

THE ETHICS OF THE FIELDWORK – METHODOLOGICAL RESEARCH AND RULE FOR OBJECTIVITY

Gabriela BOANGIU*

Abstract: From the stage of commencement, that of the scientific research, to the one of the interpretation and publishing of the result after a thorough research, the ethnologist has to observe lots of principles that will lead them to authentic, avoiding the illusions and errors. The ethics of the ethnological research imposed itself both as a methodological research, and rule of objectivity. The main ethnological research, the participative observation, has to take into consideration few rules, in order to become closer to the studied reality.

Keywords: Ethics, fieldwork, ethnological research, objectivity.

In his investigations, the researcher constantly has to reflect on the categorical statement that Kant formulated: “Behave in such a manner, that to regard humanity, both yourself and the other people, always as a purpose, never as a means” and, this way, your work will be saved through objectivity and morality, in the relation with all the respondents. It was also Kant who asserted that: “An only thing is sure: morality has value for us, not because it is a preoccupation of ours, but because it preoccupies us owing to its value for us, the humans, because it emerges from our will, conceived as intelligence, that is our true self”. Therefore, the ethics of the ethnological research is imposed both as a methodological request, and as a rule of our objectivity. From the stage of commencement, that of the scientific research, to the one of the interpretation and publishing of the result after a thorough research, the ethnologist has to observe lots of principles that will lead them to authentic, avoiding the illusions and error.

The main ethnological research, the participative observation has to consider few rules, in order to become closer to the studied reality, thus “the social and cultural phenomena are coherent and structured: the ethnologist has to regard the ensemble of the aspects met in a society, without eliminating *a priori* some field of the social life, or certain types of phenomena; there should not be shown preference

* 3rd Degree scientific researcher, PhD, “C. S. Nicolăescu-Plopșor” Socio-Human Research Institute from Craiova, of the Romanian Academy; Email: boangiu_g@yahoo.com

for the public instead of the private events, nor the important social phenomena, instead of the small quotidian gestures, not the spiritual manifestations of the material spiritual life. The ensemble of observations has to be integrated, in order to confer meaning to a social togetherness”¹.

It can be made a reference to the vocation of ethnologist, but the support of this passion for the performed work also completes the vocational spirit, “the ethnologist attains scientific rigorousness only if they shed the cultural prejudices and present themselves on the field with the spiritual necessary open-mindedness. These preliminary dispositions seem impossible to be separated from the vocation of the ethnologist. But there remains to be fulfilled the work for the objectivity of their own categories of understanding, along with the situation created by their presence on the field. Therefore, in the first stage, they have to relativize the cultural values of the society from which they emerge, and to perceive better their arbitrary character, in order to understand the culture of the others, and to transform it into a researched subject (...) They have to subject ineludibly the far society, the occidental ones, closer as a distancing project – in other words, as objectivation”².

The role that an ethnologist carries in the research is a complex one, which implies multiple attitude expressivities: “Field experiences are very different and do not obey any pre-established rule. But what it is certain is that the ethnologist is not a kind of invisible man, a neuter observer, inexistent for their respondents. Due to his presence itself, through their involvement in precise interactions, the ethnologists generate reactions, confidences, which nurture the analysis. They are the discreet observers in some cases, the insistent and active researcher in others, a simple social actor, now and then. Their so-called “informers”, if we use the consecrated term, such are the people who they have a preferential relation with, can be individuals that are positioned side-ways or, on the contrary, which have an authority position. The ethnologist is sometimes kept beside, or the other way round, summoned to express their opinion, to solve litigations. Besides some simple precautions, those of respect towards the studied populations, we cannot give details regarding the prescribed attitude on the field. But, nonetheless, we are allowed to insist on this aspect, whatever the place of the ethnologist’s in the community, they have to be able to be objective, for contextualising the observations, and confer meaning to them. The observers are themselves part of their observation, and only their capacity to objectify their position in the studied community guarantee the objectivity of the ethnographic approach”³.

Nevertheless, in case of realising a collection of oral history, “the attitude when interviewing has to correspond to a “careful listening, not a passive one”, a

¹ Marie-Odile Géraud, Olivier Leservoisier, Richard Pottier, *Noțiunile cheie ale etnologiei*, Polirom Publishing House, Iași, 2001, p. 29

² *Ibidem*, p. 31.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 32.

part of the discourse analysis needing the completion in the moment the story is collected. From here, it resorts the preference for the semi-directive interviews, which allow a free expression, exercising, in the same time, a minimal amount of control. Thus, through the intervention during the interview, along with the later work for verification, analysis and publishing, the researcher participates directly to the construction of the story⁴.

The organisation and the carrying out of the project implies numerous interrogations, in the interview, because the reciprocity of the observation can transform radically the situation of the inquiry, the first hardships that the researcher has to consider being those generated by the relation researcher/subject. What is the researcher seen like, by the narrator? How to solve the problems of approach, when the social distance between the inquirer and the inquired is too small or too big? When confronted to such difficulties, the creation of a relation based on trust appears as one of the preliminary conditions for the smooth flow of the interview. To obtain this, the researcher has to be extremely patient, to become familiarised with the studied subject, because they cannot just request a spontaneous story-telling of private elements. Moreover, they ought to, as a general rule, give information about themselves: Who are they? What are they looking for? For what purpose? Finally, they have to make sure that they meet the subject frequently, which will eventually allow, for this point, to obtain information that was hidden during their first meetings. On this trustful relation, it depends both the way in which the narrators reveal themselves, and the quality of their information⁵.

To the relation of researcher-subject, other variables participate too. Thus, often due to social and cultural reasons, or some related to generation, the two do not use the same language. Consequently, there are implied problems regarding the interpretation, because the use and the signification of the words are not similar. Sometimes, due to the risks of misunderstanding, it is recommended the integral recording of the talk, in order to further verify the meaning of the words. If the interlocutor is uncomfortable with him being recorded, this must not be considered an unavoidable obstacle; most of the time the recorder is rapidly forgotten during the conversation⁶.

The analysis of the conditions in which it is told the story (the relation researcher-subject, the situation of the interview, the conditions for the realisation) appears as one of the essential stages of the research. The biography being a commune production, it is indeed imposed, in an equal extent, an ethnographic reflection on the activity of investigation and on the studied object. Far from aspiring to the perfect neutrality, it is about the unravelling of a form of subjectivity, induced by the presence of the researcher, for fully integrating it in the analysis and to evidence it in the moment of publishing⁷.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 41.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 43.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 43.

⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 43-44.

If the interpretation of the story has to be analysed according to the procedural conditions, it also involves the relating of it to the three levels of reality. To which the discourse is connected: formal reality, the reality of representation and the experienced reality. The first covers the field of law and norms. The second one regards the representations, the moral and the ideologies. The third level is related to the social practice, the behaviours and the actions of the individuals. One of the main tasks of the researcher is, subsequently, to unravel the contradictions between the field of law and that of the practice, for noticing the way in which there are interiorised the norms. Therefore, a thorough analysis of the biographic documents implies the knowing and the familiarising with the studied group, along with the field observation. The ethno-biographic method is based on the principle that the story is not a finite product, a raw material, on which it should be done verification. Firstly, it is about the contextualisation of the story, being especially interested in the environment in which the studied person lives. The text that we collect is subjected to the verification of the subject itself, in order to make the corrections and the completions that are considered necessary. Finally, the ethno-biographic inquiry leads to the collection of new stories, for the further cross analysis. In parallel, the researcher resorts to the classical ways of verification, based on the historic sources and archives. Yet, despite these precautions, the biographic story can avoid the verification, because, sometimes it happens that the confession is unique⁸.

The publishing of the text must also take into consideration some rules in the process of passing from the oral form, to the printed text. Moreover, the content of the publication must have the agreement and the consent of the interlocutors, of the narrators.

The relation researcher – field informer is one of the most debated themes, which has been approached within the social sciences. Its centrality opens new manners for the research, shows methodologies, brings subjects together. The same centrality creates continuous interrogations that activate the process of research. There have to be considered two coordinates, on one hand the optimisation of the process of selection on addressing the field informers, along with the communicational one, for obtaining the relevant information, and, on the other side, the need of constant repositioning of the researcher, as confronted to the investigated material, for the perspective to be more comprehensive.

The displaying of some types of informers, from a folkloric perspective that has assimilated the praxeology and pragmatics elements – the study of the researcher Sanda Golopenția-Eretescu manages to offer important details for the realisation of an efficient research, within the folkloristics, and not only. Thus, she remarked: “The researcher can observe actions (interactions) that take place

⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 44-45.

spontaneously, or can generate actions (interactions), in order to observe them”⁹. Moreover, the title of subject is attributed to the individuals who “are trained by the researcher for the role of agent, or anti-agent, of some generated actions (interactions)”¹⁰.

Furthermore, “the bringing of some individuals in the position of subjects is realised through an ad-hoc oral interaction, done between the researcher and the individual. The success of this interaction depends on the researcher’s capacity to interact. The interaction is translated through a request addressed by the researcher to the individual. The subject of this research can be: execution, miming, collaboration to, imagination, description, evaluation, justification etc. of an action (part of an action) or the miming, imagination, description, evaluation, justification etc. of an interaction (part of an interaction). In the study of actions and interactions that constitute a community, the researcher has to merge the observation of the individuals with the observations of the subjects, and reach a coherent interpretation of the information, received in the two manners”¹¹. When the coherence cannot be realised but through the renouncing to a part of the existent information, there will be taken into account the information resulted from the direct observation of the phenomenon and the respective subjects, “this priority is justified by the fact that, being a creation of the interaction with the researcher, the subject is an altered individual”¹². Sanda Golopenția-Eretescu calls informer “that subject who is trained by the researcher, in at least one generated verbal interaction, other than the interaction through which he was brought in the position of subject. For example: the subject who accepts to describe, to evaluate, to justify an action and he describes, evaluates and justifies it; the subject who accepts to mime a verbal interaction and he mimes it; the subject who accepts to describe, to evaluate, to justify an interaction, and he describes, evaluates, justifies it. The informer is a subjects who talks”¹³.

In the same time, “an individual brought by the researcher in the position of subject or informer, does not cease, though his position, to affect actions (to participate to interactions) spontaneously (as individual). In observation, the researcher will have to separate the information provided by the individual, from that provided by the subject and the informer, to examine it critically, to compare and to reach to a coherent positioning of it”¹⁴. For the undifferentiated reference to an individual-or-subject-or-informer, there will be used the syntagma “folklore conveyor”.

⁹ Sanda Golopenția-Eretescu, *Elemente praxiologice și pragmatice relevante pentru o tipologie a informatorilor*, in “Revista de etnografie și folclor”, volume 22, no. 1, Bucharest, 1977, p. 16.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 16.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 17.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 17.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 17.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 17.

In the relation with an activity that they do, the individuals, who interact with the researcher can be (A) a creator-individual, (B) a performing-individual, (C) a witness-individual, or (D) a commentator-individual. The creator individual is the one who initiates the activity of research. The defining qualities are inventiveness, originality, “geniality” etc. The performing individual is the one who effectuates, carries out, does, but does not initiate the action. He is defined by skill, talent, respect for the consecrated norms, accuracy etc. The witness individual is the one who describes, specifies (gives explanations on addressing) the development and the structure of the action. He is characterised by the perceptive faculty, rigorousness, precision, exactness, strictness. The commentator individual is the one who evaluates, criticises, praises, explains, formulates the underlying norms, gives opinions on addressing the action. His main qualities are: lucidity, reflexivity, capacity of empathy. The terms of creator, performer, witness, commentator are rather vague, as Sanda Golopenția-Eretescu also noticed, therefore, they shall be considered in different degrees, considering the fact that there is dealt with ideal categories, and moreover, there can be made a distinction between the strong and the weak meanings of these terms. The types (A) – (D) represent “the ideal profiles”, they cannot be found in the “pure” manifestations, most of the times the individuals do not even denote just a unique type, but they synthesise, more or less expected, features from several types¹⁵.

Folkloristics is well-endowed, from the methodological point of view, for studying the way in which all the specified profiles are manifesting, but mainly that of the performing individual, which is defined through the capacity to do an action that they did not initiate, “according to the reason of the performance, there is made a distinction between the commissioned performer, the professional performer, the consecrated performer, performer on their own initiative, and the requested initiative. It is a commissioned performer of an action the person who was designated by a community for this position (for example: the godfather, the midwife etc.), it is a professional performer of an action the person who earns a living after the performing of the action. For example: musicians, different craftsmen (...). It is a consecrated performer of an action the person who belongs to a group that recognises the optimal qualities of performing, in other words, the performer who is evaluated superlatively by the commenting group. It is a performer on his own initiative the person who, either because he is an optimal performer, or for other reasons, does frequently, “for pleasure”, that specific activity. It is aimed, in case of verbal, musical (non-professionalised), choral activities, through terms as *folklore transmitter*. The performer on request does not frequently, and on his own initiative, get involved in the specific activity, but they have the ability to do it, if they are requested. They do the activity only if the context necessarily requires this activity, unlike the performers on their own

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 20.

initiative, who get involve in that specific activity every time the context does not forbid this involvement. The commissioned performers, professionals, well-known in a group, can be detected through the ad-hoc questioning of some informers recruited among them. The performers on their own initiative, or on request, can be noticed only through direct observation¹⁶.

It is essential to be made the distinction whether the performer denies some of the already storied, sang, played parts, if they interrupt themselves, or change the type of the story, song, or dance, if they simplify it. Each error, each change in the activity of an individual, signifies a deterioration of the object.

According to the quality of the execution, there can be made a distinction between an optimal (master) performer, average (normal) performer, mediocre performer, sub-mediocre performer. Not every optimal performer is also a consecrated one. There should be further observed whether any consecrated performer is also an optimal one. Many folklorists have interviewed and interacted with optimal performers, but it is useful, in research, the collaboration will all the types of performers, because for a series of investigations (especially those regarding forgiving of an action, or the disappearance of some songs, ceremonies etc.), the mediocre and sub-mediocre performer gain a central position. According to the fidelity the absolute action of the creator is reproduced, there can be made a distinction between a relaxed, amateur performer, and a strict, specialist one. The relaxed performer seems to rather approximate a pattern (inventing, on the way, the performances and the activities that he does not know, in order to reach the result or the type of result he knows that another performer had), he is actually a creator-performer. The strict performer repeats precisely the carefully memorised performances, to reach the exact conditions reached by the creator of the action itself. A relaxed performer is the craftsman; an example of a strict performer is the ritual performer, who reproduces rigidly performances and activities for reaching, under the same circumstances, the result that he thinks a postulate ancestral creator reached¹⁷.

Sanda Golopenția-Eretescu underlines in the same time the importance of the relations between the ideal (A) – (D) profiles, and the parameters used in the typology of the informers, such is the age, talent, belonging to tradition, memory, repertoire, heredity etc., or to folklore in general. Thus, “the old man tends to be a witness, a commentator; the child is excluded from these two positions. The talent refers rather to the quality of performer, than to that of creator, it does not have any relevance for the quality of witness or commentator. A strong adherence to tradition gives a good performer, a good witness. A weak adherence to tradition

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 21.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 23.

can give (but not necessarily) a good creator, a good commentator. The qualities of performer and witness are qualities that, in a traditional collectivity, should belong, either one or another, to each of the group members. The qualities of creator and commentator are nevertheless related to the talent of the individual, more than the amplitude and his immersion into the tradition. The performer and the witness fulfil a joint position, they are the connecting element of the group, the centripetal movement of the group being expressed through them. The memory is highly significant for the performer and the witness; it does not interest us directly when we talk about the creator or the commentator. Yet, the term is not used with the same acceptation when we refer to the performer, but when we refer to the witness. When we talk about the memory of the performer, we mainly talk about his unconscious memory, in which there have been expressed and brought to light, one after another, once triggered, the connections between the crucial moments and unanalysed acting situations etc. When we talk about the memory of the witness, we refer to their conscious memory, which keeps deliberately unaltered and “relives”, according to their will, independent from the impulse of occurrences, the details, the elements, the aspects of the actions and interactions. The well-known characterisation of Constantin Brăiloiu (“the singularity of the mechanism of the popular memory, which becomes fully aware only when the imperious exigencies of a rite or an exceptional state of mind constrains it”) refers to the unconscious memory of the performer¹⁸. The fact that memory defines firstly the performer and the witness, can be also suggested by the fact that they are the ones who can be subjected to oblivion. Generally, seldom in the case of the performer, and never in that of the witness, oblivion can be total (the individual forgets not only what he knew, had knowledge of, but even the fact that he used to know, have knowledge of that specific fact; an example of that is “the regress towards non-recognition” of some stories, noticed by Dumitru Pop and Olga Nagy¹⁹), or partial (the individual forgets what he knew, but he does not forget that he used to know that fact). The creator, the commentator forget in a way that is significant for the folklorist.

The concept of repertoire is used in the relation with the performer, but it is not relevant in relation with a creator, a witness or a commentator. There are inherited, inside the same family, qualities of performer, maybe of creator, anyway, we cannot mention heredity when discussing the quality of witness or commentator. The problems of circulation in folklore, could be better shaped if we considered the fact that the person who does it is, the performer, and the person who mentions it is the witness, and if the analysis of the individuals, who manifest

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 25

¹⁹ Dumitru Pop, Olga Nagy, *Arta povestitului și vârsta povestitorilor*, in “Revista de etnografie și folclor”, year XIV, 1969, no. 4, pp. 263-269 *apud* Sanda Golopenția-Eretescu, *op. cit.*, p. 25

these types, focused. Directed by some informers, or by chance, the researcher notices individuals who manifest the ideal (A) – (D) prototypes. There are drawbacks inherent to this observation, among which we mention two: (a) the researcher does not observe the individuals whose qualities of creators, performers etc. are not obvious for the members of the studied group; (b) the researcher does not observe the features related to the personality of the creator, performer etc., which the observed opportunity does not request. There remain for examination the special problems that appear (a) when the researcher collaborates with the subjects or the informers following (exclusively, or for another purpose) to find the (A) – (D) type of individual to whom these features belong, or (b) when the researcher collaborates with the informers for the repeating of the (A) – (D) types, in the studied group, or knowing the type in which some individuals from the group fit, others but the informers. Through the collaboration with the subjects, the researcher can know exclusively the aspect of creator or that of performer, in the personality of those individuals. Knowing the subject in the hypostasis of creator is, in its turn, indirect. The researcher cannot, if we ignore the special circumstances, request a subject to initiate an entirely new action (to create, in the actual meaning of the word), in the moment of cooperation. Or, more exactly, even if he is requested, or the subject agrees, this situation will illustrate only partially his quality of creator (because he will be, nevertheless, a second creator, who is told to create, not a proper creator, who decides entirely free on the creation). Such cases of directed creation are interpreted rather as tests of creativity, which the subject has to have, than circumstances in which he acts creatively. The knowing of the subject in the hypostasis of performer is possible and must be amplified through the elaboration of a list with ad-hoc requests²⁰.

Through the collaboration with the informers, the researcher can meet with any of the aspects (A) – (D) of their personality. He will therefore know oral creators (or also oral, in case of syncretic manifestations), oral performers (or also oral), witnesses and commentators²¹. The conclusion considers that the folkloric investigation of a problem, regardless its type, cannot be declared complete as long as the researcher has not observed (interviewed) individuals, subjects and informers from all the (A) – (D) profiles, along with individuals, subjects or informers who do not frame into any of the four types. The classical folkloric research, orientated preponderantly towards tradition, so towards the individuals, subjects and informers that belong the performing type (and inside it, to the subtypes consecrated performer and professional performer, which is manifested more preponderantly). Yet, there was noticed that the witness is equally important as the

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 26.

performer, for the understanding of the traditional aspect of a collectivity. Hence, it might be useful to be shown more attention. As regarding the newer investigations, which aim the folkloric perspectives of a collectivity, they have to consider especially the individuals, the subjects and the informers that belong to the types of creator and commentator. For meeting the (A) – (D) types, the researcher has to elaborate the instruments that would allow their finding. Among these, there are also: (a) the description of the four types; (b) the elaboration, for each of the four types, of lists that contain the requests that the researcher has to address the subject, according to the wide categories of problems that he considers interesting; (c) the elaboration of questionnaires, differentiated on the four types of informers, for the main approached problems²².

²² *Ibidem*, pp. 28-29.