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Doing fieldwork in the Macedonian countryside

Abstract

The text is dedicated to the reflections on the author's own ethnographic field research in the rural areas of the Republic of Macedonia, which has been carried out since 2011 to specify the strategies which local inhabitants develop to manage their everyday reality and practices. The author discusses the factors which influence an ethnographic field research and presents the reflexivity and awareness of the research process. She also focuses on researcher's personality and individual features, on how the locals accept a stranger in their private space. The several key moments are underlined like coming to the field and its impact on the further activity through the reflection if the field which precedes next steps, gaining the confidence and respect, difficulties that the researcher faces in communication etc. All these moments (and many others) should be considered as an inevitable part of the work.

Keywords: Macedonia, ethnographic field research, rural ethnography, life strategies

According to a common definition, doing ethnographic field research means qualitative method consisting of collecting and recording data (Kandert 2005). Activities of ethnographic data collection takes place in the field and it uses a variety of techniques – most often semi-structured interviews and participant observation, visual methods etc. Data collection – the same as the subsequent analysis and writing an ethnographic text – is influenced by many factors and circumstances. A researcher should take these facts into consideration and try to reflect them as much as possible.

I have been doing my research in Macedonia since autumn 2011 and the main goal of my work is to identify the changes in **an everyday life** of village communities in the Balkans which have occurred during several last decades, focusing on their **life and economic strategies**. This topic I have been working out in my PhD thesis. I have chosen two villages for a case study – the first one with orthodox Christian inhabitants, located in a mountainous area (1,200 meters above sea

level), inhabited by 50 locals; and another one – a big Muslim village, with 2,300 inhabitants, both located in Central Macedonia in the region of Poreche. These two localities are quite opposite cases in many aspects: while the region of Upper Poreche, where the first village is situated, is highly depopulated, some villages are deserted and come alive only during the summer when the people who left the village come back to work on their property, the other place is not so empty as the first one and it is sufficiently populated. Other dissimilarities consist of religious faith, ethnicity, occupations, strategy of money making and living standard, too.

In this contribution I would like to present my ethnographic fieldwork in Macedonia and to identify basic issues which I encountered during the research. The main attention is paid to the research in the first site – the Christian village. Here I focus on coming to the field and problems during the initial stage of the research, then, I deal with the matters connected with my stay in the field site, as communication rules, gift reciprocity, researcher's obligations after leaving the field and lack of privacy. Lastly, I would like to draw a comparison between two field sites I have visited and depict similarities and differences between them.

Reflections in/on the field

Formerly, the traditional Czech ethnography in its main discourse was only a little interested in reflection on a researcher him/herself in the field, on data collection and follow-up textual production. According to a positivist approach, the researcher was only a “collector” of “objective” data given in advance. Researchers were putting down traditional technologies, crafts, folklore, customs and material culture according to specified categories and the subsequent analysis was considered a relevant description of reality. The situation was similar in Western Anthropology – not “the experience in the field which made you an initiate, but only the objective data you have brought back” were evaluated (Rabinow 1977: 4). During the 1970s we could notice the reflexivity turn (Emerson 2001a: 20). Some Western ethnographers started to deal with the social reality as with the product of researcher's efforts to describe it and explain, not as with a really objective entity, which has to be depicted. The reflexive approach understands the social reality as a construct – a result of efforts to project, describe and explain what we are researching (Emerson 2001a: 20), and within a reflection of writing fieldnotes and ethnographic texts the ethnography itself as a “double process of textual production and reproduction” (Emerson 2001b: 353). During this time, texts about personal experience from ethnographer's diaries slowly started to be published. Often, the experience from the field was neither positive nor favourable.¹

¹ After the publication of the scandalous and controversial *Diary of Malinowski* (Malinowski 1967), for the first time, the other (human) side of the ethnographer during research emerges. Indeed, Malinowski's wife published the diaries written by her husband during his fieldwork in the

After the preliminary methodological and theoretical preparation, studying literature etc. the researcher sets out to the field – to collect data, in most cases for the topic given in advance. The concept of European Ethnology applied in the Czech Republic, in contrary to anthropological research, does not involve a long-term stay in the field site. In the ethnographic fieldwork in our country the repeated short-terms in the field predominate. According to this practice, I chose this technique for my research in Macedonia as well. The reasons were mostly low financial support and related to it – a lack of time.

However, in the study of everyday life – as we often call ethnology today – the longest stay in the field, the better. Then we can come to the field without strictly formulated hypotheses, using observation and interviews to document everyday activities of the community members, to understand the community functioning and to identify phenomena determining the rhythm of life of the observed community. The initial part of the preliminary preparation for the ethnographic field research is language training. Thus, I had been learning Macedonian language for six weeks before coming to the field at the University of Skopje and before that I had been studying it on my own, too. Furthermore, I had been learning Bulgarian, which is closely related to Macedonian, since 2004.

The personality of researcher strongly influences the whole research process, not only during the time of his/her stay in the field site. In the course of entire communication process with the local inhabitants, it is gender and age which is of the biggest significance at the beginning. These conditions determine mutual communication and all of its rules. Other factors which influence the course of the research are personal traits of character, experience, communication abilities and skills, language skills or inner motives and emotions. The researcher him/herself has to make a decision what and where exactly he/she will study. He/she has to “construct” his/her own field, choose activities which he/she will observe and particular informants, define the most important phenomena, decide what to write down in fieldnotes and, finally, decide “how observed events will be represented” (Sánchez-Jankowski 2002: 145). All these aspects deals with a hot topic of the subjectivity in the research process (Walkerline 2002).

Coming to the field

Firstly, I would like to discuss the moment of coming to the field. Until now, I have spent more than eight weeks in the field in Macedonia – six weeks in the first locality coming there four times, two weeks in the second one, coming twice. The first situations which I found crucial when I got in the place of my research was the choice of a contact person, the first contact with locals, and social status of the researcher – how I was perceived in the observed community.

Trobriand Islands. The Diaries show a man forced to live in a place he did not like, fighting fear and prejudice (Gallinaro 2009).

First of all, it is important to get confidence and respect of the community members. This is usually arranged via the first contact persons who introduce the researcher into the field and by means of them he/she makes other contacts. Sometimes, these people become researcher's key informants – people who dedicate a lot of time to him/her and who are important “source of information” for us (Hendl 2008: 195).

At the beginning of my research in the Macedonian countryside, working on my first “case” in the Christian village, it was the contact to the former local representative which was crucial for me. I obtained it from his son, a student of anthropology at the University of Skopje. He was respected in the whole “microregion” and well known in a lot of villages. He recommended me a family that I could stay with and made a connection with its members. I was received by the family warmly and remarkably quickly. They told me I could stay as long as I wanted. Members of my host family took a role of my informants as well, and the children, especially a 14-year old girl, became my gatekeeper – she introduced me almost in every household in the village. Later, I realized that the choice of the family was not accidental – it was the most appropriate household in the village. There was no bachelor or widower in the family, and there were two young girls – 14 and 16 years old. This shows how I was viewed by the community – first of all as a young single girl/woman, coming here for some reason, and secondly – as a student of “old traditions” and a foreigner, too.

Thus, I could get into the connection with the other members of village community, which was quite small (about 50 people). Up to the third stay in the locality, I knew everybody in the village. Now, I started to establish and maintain closer relations, especially with the host family – for the daughters and their relatives living in Skopje I became a friend, for the parents I became “like their own daughter” as they said. Was it because of their first daughter, who died when she was four months old and who was born almost on the same day as me? The fact they accepted me so quickly is connected with the typical Balkan hospitality and trust. In many cultures in the Balkans, the guest is sent from “superior forces” and it is honor to host him. Of course, one can be a guest only for a few days, after that he/she gains a status and role (e.g. a friend, neighbour, “adopted daughter”)² and starts to incorporate in the community. At this moment, the people hosting the researcher become more genuine, they begin to behave naturally and stop being polite all the time. In this moment the researcher gradually begins to uncover real everyday life in the community. Sometimes this phase of the research is not advantageous to the investigator, because there are many questions the locals leave without answering – incessant questioning simply becomes annoying. In my

² The experience of the Canadian anthropologist Jean Briggs became inspiration for my own reflection in the field. She worked for more than one year among an Inuit community and was adopted by one of the families as a daughter. Briggs writes about her initial high status (she supplied the community with tea and kerosene), about its loss on the grounds of socially unacceptable behavior (e.g. short temper, speaking in a loud voice), about her “silly” questions or the lack of privacy (Briggs 1970: 17–28)

opinion, in this phase participant observation is the preferred technique of data collection and the choice of other informant is preferable for a semi-structured interview.

Communication rules

While communicating with the locals, I realized it was my gender and age that were crucial. In my opinion, primarily the gender and age of the person determine his/her social status and communication rules in many cultural systems. Doing research in Macedonia, there is another important moment I have to mention – my position of a researcher and of a foreigner. Having come to the Macedonian field, I was a young woman first and only then a Czech ethnologist. I had only slight problems with the language because I speak the language fluently, but I had to deal with all the advantages and disadvantages that this position concludes (Haukanes 2004: 29–30). For example, my Slavonic origin and relative cultural closeness to the Macedonian Slavs was a big advantage. Moreover, I was perceived as a person coming from quite developed country, located near Germany, where some of the local men had worked during the 1970s and 80s. Actually, every researcher, if he/she is not of local origin, come to the field as a stranger.

In spite of the initial hospitality and kindness of Macedonians, it is quite difficult to get genuine trust of the community members and encourage them to answer the required questions. A Polish anthropologist Józef Obrębski, who spent half a year in a village in Poreche in 1933, wrote about his own field experience that:

Macedonian field is extremely difficult for the ethnographer. Here you deal with people that are always willing to treat you as a guest, reducing the contact with them to a formal polite conversation, not wanting to admit any of their originalities, something which, according to their opinion, would be in collision with the ideas, views and the customs of the stranger. Women, on the other hand, hide with great enthusiasm all their knowledge, fearing that if they reveal it to a stranger it could be used by him on their expense. This is why every piece of information should be fought for, each fact should be discovered and spied. (...) The first weeks, even the first months, I was brought to real desperation, until I started to control the situation (Obrębski 2002: 101–103; Risteski 2011).³

My experience is not comparable with the one of Obrębski's, I spent weeks, not months, in the village community, but it is interesting for comparison. Naturally, I met both very trusting and mistrustful people. However, I gained a certain amount of respect among the local people, especially elderly men and women.

³ During the 1930s Obrębski spent six months in the village of Volche in the region of Poreche, doing his field research. He was led by the idea to find out the most isolated and archaic forms of life in the Slavonic world. He studied the social culture of South Slavs, family patterns and later – traditional magical practice. His reflections on the beginnings of the fieldwork we can find in the letter sent to his professor, Kazimierz Moszyński. The letter clearly expresses the emotions and fears of Obrębski in relation to the Macedonian field.

My age group, the young people and teenagers were more mistrustful towards me and less ready to answer my questions than the elderly. That could be based on fact that I was expected to ask older people, because I came to study “traditional folk culture”, and – as I realized later – they considered me a little bit weird¹ since I had different values than they did – I was interested in “old traditions”, I behaved respectfully and meekly, I was ready to work voluntarily, I was not interested in make-up or fashion, etc.

Apart from informant’s age, it was their gender which was important for communication rules with me. In the Balkan traditional patriarchal society, the communication with strangers was reserved mainly for men. Elderly men were highly interested in me – I think the main reason for that was that I was a source of information and an interesting foreigner. They were asking me about economic situation in the Czech Republic, complaining about bad economic conditions in the region and the whole Macedonia, talking about Macedonian history and their own careers – during the Yugoslavian era some of them had worked in Germany and they knew where the country of my origin is located. It is not a new finding that elderly women were interested in different things, connected mostly with relationships and more personal aspects – marriage, family, parents and relatives. They were also interested if I paid for my stay in a host family. About the “gift reciprocity” I will speak later.

The group which was the hardest to communicate with was the one made of young men. Maybe one of the reasons for that was that there were lot of bachelors in the region and they viewed me as a potential wife, however, I knew about the phenomenon before and because of that I came there for the first time with my partner.⁴ Almost all the time during my repeated visits in the locality, they were flirting with me and making jokes. It was probably their style of having a conversation with young women. An example of this kind of communication was an interview I made with a local leader during my second visit. He was answering only some of my questions and it was quite difficult to recognize what was truth and what was a joke or provocation that should be shocking. I was not afraid of the men, because the family I stayed in “protected” me – I was perceived as their guest, thus for all the men in the village I was “untouchable”. However, in all the villages in the region I had to deal with bothering and mild form of sexual harassment.

⁴ In the locality where I stayed there were eight bachelors aged 25 to 55 but no women in this age category, excluding three girls aged 15 to 18. This demographic imbalance is typical for many rural regions in the whole Macedonia and it is caused by the fact that nowadays within the economic migration village – city direction, young girls and women are more mobile than men. In the pure patrilocal society, as the Macedonian is, sons are connected with their birthplace and land as well as they have to look after their parents. Women leave their native homes and marry in a “better place”, which means a richer and bigger village, town or city (there is a Macedonia proverb: Girls are born for somebody else’s house.). The strategy widely used by these men is to marry Catholic women from Albania, where, on the contrary, more women are abandoned because of massive labour abroad migration of Albanian men.

Gift reciprocity and researcher's obligations

Another problem is closely connected with the hospitality mentioned above. Being a researcher means using a lot of “services” provided by our informants. There are ethnographic data first of all, however, there are many more things we receive: refreshments, food, accommodation. We are faced with a problem of gift reciprocity – how do we repay for all these services and time that they dedicate to us? Naturally, it is common for ethnographers to pay for information – with money or goods. In Macedonia it is really difficult, because for the locals their hospitality is highly important, almost “obligatory” and it has a touch of holiness. As I mentioned above, a guest is sent by superior forces and all the people entering their house have to be treated the best. People often invited me to their houses directly from the street to drink black coffee, which is an obligatory drink for every guest in all the Macedonian households. If I came by myself, they felt obligation to help me with everything I needed. Often, I was offered accommodation, especially when they knew that I had not arranged my accommodation yet in the village. At my “host family’s” place I stayed for many days, usually 10 to 14 days. Naturally, they did not want to take money I gave them, thus I had to leave the money in a secret place. Each time I brought a lot of small gifts – alcohol, sweets, coffee, cosmetics – that I distributed to all my informants.

Another very important matter and obligation for the researcher is the contact with the informants after **leaving the field**. During the sojourn in the field site the researcher makes a lot of personal contacts, establishes informal relations and his/her stay is connected with a lot of positive or negative emotions. These relationships are continued and developed after leaving the field, too. Correspondence, social networks, the telephone are the tools of maintaining the contact during the absence of the researcher (Norman 2000). Since I was doing fieldwork in Macedonia, I have been using mainly facebook communication to maintain the relations, because this network is the most popular among the youngsters in the region – through the agency of young people I send my greetings to the elderly population, too. Naturally, we have to observe anthropology ethical codex rules and it absolutely bans to harm the informants in any way. In my opinion, one of the important things in this context is to keep one's promises, e.g. to send all the pictures we have promised to send.

Doing fieldwork in a Muslim village – was it so different?

Naturally, the second field site where I have been doing my research work for the second case study, was different. The local community was much bigger and not easy to penetrate. Actually, I succeeded in contacting only with the family members of my first contact person. She was my friend, we met at the friend's place in Skopje and our relation was very informal. I went with her to the village of

her origin, birthplace of her parents, where she stays sometimes for vacation and now she has moved there to teach music and English at the local school.

Contrary to the Christian village, it was more difficult here to make first contacts and each time it happened via the contact person, my friend, or her two young cousins, who were ready to help me. Surprisingly, there were not many more differences in the field of my research activity, the local people were very hospitable, kind and helpful, nevertheless, they were more mistrustful at the beginning. They did not invite me home directly from the street, but they were curious too – they stopped and asked me what I was doing there and where I am from. I realized more “patriarchal elements” in the local culture (e.g. women were not allowed to walk across the village square), but most things were very similar as in Christian one – for example rules of communication with a foreigner, division of labour, matters connected with gift reciprocity and more. In the communication with the local inhabitants I observed similar rules as in the Christian village – for example my **motion along the village** was at both places limited. I could not be moving around alone, local people were always worried about my safety and they did not let me go for a walk alone. Thus, I had to have a local companion. If nobody had time I should stay at home and “enjoy” all privileges, reserved for guests – good food, not having to work etc. Most frequently the reason was the presence of dangerous dogs that dwell in the both villages, which is common in the Balkans. This fact is connected with a high level of responsibility, which the local people who hosted me assumed and again, with a high rate of their hospitality. Also a lack of private life and limited right to decision making can be problematic during the longer stay at the field site, since we should respect the way we are treated by the locals. Usually we are treated as well as possible according to their incessantly conviction, which means we are under the control of some of the community members all the time.

Several final considerations

Doing ethnographic research is a long and complex process and if we discuss the reflexivity of the fieldwork, there are many more spheres and topics we could mention. In the paper I made an attempt to define the most problematic ones I have personally faced during my research. I focused mostly on the personality of researcher and how he/she is perceived by the locals. Actually, the process of perceiving is described by the researcher herself, thus, it means that the real perception can differ a lot. The main goal of the paper was the reflexivity. During the reflexive considerations I came to conclusion that one of the most important factors for the character of perception made by the members of local community is researcher's age and gender. In Macedonia, a guest as a role (status) is very respected, and the “system of hosting” is highly developed. I discovered there are not many differences between accepting of the researcher as a stranger and foreigner in Christian and Muslim communities. As one of the dissimilarities between them a higher level of mistrust in Muslim community can be mentioned.

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