

### **Some Reflections on Fieldwork in Russia** **Holly Porteous (University of Glasgow)**

Before I began the part of my doctoral fieldwork interviewing women about their attitudes to beauty, femininity and women's magazines, I have to admit I had a rather fixed picture in my mind of how interviews 'should' be conducted. I'd imagined the researcher sitting directly across from the participant at a small table in a quiet, plain room; dictaphone at the ready, questions prepared, pencil in hand ready for any important notes. The respondent ('Masha, 27, manager'), neatly defined by their pseudonym, age and sometimes occupation, would politely sign the consent form; after answering each question clearly, the data collection would end with the switching off of the tape recorder. Somehow the neatly presented quotations I'd seen on the pages of academic books and articles gave the process an air of formality – almost solemnity – that I found it difficult to imagine emulating when the time came to travel to St Petersburg and Nizhny Novgorod for my own fieldwork.

However, beginning to interview participants I was quickly disabused of the notion that research was always such a clean, linear process. Of course, sometimes interviews could be almost as straightforward as I'd imagined, but after a few meetings I began to realise that my role was not to create a sterile environment where I was the passive transcriber of women's experiences, but to fit in around their busy lifestyles, to meet at the most convenient (if not always the quietest) places, and to alter the interview process to fit their different lifestyles and approaches to being research participants.

It turned out that my most interesting findings often presented themselves in participant-led situations where I initially felt I'd somehow 'broken the rules' as a researcher: interviewing two or three women at the same time, conducting an interview over dinner or in a crowded, noisy café, or combining the interview into an English language practice session for participants. Even outside of interviews, there were lots of opportunities to enrich my understanding of my research topic: completely by chance, in Nizhny Novgorod I ended up living with a beauty therapist who specialised in many of the same beauty treatments I'd been discussing with respondents. Aside from finding about the beauty industry from a different perspective, spending my last few weeks in Russia sleeping in her treatment room (complete with massage table, vials of Botox and treatment posters) somehow seemed an apt conclusion to my time in the field!

As a relatively inexperienced researcher, I discovered that doctoral fieldwork also meant learning first hand that ethnographic research can be a 'messy' process, something which is not always obvious when writing a research plan or reading finished research on the page. Having different types of encounters, far from 'breaking the rules', could contribute to the research process. Obviously, using different approaches requires a degree of reflexive thought about the research process and about the role of the researcher in that process. However, it also meant that in the end I was hopefully able to gain a richer understanding; not only of how gender works as a social category in contemporary Russia, but on the many different kinds of encounters that can go into making up 'fieldwork'.