Culture, Power and Social Disparity: Researching Russia's Upper Class

Abstract

This article explores the dynamics at play when conducting research on the contemporary upper class in Russia. It examines the effect of economic and social status divide between researcher and subjects on how to gain access to interviewees and how to handle the interview situation. Culturally specific expressions of power in social interaction are sought, their characteristics identified and their raison d'être explored. Furthermore, gender related issues encountered throughout the research are discussed; which commenced at the outset when applying to the ethics board and was evident at the end when presenting the data analysis. The material for this article stems from the author's experiences of conducting narrative-biographical interviews with rich high-status Russians in Moscow between 2008 and 2009.

Keywords: Russia, power, elite, access, fieldwork, interviews

Introduction

This article reflects upon questions of gender, power and social asymmetry between the researcher and the participants when researching upper class Russians. It discusses the impact of social disparity on accessibility and relational rapport, and the consequences this has on approaches to the interpretation and analysis of the interview data. Furthermore, it examines the influence that characteristics of the researcher have on the generation of data when interacting socially with research participants. These traits include gender, age, educational background, country of origin, and language abilities.

The challenges the researcher faced during her fieldwork to a large extent conformed to the problems highlighted in the literature on the topic of research into elites (e.g. Odenahl and Shaw 2002; Ostrander 1995). These are: the impact of the researcher's versus the participant's gender, age and country of origin; the difficulties gaining access to elites; tackling the power imbalance; adhering to ethical boundaries; and how to establish relational rapport during the interview. The process of 'studying up', as Nader (1999) called it, reverses the social asymmetry typically found in social research; namely, that the interviewer has greater power over the interview process than the interviewee (Kezar 2003; Plesner 2011). These inverted power differentials in elite research were omnipresent in both the search for access and the interview itself, hence of significance in the data analysis.

In many respects, researching the Russian upper class differs from researching their Western counterparts. Most interviews were conducted in Moscow. This setting has its specifics different to the challenges social researchers are likely to encounter in many Western metropolises as well as in other parts of Russia. For example, Kay 2006, Kay and Oldfield 2011, and Pilkington 2010, worked primarily in rural Russia with very different social groups that had a higher propensity to form close relationships with their researchers. The capital has experienced the most radical social changes in the last 20 years, which makes social relations in Moscow both more sharply differentiated and more complex. Muscovites are cosmopolitan and yet often suspicious of 'otherness'; gender attitudes combine patriarchal patterns with highly emancipated ones; and new money navigates between hypervisibility and new counter-trends.

The empirical data includes 40 qualitative narrative-biographical interviews, conducted in Moscow between 2008 and 2009, with rich businessmen, businesswomen, their spouses, their adult children, as well as public figures in the arts, media and politics. These people come, for the most part, from the lower end of the richest one per cent of Russian society; mostly multimillionaires, with the exception of four billionaires. To various degrees, they enjoy high status in society; they possess cultural resources in the form of formal education, internalised cultural capital, and their cultural social environment; and they wield social capital, having access to social networks and connections which they can activate to pursue specific aims and gain influence over others.

Inspired by Daniel Bertaux's life history method (1993, together with Thompson 1997, and as used in a Russian-related context in 1997 and 2004), the interviews contained questions about people's biographies, their family history, what they considered to be important in life, what helped them to become successful, what values and skills they wanted to pass on to their children and what they wished for their future. Further questions concerned philanthropy, education, and leisure time activities; how they related to the West; and how they related to gender issues. The aim was to explore the question of how the social upper class in Russia has come into being and how it maintains and reproduces itself. The interviews were conducted in Russian and lasted from half an hour to four hours.

Alongside an investigation of the dynamics of power, social disparity and gender, this article aims to identify possible factors that supported and/or hindered the generation of empirical data. This requires the reconstruction of selected situations and processes in order to allow the reader to follow the conclusions drawn. To this end, some of these reconstructions are

presented as narratives not unlike those found in fieldwork diaries. This article is divided into three aspects of the research. The first is related to accessibility and the factors at play in the context of Russian culture, social class and power asymmetry. The second section deals with the dynamics of power expression and social disparity during interviews as well as their consequences for data analysis. The last section reflects upon aspects of gender.

Access

Accessability to potential interviewees is the main obstacle to elite research. The reluctance of elites themselves is frequently exacerbated by a reluctance of connections to assist with gaining access. Social asymmetry between a researcher and the subjects merely adds to these hurdles. My initial approach to finding interviewees was to get in touch with everybody I knew to ask whether they might have contacts to individuals in my target group. Later I tried to approach potential interviewees directly. To identify them, I went through published 'rich list, primarily '*Finans*', a Russian pendant to Forbes. I skipped the top names, googled the lower-ranked, read up on their business and life and tried to work out whether I could find any access to them. In some cases, I called up and/or wrote to their personal assistants and PR managers. These attempts produced varying results – most of them none. Whether an initial request (email, phone call, appeal to friends to ask around) led any further or not was generally a question of hit and miss. It was impossible to discern any pattern, technique or rule to follow that could be of use to others in this pursuit. Nonetheless, there are a number of observations to make.

An innate general respect for scholarship was a decisive factor for some to agree to an interview. As Hirsch states (1995: 77), a certain spirit of charitable obligation, sometimes towards universities, is for elites often a motivation to participate in research. That this spirit exists among Russian elites can be explained by the fact that parts of this contemporary upper class have been strongly influenced by intelligentsia culture, many having been born into it (cf. Gessen 1997; King 2002; Schimpfossl 2014). This social background instilled an inherent charitable geist and obligation amongst many. What is important to note here is that it is often the most high-status and affluent that were generous enough to respond to emails.

Gregory, for example, possessed both high status and affinity with academic pursuits. I had found his name on a billionaires list. He is the co-founder of a well-known company, the inventor of a highly important IT tool and the son of a famous scientist. I sent Gregory a message on Facebook. He replied the next day and said he would give me an interview if I promised not to use it for any media, but purely for academic purposes. Gregory turned out to

be a rather quiet, almost shy person and not in the least arrogant or detached from the world. After the interview, he was nice enough to give me his wife's phone number so that I could also arrange an interview with her.

Many other potential interviewees did not appreciate social research in the same way as Gregory. Instead, some were primarily concerned about PR benefits. Amongst them was the second-richest businesswoman in Russia. I was told by journalists acquainted with her that everybody usually gets an interview. At first, her secretary was indeed very open, but then she started asking questions about how many people would read the article or book and which medium it would be published in. I tried very hard to make her acquire a taste for the academic medium but failed. The secretary kept up the offer of an interview with her boss, but, as the latter valued her time, she said she would charge for it. Regretfully, I did not think to ask how much it would be.

With regard to the intermediaries who were willing to help, it was often a sense of professional duty that seemed to motivate them. As with the elite interviewees, these were usually also people who felt very confident and secure about their own status. This confidence made them more generous and willing to help a young person who had nothing to offer in return. Among those people were a number of social researchers who had depended on help themselves in the past and were now happy to assist, particularly someone junior to themselves.

By contrast, features of strong aspirations and status anxiety were particularly evident amongst those who worked in professions serving the elite. With regard to my interactions with these middle class professionals, my perceived low status presented several problems. My modest clothing highlighted this status. Attire is the principal tool used to benchmark socio-economic status. For aspiring middle class Muscovites glamorous looks are of extraordinary importance. Contrary to this the upper class interviewees seemed far less bothered about my dress code.

An additional barrier encountered was the social disparity, not only between my contacts and me, but also between them and their elite contacts. These people usually seemed proud of their contacts to elites and their privileged positions, yet they were inevitably acutely aware of their inferior status compared to the more powerful and richer individuals they provided services for. Some of those who I approached seemed reluctant to strain the relationship with their connections if not absolutely necessary. Whilst in the field, I also worked for a research project at one of Moscow's universities, where I encountered just such a barrier. I shared the

office with Dmitry, who I asked to introduce me to someone I could interview, believing that he would gladly assist, but this was not the case. One day he began to feel sorry for me. He asked me to send him my CV in order to forward it to an oligarch acquaintance who wanted to learn more about me before deciding whether to give me an interview. I sent the CV, but never heard any more about it. I asked a couple of times and the reply was: “The oligarch is thinking.” It was clear he might be thinking for a long while, way beyond the time of my research stay in Moscow.

Obstructive behaviour is also not uncommon amongst middle class professionals from other cultural backgrounds working for elites. A senior manager in his late fifties at a world-leading car manufacturer had researched a similar group to mine. Notwithstanding his hour long conversation with me, he remained most secretive, almost in a competitive sense. This man clearly had control and power to share the findings of his research with whomever he considered fit providing it did not interfere with the company’s business interests. However, he chose not to, despite his interest in my project. Such secretive behaviour is not uncommon within social research where, as Mikecz (2012: 486) suggests, potential informers and contact people often turn out to be gatekeepers.

One of the first steps to an interview was to get a potential interviewee’s phone number, ideally the private mobile phone number. Whilst in Russia unsolicited phone calls are considered intrusive, they are nevertheless more readily accepted than in other European societies. Moreover people have little qualms about handing over a number to a third party.

Once I had a phone number there was a good chance that the person would at least talk to me, if not agree to an interview. Whilst initially suspicious and annoyed, curiosity often prevailed. I came to believe that even if in high demand by the media, they are rarely approached by Western University researchers. My fluency in Russian had a significant role in facilitating communication and the foreign accent clearly played a part in maintaining the curiosity. Most Russians appreciate someone who has gone to the trouble to learn their native tongue. Furthermore, as the interview was in Russian, the interviewee would retain a linguistic superiority. Also the mixture of familiarity and ‘otherness’ in how I am capable of expressing myself was perceived by some as ‘quirky’, which was one of the few advantages I had: one interviewee told me he had vowed not to give any more interviews, but made an exception for me because I sounded entertainingly odd when I called him to ask for an interview. Here my chance of success was enhanced as, firstly, he had linguistic advantage and, secondly, the opportunity for some entertainment at my expense was presented.

After I had convinced the person on the other end of the phone to give me an interview, planning remained difficult, as hardly anybody would agree on a date more than three days ahead. The next hurdle was not to have the scheduled interview cancelled. Refusal took several forms; some called and informed me that they could not make it; others did not answer my calls if they had changed their minds; whilst others simply stood me up. One of the more unexpected cases were those who repeatedly reconfirmed their willingness to give me an interview but then continually messed me about.

This could turn into a long-term game as it did in the case of Maksim. The 32-year-old businessman kept me waiting for over a year, although I pursued him relentlessly. He would agree to a meeting, then not answer the phone so we could not make final arrangements. I kept chasing him for two reasons. Firstly, he repeatedly gave me hope. Secondly, I was very keen on this interview as Maxim was different to most other entrepreneurs I encountered. This businessman and lawyer, according to the rumors, had made his money by trading in both Duma seats in Russia, and landmines in Africa. Eventually, we agreed on a time, but when I called to confirm, he did not answer. Later that day he sent me a text saying that he would call in a minute, which he failed to do. Finally, after 12 hours sitting around trying to get this interview fixed, he ordered me to a restaurant in a casino, telling me in a text message: 'Get something tasty for yourself and find out if they have got the snails which I ordered the other day. Don't be shy.'

The interview lasted three hours and was accompanied by a great deal of food. Maksim presented himself very much as a down-to-earth, easy going, warm and generous host to the guest-researcher from the West. It nearly made one forget that he had played a year long game of hide-and-seek in which he playfully demonstrated his power, to which I had succumbed. A reason for the latter might well have been a certain hunger for the scandalous on my part (given the rumours about Maksim's career history) and pleasure in the game, more than rational considerations about time investment and chances of success.

Relational rapports: power, reluctance and self-disclosure

In her studies on upper class Americans, Ostrander (1995: 143) describes the demeanour of American elites as a combination of easiness, warmth, openness and friendliness, yet always subtly but clearly putting inferiors in their place. The Russian upper class is too new to have developed homogenous patterns of demeanour and behaviour. What characterises many of them however, is that they are uninhibited in showing their antipathies, living their foibles and moodiness. Occasional insecurity intensifies the appearance of arrogance and

dismissiveness. Historically, as a relic of both Imperial Russia and Soviet times, social relations in Russia are typically hierarchical and paternalistic. The wealthiest and most powerful interviewees tended to be the most demonstratively fickle with regard to their foibles and games. Notwithstanding this, they offer the best insight into how dominance is exerted and reinforced in social communication and interaction.

The interview with Leonid was an example of paternalistic attitudes of an elderly male participant towards a young female researcher. The wealthy entrepreneur and art collector in his seventies orchestrated all moves from the very beginning. He made clear that he had very specific expectations of how the interview would run, how long it would last and what we would talk about. The entrepreneur, who had been a part-time teacher at higher educational institutions, lectured me about science, the art theories he had elaborated and his writing of fiction which, in his opinion, was on par with Chekhov. He talked at length about god and morals, saying; 'My relationship to religion is that I don't believe in miracles but only in things for which there is scientific proof. The big bang is proven. Of course, there had to be a God. Darwin's theory is absolute nonsense. I can assure you of that, as a professor who has published more than a hundred works.' He also told me that a woman who has not given birth by the age of 30 is not a fully-fledged human being. (Nothwithstanding the fact that he probably realised that the interviewer opposite him fell into this category). Occasionally, Leonid paused briefly to test my knowledge. He also had his own ideas of what would happen with the interview material and, thus, he was perplexed when he learned that I would not base my empirical data exclusively on the 1.5 hours interview with him. Eventually I met Leonid three times, the last to collect a DVD of a documentary about him and his art collection which had been broadcast on a Western TV channel.

During all the meetings, I was in the students' role, having little chance to ask my questions. On the occasions I did manage to slip them in I received no response. Leonid's dominance was not necessarily only a sign of self-assurance and superiority, but also reveals a hint of insecurity. The latter came to the fore when the wealthy entrepreneur talked about his son, aged 9. Here Leonid became almost competitive: 'The other day I calculated the number of staff working on his upbringing. It's 20 in total. It's a whole school. … He plays tennis and golf very well and he's good at swimming… At what age did you stand on skis for the first time? Also at three? Okay, well [sigh]. He also learned skiing at that age. He reads a lot. He likes Jules Verne.' However, whether confidently in charge or showing signs of weaknesses, Leonid was unshakable in his dominance. The hierarchical disparity was too strong to break the initial power setting.

Leonids interviews raised ethical questions concerning anonymity. I had stated in my ethical application that interviewees request would be respected. Whilst Leonid was happy for me to use his real name, his interview sealed the decision for me to anonymise all. It became apparent that, in view of his self-perceived grandeur, analysis of the interview would be less rigorous if his real name was used. Anonymity releases the researcher from the shackles of how the interviewee expects to be presented in the analysis. However, this decision caused an unsolvable ethical dilemma as raised, for example, by Guillemin and Gillam (2004: 265), in that some research participants might want to have their real names reported and do not want to be assigned a pseudonym in the writing up of the research.

Reluctant respondents (cf. Vitus: 2008) posed a particular challenge. They demonstrated their power by being tight-lipped. As Adler and Adler (2002: 518) state, the phenomenon of reluctant respondents is clustered around the top and bottom of power, prestige and socio-economic hierarchies. David, a businessman and art collector high up the Russian Forbes list, immediately agreed to an interview when I called him. Despite his initial openness, during the interview he was clearly no longer in the mood. To every question he would answer 'don't know' and go silent again. Sometimes he added 'I've never thought about it'. Things deteriorated when discussing David's motivation for his social commitment as the sensitive topic of social inequality, social problems and subsequently potential social unrest came up. Thuesen in 2011 commented on similar confrontational situations in elite interviews: to generate valuable data under an increased level of stress requires confidence and a calm mind. Sitting in front of this big, imposing man in his mid-fifties, looking at me with impatience and even anger, I was deprived of exactly that (cf. Vitus 2008: 486). David only warmed up when we talked about movies, the problems with his adolescent son and his motorcycle, but by then I was destabilised and unable to exploit the opportunity.

This particular interview required new approaches to the interview analysis. First, I tried to work with the interview transcript which was obviously thin. I revisited the assessment with a wider perspective, for which I also consulted my fieldwork notes. Tanggaard (2007: 174-5) suggests that one does not need a comfortable interview situation to produce good empirical data. This apparently failed interview did contain some very informative and interesting material: it demonstrated very clearly a technique used by high-status Russians to master and control social interaction. In stark contrast to the easiness and friendliness typical of American elites, David exercised his power by simply withholding his participation in the conversation and, thus, weakening the position of his conversation partner.

Among the people I have encountered, it was the most established and wealthiest interviewees who most played out their moodiness. A couple of months after Dmitry (my colleague from the research project) had requested an interview with his oligarch acquaintance, I happened to meet the very same person at a dinner party outside Moscow. Our host asked him to give me a lift back to Moscow. During the hour and a half journey I felt firmly in control of the conversation. I even dared to ask quite blunt and cheeky questions. In the middle of the conversation, the powerful and well-known businessman brusquely leant forward and put his head on his hands, as if he was feeling sick and dizzy. I asked if he felt sick, but there was no reply. He then seemed to fall asleep. I became worried. All of a sudden he opened the window (he smoked, so it was stuffy in the car) and he replied to the question I had just asked before our conversation had abruptly stopped – presumably he had just taken a rest to think! This happened three times, and it had a strong effect on me. If I had previously felt confident and in control, with each of these gestures this confidence diminished. In the end I was left irritated and confused. The businessman had regained his ground with gestures so unusual for conversational behaviour that I had not only lost any cheekiness, but ended up completely disarmed. In this case, his odd behaviour clearly had its impact because, despite my initial confidence, I became very conscious of the power imbalance. That is, foibles work when power status is known and, more importantly, accepted by the participants.

The dynamics of domination and power in interview situations were occasionally reversed (cf. Mikecz 2012: 483). While waiting for an interview with a famous fashion designer, I met Yelena, a journalist. A few weeks later Yelena took me to an interview with Vladimir, a publicly known 49-year-old businessman. When we entered his office, the entrepreneur, a former military man, was visibly nervous, to the point that his hands were shaking. He calmed down quickly when he met me. The interview proceeded very well having kept my composure in charge of leading the interview together with Yelena. When we left, Yelena asked me whether I had noticed his shaking hands at the outset. She explained that this was because he knew he would be meeting a Western journalist (Yelena had introduced me as a journalist), and that this kind of insecurity was typical for this generation of former military people.

Self-disclosure can level power relations to some extent, as Kezar (2003: 406) suggests and as my experience confirmed. The more experienced I became, the more information I would give about myself during the interviews. I explained my questions by referring to personal examples, sometimes adding my own stories and sometimes telling the interviewees what I was thinking at that moment. This instantly provided a level playing field, thereby eliminating the pre-existing status imbalance. I was presenting myself as an equal, happy to talk about

myself, rather than limit the encounter to a one-way conversation. However, I was not able to routinise this approach; I needed to be uninhibited and in the mood for it to be successful. I was in such a mood for the interview with Andrei, one of Russia's longest-standing businessmen. It was early morning and the businessman was initially as unresponsive as David (as discussed above) but after about five minutes he warmed up. Relief set in inspiring me to add my own thoughts and try to find parallels between our lives. Andrei did not seem to see anything strange in this and our animated interview lasted for almost three hours.

What facilitated such a dynamic was that, to some extent, the interviews took many of the participants outside their usual routine. A number of my interviewees clearly enjoyed taking part. One, Aleksandra, told me that journalistic interviews often exhausted her and she tried to avoid them, whereas she was delighted to have taken part in our conversation. Some of my unusual questions were perceived as thought-provoking, and several interviewees were almost inspired and happy to articulate their answers. Inevitably, the more enjoyable the interview became the less controlled the narratives. In a number of interviews stories and the ways of relating them appeared spontaneous and uncontrived. This was particularly notable when interviewees touched on their family histories, often triggering a long sometimes excited, narration. The interviewees seemed surprised at how they spoke about their families. Some commented that they had not thought about the topic enough, giving them food for thought, thus making them realise the importance of exploring their family history further. Narrating, in these situations, became a component of identity construction.

Gender

Gender was variously an issue throughout my research, commencing initially with my application to the ethics board. For many qualitative researchers the research committee application is a hurdle to surmount at the outset (Guillemin and Gillam 2004: 263). This was certainly the case for me. My first ethics application was rejected because I pointed out that my research participants did not belong to a vulnerable group. The ethics committee then decided that I might be exposed to potentially risky situations. Consequently I had to adhere to a 'lone researcher policy' in which I declared to take all necessary measures to avoid entering any dangerous or risky situations, with regard to companionship and consumption of alcohol; in particular Russia's national beverage, vodka. Moreover, I pledged to meet male interviewees only in public places, never alone in the evenings, to advise a friend of the interview location and when he or she could expect to hear back from me. This amended ethics application was also refused because it was not formulated in a gender neutral way;

notwithstanding the existing gender imbalance and potential risks involved for a 'lone researcher'. In the end I deleted the word 'male', and my application was accepted.

Secondly, gender presented as an issue in relation to my sample of interviewees. It turned out to be more difficult than I had expected to secure interviews with women. This was unfortunate because I could not learn as much about gender relations and the gender division in families as I wished to. I assume it was harder to arrange interviews with women because, firstly, there are not many women in high profile positions in Russia and, secondly, social networks are male-dominated, i.e. men play a more prominent role in public networks. Hence my intermediaries were more likely to have had project- or business-related dealings with men than with women and, consequently, referred me to the former. I did ask some of the male interviewees whether I may talk to their wives as well, but most of them seemed reluctant. They preferred to refer me to other people outside their own families. In the few cases when husbands did connect me to their spouses, these were women who played a significant role in society in their own right.

Thirdly, I felt that my being female might have conferred advantage in some respects and this proved to be the case. It helped me to gain initial access, as women (young women in particular) are not taken very seriously in Russia's male dominated business world. Moreover, in contrast to Roberts (2013), who had to meet cumulative expenses when hosting elite interviews in upmarket Moscow restaurants and cafés (in one case including the food and drinks consumed by the interviewee's secretary and bodyguard), I was rarely left to foot the bill by the interviewees. However, I suspect that a male researcher would have been more likely to elicit revealing stories. Female interviewees did confide personal stories to me, but since I could conduct interviews with only a few of them, the number was limited. Moreover, men would probably have taken a male researcher along to more social events, including male-only ones. I feel that Russian women were less likely to do this.

Finally, there was a gender related mind-set that I became aware of only towards the latter stages of the research process. Apparently for many Russians, an unmarried woman in her late 20s could have chosen a research topic such as mine for only one reason: to benefit from wealthy (male) contacts. Once I realised this point, many of the responses I had experienced, including dismissiveness (usually from males) and hostility (usually from females), which had previously seemed random and confusing, now made perfect sense.

The fact that the interviews for this research were all conducted by a female researcher with predominantly male respondents has, without doubt, had a significant impact on the data that

was generated. It influenced the questions I asked and how I asked them. It certainly affected the participants' responses as well as the level of openness. This aspect had to be considered throughout the data analysis, as this gender constellation has potentially affected almost every single topic considered in the research; such as family-related questions, thoughts about one's after-life, leisure time activities, to name just a few.

Conclusion

The implications presented in these reflections concern a range of topics. First, the demographic features of the researcher (gender, age, educational level, country of origin, country of residence, language abilities) influenced the power dynamics at play with predominantly male interviewees, most of them senior in age, with a heightened commodified sense of gender relations. The basic attitude towards me may be characterised as paternalistic.

Second, the differences between Europe and Russia was omnipresent, as was my middle position between 'the other' and a little of 'the own' due to my command of the language and knowledge of the culture. This implied relationships of guest and host, potential spy and espied, Western arrogance and ignorance versus Russian culturedness mixed with resentful complexes. These relational setting were not fixed and my position was negotiable. My reactions and responses could modify them and occasionally invert them. However, the research participants were usually deft manipulators of these social skills, able to easily turn any dynamic the direction they desired.

Third, inverted power differentials characterised both the search for access and the interviews. The interviewees exercised their power by cancelling at short notice, refusing to reply or respond if they were not in the mood and living out their foibles. The dynamics of these interactions are highly informative, as they provide examples of how elite exercise power in semi-formal social situations: through uninhibited demonstration of sympathies, antipathies, indifference and dismissiveness as well as the uninhibited demonstrations of moodiness. The consideration of these elements is intrinsic to taking an holistic approach to the data analysis. Some aspects are allowed to emerge only by stepping back from the minutiae of the interview transcripts.

Nevertheless this does not mean that a researcher has no influence in these dynamics. On the contrary, my actions in form of demeanour, responses and gestures greatly influenced the relational rapport. Opportunities to reverse the power balance during an interview arose

whenever the interviewees showed weaknesses or anxieties they had not learned to routinely hide (as in the case of the businessman Vladimir and his shaking hands). One of the most important interventions was self-disclosure, which offered opportunities for empowerment and establishment of more equitable relationships. Another way to ensure higher quality responses from interviews is to 'keep distance.' For research into a group with implied great social disparity, it is probably sensible for the researcher not to risk subordinating themselves too much to the power hierarchies at play. Due to financial and time constraints during my fieldwork stay in Russia, I rarely had the opportunity to take breaks and move in different social and cultural circles. However, on those occasions, I was able to regain distance and fresh perspectives on the social hierarchies.

All these factors have potential influences on the interpretation and analysis of the interview data. Longer narratives, richer stories and greater disclosure are no more an indication of the subject's character than the influence the setting may have had on extracting the narrative. Age, gender, nationality form the basic parameters for the narratives that would be generated in the interviews. In elite research confidence, experience, performance and responses to specific interview situations play significant roles for both the participant and researcher. Emotional and relational rapport with the individual, alongside fluctuating social status of the subjects, have to be carefully considered when interpreting and analysing the data. Associations and connotations tied to a specific person and interview situation (Leonid's judgments and David's reluctance versus Gregory's modest generosity), undoubtedly influences the data analysis. As part of research integrity it is critical to be aware of this. It helps in understanding how choices are made during the process of selecting transcripts to represent the interviewee's own voice. This in turn underpins the work's ethical foundation, its critical rigour and a recognition of the type of knowledge produced, in order to improve the quality of the research.

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