

Reflections on Positionality from a Russian Woman Interviewing Russian-Speaking Women in London

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Abstract

This paper explores the implications of shared femininity in a qualitative study of friendship networks amongst Russian-speaking migrants in London by a Russian researcher. Drawing upon feminist literature on the complexities of women interviewing women, I outline the reflexive approach to positionality informing power relations and establishment of trust in the relationship between the researcher and the researched. The examples of interviewing a friend and two friendly strangers demonstrate the ways of negotiating mutual positions in the interaction. Shared gender is regarded as partially, but not universally, promoting rapport, taking into account the intersectionality of multiple differences between women. Considering the researcher's positionality has been presented in this paper as a means of making similarities and differences between participants useful for the critical interpretation of the work, and using its relevant aspects for building a positive, open, and more equal interaction.

Keywords: *Reflexivity, Positionality, Ethnography, Women, Migrants, Friendship*

Introduction

I: Now, let me ask you a personal question, if you don't mind.
Have you had any girlfriends here?
R: Mm-hmm.
I: Russian?
R: Mm-hmm.
I: Did you meet them through your friends...?
R: Mmm-hmmm...
I: Erm...were there many of them?
R: Nnnnooo...
I: Well, less than...five? □
R: Mmm-hmmm!
(Rustam 24; March 2011)

1.1 I am intentionally starting this paper about interviewing Russian-speaking women in London with an excerpt from an interview with a Russian-speaking man. Our talk was in the context of my research of social networks and friendship of Russian-speaking migrants with compatriots and other Londoners. While most of the women I interviewed quite readily and openly spoke about their personal relationships, I noticed the men were shyer. I could assume, after a while, that being a woman made interviewing female respondents easier. Earlier feminist writings (Oakley 1981, Finch 1984) also supported this idea. However, the experience of qualitative research and further reading makes me very careful in making such assumptions. I came across a variety of feelings while interviewing women. Misunderstanding, confusion, astonishment, awkwardness, tension – to name just a few. This paper stems from an attempt to reflexively approach these feelings and the implications of shared gender for the research results and process.

1.2 This article is a part of a study of informal social relationships amongst Russian-speaking migrants in

London.^[1] Being a middle-class Russian PhD student in my mid-20s in London, I researched friendship and the formation of personal networks in this migrant group, in order to understand how informal connections can trigger the development of this part of the population of the global city. This paper presents a reflexive analysis of relationships between me and three female respondents. Power relations and friendship were informing the positionality of the researcher and the researched in different ways in these three situations. Regarding fieldwork a personal and emotional experience (England 1994), I draw upon the feelings that interviews with these women caused, which led me to some useful findings and the consideration of the use of reflexivity in my methods. This paper will explore how attending to the relationship between the interviewer and interviewees can gain analytical depth and increase awareness of ethical concerns, when the participants' mutual positions within the fields of gender and friendship, as well as differences and similarities in social positions, are taken into account. To start, I will provide a brief overview of the literature on ethical issues in research, particularly on women interviewing women. Secondly, I will outline the research context of my study on friendship among Russian-speakers in London. In the main section of the article, I will demonstrate: a) how interviewing a female friend can provide an insight into the sensitive issues of the research topic; b) how difference between the interviewer and the interviewee is not necessarily connected with an exploitative relationship; c) how the effects of power relationships can induce reflexivity. The shared femininity is something that always underpinned these moments.

Ethical quandaries of women interviewing women

2.1 In this paper, I focus on some of the 'ethically important moments' that I came across in the course of fieldwork, understood as 'difficult, often subtle, and usually unpredictable situations that arise in the practice of doing research' (Guillemin & Gillam 2004: 262). The moral considerations and outcomes that underlie the 'ethics in practice' are framed as ethical obligations of the researcher towards his/her informants in terms of interacting with him or her in a humane, collaborative, non-exploitative way (McDowell 1992) while at the same time 'being mindful of one's role as a researcher' (Guillemin & Gillam 2004: 264). I am drawing upon feminist methodology (England 1994; McDowell 1992; Rose 1997) in considering the issues of reflexivity, positionality and power inequalities between the researcher and the research participants. This approach requires constantly employing a critical view on the research process and situating oneself and the interpretations of interviews by examining one's positionality (Rose 1997; McDowell 1992). The meaning of positionality, as a feminist term, is explained by Alcoff (1988: 434) by stressing its relational character: 'The concept of woman as positionality shows how women use their positional perspective as a place from which values are interpreted and constructed rather than as a locus of an already determined set of values'. In research, positionality as an epistemological notion has been considered to play an important role both in the field and in the text, as a realization of one's particular social location and its implications for the resulting knowledge: 'standing on shifting ground makes it clear that every view is a view from somewhere and every act of speaking a speaking from somewhere' (Abu-Lughod 1991: 141). The problems of power inequalities between the researcher and the researched are given significant attention in the feminist literature, and reflexivity, although it is not considered to help in removing the differences, can make the asymmetries visible (England 1994: 250). Reflexivity makes the researcher prepared for ways of dealing with the interpersonal and ethical aspects of research, being 'a sensitizing notion that can enable ethical practice to occur in the complexity and richness of social research' (Guillemin & Gillam 2004: 278). Elsewhere, I have argued that qualitative migration research, methodologically and ethically, can benefit from feminist tradition with its critical stance on nuanced questions of power (Malyutina 2012).

2.2 Here, I concentrate on the strand of feminist literature that analyzes the ethical implications of female researchers interviewing women. Earlier works (Oakley 1981; Finch 1984) regard shared gender as promoting the establishment of trust between the interviewer and the interviewee. They argue for less structured research strategies in order to achieve a non-hierarchical relationship between the two, and the readiness of the interviewer to invest her personal identity in the relationship. Interviewing women, especially those with a similar social position and critical life-experiences with the researcher, established 'a rationale of personal involvement [...] problematic and ultimately unhelpful to avoid', where the ethical dilemmas seemed to be the greatest (Oakley 1981: 42). Finch (1984: 74-76) explains the ease of establishment of trust with female respondents being supposedly used to personal questions, the intimate character of conversation between two women at one's home, and the shared structural positions of women, as being 'subordinate [...] by virtue of their gender'. However, later writings (Riessman 1987; Edwards 1990; McDowell 1992; Cotterill 1992; Dyck *et al.* 1995; Millen 1997) acknowledge that gender is 'not enough to create the shared understandings necessary for a successful interview' (Riessman 1987: 173). Researchers underline that female social scientists are 'influenced by their own position (their gender, race, class, age, etc.) and that of their respondents' (McDowell 1992: 405). Shared understandings do not necessarily develop from shared gender. Edwards (1990) notes that failure to acknowledge the important differences may damage the possibility of establishing rapport. Personal involvement and painful discourses may make vulnerable both the researcher and the respondent, opening the possibility of exploitation. Dyck *et al.* (1995: 613) rightly claim: 'If there is no "universal" woman, but rather a diversity of

women's experiences and subjectivities, we cannot assume that gender, racialized inequality, or other bases of social division will be paramount to how identity will be drawn on in a research interview'. The concept of intersectionality that encompasses 'the multiple relationships between different dimensions of identity that construct complex social locations' (McDowell 2008:491) and that entails complex inequalities resulting from these explains these complexities.

2.3 Even within gendered social spaces, playing up some facets of identities and playing down others enables negotiations of inclusion and exclusion, and may not automatically make one an 'insider' (Ratna 2013). In fact, employing reflexivity in a woman-to-woman interview leaves us with a multitude of questions about the most appropriate ways of including our positions into the interpretation of the work, taking it into account in the research process, and building on the arguable advantages that women researchers might possess (McDowell 1992: 405). In this article, drawing upon these considerations and uncertainties, I will explore the contested issues of positionality of a migrant woman interviewing migrant women.

Research context: Studying friendship amongst Russian-speaking migrants

3.1 In my study of friendship amongst Russian-speaking migrants in London, I wanted to question the suggestion of a tightly knit community, and critically approach the concept of transnationalism. 'Super-diversity', as Vertovec (2007: 1024) puts it while describing the contemporary state of London, is 'a dynamic interplay of variables among an increased number of new, small and scattered, multiple-origin, transnationally connected, socio-economically differentiated and legally stratified immigrants who have arrived over the last decade'. New immigrant groups have appeared on the migrant scene of Britain, differing from the previous migrants from Commonwealth countries or former colonial territories by being smaller, less organized, and highly differentiated, and not having similar historical links with Britain (Vertovec 2007: 1029). Migration from the former Soviet Union (FSU) countries in its current volume, regularity and variety represents one of the recent trends that contribute to the diversification of social life in London. My research examined sociality in different social groups of Russian-speaking migrants in order to understand this new group and the degree to which they were either diverse or closely knit.

3.2 The UK migration literature does not pay much attention to Russian-speakers. This is partly due to the relatively recent appearance of this migrant group in the UK in noticeable numbers. According to the last Census data, 66,271 people who consider Russian as their main language lived in England in 2011, 26,603 of them in Greater London (Office for National Statistics 2013). Most of the FSU countries are not member states of the European Union. Migrants from other East European countries started to receive mention in research literature since the EU accession in 2004 and increase in migration to the UK from these A8 countries (including those from ex-Soviet Lithuania, Latvia and to a lesser extent, Estonia). In addition to the tendency of academic work on Russian-speakers to aggregate in East European and Slavonic studies, rather than seep into the general sphere of migration studies, it causes the relative academic 'invisibility' of Russian-speaking migrants. This can hardly be said about certain high-profile type of figures such as post-Soviet oligarchs, whose economic, cultural and legal activities are a rather symbolic part of contemporary London and are often discussed in the UK media, usually in connection with geopolitics, international relations, corruption and crime (Malnick 2014; Judah 2014; Bullough 2014; Rankin and Goodley 2014). The body of literature on low-skilled labour migration tackling, among others, issues of precarious work, inequalities, and illegality has become saturated with studies of post-Soviet migrants including those from the Baltic states and Ukraine (McDowell 2008; Wills *et al.* 2010; Parutis 2011; Kubal *et al.* 2011). At the same time, significant numbers of non-EU Russian-speakers, particularly from Russia, tend to be (often self-acknowledged) middle-class, or 'middling' migrants – loosely understood as the people who are in the middle-class positions both in the societies where they come from and where they move to, for whom migration is not, or not just, about economic considerations (Conradson & Latham 2005; Pinaev 2013). This part of the post-Soviet Russian-speaking population of London is least studied, and is a significant focus of this research.

3.3 Kopnina (2005) suggests that Russian-speakers tend to form 'subcommunities' on the basis of social class, profession or interests, and to engage in international networks. Internal divisions 'account for the fragmentation of Russian migrants and their lack of interest in or awareness of the "Russian community"' (Kopnina 2005: 13). Byford (2009: 55) also argues that 'diasporization' of the post-Soviet Russian migrants in Britain is not based directly on Russian ethnos, state, national culture, or even language. Rather, he argues, it is united by 'a historically-specific socio-cultural background shared by the generation of people born in the former USSR [...], whose formative identifications are therefore rooted, somewhat peculiarly, in a state and society that are no more...' This migrant group is characterized by fluidity of boundaries implying its relative openness to representatives and institutions not of post-Soviet origin; high degree of social stratification; and different extents to which migrants rely on the communities of compatriots (Byford 2009). The Russian-speaking population is

geographically scattered around London, settling according to their social class rather than their proximity to compatriots. I concentrated on the specific selectivity and attention that migrants employ in the establishment of intimate social connections, which is an effect of the social differentiation among them. The proclaimed lack of cohesion amongst post-Soviet migrants is specified in quite loose connections between small social networks. At the same time, while Russian-ness turned out to be a feature of most of the close friendships, it caused questions about the possibilities of relationships with non-Russian-speakers.

3.4 Following the concerns about intercultural relationships linked to the influx of East European migrants to the UK (McDowell 2008; Keith 2005), I also concentrated on relationships of Russian-speaking migrants and other Londoners. For many, coexistence is not unproblematic: racialized attitudes can develop among migrants who find themselves in an unfamiliar environment, surrounded by a multitude of cultures, and sometimes stigmatized by the general population as a threat to their personal wellbeing or the nation-state. Some Russian-speaking migrants actively participate in processes of racialization, relying upon their previous experience of treating the different subject, discourse of the home countries, structural factors like migration policies and labour market divisions in the UK, and personal experience of encountering the everyday multiculturalism. As such, my research sought to understand the ways in which migrants deal with cultural diversity in a global city, as reflected in their practices of informal sociality.

3.5 People from the former Soviet states have rapidly formed a migrant population that contributes to super-diversity, includes various representatives of 'middling' migration (Conradson & Latham 2005), and has developed its own social world and ways of interacting with the bigger social world of the city. However, this population has not become a solid social or spatial community, its borders are blurred, its members' identifications are complex and interconnections between stratified groups are loose. Hence the term 'community' is used in this work as a heuristic device: it implies commonalities of historical, linguistic, sociocultural, ethnic, national character that exist among most of the recent Russian-speaking migrants to the UK, but does not suggest that these are seen as necessary prerequisites for formation of social networks in practice.

3.6 In order to study sociality, I used ethnographic methods, which means I spent a lot of time in close communication with my informants. My ethnographic study of the Russian-speaking migrant 'community' in London included participant observation in a Russian bar and 35 semi-structured interviews with migrants, of whom 22 were women, selected by the snowball or referral sampling technique^[2]. Respondents with different backgrounds and social statuses were deliberately selected in order to achieve a multifaceted picture of the Russian-speaking population, while particularly at the interview stage I tried to grasp the diversity of those not in the top or bottom social positions^[3]. The study started with participant observation in a Russian bar - one of the principal initial sources of respondents. Another source was existing Russian-speaking acquaintances. Some of the informants were found through professional contacts. Finally, a few were randomly 'picked up' in non-research-related circumstances, when I needed representatives of social groups different from those present in the sample.

3.7 Doing ethnography which often has to do with 'sensitive' themes entangles the researcher within the contingent links between building and sustaining relationships with informants, ethical requirements, and their own 'hybrid selves' (Pérez-y-Pérez & Stanley 2011). There are certain ethical drawbacks of a researcher with an implied 'insider' position (Malyutina 2012). Precisely, there are methodological implications of friendship among Russian-speaking migrants for the relationship between the researcher and the researched. Establishing relationships with different people has challenged my assumed 'insider' status, as a variety of differences between me and my respondents came to the fore. Being of the same ethnic/national origin with respondents was helpful in most cases at the initial stage of research, because it promoted access and the development of trust. Further communication unfolded with a search for similarities or differences between us. However, the bigger involvement of the researcher in the studied community, although it can help get access to more sides of migrants' everyday lives, is sometimes problematic for pursuing the aims of the research. The relationship is taken for granted as friendship by respondents and sometimes by the researcher, which may taint the academic representation of the research. Also, being exposed to a diversity of relationships with different people, and subjugating yourself to their understandings and practices of friendship, puts at risk the researcher's personality. Employing friendship as method involves the practices, the pace, the contexts, and the ethics of friendship, being 'a level of investment in participants' lives that puts fieldwork relationships on par with the project' (Millmann-Healy 2003: 735).

3.8 I have argued that belonging to the same community can be helpful in conducting research. However, the diversity of this community should be an object of constant reflexivity, and the seemingly easy access to a

group should never be taken to mean that you are an insider. In this respect, I support the feminist argument of making the pitfalls of a research relationship visible (Rose 1997, England 1994), and claim that practical downsides of a study can be analytically approached as a useful experience for the research practice. Reflecting on the research process, I realized that learning, succeeding and failing to approach different people helped understanding how Russian-speaking migrants considered the values of friendship, its social differences, and distinctions between the degrees of closeness. Differences that hinder the establishment or support of trust were also a demonstration of the stratified and segregated character of this migrant population. The idea of this paper stems from it: here, I take the task to explore how, in spite of certain facets of difference and power imbalance between the researcher and the researched, it is possible to make use of reflexive positioning for the research process and outcomes.

How does it feel to interview Russian-speaking women as a Russian-speaking woman?

- 4.1 While my fieldwork balanced the contexts of friendship and difference, initially I regarded interviews which seemed friendly, or those with friends, as 'good' ones, which in my subjective interpretation would mean being smooth, informative, uninterrupted, non-aggressive conversations. Conversely, those with people who were not my friends or acquaintances were expected to be not as 'good'. Similarly, I was expecting the interviews with the women to go smoother, and was less preoccupied about them than those with the men. The practice of interviewing turned to be more complicated, though. The women with whom I have had friendly relationships and I thought would easily discuss their intimate concerns with me, after my pressing the recorder's button could suddenly turn into mechanical and discreet respondents. Meanwhile, certain men twice as old as me, whom I saw for the first time in my life, and who were busy enough not to even notice some social researcher, would accommodate me in a most hospitable manner and elaborate about their friends and many other related topics for a good couple of hours non-stop. As being Russian proved insufficient guarantee for a 'good' interview, being a friend and/or of a woman, too, was not universally helpful. However, as Cotterill (1992:602) points out, even if some respondents' circumstances seem to make them easier to interview than others, 'it would be indefensible [...] to differentiate on the basis of what is a "good" or "bad" interview situation'. She continues: the researcher has to make what she can of interview conditions and adapt to the interviewee's circumstances. As I realized, the situations which could be initially associated with the failed establishment of rapport, were not necessarily indicative of a less effective interview. Rather, this was a different way of understanding different people, and seeing that their ideas of sociality in practice may be different from those of the more 'welcoming' ones. Different mutual positioning between me and respondents within the fields of friendship and gender invoked different feelings. These, in turn, helped me in shaping my outcomes about Russian-speaking women's sociality in London.
- 4.2 These accounts of interviews with three different women that took place at their homes demonstrate how my feelings have underpinned the interaction with the research participants. One of them was my friend and two were friendly strangers, each of whom, however, provided very different contexts of establishing understanding and rapport. Even though being invited to a respondent's home may seem a result of already established (at least to a certain extent) trust, in reality home-based qualitative research often involves constantly making ethical decisions, following the dynamics of the interaction (Pechurina 2014). My positionality and the ways my informants seemed to negotiate it allowed me either to draw upon or to struggle through the power relations between us.

Feeling as usual: Zhanna

- 4.3 I met Zhanna at a lecture in the university where we were both doing our degrees. We exchanged a couple of phrases in English just to realize soon that we were not only both Russian, but had come to London half a year ago, from the same part of Russia, were both in our mid-20s, from middle-class backgrounds, and even lived in the same student residence. We have known each other for a few years now. When I asked her if she would like to talk to me about her relationships with Russian-speakers and other Londoners, she readily agreed.
- 4.4 I came to Kew Gardens one sunny weekend, the place to which Zhanna had recently moved (myself and another Russian-speaking friend of hers actually helped her with this). We went for a short walk to Richmond first, strolled by the river, and then popped into big Sainsbury's on the way home to get a bottle of champagne, fruits and a cake. Zhanna was renting a room from an English family. We sat down on the bed, I turned on my recorder, and the interview started – or rather the chat we were having while walking continued. For a while it seemed silly to ask her to describe the area she has moved to or her relationships with the house owners – the topics we have much discussed and gossiped about earlier. However, we both kept down the giggling and tried to act serious - as we thought an interviewer and an interviewee should. Sharing so many similarities with Zhanna

in our life positions, I could not help the feeling that her responses were a bit predictable: in other words, I would have given very similar answers to many questions. Also, much of what she was talking about has also been part of my everyday life: for example, a year of sharing a block in a student residence with people from different countries. In general, the conversation resembled a usual friendly chat we have had many times earlier – but in a more focused and condensed form.

- 4.5 Being friends with Zhanna had several kinds of impact on the interview process. The process itself looked like a positive, friendly, open discussion – no confusion, no shyness, no pressure. Feeling familiar at the respondent's home also contributed to this. Both of us felt comfortable, but serious enough not to lose the purpose of the discussion and not to turn it into just another chat. But most importantly, the fact that we were *female friends* provided some insights to my understanding of Russian-speaking migrants' relationships with the 'others', when the issue of personal relationships with male 'others' was probed by me.

I: Would you date a black or Indian guy?

R: Aaah, that's interesting – you know, my girls...Russian-speakers...just recently were asking me *the same question*. Probably not. [...] With a black guy...no. It is still very...unfamiliar. I mean, I have a black friend at work, and it's ok. But there is something...not dislike...I don't know how to put it. I would not have a close relationship with a black guy. Although...if he were mixed race...Brazilian or Mexican – quite possible! They are very cute.

I: You said your girls were asking you the same question...

R: Ah, we were sitting somewhere *just like now*, having dinner and started talking about guys, *you know, as usual...* [a question arose] A black guy, no? And everyone was like – no, no. I guess this is too unusual *for us*. But everyone agreed to a mixed race guy (laughs), no problem.'

(Zhanna, 25; March 2011)

- 4.6 In Zhanna's conversation, the italics underline the phrases revealing the perceptions of the shared femininity (implying the researcher's understanding of talk about men as common among women), shared friendship of women (talking to the female researcher as one of the 'girls'), and shared feelings among Russian-speaking migrant women that result in some shared distinctions between perceived ethnic and racial qualities (invoking 'us' while supposing close relationships hardly possible with certain kinds of 'them'). The feeling of familiarity of a close relationship between me and some informants often supported emotional sharing of some intimate information. Interviewing a female friend allowed me to explore a sensitive issue present in migrants' social practices, a dimension of their complex relationships with the diversity of London. In particular, it prompted me to explore the dilemmatic qualities of racialized discourse described by Billig et al. (1988: 117) referring to a common formula 'I'm not racist, but' and exploring how people employ ambiguous and controversial ways of talking about the 'others', 'drawing upon opposing themes of tolerance and prejudice, sympathy and blame, nationalism and internationalism'. It also made me think that research on racism may be potentially unsettling for the researcher who has to question his/her relationship to the people and the research questions, balance views on race/racism as a research topic and personal/politicized opinions, and make ethical decisions throughout the research process (cf. Kobayashi 2001, Back 2004, Wieviorka 2004, Nayak 2010).

- 4.7 The commonalities of experience among women, McDowell (1992: 405) argues, should be recognized and become part of a mutual exchange of views between a female researcher and a female respondent. In my case, my respondent would talk 'as usual'. Hence, I knew about the issue of problematic intercultural relationships, because these thoughts were projected onto me – as an implied member of the same national, cultural, linguistic, generational and gender community of friends.

Feeling intrigued: Marina

- 4.8 Marina is Latvian and 32. She came to the UK in 1998, met an Englishman, and in 1999 her daughter was born. After a couple of years, the relationship broke up, and then Marina met her current partner – a jazz musician, half English, half Jamaican. They had a son one year before the interview. The four of them live in a small flat near Regents Park. Marina works on a perfume stand in a big Boots in Central London. Masha, another respondent, who met her by chance in Boots, knowing that I was looking for informants, called me one day and said: 'Hey, I've met such an interesting person. I took her phone number, do you want to interview her? She is a real pin-up girl!' So I called Marina, and she invited me to her home one evening.

- 4.9 Marina met me at the bus stop, indeed looking like a pin-up girl – pencil skirt, striped cleavage-revealing top, bright headband. She led me to her flat which had surprisingly dark red walls and musical equipment all over the place. I saw quite a lot of people that evening – Marina's bilingual daughter, her little son, her partner who soon ran off to a meeting 'with the guys', and her cousin, who has moved to London a few months ago and popped in to see Marina, with her Russian-speaking female friend. People were coming and going; I was sitting on the sofa and felt slightly torn between the genuine interest in my host's social network and the temptation to

ask where she got her shoes. Meanwhile, Marina was talking about herself – how she came here without the command of English, how lonely she felt at the beginning, how she exercises the skill to recognize Russian-speakers among her customers, and how she, 'a world citizen', does not like when people get together on the basis of nationality, but loves 'the whole world...just to socialize and to have a drink'. She has been 'there', she has met 'those' people. She does not want to stick to Russian or Latvian companies or areas, but prefers to meet 'new nationalities and people every day'. She went on talking about her unlucky relationships with Russian-speaking women in London:

R: The women I've met, honestly, they always need something from you. They always need help, they have problems with documents...I'm tired. Nobody helped me. I was here all alone, no papers, no rights, until Latvia joined the EU. You can meet Russian-speaking women here who are like prostitutes, just fucking around. I try to keep distance, I think they are disgracing our nation.

I: Those who you meet at work?

R: Yes, you know—I'm a talkative person. I can ask something, and then they start with questions – is your man rich, what does he do? Well, what's the matter? And I just say hi and don't mix with them.

I: That's why, you say, the relationships do not happen?

R: No, I keep distance. I've got a family, I can't live like that and socialize with such girls. [...] There are not many girls...good ones – you don't see the good ones. You don't see many good things in life, generally. Those who try to stick to you, if they are desperate about it – it definitely means they need something. One of them was asking me to find her a man, to get married. She was offering me £2,000. What the hell? [...] I keep distance, in order not to disgrace the nation. [...] Any nation has good people, though. I can't say they are all whores. You don't look like one. You are cool. My cousin is a great girl, too. And Masha is nice and kind. So, I cannot say bad things about everyone...'

(Marina, 32; June 2010)

- 4.10** It was getting darker. Marina suddenly offered me a drink. I made an attempt to refuse (since I had a couple of questions more to ask and didn't want to relax too early), but she insisted^[4]. The interview finished, Marina put the children to bed, and we sat on the windowsill with the drinks. She has invited me and Masha, my other respondent, to a 'girls' night out' the next day, with her cousin and cousin's friend:

'We are thinking of a ladies' group, and it turns out we are all Russian-speakers. A small collective, but that's great. You know, *normal people who do not offend each other, and do not request anything* ...I like that, we are *friends* then'.

- 4.11** There is another dimension of relationships among female migrants that was again projected onto me. I think I could build rapport with Marina because to her, I did not look like a Russian gold digger. My interest in her did not lead to the resentment that other Russian women's questions caused. Actually, although she made it clear that she did not like Russian women asking her about 'her man' (and I did not), she herself has told me who 'her man' was. Familiarity that was present in Zhanna's interview situation from the beginning developed gradually in this case.

- 4.12** She was Latvian, not looking like any Russian-speaker I have ever met in London, but worried about 'disgracing the Russian nation'; quite different from me, but amiable and talkative. How was that possible? The collaborative, non-hierarchical and non-exploitative relationship with respondents, a central argument of the feminist researchers (Oakley 1981, McDowell 1992, Guillemin & Gillam 2004), is supposed to be not easily achieved and influenced by a multitude of structural and personal factors defining the power balance in the interaction (Riessman 1987, Edwards 1990, Cotterill 1992, Herod 1993, Dyck *et al.* 1995). However, in the case of Marina, despite our different structural positions, it was her perception of me as a non-exploitative *woman* that made me the 'friendly female interviewer' (Finch 1984: 75). In fact, her wariness of Russian women stems from constructing an image of them as prone to exploiting her morally by invading into private spheres of her life and claiming her assistance, as well as exploiting the image of Russian women by 'disgracing the nation' with their opportunistic behaviour. I, on the other hand, was not trying to 'request' anything in a way similar to what the Russian women in her experience did. Some information I wanted from her could have been considered personal, therefore assuming a possibility of a different kind of exploitation that she would not consider as such. I had articulated the purpose of my interview which did not imply using that information to claim any services from Marina or doing any harm to her. She was interested in having a chat and maybe knowing a bit more about her compatriots from someone who was hoping to write a book about them; I was interested in her thoughts about socializing with Russian-speakers. Moreover, we were both interested in having a pleasant conversation in general. Being intrigued by her appearance and lifestyle, I have indeed considered her as different – but these differences hardly seemed to serve as serious obstacles to the interview process. Besides, she was hospitable and that helped me feeling at ease in her home. In fact, it ended up pretty much in what Marina articulated earlier as 'socializing and having a drink', which seemed to have left both of us quite happy. The socioeconomic and political dimensions of Russian femininity which were standing in the way of Marina's relationships with Russian-speaking women in London were not as prominent in our interaction. But I was only able to realize the role of

these dimensions within my respondent's narrative because of our different structural positions, and Marina's implicit acknowledgement of it.

Feeling uneasy: Nadezhda

- 4.13** Nadezhda is 45 years old. She is a housewife, and lives in Dagenham with her English husband and two daughters. She came to London 11 years ago. Nadezhda is a devout practitioner of Sahaja Yoga. She met her husband in India and married him after a guru told them they had to be together. Most of her friends are Russian-speaking women she met at yoga classes, in the college where she was studying English, and in the park where she, as other local mothers, goes with the children. She reads Russian newspapers, watches Russian movies and exchanges Russian DVDs with her friends. She also looks a bit sad while admitting that her daughters hardly speak Russian, although understand it.
- 4.14** I called Nadezhda after a recommendation from my mother's colleague who used to work with her in Russia long ago and still kept in touch with her. She has invited me to visit her one morning while the children were at school. Having already done quite a few interviews with housewives and mothers, I got used to finding □ these women usually hospitable, responsive and sociable. It may seem easy to get female respondents talking, because women can find it 'great to have someone to talk to' (Einch 1984), and 'the opportunity to talk informally to another woman may also be therapeutic for some respondents, particularly if they are deprived of other forms of social contact' (Cotterill 1992: 601). Not denying the limitations of this argument – the ease of communication being dependent on the significance of similarities and differences between the researcher and the informant, □ and the potential risks of shifting power leading to the vulnerability of the interviewer or the interviewee – I, nevertheless, found Russian-speaking housewives relatively 'easy' respondents. However, with Nadezhda, things were slightly different.
- 4.15** The interview started as usual. Nadezhda offered me a cup of tea, we sat in the garden and the conversation began. She told me how she got a job in a Russian grocery shop through her Russian female acquaintance; how a half-Nigerian girl heard Nadezhda speaking Russian with her children in the park and approached them, cheerfully saying: 'Are you Russian? I am Russian, too!' ('...and she is a black girl! She told her mum, and that's how we became friends'); how she celebrates 8 March^[5] every year with Russian female friends; how she found a good Bulgarian hairdresser after constant disappointment with English ones. Then, she asked me where I got my hair done and recommended a Russian salon. Then, she asked about the prices on haircuts in my home city in Russia. Then – how often I went home. Nadezhda complained that they could not see her parents regularly because it was too far and expensive. Then, she started asking for my advice about bringing presents to Russia for relatives. I was feeling awkward. On the one hand, I almost finished with my □ questions and was used to some extended sociality between myself and some respondents. Moreover, earlier feminist literature reminds us of the propensity of women to ask questions back, and encourages the researcher's responses (Oakley 1981). On the other hand, however, Nadezhda's series of questions were a bit unsettling. She expressed her interest in what I used to buy for my parents and friends. She was wondering about the prices on different goods in Russian shops, and I had to admit I did not remember these details. 'What else can I buy?... Can I get anything from Primark?... I don't know what they wear there, must be more elegant than here. Do they sell mint chocolate? Is it expensive? What do men wear? Do women wear trousers?...' I was getting confused. This seemed more like an inquiry, when I, despite my struggles, simply could not find relevant answers to the □ multitude of questions. I nervously sipped my tea and mumbled something like 'I am not really sure...' and 'Different people wear different clothes' – which seemed like utterly obvious nonsense. But once she had started bombarding me with questions, Nadezhda did not stop. 'Can I get them coffee? Do they sell eyeshadow there? Should I take my hair colourant with me? Do you buy perfume? What perfume do you get, is it expensive?' I was desperate. Still muttering some general rubbish, I was feeling trapped in that garden, with a nice woman 20 years older than me, who for some reason thought I was able to give her advice regarding her personal matters.
- 4.16** Probably seeing finally that there was not much use of me, Nadezhda has offered me lunch. She has □ cooked some frozen Indian food from Iceland. Then, Nadezhda suddenly started talking about her spiritual interests, cosmic energies, karma, life cycles and meditation. She demonstrated some old newspaper scraps in Russian. Then, she turned on a video tape which was apparently explaining the existence of civilization. Then, she went on talking about her practices of Sahaja Yoga, and suddenly offered to clean my chakras. Being already interested in my respondent's lifestyle, as well as worrying about being impolite to refuse, I agreed. Nadezhda told me to sit down and close my eyes in front of a picture of some Indian woman. She has done some manipulations behind my back, asking me if I felt anything. I honestly replied that I did not. She continued her passes. After a while, she announced that some of my chakras had been blocked, but she had tried to clean them. She handed me a small picture of the same Indian lady, and recommended to practice meditation at home. Finally, I left.

4.17 I had mixed feelings after the interview with Nadezhda. First, she was indeed helpful and welcoming, and I had a warm reception at her house. I managed to receive her responses to most of my questions before she took the initiative of inquiry. At the same time, I felt uncomfortable talking about personal life with her as an older woman, unlike with Zhanna or, to a lesser extent, with Marina. Second, I realized Nadezhda probably felt some trust in me, hence her questions. But I also experienced that the power balance in this interaction was mostly not on my side. There are times when the researcher can be the vulnerable one (McDowell 1992, England 1994, Rose 1997, Tillmann-Healy 2003). This may be because of the social status differences, the need to invest one's own personality into the 'more equal' research relationship, the strain of keeping the respondents' commitment to the process, or even the exposure to the vulnerability of the research subjects. Nadezhda was older than me, doing me a favour by inviting me to her home where I should have behaved like a 'friendly guest'. Finch (1984: 74) argues that an interview conducted by another woman in an informal way in the interviewee's own home 'can easily take on the character of an intimate conversation [...] the model is, in effect, an easy, intimate relationship between two women'. However, the situation of woman-to-woman home-based interview has all the chances to invoke the participants' control over the fieldwork. Datta (2008: 199) describes a situation when her location in an informant's house increased the pressure of conforming to the woman's spiritual practices: 'while it was possible for Neeti to be amiable and welcoming on the road, a more personal engagement with her in her house was possible only on her terms'. Nadezhda was also in charge. I tried my best to be polite and sociable, and not to offend my host by refusals. However, the questions she kept asking made me feel uncomfortable, while the chakras-cleaning procedure left me wondering if my behaviour was the best possible reaction. She has introduced me to her way of life, and probably tried to do me good, in her view; I took part in her yoga practices and listened to what she believed in, while I actually had quite a skeptical opinion about these practices. Considering this, was my reaction polite or exploitative? Was I attempting to extract maximum of information from her hospitality, or was I just trying to demonstrate my interest and adequate response to Nadezhda's sociability? I knew one thing for sure: the interview left me feeling uneasy, and this feeling, in turn, prompted critical thoughts about my research subject, but even more – about the process of my communication with her. Once again, my positionality was a 'shifting ground' (Abu-Lughod 1991: 141): my social location as a younger middle-class educated migrant woman of Russian origin that put me on par with Zhanna and in a way helped (or at least did not hinder) the establishment of a relationship of trust with Marina, was not helping me in my interaction with Nadezhda. But the resulting gradual development of uneasiness also translated into development of reflexivity.□

4.18 Reflexivity, a critical reflection on the production of knowledge from the research process, requires□ awareness of the potential influences and risks of the research process, and an ability to step back and take a□ critical look at the researcher's role in this process (Guillemin & Gillam: 2004). It is closely connected with the emotional component of doing qualitative research (England 1994, Ezzy 2010), and is necessary to ensure that 'the threats and dangers [...] contribute to the richness of the analysis rather than interfere with the integrity and the trustworthiness of the research process' (Possick 2009: 868). If I had not had the experience of this and other 'uneasy' interviews, the result of my fieldwork material would have been a much flatter and less complex picture□ of social relationships amongst Russian-speakers in London. The differences and discomforts of these relationships could have gone unnoticed or paid less attention, if I had not experienced them myself.

Conclusion

5.1 In this paper, I have introduced three situations that occurred in the course of my research on friendship networks amongst Russian-speaking migrants in London. The encounters with three women demonstrated how different positioning of the research participants within the fields of gender and friendship influenced my□ perceptions of the research process and results. The critical and reflexive re-assessment of the interviews has□ led me to some ideas about the practicalities of a research situation when a migrant woman interviews migrant women. Considering the researcher's positionality has been presented in this paper as a means of making similarities and differences between participants useful for the critical interpretation of the work.

5.2 Unlike the opening quote of this paper from an interview with a man who was obviously constrained by our different genders, women were quite open to talk with me. I agree with some feminist literature that shared femininity can promote rapport that often cannot be achieved while interviewing men (Oakley 1981, Finch 1984). But also, I agree with the literature that warns against relying on shared gender as a universally helpful attribute (Edwards 1990, McDowell 1992, Cotterill 1992, Dyck et al. 1995, Datta 2008). Getting carried away with empowerment and equality as key concepts structuring the study approach of feminist methodologies may be equally unjustified: feminist ideas of intimacy in a research relationship do not always translate well into practice□ (Millen 1997). As such, interviewing women can indeed be problematic and unpredictable, but even then it can be made sense of, if one takes into account positionality and uses its relevant aspects to build a positive and

open interaction.

- 5.3** Following the arguments of feminist literature, this study showed that gender is problematized and further differentiated by class, cultural, generational and other factors. In general, selectivity and differentiation function in friendship networks as well as in the research relationships, influencing the process, and mutual femininity, as well as Russian-ness, was of limited helpfulness in promoting rapport. However, it indeed helped in enhancing the reflexive approach to the interviews. Conducting research with a female friend has revealed some implicit features of discourse in migrant social networks that was a projection of shared knowledge on the relationship underpinned by shared femininity, friendship and status similarities. When the researcher and the informant did not share many commonalities, it was partly the difference between them and partly the distinction between the researcher and the generalized group of Russian-speaking women that aided the informant's positive attitude and openness in conversation. Finally, even in the case when the respondent was positively interested and confiding, and the researcher has confined to the norms of politeness, there was an ambivalent and problematic power relationship underlying the process and inducing the reflexive awareness of a special effort required to keep the balance in the research relationship. While the article concentrated on the interplay between femininity, friendship and speaking Russian, it was the intersectionality of various categories of difference - age, level of education, being or not being a mother, occupation, religious practices - that made the aspects of power and rapport within these relationships nuanced and shifting.
- 5.4** Eventually, reflecting upon the relationships with the women interviewed was also a way of understanding these migrants' concepts of friendship and sociality through practice. Reflexivity employed throughout the interview process allowed me to explore the often dynamic and not always predictable development of relationships. Attention to 'ethically important moments' (Guillemin & Gillam 2004: 262) and to circumstances that create these helps the qualitative research develop analytical depth and increases the social scientist's awareness of ethical concerns of building a productive research relationship.

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Notes

- 1 The research was conducted in London, 2009-2011. Ethical approval was granted by UCL Research Ethics Committee and all ethical guidelines were followed in the study. All respondents' names that are mentioned have been changed.
 - 2 The 22 women I have interviewed are aged 20-45, most of them in late 20s. All of them are first generation migrants, having lived here from two to 12 years. 15 are Russian; two are from Ukraine; one from Belarus; one from Latvia; one from Lithuania; and one from Tajikistan. Some of the informants have previously lived in countries including Israel, USA, Canada, Italy, Hungary, India, Bulgaria, Germany and France.
 - 3 One of the women is an illegal migrant working as a bartender. The other women are: a bartender, two designers, four PhD students, a Bachelor student, a nanny, three housewives, a scholarships administrator in an international charity organization, a shop assistant, an executive assistant at one of London schools, a phlebotomist, a risks analyst, a human rights worker, and a property consultant.
 - 4 For a more detailed discussion on the role of alcohol in research process and the ethical quandaries related to it, see Malyutina (2012): 116-117.
 - 5 International Women's Day, widely celebrated in Russia and some other post-Soviet countries.
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