Studying Hallyu in Central and Eastern Europe: challenges for empirical research

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Abstract
The objectives of the present paper are to cast light on the realities of attempting to record and analyze the everyday life, practices, and challenges of such an empirical project on the practices, opinions and attitudes of Korean-fans from central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans.
The analysis used the secondary analysis of data, interviews and ethnographic recordings of research process. Based on the results of the triangulation of the methods, the present study revealed the characteristics of fieldwork for such a research project. First, it is difficult to reach the voices one wants to hear due to time-consuming type of research involved. Second, in-field negotiations and their numerous understated assumptions can bring a high degree of stress and exhaustion for the researcher. Third, the relationships between researchers and their subjects fall along a spectrum from "reciprocal" to "potentially exploitative", while continuing to be "inherently hierarchical". From here, one cannot continue to work with and gain information from local individuals without giving back – whether through gifts or simply being a sympathetic ear. The basic conclusion of the study is the necessity of an increased number of comparative social research projects in Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans in order to gain a deeper understanding of the peculiarities of this type of scientific enterprises.

Keywords: empirical research, position and reflexivity in the field, gatekeeper, interviews, area research.

Introduction

The topics at the heart of this article interweave the professional, political, and private. By chronicling all the discussions and ethical dilemmas that come with fieldwork on Korea fans in Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans, I tried to cast light on the realities of attempting to record and analyze the everyday life, practices, and challenges of such an empirical project.

The research project which I made in 2014 with the help of the AKS Grant (AKS-2013-R 71) – "Searching the Sameness and Otherness through Hallyu – A comparative analysis of South Korean popular products' impact in Balkans and Central Europe" – allowed me not only to collect empirical data but also to scrutinize my positionality in the field, question both the social scientist's subjective gaze and the representations of "the other" and the importance of reflexivity in social science research. In general, it still remains relatively uncommon for field researchers to document the practice of the considerations of the research as an empirical action. For this reason, the objective of this article is to act as a partial road map for future research in this direction and to provide directions to help ease novice researchers or those more experienced elsewhere – into and through their fieldwork experiences, allowing for richer and more meaningful field encounters and interactions.

Following Buchowski (2004), one can notice a so-called "hierachy of knowledge in Central and Eastern Europe" as regards the social sciences in In Eastern Europe and the Balkans. This distinction was more and more considered as one between "colonialism" or, as Tulbure (2009) and Buchowski (2004) call it, "orientalism" and the Western tradition in social sciences. In calling attention to the difference between ways of understanding social sciences in Western world vs the Eastern and central European countries, the authors (Tulbure, 2009; Buchowski, 2004) start from the definition of orientalism offered by Said (1978). For Said, orientalism is, first of all, a set of discursive practices through which the West structured the imagined East. Orientalism is also "a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and … 'the Occident'" (Said, 1978, p.2). The Orient exists and people live in the region concerned, but the European representation of these people is a typical cultural creation that enables the powerful to legitimize their domination over the subjugated. The hierarchical dichotomy between the Occident and the Orient and its constant perpetuation proves that a powerful cultural hegemony is at work. As Buchowski (2004) noticed, in the domain of politics and in public discourses, the way socialist societies were presented in the West was almost invariably negative and this also had an influence on the status of social sciences in the region, which were assessed as dependent on the socialist ideology and dependent on the Western peers for recognition and legitimity. The borderline was drawn on the geographic map and the division was clear.

As regards Romanian, Chelcea (2012) assumed that it is right to speak of "hybrid actors" at the encounter between Western and non-Western ways of making social sciences. Some scientific trajectories in this region are dependent on American and/or Western social sciences; others, on the contrary, are rather independent of vis-a-vis Western social sciences and dependent upon "the changing fabric and dynamics of post-socialist societies" (Chelcea, 2012, p.4).

In sum, to engage yourself in a field-work in Central and Eastern Europe plus the Balkans in the topic related to East-Asia studies suppose a double challenge: on the one hand, the challenges faced by Asian studies as a specific area for the social sciences and, on the other, the interrogations which arouse in Central-Eastern Europe and the Balkans as regards the ways in which empirical research in social sciences was and is made after the fall of socialism.

Materials and methods

The main research methodology used is of a sociological type. More precisely, the methods used in the research project are:
1. The analysis of the social documents – journals, correspondence with the main informants in the field;
2. The semi-structured interview – the interview guide was applied in face-to-face meetings with fans of South Korea culture from Bulgaria and Hungary.

The option to "triangulate" two types of methods (the analysis of social documents and the semi-structured interview) was based on the assumption that it can be rather impossible to reach a respondent located in other countries whithout keeping close contacts on email and social networking sites (such as Facebook), on the one hand; on the other hand, it was dependent on time-limits imposed on the project that was made mainly in January-July 2014.

Results

To do fieldwork in the social sciences means to engage in a relational process (Davis and Spencer, 2010), which has to be grounded in each particular field. A scientist has to learn the

cultural ways and conventions of communication and he or she should become able to accommodate to ever changing contexts. The social scientist as a researcher has to study the phenomena in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret them in terms of the meanings people bring to them (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994).

The "human-as-instrument" role of the qualitative researcher is perceived appropriate "to capture the complexity, subtlety, and constantly changing situation that is the human experience" (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p.193). Who is doing research (Griffiths, 1998) has effects on data collection and analysis. The researchers own specific perceived subjectivities and the results of their works depend on their positionality and reflexivity within the fieldwork.

Positionality involves the recognition that "all knowledge is produced in specific contexts or circumstances and that these situated knowledges are marked by their origins" (Valentine, 2002, p.116). Hopkins (2007, p.391) proposes that such positionality is inclusive of one's race, class, gender, age, sexuality, and (dis)ability, as well as life experiences. These characteristics are relational and never static (McDowell, 1994). At the same time, positionality was defined as "self-critical sympathetic introspection and the self conscious analytical scrutiny of self as researcher" (England, 1994, p.82) and it refers to the way in which our own social position and subjectivity could influence our research because we interpret qualitative data through the lens of our own world view and because our status, gender, age and ethnicity influence how and what our participants choose to reveal to us (England, 1994; Kobayashi, 1994; Dowling, 2005). The benefit of reflexivity is that it "allows the researcher to be more open to challenges to their theoretical position that fieldwork almost inevitably raises" (England, 1994, p.89).

In the case of the research project that was made in 2014, the main points of interest where I can assess that my positionality and my reflexivity were at stake comprised: the selection of gatekeepers and informants, my positioning on inside vs outside as regards the interviewees, the "art" of interviewing, the understanding of meaning in interviewing and the interviewees as main actors in the research process.

Gatekeepers and informants comprised

Broadly said, from the sociological viewpoint, gatekeepers include "those who provide – directly or indirectly – access to key resources needed to do research, be those resources logistical, human, institutional or informational" (Campbell et al., 2006, p.98), reflecting the positive aspects that gatekeepers can also bring to one's fieldwork experiences (Heller et al., 2011).

Discussing the issue of access in social sciences and case study, Burgess (1991) argued that access is not just an issue concerning the gate-keepers or the participants' consent, but there are "multiple points of entry that requires a continuous process of negotiation and renegotiation" (Burgess, 1991, p.49).

Getting access for interviewing is significant not simply because it is a permit to go into a situation, but also because, first, the issues of power between those seeking the interview and those agreeing to grant it, raise problems about the ethics of gaining access, and are also affected by different cultural perceptions of a research interview, cooperation with outsider/s, and associated perceptions. Second, the access has to be negotiated within the cultural conventions and constraints. Third, how access has been gained and granted influences the relationship and rapport as well as the nature of the data collected in the subsequent interview situation. Access is, at the same time, "getting in" (physical access) and setting the tone for "getting on" (social access).

a. Getting in or gaining physical access for interviewing can be problematic depending on the interviewee/s and their perceptions of the research and the researchers (Fine and Sandstrom,

1988; Wax, 1971). Studies have unveiled multiple factors like interviewing being perceived as threatening, time consuming, lacking a transactional element, and relative status of the participants (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992; Marshall and Rossman, 1989, p.94-95).

b. Researchers have also highlighted factors useful in gaining access, such as a prestigious research grant, keeping a low profile, gender, links with those with power in the relative context, and many others (Gewirtz and Ozga, 1994). Burgess draws attention to the "relationships", which influence data collection and analysis (Burgess, 1984; Burgess, 1991).

Before I even enter "the field" (Gupta and Ferguson, 1997; Massey, 2003) and approach those whose voices I wish to hear, I encounter a number of gatekeepers, individuals who control "opportunities to interact with others in the chosen research site" (Hay, 2000, p.114).

The access to field in the case of the research project made in 2014 was different for each location considered – Budapest vs. Sofia – although the general path followed to gain (physical and social) access was the same.

More precisely, in December 2014, following the approval of the research project by the Academy of Korean Studies, I started to establish contact with two types of possible gatekeepers in Hungary and Bulgaria: Academics involved in teaching and learning Korean Studies from local universities (e.g. University of Sofia- Bulgaria, and ELTE University – Budapest, Hungary) and Korean Center based in Sofia (Sejong Institute from Sofia, the center for Korean Language in Varna) and Budapest (Korean Cultural Center in Budapest), on the one hand, and groups of (Bulgarian and Hungarian) fans, on the other. While in the case of the first type of gatekeepers (e.g. Academics from both countries) the contacts where made on an individual basis, using the official e-mail addresses provided by the Universities, in fans'case the search for access and for gatekeepers was more laborious, more difficult to obtain. In fact, due to the "heavy" use of Internet (own websites, social networking sites such as Facebook or Twitter) the only available option I had at that moment was to send a fixed and impersonal message both at the email addresses found on websites and on the social network sites. The message was send at around 150 email addresses and Facebook pages of the fans from Bulgaria and Hungary.

> *Dear Sir/Madame*
> *My name is [Author name], I am an Associate Professor at the University X – Faculty of Sociology and Social Work and the reason for which I am writing to you is the following: I am engaged in a sociological comparative project on the reception of Hallyu in Eastern Europe, the project is supported by the Academy of Korean Studies – the Evaluation Committee for Korean Studies Overseas - through the Grant AKS-2013-R71 granted for 2014 Academic Year. The sociological comparative research project intends to stress out both the similarities and differences among Korean fans from Romania and Bulgaria/Hungary and it involves a series of interviews and focus-group discussions with people who are fans of Hallyu or who are simple audience members of K-Pop, Korean TV series and movies, who like Korean cuisine or read Korean literature. Giving the specific profile of your fan group/association/center I want to ask you if it is possible to give me some logistic help in making this research project in Sofia/Budapest in the spring of 2014. I am aware of the difficulties that someone who is not from Bulgaria/Hungary can meet in searching subjects on this specific topic and this is the reason for which I dare to ask your help. I thank you in advance for reading this message and I expect an answer from you if possible.*
> *Yours sincerely*
> *Author name*

At the same time, in order to ease the contact both with the fans and with the gatekeepers I was trying to contact, I devellped an English version of an online questionnaire on Korean popular culture addressed to (Bulgarian and Hungarian) fans and send it on a separate set of emails and Facebook messages to around 300 groups of fans from Bulgaria and Hungary. I used also a fixed and impersonal message to introduce myself and I asked them to disseminate the questionnaire among their friends and followers in order to be filled by those who could be interested in doing that:

Dear Sir/ Madame
My name is [Author name], I am an Associate Professor at the University X – Faculty of Sociology and Social Work and the reason for which I am writing to you is the following: I am engaged in a sociological comparative project on the reception of Hallyu in Eastern and Central Europe. Unitil now I have worked on Hallyu reception in Romania https://sites.google.com/site/xxxxxx
The present sociological comparative research project intends to stress out both the similarities and differences among Korean fans from Romania and Eastern and Central Europe. I am interested in the opinions of the people who are fans of Hallyu or who are simple audience members of K-Pop, Korean TV series and movies, who like Korean cuisine or read Korean literature. I am aware of the difficulties that someone who is not from a country from Central and Eastern Europe can meet in searching subjects on this specific topic and this is the reason for which I dare to ask your help in some logistic aspects- pease disseminate among your fans fans the following questionnaire. https://docs.google.com/forms/xxxxxxxxxxxxx
I thank you in advance for reading this message and I expect an answer from you, if possible.
Yours sincerely
Author name

Immediately after that first message, the entrance "in the field" has been divided between the two countries, having its own way and dynamics for each case.
In Bulgaria, after the first official messages, I was contacted via e-mail by Professor A.F. – the head of Korean Studies at Sofia University – who put me into contact with his former student R. R..

Hello, Author name,
As you might have already guessed, I am Professor A.F.'s ex student from the Korean studies department. Nice to meet you! Mr. F forwarded to me your mail where you requested some contacts of Bulgarian Hallyu communities. I happen to know such people and already messaged them regarding your project. I have no answers yet, but in the meanwhile, could you tell me a bit more about the tasks included in your research? As far as I understood, you plan to make an anoymous Q&A survey, and then a group discussion? While communicating with the respondents, is it going to be an entirely virtual contact, including written correspondence, do you have in mind some PC to PC audio conference, or eventually meet the respondents in person? Will it be OK for you if I send you their Facebook contacts so that you can reach each other in person? Also, could you please provide details about the time they need to set aside in order to give the answers? As far as

I understood, free time might be an issue to some of my colleagues. Maybe it is also a good idea to know if there is some deadline we need to obey for giving you the answers.
Last but not least, I hope to get some answers from the respondents soon and write you back.
Best regards,
R.

R. became, thus, the main gatekeeper for the projected fieldwork in Sofia in 2014: she facilitate the contact with the rest of possible respondents, we also became friend on Facebook where there has been a lot of discussions – me posting the questions and R. answering back, mainly on the issue of respondents and details related to the planned trip to Sofia in the spring of 2014.

The situation for Hungary was quite different. The only official message I have received was from the KCC in Budapest and was related mainly with the lending of a room where the interviews can be made.

Dear Author name,
I am sorry for the late reply. We are quite busy with organizing events. We can lend a room for you where you can conduct the interview. Please tell me ahead when you want to use our seminar room. Thank you.
Best regards,
KCC

If the Hungarian "official" (e.g. Academic and cultural) gatekeepers were reluctant in answering to my messages, the real help to enter "in the Hungarian field" came from the leader of fan groups, in this case the Hungarian Hallyu Headquarter group (B. P.) and the Homemadeasia group (V. M.).

Dear Author name,
Thank you for your letter. If you need help, we can help you of course. Can you please tell me what we have to do exactly to help you?
Best regards,
Wicky
M. V.-Home Made Asia-manager

Dear Professor Author name,
thank you for contacting us! We are very glad to help out with Your research in any ways we can, as we understand that such academic works can be essential for the recognition of Hallyu in our area, and also because some of our staff members have tried their hands at the academic view of such matters as well. We have received your message on our facebook page and will proceed to share and pin the questionnary on our page, hoping that many of our readers will participate. In addition to that, we will gladly assist you in personal discussions with fans from Hungary. Are you planning on coming to Hungary in April to meet up with interviewees personally? If so, approximately when do you expect to be in Hungary? In this case, we shall try to gather a few fans for personal meeting, so that you can have discussions with them (and our available staff members will also gladly answer your questions).

If not, I think we could try and organize a series of interviews via Skype, which of course is not as intimate as one-on-one discussions, but could possibly help your research as well.
Best regards,
B. P.
Chief Editor
Hungarian Hallyu Headquarters

Both B. and V. had played the role of gatekeepers in the planned Hungarian field: after we became friends on Facebook, they answered to my questions and offered me details about the planned fieldwork in Budapest.

The inside vs outside positioning in interviewing

Even members of the same speech and cultural community are differentiated by other equally important characteristics that make the researcher "both an insider as well as an outsider" (Foster, 1994, p.131-132). In the fieldwork, Triandis (1972) acknowledge the importance of the influence on interviewer from the part of particular relationship stage or relationship type (e.g., acquaintance, friendship, or romantic relationship) and its impact on other communication variables such as relational openness; relational involvement. There is a complex interplay of social norms, values, and patterns of behaviour involved in these constructions. Some broad dimensions for positioning a cultural outsider can be: 1. an opponent; 2. a stranger; 3. a tourist; 4. a learner; 5. a guest; 6. a friend. These are not exhaustive, not discrete, and not points on a scale (Triandis, 1972).

In the case of the research project carried out in 2014, my own position as a cultural outsider was on points two, three and four from the above-mentioned list and, I have to stress the fact that I positioned myself on those three positions at the same time. First, I was a stranger due to the fact that even I was (and still remain) an Eastern European I did (and still do) not belong to the national culture (be it Bulgarian or Hungarian) within which I was supposed to made the fieldwork – my own cultural and social identity remain a Romanian one. Secondly, I had to spend only a limited period of time in each location I intend to study – a week or ten days – and, from here my position in and my "gaze toward" the field were more similar to the tourist's ones. Finally, I was a learner because, even I was aware of the fact that I knew what was happening with Hallyu in my own country – Romania – I was eager to see what are the peculiarities of the impact of Korean cultural products on other societies.

Being an insider or outsider social scientist – or "partially insider" respectively "outsider within" (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999, p.5) – is relative and relational as it depends on the criteria of identification and belonging, on relationships and on research topics and interests. It can change in the course of time or from one moment to the next. The crucial challenge and opportunity of social sciences is to make use of gradual differences and similarities, mutual curiosity and empathy, intellectual insights and knowledge through the body, as well as all kinds of relationships and relatedness. This was true in my case. Retrospectivelly, I can place myself on a middle place between those two ends of "insider-outsider" continuum. Due to the fact that I came from a society and a culture placed both in Eastern Europe and in the Balkans, I could not consider myself as a "total", "complete" outsider, as was the case with a non-European researcher or even with a Western one. But I was not a "full insider" for the cultures in which I entered in 2014.

The "art"of interviewing

Interviewing is a multi phase activity and involves interacting in many ways. An understanding of the interviewee's culture by the interviewer has great significance for all phases of interviewing including access, conducting interviews, and making meaning (Haw, 1998).

In qualitative research we accept that knowledge is situated and constructed by the social relationship that occurs during data collection (England, 1994; Rose, 1997). Our background, social position relative to the participant, and interview style – all influence the knowledge created during the research project (Kobayashi, 1994; Pezalla et al., 2012). Our subjectivity can shift and be fluid throughout the research process and we have to be ever vigilant to minimize the projection of our own position into the interview or into how we interpret the experiences of our participants (Berger, 2015). Reflexivity helps us construct a representation of ourselves relative to our participants to attempt to manage this process, but no matter how hard we try, that self-representation is never fully realized or completely transparent (Rose, 1997; Berger, 2015). In my research project I tried to plan every step in advance as recommended by Edwards (1998) and Temple (2002) as regards the fieldwork made in other cultures.

The entire process of planning the interviews made in 2014 was a long negociation based on continous online dialogues with the gatekeepers from Bulgaria and Hungary. We exchanged messages (both on Facebook and e-mail) on a weekly basis, and, as the moment of real "entering the field" approached for me, the speed of message exchanges became more intense – almost on a daily basis in the last days before the travels to Sofia and Budapest.

On the basis of the results collected through the on-line questionnaire I made a general "Guide for Interview" which I planned to apply in both locations – the interview guide has twenty questions and employed the background national (e.g. Bulgarian and Hungarian) information provided by anonymous online respondents, such as the "history" of Hallyu (Bulgarian and Hungarian) fans, the specific activities (fan meetings, participation at the local and regional contest on Korean themes) they made, the personal assessments of the impact of Korean popular culture on their own lives etc. The research instrument was devised as flexible one, open to "in the field" changes.

Due to the time-limit we agree on a fixed program of interviews of the types presented bellow:

Table 1. Interviews skedule – Budapest

hour\day	March 26. (Wed)	March 27. (Thurs)	March 28. (Fri)
10:00:00		H. R.	K. B.
11:00:00		S. G., B. R.	
12:00:00			
13:00:00		B. S.	T.-G. A.
14:00:00		B. C. K.	
18:00:00	S. S.		
19:00:00	B.E. (Translating: P.B.)	M. V	Home Made Asia
20:00:00		Németh Dávid	Home Made Asia

Table 2. Interviews skedule – Sofia

hour\day	April 27, 2014	April 28, 2014	April 29, 2014	April 30, 2014
11:00:00			T. T.	D. T., T. B.
12:00:00	M. U.			
13:00:00		E. F.		
15:00:00		D. Z.		
16:00:00				V. G. (Translating: R. R.)
17:00:00	N. D. (Translating: R. R.)			
19:00:00			R. R.	
20:00:00		I. U.		

In practice there had been some differences between what was planned and the empirical way of collecting the data but the general directions of getting and remaining in the (Hungarian and Bulgarian) field remained those negotiated with the gatekeepers.

Understanding and misunderstanding in interviewing as discussion

The problem of the language in which I had to make my research was extremely important from the begining. I came from a country with a Romance (Latin) language (e.g. Romanian) and I could not base my field-work on "linguistic affinity" with the interviewees since I had to discuss with respondents having as their native-language either Hungarian (belonging to Uralic/ Finno-Ugric language family) or Bulgarian (a Slavic) languages. English was, as such, the *lingua franca* I choose together with the gatekeepers from Budapest (B. and V.) and Sofia (R.) for both the fieldwork preparation and for the interviews. This put a great limitation on type of respondents enclosed in both samples – e.g. Hungarian sample and Bulgarian one – which were not only Hallyu fans but also has to be able to conduct a discussion in English for about one hour.

Despite the fact that almost all the respondents I encountered "in the field" were fluent in English, there have been also several cases in which the meeting was mediated by the presence of gatekeepers as "translators". The gatekeepers in Sofia and Bulgaria became, as such, interpreters of the discourse of the respondent and mediators for my questions.

In the existing literature, numerous recommendations have been made to improve the mechanics of interpretation in research, such as ensuring the interpreter is familiar with the research aims and technical terms prior to starting any interviewing (Irvine et al., 2007), explicitly acknowledging the credentials and role of the interpreter (Squires, 2009), limiting the interpretation to two languages rather than introducing added complexity with multiple languages (Kapborg and Bertero, 2002), allowing for on-going discussion about the interpretation process during fieldwork (Larkin et al., 2007), and ultimately triangulating data between participants, interpreters and data collection methods (Esposito, 2001; Temple and Edwards, 2002).

In making those interviews mediated and translated by local gatekeepers, it became clear that meaning is not simply elicited by apt questioning, nor simply transported through respondent replies, "it is actively and communicatively assembled in the interview encounter" (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995, p.115). Thus, frequently, the English interpretation was shorter and more concise

than the original response in Hungarian or Bulgarian but the non-verbal communication allowed me to add supplementary information and to put additional questions.

The interviewees as main actors in the research process

There is abundant literature emphasising the interplay of different factors on interviewing, and pointing to the issues of gender, personal experience, age, social status, race, ethnicity (Burgess, 1991: 105; Ball, 1994; Bhatti, 1995; Delamont, 1984; Flick, 2002; Harding, 1987; Lamphere, 1994; Mirza, 1995; Oakley, 1981; Opie, 1992; Stanley and Wise, 1990), shared background (Finch, 1984), shared identity (Foster, 1994), social class (Marshall and Rossman, 1989), peer group (Ozga and Gewirtz, 1993) and many others. Significantly, the complexity of these interactions increases in cross-cultural contexts as the interacting factors are perceived and experienced differently in diverse cultures.

A listener is not a passive receiver of information. While communicating, she or he is active in "assigning meaning" (Barnlund, 1998, p.40). Assumption of similarities between the researcher and the interviewees might temporarily ease the discomfort of "walking on thin ice", but it can be seriously misleading with implications for data interpretation and the research itself (Holstein and Gabrium, 1995). A familiarity with social structures and behavioural patterns improves an understanding of the responses (Garfinkel, 1959; Coulon, 1995). It is perceived to facilitate interpretation by situating the responses in the context. A tacit understanding gained through "indwelling" (Polanyi, 1967) provides a knowledge background for making meaning. Shared social and cultural knowledge contributes to give meaning to responses (Foster, 1994, p.141).

In the case of the interviews made in 2014, the positive elements that helped me come closer to the interviewees were either information I bought from the life of Romanian fans of Hallyu (e.g. what they did, how they celebrate and get involved in various Korea-linked events) and personal details. For example, in Budapest I encountered an interviewee who gave me only extremely short answers to the questions, and it seemed that the existing barriers due to age and education differences could not be overlapped. Starting with the moment at which I mentioned that I have a dog at home and I showed him the pictures of it, the discussion changed its pace and content. He started to give me more elaborated answers and with a lot of details.

Qualitative researchers recognise the significance of non-verbal messages and signals. Potter (1997) recommends an inductive discourse analysis paying attentive to social practices - hesitation, pauses, silences and overlaps. He explains these as not simply "a blurred edge on the pure message" but determining precisely what action is being performed and why (Potter, 1997, p.152). But, there is another dimension to the issues. Nonverbal communication can be there in its very absence in cultures that guard expression of emotions and personal responses. This absence of nonverbal signals may lead an outsider researcher/interviewer to erroneous interpretations and conclusions. Non-verbal messages and signals are located within cultures and patterns of behaviour, and cannot be accessed or learned through mere language acquisition.

Both in the case of the interviews made in Sofia and for those made in Budapest the non-verbal elements of the discussion were extremely important. For example, two respondents from Homemadeasia (Budapest) came together for the interview, although they were skeduled at one-hour distance. During our discussion they not only told me about the activities their group of fans made in the last two years but also presented songs' fragments of the adaptations they made in Hungarian from K-Pop songs.

I have to agree with Kim (1991) that the problem in cross-cultural interviewing is that the "psychological posture" becomes "inter-group" rather than "interpersonal", which encourages the participants "to perceive each other as a group representative rather than as a unique person" (Kim, 1991, p.266). This has implications for qualitative data and analysis, and raises ontological and epistemological concerns.

The interplay between interviewer and interviewee was obvious in the case of a Bulgarian respondent who made appeal at the existing network of fan-friends who already had meet with me or with whom I had fixed an appointement after the discussion with her.

I think the former Korean ambassador to Bulgaria Chon Bi Ho made a great deal to strenghten ties between the countries and let some Korean artists and also, businesses, enter Bulgaria. Korean Studies department of Sofia University, with its events have also raised awareness. I think you already has been there and as I undestood tommorow you will meet D and T. Last but not least, **Eastern Spirit** *fan community, initiated by D, who you already know....hm...you just meet yesterday. Yes, Eastern Spirit fan coomunity, with its online discussions, translations, and live events have made Korean culture more popular to Bulgarian audience.*

To made things more familiar for the subjects I also have to organise interviews either in a restaurant – while the respondent is eating her tripe soup portion – or at a cafee, near to the Budapest Synagogue, where the street noise almost ruined the recording of the discussion.

Conclusions

Semi-structured interviews of two convenience samples were undertaken during fieldwork in Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans in 2014. This provided contextual background and information for the research design. The data collected provided sufficient information from which to perform a qualitative analysis. Triangulation of data from the various interview techniques using an iterative approach allowed for effective, valid, and rigourous research to be conducted. This methodology resolved the research "problem" by accumulating sufficient knowledge to lead to an understanding or explanation, as suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985, p.226-227).

Within my project, the comparative research approach provided an opportunity for an in-depth examination of many viewpoints in the district at one point in time (Neuman, 2000). This approach allowed for a growing understanding of the micro level activities of individuals.

The dominant research paradigm of the research project made in 2014 was qualitatively based and used an interpretive approach and a social constructionist perspective. This approach developed an understanding of the culture and the inherent social relations within the research study (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994; Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Neuman, 2000; Sarantakos, 1993). Neuman (2000) claims this paradigm views and analyses socially meaningful action through the direct observation of people in natural settings to understand and interpret social worlds. Some results of this research project were already presented in various conferences and articles, but it remained a lot of information that can be refined and structured in future work.

The main point of this article was not to present empirical data but to draw what I called "a partial road map" for the fieldwork, which can offer directions to help ease other researchers interested in this type of topic.

Stressing the importance to establish rapport, empathy and understanding between interviewer and interviewee, Hitchcock and Hughes recommend "familiarity with the biographical

and contextual features of the respondents' life history, outlook, customs and life-style in order to be able to relate more fully and in a more appreciative way with those being interviewed" (1991, p.85-86). In the case of my research project "Searching the Sameness and Otherness through Hallyu – A comparative analysis of South Korean popular products' impact in Balkans and Central Europe" the thesis that different cultures enable different ways of thinking and different ways of interpreting objects and events proved its validity. The differences played out in the relationships and connections formed with the participants in the study had shaped the ways that meanings were shared and understood. The most important result was that those connections "in the field" were not fixed; they shifted over time, even over the course of a single interview as the discussion moved from areas where particular facets of life experience or identity were fore-grounded to ones where others gained prominence (Mullings, 1999). The interactions during the interviews added extra layers of complexity to the shifting and intersecting interviewer-interviewee positions. In purely practical terms, the (unplanned and undirected) process of "switching" over the course of an interview often provided a facilitating, non-evaluative space for informants to develop their accounts.

To sum up, what makes research in "other", that is, foreign, places different from (or similar to) more "internal", that is "at home" settings? Given my fieldwork experiences, I would suggest there are many similarities, yet four seem to stand out.

First, it can be extremely difficult to reach the voices one wants to hear. As in the case of my project, sometimes the researcher has to spent a lot of time (several weeks and even months) in obtaining access "in the field", finding relevant and information-driven gatekeepers and spent a large ammount of energy in fostering contacts with the respondents before the face-to-face meetings.

Second, in-field negotiations and their numerous understated assumptions can bring a high degree of stress and exhaustion for the researcher. While part of this occurs because of cross-cultural dialogues, the fact that the goalposts of "acceptable" are constantly shifting for purely strategic reasons makes a consistent research path almost impossible.

Third, while there are certainly situations elsewhere where interviewees have good reason to be cautious regarding what they say to outsiders I do not think this is the case with the interviews on Hallyu-related topics. Despite this general and common-sense assumption, there are several occasions both in Budapest and in Sofia when the recoder had to be covered by a tissue or in which I have to cease to ask some additional details about one sub-topic due to the uneasiness which can be noticed on the face and in the posture of the respondents.

Fourth, and most important, relationships between researchers and their subjects fall along a spectrum from "reciprocal" to "potentially exploitative", while continuing to be "inherently hierarchical" (England, 1994, p.82). One cannot, in my opinion, continue to work with and gain information from local individuals without giving back – whether through gifts or simply being a sympathetic ear. Yet each action of this type could be, of course, another negotiated process that can raise numerous ethical dilemmas, again pointing to the importance of critical reflection and contextual awareness. In the case of my research project I could not give any gifts to the respondents (due to budget constraints) but I maintained close links with them. Apart from remaining in touch by mail and on the Facebook, and after that on Instagram, there were also physical contacts that granted the maintaining the relationships. Thus, in May-July 2014, I went for three times in Bulgaria and each time I met with some of the former Bulgarian participants at the initial meeting in April 2014. In June 2014, B, my Hungarian gatekeeper, invited me at a Hungarian-Korean festival in Budapest and after that, in November 2014, I met one of the Hungarian interviewee – H. R. - as a participant

at the conference "Winning Central Europe: Spread and Reception of the Korean Wave in the Czech Republic and the Adjacent Countries", organised by Charles University in Prague, Czech Republic.

Nonetheless, the question that remains to be answered in other comparative research is: What are the ways in which a research project on East Asia made in Eastern and Central Europe can be innovative in respect to a hybridization of the methods? There can be no general answer to this, because I have no pairs with whom to discuss and to juxtapose the results, to merge and to multiply procedures, impressions and interpretations on the spot. From a strict methodological perspective this is the main challenge that I faced for the research project I made in 2014 and which has to be depassed in the future empirical researches.

Funding:

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