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5. PEDAGOGICAL PEEP SHOW

The Challenges of Ethnographic Fieldwork in a Post-Socialist Context

Peeping Toms are never praised, like novelists or bird watchers, for their keenness of observation…

(W. H. Auden)

SPEAKING THE UNSPEAKABLE

After completing my fieldwork in July of 2014, I was only able to open my field notebooks in December of that year. The emotional and psychological hardships I experienced during my year-long ethnographic research in the Russian Federation made the task of returning to my carefully kept narrative accounts a painful and dreadful chore. In my study, I traced connections and ruptures in how different groups in higher education responded to educational change. Overall, I conducted 70 interviews, nine focus groups, and about 70 observations of public events, conferences, academic presentations, and classes in three different cities. I established connections with three of my research sites during my prior research visits in 2011 and 2012, which afforded me a degree of familiarity and acceptance when I returned there to conduct my research. Despite this familiarity and seeming acceptance, I faced a number of struggles and challenges.

The struggles I faced of being treated as a source of income, a potential threat, or a messenger who has to share a positive story of Russia upon her return to the US suggest that growing commercialization of education and commodification of research present a new set of challenges for educational researchers in post-socialist contexts. Moreover, the legacies of the Soviet past, such as mistrust towards outsiders and bureaucratization of official arrangements, that remain embedded in participants' memories and in institutional structures, create barriers for ethnographic inquiry. Finally, the political tensions of reflexive competition with Russia's Superpower Other (Lemon, 2011) – the United States – cut open the old sores of suspicion, placing an ethnographer on the razor's edge of competing expectations. The excavation of the logic embedded in post-socialist contexts and the transformations they have undergone reveals barriers and impediments for inquiry that make a researcher vulnerable (Behar, 1996) during data collection.

Navigating these spaces, being subjected to the new logic that governs them, and trying to overcome the obstacles that emerged made me experience my research

as a pedagogical peep show. My transgressive involvement at the sites and in my participants' lives made me ever more aware of the price that I was paying to be privy to the local knowledge. Lest I appear unappreciative of the many acts of kindness and true humanity that were extended to me, I want to emphasize that my purpose is not to demonize individuals but rather to show how structures and social forces inherent in post-socialist sites (De Soto & Dudwick, 2000) operate in ways that can be experienced as both dehumanizing and objectifying.

In this chapter, I describe my experiences along the economic, socio-cultural, and political dimensions of the fieldwork context. The theoretical assumptions of this chapter stem from the work of Mikhail Bakhtin (1981, 1984) whose approach conceives self and culture as "a multiplicity of positions with mutual dialogical relationships" (Hermans, 2001, p. 243). Bakhtin's writing draws attention to the interplay between the economic, political, and socio-cultural forces and individuals' responses from the particular subject positions they occupy or are expected to take up by the exigencies of the context. Imbued with the multiplicity of voices and meanings inherited from the Soviet past and reinterpreted in the neoliberal present, the meanings, interpretations, and codes embedded in post-socialist contexts at times depart or are in conflict with the logic of inquiry developed in other contexts. Drawing on the principles of Bakhtin's theory of dialogism, I examine the subject positions that participants made available to me as a researcher based on my multiplex identities "with many crosscutting identifications" (Narayan, 1993, p. 676). Similarly to Narayan's description, various situations in which I found myself as an ethnographer pulled out or tucked away different strands of my multiple and complex identifications. It is with those multiplex identities that I start this exploration.

PERSONAL DIMENSION: RESEARCHER'S MULTIPLEX IDENTITIES

I was born in Russia, in what might be considered a Russian family – only my grandfather whom I never met is ethnically a Tartar. My family moved to Ukraine when I was about three years old and we visited our relatives in Russia during annual summer trips. Because of these personal connections, I expected to be considered an insider when I began my fieldwork in Russia. I also anticipated that my American education and institutional affiliation would immediately position me as an outsider. During my fieldwork, the multiple positions participants created for me based on my multiplex identities (Narayan, 1993) made me question the simplicity of this dichotomy. To bring it closer to home, I learned that having been born in that country, having a last name that had some ties with it, speaking the language that others spoke gave me very few inherent privileges. Often, I was "a person from the street," as one of the faculty members described me. In most institutions, however, this identification positioned me among the ranks of those who worked there for many years but were considered "people from the street" because they did not graduate from the same university.

The dichotomy of insider/outsider represents an individualist Western ontology in which a free subject's position vis-à-vis some boundary – be it a national, ethnic, or a group border – determines that subject's ability to learn, to connect, to comprehend, and to distance oneself from the group one studies to gain insight into their implicit or tacit knowledge (Spradley, 1979). In Russia and in some other post-socialist countries, a different set of distinctions is used to identify who can and cannot be trusted: one can either be *svoy*[1] (one of us, our own) or *chuzhoy* (alien or Other), with all the ensuing consequences. These distinctions, I believe, have less to do with a boundary as an inherent dividing category and more with a relational distance that is negotiated across interactions. This means that "origins" might not grant privileges the way an ability to find commonalities and points of connections might. It also means that the outcomes of relationship-building are less predictable than what an insider/outsider dichotomy might suggest. One might conduct research in a series of trips and even if one starts out as *chuzhoy*, one can gradually earn trust and build rapport to be called *svoy*. At the same time, just as one can gain the status of *svoy* in a matter of minutes with an apt joke, one might also lose it in split seconds of an inadvertently inserted question. The reason for this is because the answer to my position does not lie in my perceptions of who I am or where I come from (Holquist, 2002). It lies in my participants' construction of my presence.

For example, at one of the sites I was invited to review a project that some of the participants were involved in. As discussions over my reviewer role proceeded, I was told that professionals from international universities have been asked to perform this role before and were quite successful in it. Two or three days later, the same man looking at me said, "It is good that you are one of us – *svoya* – because you understand the politics of how we do business here. You know how to be careful in what you say." Whether this was a reflection on me as a person or instructions for the role I was expected to play is beyond consideration for now. The important point is that days later when the public discussion of the project occurred, I was introduced as "Helen Aydarova from Michigan State University." For the rest of the day, I was called Helen (an Americanized form of Elena) and many among those who were present hesitated to talk to me – they were not certain whether my Russian might be good enough because of the introduction I was given. The Americanized form of my name clearly positioned me as a *chuzhaya*. This was a strategic move because a reviewer from an international university added prestige to the project.

This one instance, stretching over weeks of conversations, resembled numerous other situations where I similarly moved between different positions. It also taught me an important lesson – my position is identified by the exigencies of the context and by the resources that I am perceived to bring to it. In other words, there is no a priori position that I could claim. In each and every situation, even with the same set of people, my position is negotiated anew.

Of course, being identified as *svoya* opens more doors and allows for more intimate conversations. Trying to earn the status of *svoya* required enormous work and effort on my part, but it was ultimately my participants who, depending on

the situation, chose to grant or withdraw that status from me. This bears enormous implications for ethnographic research from how projects are conceived to how they are carried out. For example, ethnographers are trained to ask clarification questions during interviews. However, when ethnographers constantly engage in negotiations of their status, a clarification question can betray their ability to be considered *svoya* in that group. After all, *svoya* knows without asking; an unexpected question can bring back the relational distance that might have taken a long time to eliminate. But such identification also does not remove many other aspects of one's identity. In my case, my Ukrainian citizenship, affiliation with an American university, and the status of a Russian emigrant had a significant bearing on my project, even in contexts where I gradually earned the status of *svoya*.

ECONOMIC DIMENSION: COMMERCIALIZATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

Mikhail Rogozin, vice-premier of the Russian Federation, in an interview about the GLONASS system in June 2014 argued that science and research need to be profitable:

> It is a feature of our national character that we produce some really unique things but are not always capable of taking advantage of our intellectual activity. This was a tendency in the Soviet times and this tendency is preserved in the Russian times… The problem that we have is that we have not learned how to make money out of the inventions and discoveries that are produced by our science. (Interview for Rossiya 24 Channel, June, 2014)

This was not the first and the last time when a Russian politician presented this argument. This position is ~~an~~ indicative of a larger transformation in Russian science and higher education that started over ten years ago but accelerated significantly in the last three years. *Educational Modernization Program for 2006–2010* (Government of the Russian Federation, 2005) set new priorities for educational institutions: apart from providing high quality instruction, they are supposed to demonstrate efficiency and profitability by introducing "new economic mechanisms that would … attract additional resources" into the educational system. One method of attracting such resources is international students – their numbers ~~are~~ supposed to grow from 0.9% to 1.6% by year 2010.

In 2012, the Ministry of Education used these new principles in a monitoring of higher education institutions. Institutions' performance was evaluated based on such indicators as students' admission scores on the Unified Exam, faculty research output, assets and facilities, graduates' job placement, profit generation, international cooperation, and the number of international students. For two years, institutions that failed to meet benchmark criteria in more than three of these categories were deemed ineffective and were closed, merged, or restructured. This was not a matter of a simple threat: statistics show that between 2012 and 2014, 20%

to 50% of Russian higher education institutions were described as ineffective and in the need of optimization, merger, or restructuring (Chernykh, 2014; Ministry of Education, 2013). Similarly to other contexts around the world, neoliberalization, commercialization, and commodification (Davies, 2005) accompanied by drastic punitive measures created a cultural shift and instilled a sense of fear (Shore & Wright, 1997) in many educational communities.

Official Channels and Associated Fees

This emphasis on economic profit and the use of international connections to generate revenue came to define my research experience in rather dramatic ways. At the first site, I was asked to follow the official channel of submitting an application for an internship at the university to the international office, signing a contract, and paying US$500 a month for "educational services" I was receiving. My research design required a three-month stay which ended up costing US$1,500 total. In anthropology of education, a three-month stay at a site is considered too short, but following the field's standard of a ten to twelve month stay would have made this research an unbearable financial burden. When I attempted to protest and discuss my situation as different – because I am not a student but a researcher – I was told that it does not matter and that if anyone wanted to do research at any of the American universities, they would have to do the same. "My daughter works for an American university and no one would let you step on campus grounds, if you did not pay," the director of the international office tried to assure me. This evoking of the Other to justify the economization of practices at home was a discursive strategy that emerged in conversations time and again.

The process of official entrance was labor-intensive: it required an internship plan, letters, permissions, and "orders" to be prepared, processed, verified, stamped, and signed. It took me three weeks to get through this process, being physically there and trying to take care of this paperwork almost every day of the week. In the end, I received the status of *aspirant-stazher* (graduate student intern) and was given a campus entry card, a student ID, and a library pass. However, it is not unheard of for researchers to wait for months before their paperwork passes through all the required channels.

At another site, three years ago I was told that the official route was too labor-intensive and if I needed any official paperwork for my visit, the department would not be able to host me. The dean at that time granted me an unofficial permission to conduct my research there. However, when I contacted her with a request for a permission to come back, I received an email from one of the department heads asking me if I could present a *napravleniye* – a letter from my university stating that I needed to intern at this university. I realized that this was an attempt to direct me towards the official channels and explained that my research is different from an internship and my university would not give me a *napravleniye*. Even though I was initially granted permission to come anyway, after two months the nudges for

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directing me towards the international office started again and ended in a slightly premature but very painful departure on my part. Conversations that led up to this made it clear that the unofficial entry negotiated over three years of a carefully maintained relationship was abandoned in pursuit of an official recognition of my presence that could generate profit and count for the university's rankings.

International Status and Othering

It was not only the finances involved that made these interactions quite painful for me. The history of Soviet Russia as an imperial center, in which students and faculty from satellite states came for training, professional development, and research created a hierarchy that was carefully maintained by the international office. Even though the process of paying made me "a customer," I was treated with contempt throughout most of my interactions with them because I was coming from another country. Waiting in line at the international office and observing interactions that were happening with other international visitors made me realize that I was no exception to the general rule; the only thing that made my case slightly different was my native Russian language proficiency. A conversation similar to the ones I generally had at the international office went like this:

"What do I have to do?" – I ask as I settle into a chair.

"Write your internship plan. Why did you write here this faculty's name? Have you spoken to her?" – Marina Vladimirovna[2] points with her finger to a line in an email I had written earlier. It had what I thought was my internship plan and I noted there that I would like to work with a particular faculty from the Pedagogy department. "No, but her research interests are closest to my research. Should I have spoken to her"?

"Don't you dare! You write a plan. I bring it to the Pedagogy department. At the Pedagogy department, they decide who is going to be your supervisor, then we create a contract. You pay and then you talk to your supervisor. What are you planning on doing?"

"See some foreign language classes." I hesitate to say more.

I am feverishly thinking, "How much can I can tell this person? Who else will know about my plans? How do I write an internship plan when I hope to protect my participants' anonymity?"

"Then you have to choose one department," she continues. "Foreign language classes are not offered by the Pedagogy department. You wrote Pedagogy department in your internship plan. There can only be one department. If you want to work with two departments, you have to have two different internships, which means you have to pay twice the amount of money. Or you discuss your plans with the supervisor at the Pedagogy department, your supervisor calls

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the Foreign Languages department, and asks them if they would let you come and observe foreign language classes. If they say no, you cannot go to see their classes. If your supervisor can arrange everything for you, you can go."

"But I can arrange everything with the Foreign Languages department myself."

"You are nobody here! No one is going to talk to you. You cannot do anything on your own here! You write you internship plan. Do you even know what you are going to do here?" (Field Notes, 2013)

My identity as a competent professional who has taught in universities in different countries, a researcher who has been conducting studies in several different contexts, and simply an independent adult who has traveled around the world was shaken up and shattered by these interactions. As time went on, I began noticing how my heart would pound and the palms of my hands would sweat any time I saw the building where the international office was located. I was the Other and the othering I was experiencing was painful.

Fees and Relationships

The conflicts over my position extended beyond my interactions with the international office. At the Foreign Languages department where I was conducting most of my research, I had regular conversations with one of the department heads – Tamara Alekseyevna. Amidst chats about department reviews that placed unrealistic demands on faculty, the topic of my presence would pop up:

"Why should we have people come and see our classes without paying for them?" says Tamara Alekseyevna, as she is sorting papers on her desk.

I am standing up against one of the bookshelves in the department office. My heart sinks, I blink.

"All these people, students from other countries, come to our department and don't pay us for being here. Why should our faculty let them come in to see their classes?"

Eventually, I give up.

"The international office has taken me through every circle of hell already. I am paying $500 a month. I simply cannot pay any more."

She looks at me. We have known each other for a year already. We have had different types of interactions. She realizes that I am getting emotional over this. She must have felt remorse that she brought this up. "Why did you even go to the international office? You should have come directly to us."

"I was told that I have to go to the international office and that I have to have a supervisor to be allowed access to the campus." I now seek pity.

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"Who is your supervisor?"

I pause but then realize there is no point in hiding, "Golubenko Lidiya Vasilyevna."

"Oh, I know her. She is from the Pedagogy department. You might be paying but she is not getting any of that money. The international office is keeping all of it. The university has one account and all of that money is going into that account. And who knows where it is going afterwards." (Field Notes, 2013)

Tamara Alekseyevna's take on fees was confirmed by the international office staff. When my contract came close to expiring the first time, I went to the international office to ask about any other options I might have.

"My contract is running out soon. After this, I can only stay for two weeks. Might there be a way not to sign a contract for the full month?"

"No, the system is set up in such a way that one month is the only increment they have because you don't pay for a month, you pay for ten hours of consultations with your supervisor."

"I am not complaining or anything, but there is no way my supervisor could meet with me for ten hours in the two months I have been here. There is no way she could give me ten hours of her time in the two weeks that I have left."

"Well, you have to understand that she is not required to meet with you. Her meeting with you is entirely from altruistic motives. The system has not been fully developed and the faculty are not getting paid anything for working with you. There is nothing we can do. But you can. You can write to her and call her and get her to meet with you."

"I can't do that. I am a human being, too. I understand that she is busy. It just sucks to be paying for a month knowing that I will not even be in the country for half of the time I paid for."

"That's how the system works." (Field Notes, 2013)

She was patient explaining it to me. Not for a second though did she seem to cringe at the strangeness of the situation. I, on the other hand, struggled to comprehend "the system" of "paying for ten hours of consultations with the faculty" but faculty not getting any of it and me being responsible for making sure that I get the "services" that I paid for.

At the department, exchanges about fees gradually grew into conversations about the unethical practices that the university administration and the international office were engaged in. It turned out that the faculty themselves experienced a significant amount of humiliation and pandering from the international office; quite a few international partnerships were lost because the international office was demanding that foreign universities pay for their association with this Russian university.

The faculty members were penalized most for this because the loss of international partnerships reflected poorly on department's rankings and yet they felt powerless to do anything about it. Finding this common ground was a relief – it was very important for me to move beyond "I versus them" thinking that I began to develop.

But the conversations about payments which happened on more than one occasion and with different people ingrained in me a sense of being a client at a peep show: I pay an entrance fee, I watch a show. In this case, it was a pedagogical show of lectures, seminars, and faculty-student interactions. Occasionally, my requests for interviews with people working for other institutions produced a similar response – "If you want to talk to me, you should pay me because my time costs money." It was usually said in hints and roundabout explanations but the message was the same. If I asked for statistics, syllabi, or any reports, I was told that I could not obtain any of those or could get them for a fee because of the "intellectual rights" or "technical expertise necessary to retrieve the data." Demands that I should be paying for any contact or any instance of revealing something carried an unsettling and transgressive quality. My presence at the sites and in those interactions felt polluting. Paying for ethnographic data of observations, interviews or artifacts[3] created ethical conundrums for me because the rules of ethnographic research state that a researcher should avoid entering into any fiscal relationships with the hosts (Fetterman, 2010).

But eschewing fees had its own price. At the first site, I paid only for two months but needed to stay longer. My campus entry card stopped working the day after my contract expired; I had to get into campus by showing my passport. The fear set in. I could feel it travel through my body as I approached the gate of the university and fumbled through my purse for my passport. Thoughts about being caught "trespassing" or being called out by someone at the department for being there without having paid were distressing. A few people said to me that at a large university no one could ever track me down, but I felt like a bug crawling around waiting to be squashed under someone's shoe. The bug metaphor matched my physical state, but I was not the one who came up with it – I picked it up at a department office. During a celebration of a faculty's promotion, Tamara Alekseyevna picked up the diploma stating the person's new position and said, "Watch out. You don't want to spill wine on this one. Without a paper, you are a bug" (*Bez bumazhki, ty – buka*shka). The latter statement was a paraphrase of a common saying, "*Bez bumazhki, ty – kakashka*" (without a[n official] paper, you are [just] a turd). While during that moment, this was a celebratory statement – "you are someone because you have this piece of paper" – hearing it made me think of my miserable state without the paper(s) that would legitimize my presence.

I was concerned for myself and for those I spoke to, whose classes I observed, and with whom I began to develop relationships. It might have been an irrational fear induced by masterful story-telling about why an official connection was necessary in the first place. But I was also painfully aware of how intently the administrator's eyes rested on me any time she saw me in the hall speaking to a faculty or a group of students. One of the faculty blushed when she noticed that look. I was too afraid

to risk it, so I paid for another month even though I could only stay for two weeks. My own physical state improved significantly when I got my official status back.

Fees, Attachments, and Connections

Unofficial presence removes the headache of bureaucratic hassles and concerns about fees for data; yet it also places certain limits on what one can do. With an unofficial arrangement there is nothing that "attaches" or "connects" one to the site. The most basic manifestation of this is the absence of a pass to enter campus. But on a deeper level "attachment" represents access to networks and resources. As I was pondering over these dilemmas with a Russian researcher in another city, she made a comment,

> You need to be *prikreplena* – attached – to do research anywhere. In Russia, in America. It is all the same. You want to do research at the university? You want to have a desk? You want to be able to come in? You want to have access to *svyazi* (connections)? You have to pay and be 'attached'! (Field Notes, 2014)

She felt that it was unfair of me to expect to do research any other way, even though she never had to pay for her own research projects at other institutions. This normalization and naturalization of fee discourses left me quite unsettled. To my knowledge the university where she worked did not engage in similar practices, but she still subscribed to the "common sense" of fees for foreign researchers: they – the foreign researchers – are different from us, they are not *svoi*, and therefore should go through different channels when they do research in Russia.

Despite the unsettling nature of our conversation, this researcher made an important point: official "attachment" allows one to access the networks or connections that members of this site are privy to. At the site where I was officially "attached" as *aspirant-stazher*, I was given a well-connected supervisor who arranged interviews for me with people important for my research. Those were the easiest interviews to schedule and without them my study would have been greatly impoverished. Even if I contacted people for an interview on my own, most wanted to know what institution I was "attached" to in the country and many felt more comfortable speaking to me when this "attachment" was clearly established. While it alleviated some of my participants' concerns, the price I was paying for that "attachment" made me question the value of what I was doing time and again.

SOCIO-CULTURAL DIMENSION: FEARS AND KNOWLEDGE BOUNDARIES

Re-living Memories of the Past

The fears, potentially irrational and unsubstantiated, that emerged when I lost my official connection to the campus, made me aware of the fears that many of my participants lived with. "Will I be fired after this?" was a common question that

I was asked when I approached faculty with a request for an interview. "Will I lose my job after this?" I was asked several times. "There was one professor who told the President about all the problems at the university when the President was visiting. He was fired right after the President left. Where is he now? No one knows," shared an elderly faculty member when I asked her if I could interview her. At first, I was befuddled. I promised anonymity, I described all the precautions that I was taking, and I was still getting many refusals. I realized that participants have a right to refuse to participate in research (Tuck & Yang, 2014), but I wondered why this was happening with such regularity.

Several months later, I got my answer during a roundtable session at a Russian conference. The chair noticed several recorders placed on the desk in front of him and exclaimed, "We live in a country where the speed of snitching is faster than the speed of sound (Rus: *Skorost' stuka prevyshaet skorost' zvuka*), but that's fine, I can deal with those." This reference to a joke draws out an important aspect of post-socialist collective memory: what you say, even if it is to someone you know, can have tremendous negative consequences. Viewing interviews from this perspective reveals possibilities of multiple threats. This raised a question of how I as an ethnographer can go about collecting interview or conversational data at research sites laden with memories of dismissals, arrests, and prison sentences that occurred when friends, relatives, neighbors, and co-workers engaged in reporting on each other. People were cautious about divulging any information because in some institutions the system of reporting on each other was still maintained, even if the consequences became less drastic.

I did not experience the same number of refusals at all sites, but I learned that I was not excluded from this rule: I had to be careful with what I divulged as well. I once had a friendly conversation with a young faculty member who I knew worked for the university only on Mondays. It is common for faculty members to have multiple jobs and I usually asked them what else they did for a living. "Oh, I work for the defense industry," she responded cheerfully. Two weeks later I learned that this phrase is a euphemism for the Federal Security Bureau, which made me go through my recollections of that conversation several times before I could start sleeping peacefully again at night.

Constructing and Crossing Knowledge Boundaries

Even if participants agreed to do an interview, fear and caution were still occasionally present. It was a relatively common occurrence when participants openly delineated between public knowledge (or publicly available information) that they felt safe sharing and the private knowledge that they felt they were responsible for protecting. For example, one interviewee spent twenty minutes asking me what I already knew about the policy that I was researching and then said, "I would not want to… I probably should not be telling you anything about the things that happened internally…" By minute twenty-five I despaired of learning anything new through

this exchange and was just trying to keep the conversation going. The conversation ended up richer than I expected, but most of what I learned came from pointers to where I should look for more information rather than the participant revealing the answers to the questions that I was asking. The delineation between external/public knowledge and internal/private information was a carefully constructed boundary and very few questions I asked helped me cross over it.

What was ironic about my research was that participants reluctant to do an interview or having given me "safe" answers during interviews were willing to share struggles, perspectives, and challenges during informal chats (sometimes right after the interview). One person hesitated about an interview and minutes later started telling me her perspective on the changes in educational policies, higher education reforms, and cultural transformations that were affecting her life. Then she said, "See, I already told you everything." The challenge of such encounters was that I was not always prepared "to hear" what I was being told and to remember that this was the moment when I was invited to be a witness to the private insider knowledge. Eventually, however, I stopped prioritizing official interviews and started seeking out opportunities for casual chats when faculty and students opened up about their struggles and their life experiences. Conversations over tea or over other tasks in department offices did not carry the same weight as an official interview might and removed the fear of performance that kept many people from engaging with me. This way I got a glimpse into private stories, inner workings of department and university politics, and participants' perspectives on the injustices they were experiencing. This all raised ethical questions – were the participants sharing because they were aware of my researcher role or did this happen because I was no longer perceived as one in that moment?

Moreover, questions arose for me about how to approach these chats. In a traditional interview (as opposed to postmodern or active interview; Gubrium & Holstein, 2003), it is the researcher who asks questions that are determined by the research questions that guide his/her inquiry (Spradley, 1979). In informal chats, however, the researcher's role is assigned by the participants – be it a listener, a sounding board, a shoulder to cry on, a witness, a scapegoat, a messenger, a spy, an enemy, or a friend. Being given a role in a conversation assigns a position from which to read what one is being told, entangling one in a web of relationships and power divisions. How does one make sense of such stories then? How does one approach the truth value of the stories that emerge in such conversations, when they refer to the taboo knowledge of corruption, illicit practices, bribes, and money-laundering that institutions are mired in or when they refer to descriptions of accomplishments, normality, consensus, and faithful implementation of Ministry of Education's directives? When one is no longer in control, what research question is one answering? What purpose of inquiry is one pursuing? How does one put together a story when the tapestry of what is discussed in these conversations becomes uncontrollably personal and intimate, implicating the speakers and the listeners in equal measure?

Ultimately, the biggest lesson I learned from my fieldwork was that I was given most information when I asked no questions. In situations when I explained my

research project, what I was interested in, and (if asked) why, participants tended to open up and share how they felt about the problem that I was trying to understand. Even in situations when participants wanted to help me with my research project, answering my questions put them in situations where they felt threatened and concerned for their safety, their jobs, and well-being in the department. It took time to learn to simply listen. This, however, did not remove my feeling of being a peeping Tom – staring into private struggles, personal pains, and dirty little secrets – and wondering where social science research ends and transgression begins.

POLITICAL DIMENSION: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND THE POLITICS OF SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH

My association with the US was continually scrutinized. More times than I am willing to count I was called a spy. Before, during, or after interviews most of the time I was asked: "Why would an American university be interested in Russian educational reforms? Who sent you here? Why did they send you here?" In the spring of 2014, as the relationship between the two countries began to deteriorate, conversations became more heated: "Why are your people doing this to us? What will happen next?" Once I was invited for a class discussion where I had to give an account of the American foreign policy, especially in respect to Russia and Ukraine. Fortunately, the meeting never took place.

There were additional dimensions of my complex relationship with the US. First, I was an emigrant. For older generations, I was a traitor who left Russia. I had to have a response ready about whether I was planning to return and when I might do that. For younger generations, I was their dream come true. I had to have a response ready for how they could follow suit. Neither group was ever satisfied with my answers. These exchanges, however, had an effect only on personal interactions. Provided I had patience for being called a traitor, I could still engage in fruitful conversations.

The second dimension had less to do with me personally and more with how social science research is constructed in Russia's post-socialist space. During the Soviet times, with some variation, science derived its value in its ability to serve the society or those in power. Communist party decrees often determined directions for research projects and judged whether research undertakings fit the ideology of the socialist society. In social science, reports on the desired state of affairs eventually accrued higher value than critical explorations of social conditions. Observing this situation in education, Kohli (1992) noted "it often was difficult for me to ascertain what was fact and what was fiction about the reputation of the research being conducted" (p. 35). Even if a shift began to occur after the collapse of the Soviet Union, neoliberalization of Russian education and science facilitated a reverse to previous approaches. With the roll-out of audit culture, research instruments became employed to scrutinize higher education institutions' performance and practices. This placed institutions and individuals in a conundrum: to create safe representations of the desired state of affairs or to engage in "real" research.

An exchange that captured these positions and the polarization between them occurred during a university scientific council in central Russia. An administrator presented to university administrators and faculty members results of a student survey. On the survey, students were asked questions about their attendance, their field placements, and research work that they carried out as a part of their curriculum. Afterwards during the discussion session, a faculty member came up to the podium and addressed her colleagues:

> If this survey is going to be carried out again, we should prepare our students for answering questions on this survey. I think preparing students for participating in this survey is really a part of the upbringing work. It is no less important than the work that we did when we were told that someone who is checking our work (Rus. *proveryayushchiy*) might come to talk to our students. We prepared them then… We should try to increase students' loyalty to the university through this survey because in 70% of the cases this time they just gave whatever answers came to their minds.

Seconds later, the next speaker responded this way:

> I absolutely disagree with the previous speaker. If we come into the classroom and tell students what answers they should give to questions 1, 2, and 5, increasing their loyalty to us this way, this will no longer be a sociological survey and the results will not be trustworthy. We should use the results to figure out what we can do better, not tell students how to be more loyal to the university. (Video Transcript, May 2014)

This exchange, more than anything else, underscores the complexity of responses and the ambivalence towards how research should be approached and engaged with. One can tamper with responses and get what one needs, such as the ministry's favorable evaluation of the university. Or one can say that science requires a pursuit of answers with no meddling involved. But even then the question remains about what to do with the results. Science for science's sake is rarely done in the field of education. Instead, research findings are expected to improve practices, institutions, and learning outcomes.

These complexities and ambivalences have a significant impact on how a social scientist is perceived in a post-socialist context. It can be someone who should be given an account of the desired state of affairs or it might be someone who should be told how things "really" are. In my case, the construction of social science research intersected with Russia's competition with the US. While some of my interlocutors just wanted to describe their position, others wanted to convince me of the superiority of traditional national educational approaches and Russian educational accomplishments. For example, in a conversation with a group of administrators, when I asked them about a policy under debate that I focused on in my research, the man who presided over our meeting responded:

You don't need to look at some silly documents that probably will never take effect. No one needs that. You should go and tell Americans about the good things that we do in education in Russia. That will be interesting for them. (Field Notes, 2014)

This interaction helped me see that for some people the role of my research was to construct a desired state – a state devoid of conflict and contestations – to present to Americans a positive image of Russian educational institutions. For several others that I have met, my responsibility was to paint a picture that would show that Russia was not losing any ground in its educational race against the United States. I was positioned as a messenger and the contents of the message were scripted for me.

For other people that I met, my responsibility was different – my research had to do good for Russia. In a social setting, I once was asked about what I was doing. In halting speech, I explained that I was researching educational transformations:

The person exclaimed, "Oh! So you come here with an outstretched arm!"

I was startled. I did not know what to say. Finally, curiosity won. "What do you mean?"

"Well, what are you going to do with your research? Aren't you going to offer solutions and tell our officials what they have to do differently? There are so many problems in our education now."

I never thought of my research as telling anyone what to do. I tried to explain that. "My goal is to describe and analyze the transformations that are occurring and how they might connect with the changes on the global stage."

It was her turn to look incredulously at me. "Oh," she finally said. "There are a lot of problems that need to be solved, you know." (Field Notes, 2014)

This brief conversation helped me realize why several participants had previously told me "We don't need Americans telling us what to do." I am not an American and I had no such intentions, but the construction of research that has emerged through the (post)Soviet times and the reflexive competition with the Superpower Other (Lemon, 2011) positioned me as a problem-solver sent by the US. For many people, my research was supposed to solve social problems and represented a form of assistance from the United States to Russia. While some thought that help from me should be welcomed, others thought it preposterous. The latter preferred that I would remain an observer – a peeping Tom that does not meddle in the affairs – while the former indicated that this would be a betrayal of their trust and good will. My attempts to distance myself from either of these constructions rarely met any degree of success.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I analyzed research dimensions and my subject positions when I was conducting an ethnographic study of Russian educational modernization reform. In my case, the economization of education, the fears embedded in the context, the distrust for the US, and particular constructions of social science research created ruptures in how I was positioned and how my research was perceived. Through the pain and the doubts of this research, I wrestled with the question of who I have become. I struggled with the thought of having engaged in a peep show in classroom observations, interviews, and informal chats. While I learned much through my study, the positions I was assigned often troubled me deeply. The movement between the positions of a student, intern, spy, friend, a messenger to the West, and a researcher took a significant emotional and psychological toll on me. Recognizing that my experiences might be idiosyncratic, I would argue that anyone planning to undertake research in a post-socialist context should conduct a context analysis along the four dimensions – economic, socio-cultural, political, and personal – to examine what obstacles, challenges, and struggles might arise.

But to end with a description of my personal struggles would be a betrayal to those who assisted me and supported me despite potential dangers. I want to close this chapter with an invitation to consider how our research might be brought back to our research contexts. What would it take for ministry officials to hear the voices of those who struggle the most right now? And what responsibility might we have to communicate our findings or even our research dilemmas to audiences outside the Western academia in ways that might improve our participants' working conditions? In raising these questions, I do not propose that researchers create a ten-step reform plan to share with the policy-makers in the research context. Rather, recognizing the fears and the silencing that I observed during my ethnographic research, I wonder if there are ways that the privileged positions outside the world of post-socialism can be used to vocalize the struggles and shed light on the injustices of educational reforms. Taking seriously the hope of those participants who looked at me as a subject of potential change, I wonder if there are more *becomings* for all of us in the days and years to come.

NOTES

1   Yurchak (2005, 2014) explores the notion of *svoi* (plural of *svoy*) as "a particular kind of sociality that emerged in the late Soviet period as a shared space of 'normal life' not in opposition to the state, but within it, thanks to it and despite it" (2014, p. 296). While this type of sociality was common during the socialist period, it is less common in the current historical moment because one's relationship with the authoritative discourse of state ideology can be more ambivalent and multiple. For this reason, I draw on this notion to describe the negotiation of distances among individuals, rather than a sociality that positions one in particular relationships vis-à-vis the state.

2   All names are pseudonyms. Details of my research are altered to protect participants' anonymity.

3   The practice of data fees exists in large-scale database research where fees for access to data can be justified by the labor that was put in the data collection, collation, cleaning, and database maintenance. In Russia, this practice is also beginning to become widespread – quantitative data that was accessible to educational researchers even the year before my fieldwork has also become subject to purchasing and selling rules.

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