

The Ethnographer's Ethnicity: a Golden Ticket or a Barrier to the Field in Southeastern Europe

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Abstract:

Introductions to ethnographic research for university students in North Macedonia are starkly different from the often idealized 'first encounters' we read in classical anthropological texts, what Hammersley and Atkinson call "the Western 'rite of passage'". Students from North Macedonia conduct fieldwork in urban and rural areas of their home country, usually focusing on a different geographic region every year. Through this experience, students are introduced to a 'foreign' field that is often very familiar – the language is common, and the general cultural context is shared. In such a fieldwork context, the question of ethnicity, as a broad category of importance in the self-identification of communities and citizens of the region and a category frequently present in the rhetoric of various political groups, cannot be withheld. In this sense, it is not only the ethnic identity of our interlocutors that is of interest, but that of the researcher, for whom it can represent either a barrier or a tool to aid the research process. This paper aims to highlight the need to include ethnicity in conversations about fieldwork. It will examine introductory reading materials and practices in ethnography and attempt to synthesize understandings of auto-reflexive examples of fieldwork to consider how and whether ethnicity can be included as a characteristic of the researcher.

Keywords: ethnicity, fieldwork, students, native anthropologist

Introduction

The question of ethnicity seemingly keeps coming up in the region of Southeastern Europe, including in the research interests of anthropologists and other social scientists. In addition to the current demographics of states in the area, all of which boast an ethnically diverse population, the history of independence of the region's states is inseparable from narratives on ethnicity and nationality. For anthropologists and ethnologists, the question of ethnicity is crucial, as national liberation movements or ethnic conflicts mark the societies we conduct research in. At the same time, social change processes through urbanization and migration also involve ethnicity categories (Hylland Eriksen, 1994: 12). Furthermore, in the Southeastern European region ethnicity can play a categorizing role in the social lives of the people we engage with (Neofotistos, 2007: 51). In the case of the Department of Ethnology (the predecessor to the current Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology as part of St. Cyril and Methodius University), one of the aims of the program was to professionally train students to "to be able to follow the ethnic processes that are a vital part of life in the modern world" (Case Study 3, Risteski: 2017, 34).

Ethnicity in the Southeastern European region can be defined as a distinct category of social categorization. Distinctions between ethnic groups in the region are continuously maintained by religion and language, among others. It is important to note here that ethnicity as a concept and its characteristics are highly contested in contemporary anthropological work. Although we function within that specific framework of understanding, the category of ethnicity for the public, non-anthropological community is arguably still defined within largely essentializing perceptions. From that viewpoint, one can roughly classify ethnic groups in North Macedonia into broader categories: the Orthodox Macedonian, Serbian and Vlach groups, besides the Turkish, Albanian, Torbesh, and the Roma, present in both categories. In a different formulation, one can separate the Slavic speaking Macedonian, Serbian and Torbesh from the other linguistic groups.

One can argue that as a result of early politics related to constructing national identity in line with the nation-state, a set of power relations is formed between the dominant and minority ethnic groups and the people belonging to those groups in everyday life and professional life. Furthermore, there is a history of dichotomization and antagonistic relations between specific groups, notably in recent history the Macedonian

and the Albanian (Neofotistos, 2007: 49). Non-Macedonians represent a part of the state but not of the Macedonian nation. In that sense, ethnic Macedonians maintain “a dominant relation of encompassment while non-Macedonians are connected to Macedonians in a subordinate relation of incorporation” (Neofotistos, 2007: 53). In line with the nation-state ideology, in the Socialist Republic of Macedonia, like other regional states, the subject of ethnology was focused on the nation (Risteski and Dimova, 2014: 274). To clarify the use of the terms ethnology and anthropology, until 2005, scholars in the country defined their work as ethnology, in line with early characteristics of a ‘national discipline’ in the region. In 2005, the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology introduced a study program that brought together the traditional national ethnology (generally focused on folklore, material culture) and contemporary anthropology studies (Ashtalkovska-Gajtanovska, 2021: 236). Due to an acknowledgement of the large number of researchers who continue to define their scope of work within ethnology and the reality of the Institute’s program of study distinct leaning towards ‘more than ethnology’, I use both terms throughout the essay.

I approach the topic of ethnicity from the point of view and experience of a researcher who belongs to an ethnic minority from Macedonia. In particular, the interest lies specifically in ethnic identities and ethnic identity fluctuations for the researcher in the field. Through auto-reflexive experiences, I aim to think about teaching research methodologies to future students, in particular ways to incorporate questions of the researcher’s own ethnic identity when doing fieldwork.

The concept of ethnicity in anthropology

2017 marked my first year participating in the undergraduate study program at the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, St. Cyril and Methodius University, as a “demonstrator” (part-time teaching assistant). It was my first year of interacting with undergraduate students, providing seminar classes in accompaniment to lectures delivered by professors. Although I was in a different position now compared to my undergraduate studies, I was still learning in many respects, particularly how to pass on what I had previously learned to current students. First-year students were quite helpful in this learning process – through their lack of fieldwork experience and questions about what anthropologists do. I often reflected on my own experiences when speaking to them, either for our class “Introduction to Methodology” or in the role of a younger colleague offering advice. One of the more exciting aspects of the study program at the university is the annual “Field Ethnology” course. As part of this course, students participate in a supervised week-long field excursion where they gain firsthand experience of the practice of ethnographic fieldwork. As part of the course requirements, students conduct research for a specific research question and write a research paper, synthesizing their analyses from their findings and learning how to write an ethnographic text. Due to a lack of funding from the university, students are expected to cover the expenses of this trip. Keeping in mind the varied economic status of the students, the Institute refrains from imposing high-cost trips, which can significantly limit the choice of destination each year. As a result of that situation, the annual trip for many years back has been a specific rural or urban environment within the state’s territory. Thus, during my undergraduate studies, the field excursions were set in the rural Strumica region in 2011, the village of Melnica, the region of Cashka, in 2012, the village of Capari, Bitola region in 2013 and several villages in the Mariovo region in 2014. In 2018, the location was the city of Kriva Palanka, situated in the eastern part of the country.

The training of ethnographers and anthropologists in North Macedonia is a *de facto* training of ‘native’ anthropologists, as opposed to what may be called (with some reservation) ‘regular’ anthropologists or those who study the foreign Other (to use a distinction brought up by Narayan, 1993). Narayan proposes that this distinction be replaced with the idea of anthropologists “in terms of shifting identification” (Narayan, 1993: 671) to improve on this relatively rigid conception. The view of a ‘native’ anthropologist maintains the image of an authentic insider, one who can provide an accurate picture of the inside, and this essentializing characteristic of native anthropologists tends to reduce them to such a category, brushing off their complexities as individuals and researchers (Narayan, 1993: 677). Yet, no matter how it is defined, there is a clear difference between native and regular anthropologists, if not determined by their professional experiences (positive or negative), then simply by their initiation. Although students at the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology are initiated into the imaginary field through ethnographies written by American or Western European authors travelling and living in remote places in the Eastern hemispheres, they do not go through the same experience. Our students do not have to travel abroad for a long time and do not have to learn a new language. They learn how to do research with these comforts in their native country, and most students choose to continue in such a field in the future.

This was the case with my classmates and me. However, although we too conducted fieldwork in our home country, the places we visited *were* foreign to us in many respects. In some cases, the distinction between rural culture and our accustomed living in urban areas was large enough to allow for some students' rigid simplification (almost exoticization). We often applied common conceptions to rural culture – as if all rural regions could be defined as one. Besides the Otherness of rural areas in that respect, one additional aspect that stood out for me, in particular, was ethnicity, specifically how I was almost always the odd one out during my studies. In both cases, however, there was no clear-cut distinction between the Otherness of my colleagues and my specific Otherness. We were both familiar with our field. However, we were also foreigners – so-called 'local foreigners'.

Beginnings

I enrolled at the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, part of St. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje, in the year 2010. I was advised not to enrol by most of my surroundings. They reasoned that my ethnic Albanian and Turkish background could make me a target in what they assumed to be a predominantly ethnically Macedonian surrounding. The concept of "ethnology" and assumptions about the meaning made my surroundings wary. Visual representations of ethnology in Macedonia are primarily centred on traditional Macedonian culture. A Google search of the term "ethnology" in Macedonia provides images from the Institute of Ethnology (publications or events), Macedonian national dress, photographs of ethnological museums, and stylised depictions of traditional designs. The Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology does not directly depict these styles of images (in fact, the Institute's website and other promotional material attempts to move away from these depictions). However, the general public associates contemporary ethnology with Macedonian national ethnology. Most of my acquaintances (none of whom had studied ethnology) also assumed that the program of study at the Institute provided a form of national ethnology. Before enrolment, I was warned with questions: What if it is a nationalistic environment? *Why* would you want to study ethnic Macedonian culture if you're not Macedonian?

The good news is that I *did* enrol at the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology and found an environment that was welcoming and a study program that was multicultural and not at all proposing a nationalistic discipline of study. This conception of the current program was a deliberate investment of the faculty in "promoting the ethnological studies as multicultural and liberal, not only in terms of the treatment of minorities but also regarding gender, class and other politically sensitive issues" (Case Study 3, Risteski, 2017: 32). None of my peers and professors had any visible nationalistic or prejudicial pretences toward me (I was the only ethnic non-Macedonian student in my year). At the same time, I found that the concept of ethnicity was approached from a wholly different perspective in contrast to the non-anthropological world. My studies did lean towards ethnic Macedonian culture in terms of the content material of classes. However, this did not pose an issue to me, as I found subjects on sex and gender, economic, and political anthropology more interesting than any ethnology.

Otherness in the field

As part of our studies, we read works on ethnicity and notable classics such as Frederik Barth's introduction to *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*. We deconstruct the meaning of ethnic distinction, analyzing its relation to the national history of the Balkan states, religion, social status and social relations. We learn to separate ourselves from that which we are studying. However, most of our work as researchers is done in non-anthropological environments (i.e. non-academic). It is difficult to forget a part of you in these cases, especially as a student only beginning with their field experiences.

During my undergraduate studies, all of the villages we visited, apart from one (Melnica), had a predominantly ethnic Macedonian, orthodox Christian population. As mentioned previously, these villages were both familiar and foreign to me in many different aspects as to other students. To begin with, it was rare that one of us had ever visited that particular area previously. However, the structure of most villages in North Macedonia is similar – the villages include a village centre (*sredselo*) which features either a *koperacija*, or a store that is a remnant of former socialist times, or the village water fountain, the central gathering place of women in olden times. We learned that by stationing ourselves at the *sredselo*, we could start a conversation with villagers passing by and then be guided on. Another aspect was the language. My peers and I all spoke Macedonian. However, we did not speak the same dialect. In particular, being born and raised in Skopje, with no family in rural parts, posed a real difficulty. Not only did I sound different, I often did not understand the people I was speaking to. A large portion of my transcribed materials from my first years in the field include random words and sentences excluded due to my inability to understand the speaker's dialect. We stood out by our behaviour – choosing to sit

with the elderly or roaming the village for hours, overly enthusiastic to talk to anyone who crossed our path. We dressed differently from the inhabitants (hiking boots and waterproof coats), not to mention that we carried cameras and voice recorders.

In my generation, I felt even more distinct by virtue of my ethnic and religious background, both inter-related, as it has become almost a social fact that ethnic identity in the Balkan states is distinguished by religion and language (Hammel, 24). In that respect, I remember the look of confusion given to me by the caretaker of a church when my group of classmates and I entered a church and I was the only one not to cross myself. As an example of an opposite situation – the one year we visited the predominantly Muslim village of Melnica, it did not matter that the inhabitants were ethnically Macedonian. The shared aspects of my culture with theirs was liberating for me as a student. I felt more confident in my conversations and my movement throughout the village. It is significant to mention that ethnic likeness or difference does not pose a permanent barrier or a tool that by itself enables positive field work. However, for students who are learning and rehearsing ethnographic practices, it can significantly alter the experience of learning ethnography.

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In this sense, what is particularly interesting is the ability of the researcher to fluctuate between identities due to a particular personal characteristic. This is not specific to researchers but rather a common possibility and reality for many people, who can ‘manipulate’ their ethnic identity based on the necessity of a situation (Hammel, 2000: 26). In my case, I speak Macedonian fluently and have no discernible accent that can ‘reveal’ my background. Although of Albanian origin, my last name can be pronounced to sound Slavic. Additionally, I could define myself as Albanian, Turkish or simply Muslim in different situations or be silent. Due to a language barrier, my peers did not have this benefit in their interactions with Albanian or Turkish communities. However, we did not conduct fieldwork in such settings, to begin with). This distinction is again connected to the hierarchical encompassment of ethnic communities. I have come to identify myself as a “halfie”, used by Narayan as a proposed term for an anthropologist with a mixed background – both native and non-native (Narayan, 1993: 673). I *am* from Macedonia and can technically be called a “native anthropologist” however, and I am not native to ethnic Macedonian culture.

The most recent example of a field experience in which I could move through different roles was in 2018, from my accompaniment of that year’s undergraduate field excursion to the city of Kriva Palanka. According to the last valid census of 2002, the population of Kriva Palanka is 96% ethnic Macedonian, while the rest are a mix of Roma, Serbian and several other ethnic groups. In passing conversation with some elderly men about our fieldwork, one of them began explaining that ‘*shiptari*’ (derogatory term used for Albanians) had never settled in the city, and that he would personally never allow their entrance. He did not know that I had some Albanian background, nor do I believe he assumed it in any way. He continued to speak about *shiptari*, as I slowly attempted to change the conversation. This experience for me now was just a passing remark; the first time I heard the phrase *shiptari* being used on the field, however, I was a student and took it more seriously. I wondered whether I would be faced with shunning or worse, direct confrontation, if I ‘admitted’ my background. On the field, our interaction is not one-way. Just as we analyse our subject, our subjects analyze us. Our subjects are not pre-occupied with the research, but with what kind of people we are – whether we can be trusted, whether we are acquaintances or friends, or even the extent to which we can be manipulated (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2010: 65).

Another similar example emerged in 2011 when I and several of my classmates were doing fieldwork in the village of Capari, Bitola region. Having heard that we were staying in the village, one older inhabitant invited us all over to visit his home museum of taxidermy animals. As we were sitting in his living room, he agreed to allow us to turn our recorders on as we spoke of his *gastarbeiter* travels in Australia. On one of the walls, a clock in the

shape of Australia ticked away. The man made a passing, derogatory remark about Albanians during our conversation. Just to confirm, he asked, “there’s no *shiptar* here, right?” Although my classmates fleetingly glanced at me, none of us said anything. The conversation continued as if nothing had happened. I distinctly remember questioning my choice to keep quiet for the rest of the trip and feeling guilty that I had ‘deceived’ the person entrusting me with his life story. At the same time, however, I did not feel comfortable revealing my ethnicity due to the antagonistic tone of his remark.

When first setting out on the field, students of ethnology and anthropology have little else but their older peers’ and colleagues’ experiences and written accounts to guide them. Through lectures and readings, students are taught the ethical guidelines on interactions with the field, as well as methods of accessing the field. Hammersley and Atkinson, in *Ethnography - Principles and Practices*, the textbook utilized for the subject “Methodology of Ethnological and Anthropological Research” at the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, speak of ‘impression management’ as a component that the ethnographer must think about (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2010: 65). They further state that “impressions that pose an obstacle to access must be avoided or countered as far as possible, while those which facilitate it must be encouraged, within limits set by ethical considerations” (*ibid.*). Students are taught to introduce themselves and their purpose and obtain permission to record conversations and utilize the information for research purposes. However, the amount of information we give out is not strictly determined. In my case, I never introduced my ethnic background in initial encounters seeing no need to in the first place. Yet, my meeting with the older man question made me think – Would the conversation have taken place differently if he had known there was an Albanian present? Was this withholding of information deception on my part?

During field research, the researcher might have to suppress their own beliefs when interacting. This is not so much deception as courtesy and ‘interaction ritual’, as Goffman is quoted in 1972 (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2010: 72). The question is how ethnicity as a concept can be approached personally by anthropologists in the field. Barth claimed that ethnic identity, as a status, is “superordinate to most other statuses, and [it] defines the permissible constellations of statuses, or social personalities, which an individual with that identity may assume” (Barth, 1967: 17). To illustrate is an example of a remark made by a taxi driver in Kriva Palanka, in the same recent field experience. After I commented that the area was beautiful and the city particularly lovely, he chuckled and said, “Well, yes, we’re all our own here (*Pa, da, site sme nashi tuka*)”, meaning we are all Macedonians. As Goffman states, individuals, seek to gain information about others when entering their presence, seeking information on the person’s socioeconomic status, trustworthiness, and his/her attitude towards them (Goffman, 1956: 1). Based on this information, they will determine how to best act (*ibid.*). Thus, the displaying of particular cultural traits allows for the classification of individuals as members of an ethnic group (Barth, 1967: 12) and to maintain a distinct ethnic identity, criteria for membership and exclusion are employed, as such a shared ethnic identity implies shared “criteria for evaluation and judgement” (Barth, 1967: 15). Ethnicity is a part of social relationships, primarily when cultural difference affects the interaction between people (Hylland Eriksen, 1994: 16-17).

On the other hand, Brubaker posits a conceptualization and studying of ethnicity outside of bounded groups and describes how studying ethnicity should move beyond “groupism”, which implicitly assumes actors to be defined by a common purpose and internally homogenous (Brubaker, 2004: 8). There are situations in which ethnicity is not ‘superordinate’. This perspective can be valuable to students of anthropology, who, apart from theoretical studies of ethnicity, are also physically and socially present in an environment in which ethnicity is (from the outside at least) defined mainly within essentialist conceptions. As Brubaker states, this kind of ‘ethnic common sense’ cannot be ignored and is part of the empirical data that we deal with (Brubaker, 2004: 9). On the hand, Mursic, quoting Schwartz, highlights specifically that issue – whether “anthropology can solve the problem of its limits by challenging ‘the informants’ essentialisms” (Mursic, 2000: 75).

Likewise, ethnicity can impact the researcher’s entrance into a field according to conceptions of the role and possibilities of an individual belonging to a particular ethnic group. Two years ago, I was invited to join a research project on collecting oral histories and memories of people who most felt the effects of the 2001 conflict in North Macedonia. I enthusiastically joined the group meetings and participated in methodology, locations, and time frame discussions. However, I was soon tasked with conducting interviews with the Albanian population. When I explained that I do not speak Albanian, I was met with blank stares. I was invited for that purpose, as the organization needed someone to cover the “Albanian side”. There was an assumption that the research could be realized only if there was an ethnically “alike” researcher to the community, a recommendation carried forward by some anthropologists, like Vitkor de Munck (Ashtalkovska-Gajtanoska, 2015: 123).

It would have been silly to lead a multi-ethnic project with an ethnically homogenous research group. Understandably, such intentions can benefit the research outcomes by allowing ‘insiders’ (especially minorities) to approach a research question, mitigating dominating voices from the outside. However, this case brings up once again a point in the so-called lived reality of a researcher. If we move beyond analyzing ethnicity as defined and constructed through bounded and homogenized ethnic groups on a theoretical level, how are we to deal with the existence of ethnically-related preconceptions and expectations within the institutions that support that research?

Narayan, citing Edward Bruner, claims that anthropologists are all bi- (or even multi-) cultural, carrying an ethnographic self and a personal self (Narayan, 1993: 681). We belong to our private world. We define ourselves in much the same ways our informants do, and in the professional world, where we attempt to withdraw ourselves from any “human” categories. Coffey, covering three well-known ethnography manuals, highlights the gaps concerning the researcher's identity as an individual and an inseparable part of the research process. She emphasizes how in most ethnographic how-to manuals, the position of the researcher in regards to himself is that “the researcher identity is to be ‘managed’, amended and constructed to facilitate the research process” (a similar note to Hammersley and Atkinson) (Coffey, 1999: 5). Yet, as Coffey notes, this method does not deal with the actual effects fieldwork may have on the researcher's identity. This issue plays a significant role in the Southeastern European region, especially as “native” researchers live their lives within the contexts they study. Although my peers and I were somewhat foreign to the field, we were never really foreign. In the field, when interacting with anyone in the context of research, we would still be part of the familiar myriad of ethnic identities within North Macedonia – we were Macedonian, Albanian, Turkish, Vlach or other. Within that context, as Mursic points out, not all scholars are fluent in the languages spoken in each community (Mursic, 2000: 75), and although we, as others around us, may be able to “tweak” the way we present ourselves for our benefit in some situations, that is not always possible. Besides, there is an unsaid expectation that one would research within their “own” ethnic heritage, partially due to a hypothetical possibility of understanding the emic view (*ibid.*). This locality of the “native” anthropologists is the issue that students will face. In “foreign” local fields, especially in ethnically different regions, they will not be “total” foreigners but a familiar foreigner.

Ethnographic closeness

Regarding the flexible role, ethnicity plays for the researcher, examples of shared ethnicity in my case have been rare. For my Macedonian peers, this was their experience in the field for most years. The example of the village of Melnica, a predominantly Muslim village in the central part of the country, can partially illustrate this point from my experience. The population of Melnica defined itself as 51% ethnically Turkish, 41% Macedonian, and the rest Bosnian, Albanian, Serbian or other in the last state census (Census 2002, 190). Historically, however, the village was inhabited by Mijaks converted to Islam who moved from the Debar region in the 18th and 19th centuries (Crvenkovska, 2000: 1). As such, the ethnic identity of most inhabitants is in flux – while most inhabitants speak Macedonian and practice Islam, their choice of identification is varied. During our field excursion to this village, I stood out from my university group because I shared the same religious background as the inhabitants. I felt very confident during this trip, as I “understood” what informants were telling me. In this sense, I bonded with an older man because both of us had family that had moved to Turkey in the 1960s in search of a better life. I understood aspects of the culture which I could recognize from my own home.

In 2012, I had the opportunity to attend the Konitsa Summer School in Konitsa, Greece. Working in a group, we ventured throughout the city, talking to coffee-shop owners as part of our research. Our group consisted of me, a girl from the same university as me, and a student from Greece. We sat in a café and talked to the owner, a middle-aged Greek woman, and a visitor, a seasonal worker from the Albanian town of Leskovik, a bordering town from which an influx of Albanian seasonal workers entered the Greek town every year. Our conversation was complex, a chain of translations between Macedonian, English, Greek and some Albanian. I found myself excited to share that my great-grandmother was originally from the same village as Leskovik. At that moment, the Albanian man got excited and asked me what her maiden name was – when I told him, he jumped even more – he had relatives that carried that surname. So, we laughed at the idea that we might be distant relatives.

The above experiences were significant in my experience as a student due to my exceptional ease in the field. Finding common ground with informants, I engaged in informal conversations, straying away from the strict research topic. I did not bother to ask for explanations of customs, as I knew what they were (at that time assumed to know). I even suggested specific comments based on my own or my family's experience. However,

the traditional approach to ethnography encourages the ethnographer to embrace ignorance (Coffey, 1999: 20). As Coffey notes, “over-familiarity is considered a problem, rather than a strength, at least initially” (*ibid.*). Fieldwork is a subjective experience experienced personally by the researcher, yet the ethnographic data is expected to fit the requirements of objectivity of science (Pratt, 1986: 32). In this sense, the presentation of the self in any environment involves repression of the self to an extent. In the ethnically familiar environment, this familiarity, in particular, is to be repressed. Notably, ethnicity does not even take up a significant position in such an environment, as ethnicity is characterized by what it is not (Hylland Eriksen, 1994: 14).

In that sense, the inexistence of a difference does not emphasize common ethnic identity but leads to an emphasis on other differences (perhaps gender or age). In an ethnically alien environment, the category is defined yet is to be downplayed to construct the ethnographic self. Yet, our roles in the fields are not just about presenting a particular self but can also mean “becoming a different self” during or after the fieldwork (Coffey, 1999: 28). Vasiliki Neofotistos, in her account of ethnic violence in Macedonia, offers how her Albanian and Macedonian informants appropriated her as “theirs” (“ours” – “nasha” or “jone”) based on common characteristics (Neofotistos, 2007: 48). Macedonian informants deemed her Macedonian due to her Greek Orthodox parents, while Albanian informants deemed her Albanian due to her speaking of the language and living in the USA (*ibid.*). Yet, for native anthropologists, their ethnic identity is pre-determined. It is questionable whether, for example, Macedonian or Albanian can be appropriated to be a different ethnic identity, especially if they share some ‘common’ characteristics of their ‘primary’ background (such as a notable accent or clothing practice).

Experiences that involve a discussion on ethnic identity may come up for students from the Southeastern European region, especially with the increasing mobility of researchers within the region and the move outside of ‘our own’ communities (which was the basis of the early national ethnology). In situations where ethnic identity is shared, one can argue that the researcher can overlook certain elements due to close familiarity. As Narayan states, studying one’s own culture is an inverse process to studying a foreign one – it involves including ‘analytic categories that rename and reframe what is already known’ (Narayan, 1993: 678). Most students that enrol at the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, ethnically Macedonian by origin, relate the experiences of their informants to what they have heard from their older relatives. To show familiarity to informants, it can present an image of likeness, even an image of a grandchild. Similar to my experience in Melnica and Konitsa.

On the other hand, experiences that involve a different ethnic group can be confusing. Students are advised not to engage in political discussions and refrain from speaking about ethnicity. In this sense, the attitude is reminiscent of the period of the ethnic escalation in 2001 and the Department of Ethnology’s response – being neutral by either not dealing with the issues or trying to be as objective as possible in interpretations (Case Study 3, Risteski, 2017: 32). Yet, students will one day inevitably enter a mixed field. With no prior training on how to approach such environments, they risk reducing the issue of ethnicity to one of purely recognizing and identifying differences.

Conclusion

The question of how to incorporate issues on ethnicity, especially the researcher’s ethnicity, in taught ethnographic courses persists. Ethnicity is a category ingrained in people’s lives through language, religion, and even locality, albeit not always a “visible” characteristic. It is simultaneously an in-born categorization, as well as a cultural construct. It may be possible not to emphasize one’s ethnicity if a situation allows it. The question then shifts to how important it is to publicly identify oneself as belonging or not belonging to a specific ethnic group. This, understandably, depends on the situation. In longer ethnographic research projects, the ethnographer will assumedly (in the ideal ethnographic scenario) become very close personally with his/her informants, and ethnicity will not pose a barrier in any case. However, the researcher-student might find herself in a position where she assesses that she should refrain from sharing too much information. This can arise in any situation, not only ethnicity. As in the example given by Ashtalkovska-Gajtanoska notes, Karen Lumsden, conducting research on a “male topic”, at certain times repressed her personal opinions in order not to alienate her informants (Ashtalkovska-Gajtanoska, 2015: 116). In any case, this is a contested choice that the researcher acquires with experience of real situations.

A further note on the researcher’s ethnicity is that of the researcher’s changing ethnic identity – or the impact field research can have on him/her as a student. In that sense, ethnographers acquire a state of post-ethnicity, which allows them to transcend their ethnic identity in the role of a researcher. However, this status is not visible to the informants, who perceive the stranger as an individual and attempt to place him/her in their broader categorisation of social

groups. Thus, the ethnographer does need to 'mediate' or 'regulate' his/her role, not by strictly revealing or concealing one's ethnic identity but by accepting that such a categorisation is relevant to how the field perceives him/her. In that sense, the concept of ethnicity for anthropology students should be considered more than an analytical tool but rather an aspect related to more general processes of building resilience as researchers. Although contemporary trends in anthropology lean further away from early works in which ethnicity was the central focus and point of understanding, especially in discourses on the Balkans, there is still an existing public narrative on ethnicity in which researchers live their everyday life. This is similar to other concepts we deconstruct within academia (such as gender) that persist in being defined as bounded categories in (relatively) dominant narratives on the outside. There is a real need to integrate discussions on such issues within early studies – whether by students conducting short supervised field-work research or continuous critical reflections on their positioning as a researcher and non-researcher.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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