

THE RESEARCH OF THE EVOLUTION OF TRADITIONAL ARTS USING GROUNDED THEORY DURING COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

Studying the evolution of traditional arts in the XXI century brings with it the need to take into account a series of other concepts that are somewhat new in the study of traditional cultures, namely: pseudo-traditions and traditional kitsch, and also of already existing concepts such as the process of traditionalization and the adapting process of traditional arts. To better define these new concepts and to understand the reason behind the change in the traditional arts, I have chosen to use a grounded theory approach to the research to highlight and point out the reason and process behind the adaption and evolution of traditional arts. The method I intend to use to collect data is in-depth interviewing combined with the observation of the interviewee in his environment or surrounded by his creations.

But the Covid-19 pandemic has overthrown the data collection plans. In this article I want to emphasize the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has on data collection and analysis, impacting the result of the research overall.

The Covid-19 pandemic has forced me to reassess the data collection method approach. The in-depth interviews have transformed into semi-structured or even structured interviews, with the interviewee being able to easily avoid sensitive or disliked questions. It also takes the possibility of the researcher to analyze the behavior or reactions of the interviewee, limiting the data analyzed.

The difference between the quality of data collected from face-to-face interviews compared to telephone or on-line interviewing is emphasized by the degree of the interviewee's openness when discussing sensitive subjects, the predominance of non-opinion answers or evasive ones.

In this article I want to emphasize the effect of the pandemic on the research of traditional arts using a qualitative methodology. Although on-line video interviews offer a closer to face-to-face interview experience, the interviewee is more prone to avoiding sensitive subjects or ending the interview altogether.

Keywords: *Covid-19 pandemic, grounded-theory, qualitative research, on-line interviewing, interviewing over the phone, in-depth interview*

INTRODUCTION

This article encompasses the evolution of the methodological and research aspects of my doctoral thesis in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. The main purpose of the doctoral thesis is to observe and identify the evolutive process of the traditional Romanian crafts, with an emphasize on the traditional Romanian blouse called *ie*.

To better understand the evolutive process, an analysis of the structure, motifs and symbols of *ie* is necessary. I have chosen to talk with the experts that are closest to the creation process of the *ie*, the local craftsmen and craftswomen, national costume collectors and museum curators, with an emphasis on the young, local craftsmen and craftswomen being one of the main informants. Assuming the fact that they are the experts, an unstructured, in-depth interview is used as the main method of data gathering. The data is being analyzed using grounded theory principles. Other data gathering methods I use are observation of the craftsmen or craftswomen in their own workshop or at festivals, museum visits and photographic analysis.

To prepare for the way the research and data gathering were going to take place, I conducted a few interviews with local craftswomen, museum curators and collectors back in 2018, along with visit museums in the country. The next phase of data collection caught me in the beginning phase of the Covid-19 lockdown, greatly limiting the access to possible informants and the possibilities of a standard, in-depth face-to-face interview.

The following interviews needed to be conducted via on-line technologies like Skype, Zoom, Cisco or Facebook or via telephone, the museum visits being limited to the few museums that organize on-line expositions.

I have written this article as a result of the impact that the Covid-19 lockdown has had on the data collection process. From hereon I will showcase the impact of a pandemic on a qualitative methodology-based research and on the data collection process. A brief comparison between the in-depth face-to-face and the new resulting interviewing techniques I had to use, will exhibit the impact on the data collected.

Grounded Theory in a doctoral thesis

Being developed by Straus, Glasser and Corbin, grounded theory is a method of data analysis which resides at the basis of theory formation [1]. It emphasizes the importance of the respondent's knowledge and experience. The best way to bring such experience to surface is through in-depth, unstructured interviews. Such interviews place the interviewee on the spotlight, the interviewer's only purpose being to give a theme of discussion or to probe into details that he or she finds of importance in the interviewee's story. The grounded theory method suggests theoretical sampling, where new sources of information are selected based on the codes generated by the data collected priorly [1].

Given this brief description of grounded theory, it is understandable why I have chosen such data analysis method for better understanding the data collected for my doctoral thesis. Alongside the theoretical sampling used to select information sources, I have opted for a snowballing sampling technique, which implied interviews with craftspeople from similar geographical areas. The first interviewees were contacted in museums or thematic festivals. Based on the contacts established there, I would visit different workshops and meet other such craftspeople.

The initial interviews were both unstructured and semi-structured, depending on the context of the interview. First interviews with museum curators from the Ethnographic Museum from Iași and craftspeople from the ‘*Festivalul iei*’ from Iași were unstructured, although there were some craftspeople that have refused to be recorded while interviewing and required some pre-established set of questions. While visiting the Ethnographic museum, I have encountered a personal exhibition and interviewed the collector. His interview was based on what was exhibited and his view, experience and knowledge on the evolution of the traditional *ie*, based on the costumes that he owned and exhibited. Other types of data were collected in other museums from the country included an interview of an exposition presentation and photographs of traditional seams, motifs found on carpets, traditional gates and other traditional objects found in the house of a peasant. The photographs served as comparison material between new and old structure, colors and motifs. It also helped tackle the phenomenon of ‘traditional nationalization’ conducted during the communist regime. The following steps were to interview more crafts people at festivals or in their workshops, visit more museums and meet other craftspeople with on-line shops. The on-line traditional themed shops would allow me to understand the process behind the evolution of the traditional *ie*. The sources of information would be the founders of the on-line shops, the description of the website and the photographs with the products.

When the first news of the Covid -19 epidemics appeared, I was starting to plan trips all around Moldavia to collect data. The first and last face-to-face interaction with an informant was a museum visit in the city of Gura Humorului which resulted in a few photographs and an interview with the museum curator. Starting 16th of March 2020, the president of Romania has declared state of emergency, which forbade non-emergency outings. The situation lasted until May 15th, after that following a state of alert and a growing number of Covid-19 cases. This situation forced me to reassess the data collection method. From face-to-face in-depth, unstructured interviews, I had to move to on-line or other the phone interviews. I later found that the unstructured interviews started to transform themselves into semi-structured or even structured interviews. To understand this shift in the type of interviews conducted, a comparison between face-to-face, on-line and over the phone interview is necessary.

METHODOLOGY

To write this article I have broadened my literature review themes by including researches about the differences between face-to-face and on-line or over the phone interviews, as the national situation forced me to reassess the data collection methods. To analyze the differences between the two types of interviews, I have used a similar approach to the one used in my doctoral thesis, namely the coding used in grounded theory and my personal experience as both a subject and researcher.

Firstly, I have identified some relevant codes in the literature, codes that also apply for the interviews that I have conducted. A fault to this method is the number of face-to-face interviews compared to the technology-mediated ones, but to compensate for that I will draw on my experience on conducting interviews, as both my bachelor and dissertation thesis included face-to-face interviews. To better keep track on the data and information collected from the literature research and also from the interviews that I have conducted, I use the NVivo software. I limit myself to the codes identified and do not venture myself in creating concepts and categories because 1. the timeframe to write the article is small and 2. to better pinpoint the differences and create concepts based on the literature and data available out there, another research is necessary.

1. Location refers both to geographical distance between the interviewer and interviewee [4] and to the physical places where events relevant to the research and to the evolution of traditional arts takes place. The geographical distance between the researcher and the informant is a common vindication to use on-line or over the phone interviews instead of face-to-face ones when doing a qualitative based research [4]. Geographical distance has proved to be an issue for me as well after the pandemic struck. The second element of location refers to places of importance for the evolution of traditional arts, such as fairs and festivals. These places are a good observation and data collection spots, as craftspeople gather here to exhibit their crafts.

2. Timeframe is a code identified in the literature review and encompasses the time cost of face-to-face interviews compared to the telephone or on-line ones. One study suggests that a technology mediated interview is one forth to one half of a face-to-face one [10]. There are also implications to the more cost-efficient interviewing methods such as the pressure to finish sooner [6], the need to prepare beforehand any on-line material required for the interview, or the awkward silence moments that in a face-to-face interview are a breather for the interviewer to take some notes [6].

3. Visual cues encompass subcodes such as nonverbal communication, social cues, spontaneity of answers and reactions and data richness [6]. Each of these reflect both nonverbal and paraverbal communication. This can mean both a greater richness of the data, with visual cues or more spontaneous and unreserved answers [4], and a greater bias which results from the interviewee being influenced by the tone, expressions or reactions of the interviewer.

4. Another element that has affected the data collection process, hence the results, is the type of interview taken face-to-face, compared to the one take using technology mediated interviews. Even though there is no much data regarding this niche of influence of technology mediated interviews on the type of the interview, I have encountered the need to adapt the interviewing style accordingly, resulting in differences in the data collected.

Once identified these codes, I have compared them to the interviews that I have conducted up until now.

Interview Types

Even though some sociologists tend to group together the semi-structured and the unstructured interviews as in-depth or qualitative interviews [2], the semi-structured interview is a combination between the structured and the unstructured interviews. A data collection tool used in qualitative based researches; the semi-structured, in-depth interview places the researcher in a more open-minded position where he or she lets the interviewee fill up the contour of the research question [2].

The most important trait of the in-depth, semi-structured interview is the possibility to let the interviewees ‘talk in their own terms’ [3], while the interviewer is following his or her research purposes by guiding the conversation according to a check list. The semi-structured interview is especially useful, in the context of grounded theory, when the researcher has already analyzed and coded some of the collected data and has an idea of where the results are leading to, remaining open to new leads. Unfortunately, the Covid-19 pandemic has caught me at the very start of the data collection process, having conducted just a few test interviews.

In a way similar to the semi-structured interview, the unstructured interview gives a higher degree of freedom to the interviewee, his or her only limit being the discussion topic proposed by the interviewer. Used in a grounded theory context, the interviewee talks about his experience about the given theme [3], in this case the evolution of traditional arts with an emphasis on the traditional ie, his or her opinion on it and other life experiences related to the theme or other tangent activities. This data collection tool gives the researcher the possibility to probe into themes and idea that he or she has not come up with, giving richness and more credibility to the results.

Both semi-structured and unstructured interviewing tools give insight on how the individuals see and transform the world [2].

Data Analysis

The need to switch from unstructured to semi-structured interviews came with the shift from face-to-face to on-line or telephone interviews determined by the Covid-19 pandemic. At first sight, the switch from face-to-face to technology mediated interviews may seem a cost-efficient way of data collection, but both my experience and literature, the data collected in face-to-face interviews differs from the data collected through technology mediated means.

The face-to-face interview implies, indeed, time and other costs, as it is difficult to reach people located in different geographical areas [5]. Another disadvantage closely related to the first one is the access to interviewees, as some of them may be living half a day or more apart, or not connected to a common transportation way. Other relevant respondents might be away of the country or might have a busy schedule and make it even more difficult to meet face to face [5]. The technology mediated interviews might resolve some of these problems, but others arise, such as the absence of nonverbal communication [6], the absence of visual cues that give clues to what the interviewee is thinking, of how he or she is feeling [6], or gives the possibility to show examples or models. While conducting face-to-face interviews for my bachelor's degree, I had to interview people from rural areas, with low connection to the internet, poor signal or other communication difficulties. Meeting them face-to-face made it easier to gain their trust, to read their reaction to some of my questions and to probe deeper when one question seemed difficult. The first interviews conducted for my doctoral thesis were at the shop of a craftswoman, in the museum with a curator and at the private collection of a curator and collector. In each case, each interviewee took the time to explain the history of the national costume and of the *ie*, the symbols of the colors or motifs, the differences between different types of sewing techniques or materials. Both the interviewee and I felt that the face-to-face interview brought more data to the discussion, as we had life-examples to talk about.

The next interviews were conducted using on-line technologies like ZOOM and Facebook, along with telephone mediated interviews. One interviewee required a Skype interview, but was changed to Facebook, as some connectivity problems were encountered. Out of all on-line interviews, there was not an interview without any connectivity issues, which made the discussion flow a little bit difficult, as some questions had to be asked again because the answer was not clear, or there was some delay in the answer or question, creating confusion. One big advantage to the on-line methods is the possibility to view the interviewee and exchange photos or other types of media as the interview goes on.

The on-line interviews allowed me to interact with respondents that otherwise I would not have met. While searching for Facebook Groups for craftspeople, I have found a new type of creators, 'protectors' and promoters of the traditional

ie, formed out of mostly women, but also men, that sew *ie* according to the XIXth century.

Another type of technology mediated interviews is the telephone interview. The telephone interview shares with the other non-face-to-face interviews the advantage of connecting to possible respondents without taking into account the time and travel costs, especially if the interviewee is located quite far away [6]. But compared to the other technology mediated interviews which offer the possibility to at least view your counterpart, the telephone interview keeps the interview information to a minimum. Sometimes, this can be seen as an advantage, as the information offered both via face-to-face and telephone interviews is similar [7]. There were registered cases where the anonymity given by the telephone interview helped in gathering data that, otherwise, would have been impossible to collect [8]. But this also means that the interviewee can multi-task while interviewing, as the researcher cannot see what he or she is doing. This means a lack of attention and implication in the interview, especially when the theme requires it [9]. Both the telephone interviews that I had conducted had awkward moments when I had to take down notes and the interviewees gave shorter and less elaborate answers.

Out of the thirteen interviews I have conducted, one was face-to-face with acceptance of recording, three were face-to-face with decline of recording, seven were online via ZOOM (one) or Facebook (six) and two interviews were conducted over the phone. To make the comparison more valuable and closer to reality, I created groups of interviews based on the activity of the interviewees, so that I can compare the local craftsman's interviews between them and not a local craftsman's interview to that of a collector or keeper of *ie*. The reason I have done this is because each type of informant has a different discourse, namely, a collector or keeper will be keener to respect the authenticity of tradition, while for a craftsman it is more important to combine the authenticity with the modern or with the requirements of the market. Hence the differences between their attitudes and statements.

The first group is comprised of collectors, museum curators and restorers. With persons from this group I had three face-to-face interviews, one telephone interview and 4 online interviews, ZOOM or Facebook.

The second group, that of craftsman, is scarcer, as I had collected two face-to-face interviews and one over the phone. The reason I was not able to contact more craftsman was because not all of them are part of a group or available online contact information. They were also less likely to accept an online interview, as it happened with one of the interviewees.

In the first group, the differences between the face-to-face, on-line or over the phone interviews had a lot to do with the knowledge and age of the interviewee. The most difficult to hold and the closest to a structured interview

was with a young restorer which just started her road as a restorer. Because the knowledge was fresh for her, she needed additional questions to be able to describe her relationship with the traditional arts and her view on the evolution process of the *ie*. Aside from that, most on-line interviews were semi-structured or unstructured interviews, the interviewee needing a sign of attention or approval from the interviewer, like questions, completions or other such phrases. The advantage of face to face interviews resided in the power of example. In all three interviews, the interviewee used visible models or examples to explain the meaning of symbols, construction or to showcase the evolution of the construction of the *ie*. Such desire was encountered also in the on-line interviews, but because of the low quality of the camera, only colors or overall construction were discussed with examples.

The second set of interviews, those conducted with craftspeople, showed a real difference in the way they were conducted. Both the face-to-face interviews and technology mediated ones offer the interviewee the possibility to end the discussion sooner or to weasel out of the discussion, but during the telephone interview, the interviewee could more easily give a more detached and socially accepted answers. While taking the face-to-face interview, it is easier to pay attention to the interviewee, his or her gestures and possible contradictions, as the interviewee is more relaxed and does not try to end the interview sooner. The over the phone interview was closer to a structured interview, as the interviewee wanted to keep his or her explanations short and end the phone call sooner. The on-line interview with the craftspeople had the same issue of the difficulty of showing or explaining construction elements. Unlike with the first group, where interviewees were more open, in the case of on-line interview, the craftspeople were a little more reserved. But, as I was not able to conduct more interviews with craftspeople, it is not generalizable.

CONCLUSION

The Covid-19 pandemic has forced me, and other researchers, to readjust my data collection techniques and schedule. As I am conducting grounded-theory based qualitative research, I have to take interviews, make observations and participate in thematic events, but since the Covid-19 pandemic the events were cancelled, observations were close to impossible to conduct and the interviews moved from face-to-face to technology mediated and from unstructured to semi-structured or even structured. But this event has also helped broaden my pool of informants. If up until the pandemic I had an image of whom I wanted to include in the research, the covid-19 outbreak has given me the opportunity to find new places to conduct my research on such as dedicated Facebook groups for restorers of the traditional Romanian blouse.

The interviews are indeed a lot more difficult to conduct, as the interviewees are more reticent and not as relaxed as in the face-to-face scenario, also limiting my possibility to spot inconveniences or lies. Also, if the interviewee contradicts

himself, it is harder to come back on the idea, as the interviewee might feel offended and hang up or end the interview a lot easier compared to the face-to-face scenario. The face-to-face scenario also helps with the non-verbal and paraverbal communication that is almost if not totally absent in the on-line and telephone variants. Broadening my information sources also meant interviewing people from other regions and with different backgrounds and thanks to the on-line platforms I was able to save both time and money. Overall, the research process was influenced by the covid-19 pandemic, forcing me to readjust, but it has also given me the opportunity to identify sources that otherwise I would have missed.

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