 1995) or Eastern Europe (Kanovsky 2007)) people mostly adhere to the opposite set of views. In the following years, a new direction, folk sociology of ethnicity, gained significant momentum: the methodology became more complex (Hamer et al. 2020), the findings—more differentiated (see Erut 2017; Schraml 2014; Roberts, Gelman 2016), while the theoretical implications connected this direction with various aspects of developmental psychology (see Astuti et al. 2004; Kinzler, Dautel 2012; Woods 2017), evolutionary cognitive science (see Cosmides et al. 2003; Kurzban et al. 2002), etc. These studies, with rare exceptions (Hussak, Cimpian 2019), constructed a “primordialism/essentialism–constructivism” spectrum, contrasting the ideas of ethnicity as an innate characteristic and as a cultural category into which an individual is socialized.

In the last 20 years, constructivist studies on the topic have increasingly noted that ethnicity is largely produced under the influence of states and their bureaucratic machines (see Appadurai 1993; Simon et al. 2015) and that people in modern societies identify with categories that are in one form or another imposed “from above” as part of the procedural framework for counting and classifying the population for subsequent management. Folk sociology of ethnicity, which has gradually come to the conclusion that ordinary people’s ideas about ethnicity are not uniquely determined by the human mental constitution, but are significantly dependent on the context (Woods 2017), is still practically indifferent to the “documentary” turn in ethnicity studies and generally does not tend to focus on the differences between pre-modern classifications and those formed under the influence of modern states. Research into modern classifications *de facto* assumes that they are of a stable nature, as a result of which people can convince themselves that they do in fact belong to the category which the state “prescribes” them and thus “materialize” the corresponding ethnic categories.

What happens, however, if the classifications “from above” are dynamic, and people are assigned to different ethnic categories over a relatively short period of time? Can we assume that

such transitions will lead to the emergence of a special type of constructivist folk sociology, according to which the main ethnic reality is the reality of official documents (*documentary reality*), and a person's ethnicity is defined neither by the ethnicity of their parents, nor the one they were socialized into, but who they are classified as in the documents recording their ethnicity?

Dagestan, a republic in southern Russia, provides a striking example of the mutability of official classifications. The current paper, based on 130 in-depth interviews conducted in different parts of Dagestan, demonstrates that documentary constructivism has indeed emerged in Dagestan as a special type of folk sociology of ethnicity and that people who belong to communities that were reclassified during the Soviet era are significantly more likely than others to gravitate toward this perception of the nature of ethnicity. Taking this into account, the following broader theses are proposed for discussion: (1) folk-sociological ideas of ethnicity are linked to the history of the formation and change of ethnic classifications and (2) the more vague and contradictory the state classification policy is, the higher the likelihood of the spread of documentary constructivism as a view on the nature of ethnicity.

Theoretical background

Conventional framework (see Berg-Sørensen et al. 2011; Williams 2015) places the existing academic conceptions of ethnicity on a continuum, with constructivism and instrumentalism on one side and primordialism and essentialism on the other. Based on the existing “constructivist consensus” (see Wimmer 2013; Chandra 2012) the current fundamental points of this opposition can be described as follows. Primordialist and essentialist studies of ethnic phenomena focus on variously labelled collectives (tribes, ethnic groups, nationalities, etc.), which have their own culture that is not reducible to others, and members who are born as belonging to them (ethnically), i.e. their ethnicity is transmitted genetically and cannot change during one's life. Constructivism and instrumentalism, on the contrary, argue that ethnicity is something that is acquired in the process of socialization, partly through cultural assimilation, partly through categorization and identification of a person as a representative of a particular group, and, moreover, ethnicity can change over time. An important milestone in the development of constructivism was the problematization of the concept of “group” (Brubaker 2002), as a result of which it is ethnic categories and the meanings associated with them that become the focus of analysis.

This conventional framework is apparently not entirely accurate and sometimes caricatures (Horowitz 2002) primordialism and essentialism, almost automatically attributing everything that the author of the corresponding text considers “correct” and “good” to constructivism. Thus, from publication to publication, the ideas persist, according to which the founder of primordialism is

Clifford Geertz, though he, in quite a constructivist manner, opposed the subjective importance of ethnic and other social identities (Geertz 1963)¹. At the same time, the classic of constructivism and instrumentalism is considered to be Fredrik Barth, who conceptualized ethnic boundaries and who fell into the “sin of essentialism”, generally not abandoning the idea of the existence of groups as a phenomenon (Barth 1998)². These examples suggest that it makes sense to return to the issue of delineating the field, despite the calls to stop “beating the dead primordial horse” (Wimmer 2013: 2), due to the need for a more complete understanding of the phenomenon of ethnicity. Some such attempts have already been made. It has been stated, for example, that the space of disagreement is described not by the “essentialism–constructivism”, but by the “perdurabilism–instrumentalism” spectrum, and that the subject of the dispute is the stability of ethnic categories and the question of whether or not ethnicity can be reduced exclusively to a pragmatic instrumental interest (Hale 2004).

It is important to note that over time, it has become clear that constructivism is fighting not so much against scholars who adhere to essentialist and primordialist positions, but against non-academic, vernacular ideas about the nature of ethnicity (see Wimmer 2013; Varshaver 2022b, 2025c), the bearers of which—ordinary people—according to some research, tend to think in a groupist way, attributing a special culture to ethnic groups, and also believe that ethnicity is an inherent feature, attributed to a person “by blood”. Folk sociology studies how ordinary people actually perceive ethnicity.

A kind of forerunner of this direction was the aforementioned study by Lawrence Hirschfeld (Hirschfeld 1996), in which he showed that people have a special cognitive mechanism for dividing the social world into ethnic (in particular racial) categories, and that these categories are formed via the same mechanism that people use to distinguish biological species. Hirschfeld emphasizes that such deep classificatory logic is essentially inherent in humans: people are inclined to naturalize social differences by dividing people into stable groups, the representatives of which are united by a common internal essence. Following in the footsteps of Hirschfeld’s work, two important studies were conducted, their authors asking the question of whether people are essentialists or constructivists by nature, and giving polar opposite answers to it.

The first study was conducted by Rita Astuti (see *Astuti* 1995, 2001). Using significant empirical material collected in Madagascar, the author studies the ideas about the essence of ethnic

¹ Effectively, he was talking about distinguishing types of social constructs, but his ideas were misinterpreted by the academic community: making it seem that he believed that “social predeterminisms” actually exist and are not constructed. On the topic of receptions of the concept of primordiality see (Geertz 1994).

²According to Barth’s thesis, groups exist, but, firstly, their culture is formed not through adaptation to nature, as it was believed in the anthropological approaches he problematized, but through interactions with representatives of other ethnic groups in spatial and at the same time social borders, secondly, it is exactly the borders where the formation of the conceptions about the culture of a group happens. Those conceptions may significantly stray from what an anthropologist may observe “from the sidelines”.

categories among the Vezo. Astuti used the now classic *Switch at Birth Task* (SaBT)³, based on the results of which she concluded that, in the minds of informants, the ethnic category of a child who, for whatever reason, has been raised by a foster family, coincides with the ethnic category of the foster parents, not the biological parents. Thus, even in traditional contexts, informants are constructivists.

The aforementioned 2001 paper by Gil-White (2001), describes how inhabitants of the Mongolian steppes qualify children raised by members of an ethnic category different from that of their parents. The author shows that even steppe dwellers, convinced that membership in an ethnic category is transmitted through socialization, eventually begin to claim that “Mongolian-ness”/“Kazakh-ness” is some property inherent in a person since birth. According to Gil-White’s explanatory model, the idea of ethnicity is always centered around ideas of origin and normative endogamy, and if ethnic groups differ sufficiently from each other in some significant characteristics, these groups (here Gil-White continues the logic of Hirschfeld) will be essentialized by humans as biological species. Such reasoning allowed Gil-White to conclude that it is essentialism that is the natural optics for the human consciousness for the perception of ethnic groups.

Martin Kanovsky (2007) attempted to integrate the results of Hirschfeld, Astuti, and Gil-White. Criticizing such a classic indicator of essentialism like the biological inheritance of membership in an ethnic category, he pointed out that the connection between essentialism and various causal mechanisms for acquiring an identity is always empirical and never constitutive, and people can think in an essentialist way, even denying the fact of ethnicity being transmitted “by blood”. The conclusions about the non-optimal nature of the existing system of indicators and the need for a more complex one were supported in the subsequent research (Hussak, Cimpian 2019). Meanwhile, Kanovsky’s results quite clearly indicate that it is socialization that becomes the key indicator for determining the ethnicity of a child for ordinary people, and, in general, in the debate about the essentialist or constructivist nature of man, Kanovsky’s data testify in favor of folk constructivism.

Such a discrepancy could not but lead to an understanding of the need for a cross-cultural study of folk ideas about the essence of ethnicity. The results of several studies (see Hamer et al. 2020; Rad, Ginges 2018) demonstrated that the prevalence of certain ideas does indeed vary significantly from context to context. Moreover, it was shown that neither essentialism nor

³ SaBT is a classic task in the research of folk sociology of ethnicity, in which informants are asked to answer a question about the ethnicity of a child who, having both parents die in a car accident, was taken in by a foster family consisting of the members of a different ethnic category. The task allows for variations regarding the child's age and other significant contextual variables.

constructivism is the only folk theory of ethnicity or a baseline one: in all the studied countries, both essentialists and constructivists were identified, with the proportion of the latter being higher. In addition, a meta-analysis of the studies did not lead to significant results; its author, Alejandro Erut concluded that both the conceptualizations of constructivism and essentialism and the field methods of identifying the position of the subjects differ significantly from researcher to researcher (Erut 2017).

In parallel, efforts that are potentially important for reconstructing the “natural” concept of ethnicity for humans have been undertaken within the framework of developmental psychology: information about changes in ideas about ethnicity over the life course could tell us a lot about which of them are closer to human nature. However, there is no certainty here either. Some researchers argue that the degree of essentialization of ethnic categories increases with age (see Hirschfeld 1996; Birnbaum et al. 2010; Kinzler, Dautel 2012), while others propose the opposite (Astuti et al. 2004; Woods 2017) or describe more complex connections between age and perceptions of ethnicity (Diesendruck et al. 2012). In particular, Ruth Woods, using a sample of students from a multicultural school in London, shows that in a community where ethnicity is primarily defined based on attributes that are considered alterable (in this case, religion), children tend to superimpose assimilated knowledge about freedom of religion on judgments about ethnic categories during their education, and the transfer of constructivist judgments about religion to ethnicity increases as they grow older (Woods 2017).

Overall, these studies indicate that humans are not “naturally” essentialists or constructivists and that the vernacular conception of ethnicity is acquired by children in the process of socialization. The social (and in this case discursive) nature of folk perceptions of ethnicity is also demonstrated by the research of Carla Schraml. Based on interviews conducted in Rwanda and Burundi, she shows that constructivist and essentialist judgments are intertwined in the rhetoric of informants and that ethnicity is not perceived by them clearly and consistently (Schraml 2014).

All the works mentioned, however, conceptualize essentialism and constructivism as a dichotomy of the innate and the acquired, “blood” and “culture,” understood in one way or another. However, constructivism, asserting that ethnicity has a social nature, uses its own optics when examining ethnic phenomena. In this regard, the emphasis is on the relationship between ethnicity and the state and, above all, the role of official classifications in the production of ethnicity.

Research into these topics started in the 1980s. In 1987, William Petersen published a work in which he traced the changes in the list of ethnic categories in the USA from census to census and the way it became increasingly politicized (Petersen 1987). A year earlier, in 1986, in the *Demography* journal, an article by Harvey Choldin was published, discussing the way the question about Hispanic

origin was included in the 1980 census as a result of negotiations between the US Statistical Bureau and Hispanic organizations, in exchange for the latter facilitating access of census takers to their members (Choldin 1986). In 1993, an influential essay by Arjun Appadurai was published, which, using India's case, illustrated how the introduction of official ethnic classifications leads to the emergence of new social and ethnic groups and a significant change in the construction of ethnicity over a large territory (Appadurai 1993). This thesis was analyzed by Susan Bayly, who described in detail the role of states and state classifications in the formation of the modern caste system (Bayly 1999). A similar logic was used by Francine Hirsch, who studied the formation of ethnic categories in the Soviet Union and clearly showed that through the census and passport, these categories were largely imposed on the peasant population, who did not define themselves in ethnic terms (Hirsch 2005). Şener Aktürk in an article from 2011 showed how the mention of an ethnic category in a passport influences the formation of special regimes of ethnicity (Aktürk 2011). In 2001, a collection of articles was published devoted to the connection between the census and identity. Its editors David Kertzer and Dominique Arel formulated a thesis in the introduction that largely summarizes the described approach: state statistics not only and not so much reflect social reality in its ethnic aspect, as construct it (Kertzer, Arel 2001). The answer to the question of why official ethnic categorizations are needed at all was discussed by Jean-Louis Rallu and colleagues, who concluded that states can “count to dominate and exclude”, “not count to unify and assimilate”, “count or not count in the name of multiculturalism”, and also “count for positive action (eradicate discrimination)” (Rallu et al. 2006). Thus, the state, through bureaucratic mechanisms which include censuses and passportization does not so much study and record the existing state of affairs, but actively categorizes the population. If this is so, then the population must “believe” in the proposed categories, and “faith” must be formed through the essentialization of these categories. But for this, the state must be sufficiently convincing—both when it comes to the consistency and coherence of ethnic classifications and their significance for the distribution of resources.

How, however, will ordinary people perceive ethnic categories if the state pursues inconsistent classificatory policies? With rare exceptions (Todd et al. 2013), this question has not been posed in the literature.

Research context

In terms of ethnic and social categorizations, Dagestan at the beginning of the 20th century presented a motley picture. The influence of feudal states and political associations, that emerged on its territory at different times and were to varying degrees dependent on the Russian Empire, was superimposed on external and internal ideas about cultural (linguistic, ritualistic) similarities and

differences (Tishkov, Kisriev 2007), all the while the most important elements of Dagestani society structuring social relations were patrilineal clans (*tukhums*) and rural communities (*jamaats*) (see Gadzhieva 1985; Magomedova et al. 2021; Khashaev 2007). Like other territories that became part of the USSR in the 1920s, Dagestan became an object of “conceptual conquest” (Hirsch 2005), i.e. administrative reorganization and update of classifier activities, within the framework of which ethnic categories were labelled “peoples” and “nationalities”. Previously existing vernacular and scientific classifications were used as a basis for the official lists of nationalities, while the lists themselves often became the subject of discussions. By the 1926 census, about 40 Dagestani “peoples” were identified, but by 1939, as a result of state policy to consolidate nationalities, about 16 of them were recorded, mainly due to the inclusion of peoples living in the southwestern, mountainous part of Dagestan in the category of “Avars”⁴. Later, however, contrary to the course of consolidation, the 1959 census recorded “Tsakhurs” and “Rutuls” separately. In the post-Soviet censuses, the list of nationalities was brought into almost complete conformity with the 1926 list, despite significant opposition from the establishment of the 14 “official” nationalities (Tishkov, Kisriev 2007), each of which, according to the first post-Soviet constitution of Dagestan, had to delegate a representative to the main republican executive body, the State Council (Landa 2016). Nowadays national classification in Dagestan is gradually losing its significance as a regulator of social relations—partly due to the rising influence of Islam in the republic, partly due to the depoliticization of nationalities (see Varshaver 2022a, 2022b, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c).

This trend can also be linked with the abolition of the mandatory record of nationality in personal documents—the corresponding line present in the passport of a citizen of the Soviet Union, and then Russia in 1932–1997 (see Arel 2001; Bayburin 2017), or in the personal cards of members of executive committees, prisoners, etc., earlier. The line would be filled in based on the applicant’s words at first, in the late 1930s, however, this rule changed with the introduction of NKVD USSR Circular No. 65, which stated that the nationality label in identity documents should be carried out in conformity with the nationality of the person’s parents (Bayburin 2017), based on their documents. If the mother and father belonged to different nationalities, one of them could be chosen, except for some special cases (Hirsch 2005). These rules existed until 1997 when the “Passport Regulation” was adopted in Russia, which abolished the corresponding line⁵. At the moment, nationality is not recorded in the passport of a citizen of the Russian Federation, but in some documents, such as, for example, a military ID or a marriage certificate, such information can be indicated if the applicant

⁴ Calculations by the authors based on the data published in *Demoscope Weekly* demography journal. <http://www.demoscope.ru>

⁵ See: Resolution of the People’s Assembly of the Republic of Dagestan “On the new passport of a citizen of the Russian Federation” from 29.04.1998 No. 1977.

wishes to have it listed. Additionally, there is an opportunity for the national republics of Russia to use a special insert in which the information provided in the passport would be duplicated in the language of the republic. In Dagestan, an attempt was made to preserve the “nationality” line in the insert, but due to a conflict between the norms of republican and federal legislation, this line was abolished in 1998 (Zaynitdinov 2020). Thus, at present in Dagestan, as in the rest of Russia, the indication of nationality is optional and rather marginal.

Research methodology

The empirical basis for the article consists of interviews collected by the authors and their colleagues in August 2022 in Dagestan. The interviews were devoted to ethnicity in a broad sense and touched upon a variety of topics: marriage attitudes, rules of membership in ethnic categories, ethnic jokes, but also the meaning of ethnicity from the informant’s point of view. It was this part of the guide that became the basis for the data analysis for the current paper. The main tool aimed at identifying the informant’s position on the “essentialism-constructivism” continuum used was the SaBT vignette, presented as follows:

Imagine a situation. A child was born into a family where the father is Avar and the mother is Avar, but in the child’s infancy, the parents got in an accident and died, and the child was taken in by the family of the father’s best friend, an ethnic Dargin. In this family, the child was treated as a family member, given everything that the friend’s own children were given. The child learned the Dargin language just like them and does not know Avar. What nationality do you think this child is? What if the accident happened not in infancy, but when the child was six or seven years old? What if the deceased parents were Russian? What if the nationality of the parents is unknown?

The vignette used different wording depending on which nationalities were mentioned earlier in the interview, but the plot remained the same. In addition, to study the informant’s ideas about the nature of ethnicity, the question was asked: “What do you think about nationalities—are they important at all nowadays? Why and/or when?” We also took into account that relevant information could be contained in any fragment of the interview. A total of 135 interviews were collected, 133 of which were transcribed—and became the object of analysis. All the interviews were conducted in Russian, the quotes in this paper have been translated into English by the authors with an attempt to preserve the original cadence and tone of the speakers.

Data were collected in the capital agglomeration of Dagestan (78 interviews) and seven mountain villages: Kubachi (10), Urkarakh (6), Arakul (8), Nizhniy Katruk (8), Ikhrek (6), Bezhta (8), and Tlyadal (9). In four villages, ethnic reclassification was carried out during the Soviet era: the residents of Ikhrek, “Lezgins”, became “Rutuls” in the 1959 census; the “Kubachis”, recorded as a separate nationality in 1926, were included in the “Dargins” category in 1939; and the residents of the villages of Bezhta and Tlyadal, recorded as “Kapuchins” in the first Soviet census, were later recorded as “Avars,” while in the latest censuses, some of them turned out to be “Bezhtins.”

The interview transcripts were uploaded into the qualitative data analysis software Atlas and thematically coded. In the first stage, general codes were created to denote materials relevant to the topic. Then, specific codes were identified and attributed to statements that allowed us to determine the informant’s view on the nature of ethnicity. For example, the code “blood/genes” was assigned to statements in which the respondent claimed that ethnicity is a biological category and is transmitted genetically, the code “culture/upbringing”—to statements from which it followed that ethnicity is acquired in the process of socialization. The code “identification” was used if the informant stated that ethnicity is what a person thinks about themselves. The code “identification by others”—if it was claimed that ethnicity is defined by how other people classify a person. The code “documents” was assigned to a statement that implied that ethnicity is set by the category which a person is attributed by official bodies and the documents they issue. Quite often, the same informant expressed judgments that were coded differently, so the last stage entailed analysis of each interview with the intention to reconstruct the informant’s general train of thought. Then, by a collective decision of the authors of the article, the informant was classified either as an “essentialist” (which corresponded to the dominance of the code “blood/genes” in his statements) or as a “constructivist” (which corresponded to the dominance of all other codes), after which “documentary constructivists” were identified from among the “constructivists”—informants in whose interviews statements marked with the code “documents” dominated over others. The number of interviews made it possible to prepare a database for statistical analysis designed to test the hypothesis that documentary constructivism is widespread in communities that have become the object of ethnic reclassification. The database for each informant contained variables reflecting the presence or absence of different types of statements, the informant’s point of view, their origin (e.g. from a “reclassified village”), as well as socio-demographic characteristics (gender, age, level of education, etc.). The calculation was carried out in the *SPSS Statistics* using the logistic regression method, where the dependent variable was set as the informant’s views on the nature of ethnicity (codes: 1—documentary constructivism, 0—any other position).

Results: reconstruction of documentary constructivism

Documentary constructivism is a term we use to describe the statements and views of people who reduce ethnic categories to documentary reality. Ethnicity in this worldview is a product of the systematizing activity of the state, embodied in official documents and classifications (e.g. censuses). How exactly does this manifest itself in people's responses? Below is one of the statements regarding the SaBT vignette that was classified as expressing a documentary constructivist position:

Interviewer: *[Reciting the vignette] ...He is raised in the family as one of their own. And that's the situation. Avar or Dargin?*

Informant: *Doesn't matter, doesn't matter what nation he was raised in. [What's important is that] on the birth certificate... what's written? They write the nation too, don't they? Yes, they should, I think. <...> What they write stays with you for life (male, 35, Tlyadal).*

Here the informant, answering the question about what the ethnicity is of a child raised in a foster family, says that the most important characteristic that allows one to classify a person as belonging to a particular nationality is the label in the documents. This label, in the informant's opinion, cannot be changed. In the interview fragment below, the informant claims that nationalities in Dagestan have ceased to be important and this happened due to (or in parallel with) the fact that the corresponding line disappeared from the passport:

Interviewer: *Well, like, are nationalities important in Dagestan now?*

Informant 1: *Nationality—we don't have that. Whatever nationality... Previously, it was stated in the passport—Lak, Russian, Dargin, Avar. Now it's not there. It's not there. Here, there's no nationality in the passport now.*

Informant 2: *[In the Lak language]. Why, doesn't it say "Lak"?*

Informant 1: *Wait. We don't have it. Don't have it. Show me your passport—if it says you're a Lak, I'll hang myself right now. [Laughter] We don't have it. It used to be "Lak", "Dargin", but not anymore. There's no such thing anymore. We are all one now (male, 75, Arakul).*

In these two examples, it is precisely the documentary reality that, for the informants, is if not the main modality of the existence of ethnicity/nationality, then the most important indicator of its relevance.

The third example is a discussion of the possibility of changing nationality:

Interviewer: *And what do you need to do it?*

Informant: *To change nationality? [Change] passport. Change the name, probably... I don't know this procedure. (male, 52, Bezhta).*

Here, for the informant, the question of nationality is essentially reduced to the question of changing a label in the passport and is equated to the procedure of changing one's name. And in the following example, nationality is directly reduced to a "piece of paper":

Interviewer: *It's just that I thought, and some people think that it [nationality] is sort of an innate thing.*

Informant: *The innate thing is race. And a nation is just a piece of paper (female, 29, Makhachkala).*

The reconstructed view is thus obviously not essentialist: in it, ethnicity is deprived of its original primordial status. However, this opinion does not coincide with the logic of classical constructivism commonly seen in studies of folk-sociological concepts, either. In classical constructivism, ethnicity is grounded in culture, upbringing, etc., while in documentary constructivism it is simply a piece of text in one's documents, conditioned by the will of the state or (in some cases) the desire of an individual. Documentary constructivism is thus a real consistent position that can be reconstructed from the statements of ordinary people.

Documentary constructivism—mixed and pure.

Quite often, however, takes that could be described as documentary-constructivist are mixed in the informants' narratives with those that correspond to other opinions. This is what such mixed narratives might look like:

Informant: *By and large, I am an Avar. In my passport, I am listed as an Avar, and my birth certificate says I am an Avar. I feel like an Avar. Why? Because, for example, we*

speak Bezhta, and if they listen close, they can understand our language (male, 52, Bezhta).

In this case, the passport is one of the indicators of the informant's "real" nationality, but far from the only one, and linguistic, self-identification, and other arguments are also at play, intended, when considered as a system, to convince the interviewer that the informant is indeed an Avar. In the following example, the passport turns out to be an additional indicator of nationality, inferior in importance to others:

Interviewer: *So, you kind of feel like...*

Informant: *More Botlikh, probably.*

Interviewer: *Not Avar?*

Informant: *Well, Avar is like [stated] in the passport, I guess. But I don't know the Avar language... (female, 29, Makhachkala).*

Moreover, there have been cases where the documentary modality of the existence of ethnicity was contrasted as artificial with others, which were recognized as "real":

Informant: *When I was at the technical school, my parents were Avars, and when they were automatically listed as Lezgins, only later, when I became an adult, I started to look into it. Later I said that I was an Avar. <...> My mother-in-law, she was a purebred Avar, her father was Andi and her mother... Well, that was also an Avar village. But in her passport, it said that she was a Kumyk. Do you know why? At the time in Buinaksk, villages in Buinaksk, those who spoke the Kumyk language thought that she was a Kumyk. <...> It was my friend who opened my eyes to the fact that my mother-in-law was an Avar. She didn't run to change her passport after that, left it as it was (male, 59, Arakul).*

The mere mention of documentary reality, therefore, does not unambiguously indicate the general documentary-constructivist position of a person. At the same time, two markers were recorded that point to it in the conversation between the interviewer and the informant. The first (and perhaps the most symptomatic) is characterized by the respondent's immediate reference to a passport or other official artifact when asked about ethnicity: a person remembers documents before

anything else and interprets the question specifically through the framework of documentary reality. In one of the interviews, the conversation turned to the informant's place of residence and the nationalities present there. The informant immediately referred the interviewer to the documents:

Interviewer: *But they're still all Dargins?*

Informant: *With all this in mind, yes, the passport office still lists them all as Dargins. Or they simply write Russian citizen, Russian. Well, according to their instructions, when they receive different instructions each time, they list [nationality] in the passports according to these instructions (female, 60, Kubachi).*

The second marker that “gives away” a documentary constructivist is the appeal to documentary reality as an ultimate argument in the respondent's reasoning about ethnicity: when contemplating it, the person doubts, gives arguments in favor of different positions, but ultimately turns to documentary reality as the final argument:

Informant: *[In response to the SaBT vignette] Well, yes, everything is right with him—he will speak Avar; everything, everything, well... If there are Dargins in this village, and he will speak with them, if he already knows the Dargin language, he will speak both Dargin and Avar. <...> If he was a Dargin, if it is stated in his documents, for example, at the age of two or three, if it is stated “Dargin”, it will remain “Dargin” until the end. <...> It doesn't matter what is there, on this, it is stated “Dargin”—period, he will remain it until the end, doesn't matter at all (male, 55, Bezhta).*

The informant essentially says that, when juxtaposed against the documentary reality, all his previous reasoning is meaningless, “doesn't matter”. Regardless of the degree of mastery of culture, tradition, and language, a person “remains until the end” the ethnicity that is stated in the documents.

What are the cases of documentary constructivism that are closest to “ideal types”? The informant is 28 years old, she grew up in the village of Ikhrek, but as an adult, she moved to St. Petersburg, married a man from Central Asia, and now works as a wine merchant. The woman rarely visits her home village, with the sole purpose, in her own words, of visiting her parents. The conversation turned to her son's nationality, to which she said: “[He] has no nationality. But you can give him a nationality. You can do this at the registry office.” When the interviewer asked whether

the child’s nationality was the nationality of his father, she replied that “these are probably just stereotypes of old times.”

However, one should not consider documentary constructivism to be the point of view common exclusively among young, “modern” city dwellers. Another example illustrates this. The informant is a 50-year-old man from the village of Bezhta, currently working as a security guard. After his military service, he moved to another village, and a little later moved to the Volgograd region for work, where he lived for some time. In a conversation about the differences between nationalities, the informant first and foremost refers to the Soviet reality and how ethnic communities were “redrawn” at that time: “Well, how can I explain it to you? For example, the Bezhtin—we called them “Antsukh-Kapuchin Mountain Society”. <...> But under the USSR, all the mountain people were united and given the name—Avars”. Then, when discussing the vignette, he claims that a child, “if it [the document] says “Dargin”, remains that until the end”. But when it comes to the possibility of changing nationality, it turns out that this can be done by changing the entry in documents: “If [a non-Avar who married an Avar] wants it [her documents] to say that she is an Avar, she is an Avar, that’s it, it depends on the person.” Thus, documentary constructivism, within the framework of which ethnic reality is completely or mainly reduced to the reality of official documents and classifications, is a phenomenon that does indeed exist in Dagestan. Can we, however, say that it is widespread in certain communities and social groups—which, in turn, allows us to assume the mechanism for the emergence and consolidation of such a position?

Determinants of the documentary-constructivist point of view.

To understand what personal characteristics determine the documentary-constructivist views of informants, a basic quantitative analysis was carried out. In addition, during the analysis, the hypothesis was tested that the documentary-constructivist position is more common in those communities whose members were reclassified at least once by the Soviet authorities.

According to the results of coding the statements (Table 1), 46% of informants were classified as essentialists, 54% as constructivists, and 12% of the total number of informants (15 people) as documentary constructivists.

Table 1—Distribution of informants by category

Category	Number of informants	%
Essentialists	56	46
Constructivists	67	54
Documentary constructivists	15	12
Total	123	100

This distribution made it possible to make additional calculations and determine which factors are associated with the documentary-constructivist attitude.

Table 2—Logistic regression model

Predictor	Coefficient B	Standard error	Wald χ^2	Degrees of freedom	Significance	Odds ratio
Reclassified village: 1—yes, 0—no	1.639	0,681	5,791	1	0,016	5,15
Age (years)	0.05	0,018	7,711	1	0,005	1,052
Gender: 1 — male, 2 — female	-0.411	0,652	0,397	1	0,528	0,663
Education: 1—higher, incomplete higher; 0—compulsory middle and lower	0.148	0,367	0,162	1	0,687	1,159
Has lived outside Dagestan: 2—yes, long time, 1—yes, short time, 0—no	-0.058	0,365	0,026	1	0,873	0,943
Constant	-4.951	1,264	15,341	1	0	0,007
Dependent variable: informant classified as documentary constructivist; 1—yes, 0—no						
Model summary						
N	99					
-2 log likelihood	65,270 _a					
Nigelkirk χ^2	0,304					
Cox & Snell χ^2	0,174					

Only 99 cases were included in the calculations since some informants did not know what village their family was from, or they classified themselves as “city dwellers”, not connected with any village. The results indicate that the variable “reclassified village origin” is a significant predictor of the documentary-constructivist position: its probability is five times higher among former or current residents of such villages than among others. Another factor is age: the older the person, the more likely it is that the “nationality is just text in the passport” idea would dominate in their narrative. At the same time, education and experience of living outside Dagestan (variables included in the calculations are based on the assumption that the determinant of the constructivist views is the complexity of the person’s experience) do not determine the documentary-constructivist

(as well as simply constructivist, as follows from the calculations not included in the final text of the article) views.

Thus, documentary constructivism is more widespread: a) among older people, and b) among those who belong to communities whose nationality was reclassified during the Soviet era. This may mean that the “re-tailoring” of ethnicity is a kind of “shock therapy,” and the experience of people who have undergone reclassification allows them to reflect on the nature of ethnicity and come to the conclusion that ethnic differences are not an objective reality, but a product of the state’s classifying activity. As this experience is “forgotten,” the dominant folk theory of ethnicity may also change.

Conclusions and discussion

According to our research, there is an opinion in Dagestan that nationality is just a label in a passport, which is much more widespread among people who come from communities whose nationality has been reclassified by the state over the past century. This opinion, however, is not the only one (and, as one might assume, not the dominant one); there are also widespread folk-sociological judgments that can be classified as essentialist and constructivist in the traditional sense. This allows us to say that the person’s perspective on the nature of ethnicity (at least in part) is a variable, the “value” of which depends on the specifics of the ethnic reality in a given area. It is therefore not surprising that Gil-White’s nomads, whose historical memory views ethnicity is relatively static, turn out to be more essentialist in their views, Kanovsky’s respondents from Western Ukraine, where ethnicity had a more dynamic character, are constructivists, and the Dagestanis, whose nationality since the 1920s has been largely the result of state classifications, are documentary constructivists. In other words, the folk theory of ethnicity is empirical in nature, and the more reasons social reality provides for this, the more constructivist it will be. In addition, this theory becomes a supporting element of ideas about ethnicity in the relevant communities, which may have its consequences: if nationality is something that was imposed (and inconsistently) by the state, is it worth focusing on it in everyday life, in choosing marriage partners, in building political coalitions, etc.?

In this logic, one could assume that the state in modern contexts will always “constructivize” popular ideas about ethnicity—simply because it often tries to control this issue in one way or another (Morning 2015). The issue of ethnicity, however, is not so easily resolved: on the one hand, the depth of historical memory plays a role here, allowing us to collectively “not forget” about reclassifications that once took place and about the corresponding marks in documents. On the other hand, of importance is the persuasiveness of the state as a constructor of reality. In Dagestan, the

state was inconsistent in its classificatory activity, which, in all likelihood, gave rise to documentary constructivism, which denies any nature of nationalities other than the “official” one.

These considerations, however, do not remove, but only complicate, the original question about the natural human intuitions that regulate our perception of ethnicity. The fact that folk sociology of ethnicity sometimes relativizes actual ethnic classifications does not change the fact that the human brain as a whole tends to essentialize them. It is just that this essentialization is sometimes reinforced by folk theory, and sometimes contradicts it; in the latter case, the “initial settings” are hidden deep inside (*below the surface*), but do not disappear. Folk theories of ethnicity and a person’s basic understanding of the nature of ethnicity are, therefore, two different questions, related to each other, but not conflicting. Moreover, the use of narrative methods in folk sociology research is not the best way to answer the question of how the human brain perceives ethnic classifications.

Rather surprising is also that scholars are generally satisfied with the crude continuum “*nature—culture*”, without trying to more subtly reconstruct the ideas about the ethnicity of ordinary people. For example, folk instrumentalism—the reflections of ordinary people on the nature of ethnicity in a situation where it is possible to change identification depending on the circumstances—has clearly not been fully explored, though this practice is widespread and widely known. In Dagestan, the instrumentalist narrative reflects, for example, the story of Mountain Jews who sometimes registered in the USSR as Tats, which allowed them to avoid discrimination, but this did not have much of an impact on the perception of the nature of ethnicity, if at all. In general, the Soviet practice of rigidly linking nationality to documents and to the nationality of parents encouraged people either to essentialize ethnicity (if they “believed” the state) or to construct it in a documentary vein (if state classifications seemed untrustworthy).

Thus, the various folk theories of ethnicity that cannot be reduced to the “innate—acquired” dichotomy have yet to become an object of study. This article, which analyzes documentary constructivism as one such theory and explains its prevalence in a certain type of community, will hopefully contribute to the study of folk sociology of ethnicity.

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