Vernacularizations of 'gender' in Kazakhstan: A microethnographic view on interactions at the workplace of an international development organization
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Abstract
The past twenty years of independent Central Asian states have witnessed the growth of a professional, transnational epistemic network of gender experts. Today's politics of gender, including such ideas as gender equality and empowerment of women, were, and still are, to a large extent influenced by gender discourses stemming from global development thinking. Accordingly, in her review of Central Asian gender politics, Deniz Kandiyoti (2007) identified international aid agencies as one type of important players who partake in shaping the terrain of current gender orders in the region.

Paying heed to Aradhana Sharma's (2008) suggestion to study everyday manifestations of women's empowerment as part of neoliberal transformations in development, our paper turns its analytical gaze to some of the interstices of development thinking and work, namely to the office of an international development organization located in Kazakhstan. From the perspective of the sociology of knowledge (Berger and Luckmann 1966), development can be seen as a form of knowledge production. Its ideas, visions, and concepts are constantly negotiated (Lachenmann and Dannecker 2008) at multiple levels of the global net of development aid. We use Sally Merry's (2006) concept of 'vernacularization' in order to inquire into how global gender discourses and their meanings are remade in the vernacular. Though Merry's concept offers a pertinent theoretical tool for handling the divide between global and local understandings of gender, it needs to be elaborated in terms of its relation to empirical research. Thus, in this paper our central research concern is to suggest a suitable methodological approach that allows studying the translocal production and negotiation of gender knowledge procedurally and in detail. Our approach builds on work in the tradition of ethnomethodology, conversation / interaction analysis, and 'doing gender'. After discussing certain problems of interview research methodology (only retrospective accounts, poor accessibility of implicit knowledge), we introduce a microethnographic approach (Streeck and Mehus 2004) that allows bringing into analytic view such phenomena as emotions, non-propositional argumentation strategies, and the sequential production of meaning in a multi-modal, material environment.

We participated in a six-day journalistic training that the international development organization provided for Kazakhstani university students. From about 20 hours of audiovisual recordings we chose two scenes for an in-depth analysis with the aim of understanding how gender discourses get vernacularized in ordinary human interaction.

Our findings show that and how forms of gender and development knowledge are outcomes of social situations and events, e.g., one cannot assume of development and gender expert knowledge to continuously define a situation in asymmetrical terms. Neither expert nor lay knowledge is a given independent of situational contingencies. Our example case shows that expert knowledge as well as local knowledge may be looked at as resources for conversational strategies. Finally, our hope is that our study will be seen as an attempt at delivering new insights about the ordinary, everyday workings of development from within the many 'black boxes' of contemporary development aid.

Keywords: gender; development; Kazakhstan; ethnomethodology; microethnography; conversation analysis
Short bibliography


