

FIELD DIARIES, EMOTIONS, SUBJECTIVITY, AND THEIR ROLE IN ANTHROPOLOGICAL RESEARCH

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Abstract: The question of objectivity and subjectivity of anthropological research has been prominent in academic discourse since the second half of the 20th century. The article aims to contribute to debates on objectivity and subjectivity in anthropological and ethnographic research. Specifically, the author addresses the issue of how to deal with personal feelings and emotions that researchers encounter during field research. The author tackles the methodological and epistemological aspects of ethnographic research associated with using personal experiences, feelings, and emotions as ethnographic data. These issues are considered in the context of research of religion. In conclusion, the author expresses the view that personal experiences, feelings, and emotions should not be perceived as equivalent to data obtained by the scientific method. Despite this, they play an important role in the process of writing ethnography.

Keywords: objectivity, subjectivity, field research, ethnography, field notes, diary.

Introduction¹

During the anthropological research of religion and supernatural beliefs, researchers often encounter different worldviews. On a personal level, such contact frequently evokes emotional and subjective responses. In this essay, I will address the question of how the individual experiences, feelings, personality of researcher, and emotions experienced by anthropologists during field

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research, affect the research and results of the research. It is especially important to reflect on these issues in the context of the study of religion since religion has a significant impact on the lives of individuals and groups. I also believe that every anthropologist or ethnographer has dealt with this issue at some stage during his career. In this essay, I will outline how I approached these methodological problems of ethnographic research.

On the example of my ethnographic research aimed at religion, I will illustrate how ethnographers can approach one's own emotions during field research. From the methodological point of view, I will suggest the role that the personal feelings and emotions of a researcher can play in the process of writing ethnography (the results of field research and subsequent analysis of data). My aim is not to give definitive answers. I would only like to present "my answers" to the question of "subjectivity versus objectivity" corresponding with the positivist, naturalistic, and materialist model of science (e.g., Boyer, 1990, 2001, 2003, 2011; D'Andrade, 1995; Lett, 1997a; Sperber, 1996, 2011). I argue that personal experiences, feelings, and emotions should not be perceived as equivalent to data obtained by scientific methods. Despite this, they can't be ignored and have an important role in ethnographic research.

Before proceeding further, it is necessary to point out that the term ethnography can bear at least two meanings. First, ethnography (ethnographic research) can be considered as a research method that is characterized by systematic collection of empirical data, especially through the methods of participant observation and ethnographic interview (Berg, 2001, p. 139). Ethnographies are also the final product of systematic data collection and subsequent analysis. They are a comprehensive description of socio-cultural phenomena and societies. When I am referring to ethnography as a result of ethnographic research, it is written in italics.

Crisis of representations and postmodern anthropology

In the early stages of anthropological research, anthropologists generally did not question whether their description of diverse cultures is an objective description of socio-cultural phenomena. This question came to the wider attention in the second half of the twentieth century. Interest in it is associated with various important moments in the history of anthropology and scientific research in general: the crisis of representations; the rise of interpretive anthropology, symbolic anthropology, and postmodernism in the social sciences and humanities, and publication of personal notes from Bronislaw Malinowski's

field research in the late 1960s. In the following pages, I discuss selected issues from these moments related to the topic of the essay.²

During the fifties and sixties of the twentieth century, it was gradually becoming clear, that the same cultural phenomena can be interpreted and analysed by two anthropologists in opposite ways. This period in anthropology is called the crisis of representations. Questions related to the objectivity of ethnographic research, as well as its epistemological or ontological foundations, gradually began to open (e.g., Bužeková, 2012, 2018; Bužeková & Jerotijević, 2012; Freeman, 1983; Holmes, 1957; Lewis, 1951; Mead, 1928; Redfield, 1930).

It was during this period when symbolic and interpretative approaches to the study of cultures begin to form in cultural and social anthropology. Contemporary postmodern and interpretive anthropology has been influenced by the ideas of the doyen of symbolic and interpretative anthropology such as Clifford Geertz, David Schneider, Victor W. Turner, or Mary Douglas (e.g., Turner, 1985). Interpretative anthropology is characterized by the aim to describe and understand cultures and societies "from within" – i.e., from the native's point of view.

The ideas of interpretative anthropology had significant impact on the postmodernism. One of the main characteristics of postmodernism is the critique of history, research methods, ethics, theories of socio-cultural anthropology, and the results it has achieved so far (Caplan, 2003). Postmodernism generally perceives science and the scientific method as a product of ideology set in a specific cultural context and identifies it with the domination of "the west" and oppression of the "others". Their aim is not to create universally valid, coherent, and falsifiable scientific theories (Kanovský, 2002, p. 171). For example, Clifford Geertz did not consider the study of culture to be an experimental science explaining laws of causation, but an interpretive science explaining meanings ascribed to cultural practices.

Anthropologists inspired by Geertz consider sociocultural anthropology to be part of humanities – the study of art, literature, dance, architecture, philosophy, and many other forms of human creative activities. Postmodern anthropologist emphasizes the author's emotions, subjective feelings, creativity. These principles of postmodernism have also been applied in the anthropological re-

² I would like to emphasize that the list is incomplete in a sense. The second cognitive revolution as well as one of the oldest questions in anthropology ("Is anthropology science or a part of humanities?") are also related to the topic of the essay. Also, I do not address the second cognitive revolution and will deal with questions regarding the nature of anthropology only marginally. In the context of this essay, it is sufficient to point out that postmodern anthropologists consider anthropology to be a part of humanities. From this perspective, anthropology should not be subjected to the rules and principles of the positivist, materialist, and naturalistic scientific research (for discussion see Beaulieu, 2004; Bužeková, 2012, 2018; Carrithers, 1990; Gellner, 1992; Lett, 1997a, 1997b; Marcus & Fischer, 1999; Spiro, 1996).

search of religion. As we will see in the following section, in several cases, these ideas resulted in research strategies such as going native or subjective soaking.

Going native, subjective soaking and research of religion

Some postmodern and interpretive anthropologists let themselves to be fully involved in the activities of the studied societies. They try to convey to the reader the authentic experience and ethos of a given culture. In rare cases, it can result in the "absorption" of the anthropologist by the culture under study. Anthropologists voluntarily and intentionally become members of religious communities, participate in rituals, and accept the worldviews of respondents as their own. They go native or undergo subjective soaking (Ellen, 1984, p. 77; Berg, 2001, p. 134).³

Edith Turner, the wife of Victor Turner, among others, argues that going native or subjective soaking is crucial when the goal is to understand religious and spiritual experiences and phenomena (van Binsbergen, 1991, 2003). Turner also favours the idea of anthropology as being part of arts and humanities as well as ethnography as a literary genre and creative process or retelling of stories. She argues that when a researcher studies religious rituals without first participating in the ritual as an active participant, he always "misses something" (Turner, 1987, 1996; Turner & Blodgett, 1992). In an interview with Mathew Engelke (2008), she answered his question whether she promotes and uses the method of immersion in another culture (going native, subjective soaking), as follows: „As much as I bloody well can! To me that's the point. There is a slight limitation, but human beings are extraordinarily pervious to each other" (Engelke, 2008, p. 850).

Another representative of this approach is anthropologist Wim van Binsbergen. During his field research, van Binsbergen decided to be initiated as a sangoma (traditional healer in South Africa). Van Binsbergen considers his experience and knowledge gained during the rituals, in which he acted as a sangoma, to be legitimate scientific data. According to him, the knowledge he has acquired in this way has general validity. He argues that this type of knowledge informs about the state of the world in the same way as data obtained by the methods of "western science" (van Binsbergen, 1991, 2003).

³ As early as the second half of the nineteenth century, there are records of anthropologists that went native. American anthropologist Frank Hamilton Cushing (1857 – 1900) became a member of the Zuni tribe (one of the Indian tribes inhabiting present-day areas of New Mexico and Arizona in North America) during field research. Cushing participated in rituals not as a passive observer, but as an active participant. Despite his active participation he maintained a certain distance as well as scientific objectivity. Cushing eventually left the Zuni tribe and returned to the busy streets of American cities.

Edith Turner and van Binsbergen among others, presented their personal experiences as legitimate scientific data. As Bell and Taylor point out, participation in religious rituals and activities, going native, and subjective soaking are viewed sceptically by many social scientists, especially when presented as a legitimate research strategy (Bell & Taylor, 2014, p. 549-550). One of the subjects of criticism is the credibility of the data obtained and the scientific quality (or value) of the research carried out (Bužeková, 2018; Eller, 2007, 2019, 2020). The absence of a systematic methodology that would allow verification of scientific hypotheses and scientific theories may ultimately lead to interpretive and postmodern anthropology becoming more of a literary genre or style and not a science. I will return to these questions in detail in the following chapters. At this point, I would like to emphasize, that utilizing the method of participant observation in the scientific study of religion and religious rituals does not require active participation, acceptance of the respondents' worldview as "truth" or conversion to religion under research, as some postmodern anthropologists suggest.

Ethnography as a scientific research method or ethnography as a storytelling of an individual?

In the beginnings of anthropology, *ethnographies* were related to individual cultures or societies. At present, *ethnographies* are rarely written as all-encompassing works. Most of the time they are dedicated to a specific group within society or concrete societal or cultural phenomena. *Ethnographies* are based on the detailed description and contextualized interpretation of socio-cultural phenomena recorded among individuals or groups (Berg, 2001, p. 134). Other researchers define *ethnography* as the final product or result of field research and subsequent analysis (Berg, 2001, p. 133). I also think, that Spradley's classic definition of ethnography as the research method and process of describing culture (cultural phenomena), stood the test of time. According to Spradley, the quintessence of this process is to understand a different way of life, a different culture from the perspective of its members (Spradley, 1980, p. 3).

One of the main research strategies used in the process of creating *ethnography* is the thick description. The terms thick and thin description were coined by Clifford Geertz (2000). Thick description, method of a detailed description of sociocultural phenomena and behavioural patterns of individuals and groups in a concrete socio-cultural context, is characteristic of anthropological and ethnological field research in general. However, the utilization of unconventional narrative strategies, as well as the use of subjective experience and related emotions, in the process of writing *ethnographies*, is more typical in post-

modern anthropology. Subsequently it resulted in the emergence of reflexive ethnography (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Marcus & Fischer, 1999; Stoller, 2010). In reflexive ethnography, the ethnographer's personal feelings, emotions, and reactions to situations encountered during field research are an essential part of the *ethnography*. The concept of evocation of emotions and emphasis on the individual actor has been prominent in the works of postmodern anthropologists since the 1980s.⁴

One of the leading figures of postmodernism in anthropology, James Clifford (1986), sees the ethnographer as both a writer and a scientist with subjective feelings and emotions. However, he does not assert absolute epistemological, cultural, or ethical relativism or resignation on the acquisition of reliable and falsifiable scientific knowledge. Other representatives of postmodern anthropology, Marcus and Fisher (1999) point out that attempts to transfer the personality of an anthropologist into *ethnography* can result in a certain form of exhibitionism. This occurs in cases when anthropologist becomes the focus of *ethnography* instead of the members of culture under study (Kottak, 1991, p. 31).

It is thus clear, that even within postmodern anthropology there are different views on the use of personal experiences and emotions in the process of creating *ethnography*. Not every representative of the postmodern approach in the study of religion utilizes methods such as going native or subjective soaking. However, I believe that this is a difference in degree rather than in kind because most postmodern anthropologists consider their use to be a legitimate practice.

The *ethnographies* of postmodern anthropologists raise several methodological, theoretical, ontological, and epistemological questions. These questions relate to the adequacy and legitimacy of methods such as going native and subjective soaking, active participation in religious rituals, analysis of one's feelings and emotions, and their presentation as scientific knowledge. One of the main points of criticism is that the research conceived in this way cannot be subjected to the rules of falsification and replication, i.e., to the basic principles of scientific research (Bužeková, 2018; Bryan, 1985; Lett, 1997a; Popper, 1997; Sperber, 1996). Therefore, if personal experiences, subjective feelings, and emotions are not to be presented as legitimate scientific data, what is their role concerning anthropology, ethnology, and ethnography? I think the famous British anthropologist of polish origin Bronislaw Malinowski can be an inspiration in finding an answer to this question.

⁴ In the last two decades, there has been a partial shift from dialogue with respondents to cooperation or collaboration with respondents in the process of writing *ethnographies* (Moose, 2006, p. 937). This shift represents an effort to eliminate any type of oppression and differences in power between anthropologists and research participants, and the dominant position of the anthropologist towards respondents.

Bronislaw Malinowski – "The father of field diary"

During the years 1915 – 1916 and 1917 – 1918 Bronislaw Malinowski conducted long-term ethnographic research in the Trobriand Islands, located in the Indian Ocean. During his stay in the Trobriand Islands, Malinowski was immersed in detailed ethnographic research of Trobriand culture. Malinowski collected information about religion, myths and magic, language, subsistence strategies, kinship systems, family, and sexual life of the inhabitants of Trobriand Islands (e.g., Malinowski, 1922, 1927). However, my goal is not to focus on Malinowski's scientific work, since they have received close attention from anthropologists and ethnologist alike (e.g., Ellen, Gellner, Kubica, & Mucha, 1989; Jerotijević, 2011, 2013; Kanovský, 2004). I will focus on the publication *A Diary in the strict sense of the term* (Malinowski, 1967) that was published after his death.

In addition to ethnographic data, Malinowski also recorded his personal feelings, moods, emotions, and sexual fantasies. He kept them separately from other field records. Nevertheless, they were published after his death by his wife Valett. The publication was named *A Diary in the strict sense of the term* (1967, 1989) - hereinafter referred to as Diaries. I believe that this is an important milestone in the history of anthropological and ethnological field research. In a sense, it could even be said that after their publication anthropologist began to view long-term field research from a different perspective.

Before the publication of Diaries, there were few mentions of how field research affected anthropologists. The basic notion of field research was that the anthropologist came into the field, observed, and recorded, conducted interviews, and then published the results completely unaffected by local conditions and worldviews of people they studied. The Diaries shattered this stereotype. It turned out that anthropologists, like everyone else, were affected by separation from their own culture and unknown environment in several ways. The Diaries tell us about Malinowski's reactions to the new and foreign environment. They contain Malinowski's feelings of alienation, descriptions of desires to go back home and leave field research, doubts regarding the importance of his research. There are antipathies and at the same time respect for the respondents as well as descriptions of boredom, arousal and enthusiasm, restlessness and indignation, compassion and hatred, emotions, and sexual desires.

The publication of the Diaries was received controversially. Reactions varied. Several anthropologists (e.g., Hortense Powdermaker, Phyllis Kaberry, Lucy Mair) have expressed a negative attitude: they believed that *Diaries* could negatively affect Malinowski's scientific heritage and intellectual reputation (Firth, 1989). Others also saw a positive side in the publication of Diaries. For example, Clifford Geertz changed his originally negative opinion, approximately twenty years after the publication of the Diaries. Geertz takes an analytical per-

spective in his book *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author* (Geertz, 1988) and considers Diaries to be an important milestone in the history of anthropology (Firth, 1989). James Clifford, representative of postmodernism in anthropology, considers Diaries as one of the most significant books in the history of anthropology because they reveal the complexity of ethnographic research (Clifford, 1986; Clifford & Marcus, 1986).

Edmund Leach argued that if private notes from field research were to be published, we should not look at them as a representation of the author's personality or scientific opinions. Rather, Diaries represent a tool or way of maintaining contact with the author's reality in unknown and traumatic situations (Firth, 1989, pp. xxii-xxiii). We can perceive them as a kind of catharsis, helping the author to deal with a new and unknown environment, and events, foreign smells, sounds, and tastes.⁵

Following the publication of Malinowski's diaries, many anthropologists have realized that long-term anthropological field research has a significant impact on researchers themselves. The publication of Diaries poured additional oil into the imaginary fire in the debate regarding the objectivity and subjectivity of anthropological research. They were released during a period when the notion of the anthropologist as an objective and unbiased observer of reality was being questioned (D'Andrade, 1995; Geertz, 1979; Hammersley, 1991; Rabinow & Sullivan, 1987).

We should not look at Diaries as a reflection of Malinowski's personal opinions and feelings. Firth believes that they have made a significant contribution to understanding the position and role of the researcher as an active participant in social interactions occurring during field research (Firth, 1989, p. xxxi). The Diaries are proof that, despite the personal and subjective views of the anthropologist, it is possible to maintain objectivity in scientific research. I think they represent sort of a "guide" on how a researcher can approach his feelings, opinions, or emotions during field research. Guide, that I have used myself multiple times.

⁵ It is important to state that Malinowski's subjective states were unlikely to be reflected in his scientific publications. There is no mention of antipathies or ambivalent feelings towards the inhabitants of the Trobriand Islands in the scientific publications of Malinowski. In answering one of the current questions of Malinowski's time, the question of the differences and similarities between "savages" and "civilized", Malinowski focused on emphasizing what "savages" and "civilized" have in common. Parry says that he did not succumb to the temptation to describe the "primitive man" as an antithesis or contrast of the "modern man" (Parry, 2007, p. 340). We can only guess whether Malinowski's occasional frustration and boredom would have been reflected in his scientific work if he had not written a diary.

Diary and its role in ethnographic research: personal experience

During field research ethnographers are exposed to new, unknown stimuli, which in turn can cause emotional reactions. This statement with a connection to the above-mentioned thoughts leads us to the two subsequent questions: 1. what is the role of subjective states, personal feelings, and emotions of a researcher during field research and in the process of writing ethnography, and 2. how should ethnographers approach and deal with them?

I believe that Bernard's distinction of four types of field notes, that anthropologists can create during field research, can shed light on this question. Bernard distinguishes the following four types of field records: short notes made during the ethnographic interview or participant observation (scrapes), diary (personal diary), time notes (time schedule), and complete field notes written at the end of each day of research (Bernard, 2006).

Unlike field notes, a diary should be filled with the personal and emotional reactions of the researcher. The diary represents a place of escape, a safe place. A place where we can speak without being judged. Diary can help researchers reveal their cognitive biases and prejudices. After all, the researcher is "just human" and regardless of formal academic training in ethnographic research, it is not possible to completely avoid the pitfalls of logical fallacies and cognitive biases. Diary helps to deal with fear, loneliness, emptiness experienced during field research. According to Bernard, anthropologists need a diary during ethnographic research, as it not only serves as a form of catharsis but can also prove useful during data analysis. However, as in the case of Malinowski, Bernard stress that a diary should be separated from other forms of field records (Bernard, 2006; Ramšak, 2002). I believe that diary is a useful tool for every ethnographer, regardless of the theoretical concept applied during field research.

I carried out several long-term ethnographic field researches in the rural environment in Slovakia. They were focused on various aspects of religious life. In western Slovakia, the focus of the research was cooperation between the communities of Roman Catholics and Protestants living in one village (Uhrin, 2018, 2020). In central Slovakia, I focused on the communities of Greek Catholics and Orthodox believers and the relationship between these two denominations during the revolutionary years 1968 and 1989 (Bužeková & Uhrin, 2020). In the east part of Slovakia, my research took place in a village, where lived Greek Catholic believers. This research was aimed at the symbolism of religious rituals (Uhrin, 2015, 2020). I conducted ethnographic interviews with religious experts and laypeople. I also utilized the method of participant observation and attended rituals such as catholic masses, baptisms, weddings, or funerals. I observed and recorded people's behaviour during important Christian holidays and festivities. However, I did not participate in any

religious ritual or festival as an active participant. I have retained the role of an active and objective observer. During every field research, I wrote a diary in a manner described by Bernard (Bernard, 2006; also, Uhrin, 2013, 2019, 2021a).

I also experienced states of indignation, boredom, joy, and worry. From time to time, I felt homesick and missed my family, close friends, and colleagues. Some interviews exhausted me mentally, during others I felt bored. These subjective opinions, experiences, and emotions were recorded in a diary. I believe that writing a diary is one of the things that helped me maintain objectivity during research and data analysis.

As an unbeliever (methodological agnostic – see Eller, 2019, 2020), I was confronted with different worldviews. However, the role of scholars of religion is not to evaluate the content of religious ideas and practices, but to examine their meaning and function in a particular society – this statement postulates cultural not ethical or epistemological relativism. During my research, I adhered to the epistemological principles of the scientific method. All data analyses and results published are not based on personal feelings and impressions but were/are subject to peer review and the basic principles of scientific research: replicability and falsifiability (Lett, 2004, 1997a, 1997b; Popper, 1997 - see also, Uhrin, 2021b).

The existence of emotional reactions and subjective feelings experienced during research does not imply that we should abandon the idea of objective research based on the positivist model of science. After all, any research or scientific work is influenced by the subjectivity of the author. The diary, in the form, as Malinowski wrote it, is an effective tool that enables us to filter out feelings and emotions. In Bernard's words: "perhaps the most important thing is to write the diary itself and keep it separate from other field notes" (Bernard, 2006, p. 391).

I would conclude that being aware of the potential influence of personal feelings and emotions of the researcher on the course and results of research (i.e. reflexivity) is an essential moment of anthropological and ethnological field research. However, we should not allow it to result in the resignation on objectivity and the search for universally valid explanations of social and cultural phenomena. As Parry says, we should not succumb to "incoherent fragmentation" and should not allow sociocultural anthropology to become just a mere assemblage of anecdotes and personal narratives (Parry, 2007, p. 338).

Closing thoughts

Since the subject of research in ethnology and anthropology are living human beings and intricate relationships between them, the researcher can't avoid subjective feelings and emotional reactions during field research. Almost all anthropologists experience similar states of body and mind as Malinowski experienced during his stay at Trobriand Islands – they are referred to by the umbrella term culture shock.

Oftentimes postmodernists present their own emotions, subjective feelings, and experiences as relevant scientific data and as a part of their scientific publications. According to some postmodern anthropologists, e.g., Edith Turner or Wim van Binsbergen, the active participation of an anthropologist is essential for understanding religious practices and rituals. Such an approach raises criticism from positivist and scientifically oriented researchers. They argue that data of this nature and the results based on their analysis do not conform to the basic criteria of scientific research: replicability and falsifiability (D'Andrade, 1995; Lett, 1996, 1997a, 1997b, 2004; Popper, 1997).

Emphasis on reflexivity is perhaps the most significant contribution of interpretive and postmodern anthropology to anthropological theory. Reflexivity highlights the unavoidable subjectivity of the researcher and its consequences for data collection and interpretation. Although most ethnographers acknowledge the value of critical reflexive thinking, several argue that literary and interpretive trends stand in opposition to the scientific goals of anthropology, as they focus more on the subjective aspects of ethnographic research than on researcher problems themselves (Bužeková, 2012, pp. 9-10).

The researcher's personality, interests, beliefs, feelings, and emotions influence questions they ask, research problems they address as well as theoretical perspectives they apply. This statement also applies to myself since I was inspired to study religion by professional as well as personal interests. However, our interests, personality, and beliefs mustn't affect the objective aspects and results of the research. Even Malinowski's subjective states, feelings, emotions, frustrations, and sexual fantasies did not translate into his scientific publications. By being aware of the potential limitations resulting from our subjective feelings and emotions, we can systematically work on reducing their impact on the objectivity of research carried out. I believe that we should not disregard the pursuit of objective knowledge. The goal, for anthropologists and ethnologists or any scientist in general, is not to become, as Bernard says: "machines for recording and analysing data". We should strive for objectivity by producing knowledge as little as possible influenced by our prejudices and cognitive biases (Bernard, 2006, pp. 370-371; also, Bryant, 1985; Caplan et al., 2003; Jorgensen, 1989; Lett, 1996, 1997a, 1997b, 2004; Spradley, 1980).

Ethnographic research of religion can be rigorous and positivistic. Berg says that scientists should present their findings as claims that may require further confirmation or verification. Anthropologists and ethnologists should in *ethnographies* present claims that can in principle be replicated and refuted (Berg, 2001, p. 139). Berg's definition coincides with the positivist and objectivist perceptions of anthropology. Thus, I argue, that objectivity in *ethnographies* can be achieved by rigorous adherence to the fundamental principles of scientific research: replicability and falsifiability.

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