

Chapter 6

‘Visiting Home’ as a Method and Experience: Researching Russian Migrants’ Homes in the UK



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6.1 Introduction

The increased interest in the subject of home in recent years has resulted in a number of studies that approach it not only as the main site of data collection to explore issues related to identity, personal life, family and, more recently, migration, but also as the key subject of research. As a result, there has been growing acknowledgement of the significance of the home and of its interconnection with various aspects of personal, social and political life. This has become even more acute recently in light of the COVID-19 pandemic (Boccagni, 2020; Brickell, 2020).

To contribute to these discussions, in this chapter I revisit a study which examined the interrelation between home, migration and cultural identity (Pechurina, 2015), using home-based qualitative interviews as the main method of data-collection. By focusing on the experience of interviewing participants in their homes and building on the sociology of personal life, the chapter discusses how being a researcher and a guest at the same time may have affected the interview situation and the subsequent analysis and presentation of the results. As my research showed, while the domestic spaces in my study provided welcome and hospitality, they also imposed boundaries and rules. However, these rules were not always clearly defined, but rather negotiated and co-constructed throughout the interview. Activities such as going food shopping, walking in the nearby park and cooking together with the participant(s) before or during the interview contributed to better rapport and created a more informal interview setting. At the same time, the exposure to more intimate and sensitive moments of people’s lives made me reconsider my interview strategy and affected my behaviour during my home visits. In other words, the role of a researcher required me to go further and inquire more, but the constructed role of a guest prevented me from doing so. However, while

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acknowledging the challenges and limitations presented by these encounters, I also believe that these moments directed me to important methodological insights and discoveries about ethics, positionality and emotions which were implicitly present throughout the study. Here, I follow Jordan's (2006) argument about the negotiated and evolving role of the researcher who continues to maintain relationships with their research subjects and the data long after the analysis. I also agree with Rose's (1997) classic argument about the ongoing need to question the gaps and uncertainties that arise throughout the process of knowledge production. I hope that revisiting a past project will enable me to explore further my memories, perceptions, and uncertainties, thereby offering ways to enhance reflexivity in qualitative research more generally.

The chapter will start with an overview of approaches to the study of homes followed by a description of my positionality and the methods deployed for my research project into Russian migrants' homes – how they were designed and then developed as the study progressed. I will specifically focus on approaches developed within sociology of personal life and visual anthropology as these were the ones I used as a guidance for my work. The chapter will then proceed to discussing situations that illustrate how my awareness of rules and personal boundaries affected my behaviour during the interviews.

6.2 Researching Homes: A Personal Life Perspective

The subject of home has long been part of sociological research, including studies that work within feminist and/or personal life research frameworks and deploy in-depth qualitative, ethnographic, and (auto)biographical methods (see for instance, Goode, 2007; Hurdley, 2006; Smart, 2007; Widerberg, 2010). Feminist scholars approached home as a site of gendered labour, domestic work, and unequal power relations (Mallett, 2004; Marion Young, 1997), as well as looking at it through the prism of consumption and value (Casey & Martens, 2007; Madigan & Munro, 1996; Skeggs, 1997). Adding to this, researchers of personal life paid attention to home, and objects that permeate it, in close connection with notions of family, privacy, and intimacy (Hämäläinen & Rautio, 2013; Rose, 2010; Woodward & Greasley, 2015). Conceptually, this viewpoint has been reflected through understanding of home as complex, changeable and multilayered, where its material, practiced and sensory qualities are of equal importance (Ahmed, 1999; Blunt, 2005). For scholars exploring personal life and the family this conceptualisation has been instrumental in showing how home both reflects and constitutes relationships, and (re)constructs memories and attachments (Hecht, 2001; Smart, 2007). Thus, home in this context has not been approached merely as a background to everyday life, but rather as an integral part that constitutes and defines it (Casey & Taylor, 2015; Miller, 2001).

Correspondingly, the methodologies developed within the personal life framework have been closely linked to researchers' feminist standpoint (Letherby, 2003). This means that they have been largely concerned with navigating the process of

knowing through existing intimacies and sensitivities of domestic environment as well as paid attention to different types of reflexivity and power relations that develop between researchers and research participants (England, 1994; Mullings, 1999). The questions surrounding research ethics and related responsibilities and vulnerabilities of research subjects have also been paramount for feminist researchers (Birch & Miller, 2002). More specifically, in relation to research within domestic setting, Hämäläinen and Rautio (2013) reflect on the contradictory or ambivalent nature of home as an interview setting for studying sensitive family issues, which can equally appear as a familiar and comfortable environment where participants feel at ease, as much as a highly sensitive place, where a researcher may feel like an intruder. As a result, while offering a suitable setting for research on personal life and sensitive issues, home also brings challenges for the researcher who observes life 'behind closed doors' (Hockey, 2002; Mason & Davies, 2009). Adding to this, Gabb (2010) suggests that uncomfortable 'home truths' and 'messiness' of everyday life uncovered by the researcher during her visit should be retained and responsibly incorporated into the research as they constitute an important part of family life as it is lived every day in all its complexity.

Important methodological contributions into studying homes have been made by Sarah Pink as part of her work on visual and sensory ethnography (Pink, 2004a, b, 2006). Pink coined the concept of 'sensory home' which she studied through a method of video-interviews, accompanied by more in-depth involvement of the researcher in the interview process. As Pink argues, during the home interview researchers should pay greater attention to participants' responses as well as to their own experiences and feelings, aiming to engage their senses (Pink, 2006). This also means that one has to reflect more on the interview context and develop awareness of their own reactions and contributions into the interview setting. In other words, a researcher conducting home interviews should see oneself as an active participant rather than an independent observer, thereby turning to either a 'sensory apprentice' (Pink, 2009: 69–72) or a 'sensory participant' (Pink, 2009: 81–96).

In addition, in her earlier work, Pink discussed the process of video-interview in more detail (Pink, 2004b), paying particular attention to how home was presented to her by research participants. As Pink showed, the presence of the camera prompted participants to incorporate a number of home-presentation narratives which were borrowed from everyday discourses and practices. Importantly, these produced video-narratives, which Pink referred to as 'Hello magazine', 'estate agent' and 'self-analysis' (2004b: 62), enabled participants to construct individual stories 'about the everyday relationship between a particular self and her/his material/visual home' (ibid: 66). At the same time, while these narratives did not deviate entirely from 'the concerns of the research' (ibid: 75), they would still require the researcher to be able to recognise and negotiate them throughout the interview, and situate them within the relevant cultural context later, during the analysis.

Overall, the above examples advocate for a methodological approach that recognises various dimensions of the home and enables greater involvement and sensitivity of the researcher throughout the research process. It is possible to see how this strategy can be applied to research of homes in the context of migration. In fact, the

number of recent studies that use visual and home ethnographies to explore the meaning of migrant homes are illustrative of the potential of such an approach (Bonfanti et al., 2019; Dibbits, 2009; Levin, 2014; Ochs & Kremer-Sadlik, 2013). These studies, which often deploy methods that generate rich and multi-layered data, proved to be effective in grasping the complexity of everyday experiences and embodied practices of homemaking (see Giorgi & Fasulo, 2013). At the same time, methods that may get us closer to lived experiences of home and enable us ‘to access difficult stories’ (Ratnam & Drozdowski, 2020: 771) can also ‘challenge our capacities to read, sense, and try to grasp the enormity of what is untold...’ (ibid). Importantly though, as academic work in relation to better defining and conceptualising migrant home has been expanding in recent years, less attention has been paid to discussion of methodological aspects of doing research on and in the homes of migrant and mobile people. Recent work that has emerged as part of the HOMInG project (Belloni et al., 2019; Boccagni et al., 2020; Boccagni & Kusenbach, 2020; Miranda-Nieto et al., 2020) has stimulated the methodological discussion on research of migrant homes by taking into account the relational and multi-scalar nature of home. However, with the burgeoning research on home across contexts and disciplines there is a clear demand for critical discussion of ethical issues, researcher’s reflexivity and positionality, as well as knowledge production – the issues that have long been the focal point of feminist research (Rose, 1997).

The study of Russian migrants’ homes discussed in the following section reflects the ideas presented above. My engagement with sociology of personal life and visual ethnography influenced the methodology of the study. It also offered me tools for reflecting on my positionality and relationships with the participants during the study. By revisiting this research and reflecting more on the interview experience I hope to be able to unpack further complexities and uncertainties of the process of home interview, which were not fully visible to me at the time. In what follows I will describe this approach by first presenting the designed methodology of the study and then showing what changed along the development of my fieldwork. As I will eventually show, home is a special place for research that affects both participants and researchers.

6.3 A Case Study of Russian Migrants’ Homes

6.3.1 Research Design

The research project ‘Creating a Home from Home. Russian Communities in the UK’ was carried out in 2006–2010 as part of my PhD dissertation. It aimed to investigate how Russian migrants in the UK negotiated and (co)created a sense of connectedness with their national culture through the organisation of their domestic life and the materiality of their homes. Thus, such aspects of domestic life as home décor, material objects, and the practices surrounding cooking and mealtimes have

been used as a 'way in' to explore broader concepts related to home, belonging and cultural identity. Importantly, when it comes to material cultures, the focus of the study was not narrowed to finding out which objects migrants had brought from the home-country or acquired later and kept in their homes. It rather was guided by exploring the meanings and significance of those objects for my participants' identity and culture.

Correspondingly, I chose in-depth home-based qualitative interviews as the main method of data-collection. Following Jennifer Mason's argument about the situated and contextual nature of qualitative interviews, I aimed 'to ensure that the relevant contexts are brought into focus so that situated knowledge can be produced' (Mason, 2002: 63–64). In this regard, the home as an interview setting was expected to illuminate those contexts for myself and my participants, as well as allow me to get closer to intangible and embodied aspects of homemaking which constituted an important aspect of its meaning (Mason & Davies, 2009). Thus, when deciding to conduct the interviews at participants' homes I aimed to be able to combine multiple roles and contexts of inquiry: a researcher and a visitor, i.e. someone who can analytically 'observe' the home and practically experience it at the same time.

I designed the interview as a semi-structured one, with general questions on participants' background and their migration history as well as topics related to everyday activities, social networks, Russian culture in immigration, and important reminders of Russia, including objects and food. Additionally, as a way of uncovering some of the participants' deeper thoughts and reflections in relation to their culture and identity, the interview involved a focused discussion about significant objects and related memories, associations and life stories they may evoke, similar to Money's idea of object narratives (Money, 2007). As Money put it, conducting the interview in the home setting made it possible to 'observe people in the actual context of their everydayness, and see and feel the objects they referred to in their narratives' (Money, 2007: 374).

Furthermore, building on Pink's work discussed above, I asked participants to do a home tour for me during the interview. This allowed me to learn about participants' homes and to have an opportunity to engage my senses more. As the interviews were conducted during my first years living in the UK, of which I did not have much knowledge, visiting homes was a way for me to get to know different homes (i.e. houses and apartments) and their materiality. In addition to seeing what the homes were like it was also a way to feel the materiality – to experience it as a visitor, or as a guest. On some occasions I spontaneously participated in the domestic routines, e.g., cooking, or getting ready for work. While prioritising the sensory experience of visiting home, I still wanted to add a visual dimension to my data. Occasionally, the interviews were supplemented by photographs of objects and interior details taken during the interview, such as walls with pictures, fragments of furniture and original interior details. However, my ideas about the use and value of these photographs changed throughout the project – something I will discuss further in this section.

My understanding of positionality was situated within a broader feminist tradition that defines it as contextual and dynamic, with continuously shifting boundaries

(Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Ganga & Scott, 2006; Merriam et al., 2001). Throughout my study I experienced various points of shared positionalities with my participants (Mullings, 1999) based on changing categories of class, age, gender, ethnicity, and stage of migration. As a white heterosexual single woman of Russian origin in my mid-20s, first in the family to get an education above a Bachelor level and who, at the time of the fieldwork, was on a temporary visa and had little knowledge of life in the UK, I was perceived differently by different groups of Russian migrants. This was due to complex and situated intersection of our identity categories (Valentine, 2007), something I have reflected on in my earlier work (Pechurina, 2014). Similar to Mullings (1999) I could consider myself as a 'partial insider' (344) whose identity categories afforded varied levels of closeness with participants at different points of the research. I was born in a small town in Altai and moved around both as a child and then later as a young adult to pursue an education in Moscow. This exposed me to different geographical and cultural contexts across Russia and helped me to expand my contacts and establish relationships with participants of different backgrounds and occupations from different parts of Russia and former USSR. However, while shared ethnic and linguistic background could help me achieve an 'insider' status, my affiliation with the University distanced people and affected their desire to share details of their lives with me. Furthermore, younger women both married and single were more willing to trust me, while men were more reluctant to invite me and to show me their homes. This also points, importantly, to the sexualised nature of an interview situation (Harries, 2016).

My condition of relative, and at times fluid, proximity required a strategy of reflective balancing of power both before and during the interview. One of the ways of finding a point where a sense of trust could be established between my participants and me was achieving a status of a 'familiar face' or a 'friend' i.e. either be known well to my interlocutors or to be recommended by a friend of a friend. For instance, some people may not have answered my emails if I had not introduced myself as 'someone's' friend, and there were people who I could only meet through socialising activities (e.g. as a guest in birthday parties). While becoming a familiar face enabled me to know more people and arrange more interviews, it was not always a smooth experience. Being involved in friendship circles also meant observing details of people's relationships and not having control over discussions of the interview experiences between people who knew each other. There were people who became my close friends and because of that I never asked them for an interview. There were others I felt more connected with, but the encounter did not last. Some contacts lasted longer, but many had a natural end, which was not always easy to deal with on a personal level.

Overall, in 2007–2008 I conducted 30 in-depth interviews with participants of varied socio-demographic backgrounds who resided in different parts of the UK and who defined themselves as ethnic Russian. Four people were retired, while the rest were employed in a range of professions including academia, catering, sales, and office work. The interviews were conducted in Russian and then translated into English. From thirty interviews conducted, nine were carried out with men, seventeen with women, and four with men and women together. Although I identified

some typologies of my participants during data analysis, e.g. by their time of arrival (Pechurina, 2015: 100–101), or the way they expressed attachment to the UK (ibid: 100–103), each interview experience was unlike the others, thus reflecting the unique story of each participant and of their homes (Hämäläinen & Rautio, 2013). People could have had similar objects (such as national souvenirs) and could have done similar things at home (e.g., celebrating national holidays) but the experiences related to those objects and their stories of migration were very individual. In this respect, a deeper reflection on the interview process is a valuable exercise which can help with the analysis and interpretation of the data.

6.3.2 *Changing Fieldwork Experience*

As my approach to data collection was open and flexible, so my methods and strategies have been continuously adjusted to the contexts I studied. Consequently, as the fieldwork progressed, my understanding of migrant homes and the ideas of how best to approach them have changed too. Below I wish to reflect on several key changes that my research followed as a result of shifting understandings of the research process and of my position within it. By focusing on specific aspects of knowledge production such as negotiating access to interviews and balancing my role as a researcher and guest, I aim to uncover gaps and uncertainties that these situations and contexts produced. However, I also wish to acknowledge that such insights cannot account for the full complexity of the relationships between researchers and their interlocutors.

The first change refers to establishing trust and finding ways of *entering* people's homes. Similar to other researchers of migrant communities, my invitation to someone's home depended on gaining people's trust and on our mutual cooperation (Lazzaro-Salazar, 2019; Stachowski, 2020). The other aspect is related to discussed earlier cultural specifics of Russian friendship which required me to gain the status of a 'friend in need', or somebody who needed a favour – in my case, a 'young' female researcher who needed participants for her project (see Pechurina, 2014). As a result, I spent considerable time socialising and getting known to people before I was able to gain their trust and arrange an interview in their homes.

Furthermore, I see parallels with Jordan (2006) who points out that inviting a researcher into a house may require time for participants to figure out a set of rules with regards to hosting him/her. In a similar way, participants of my study who had not experienced this kind of research before may have needed time to understand what I was looking for and what role their homes could play within this process. For instance, these expectations may have been reflected in the reasons for not inviting me that some of my participants gave me: 'I don't have anything from Russia', or 'My home is too messy' and 'I don't have any *matryoshka dolls*' were some of the typical responses which would also indicate a particular perception of what can be meant by the 'Russian objects' and 'Russian homes' I was investigating.

Consequently, these circumstances affected my initial fieldwork strategy. As I spent more time with and within the community, the original method of qualitative interviews at home expanded to include elements of the ethnographic study of a relatively cohesive migrant group with the majority of participants recruited through the snowball method. As a result, some of my data was collected when visiting public places, revisiting interviewees' homes, by email or in day-to-day conversations. I also kept a research diary to record the information and observations which I obtained outside of my interviews.

Importantly, the process of taking photographs was modified because participants were keen to have more control over the subject of the photographs, i.e., asking me to take photos of particular objects only and/or avoid interior details. On some occasions, participants wanted to take photographs themselves and/or used their own cameras to do so. Involving participants in the research process certainly had a positive effect on the process of the interview, but it was not always effective for keeping control of the quality of the produced images. For example, having souvenirs (such as *matryoshka dolls* or traditional crockery as shown on Fig. 6.1) was not uncommon, but the reasons for collecting and keeping these items could have been different for different people. The items on a shelf in Fig. 6.1 were important for N. because she inherited them from her family. However, I was not allowed to photograph all of them. For others, a souvenir on display could be a reminder of the recent trip to Russia rather than signifying any family ties. The question of what



Fig. 6.1 A fragment of home interior, photographed during the interview. (Author's picture)

the image showed was also important from an ethical point of view as I had to consider how revealing some of the images were and where there might be a chance of unfavourable reactions from the audience that could judge the interiors based on their class-related aesthetics where souvenirs could be treated as an indicator of kitsch and low taste.

Another important reason was related to the quality of the photographic equipment that I had access to at that time, which limited my ability to produce images that would 'speak up' and add value to the verbal data (for more on this see Heng, 2016). Thus, by photographing objects from a close-up angle (a kind of photograph which many of my research participants would be comfortable with), I could miss the important contextual details of the interior. The example of this can be a photograph of Russian bast shoes (*lapti*) in Fig. 6.2 which, following my interlocutor's request was taken from a close up and so did not include surrounding contextual details of the interior. Also, many photographs were not in a format that would suit print publishing (e.g. due to small size and low definition). Consequently, although the research project contained an element of visual research, it did not produce a visual output – something that I could refer to as a limitation of the study. Having said that, reflecting on this experience also allowed me to evaluate visual research more critically as well as to rediscover its potential, not only in terms of its ability

Fig. 6.2 Many participants requested that pictures be taken from a close up. In fact, this may over-emphasize certain specific objects and shift the focus away from their contextual backgrounds. (Author's picture)



to make things visible, but also as a way of producing knowledge which is visual (Rose, 2013). This can mean, for instance, using various formats of academic writing (such as visual essays) or designing a research methodology that can contain a creative element from the outset (e.g. by collaborating with artists or participants to produce a visual narrative for further presentation).

Despite the initial challenges of getting access, the interviews offered a chance to share and hear memories, stories, and emotions. Sometimes I was invited to stay for a meal after the interview that led to further ‘non-recorded’ discussion. In this sense, and adding to the previous point, putting less focus on the photographic component of the study offered a way to (re)emphasise the value of the context of the interview and avoid stereotypical focus on souvenirs (many of which, in fact, revealed complex meanings and memories: see Pechurina, 2020). I wanted to see the home but I also wanted to highlight elements that were not directly visible to the eye thus bringing in focus the collected ethnographic data. This also meant not only accepting things that were shown and words that were said, but also the ones which were hidden and/or silenced, but nevertheless constituted an essential part of the narrative and co-created knowledge (Ryan-Flood & Gill, 2010). Deploying a personal life framework helped me to acknowledge the significance of my position as a researcher and these difficult moments. It also equipped me with tools to reflect on these moments later, as I continued living and working in the UK thus gradually evolving from a researcher of migrants into the female migrant- researcher. Naturally, some of my own experiences have become more attuned to my participants’ narratives, while some impressions have become more distant. I believe that the temporal character of my positionality is also reflected in my writing which features personal reflections as a way of building dialogue and connections between my participants’ narratives and my changing ways of seeing them.

6.4 To Invite and to Be Invited: Some Reflections on Home-Based Interviews

Below I will describe the examples of two interviews that show different ways of conducting research about home while being at home. Being among the first interviews I did for the study, I believe that they reveal important moments of decision making in relation to my expectations and behaviour, both as a researcher and a visitor.

I will start with an interview I conducted with a single man in his mid-30s who lived in Scotland. As we arranged the interview, P¹ indicated that there is ‘not much to see in his typical bachelor flat’ so on my arrival he suggested that we walk around

¹Here and throughout in the chapter I use capital letters to refer to participants’ names. While I used pseudonyms in my earlier work as a way of anonymising participants, I switched to letters as a way of avoiding using personal names unless there was participant’s consent to do so.

town and his favourite places first. I agreed and we met in one of the parks where I proceeded with my questions. Most of the interview was conducted while walking, first in the park, and then in the city on the way to P's flat. P talked about how he arrived and settled in Scotland, his experience of adjustment, his likes and dislikes. Standing next to birch trees we discussed Scottish nature, which P loved and which, as he noted, was reminiscent of his native place in Russia due to their similar latitude. Being mobile was important for P., which meant regular trips to the countryside with a hiking group or going to the other cities in the UK for a break. Later, as we walked through town, he pointed to the architecture of the buildings whose greyness and scale reminded him of the feeling of being in a Russian city, the atmosphere of which he sometimes missed. He talked about getting used to living abroad and the struggle to build 'his' circle of Russian friends around him. Throughout this walk the idea of home and feeling of home gradually started to emerge. This was not something that was particularly linked to the materiality of P's dwelling. Eventually, we came to his flat where P invited me in and told me that I could have a look 'if I want to'. He showed me some objects which he brought from his regular trips back to Russia, including kitchen items and some tools. However, there was a feeling of the situation being too forced and that I had overstayed my welcome – I did not feel I was fully invited. I did not see myself walking around and picking up the objects I could see any longer. I started being cautious, wondering whether I wanted to see or discover more. I stayed in the living room for about 15 min, then finished the interview and left.

The other interview was conducted with a family who had been living in a northern city in the UK for several years. I was invited by a common friend, a person who initially helped me to get to know my first research participants. The interview was arranged as part of a dinner invitation. I asked to allocate specific time for the recorded part and the home tour during the interview. The hosts were very friendly, the atmosphere was welcoming and light, despite the fact that we had not met before. The discussion continued well after the recorded part when we shared tea and cake. Once again, as it was one of my first interviews, I intuitively relied on clues from my hosts and participated in the dinner as well as staying afterwards. I was given a home tour during which I asked about objects I saw. My hosts also gave me suggestions of other people I could interview.

As both of these examples show, the interviews involved complex dimensions related to class, gender, and culture. However, they also illustrate various 'difficult' moments that can be experienced by a researcher, which in this case refer to visiting someone's home and experiencing it either welcoming or not and the subsequent decisions that followed from it. While in one case I felt it was time to end a visit sooner, in another I decided to stay – which was not solely because the participants explicitly invited me to. My ambiguous position as someone who is invited but not welcomed reflects Lenhard and Samanani's (2020) point that home can be equally hospitable and excluding for a visitor. Similarly, Heath and Scicluna (2019) refer to the ambivalence of home in which host-guest relationships can be characterised by both hospitality and hostility. Significantly, though, my awareness and co-construction of boundaries was not only the result of a presumed lack of welcome

on behalf of my host. As I noticed, the more I got to know people, the more cautious I became with regards to how far I could go and how much I could ask during my visit, thus trying to fulfil a 'visitor' role, who knows one's place. The two scenarios described above formed part of my experience in other interviews: it was not uncommon for me to be taken for a walk around before visiting home or to share a meal or coffee. People asked me about my train or bike journey to their homes, referred to some landmarks if we walked to their home together, sometimes took me for a short drive around. Occasionally, I went with my participants shopping for food to cook our lunch or participated in cooking and eating it together. At the same time, while observing various aspects of life clearly brought me closer to the participants, it also made me think how to incorporate the role of the person (a 'friend' as I earlier indicated), a researcher and a visitor who had to be entertained (Jordan, 2006).

One of the consequences of such closeness that emerged between me and my participants during the interviews was the strategy of deploying 'ethics of responsibility' (Birch & Miller, 2002: 93) in order to protect some of the participants' personal stories which were revealed to me. My interview with S, a female participant in her 70s who I met through the Russian Orthodox Church, lasted for several hours. As she talked about her initial hardships as she arrived in the UK through Germany as a young girl, working at the local textile factory and a gradual adjustment to life abroad, S showed me around the house where she lived for more than 50 years, first with her husband and then alone. We talked about her roots and relatives in Russia and her closest friendships in the UK. As she showed me some of the photographs from a recent visit to Russia she also mentioned that she felt hurt by her encounter with a journalist who was interested in her story some years ago. While she was open to me throughout the interview and allowed me to photograph her home and interior, she was reluctant to show me some of her most significant possessions partly because of her previous experience. As S. pointed out, some of the objects she cherished were kept in her drawer, but she was not going to open it. However, we carried on talking about her life, her friends, the Church. I had a strong emotional response to her story and felt connected to her. Something definitely happened there, during that interview, which was not only significant for the subject of my study, but also for me as a person. As I sat on the bus back home, I could not hold my tears. What was it that made me cry? Was it, perhaps, the overwhelming hospitality and openness of this woman who talked to me, a stranger, for hours in her own home? Or maybe this reminded me of my own grandmother, who was far away and who I deeply missed? The important point here is that the personal reaction that this interview triggered was part of the encounter which I had to accept as it was. Dealing with personal lives and home, as a special kind of place for everyone, means accepting and learning about the emotions and senses it may bring, which can be not just the participants' but also one's own.

This experience also made me feel particularly cautious and reflective on how much more I should ask and see during the interview and how should I proceed with it afterwards. I felt very welcomed and confused at the same time, both grateful and indebted for such profound experience and knowledge. My interview with S illustrates a case where a formal arrangement of the interview can emerge into a more

sensitive and emotional encounter for both researcher and participant. As with other interviews of similar nature that I also experienced during my study, the emotional aspects were closely intertwined with knowledge production (Lumsden et al., 2019) and thus brought important questions about interpreting the interview narratives, presenting participants' stories and not speaking over their 'voice' at the same time. Trying to reflect on and balance various perspectives, including my own could be one way of dealing with it. But there is also value in recognising the changing and emergent nature of the research process and associated data which can evolve with time and be retrospectively revisited by the researcher, whose feelings and interpretive frameworks may also change and thus enable a more 'distant' view of the situation. This is something that I have also been trying to engage with throughout this chapter.

6.5 Conclusion

As Jordan (2006) points out in relation to her study of families in home environments, the roles of researcher and participants evolve during the process of research and reflect the ways in which these roles are defined and constructed both before and during the interview. Conducting the interviews in the interviewees' home was an important way of getting to know practical and contextual aspects of homemaking in a study that concerned itself with aspects of identity, belonging and home. For example, the setting of the interview (e.g. kitchen or living room) and/or activities that accompanied it (coffee, food, cooking together, participating in family activities) certainly affected the dynamic of the interview and my experience within participants' domestic space. However, while having access to fragments of participants' personal lives provided valuable insights into practiced aspects of everyday home-making, it was also an indicator of how the visitors were welcomed and treated within different households. In other words, the co-shared moments were part of the life that was shown to me, that I was invited into, but still were not something I had a full overview of.

By deploying home-based qualitative interviews as the main method of data collection, my study aimed to uncover both tangible and intangible dimensions of the home, the former including material objects and elements of home décor, and the latter – the feeling of being at home and the homely atmosphere. As such, although the interviews were focused on material and practical dimensions of homemaking, they also aimed to explore connections between home, everyday life and the experience of migration into the UK. As a result, my task as a researcher was not only in finding the references to belonging and Russianness but also in understanding and contextualising them, or, trying to 'write in' my participants' stories into the broader narrative of post-Soviet migration abroad. As I continue to revisit the collected data I discover further complexities and interconnections between participants' stories of home as well as my own. In this chapter I focused more on the more challenging and critical moments of the home visits, reflecting on the ambiguous position of a

researcher. This is shaped by various internal and external factors related to social and personal backgrounds, and expected norms of behaviour. I also suggested that the homes one studies and visits are not always experienced in a positive way, hence the host-guest encounters that happen may not necessarily be defined in straightforward terms. In this sense, home both as a subject and location of research is a special kind of place which we continuously rediscover.

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