

Teaching Ethnology and Ethnography during Global Pandemic: Few Remarks from Slovakia

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Abstract: In the middle of March 2020, due to the global pandemic of Covid-19 disease, Comenius University in Bratislava switched to distance method of education. The transition to distance teaching and learning and restriction of contact with „unknown people“ profoundly affected the teaching activities of the Department of Ethnology and Museology, Faculty of Arts, Comenius University in Bratislava. In this paper I describe how the way of teaching theory and methodology of ethnology and socio-cultural anthropology as well as methods and techniques, utilised in ethnographic research, had to be adapted to novel conditions. I will also address how the structure of ethnographic field research, conducted by first year bachelor students of ethnology, had to be changed regarding government restrictions associated with Covid-19 pandemic.

Key Words: Ethnography, Ethnology, Field research, Covid-19, Pandemic, Slovakia

Introduction

We would probably be hard-pressed to find a part of our professional and personal lives that has not been affected by the measures associated with the global Covid-19 pandemic that we have felt since about mid-March

2020. The current pandemic has exposed several problems in many countries around the world in terms of public health, education, or the third sector. The pandemic has also caused a challenge for education at universities in several ways. In the middle of March 2020, Comenius University in Bratislava switched to the distance method of education. The transition to the distance method of teaching and learning concerned all educational institutions in the Slovak Republic, from universities and colleges to high and primary schools. I was still a doctoral student of ethnology and cultural anthropology at the Department of Ethnology and Museology, Faculty of Arts, Comenius University in Bratislava, when we first felt the effects of the worldwide pandemic. The defense of my dissertation thesis was moved from May to August 2020. In August I successfully defended my thesis and obtained a PhD. in ethnology and cultural anthropology. In September, I took up the position of assistant professor at the Department of Ethnology and Museology, Faculty of Arts, Comenius University in Bratislava.

The transition to distance teaching and learning and restriction of contact with „unknown people“ profoundly affected pedagogical activities at the Department of Ethnology and Museology, Faculty of Arts, Comenius University in Bratislava. For more than three semesters (summer semester 2020, winter semester 2020, and summer semester 2021) we have been teaching students almost exclusively in digital space. In the following paragraphs, I will describe how the way of teaching theory and methodology of ethnology and socio-cultural anthropology as well as methods and techniques of ethnographic research, had to be adapted to novel conditions. I will also address how the structure of ethnographic field research, conducted by first-year bachelor students of ethnology, had to be changed considering government restrictions associated with the Covid-19 pandemic.

1 Teaching first-year students of ethnology

All students of ethnology at the Department of ethnology and museology, Comenius University in Bratislava, must complete, among other courses, four core courses in the first year of bachelor study. The four core courses are *Theory, methodology, and history of cultural anthropology* (two-semester

course); *Methodological foundations of ethnographic research*; *Methods, and techniques of field research*; *Field practice*. The purpose of the courses is to acquaint students with the basic principles of theory and methodology of ethnology and sociocultural anthropology. Let me briefly describe the purpose of each course and alternations that had or had not to be made during the pandemic.

The aim of the *Theory, methodology, and history of cultural anthropology* is to acquaint students with the development of theoretical thought in ethnology and socio-cultural anthropology. This course is based on thorough reading, studying, and analysis of classical works of the doyen of socio-cultural anthropology (e.g., Benedict, 1935; Geertz, 1973; Lévi-Strauss, 1963; Malinowski, 1932; Mead, 1928; Tylor, 1883; Turner 1991). Attention is also paid to the writings of founding fathers of social science such as Emile Durkheim (Durkheim 1995). Due to how ethnology has developed as a scientific discipline in Central and Eastern Europe, students must also become acquainted with the works of German ethnographers and ethnologists (e.g., Frobenius, 1909), Russian (soviet) ethnographers (e.g., Bogoraz, 1925; Shirokogoroff 1935) as well as Slovak and Czech ethnologists and ethnographers (e.g., Bogatyriov, 1937; Melicherčík, 1945).

During the course, *Methodological foundations of ethnographic research* students learn about basic principles, selected methodological approaches, and epistemological as well as ontological foundations of social science research. Special attention is given to the ethical aspects of ethnographic research. They will learn to identify ethical issues and their corresponding methodological solutions. Students are required to read selected works on the methodology of scientific research and the specifics of ethnographic research (e.g., Creswell, 2014; Leavy, 2017; Lett, 1997). After thorough and critical reading of selected book chapters or papers, they are required to prepare questions that are discussed during seminars.

The basic nature and structure of these two courses did not change during the pandemic. Students attended lectures (online), read books, discussed fundamental issues of social anthropology and ethnology in seminars. Although the warmth of human contact is irreplaceable during the teaching and learning process, students were able to meet all

the formal requirements for successful completion of these two courses. More importantly, they achieved similar learning outcomes as students in previous years. We draw this conclusion from the results achieved by students in both courses. The results were comparable to those of students in previous years who took the course in a face-to-face format. Despite the distance-online learning, students in the academic years 2019/2020 and 2020/2021 were able to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills. However, for the other two courses mentioned above, several major changes had to be made due to the pandemic.

2 Preparing for field practice during a pandemic

In the summer semester of 2020 and 2021, the most significant alterations regarding teaching had to be made in courses *Methods, and techniques of field research* and *Field practice*. In *Methods, and techniques of field research*, students are introduced to field methods and techniques used in ethnographic field research. Particular attention is paid to the methods of ethnographic interview and participant observation (Spradley 1979, 1980). Students will get acquainted not only with the theoretical aspects of conducting interviews and observations but also with their practical dimensions. They will learn about the different types of records that ethnographers make during field research (e.g., Berg 2001; Bernard 1995).

One of the tasks, students are required to complete, is to conduct an ethnographic interview with an „unknown person“ and conduct participant observations in an „unknown environment“. An unknown person can be any person they meet on campus, college, or anywhere else. The unknown environment can be a school club of which they are not a member and do not attend, an open-spaced food market, or any sports event. In a simplified sense, participant observation can be thought of as the observation of any interaction between individuals or groups, events, or places (for details see Spradley, 1980; Creswell, 2014; Leavy, 2017). For example, participant observation may be the observation of a busy street, a shopping mall, a park, or a playground. Participant observation does not necessarily require close face-to-face

contact or conversation with the people being observed. Thus, participant observation can be carried out during many anti-epidemiological measures and regulations.

Most students were able to conduct participant observation in an „unknown and unfamiliar environment“. In the case of the ethnographic interview, the situation was more complicated. The regulations of the Government of the Slovak Republic were changing during the year. In certain periods of 2020, it was recommended to meet only with family members and people living in the same household, while avoiding contact with strangers. For this reason, students had to conduct ethnographic interviews with either family members or strangers via the Internet. Despite the obvious limitations, students acquired the necessary skills to conduct ethnographic interviews and participant observation.

The knowledge and skills that students learn in *Methods and techniques of field research* are used and further developed during *Feld practice*. *Field practice* takes place every academic year at the end of the summer semester. It consists of ten days of field research in a rural environment of Slovakia. Each year specific research sites are selected considering local conditions and the cultural history of concrete villages and regions. All students conduct research in the same location. Over the last ten years, the number of students has ranged on average from ten to fifteen.

Before the *Field practice*, students possess the necessary skills and knowledge for conducting ethnographic interviews and participant observation. The main purpose of *Field practice* is to apply the learned knowledge of basic methods of data collection in practice. Before the research, each student chooses a research topic for which ethnographic data are collected. Research topics include social and economic aspects of life, religion, agriculture and crafts, folklore, religious and non-religious holidays, etc. As with the bachelor's and master's theses, each student has a supervisor. Teachers from the department also take part in every *Field practice*. Their role is to help and guide students through their first field research. The knowledge acquired during field research and results of subsequent data analysis results in the first short ethnography that students write. During *Field practice*, students also acquire soft skills, which are quintessential for carrying out in-depth and successful ethnographic

research. *Field practice* bonds students together and teaches them the importance of teamwork.

3 Plan, adapt, overcome – ethnography during Covid-19

During the academic year 2019/2020 and 2020/2021, the academic staff of the Department of Ethnology and Museology had to react flexibly to the often-turbulent changes in government regulations and measures. In the spring of 2020 and 2021, it was clear that a global pandemic would also affect annual *Field practice*. A decision was made to carry out *Field practice* while considering the then actual government regulations.

As in previous years, students chose the research topic and supervisor. In comparison with previous years, all research topics in the year 2020 were related to the current pandemic situation in Slovakia (e.g. religious life during a pandemic; communication with friends and family during a pandemic; sports and physical activities during a pandemic, changes in family life and interactions with kin during a pandemic). The field practice in the summer semester of 2020 and 2021 was not of a collective nature. Students conducted ethnographic interviews and participant observations individually. Some carried out research in a rural environment of their choosing, others in Bratislava, the capital city of Slovakia. Some students conducted ethnographic interviews face to face with the research participants (naturally only if the regulations of the Government of the Slovak Republic and the Public Health Office allowed it). While others opted for interviewing research participants online.

Ethnographic research conducted on the internet and ethnographic research of the internet are among the leading research directions in contemporary sociocultural anthropology and ethnology. Over the last twenty to thirty years, digital ethnography has been one of the fastest-growing research methods. Although students have not conducted research on the Internet, they have used various internet applications as a means for conducting ethnographic interviews. For this reason, in some cases, students had to be made more familiar with the specifics of conducting research via the Internet (e.g., Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce

a Taylor, 2013; Hine, 2015; Sanjek a Tratner eds., 2016). The fact that despite often unfavorable circumstances, students conducted ethnographic research of remarkable quality, indicates that they have not only acquired the necessary theoretical knowledge but are also able to apply it during ethnographic field research. Some of the students' research has been even published in co-authorship with their supervisors in scientific journal (e.g., Bužeková a Dubravčák 2021; Uhrin, Besedová, Mesíčková a Pavlíková, 2021).

The global pandemic of Covid-19 affected the lives of people all around the world. It also had a significant impact on the first year of university studies for thousands of students in Slovakia. Despite often unfavorable conditions, the teachers at the Department of Ethnology and Museology, Comenius University in Bratislava did everything in their power to teach students the necessary theoretical knowledge and practical skills for conducting qualitative ethnographic research. The pandemic has taught us to respond flexibly to new situations concerning the education of ethnology students. It has shown that conducting ethnographic research during a pandemic, while methodologically and practically challenging, is not impossible.

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