

# Ethical issues in doing (ethnographic) research in Russia

Dr Jeremy Morris, University of Birmingham



# Approaching 'class' in postsocialism

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informed by:

- 'new working class studies': class
  - grounded in experience of everyday life
  - spatially moving beyond the workplace
  - problematizing static view of 'identity politics' and 'world of work' (Russo and Linkon, 2005)
- Neoliberal reform and retreat of the social state in Russia produces 'precarious workers'

# Material cultures of the margins

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- ◉ DIY 'make-do and mend' decoration and functional production in the domestic setting.
- ◉ What does DIY tell us about the interplay between work and domestic space?
- ◉ How is recourse to DIY illustrative of the importance of social networks?
- ◉ How does DIY decoration contribute to social capital?



# Informants and field methods

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- Ethnographic Fieldwork looked at blue-collar employees in small former company town in Kaluga region 2009-
- Semi-structured interviews and participant observation of workers in formal and informal economy

# The 'company town' field



Extensive abandoned industrial areas alongside shiny new foreign and domestic concerns



# Working spaces



# Qualitative methods: epistemology

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- Qualitative methods are rooted in an **interpretivist** approach.
- This means qualitative sociologists seek to understand the social worlds of their respondents.
- The **ethnographic method** in particular emphasises the importance of studying social phenomena in their 'natural settings' (a principle referred to as '**naturalism**')



# Key issues for qualitative researchers:

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- ⦿ Access to the field (role of gatekeepers)
- ⦿ Generating respondents (snowballing)
- ⦿ Recording fieldnotes
- ⦿ Conducting interviews
- ⦿ Analysing data (transcribing, identifying 'codes', coding, and connecting codes to make 'themes')

**ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS MUST  
INFORM EACH STEP...**

# Other considerations of ethical relevance

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- **Research is often with vulnerable or 'hard to reach' groups**
  - **The researcher is central to the production of the research text. Therefore the 'positionality' of the researcher has to be built into its analysis.**
  - **We never really know how 'honest' or 'open' research subjects are being with us.**
  - **Ethnographic data may be valid but are not reliable i.e. similar studies in different contexts can produce very different results.**

## basic principles of ethical research practice:

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- ⊙ **Informed consent**
- ⊙ **Confidentiality**
- ⊙ **Do no harm**
- ⊙ **Respect for privacy**
- ⊙ **Avoid deceit (is covert research acceptable, if so when?)**

# Critical and 'reflexive' approaches

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- There has been a growing critique of the philosophical principles of *naturalism* and *realism* that underpinned early ethnographic approaches for their hidden positivism i.e. their concern to keep the 'object' of study in its natural setting and minimize the role of the researcher.
- In place of naturalism, a '**reflexive methodology**' was called for, rooted not in hiding the role of subjectivity in the research process but accounting for it. This is often referred to as '**positionality**'.
- This also allows the possibility of the reconnection of politics with research. Exposing the importance of issues of power between researcher and researched within the research process becomes part of a wider project of conducting research which challenges existing hierarchies of **domination** and **subordination**.

# Acknowledging the unequal power relationship

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- Being a reflexive researcher means acknowledging unequal power relations in the field and accounting for them. Because of the closer involvement of the researcher with the researched – all the standard categories of ethical research are problematized:
  - **Informed consent**
  - **Confidentiality**
  - **Do no harm**
  - **Respect for privacy**
  - **Avoid deceit**

Is informed consent/avoidance of deceit possible or even desirable in participant observation?

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### Practice based issues:

- In researching marginal and elite informants in the *same* organisation, what do we tell each group?
- If we 'telegraph' our thesis, e.g. 'informal payments in healthcare are influenced by the practitioner's judgement about the means of the patient' – won't this invalidate our findings?
- In 'grounded theory/reflexive research, how do we fully know the subject of our research in advance of the field?

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- Similar issues arise with regard to the other ‘principles’ of ethical research:
  - **Confidentiality**
  - **Do no harm\***
  - **Respect for privacy**

**\* In this case it is more a question of the difficulty in predicting the researcher’s effect on the lives of those in the fieldsite, especially if conducting ‘participant observation’**

- ① Any participant observation worth the name involves some kind of 'intervention' into the lives of informants. Inevitably this changes both the researcher and researched.