### Ethical issues in doing (ethnographic) research in Russia

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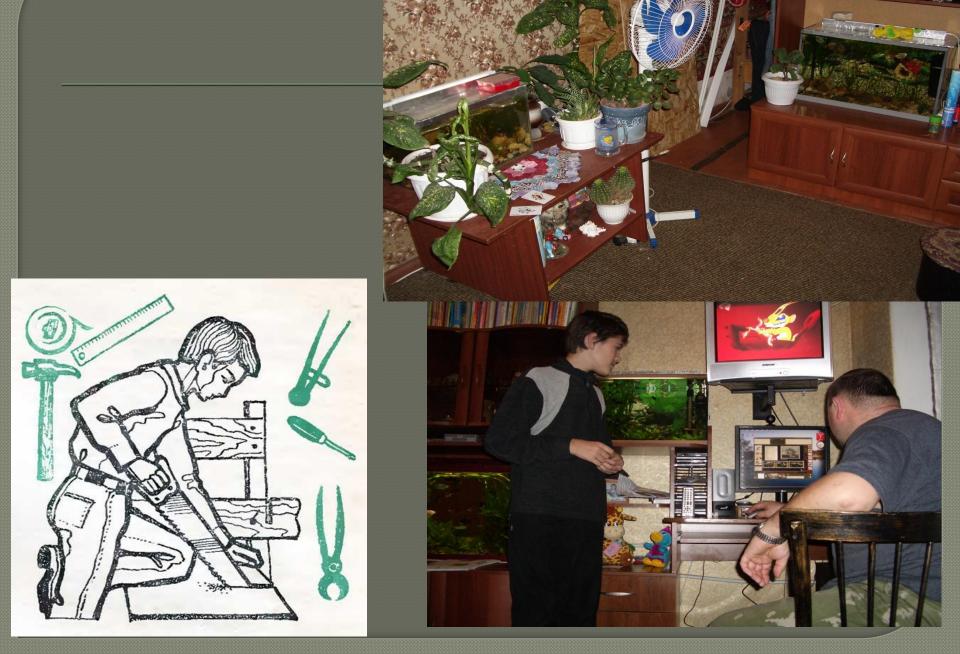
# Approaching 'class' in postsocialism

#### 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

- 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

- Ethnographic Fieldwork looked at bluecollar 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





### Qualitative methods: epistemology

- 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:

- 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 relevence

- 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:

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

### Critical and 'reflexive' approaches

- 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.

# Acknowldgding the unequal power relationship

- 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?

#### 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 practicioner'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?

- 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'

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