

Doing Gender in Research: Reflection on Experience in Field

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The article shows how doing gender (mutual gender categorization of interacting people and construction of their behavior according to this categorization) can influence research method and research hypothesis. Communication between respondent and researcher during semi-structural interview is in focus. Key Words: Reflexivity, Doing Gender, and Interview

The idea that all stages of social research are gendered has been discussed extensively in the literature (Callaway, 1992; Reinhartz, 1992; Warren, 1988). A great number of texts are devoted to reflection how gender influence researcher/respondent interaction (Finch, 1984; Gill & Maclean, 2002; Giovannini, 1986; Gurrey, 1985; Hunt, 1984; Krieger 1986; Scott, 1984; Warren, 1988). In this article I present reflection on discrepancies between my interviews with men and women conducted within the research project “The effectiveness of programmes for the integration of forced migrants: gender perspective”¹. I argue that reason for observed differences between interviews is an unavoidable process of doing gender, in other words, mutual gender categorization of interacting people and construction of their behavior according to this categorization.

In the first part of the article, I make a short introduction of the research, on which my present reflective study is based. In the second part, I show how the researcher does gender in interacting with the respondents and how this process influences research method. In the third part, I illustrate how doing gender influence research hypothesis.

Research and Method

The reflective study presented in this article stemmed from the research project about influence of gender order² on integration of forced migrants³ from the former republics of the USSR into Russian society. The main hypothesis of this research was that different gender groups of one and the same category of migrants have different experience of adaptation due to gender order of receiving society and their perception/understanding of this gender order. To gain access to experience of migrants and their reflection on it I decided to interview migrants about their life in Russia. Among

¹ This research was conducted in Novosibirsk region (one of the Russian regions situated in Western Siberia) during 2001-2003. It was supported by INTAS (fellowship reference N YSF 01/1-26).

² The ‘gender order’ can be defined as ‘a historically constructed pattern of power relations, between men and women and definitions of femininity and masculinity’ (Connell, 1987, pp. 98-99).

³ According to Russian legislation status of forced migrant is granted to Russian citizen who has left the place of his/her residence as a result of violence or other form of persecution towards him/herself or members of his/her family, or under real threat of being subjected to such on the grounds of nationality, race, religion, language, political views, affiliation to a particular social group.

all possible forms of interview I choose semi-structural interview, because I did not want to force my respondents to admit my presumptions, which stemmed from my social experience (quite different from their experience). This form of interview allowed me not only to clarify the themes and ideas that I brought to my respondents but also to obtain and develop new themes and ideas during our communication.

During research I used three ways to get access to my potential respondents. The first way was through snowballing from my friends and other migrants. The second way was building initial contacts with respondents through non-government organizations. The third way was building these contacts through migration service.

Interviews for the research were conducted in urban and rural area of Novosibirsk region. I started the research by dividing my potential respondents into two gender groups (women and men). However, during communication with migrants within the first stage of fieldwork (summer 2001) I understood that I needed further development of sampling criteria, because women and men of different ages revealed to me different experiences of adaptation in Russia.

After each interview I tape-recorded description of its flow and immediate reflection (my feelings and thoughts about interview and communication development). These records were revised during transcription of the interview. At that stage I developed my initial ideas and indicated previously ignored moments of communication to think about.

Interviewing Men and Interviewing Women: Reasons for Differences

In conducting semi-structured interviews with forced-migrants I realized that my interviews with men differed from interviews with women in: (1) length (interviews with women lasted longer than those with men), (2) format of communication (interviews with women were taken up by monologues and interviews with men were usually question/answer dialogues), and (3) reflectivity (interview with women were much more reflective than those with men). According to the literature, other female researchers have also experienced discrepancies between interviews with men and women in their research practices (Finch, 1984; Flynn, 2001; Hertz, 1986).

According to Finch (1984) the reasons why women can be more enthusiastic about talking to a woman researcher lie in the social experience of women and their expectation that the researcher, as a woman, shares with them this social experience and can, therefore, easily understand them.

Women are more used than men to accepting intrusions through questioning into the more private parts of their lives... Through their experience of motherhood they are subject to questioning from doctors, midwives and health visitors; and also from people such as housing visitors... who deal principally with women as the people with imputed responsibility for home and household. As subjects of research, therefore, women are less likely than men to find questions about their life unusual and therefore inadmissible. (p. 74)

She continues. “[W]hen the interviewer is also a woman both parties share a subordinate structural position by virtue of their gender. This creates the possibility that a particular kind of identification will develop” (p. 76).

Following logic of explanation expressed by Janet Finch (1984) men are more reluctant to talk with a woman interviewer, because, firstly, they are less used to being questioned, and, secondly, they do not expect the researcher to understand them because she (the researcher) does not have the same social experience as they have.

This explanation of discrepancies between interviews with men and women is focused on respondent. Hypotheses are made about influence of her/his social experience and his/her perception of interviewer on interview. However, social experience of an interviewer and his/her perception of respondent influences interviews, too. I argue that researcher activity in doing gender (categorization of her/his respondent as a “man” or “woman” and construction of her/his behavior taking into consideration this categorization) is one of the factors that causes the disparity between the interviews that she/he conducts. According to West and Zimmerman (1987, p. 126),

Doing gender involves a complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional, and micropolitical activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine ‘natures’... It is a situated doing, carried out in the virtual or real presence of others who are presumed to be oriented to its production.

In other words doing gender is categorization in process. I want also to stress that it is mutual categorization. According to this perspective gender is not something that is ascribed to a person, but it is something that is “negotiated” during interactions between researcher and respondents (Hunt, 1984; Krieger, 1986; Turnbull, 1986).

My interactions in the field were usually conducted in the following way. I introduced myself to all my respondents as a researcher. Thus I provided them with an initial classification “box”: *researcher (professional)-female-young* or at least *female-young-researcher (professional)*, instead of the less detailed box *female-young*. By this, I narrowed the possible patterns of communication. My introduction impelled my respondents to construct further communication along the format of a research interview, question-answer process, where the interviewer asked and the interviewee answered. In this format of communication I possessed a more powerful position than my respondents. However, from time to time the question/answer format was transformed during my communication with respondents into a much more friendly and equal form of communication. This changing of format usually led to long and reflective interviews.

Abovementioned breaking of question/answer format often took place in interviews with women, but there were a few cases where this breaking had happened during interviews with men. This asymmetry took place because I constructed my behavior with women and men following my presumptions about normative patterns of communication based on previous social experience.

I allowed the subversion of the question/answer format with female respondents, because I expected that informality in communication would lead to equality between us (Oakley, 1981). Although there were interviews with women that were developed along the question/answer format, because my respondents themselves did not want to go

beyond this format in conversation with me, I still felt free to introduce myself as a young woman to them (not only as a researcher) and to show my interest in their stories. As a consequence, this helped me to reach a situation of confidence with them and to receive longer and more informative responses.

Taking the role of active listener (I expressed emotion and reacted to the story verbally as well as through body language), I encouraged women to talk. Some of my female respondents “forgot” that my prime identification was as a *researcher* (professional) and began to treat me first of all as *female-young*. Some women began to construct a mother-daughter dialogue; others began to see me as a friend. Some of them looked for moral support from my side; others wanted my advice, etc. One of the more distinct characteristics of communication format transformation was the shift in the form of “you” from the more to the less formal form (from “Vy” to “ty” (*in Russian*)).

I did not adopt the same strategy of subversion question/answer format during interviews with men⁴ because I thought that they would possibly interpret my behavior as flirting. I perceived that in this case I would be in a less powerful position than my respondents. Because of anxiety of losing control over the conversation I was very careful in the expression of the active listener position with them even if I was not satisfied with the amount of information provided.

Although in the interviews with women I allowed myself to be beyond classification “box”: *researcher (professional)–female-young* and developed other identities (friend, daughter, consultant, and etc.) I did my best to keep my identification as a researcher primary in the majority of interviews with male respondents. I think that these efforts could be one of the reasons for the differences between dynamics of interviews with men and women. Tending to see me first and foremost as a researcher, men acted in a way that they thought was appropriate for communication with such people according to the stereotype, “sociologist is a person with rigorous list of questions.” They waited for my questions and then they provided short answers.

Research Hypothesis and Doing Gender.

Doing gender could influence not only the dynamic and format of communication with respondents, but also research hypothesis.

Men who were around the age of 60 (the age of retirement) revealed in interviews that they experienced difficulties in supporting their concepts of what it means to be “a man”, while men from other age groups were silent about such kind of troubles. The main challenge to men around age of retirement was their inability to find a job.

Certainly it’s unbearable to realize that nobody needs you. As it happened I worked more than 30 years, obtained experience and skills, and nobody needs me now. Nobody needs my experience and knowledge... I am able

⁴ Among my interviews conducted with male respondents, there were two groups of cases where subversion of the questions/answer format took place. The first group consisted of two interviews with relatively old men. Our age being the crucial factor in negotiating how to view each other gave us opportunity to construct so call “a father-daughter relationship”. The second group consisted of one interview with a 38-year-old man who viewed our meeting as a date. In this case my identity was constructed as ‘young-woman-single-possibly future girlfriend’.

to work with... to be head of two or three thousand people... I understand that it all gone, that nobody will employ me as a director. I did not hope that I would work here as a director of any enterprise and I tried to apply to position of foreman, but nobody wanted me even to that position... As soon as I indicate my age, people loose interest...

The importance of having a job to support the concept of masculinity is well discussed in literature (Ashwin & Lytkina, 2001; Kukhterin, 1999; Rubin, 1994). Interviews with men around the age of 60 were stories of reformulation of their self-perception and perception of world around them.

I asked myself if crisis of masculinity was a characteristic feature of migrants who are around age of retirement. The positive answer to this question would correspond with my main research hypothesis by taking in focus the age dimension of gender order. I could presuppose that men from other age groups did not report crisis of masculinity because they did not have it, as far as all of them had their jobs. Even if they were not happy with their present positions they still had perspectives at labor market because of their age. However, I needed to give negative answer to the abovementioned question, as far as some women in their interviews revealed that their partners, who were in around the age 30 and 40, suffered crisis of masculinity stemmed from their inability to get a job that corresponded to their professional background/qualification.

I think he held a position that was not as high as he wanted. That's the reason why he had problems. Our circumstances made him took different work. Once he even worked as a cattle-farm worker. Maybe it disgraced him.

Interviews with women showed that decrease of professional status could affect vision of man's status in the family (especially if he had been always a bread winner and now his wife appeared to be more successful at labor market) and change relationships in it.

My husband was a train driver there. He couldn't find a job in his line of work and ended up as a mechanic here. His wage is now lower and we can't think of him as the breadwinner anymore. If I didn't have my profession, my job, life might be much harder. He feels this fact keenly, because.... He has been always the breadwinner, but now...Relations have changed, because my husband loses his moral certainty... I try to show that he is the head of the family, but he understands everything ...

I started question myself why men (except those from discussed age group) kept silence about their troubles. Why did they choose to represent themselves as people without any problems? Certainly, it could be that they were silent about challenges for their concepts of masculinity because they did not experience such challenges. However, it may be that the reason why the theme of crisis was absent in "male" interviews was in researcher- respondent interaction.

First of all, crisis of masculinity belongs to sensitive topics, which could arise in the conversation between people who felt a high level of confidence to each other. I could not reach this level in most interviews with men, because my work on doing gender was affected by presuppositions, based on previous social experience, about possible interplay of power relations with men and women.

The reason also could be in men's wishes to present a particular image to the *other* (to me). This *other* was a member of local society, this *other* was a researcher, and this *other* was a young woman. No story about a crisis could be told to this *other*. There was only a story of success or at least a story of stability.

A clear example of such "story for other" was presented in an interview with a 38-year-old man who perceived our meeting as an opportunity to strike up an acquaintance with a woman. In view of this prime intention, he was very talkative about himself. I only regulated our conversation so that he could not avoid answering my specific questions, which revealed the precise day-to-day conditions of his life. He had a diploma of higher education, but now he was a workman at a factory. His wage was not high for the area where he lived. There was a possibility that it would become even lower. He lived with his mother and grandmother in a little two-room house. There were some facts that he related with anguish.

I don't have my own car now. You see, for a long time I didn't even know the price of bus tickets. Now I feel, as though I am not a man. When your own car is near your house, it is a completely different feeling. I haven't had a car now for almost two years.

At the same time he related his experience as a success story. He started in Russia (Novosibirsk) with nothing and now he worked at a good place. He earned enough money to live and planned to earn more. His living conditions were poor, but he would do something about it and the situation would change. He would solve all of his problems.

I know that it will be my time sometime. Everything will be all right. I live now with my mother and grandmother, but I will have my own place to live. I don't have a car, but I will have one.

This respondent presented himself as a man who could solve all of his problems, as someone who was self-confident, responsible for his actions, and who could be a good breadwinner, despite the fact that his circumstances belied his optimistic mood and words.

Why then are men around the age of 60 and older more open to the *other*? The answer to this question could be also found in process of researcher-respondent mutual categorization.

Although I preferred to keep *researcher* as the prime identification and remained in question/answer format when I interviewed male respondents, I allowed myself to introduce informality into communication with men around the age of 60 and older. I did this because my expectations about gender intertwined with my expectations about age. I did not expect men of this age to perceive my informality as flirting. I reacted to them as people with a great experience of life. They are elders. I think that they mainly

accepted me as a young person. I showed interest in their life stories; I asked for their evaluations and advice and they told their life stories as lessons for a young person.

When people are young their perception of the world around them is light.
For me it is not so. You'll remember my words when you are my age.
You'll understand that I am right.

It may be because of this mutual categorization these men were frank with me and told me about their difficulties to support their concepts of "a man". They did not present themselves to the young woman or researcher. They presented themselves to a young person who was interested in their life experience. However, it was only my hypothesis why this category of men revealed crisis of masculinity to me, while the rest of my male respondents did not do this.

Thus doing gender influences research hypothesis. Firstly, influencing on dynamic and format of communication, this process could determine if this or that hypothesis (idea) appears or not during interviews. Secondly, perception of interviewer as *other* could influence appearance and testing hypotheses even in a situation of good rapport. Gendering each other changes the self-representation of people and as a result a female interviewer may receive different stories from her respondents than a male interviewer. Unfortunately, there was no opportunity to test this in the framework of my actual research.

Conclusion

Doing gender influences research method (dynamic and format of interview) and research hypothesis (its appearance and testing). Reflection on doing gender could prevent construction of gaps between/among genders in literature. It is important to keep in mind that the researcher is involved in doing gender and moreover cannot avoid this process. Thus reflecting on difference in interviews, it is worth paying attention not only to the respondent, but also to yourself (table 1). It is difficult to trace your own work on doing gender as far as activities constituting this process are often social practices which you never question (some of them you do not notice as you do not notice air, some of them you notice but you take them for granted). I am quite skeptical about possibilities to trace these practices during communication. As for me, I was able to do this only after the interview, thinking about communication which was already gone and working with text which I received through this communication. However, it is better than nothing. At least at the stage of analysis there is an opportunity to decrease possible biases in information caused by non-reflective gendering during interview.

Table 1

Table of respondents

N	Gender	Age
21	female	42
32	male	38
40	female	45
51	male	57

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