

# ETHNOLOGIST IN VIEW OF PSYCHOLOGICAL CHALLENGES OF THE CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

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## Abstract

Every meeting with a stranger is an unrepeatable experience and this refers also to people met during fieldwork. It is worthwhile to be aware that the psychological sphere of the researcher and the researched result in the bidirectional influence on contacts and their effects. This text is an attempt to analyse the selected aspects of the researcher-researched relation, which have their source in psychological determinants of the functioning of human beings. Therefore, I discuss the following issues: emotions and their role in effective communication, the cultural behaviour patterns and the authenticity of the researcher, the influence of the gender category on the fieldwork and the interdependence between the cultural relativism and ethical principles of the researcher. Each of these issues is exemplified with situations from my own research experience and I try to present both their reasons and consequences. The crucial aim of this article was to encourage to the discussion on the role and influence of the psychological sphere of the researcher and researched on their bilateral cross-culture communication.

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Każde spotkanie z drugim człowiekiem jest niepowtarzalnym doświadczeniem osobniczym i dotyczy to również ludzi spotykanych podczas badań terenowych. Warto mieć świadomość, że sfera psychologiczna badacza i badanych przenikają się wzajemnie i wywierają obustronny wpływ na kontakty i ich efekty. Tekst ten jest próbą zwrócenia uwagi na wybrane aspekty relacji badacz-badany, które swe źródło mają w psychologicznych uwarunkowaniach funkcjonowania człowieka. Omawiam więc następujące zagadnienia: emocje badacza i sposoby radzenia sobie z nimi; kulturowe wzory zachowań i autentyczność badacza, wpływ kategorii *gender* na prowadzenie badań oraz zależność między relatywizmem kulturowym a zasadami moralnymi badacza. Poszczególne zagadnienia egzemplifikuję sytuacjami z własnego doświadczenia pracy terenowej i staram się pokazać zarówno ich przyczyny, jak i konsekwencje. Zasadniczym celem tego artykułu jest zachęcenie do dyskusji na temat roli i wpływu sfery psychologicznej badacza i badanego na ich wzajemną komunikację międzykulturową.

Key words: ethnopsychology, refugee, fieldwork, cultural communication, emotions, gender, culture script.

## INTRODUCTION

The commonplace idea that the researcher is free from his or her emotions, fears, stereotypes and prejudices, sustained until recently, has been acknowledged as false. It is quite the opposite: very much like any other human being, researchers experience cognitive doubts, are led astray by certain illusions, succumb to stress and disappointment,

seek sense and order in the surrounding reality. As an effect, the relationships forged in the course of fieldwork are influenced by the researcher's personality as well as by the cultural determinants underlying this relationship. Situations in which complex emotions and confusing feelings come to the fore may give rise to barriers in communication, which would be difficult to traverse unassisted, especially if representatives of different cultures are involved. Although the cross-cultural communication studies are most commonly associated with the global business (cf. Breamer, Varner 2011), their sources can be traced back to cultural anthropology and the works of Edward Hall (1985, 1987), as well as Clifford Geertz and the others<sup>1</sup>. Without delving too deep into the theory and communication models, I employ this term to describe the ways in which representatives of different cultures communicate with each other, express their thoughts, values and feelings (cf. Gudykunst 2003; Gudykunst, Moody 2002). One of the key assumptions of cross-cultural communication theory is the belief that cultures provide people with certain patterns of thinking relating to the perception and interpretation of the world (Gudykunst, Hammer 1988, pp. 106–108). This has numerous implications which, on the one hand fascinate anthropologists and, on the other hand, generate challenges and traps with which they have to deal. Therefore, in this part of the article I wish to discuss the difficulties and confusions arising from different ways of perceiving and interpreting reality, which a researcher is likely to encounter in contact with an informant. These situations are hardly surprising and it might be tempting to claim that they form part of the occupational risk of any ethnologist's profession.

Below I bring up a few aspects of the researcher-researched relation, which stem from the psychological determinants of human functioning and I illustrate them with situations which occurred during the fieldwork I conducted in refugee camps. Since my primary focus is to discuss the practical aspects of fieldwork and to share the ethnographic auto-reflection, I place more emphasis on the examples, the so-called case studies, rather than on theoretical analysis.

#### EMOTIONS AND THEIR ROLE

Such specific personality traits<sup>2</sup> as psychological endurance, capability to cope with stress and non-conformity<sup>3</sup> are rarely mentioned among the predispositions of an ethnologist. More often, the significance of extraversion,<sup>4</sup> having an easy manner, com-

<sup>1</sup> The studies of Geert Hofstede (1993) and Fons Trompenaars (1995, 1997) made an indisputable contribution to the development of discipline and studies on cross-cultural communication.

<sup>2</sup> Personality is defined as a relatively stable manner in which individuals react to other people and enter into interaction with them (Hall, Lindzey, Campbell 1998, p. 19).

<sup>3</sup> In social psychology, conformity is defined as a change in behaviour or opinion under the influence of the group (Aronson 2011, pp. 13–20).

<sup>4</sup> It is assumed that features denoting extroversion are: sociability, warmth, activity, positive emotions, seeking sensations and assertiveness.

municativeness and openness to new experiences is stressed.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, a researcher who is going into the field and is willing to interact with the local society has to traverse a host of barriers, including the resistance<sup>6</sup> of researched and his or her own limitations. It does not go without psychological costs, especially since the more difficult the research objective, the higher the price to be paid. Most of the psychologically troublesome situations have their source in emotions, which are neither culturally congruent, nor always universal (Ekman 1999, pp. 20–25). The circumstances in which our words and behaviours trigger inadequate and unpredictable reactions, or lack of them, certainly belong to confounding ones. According to Paul Ekman, refined and specific emotions are a combination of some basic sensations (like anger, joy, disgust, astonishment, fear, sadness), and their expression is strongly determined by cultural factors. For this reason, they are not always clearly legible and well-recognized by everyone (Doliński 2000, pp. 362–363; Triandis 1994, pp. 285–306). A human being deprived of these seemingly natural communication guidelines suddenly realizes how important a role they play in everyday relations.

The emotional sphere in the researcher-researched relation has a pivotal significance for the atmosphere in which the encounter proceeds, but also for the understanding, effectiveness and intensity of mutual communication. However, it is not uncommon for the response to a proposal of conversation to be completely unexpected, and for the “Innocent Anthropologist” (cf. Barley 2000) to be held responsible for historical injustice, political decisions, racism and promoting stereotypes. These accusations, in a sense, belong to the specific canon of “history of science”, which is why I took them “with tongue in cheek”, and even considered them absurd for a long time. Little did I know that I would one day have to face them in rather unexpected circumstances.

The following incident took place during a meeting long awaited by me, to which I was going with open enthusiasm. I had finally managed to make an interview appointment with one of the leaders of the Caucasian diaspora in Poland, who represents refugees from Chechnya. When I came to the seat of the association, to my great surprise, this man categorically refused to speak with me. He raised his voice, tried to turn me out and discourage me from working on the issues of interest to me; he did so in many ways, including lambasting, insulting Polish researchers, particularly anthropologists, and making accusations of insidious motives behind our actions. When I survived the uncontrolled stream of spiteful remarks and for a brief moment we were to hold a semblance of a conversation, I heard a tirade on the devious intentions behind the inquiries – mine personally, as well as of other representatives of the Polish science,

<sup>5</sup> Openness to experiences is one of the dimensions of personality and refers to the way in which an individual reacts to unfamiliar situations and events. It describes the tendency to seek experiences and their positive evaluation, tolerance for the new and cognitive curiosity (Cervone, Pervin, John 2013, p. 285).

<sup>6</sup> Resistance in psychology is defined as the inability or unwillingness to discuss certain issues, such as thoughts, desires and sensations (Zimbardo, Ruch 1998, p. 674).

about our venality and careerism. At the end of this rant, my interlocutor admitted that he was disappointed with Polish ethnologists and he did not want to deal with them anymore. Since it is difficult to argue with subjective feelings and to question the individual experience, I calmly swallowed this “bitter pill”, despite the sense of injustice which I experienced. However the absurdity of the entire situation also sparked my curiosity of where this was headed. The long wait paid off, as at one point we started to talk normally. The verbal attack, of which I had become quite a random victim, became more understandable to me when I heard the story of my interlocutor’s contacts with representatives of the Polish media and science, and of their unpleasant consequences for the group he represents. After a while, he stopped insisting on identifying me with his antagonists and pinning on me features and themes that were unfamiliar to me. Thanks to this, I could also hear a long monologue about the vices and intolerance of the Polish nation, delivered at the end of the conversation by my host, thus illustrating the story of exile hardships. It was not an edifying experience, but I think that for research purposes it was nonetheless interesting and inspiring. It made me realize, among other things, that the emotional attitude of an interlocutor and researcher at the time of an encounter may not always be consistent, although it does not necessarily mean that it will be unsuccessful, even if unpleasant. It is worth to remember that the respondents have their own knowledge and ideas about the culture represented by the ethnographer, and these may spur behaviours radically inconsistent with what we expect. They may also be in a bad mood, or simply not want to talk and they are fully entitled to this attitude. Neither do they have to excuse themselves nor justify their reluctance to come into contact with the researcher, although in the case described above I did receive an explanation: *We do not need your research! It is useless to us! That is your problem, but we are not looking for you. Let us live in peace! We have our own identity and culture and we do not care about your pretending to understand it, and instead misrepresenting it in your pseudo-scientific works which only serve to advance your own careers!*

This example also shows how seemingly unambiguous situations may be perceived in strikingly different light and it illustrates the myriad different ways of their possible interpretation. At the same time, sources of communication disruptions may be complex and unpredictable, in which case only the researcher’s patience and the respondent’s good will may be able to cut through this truly “Gordian knot” of cultural misunderstandings.

#### PATTERNS OF BEHAVIOUR AND THE DILEMMA OF AUTHENTICITY

There are different opinions on whether scientific reliability requires full openness and transparency of the research, and these beliefs are largely contingent on the discipline and methodology applied (Hammersley, Atkinson 2007, p. 88). In ethnology, there are no overarching rules regarding this subject, although many academic institutions and

associations have refined their internal regulations (Babbie 2013, p. 71), for instance *Code of Ethics of the American Anthropological Association* (1998) or *Ethical Guidelines for Good Research Practice*, prepared by the Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and Commonwealth. However, this is not a tool employed on a general level to set standards and develop systems of internal control, as is adopted e.g. in psychology. Therefore, each researcher has to grapple with ethical concerns on their own. The issue of expression of researcher's emotions and opinions is not a trivial one and probably every ethnographer had found out more than once that the price for obtaining interesting insights is sometimes high. Especially if the entry into the world of the respondents is paid with having to leave aside or deny one's beliefs and habits.

Not rarely, the respondents will try to convince us to taste their local delicacies or to accompany them in a variety of traditions (e.g. ritual slaughtering of animals), but perhaps it is even worse when they try to pull us into local conflicts or when they seek allies in ethically and morally questionable matters. Sometimes the anthropologist becomes caught up in a reality that is not so much "exotic" as rather gloomy, depressing and ridden with defeat. There are places, like the refugee centres, where representatives of scientific institutions are expected to fulfil hopes and expectations which are difficult to satisfy. The decision on whether to disperse these false perceptions and risk losing the interest of those who entertained them and, consequently, the chances for an interview, is not easy, and each time is an individual choice (Babbie 2013, p. 68). Although I believe that it is better to avoid ambiguity, to clarify to the interlocutors the purpose of researcher's visit and not promise too much, it is not always enough to curb the figments of imagination of the researched, relating to, for example, that they can count on help with the "settling" of their status procedure.

Sometimes, however, the dilemmas of sincerity and "authenticity" in relation to the interlocutors map the cultural subtleties that are completely unfamiliar and uninteresting to the researched. Their roots lay in the cultural patterns of behaviour and notions of what it means to be "fair", how to show esteem to another person and how to demonstrate respect for her/his rights. The example presented below is an illustration of the paradoxical situation and trap of the inclination towards "professional correctness" related to the work ethic of an ethnologist.

The director of one of the capital city's elementary schools attended by children residing at the nearby refugee centre told me about a "cultural experiment", which he had conducted among the mothers of his Chechen students (only single mothers and their children can stay at this centre). He greeted the women who visited their children's school at the director's invitation in "European" style, that is with a handshake. He did it on purpose, because – as he explained, pleased with himself – he wished to assess their willingness of cultural adaptation and cooperation. According to him, the first woman reacted with embarrassment and dropped her eyes, the next one with confusion mixed with curiosity, and another one with embarrassment but also

firmness in the returned gesture. Later on, women went to one of the classrooms and after a presentation by the host they took part in the discussion (much more actively than he thought) on the terms and conditions of education in Polish schools. They did not look either inhibited or “suppressed”. They were simply mothers, seeking the welfare of their children. The stereotype of a humble Muslim woman, who does not take the floor in the presence of an unknown man, did not manifest itself this time. In the director’s opinion, this was proof of their great deal of cultural flexibility and high ability to adapt, which is something they are usually not given a chance for, as it is assumed in advance that in this culture it “will not work”. Observation shows, however, that sometimes an example is enough to break the settled traditional model and to bring about collective imitation. If there are multiple people participating in the event, then the responsibility for the violation of the canon of cultural behaviour and, possibly, for breaking taboos is dissipated, and the system of social control is weakened. The negotiation of common interest becomes more important than the upkeep of an abstract and idealized image of the group.

The conclusion which arises upon the analysis of this study is that often we assume *a priori* that we know better than foreigners what is or is not appropriate in their culture, and what is the proper behaviour in particular situations. Thus, we force specific cultural scripts and try to impose our own notions on the researched. What is more, we do so frequently while convinced of our tolerance and openness to other cultures (because of course we do not force patterns of our own group behaviour), even though all the while we expect specific stereotyped actions from the foreigners. We fail to see that such behaviour prevents them from arranging a given situation in their own way. Not only that – we limit their spectrum of actions down to the choices which we deem appropriate to their culture, without stopping to consider that perhaps they would rather opt for the expression of a different model. We reserve the right to make the decision on the adequacy or inadequacy of certain acts of communication (e.g. words, gestures, of personal zone, the organization of space, physical appearance, etc.) (Nęcki 1996, p. 212).

The issue of researcher’s authenticity in a culturally unfamiliar environment may be likened to a musician playing out of tune in an otherwise harmonious orchestra. An ethnologist in the field who is struggling to “blend in with the background” or “integrate with the locals” draws attention in a much analogous way. The harder s/he tries to become transparent, for example by wearing colourful, regional clothing or by praising jihad or polygamy, the more his or her behaviour smacks of falsehood and masquerade. Conversions of this type are not at all uncommon among researchers, but are immediately identified by the hosts. Imitating foreign cultural patterns (cf. Qingxu 2009), even when done out of kindness and interest in the culture, often turns into an unintentional caricature of those patterns. This is due to the fact that participation in a specific cultural code and collective heritage and tradition justifies and validates using cultural matrices (Staszczak 1987, p. 360) of the particular community on par

with its members. In other cases it is groundless, albeit of course permitted. The final decision is always vested with the researcher. Sometimes, however, that balancing between respecting the norms and customs of a culture and its imitation is not easy. In either case it is best not to overdo it, which is the easiest way to lose one's credibility and to expose oneself to ridicule.

An example of a situation in which, in my opinion, the authenticity of the researcher has been put to the test, is a procedure described by the author of a study regarding Chechen refugee children in Poland. She writes: "In order to gain the trust of refugees, I behaved as they did: I dressed like Chechen women (I wore long skirts and a head scarf), I obeyed the rules of behaviour in the area of the refugee centre, for example by taking off shoes before entering the room or fasting together with them during Ramadan" (Januszewska 2010, pp. 129–130). Unfortunately it does not transpire from the author's report whether this helped her to any extent to gain a better understanding of the reality of existence of the researched group. The question arises whether the researcher undertakes this type of efforts for his or her own sake (the desire to temporarily experience and taste the reality of the "other"), for respondents (to show solidarity with them in a naive and good-natured way) or for producing an effect of the research (hoping that it would encourage those researched, who were not convinced about the sincerity of the researcher's intentions, and would provoke some "avalanche of confessions"). Each of these interpretations seems equally good and right, as long as it is true and follows from methodological reflection. Otherwise, the suitability of the applied examination procedure to the set goals of research should be given more thought.

Meandering between sensitivity or empathy towards another culture and unintentional comic effect tends to be misleading. Even if we act consciously, it turns out that we are unable to avoid dilemmas and doubts which to some extent will always influence the quality and quantity of materials collected in the field.

#### WOMAN RESEARCHER AND GENDER ROLES

Gender issues<sup>7</sup> which arise in the researcher-researched relationships have already been stressed and analyzed a number of times (cf. Warren, Hackney 2000; Järviuoma, Moisala, Vilkkö 2003), and it is beyond any doubt that they play a significant role in the "field". Researchers emphasize that attitudes towards one gender or another have been shaped by history and tradition, and are not grounded in biology (Sacks 1979, p. 7). This, however, does not change the fact that a woman who ventures into the field is treated differently than a man.

<sup>7</sup> I will use the notion of gender in the broad sense given to it in anthropology; within that perspective it refers to culturally conditioned behaviours and meanings, attributed in the various communities to women and men due to different gender roles performed by them (Jankoviak 2006, pp. 217–220).



While conducting my research among Muslim immigrants, I pay more attention to the choice of my dress, to how I speak and to my manner of expression. It is hard to tell if this helps, because at almost every meeting I am forced to negotiate our relationship anew and to repeatedly regurgitate the reasons for my presence and interest in their lives. This has become somewhat easier recently, as a wedding ring on my finger implies that the motive of my inquiry is not marriage, nor the desire to have a love affair with an “exotic” refugee, of which I have been suspected before. However, not everybody knows the meaning of this symbolic golden ring and the Chechen children keep asking me with curiosity about it. Whenever they get a chance, they explain to me: *Prophet Allah forbade us to wear gold rings* (Abubakar, 8 years old). It is common for young, fair-haired women to receive “attractive marriage proposals”. Women volunteers working with children at a refugee centre told me that sometimes it is difficult for them to carry out their duties, because a lot of time their time is wasted on getting rid of the bored men, floating about aimlessly. They do not bother women of their own, because they are not allowed to, but the volunteers, according to some men: *probably want it and expect it, because they come here and you can see that they enjoy it, because they laugh and joke* (senior man, Issa). The presence of young Poles at a centre for Caucasian women is also sometimes disturbing and creates suspicion, since they do not have a good opinion about European women. During a more intimate conversation, one Chechen woman told me that in their circles a lot is said about the alleged promiscuity and accessibility of *Polack* women. Chechen women, on the other hand, are stereotypically known for the jealousy of their men and for their overarching fear of being abandoned by them. After asking about the details, I heard that Polish women, like the Russians who have long known the superior qualities of Caucasian men, come here mainly in order to flirt with the men and to provoke the jealousy of their wives. When I asked whether they believed that I was also coming for that reason, one of them, Zarema, a cheerful and talkative mother of four, said with a laugh: *No! You do not! You have a husband, he will keep an eye on you. Would he allow you to come here if he knew that you are talking with men alone!?!*

The sensitive nature of gender issues and their impact on the fieldwork will not be diminished by any anecdote, or any list of good advice. The trap of gender roles is an insidious mechanism and may happen regardless of our efforts and attempts not to offend anyone. At times, despite modest appearance, taking piercings off from the ears and nose and abstaining from nurturing the addiction to tobacco (considered by Chechens and other Muslims as one of the worst and disgusting habits of European women), instead of obtaining the arranged interview, we receive lectures and reprimands. However, even a lesson on morality given by a representative of another culture may be a joy for the researcher who enjoys a good topic for an “ethnologically interesting” flashcard.

One example of this is the incident that took place during my conversation with an old and respected Chechen refugee on the subject of socialization of their children;



I learned that in Poland we have no idea how to educate the young generation. All that we do in this regard really boils down to anti-education. The main problem is that we have no authority, because Polish males have no character and are unable to induce obedience, while the women have no sense of dignity. Children can sense it, and therefore they walk all over their parents, do not show respect to anyone and, generally speaking, anarchy rules. When I tried to use these allegations to find out how this is handled in the country and culture of my interlocutor, he said: *That is exactly what I'm saying! Your women have no moderation and harmony. You look and behave in a shameful way which goes against the God-given way of nature. You do everything that we would never allow our daughters and wives to do. Never! See for yourself, you come here and ask about things which are none of your business, and you should have a home, a husband, children to deal with and take care of.* I responded that I do have a husband and a child, but it does not stop me in any way from doing other things too, and from being interested in people. Moreover, due to the fact that I have a family, I know what I am asking about. At this point, the man stood up rapidly (I was even a little startled), came up to me and said: *It changes everything. A woman who has children is a Mother, first and foremost. And a Mother is much more than just a Woman. One cannot say no to a Mother. Why did you not say that right away?* Certainly because, first of all, it did not occur to me, and secondly, I did not think it could be of that much importance and impact on the research in this environment. As it turned out, the influence was huge and not always predictable, and the *gender* category more than once determined my research at the refugee centre, as well as the applied methodology procedure.

It is worth mentioning that the consequences of gender roles and their importance for the fieldwork can manifest themselves in ways that are equally surprising and inspiring. For some time now I have been able to observe also how the private life of the researcher and his/her family becomes intertwined with the life of the researched. I realized that, willingly or unwillingly, certain processes, breakthroughs, crises and personal events are also perceptible to the people with whom we meet and how they affect the mutual relationships. I experienced this to a particularly pronounced extent during my pregnancy. I probably would not have been able to realise the potential significance of this fact had it not happened to me personally. At the time, I was able to directly observe the change in the attitude toward me of the people with whom I have been in touch for long time. This concerned residents of a refugee centre where I worked as a volunteer taking care of children (within one of the NGOs) and conducted field observations related to the research project. The majority of the people who lived there came from the Caucasian republics (Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingushetia, Georgia). As soon as my condition became visible enough to be obvious, women with whom I was previously not able to establish informal contacts, because they persistently identified me with the aid organization, suddenly started to approach me out of their own initiative and talk to me, and also kept inviting me to have tea with them.

I believe they became more trusting and open towards me. They willingly shared their life experiences, talked about the past and present and asked about living conditions in Poland. I remember that they have been surprised and touched when I said that my husband and I did not want to know the sex of the baby. One of them said: *Wot molodec! It's just like where we come from. There is no need to peek at God, you shouldn't...* Often, at farewell, they would touch my belly and say words of blessing. During that period we were joined by the universal feminine physiology that knows no classes and cultures and I became closer than before to them for a few months. We were joined by the physiological solidarity of motherhood and the common fate of women. Some change towards me also took place in the attitude of the refugee centre's men, who would more often greet me with a "good morning", and who started to approach me to ask how their children behaved. Chechen girls were very interested in and moved with the change of my appearance, and at every meeting, repeatedly, they asked me whether I preferred a boy or a girl. And the boys, while I was leaving the common room after finished classes, ran after me and offered to accompany me for a bit (because the road to the bus stop led through a dangerous path in the woods at the back of the tram depot). At the time, while watching these little men and young women, I was able to see directly the meaning of early preparation of children to perform certain roles, functions and duties of vital importance to society and culture.

Since then, my child very often accompanies me in the fieldwork (see also Dewalt, Dewalt, Wayland 1998, pp. 259–301). The described centre no longer exists, and most of the people with whom I became friends have left "out into the world", seeking a more stable safe heaven. Therefore I was once again forced to start building relationships from scratch and to 'tame' a difficult field. A "new value" was added as well, that is my husband who accompanied me in the research and, as it turned out, also had a great influence on relations with the community. While we travelled, he was supporting me in terms of organization, but additionally, out of necessity, he also served as a babysitter. The latter task was for some time the reason of distance, distrust and mockery from residents of the refugee centre. Through this I learned a lot about the views of Chechen women regarding gender roles in their culture and contributions of the men in raising children. Interestingly, the women also believed that it is a strange and suspicious phenomenon when a man is able to take care of a baby and has a good rapport with a child. When I asked about the details of these concerns, with all the delicacy they replied that it is just "unattractive and abnormal in their culture, and brings shame to the man", while the blame for this shameful tarnishing of his reputation falls on the woman who allowed this to happen. Such situation is an indication that she is unable to deal with everyday duties and is "a bad mother and wife", which exposes her husband to public ridicule. After some time, however, one of the older men overcame his reluctance and started to talk with my husband. As it turned out, he was not as effeminate as he had seemed to them because of the child and suddenly he regained attractiveness in the eyes

of the community and became a sought-after conversation partner, which I witnessed with undisguised envy. His popularity increased even more when he revealed that professionally he has nothing to do with ethnology (*sic*); on the contrary, he represents the technical sciences. From that moment on, he was invited for tea and fritters, and I looked after the child while sitting with the other women on the bench. From then on the world was restored to the proper order and harmony, which myself and my husband had temporarily disturbed with his presence and “unconventional behaviour”. Everything fell into its traditional place – “women are for children and men for the important matters of this world”. Once again I also felt that the category of gender and gender roles are issues that directly relate to the workshop of an ethnologist.

#### CULTURAL RELATIVISM AND ETHICAL PRINCIPLES

The relativity of artefacts and cultural norms are major subjects of modern anthropology, dating back to the very origins of its foundation.<sup>8</sup> This view is often linked with the argument that all cultures are vital adaptations (of the state of nature) and deserve equal respect. Therefore they should not be exposed by outsiders to negative and assessing judgments about their value and importance, as this is merely a step away from ethnocentrism. Personally, I lean towards the meaning of this term as considered within a wider philosophical context in which it is associated with related forms of relativism, that is moral, ethical, cognitive, linguistic, historical, etc. Within this meaning, according to the authors of the paper entitled “Rationality and Relativism”, it forms part of the general Relativism perceived as opposition to Rationalism, or sometimes Fundamentalism (cf. Hollis, Lukes 1982). In the postmodern perspective, in order to describe the corresponding processes, Clifford Geertz uses the term anti-anti-relativism (Geertz 2001, p. 42).

For some time now I have had the impression that the trite understanding of relativism and the abuse of this term caused by employing it in inadequate situations has considerably distorted its original meaning (including in ethnology). The fundamental problem for the fieldwork is the relativity of the observed reality and difficulties in analyzing cultural phenomena examined without the judgemental carbon copy of one’s own culture and its norms. All the more since the anthropologists, along with their interests, are increasingly entering the field which not only metaphorically can be called a “minefield”. They are in fact reaching areas of armed conflict, ethnic extermination, genocide, environmental disasters, etc. (Eller 2009, pp. 314–338; Nolan 2003, pp. 129–153). Therefore, there are situations where the silent acceptance of crime and

<sup>8</sup> Basically, the major point of “culture relativism” come down to assumption that it “expresses the idea that the beliefs and practices of others are best understood in the light of the particular cultures in which they are found” (Ito-Adler 2006, p. 98).

pathology in the name of lofty academic theories (e.g., such as cultural relativism) might be, without exaggeration, compared to complicity. Cultural anthropology for a long time has been regarded as an engaged discipline and so it attracts idealists and activists. In their writings they often argue – for the sake of principle and out of a sense of mission – on the side of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, giving them a voice. However, polysemantic and cultural polyphony causes even them to feel lost in the number of conflicting pieces of information and mutually exclusive social and political theories. The gap between cultural relativism and axiological universalism can be found also in the case of research carried out in a seemingly “well-known and familiar backyard” of one’s own culture (Kołakowski 1990, pp. 12–15). This illustrates the conceptual chaos and the normative ambiguity that can apply also to ethnologists.

It is not a very popular subject among researchers, because it is not easy to admit one’s interpretational powerlessness; besides, no one wants to be considered an intolerant xenophobe rejecting the – euphemistically called – “otherness and wealth” of another culture. Sometimes, however, we become observers and participants of events we neither understand nor accept, and having workshop knowledge or scholarly theories are then of no help to us. The desire to play by the rules of political correctness may be an additional obstacle in this matter. In this way, cultural relativism often “ties the hands” of researchers and “gags” them. Another thing is that each heard story conceals people who in some way entrusted them with us and allowed us to enter their world, and this is obliging. Sometimes this obligation requires us to remain silent and keep certain information in confidence; for instance when I learned about the marriage (engagement) of a fourteen-year-old daughter of my refugee interlocutor, although I knew that in the light of the Polish law this is a crime.

At this point I do not find it fitting to quote anecdotes aimed to arise sensation and to cause the tabloidization of this discipline, because my goal is simply to draw attention to situations in which a researcher – by his or her action or omission – verges on illegality. The resulting dilemmas between the need to intervene and the loyalty towards the informant sometimes obscure the fact that we are not bound by any kind of professional secrecy, but merely by a “sense of decency” so quandaries of this type should not relieve us of social responsibility.

However, some time ago I also fell into the trap of relativisation and I held a couple of long discussions and exchanges of arguments to defend my point of view. Although I was defeated in the end, from the hindsight I admit that maybe it was a good thing, as the consequences of my mistake could have been more serious than the consequences of my interlocutor’s mistake. The issue involved violence against refugee children, which was not rare at the centre; back then I perceived it as “different” educational method. Several times children taken by volunteers to the swimming pool had red and blue bruises from the blows of a belt on their backs. Asked about the reasons, they usually got annoyed and took all the blame on themselves, saying, e.g.: *Yesterday*

*I made my dad angry, because I did not want to come from the yard into the room.* The volunteers, most of whom were students of pedagogy or social work, insisted to initiate the administrative procedure clearly defined for such cases. The procedure consisted in reporting the problem to the centre management, where it was registered as “an incident”, and then the psychologist, the Social Welfare Centre as well as the Police Department would be informed. Moreover, a motion would be lodged with a court, moving for a limitation of parental rights. I argued that these children come from cultures in which they are raised strictly, with a hard fist and a belt. Thus, I believed that first their parents should be talked to and explained the cultural differences in terms of penalties and legal consequences of this type of educational methods in Poland. I got my way and the result was that the family forbade their children to go swimming, withdrew them from activities in the day room and their father yelled at us in the hallway, requesting that we “keep our hands off his educational methods and his children”. The repercussions of this event were in fact much more broad, as the news spread among the residents of the centre. They responded in either of the two ways. Some limited their children’s participation in all organized activities, while others tried to teach us about the role of the child and his or her rights in their culture. I sustained my view that you have to work calmly and with respect towards cultural norms of children’s and foreigners’ countries of origin, trying not to cause them any additional troubles, of which they already had plenty. My colleagues disagreed. They believed that since these families lived in Poland, the Polish law applied to them and moreover, in order to live here in the future, they should adapt to the binding norms. At the next suspicion of violence (physical and emotional), this time by a woman who was clearly dysfunctional, radical steps were taken, including calling the police and the threat of locating the girl in the police child custody. I do not know if it worked, because the woman soon left and the fate of the family (mother and three children) are unknown to me. To my surprise, however, reception of the intervention was completely different than before. In simplification, I can say that it was taken seriously and with attention, and as a result the prestige of the initiatives taken by the activists from the foundation increased (reflected, among other things, by the children’s attendance to classes). Looking back, I think that sometimes one needs to have the courage to admit that the facts are “black and white”, rather than water them down to the shades of gray – hiding behind the broadly understood “cultural differences”. Therefore, it seems to me that my colleagues were right all along and the appropriate thing to do would have been to react immediately, without delay, in accordance with the local laws and regulations to prevent the increase of harmful incidents for both sides.

Setting the border between acquiescence or tolerance and objection or interference in the culturally different patterns of behaviour is extremely difficult and not devoid of controversy. Another situation which made me aware of the axiological challenges of the ethnologist’s profession was a discussion with a young, well-educated and culturally

well-adapted Chechen man working at one of the non-governmental organisations. During an interview on traditional family structures, with a smile on his face, between sips of tea, he told me about the famous case involving a young woman beaten to death by her cousin. Her crime had been the refusal to marry the candidate chosen by her family and getting in a relationship with a foreigner (this took place in Belgium in 2005). When I expressed my outrage, he looked at me, puzzled, and said: *She just had no honour – it happens... So she should not live.*

It is true that being an ethnologist does not give one the entitlement to pass judgments about other cultures and their practices; nevertheless, it does not release us from reacting to injustice and illegal behaviour. Even when they are perceived as such only through the prism of one culture. Probably I am about to expose myself here to the criticism of the followers of the extreme relativism fraction, but I think that if a particular community refuses rights to other social groups in the name of principles adopted in their culture and customary code (for example, allows the cruelty and aggression towards women and children), and this is happening in my country, I have the right (and obligation) to express my strong opposition. If this sounds like a manifesto of my views – that was not my intention. The limited length of this text forces some simplification and perhaps even the trivialization of the issues discussed here, but I think that philosopher Charles Taylor was right while claiming:

“Understanding the other is always... comparative... we only liberate the others and *let them be* [as anthropology enjoins] when we can identify and articulate a contrast between their understanding and ours” (Taylor 1995, quoted in Inglis 2004, p. 79).

Instead of a punch line, I will use the observation elaborated by Fred Inglis:

“This is certainly not to say that the content of one culture may not be reproached for irrationality or inhumanity, but such an egalitarian approach requires a moral strength of one’s own, even if it is found incomprehensible or ridiculous by the members of another culture. [...] For it is the moral justification of the human sciences that they determine both how the world is and how it ought to be” (Inglis 2004, p. 79).

In these words, I think, lays the crux or, in other words, the “Heart of Darkness”, which compels us to a deeper ethical reflection on the condition of the humanities, social sciences, their paradigm and, in general, research that is conducted in the more “challenging fields”.

## CONCLUSION

Passion and commitment is an important element of every work, and this is especially true for sciences. However, sometimes difficult relationships with other people are the very specificity of the ethnologist’s profession. Getting accustomed with the natives requires tremendous amount of effort and investment, also of our emotional, intellectual and cognitive reserves. At the same time it is never known whether they

will be returned and to what extent. “Entering” the field also brings an element of adventure and risk.

Therefore, it is important to maintain the right balance between optimism, intuition and action strategy. The inability to keep scientific and personal distance, and the confusion of roles (researcher, activist, politician, “helper”, etc.) can lead one to a dead end, which is not easy to get out from. The most fundamental mistake is the failure to define the mutual expectations and possibilities from the very beginning. It also reminds me that the ethnologist’s profession involves some risk which, for the purpose of these considerations and in reference to one of the stories in “The Little Prince”, I would call the “tamed fox” syndrome. The wise fox said to the Little Prince, by way of caution: “One only understands the things that one tames” (Saint-Exupéry 2000, p. 60), but it also has its great consequences: “You become responsible, forever, for what you have tamed” (Saint-Exupéry 2000, p. 63).

Fieldwork is a type of convention and one should be aware that the psychological spheres of the researcher and the researched permeate each other and exert bidirectional influence on relationships and their effects. This is accompanied by a variety of emotions, which are not easy to control. Affective and behavioural surface of communication is not of any smaller importance than the intellectual plane. It always in some way affects the interpretation of the data, and sometimes gives them their final form and content. The greatest illusion of an author, then, may be his or her conviction of their undisturbed research objectivism. Professionalism, even when it is full of distance to the world and when it sets reasonable aims and objectives, in fact does not always guarantee avoiding surprises and failures. Therefore the, not deprived of pathos, motto defining the ethnological profession should be: “A good ethnologist is an empiricist who feels and a rationalist who experiences”.

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