

“NOW I KNOW NORWAY FROM WITHIN”: *Boundary Work and Belonging in Au Pairs’ Narratives*

Abstract

This article analyses how female au pairs from the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) perceive some aspects of Norwegian society – public arrangements and rules; localities and social environment; and privacy and culture of parenting – to express their belonging to it. Applying the concept of boundary work, and drawing on in-depth biographical interviews with current and former au pairs, I show how they find their own place in a new context. I argue that boundary work through comparisons with the hosting Other and active reflection on differences and similarities of Norwegian and post-Soviet realities enables au pairs to appropriate new cultural and social sources and become more enthusiastic about subsequent integration in the host country.

Keywords

Au pair migration • boundary work • belonging • Norway • CIS countries

Olga Tkach*

Centre for Independent Social Research (CISR), St. Petersburg, Russia

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Introduction

In various contexts, the views of native citizens on ethnic minorities and migrants have been studied quite intensively, applying, for example, the post-colonial framework and the concept of ‘whiteness’ (see Samaluk 2014). Migrants’ otherness and marginal position have been constructed and maintained from politicised and hegemonic perspectives in terms of subordinated ethnicity, culture and belonging to a diaspora (Salih 2000: 321-322, Salih 2003), and also inferior social class and job qualifications (Samaluk 2014: 380). Generally, in the public realm of receiving society, migrants have been perceived as Others through the images of competitors for jobs and space and as constructors of social problems (Dannecker 2005). In the private sphere, migrant domestics are ascribed to the categories of intimate Others (Lan 2003: 525) or intimate foreigners excluded from full citizenship (Parreñas 2008: 100). Similarly, contemporary scholarship on au pair migration argues that au pair newcomers are seen by the mass media, au pair agencies and employers as subordinated foreigners through ethnic, gendered, racial and class lenses (Hess & Puckhaber 2004; Anderson 2007; Cox 2007; Durin 2015). In Norwegian academia and the media, au pairs (mainly Filipinos) have been portrayed as victims of exploitation (Øien 2009; Bikova 2010; Sollund 2010; Isaksen & Stenum 2011).

This article aims to use different research optics and consider au pairs as subjects of perception in the receiving context rather than objects of locals’ views. By the fact of relocation, immigrants immerse themselves in a new social structure and culture, rules of communication and a complex matrix of relationships with natives and co-nationals (Salih 2000; Cvajner 2012; Durin 2015). I follow researchers who approach au pairs not just as economic actors but also as tourists or travellers who arrive to look for new life opportunities, explore the country and develop themselves. For example, Eeva Jokinen and Soile Veijola (1997: 44) classified au pairs as tourists who ‘enter a totally strange symbolic order, a configuration of a foreign culture/language/household’. A significant role in the development of image of the country, its culture and people is attributed to the relationships between the au pair and the host family and also experiences with other people outside the family, especially other foreigners (Durin 2015: 162–166). Au pairing can be conceptualised as a process of discovering mobility, ‘an exercise in knowledge accumulation, and social work construction, which potentially informs subsequent mobilities’ (Williams 2009: 315).

This article analyses how female au pairs from the Commonwealth of Independent States (part of the former USSR) view and perceive Norway, and what aspects of the society they highlight to express

* E-mail: tkach@cisr.ru

their belonging to it.¹ During my fieldwork, I noticed that vibrant and detailed talks about Norway and Norwegians spontaneously came up in interviews with au pairs either as warm-up or complete talks. As a Russian speaker and newcomer in Norway, I was accepted amongst au pairs as a reliable person for them to verbalise and share their views on cultural distance and closeness between themselves and representatives of the hosting society and between their home and host countries. Their perceptions and feelings of belonging have been developing and changing across their stay in the country. Just as Daria², a former Russian au pair, who was recalling her au pair experience, other interviewees considered it as a unique chance to learn about Norwegians and their everyday life 'from within', that is, living with them. To me, au pairs acted as amateur anthropologists who became immersed into Norwegian society, comprehending it in accordance with the peculiarities of the au pair experience, their length of stay and current status in the country; and who got practical knowledge on how to survive, live and succeed in it.

The paper begins with the presentation of research context and data. I then offer an analytical approach that applies the concept of boundary work as a process of constructing self in a new context and finding one's own place in it through comparisons with the Other. It is also highlighted that boundary work takes place as a process that develops and changes over the time of staying in Norway. The next three sections explore comparisons that au pairs make between their home countries and Norway to define their own identities and position themselves as migrants. They reflect on their home and receiving contexts, referring to the levels of public arrangements and rules; localities and social environment; and the private sphere. All of these dimensions of Norwegian society are considered through comparisons with current post-Soviet realities. The final part outlines au pairs' efforts to reconsider cultural gaps and construct their belonging to Norwegian society in the course of au pairing and thereafter.

Research context and data

Norway belongs to the group of European states that accept au pairs from non-EU countries. Nonetheless, its policies differ from those of other countries in several respects. The institution is monitored and regulated by the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (UDI). It distinctly frames rights and obligations of au pairs and host families, such as au pairs' working and living conditions, the amount of pocket money to which they are entitled and the amount of money they are to be given to cover Norwegian language courses (UDI 2015). Annually, UDI grants about 2,000 au pair permits that are ascribed to a category of study visits. Up to 85% of applicants come from the Philippines, although a number of au pairs from CIS countries, such as Ukraine and Russia, are also notable and remain in the top 10 of all sending countries.³ The age range of applicants is relatively wide – 18–30 years, and their length of stay can last up to 2 years.

Au pairs receive comparatively generous economic provisions – NOK 5,400 (approximately 580 Euro) monthly (before tax) as pocket money and up to NOK 8,100 (approximately 870 Euro) annually for covering language courses.⁴

The empirical research for this article is based on biographical interviews with 22 young women. The only criterion of the participants' selection was their East European (post)-Soviet origin and current or recent belonging to au pair placement. They were recruited via different sources I had access to in Oslo – my personal and professional networks, au pair agencies, online forums for newcomers, religious communities – and also through snowballing. Other characteristics of the sample, such as age, class origin and the level of education, came up later as a part of biographical data. The interviewees were raised in working-class and lower-middle-class families in various regions of Belarus, Moldova, Russia and Ukraine. Almost all (apart for three cases) have had higher education and even career prospects before they moved to Norway as au pairs in the period between 2001 and 2010 at the age of 19–29 years. The majority of the participants came from families with rich cultural capital – either one or both parents are educated people with professional jobs (the so-called *intelligentsia*). However, in cases when parents lacked educational background themselves, they strenuously invested in their daughters' higher education, including foreign language training (cf. Rohde-Abuba 2016).

Amongst the participants, the rationales for becoming au pairs were heterogeneous. When the young women graduated from universities and entered the labour market, many of them realised that they were not able to find promising jobs, because of both structural barriers and the absence of social capital through their families. So they saw their move as a break from stressful life in the homeland. Personal dissidents (Lalotou 2010: 49, 51) took this journey as a getaway from standard biographical scripts. For others, participation in an au pair programme meant easier, though postponed, access to education abroad or simply seemed an appropriate avenue for accomplishing general goals such as 'seeing the world' (cf. Lalotou 2010: 46, 52). Even though motives varied, they all signified a choice of au pairing as discontinuity with the previous life course and crossing of a certain societal border. Au pairs' young ages and the absence of serious commitments or dependents left behind facilitated their easy departure. CIS au pairs do not enjoy visa-free entrance to Norway, so an opportunity to travel overseas and stay abroad for at least 2 years held great value to them. For many, moving as an au pair was the first experience of going abroad at all and to Norway in particular. In a few cases, some information about the scheme was provided by friends and acquaintances who had emigrated earlier. Mediated information was also collected from thematic online forums or au pair agencies.

The total sample is diverse in terms of current position and length of stay in Norway. Amongst the interviewed women, 8 were current and 14 were former au pairs. The length of stay varied from 3 months up to 10 years. Over the course of the project, seven of the former au pairs studied in Norwegian universities and high schools and seven

were employed as skilled workers in public or private sectors. Six former au pairs were either in long-term relationships or married, two with baby boys. All interviews were conducted individually, in Russian. They lasted from 1.5 to 3 hours and were recorded and transcribed. I met several times with some of the interviewees, for I also participated in their leisure activities, and documented these data as field notes.

On migrant boundary work: analytical approach

Contemporary scholarship on self-making or identity construction points to its dialogical nature in close relation to others (Skeggs 2002: 163; Skeggs 2004: 177; Yuval-Davis 2011: 16). An intrinsic part of the process of constituting the self is boundary work (Lamont 1992: 11). It starts when individuals think of themselves as equivalent and similar to, or comparable with, others and 'perform' their differences and similarities (Lamont & Molnar 2002: 188). Being quite a universal means of self-adjustment and self-making, boundary work is also applicable to the situation of migration. For instance, Deborah Bryceson and Ulla Vuorela (2002: 11-12), who studied transnational migrants, suggested a similar term to boundary work, 'frontiering'. They argued that boundary work or frontiering automatically starts with 'the encounter between people' and presumes 'the act of defining identities, differences and agreements', drawing boundaries 'between acceptable and unacceptable'. It is important to highlight here that boundary work as self-positioning at the interface between two (or more) contrasting ways of life means agentic choice (Samaluk 2014: 380; Bakewell 2010: 1694; Bryceson & Vuorela 2002: 11-12), which makes it comprehended and conscious, that is, agentic activity. Therefore, the concept of boundary work presumes two consistent aspects of self-positioning in relation to the Other as people and culture – active thinking, comprehension and reflection on where and why oneself belongs, and certain discursive and practical strategies, to either strengthen or weaken boundaries, reinterpreting and adjusting one's cultural competences to new challenges; or to protect them from undesirable interventions.

One of the mechanisms of boundary work can be described through a concept of 'stranger fetishism', or a dialectics of frontiering. It works simultaneously to expel the stranger as the origin of danger and also to welcome some strangers as the origin of difference, a potential object of consumption with the possibility to propertise (Skeggs 2004: 165). Appropriation of different parts of a culture as a resource is undertaken selectively (Ibid: 187).

The main basis for boundary work is biographical experience relating to a migrant's past and anticipated future. As Abdelmalek Sayad (2007: 3-4) argued, '[t]o immigrate means to immigrate together with one's history (immigration itself being an integral part of that history), with one's traditions, way of living, feeling, acting and thinking, with one's language, one's religion and all the other

social, political and mental structures of one's society [...] or, in a word, with one's culture'. This cultural background determines 'a new way of defining themselves, and a different self-representation' (Sayad 2007: 47). Migrants construct the image of the Other based on pre-existing hierarchical systems and dichotomous models of developed–underdeveloped world that they bring from their country (see Liapi & Vaiou 2010: 224). For instance, immigrant women come from countries having different economic conditions and cultural traditions, and this may influence their views on their positions in the receiving context. This asymmetry of rich and poor countries can also be posed in terms of relationships between immigrants and receiving populations (Campani 2010: 154–155) and reflected in migrants' identity formation through boundary work. Migrants may use their general biographical experience, migration story and social/cultural relation to their home contexts as a resource of self-positioning in the receiving context and local social hierarchies. Dialectics of closeness and distance from the Other may also change over a certain period of time, depending on the current position of the migrant.

I use the concept 'boundary work' as a theoretical tool to analyse the realms in which CIS au pairs compare and contrast themselves to Norwegians and their cultural background and competences to the receiving context. The concept of boundary work is seen here as a process of constructing self in a new context and finding one's own place in it through comparisons with the Other as people and culture and search for ways to get closer to them. Feeling of closeness to certain social groups and self-identification with them can be defined by the term 'belonging' (see Yuval-Davis 2011: 18). This contested and multidimensional concept is located on different analytical levels – macro, meso and micro. This research focuses on au pairs' belonging on micro level, which according to the definition by Christinsen and Qvotrup Jensen (2011: 147-148) refers to 'identities of individuals', social groups and is based mainly on face-to-face relations, which construct social distinctions in relation to whom you identify with. Such belongings can be reflective and deliberate, they can be oriented towards integration in local communities, but may also be characterised by prejudices, e.g. about class and race/ethnicity'. Speaking of their likes and dislikes of Norwegian society with references to the CIS, au pairs most overtly emphasise three main fields – public arrangements, localities/neighbourhoods and the private realm. All distinguished fields, where boundary work and self-positioning (belonging) gain the greatest value to the au pairs, are analysed one by one in the following sections. The chosen division around the three main fields is analytical. In actual narratives, boundaries between these fields are porous and interlinked.

It goes with accordance to the principles of intersectionality (see, e.g. Yuval-Davis 2011) that social identities, as well as identity construction through boundary work, have a multi-faceted nature in relation not only to national belonging but also to gender, class, ethnicity and education. The interplay of these dimensions of belonging appeared to be the most significant for my interviewees' agentic boundary work when they compared sending and receiving

societies, and their previous and current lived experience. Current and former au pairs observe and experience various aspects of social distance and inequalities. Under such conditions, they may find themselves excluded but willing to overcome social distance and get closer to attractive hosting others. As Skeggs argued (2004: 177), the ability to appropriate (other's) culture in the making of self becomes central to how class is made in the contemporary world. This economic and cultural class-making is also gendered.

Public arrangements and regulations of life in Norway: beneficial differences

Encounters with public institutions from the very first days demonstrate to au pair participants certain rules that organise the host society as more advanced than their sending ones. First, au pairs appreciate that Norwegian bureaucracy works transparently and conveniently, unlike that in CIS, where people feel helpless when they apply for inefficient public services:

It was an obvious contrast with Russia, where everything functions improperly, you have to struggle through and understand what is going on and how to function and live. Here [in Norway] you come and get everything prepared. Folkeregisteret [the National Registry] is a place where they register you; it gives you an address where you are registered. You take your paperwork, your documents there, and you receive everything in the mail. [...] Everything here is very straightforward and convenient for people, and you always know where to go with your inquiry. (Marina, 25, Russian, former au pair, 5 years in Norway, works at school)

The interviewees enjoy the rights that even the temporal status of an au pair permit provides. Alongside a national ID, they get health insurance, can open a bank account and get enrolled in the Norwegian taxation system, similar to any other 'proper citizen'.

Their first positive impressions of Norway's well-organised system of public agencies become even stronger when they learn more about their hosts' lives and, later, when the former au pairs manage to enter higher education or find jobs. This especially relates to labour rights in Norwegian society secured by trade unions and efficient laws. They find out that these contrasts with tougher lives in au pairs' home countries, where ordinary people overwork to live better or because their labour rights are abused by employers. One of the interviewees called the Norwegian system of labour rights protection the 'Disneyland of labour rights'. Another, Eugenia, a student of the University of Oslo, confirms this definition,

It is simply more economically convenient to live here. You work and you earn. It is feasible to buy a flat, if you want. It is realistic to earn considerable money. Where in Russia could I afford studying, working 2-3 days a week, paying the rent and my

hobbies? I would rather work as a waitress here, than work myself off 50-60 hours a week as a manager in Russia. (Eugenia, 26, Russian, former au pair, 3 years in Norway)

Then Eugenia admitted that sometimes life in Norway does not even seem real to her – it is too good to be true, when work does not absorb the whole life and salaries are fairly paid:

Actually, life here is more relaxed than in Russia. There you leave home at 7 in the morning, it takes 2 hours to get to work, your workday lasts from 9 till 6, but you actually stay there until 7 or 8, then you finally go home. There's no time [for yourself]! Here people work from 8 till 4. Every hour they get a 5-10 minute break, so they don't overwork. They're home at 4. So their evenings are free. Actually, on Fridays they work even less, till 3. They get paid 1.5 times the regular hourly rate for overtime.

Norwegian labour rights protection and the more general system of social justice make au pair migrants' lives less anxious and more promising in terms of stability. They experience that rules of life in Norway are transparent, and consistent adherence to them can be beneficial to anyone. Lidia explains this by the example of taking out a mortgage:

In our country when people take out mortgages, they get all strung-up like, "Oh Jesus! I took a mortgage! What have I done?" After calculations you realise that you pay 150-300 times more than the house is worth. Here you understand that if you stay legally, then in time you'll gradually get everything. Yes, you'll be paying off the mortgage for about 30 years, but at the same time you'll be living (*with emphasis*) in the house. It's not like in our country, where for 30 years you're paying off the mortgage, and your parents make sure you don't starve to death. (Lidia, 28, Ukraine, former au pair, 2 years in Norway, studies and works)

In the interview narratives, economic and social stability and the meritocracy of Norwegian society are sharply contrasted with the outcomes of transformations in post-Soviet societies – enormous socioeconomic hardships that many social groups face and serious social polarisation reproduced across generations. Another attractive side of Norwegian society mentioned by the interviewees is its developed welfare system that has an obvious advantage over demolished social protections of the Soviet period and current commercialisation of public services. For female au pairs, accessible public care services have a special value:

It's amazing how much is given to people, done for them and their comfort, how much help pregnant women and new mothers receive, all the money and health care, everything is for the people. This is a very decent country to live, work and vacation in. If you work, you get paid. I think Norway is an excellent country to

live in, superior to the US, Russia and any other country. It's hard to make it, to study here, but your labour is rewarded, and that's why I want to live here. Yes, very much so. (Valia, 19, Russian, first year au pair)

Hence, CIS au pairs are impressed by the well-organised bureaucratic institutions, human rights protections and the welfare system, all of which they believe make the lives of Norwegian citizens predictable and secure. They see a sharp dichotomy between home and the host society and criticise, though with a tinge of bitterness, their countries of origin where they never had equal opportunities, rewards for their endeavours and clearly foreseen life prospects. Eventually, this difference seems to au pairs more and more obvious and the Norwegian system of regulation grows more attractive to them and strengthens their feelings of belonging to a new society. They get inspired to invest their efforts in staying in the country. However, the au pairs' perceptions of Norwegian localities and neighbourhoods seem more controversial, especially in the beginning of their stay.

Norwegian localities and social environment: discoveries and frustrations

Everyday life in new localities and neighbourhoods produce diverse feelings and perceptions, which make au pairs' boundary work less apparent. Although newly arrived au pairs admire beautiful nature – fjords, landscapes and the sea – they find various settlements, even the capital city, not to mention smaller remote areas, quite boring, especially during the winter. They rarely find anything interesting to experience – neither vibrant social life nor attractive sights or rich cuisine. They feel isolated and see Norwegian small communes as closed towards newcomers and cut off from the rest of the world. Eugenia expresses her vision of Norwegians' comfortable universe in greater detail:

In my opinion, Norwegians are narrow-minded and fixated on Norway, on their bubble. They think they're the best nation on the face of the Earth, the smartest people who know how to live and are ready to teach everyone. [...] I think those people can only live in Norway because if they were sent somewhere else to live and survive on their own, they'd die right away. [...] Those who have lived abroad have at least seen different life. They understand that not everybody lives like they do, and poverty actually means that you have nothing to eat, not that you can't afford Dolce & Gabbana or something like that. (Eugenia, 26, Russian, former au pair, 3 years in Norway, university student)

The boundary work presumes distance and self-defence of a newcomer in a new context. In this quote, boundary work is expressed in terms of economic class – they, wealthy Norwegians, do not respect and understand us, poor post-Soviet people and vice versa. Eugenia and her au pair 'colleagues' consider natives lucky

to be born in such a wealthy country, where they do not need to be strong and struggle for their life chances (cf. Solari 2011: 34). Still, CIS au pairs believe that they possess richer cultural and social capital than the locals do, so they draw a picture of less-experienced and less socially competent Other. Newly arrived au pairs attribute a set of negative characteristics to Norwegians, such as unsociable, reserved, emotionally cold, self-centred, selfish, snobby, distant, slow, non-talkative and unsupportive. Au pairs oppose indifference and arrogance that they can experience in communication with their host families and surrounding communities to warmth and affection that embraced them at home countries, which they see as more emotionally affluent societies. Those au pairs who had serious issues with hosts can portray them and other Norwegians as following Protestant ethics – pragmatic, mercantile, mercenary, stingy and spoiled by consumerism and materialism. Through this self-subordination, my interviewees demonstrated that they did not feel comfortable and welcome in the hosting country, regardless of the invitation to stay there as family members and domestic helpers.

More time in Norway changes female au pairs' visions of their new surroundings, especially in comparison with their negative experiences in Belarusian, Moldovan, Russian or Ukrainian cities and towns. Two quotations below accentuate a culture of constant fear of street crime amongst young women, which they have brought from post-Soviet residential areas. They enjoy an opportunity to forget about this fear as they live in posh and protected middle- and upper-class neighbourhoods:

Skiing is really cool here. There are these ski-tracks all around the city. They are well-lit at night. And it's not like in our country, you go out and some psycho kills you in the woods. Here many people ski with children. You can come at 7 or 8 in the evening, ski for a couple of hours and then go home. Everything is perfectly organised in this sense. (Eugenia, 26, Russian, former au pair, 3 years in Norway, university student)

I lived in a very quiet neighborhood. Tell me, where in Ukraine could I walk home at 3 a.m. knowing that I wouldn't be assaulted or killed? The only thing I was scared of was deer and moose. It's funny. You aren't afraid of a man that could kill you for 25 Hryvnias. (Lidia, 28, Ukrainian, former au pair, 2 years in Norway, studies and works)

Female au pairs are happy to transgress the boundary they started to draw. They enjoy safety and freedom from violence and reconsider their views on Norwegian neighbourhoods. The interviewees appreciate that a secure environment alongside beautiful nature changed them a lot – made them calm and relaxed and stopped them from worrying about things. Even if they lack spontaneous communication, female au pairs are ready to pay this price to have more predictable lives, and they prefer to accept a more 'distant' culture in order to enjoy a better developed and more predictable social infrastructure.

These positive feelings about hosting locations increase if current au pairs are satisfied with their relationships with their host families or former au pairs managed to stay in the country. They start to identify themselves with a new place and stop living mentally in sending countries. Former au pairs who were able to find themselves in the labour market and, therefore, improved their class position in the country develop even more positive attitudes towards Norwegians. For example, Larissa had negative experience with her first host family: 'I used to hate Norwegians, when I was an au pair. Because when you live in, you have nowhere to go, and you see their faults. Now I can remain casual with people, and everybody around seems so nice!' (Larissa, 27, Russian, former au pair, 5 years in Norway, tour operator). Au pairs start describing Norwegians as active and sporty, as well as welcoming and friendly towards well-educated newcomers who are ready to contribute to the development of the receiving society. They reinterpret an image of 'cold Norwegians' as those who respect others' space. The greater distance that Norwegians maintain gives female au pairs more freedom and makes relationships more positive and affable and emancipates them from social pressure and hegemonic constructions of gender roles:

I'm 26 now. I know that all the relatives and friends in Ukraine are already waiting. "When are you gonna get married? When are you gonna have a kid?" But I'd like to study for a little longer, study here, in Norway, and maybe somewhere else too. Maybe go somewhere after I'm done [with] school, work somewhere else. (Katia, 26, Ukrainian, former au pair, 3 years in Norway, MA student)

CIS au pairs find that the autonomy and individualism of Norwegian culture differ from the collectivistic and close-knit relationships they experienced in post-Soviet societies. Newly arrived au pairs relate Norwegian lifestyles and manners of communication as arrogance and boredom, and Norwegians seem too different to want to get closer to them. Gradually, stranger fetishism starts working – even though Norwegians seem culturally and economically distant, their living conditions evoke a desire to stay here longer. Timidity and disaffection disappear as au pairs discover positive aspects of life in Norway – everyday safety and possibilities to make individual choices that female au pairs value a lot. Cultural otherness of Norwegians is not perceived so acutely any more, and isolation changes its meaning – from a lack of social networks and human affection to an opportunity for self-development and emancipation from social pressure. Moving from the level of localities, let us take a closer look at how the au pairs perceive the realm of household.

Norwegian relationships in the private sphere: advantages and lessons

As insiders, au pairs have a rare chance to observe gender relations in Norwegian families. For many of them, a female host was the main

contact person. If the relationships with her turn out problematic and do not get better in the long run, a host lady gets a label of 'bossy spouse' from an au pair and begins to represent all Norwegian women in his or her worldview. In this pattern, a host man is seen as suppressed, which is contrasted with au pairs' cultural experience: 'In the average Norwegian family the husband is emasculated. So imagine, the wife runs the whole show, and he's walking around like he's not even there' (Polina, 28, Ukrainian, second year au pair).

Another mode of private gender relations that come up in the au pairs' narratives is based on friendly relationships with the hosts and enables au pairs to distinguish a pattern of a participant father – very attractive for the girls from CIS:

What I really like about Norwegian men is that they take care of their children. We don't have anything like that. In my country, a dad is a dad. He works. Of course, he can play with a child, but he does not clean, cook – nothing else. Here it is normal that a man comes home and cooks, takes the children to bed, bathes them, takes them for a walk, and all this is normal. And I like it. (Eva, 24, Ukrainian, second year au pair)

The interviewees can observe that Norwegian gender culture is very dissimilar to Eastern European cultures, in which domestic work is an entirely female burden and men and women are not equal partners. The female interviewees who planned to settle and start their own families in Norway considered au pairing to be a school for creating an egalitarian family. They learned what middle- and upper-class Norwegian men like to eat, how they spend their weekends, how they treat their wives and kids, how they behave in cases of divorce and what kind of lifestyles they usually lead. In other words, they learn 'what to expect from Norwegians' and 'how to be a good Norwegian wife', although my interviewees opposed themselves to marriage migrants and preferred intellectual investments in education in order to stay in Norway (see Tkach 2014: 145–147).

As (former) childcare workers, the interviewees witnessed an encounter of two different parenting cultures. According to the narratives, in Norway, parenting means minimisation of pressure and limits on children, whilst in Russian and other related cultures, to be a good parent means relating to discipline, control and high protection. First, the Norwegian style of childcare has been interpreted as lack of care that relates to the abovementioned image of 'cold Norwegians'. For example, CIS au pairs find conditions in Norwegian kindergartens too tough for little children, for they 'spend too much time outside', 'do not have warm meals', 'go without midday sleep' and so on. Second, Norwegian parenting, as au pairs view it, presumes a minimisation of control, discipline, and education. They were surprised by toddlers who wear diapers until the age of 3–4 years and sit in a stroller until the age of 5 years as well as students of primary school who do not receive homework until the sixth grade, according to the au pairs' knowledge. For CIS au pairs, Norwegian children seem spoiled, lazy and lacking in motivation and concentration. Au pairs associate

the infantilisation of children with Norwegian welfare capitalism that provides free higher education and other benefits to everybody.

However, the Norwegian parenting culture had some elements that seemed positive to au pairs. Namely, how host parents deal with their children – on equal terms and with enormous patience. My interviewees confessed that they became impressed that highly educated, intelligent Norwegians do not raise their voice and do not spank children, but explain, convince, talk to them patiently and for a long time, and seem to never say 'No' or mock them (cf. Gullestad 2006: 165, 167):

I appreciated that they gave their children freedom. They never said, "Go there! Stand here!" They never commanded. Instead they always said, "Would you like this? Or would you like that?" They got them interested. I liked that so much! They also had close relationships with each other. I've never heard them yelling at the kids or arguing in front of them! (Chulpan, 32, Russian, former au pair, 6 years in Norway, on maternity leave)

Even though some participants viewed that host parents can afford being kind and patient to their children only thanks to au pairs who do all the routine and dirty housework, they also admired such relationships. CIS au pairs begin to believe that decrease in control and avoidance of pressure on children have a positive impact on their development. They re-evaluate the culture of control and oppression that they grew accustomed to in their home countries and considered the norm and perceive that it humiliates and traumatises children. In the narrative interviews, a thoughtful (Scandinavian) approach to childrearing, in contrast to spontaneity and frequent outbursts, frequently observed in the CIS counties, has been associated with societies having strong rule of law. For instance, Lidia believes that juvenile justice holds back Norwegian parents and makes them treating their children softer and with more patience:

Here, they have social protection in case you traumatize your child. God forbid, you say something wrong or offend a child! You might end up losing your kid. That's why my family was very accepting, they were afraid of the law. "I'd better explain this to him." She [host lady] would spend hours talking to him [her son]. (Lidia, 28, Ukraine, former au pair, 2 years in Norway, studies and works)

Living with host families, au pairs get access to others' culture as a resource in their own self-making (Skeggs 2004: 177), which is not only gendered but also classed. They have two years to observe patterns of leisure, consumption, financial decision-making, standards of cleanliness, clothing, cooking, spending family events and so on. Some of them have a chance to travel with their hosts across Norway and worldwide. Polina gives one such example:

The [hosts'] house was high-end. Actually, I wanted to end up exactly there. I wanted to be somewhere, where you can really learn things: how to live in a luxury environment, which brands

those people wear, how to take care of expensive clothes, what kind of plates they eat off. It was a high-status family. (Polina, 28, Ukrainian, second year au pair)

For well-educated and skilled CIS au pairs, wealthy dual-career host families and their lifestyles becomes an object of 'stranger fetishism'. Au pairs reflect on their current position and understand that in order to reproduce such a lifestyle, they have to belong to the relevant social milieu. They perceive au pairing as temporal 'downgrading' and think over how they would enhance their position and attain equality with middle-class Norwegians. CIS au pairs, especially newcomers, figure out that they lack cultural and economic resources to be treated by natives on equal term. As I spoke with Masha, a 27-year-old second-year au pair from Moldova, she imagined her possible future job, pointing at the boutique visible through the café window:

I would not refuse an offer to work in such a boutique, for example. I was told I was a good candidate for this job. However, my Norwegian is not good enough yet to serve the customers easily and effortlessly. This kind of shop is attended by ladies who look down on migrants. They are used to wearing mink coats. They think they are better than others. I can also afford a mink coat. But I can buy it not for NOK 20000 as they do; I can go home and buy this fur coat for NOK 2000, and look just like them.

Masha sees that her language and professional skills are not being appreciated by wealthy Norwegians, and she finds it unfair. Yet, she believes that simulation of equality, for example, buying luxury goods cheaper based on the price difference on them in Norway and her home country, is the only way so far to minimise social distance between herself and natives and feel closer to them. Nonetheless, actively thinking about their future, au pairs get inspired to use educational and then matrimonial strategies to stay in Norway as equals to attractive social groups (Tkach 2014). In order to overcome social distance with Norwegians, they tend to increase it between themselves and other social groups that they prescribe marginal positions to. First, they view their peers who stayed behind as less fortunate, immobile people, who are not brave enough to change their lives. Au pairs see themselves as winners who were not scared to start a new life abroad. Second, trying to create sameness with Norwegians, CIS au pairs draw cultural and racial boundaries between themselves and other migrant groups, for example, mail-order brides, domestic workers or refugees:

I don't understand why Norway accepts refugees. "We must support everyone," they say. Alright then, support me! I have a university degree, I've learned Norwegian in a matter of 6 months, I can be helpful to this country, and have white children with a Norwegian man. I'm a Christian, we usually have many children. Refugees and social dependents are leeches on the system. (Masha, 27, Moldovan, second year au pair)

Séverine Durin (2015: 164) also observed that the Latin American au pairs in France differentiate themselves from other ethnic minorities and express a sense of disdain towards them. She considers it as a strategy of people who are seen and categorised as 'foreign' or 'migrant' to be different from stigmatised groups. The same conclusion is applicable to the participants of my research who frequently expressed racist attitudes to other non-EU migrants (Pakistani, Moroccan, etc.), seeing themselves as more appropriate citizens suited to Norwegian society. The same distancing from other immigrants has been done towards other incoming migrants from the CIS. Though au pairs lack social contacts, they do not look for the company of compatriots or at least try to minimise communication with them. On the contrary, as time goes on, they attend Russian discos and Ukrainian concerts less frequently, and increasingly go for winter sports, and cook and learn to like Norwegian traditional Christmas dishes. They seek to play down their cultural differences and try to perform Norwegian cultural repertoires. Female au pairs believe that they have enough cultural and educational resources to achieve this and seek to marry a Norwegian man to build a family on the egalitarian ideas that they have come to experience during their au pair stay. Living with their hosts, au pairs do not position themselves just as au pairs, but rather as potential members of the receiving society, learning its rules and norms.

Conclusion: from gaps to bridges

This article adds to previous analyses of the au pair's experience as strategic multi-faceted work – domestic, emotional, intellectual and networking – that leads CIS au pairs to stay and live in Norway (Tkach 2014). It draws attention to another facet of au pairs' work – agentic boundary work or fronting that gears au pairs' feelings of belonging to a new society and their efforts to integration within it.

CIS au pairs pursue boundary work from the very first day in a new country where they encounter with a more transparent system of regulations. They see their move as one from underdeveloped post-Soviet capitalism, where one has to work long hours and insecurely, to a capitalist society with a generous welfare system and a well-regulated institutional framework, a society where one can stay relaxed and safe. They oppose harsh post-Soviet realities to what they view as easier, more secure, fairer and more rewarding conditions of Norwegian socialism. They see that a new environment provides more advanced structural and institutional possibilities (equality under the law, social welfare, human rights protections and everyday safety). Yet, it demands and constitutes another pattern of subjectivity – free, egalitarian, individualistic, respecting others' privacy and obeying the laws.

Attitudes towards Norwegian culture and Norwegians are not unified. They develop as an extended process through the dialectics of distance and closeness. It can start by drawing sharp boundaries

of distrust to people and hostility towards the receiving culture. This distance enables a newcomer to create a comfort zone and protect himself or herself from uncertainty. Gradually, au pairs drift from a rigid black-and-white picture of their new surrounding world to a more diverse and empirically based worldview of that new context. Trying to bridge cultural and social gaps, au pairs construct their self-positioning and belonging to the Norwegian society (cf. Yuval-Davis 2011: 17) through interest towards the Other. As amateur anthropologists, they use two years of au pairing to accumulate practical knowledge and try to apply it 'as a native' and to remain in the country. Even though some of them experienced tensions, misunderstandings and abuse in their host families, the au pairs tend to describe this period as 'cultural exchange' giving them deep knowledge about 'what to expect from Norwegians' and how to 'do Norwegianness'.

However, former au pairs experience that their new cultural resources do not completely bridge the gap between them and the host community. After 3–10 years stay in Norway, they can still make futile efforts to build networks with Norwegians (Tkach 2014: 145). They believe that inequality and social isolation remain problems for them in Norway, but it seems possible, though complicated, to overcome them based on their knowledge of how Norwegian infrastructure and culture operate.

Gradually, stranger fetishism as a mechanism of boundary work turns from fear and hostility towards the Other to the appropriation of some aspects of life in a new country. Au pairs not only see differences but also try to perform similarities and get closer to the most attractive groups of well-educated and well-paid Norwegians they lived with. Knowledge of rules of communication in public institutions and neighbourhoods allows them to actively participate in Norwegian social life – taking part in the language and processional training sessions and new university courses or become volunteers in NGOs or ethnic and religious group activities. Avoiding social pressure, female au pairs postpone their marital choices and invest in their education and professional growth, therefore, improving their class position in Norwegian society. Former au pairs try to diligently follow the lessons they got in the host families and make proper class strategies in consumption, leisure, housing rent and so on. Therefore, they appropriate aspects of upper-class Norwegian culture in order to enjoy Norwegian social institutions and try to enhance their quality of life. Apparently, the resources that CIS au pairs get during their participation in the programme and thereafter seem quite unique to them and useless elsewhere outside of Norway.

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Olga Tkach holds a PhD in sociology and works as a senior researcher at the Centre for Independent Social Research (CISR) in St. Petersburg, Russia. Her current research interests include migration and mobility, domestic work and home, post-socialist transformations. Recent publications are 'Labour Migration and the Contradictory Logic of Integration in Russia', in *The EU's Eastern Neighbourhood: Migration, Borders and Regional Stability*, eds. I. Liikanen, J.W. Scott, T. Sotkasiira, Abingdon and New York, Routledge, 2016, pp. 201–217 (with O. Brednikova); "'You Are Responsible for Your People". The Role of Diaspora Leaders in the Governance of Immigrant Integration in Russia', *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, Vol. 24, No.2, Spring 2016, pp. 173–198 (with M. Berg-Nordlie).

Notes

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2. This and other names of interviewees used in this article are pseudonyms.
3. The statistics is provided by Peter Akre, a senior advisor at the Analysis and Development Department, UDI.
4. In the period of the research, the payments correspondently comprised NOK 4,000 (approximately 500 Euro) and NOK 6,000 (approximately 750 Euro).

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