

Technologizing the opinion: Focus groups, performance, and free speech

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Area

A Introduction

In Fall 2010, I arranged and observed a series of five focus groups in Almaty, Kazakhstan, each with 4 to 8 participants (of mixed ethnic and geographic origin, age, and socio-economic status), all moderated by a middle-aged, Kazakh woman. This was not my first experience with qualitative research, but it was my first experience with focus groups. Things did not go quite as I expected. Over the course of many years conducting fieldwork in Kazakhstan, I have developed a certain fluency in the official government rhetoric; so I could immediately recognize its pervasive infiltration in the language of the focus group participants, as well as the near complete absence of any non-mainstream views (regardless of whether the topic was Kazakhstani patriotic underwear imported from China or Astana's skyscrapers). The refrain, "thanks to our president" (*blogodarya nashemu presidentu*), echoed in my ears day after day. After only a handful of groups, I had already reached a point of "saturation" (Crang and Cook 2007, 14-15), hearing little variation across participants' responses. In retrospect, I should not have been surprised, but at the time, I was dismayed at this outcome: had I created a disciplinary setting, which in itself would produce the effect of pure regurgitation of state rhetoric? Was Kazakhstan in general a disciplinary setting that quashed independent thought? Were these participants brainwashed, coerced, true believers, co-opted, self-motivating, or all of the above? My focus group experience compelled me to stop and rethink some bigger theoretical questions about the nature of power and discourse in this post-totalitarian, but hardly 'democratizing,' context.

Many research methods have been designed in Western liberal contexts, in which citizens are socialized in the vocal expression of their thoughts. However, as the other authors in this special issue illustrate amply, and as this focus group experience forcefully illustrated to me, serious challenges can arise when translating them outside of these more 'open' political settings. More specifically, 'closed contexts' are characterized by an absence of liberal subjectivity, most succinctly defined as those practices of governing others and the self 'through freedom' (Foucault 2008, 2010; Rose 1996, 1999). These practices being different in spaces of closure, one must be careful not to assume the liberal subjectivity that is often built into the very design of qualitative methods. As I argue here, it is imperative that we as scholars hone in, not just on

the actual spaces of ‘closure’ being explored in this special issue, but that we tease out the implications of subjectivizing practices that arise in such closed contexts.

Before moving on to the theoretical arguments of this paper, it is first necessary to give some additional background about the country of my fieldwork discussed here, Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan’s government is best characterized as a ‘soft’ authoritarian regime; i.e. one whose methods of government rely less on naked force, and is more dependent on infrastructural power than in its ‘hard’ authoritarian counterparts (Schatz 2008; Schatz and Maltseva 2012). President Nazarbayev’s regime has been in power since the end of the Soviet Union in 1991, although it has changed dramatically in the course of its twenty years of rule. Inheriting immense resource wealth (primarily in oil, gas, and uranium), this system functions through a hegemonic official discourse of state benevolence and progress (which I cannot explore at length here, but have discussed elsewhere; see Koch 2012; forthcoming-a, b, c). This discursive environment works more through the ‘positive’ language of progress and modernity, and less through the ‘negative’ system of repression – a balance that was arguably reversed in the Soviet Union.

Nonetheless, important Soviet legacies persist in independent Kazakhstan through various reconfigured practices of self-policing and state policing of rhetoric. For example, there are still systematic infringements on press freedom¹, and it is illegal to speak negatively about Nazarbayev; indeed few people actually mention his name when they do speak about him, typically saying ‘he’ (*on*) or ‘our president’ (*nash president*). Still, the discursive environment is not so dire as it was under the Soviet regime – when people were encouraged to turn in fellow citizens and a falsely placed noun or adjective could cost a person their life. This led to a situation in which people were hyper-aware of the consequences of their words and whether these conformed with the prevailing official line, and more broadly, to a popular refusal to discuss politics. In this sense, Kazakhstan is not at all like liberal democracies, such as the United States or the UK, where people openly and often loudly speak their mind about any range of political issues. As Figure 1 makes apparent, Kazakhstanis still largely believe that their compatriots are afraid to openly voice their thoughts about politics.

¹ For example, in the ongoing, systematic closure of independent newspapers and opposition internet sites, and persecution of journalists and opposition figures, in the wake of the December 2010 Zhanaozen massacre (Bigg 2012; Koch forthcoming-c).

In your opinion, are people in Kazakhstan afraid to openly express their political views or not?

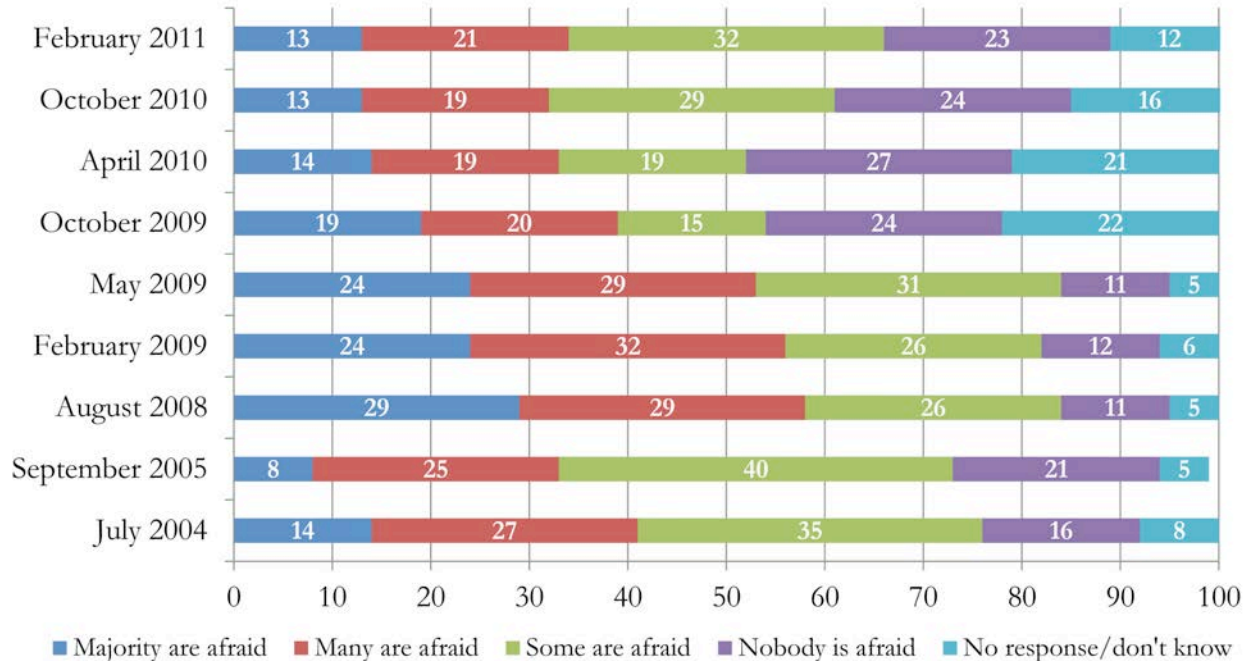


Figure 1 International Republican Institute (2011, 41) poll on perceived freedom of expression.

All these factors suggest that Kazakhstan might productively be understood as being characterized by a ‘culture of fear.’ Of course, most citizens do not experience fear on a day-to-day basis, but “in a very basic way, in a culture of fear, meaning itself is made possible by what is missing” (Mitchell 2002, 153). This specifically translates into a reticence to engage in discussions that are deemed ‘Political’ (aka ‘high politics’) – with this term being defined as precisely those subjects which could endanger one’s safety. As a political geographer interested in issues of politics with a capital and a small ‘p’, I was aware of this challenge from the outset of my project. I sought to account for the popular reticence to discuss ‘high politics’ by designing my focus group research around a number of ‘trigger images’ that did not come across as overtly political (e.g. images of the country’s new capital, a famous Kazakhstani cyclist, the country’s newest university). But as noted above, I failed to anticipate the very depth of a strictly disciplinary society, and how the policing of the self and of others would unfold in the context of seemingly banal discussions. Part of a mixed methods approach, the focus groups were but one

dimension of the study. However, the questions about power, subjectivity, and free speech that they raised were simply more forceful than in some of the other components of the project, which also included a large-n survey, interviews, participant observation, and discourse analysis. As such, the goal of this short paper is to back-track and tackle some of the theoretical issues that arose in the use of the focus group method in Kazakhstan, and to draw out some more general lessons about field methods in both ‘closed’ and ‘open’ settings alike. I will begin with a brief discussion of the binary between persuasion and coercion, before then critically interrogating the very notion of the ‘opinion’ as a historically-produced ‘technology of government.’

B Power, subjectivity, and technologies of government

In the Western academic and policy communities, the political environment of Kazakhstan is generally classified as ‘authoritarian’ or ‘nondemocratic’: there are no free elections, no free press, no due process, bribery and nepotism are rampant, opposition groups are systematically persecuted, and so on. While all this goes on daily, it is not always on the radar of ordinary people. In fact, the Nazarbayev regime is quite popular among many segments of the population and the refrain ‘thanks to our president’ is truly meant when said. So how can one describe the sort of ‘coercion’ that is going on when people are apparently ‘convinced’ by the regime’s legitimating script? Can it even be called coercion? Indeed, where is the boundary between coercion and legitimacy? And what can explain the processes whereby average citizens produce the government discourse so eloquently and internalize it in such a way that they consider it their ‘own opinion’? This is not the typical vision of coercion, classically defined as forcing people to do something they would not otherwise do. In this vision, ‘force’ is understood as a negative and external power weighing down on autonomous subjects (Mitchell 1990). Unfortunately, this vision simply cannot explain the immense popularity of authoritarian regimes, such as that found in Kazakhstan.

A common figure in academic efforts to understand coercive regimes is the brainwashed citizen who ‘believes’ government propaganda (see Wedeen 1999; Yurchak 2003). This individual is a particularly liberal character: she is assumed to be a free agent, who operates rationally and autonomously. Her logical reasoning is merely led astray by the cunning propaganda of a coercive regime. A variant of the brainwashed citizen is the ‘split subject,’ i.e. one that ‘plays along,’ but does not ‘really’ believe in the regime. This character may or may not

condone or support the regime, but simply follows the rules and ‘keeps their head down.’ As with the brainwashed citizen, narratives of the ‘split subject’ rely on a problematic distinction between “a public (and behavioral) acquiescence and a realm of private (and largely mental) autonomy” (Mitchell 1990, 551). Acknowledged or not, assumptions related to this set of interlocking binaries (persuasion-coercion, mental-physical, private-public) carry serious implications for research methods employed by social scientists.

First, these assumptions tend to “reproduce a Western-centered understanding of a normal person as a bounded, sovereign individual with a ‘unitary speaking ego’ whose authentic voice can be hidden or revealed” (Yurchak 2003, 483). This then positions the researcher as an expert, who is to evaluate material and discursive events for their “‘truth conditions’—as either *true* (‘real’ support) or *false* (‘dissimulation’ of support)” (Yurchak 2003, 483). In the case of both the brainwashed citizen and the citizen who plays along, the scholar assumes a strategic position of exposing the ‘false consciousness,’ of unveiling the private or the ‘real,’ which is invariably assumed to be resistance to ‘external’ oppression (see Mitchell’s (1990) forceful critique of James Scott’s (1985) *Weapons of the Weak*).

Especially pertinent to the study of ‘closed contexts,’ such an approach fails to provide room to conceive of agencies that could actively support relations of domination. This is connected to the fact that liberal visions of subjectivity tend to construct agency as *subversive* action (Nealon 2008, 102; Yurchak 2003, 483). This of course overlooks an enormous range of agencies, in which citizens of ‘illiberal’ regimes *support* the system, willingly or otherwise (Koch 2012; forthcoming-c). Resistance in the liberal line of investigation effectively becomes a “high-end or very expensive commodity, revealed magician-like by unique men and women, and available only at scarce or obscure locations, such as academic monographs” (Nealon 2008, 106). Accordingly, some scholars are too quick to look for ‘resistance’ to power, while failing to acknowledge that the notion is largely a “holdover category of humanism” (Nealon 2008, 95) that is a unique technology of liberal arts of government and subjectivity (Foucault 2008; Oksala 2005; Rose 1996; 1999). A full discussion of the theoretical work on resistance, freedom, and agency is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is important to note that in closed contexts, such liberal modes of subjectivity do not prevail – and this has major implications for how people express themselves. Free speech, as I detail below, is not a ‘natural’ practice, but a technology of government.

Although many theorists have sought to overcome the persuasion-coercion binary by demonstrating how they are inextricably intertwined (e.g. Bourdieu 1977; Gramsci 2008), Michel Foucault has instead sought to completely bypass the issue by reframing discussions about power in terms of subjectivity and the ‘conduct of conduct,’ i.e. structuring the field of possible actions. For him, power is neither violence nor consent, but “a total structure of actions brought to bear upon possible actions” that can make things easier or more difficult (Foucault 1982, 789). The concept of power as guidance “does not exclude consensual arrangements or the recourse to violence, but it signifies that coercion and consensus are reformulated as means of government among others—they are ‘elements’ or ‘instruments’ rather than the ‘foundation’ or ‘source’ of power relations” (Lemke 2011, 17). Crucially, Foucault’s approach rejects the search for some hidden reality ‘underneath’ social practices (Veyne 1997, 153). Instead, the source of analytical material becomes a complex of practices and ‘technologies of government’:

A technology of government, then, is an assemblage of forms of practical knowledge, with modes of perception, practices of calculation, vocabularies, types of authority, forms of judgement, architectural forms, human capacities, non-human objects and devices, inscription techniques and so forth, traversed and transected by aspirations to achieve certain outcomes in terms of the conduct of the governed (which also requires certain forms of the conduct on the part of those who would govern). (Rose 1999, 52)

In his lecture series, *Security, Territory, Population*, Foucault (2007) demonstrates how ‘interest’ is just one such ‘technology.’ He traces the historical evolution of the eighteenth century notion of ‘desire’ into the notion of ‘interest’ (Foucault 2007, 72-74), which factored prominently in the establishment of liberal modes of government (Foucault 2008, 45, 272-280). In the following section, I argue that, in the very same way that desire was technologized as interest, thoughts have been technologized as ‘opinions.’

C Focus groups and technologizing the opinion

Taking inspiration from Foucault, as well as the larger body of poststructuralist work (increasingly being named part of the ‘practice turn’ or ‘performative shift’), geographers have been key proponents of such an approach that eschews the search for hidden social realities underneath practice. For example, Bosco and Herman (2010, 195) emphasize how focus groups are an especially useful tool to get at the performance of individual and group identity through the dynamic conversations they generate. For them, focus groups are collaborative research

performances between the participants and the researchers. Geographers have also made an important contribution to the methods literature with their emphasis on the role of *context* in the conduct of qualitative techniques (e.g. Bosco and Herman 2010; Elwood and Martin 2000; McDowell 2010; Megoran 2005; Pratt 2002; Secor 2004). A key theme in this work is that methodological tools are not neutral, but “political endeavors” (McDowell 2010, 159). Despite all this productive work, it has primarily emphasized the micro-context – e.g. the actual room or space in which focus groups are conducted (Bosco and Herman 2010), or the clothes one wears (McDowell 2010) – and few scholars have explicitly attended to the broader political configurations of the states in which this work is conducted (for a notable exception, see Megoran 2005).

In this section, I return to my argument above that unique practices of subjectivity characterize closed contexts, and argue for the need to simultaneously attend to the macro-context in discussions about the situated research performances employed in geographic fieldwork. But rather than discuss regime types more broadly, the Foucauldian approach attends to technologies of government, which may arise under some political configurations, but not others. Here, I am concerned with the technology of the ‘opinion,’ which I argue is a technology of liberal democracy. In democratic settings, the opinion carries with it an assumption that is similar to the liberal idealization of agency as “doing something freely, subversively, not as a mere effect programmed or sanctioned by constraining social norms” (Nealon 2008, 102). That is, the opinion is something held by an autonomous individual, outside the constraints of ‘external’ forces. But this imagined autonomy is itself a political achievement that denies the fact that: “In acquiring one’s conception of the world one always belongs to a particular grouping which is that of all the social elements which share the same mode of thinking and acting. We are all conformists of some conformism or other, always man-in-the-mass or collective man” (Gramsci 2008, 324).

In his treatment of ancient Greek *parrhesia* (to speak ‘freely’ or ‘candidly’), Foucault (2001) historicizes the concept of free speech. Through this study, he illustrates how the practice of expressing one’s opinion is socio-historically situated. In ancient Greece, not everyone could participate in *parrhesia*, which was generally limited to male citizens, who were typically of means – the *parrhesiastes* (Foucault 2001, 18). But the practice was never static, and Foucault details how a “crisis of *parrhesia*” emerged “at the crossroads of an interrogation about

democracy and an interrogation about truth,” and gave rise to “a *problematization* of some hitherto unproblematic relations between freedom, power, democracy, education, and truth in Athens at the end of the Fifth Century” (Foucault 2001, 73). As he shows, shifting modes of government in Athens were tied to shifting modes of political expression. Foucault’s ‘classical turn,’ apparent here, was inspired by his close friend and colleague Paul Veyne, who was also concerned with the relationship between political context and opinions.

In *Bread and Circuses*, Veyne (1990) similarly demonstrates the ways in which the *vox populi* was variably manufactured and technologized in and through shifting power relations in Greek and Roman history. In classical Greece, for example, the *vox populi* was sought, but popular approval was seen more as an honor for the public benefactor (*euergetai*) rather than a mandate of what we now call ‘legitimacy’ (Veyne 1990, 126). Elections during the Roman Republican Oligarchy had a similar role, with the oligarchs competing in them for honors, but which the electors generally considered “a charade from which they might at best expect to make a little profit” (Veyne 1990, 223). Veyne is also careful to point out that, because of the particular configuration of power relations in the Roman Empire, “*there did not then exist the phenomenon called public opinion*” (Veyne 1990, 295, emphasis added), for public opinion, he argues, “does not consist in rebelling, suffering silently or being discontented, but in claiming that one has the *right* to be discontented” (Veyne 1990, 295). Veyne’s discussion of right is important here because he points to the social construction of what Foucault (2008) later calls “the subject of right.” The subject of right is governed by a specific “logic” (Foucault 2008, 274) that corresponds to specific configurations of power relations and modes of governing particular to liberalism. The opinion as a political technology is thus tied to the introduction of the notion of the autonomous individual as an “atom of freedom” (Foucault 2008, 271). As this particular conception of the opinion is so closely tied to the liberal art of government, scholars should indeed be wary of searching for it in places without such a history.

Scholars should also be wary of applying the normative lens of the liberal tradition through such terms as ‘propaganda,’ which is generally employed as a pejorative term that “likens state ideology to brainwashing” (Hoffman 2006, 561). The notion of propaganda also presumes an autonomous public, whose rational opinion is to be swayed. Continuing the line of reasoning above, Paul Veyne writes: “Propaganda and dictatorship can exist only in societies with a public opinion. How could one become a dictator in an old monarchy where there was no

public opinion to master and befuddle? And to what end?” (Veyne 1990, 378). Propaganda designed to mobilize “public opinion so as to drag it out of the political indifference” (Veyne 1990, 378) implies a particular political relationship: it implies a system in which public opinion is treated as a matter of significance in the broader regime of government. Yet such an implication may not hold up in certain places.

Indeed, in Kazakhstan, just as in the Soviet times, public landscapes and soundscapes are characterized by a veritable semiotic barrage of state rhetoric (on this ‘cluttering’ in Syria, see Wedeen 1999). And yet, few people attend to them consciously, nor would they demonize them as ‘propaganda.’ Nonetheless, as I found out in my focus group research, although people may claim to ignore the ubiquitous billboards and advertisements, they do assimilate these discourses. The main difference is that in Kazakhstan, popular ‘opinion’ is simply not technologized as an instrument of endowing legitimacy to the regime (though it is certainly a source of honor for public officials, as with Veyne’s *euergetai*). This does not mean that people do not have their own thoughts about what goes on around them; it is to say that there is a strong discursive consensus in the country that ordinary people’s ‘opinions’ about the world are not a matter of relevance in ‘high politics.’

In this case, it is also important to consider the norms surrounding *where* certain acts of expression take place. During the Soviet Union, and still today in the various successor states, everyone knows that it is acceptable to discuss ‘kitchen politics,’ and they do so freely in the privacy of the home. In Kazakhstan, I have found that it is only with disgruntled and dispossessed Russian taxi drivers in the big cities that this conversation is brought outside the kitchen (they have nothing to lose and they will never see you again). In general, however, individuals who attempt to breach this norm are sure to be chastised, or met with the conversation-stopper: “*V politiku ya ne lezu*” (“I don’t talk [get into] politics”) (Laszczkowski 2010, 8-9). Of course, this does not indicate an absence of political consciousness. Rather, it reflects a relation to the self as a conscientious individual (the so-called ‘normal’ subject) who complies with social expectations of public silence toward high politics. Notably, this practice operates in conjunction with a circumscribed definition of the ‘political,’ as noted above, which excludes precisely those subjects that endanger one’s safety. In Kazakhstan, for example, the President is not politics (Laszczkowski 2010, 9), just as the Roman Emperor was not politics (Veyne 1990, 296).

But the threat to one's safety resulting (e.g. from outright critique of hegemonic powers) is indisputably less present on a daily basis than the *moral order*, which has co-evolved with the more repressive techniques of governing in Kazakhstan. Just as in the Soviet Union, where Stalinist terror did not prevent Soviet socialist ideals from motivating and inspiring millions of people into the early 1990s. As Kotkin (1995, 357-358) explains, we can either assume that these millions of people were ignorant or deceived, or we can try to understand why they reasoned the way they did, "fearing terror yet believing that they had built, and lived under, socialism." The fact that such a mass of people could be led to think so coherently about their situation "is a 'philosophical' event far more important and 'original' than the discovery by some philosophical 'genius' of a truth which remains the property of small groups of intellectuals" (Gramsci 2008, 325). In Gramsci's (2008, 325) line of reasoning, what makes this possible is the diffusion of constructed 'truths' through socialization, and making them "the basis of vital action" and the intellectual and moral order. In the Soviet Union, the 'truths' of socialism were disseminated not only through official discourse, but articulated in the daily actions of Soviet citizens, for whom they were tied to issues of life and safety – but also to a genuine hope and idealism of the intellectual and moral order (Kotkin 1995, 358). The mode and manner in which these political 'truths' were disseminated also had the effect of limiting open political discussion. Consequently, "few could imagine alternatives. Nor was anyone encouraged to do so" (Kotkin 1995, 358).

The circumscribed definition of the 'political' is one of those 'truths' built upon the absences of a culture of fear in Kazakhstan, but which is often probed and tested, and simultaneously worked into a system of social norms. And yet, the silences and absences in closed contexts may not necessarily indicate a system of fear and oppression, but could be a clue to a particular configuration of power relations that does not technologize a relationship with the self such that a vocabulary for one's condition can be articulated, or seen as worthy of being articulated. That is, people are not governed through the freedom of expression, and governments do not derive their 'legitimacy' through making claim to having popular opinion on their side. This is not to say that closed contexts are therefore void of people who actively try to 'fight the system.' On the contrary, people are merely not encouraged (either through a moral, bureaucratic, or other system) to relate to the self as a free agent, whose vocal expression of his or her opinion is connected to the possibility of changing their political situation. This is why the overall picture may be one of 'passivity.'

Indeed, as Yurchak (1997) details, the ‘normal’ Soviet subject was characteristically passive; whereas both opponents to the Soviet regime (the *dissidents*) and the active supporters (*aktivists*) were deemed fringe, and typically dangerous, characters. However, one of the most fascinating dimensions of oppressive regimes more generally is the energetic support they seem to inspire in such *aktivist* subjects. In order to better understand non-liberal political configurations, it is important to note that governmental practices – regardless of whether citizens subjectivize themselves as ‘normal,’ ‘dissident,’ or ‘activist’ – can equally *support* hegemonic power relations, just as much as they may work to skirt them. For this reason, as Gramsci (2008, 247) has argued, ‘prize-giving’ activities cannot be separated from the repressive aspect of law: “praiseworthy and meritorious activity is rewarded, just as criminal actions are punished (and punished in original ways, bringing in ‘public opinion’ as a form of sanction)” (see also Foucault 1975). So while the moral order in a culture of fear may be a coping strategy or form of protection for most subjects (Bourdieu 1977; Mitchell 2002; Yurchak 1997), so too can it bring rewards for others. In both cases, however, there is a moral economy in which ‘docile’/‘obedient’ subjects are valorized and rewarded – which is not just a political technology in illiberal rule, but also in liberal arts of government.

D Conclusion

To conclude, let us return to the focus group participants who so diligently reproduced the official government rhetoric, ranging from the typical narratives of ‘progress’ to the trite official line (e.g. that Astana’s skyscrapers are blue because they symbolize ‘freedom’). In the context of the focus group alone, there was no immediate ‘reward’ for performing this discourse. Big brother was not watching us. But the participants were of course watching, and thus policing, each other – as well as themselves (i.e. ‘their selves,’ Rose 1996). But the focus group was not an exceptional environment for this self-policing: what I witnessed was a well-rehearsed performance, evidence of effective socialization. My moderator, for one, was very pleased with the way the groups went; the participants “said everything correctly” (*vsyo pravil’no skazali*).

Indeed, the lack of deviation was uncanny, but there were also many individuals who chose not to speak. I can never be certain what internal psychology was driving these participants’ choice to remain silent, or the choice of others to speak loudly and to speak *pravil’no*. But in any case, the issue of central importance from an academic standpoint is

decidedly *not* whether people ‘believe’ the discourse they produce. Rather it is how people align themselves (‘their selves’) to the prevailing ‘truths,’ established by the socially- and geographically-contextual system of norms, in which they are embedded. These hour-long sessions did not radically transform the way that the participants related to themselves. They are forever embedded in a social context, in which they have come to position themselves in a particular way in relation to the ‘truth’ and “standards of respectability” (Hoffman 2006).

The focus group method provided a unique opportunity to glimpse the interface between the conduct of others (official rhetoric) and of the self (one’s own production of discourse). Though this link is often underplayed in the literature, “It is exactly the interplay between these technologies, between the guidance of others and the forms of self-conduct, that is at the heart of an analytics of government” (Lemke 2011, 22). As suggested by the practice-centered methodological work developed in geography and beyond, in which qualitative tools are seen as part of a situated political performance, the task at hand for scholars working in ‘closed’ and ‘open’ settings alike is to attend to these various technologies of government in both the micro- *and* the macro-contexts. As I have sought to illustrate here, not only does a focus on technologies of government facilitate a broader picture of how power operates in and through subjects and their practices, but it also crucially historicizes certain technologies, such as the ‘opinion.’ Once the ‘opinion’ is seen as a political technology that does not characterize closed contexts, it becomes rapidly apparent that scholars need to ensure vigilant attention to the assumptions about subjectivity built into the various field methods they employ – whether in ‘closed’ or ‘open’ contexts.

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