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# Doing a field research in an intercultural labyrinth of a small spa (a ball of thread included)

## Abstract

The article bases on ethnographical field research made in intercultural environment of little Slovakian spa. The author choses a place where different social groups co-exist: spa clients, spa employees and residents of the spa village. The general question is how the local quality of this environment is perceived and what are the contents of this exact idea of local quality, but the text mostly reveals a few aspects of the field research experience, the role of anthropologist, problems with finding informants and possible ways of fitting into the rythm of live in the spa resort.

**Keywords:** field research, spa, intercultural environment

## Introduction

Being an ethnologist means mastering the art of doing a field research. Since the first encounters with this special method of research, students of ethnology are often faced with questions not only regarding their field of study but also questions regarding themselves as personalities. Can they understand the complexity of the field with its richness of people and situations, and do they have the skill of describing and analyzing the many different ways in which these people live their lives? Each research is special, as ethnologists learned on the famous case of Margaret Mead versus Derek Freeman where Freeman (1983) researched the same topic in the same field and had very different findings, which led him to conclude that Mead's findings were not accurate. What he did not realize was that he had a very different position in the field that Mead had and, also, he did his research a few years after that. What is a week or even a day in lives of men. They can change drastically in an instant. Even things that appear to be set in stone, such as traditions, are subject to change. It takes longer, but they do anyway. A good eth-

nologist knows that his presence in the field makes this field different, he or she is the centre of a changed reality. As the research progresses, and he or she becomes more or less a part of the field, he or she then faces another challenge. How to be close to the field, but not too close. How to be friendly, but not too friendly. Because becoming part of one group in the field can restrict from being part of other groups that could be fundamental for further research. The balancing of these skills is not an easy task, but it comes with experience and a will to enter every field with excitement and curiosity.

## Basic information on PhD thesis research

In this paper I will share my experiences of doing a field research for a PhD thesis currently in the making, entitled *Being special, being local as a distinguishing category in intercultural relations within global world (a case of a small Slovak spa)*. The focus of the thesis is on an intercultural environment of a not very known spa in the Záhorie region of Slovakia located in the village Smrdáky, and how the local quality of this environment is perceived and what the contents of this exact idea are. The overall theoretical background of the thesis is based on the work of Berger and Luckmann (1991) where the focus is on the creation of human knowledge of reality in an everyday nontheoretical life. For my thesis the contents of these creations are important, not the very process of creation.

The research is divided into two parts. The first part was very complex from the ethnographic point of view, which was completely new for the researcher. It was conducted in the spring/summer of 2012 for nearly a month in the region on the very west of Slovakia in the village of Smrdáky.<sup>1</sup> This region, called Záhorie, is known for its special dialect and close cultural relations and proximity to Morava of Czech Republic and Austria. Slovakia is rich in thermal waters and springs,<sup>2</sup> however, in this region, the chosen village is the only occurrence of thermal water, thus spa. This occurrence is also special in another way – the water has one of the highest amounts of sulfur in the whole Europe, being very beneficial for the people suffering from skin diseases – the results are nearly miraculous.<sup>3</sup> The spa lies in a small valley near the municipal centre Senica, and is an integral part of the village, in the past focused more on viticulture and agriculture. The spa village and the surrounding area form a special space defined by Ladislav Lenovský as a spa microregion,<sup>4</sup> a relatively homogenous area mostly effected by the spa, for example a catchment area of the spa employees, the emergence appearance of private accommodation, the general public's interest in spa matters and so on. Short

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<sup>1</sup> Name derived from the Slovak word „to stink“ as a reference to the sulfur-heavy hot springs.

<sup>2</sup> For more see Husovská, Takátsová 2002.

<sup>3</sup> Symptoms of the people suffering from psoriasis almost completely vanish after several spa stays.

<sup>4</sup> For more see Lenovský 2009.

information about the spa history will provide a more vivid image of the field. The spa was founded by Jozef Vietoris, a lower nobleman in 1832. It has a colorful history of owners, including the state during socialism and currently belonging to the Danubius Hotels Group, a Hungarian company along with the most famous Slovak spa – Piešťany. The last change of ownership still can be seen in the field, which is completely understandable, thanks to the length of the previous socio-political organisation of the whole society. Since the founding of the spa in the 19th century, visitors included a variety of people from different social groups, noble people had a special noble spa building called “panský kúpel”, commoners were also served in the houses of the villagers. People from different countries have found their way to this small spa since the early days of its existence. Today foreign visitors in this spa come mostly from Russia, Arabic countries, Eastern and Middle Europe, but in recent years there is also a number of visitors from Western Europe. But as one of my respondents puts it “Westerners still don’t trust our medical tourism, in many cases they know nothing of its existence.” This is a very interesting topic, related with many (or a few?) ways Slovakia in which presents itself in an international tourism arena. It is unfortunate but irrelevant to the focus of this research. In the future maybe. What is definitely relevant is that a small Slovak village with the spa makes a fully defined intercultural environment where the occurrence of intercultural communication<sup>5</sup> happens daily.

With this situation in mind and for a rich and complex research sample were chosen three social groups:

1. Employees of the spa at all levels, from cleaning ladies to higher management, respondents domestic and foreign.
2. Spa guests, foreign and domestic.
3. The residents and officials of the village (mayor, priest...).

This sample was a natural choice, but since the aim of the first part of the research was an ethnography of the field, it has proven very helpful in understanding the environment. For further research, the sample will stay divided in these groups, but more specified individuals will be chosen for semi-structured ethnographic interviews.

Methods used in the first part of the research were classic ethnographic tools – participant observation and ethnographic interview, while the participant observation had a much larger role, due to better understanding of the reality of the field – the intercultural environment. In the second part of the research planned for the summer of 2013, a bigger focus will be on the ethnographic interviews conducted with a significant number of participants from all three the groups of the research sample.

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<sup>5</sup> I work with definition by Jan Průcha: The process of interaction occurring in various situations, where communicating partners come from different language or cultural backgrounds including different ethnics, nations, religions. This communication is determined by the specificity of languages, cultures and value systems of the communicating partners.

## The labyrinth of a small spa intercultural environment

Entering a new field for an ethnologist is like entering the beasts burrow for Theseus – all the dangers are there, but at the end the beautiful Ariadne awaits – a fantastic research transformed in a captivating and rich ethnography, that takes readers to infinite realities of human cultures. For me, entering a spa in Záhorie region was a very strong experience. To rely completely on yourself, and on the skills you learned during the studies, and to really go there and start, to address complete strangers face to face, to want them to give you their time – this is the daily bread of an ethnologist. But as the time progresses, you find courage, you better understand how the field works, you know who to address and when, you get the feeling that this will be a great interview, but maybe not this time, maybe the third time you conduct it. The longer you stay in the field, the more your self-confidence grows. One of the mistakes I now know I made, was leaving the field in the middle of the research for a week. As I was leaving I felt I already belonged to the community, everyone said hi, they themselves wanted to be interviewed, not because I asked them. After returning to the field, I basically had to start all over again with building the trust between me and my respondents -- many of the visitors had ended their spa stay, a lot of employees I came to know left for vacations – the field changed significantly. Since you as a researcher, and a human being have to take occasional psycho-hygienic breaks from the field, you have to be ready to face the consequences.

Another thing that I noticed when I analysed the collected data from the field was the importance of those who introduce you – from whom the people in the researched community know about you. I was doing the research with the approval of the spa management – I had no other choice if I wanted to be ethically correct. Thus, I was perceived in many occasions as someone from the company, and many respondents acted accordingly. Another thing that had a significant impact on my image in the field was a respondent who became my guide naturally through out the entire course of my research in the field. He was a spa regular for about 20 years and knew every employee by their first name. He knew almost every resident in the village and the surrounding villages and the names of their kids and pets and so on. What was even more fascinating was the fact that he was a foreigner, but spoke the Slovak language at a very good level. He knew all the inside stories, so all I had to do was basically listen to him. At first I did, it was so easy. But then I realized, that this was his point of view, all the data I collected this way I had to filter later, and then see for myself if they work from other points of view as well, in other words, if they are valid. It is important when collecting data to make notes on almost everything that will later illustrate the context of your research situation.

If you want to be honest with your respondents you have to apply the ethical principles of ethnographic research, first by saying who you are, what are you doing, and how it will affect your respondents. In a spa, where people usually go

to rest, relax and cure themselves, they tend to seek solitude and quiet and are not interested in anything that involves a lot of activity, or so I was told – to be very careful who to address, when, where, to always tell them the intent of my interest in a conversation. And so I did, but it did not always benefit my research. Most notable was the case of the spa hairdresser. This was the interview I was very excited about, hairdressers usually know their community very well. I wanted to make it a little more interesting so I came as an ordinary customer seeking a new hairdo. As I sat there, my hairdo was beginning to change and we started talking. I introduced myself, told the basic information about my stay in the spa and that was where the conversation ended. I went away with a pretty nice hair, but no data whatsoever. Later, when I analysed this episode, I realised that no data was also data, and not a bad one so to say. When I will return to the field, I will definitely address this lady in a different manner, where it will not be such a shock for her.

Some interviews were, on the other hand, a shock for me. There was a spa guest whom I met while I was off duty having a coffee – not doing any participant observation. But as I learned during this research project, an ethnographer is never off duty while in the field, not even when he or she wants some quality time with a cup of coffee in the sun. He approached me questioning if I was the researcher doing research here. He said he would be a good respondent, because he is a very discontented guest of the spa. He invited me inside the cafe where TV was on – the Summer Olympics in London, which he wanted to watch a little. What he started saying had little to do with his dissatisfaction as a spa guest, he told me his life story, his experiences in other spas in Slovakia, this was one of the best qualitative interview I had there but it came with a price. I am a non-smoker and this cafe was absolutely filled with smoke largely due to my respondent who smoked maybe two packages of cigarettes during the interview, but also from other tables. So many times I wanted to leave and breath fresh air but the circumstances would not allow it. Anyway, I survived.

Being an ethnologist also means taking little risks. I was invited for a walk around the village by a complete stranger, who said that he will show me something that might interest me. It was a beautiful Saturday, I had no interviews planned so I went. And it turned out to be an amazing insight in a free time of a spa employee, her friend and her husband. They were enjoying the shade and the wind on a hot summer day on a little hill above the village in a vineyard cottage. What a fantastic participant observation of a way of life.

Going to a neighbouring village for an interview was another risk I took. I had the interview with a priest in the village far away from my spa village. It was risky because I did not know I was going to get back to my accomodation. I went there with some other spa guests who all went for the mass in the neighbouring village. My interview with the priest was supposed to be the next day in the spa village, but he had to change his plans because of me so that I could interview him. We had to do it that evening after the mass in another village after the last bus left. Again I was surprised greatly how it all turned out. The interview was very rich in details since this priest is very active in the community, he knows his people

very well and does a lot of work, other than strictly church related. The interview continued less formally while he accompanied me as the sun set through the vineyards to my spa village.

The third time I took a little risk was when I said yes to a tennis match with a man who turned out to be a well skilled player. I already knew he was a spa regular for many years – a potential good respondent. What I also already knew was that I was a no tennis pro and this might end very soon. But again, I was pleasantly surprised. After playing for a while, it started raining. At first only a little, so we continued playing. But soon a terrible summer storm started and since the tennis courts were deep in the spa park, we had to hide in a gazebo where he finally agreed to grant me an interview. I never took big risks, being in a field alone is a tough situation. But not being afraid is very important, because then the field opens to you with all its colors and magic of the everyday life.

For the second part of my research I plan to return to this spa village, collect more in depth data and write an influential PhD thesis on how people perceive the local quality of an intercultural environment. And since I completely identify with Spradley's words on the reasons for doing ethnography,<sup>6</sup> I plan to apply the findings in a form of various intercultural manuals that will ease the multi-levelled communication in spa. First manual will be intended for the higher management of the spa, so that they understand better the point of view of their guests and employees. It is not some naive thought that I would like to carry out, but a much needed insight to spheres where the people from higher management usually do not look or look only for a small period of time, depriving them of the context. But it comes with the job, they are not there for the partial stuff. For the partial stuff there are the employees who for instance have to interact on a daily basis with people from very different cultural backgrounds. For them my other intercultural manual will be intended which will hopefully help them gain better selfconfidence interacting with foreign guests and gain better intercultural competence. And the last manual will be for the foreign guests of the spa, an intercultural guide of the spa with a qualitative twist. As I learned from many interviews with the foreign guests of the spa, most notably from Western Europe, they were experiencing a cultural shock upon their first visit to the spa. The food, the service, the village, the community – they were not talking about the quality, but of the basic nature of these things – they were so very different. Knowing that this is a natural feeling in a new environment, the intercultural manual could ease the adjustment by highlighting the context of the more specific manifestations of the local quality. During my research I came to an understanding that these kinds of manuals would benefit the community. They were expressed both literally – certain respondents were already looking forward to this type of my research outcome even during my first days in the field – and figuratively – by improving the image of the spa.

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<sup>6</sup> The intent to understand the human kind, but also to serve the needs of humanity, from the ethnographic interview.

## Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to pick a few aspects of the field research experience and to contemplate on what it means to be an ethnologist and a good ethnographer with some experience behind me. The paper is intended for students of ethnology whose studies are aimed at the mastering of one special set of skills, the one that makes our discipline so exciting – the art of doing a qualitative field research. The ball of thread mentioned in the title of the paper refers to the ways young inexperienced aspiring ethnologists can approach different situations during their very own research fields. It can give them courage, or serve as a guide what not to do. In this paper traits that are opposite to each other were also highlighted. Becoming a member of the community, without loosing detachment, not being afraid to take risks, but being carefull at the same time, being honest and ethical, but getting data even though it is harder this way. All these traits are accompanied by the fresh experiences from the field of my PhD thesis research in Záhorie region, where I try to understand the way of life of a small Slovakian spa and its guests, employees and residents, foreign and domestic. The paper is more of a guide, or an inspiration than a theoretical study. The stage at which my PhD thesis is currently is based on an inductive approach to the research, from the most simple parts to more elaborate ones. In the near future more theoretical concepts will be added to the analysis of the collected data slowly becoming a PhD Thesis that I will hopefully but certainly gladly present on yet another Ethnology without borders conference.

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