6.3 Ethical issues during ethnographic research among the Finnish Roma: a personal experience

Kai Viljami Åberg[1]

Abstract

Cultural diversity manifests in all relationships, including research relationships. Academic investigators work across a broad range of cultures that goes beyond ethnicity. What implications are most important for academic researchers to consider when designing and implementing a project? Also, a review of relevant literature suggests that ethical implications begin with the power aspects in the research relationship. Consent, research processes, research design, data ownership, and uses of data are also salient issues that arise. Thereby conducting research across any cultural context requires intense attention to ethics. A cross-cultural research relationship inherently involves a dynamic of power: E.g., in Finland data ownership has become increasingly articulated as a major concern for research participants (Roma and non-Roma) and particularly participants from any marginalized groups. In this paper, I question some of the 'taken-for-granted' conceptions and consider an alternative to the existence and practices of Finnish Romani music studies. Examples from Romani community based my intensive field research among the Finnish Roma since 1994.

Keywords: ethics, Finnish Roma, power, control, research design, data ownership.

1. Introduction

As we can read, the title of my article is a complex one. Why we non-Roma are so interested about the Roma? It could be also like this; why we the main population are so interested about the minorities? What comes to the Roma, we know that there is a lot of historical background, ideological and cultural aspects – some stereotypes (similar like orientalism) - but also the question of esthetic – what comes especial to the music and arts – and the question of power and personal orientation. In my opinion, we must understand that the cultural diversity manifests in all relationships – not only Roma, but many minorities - including research or ethnographic work. Academic investigators work across a broad range of cultures that goes beyond ethnicity. That is why a cross-cultural research relationship inherently involves of course a dynamic of power: E.g., in Finland data ownership has become increasingly articulated as a major concern for research participants (Roma and non-Roma) and particularly participants from any marginalized groups. And now, in this paper, I question some of the 'taken-for-granted' conceptions and consider an alternative to the existence and practices of academics. Examples from Romani community based my intensive research projects among the Roma between 1994 - 2017 presented as illustrations.

1. University of Eastern Finland; Finnish Language and Cultural Research. E-mail: kai.aberg@kolumbus.fi

2. A Brief History of the Kaale

Finland has perhaps the most homogeneous Romani population in Europe, with the *Kaale* population comprising groups of the Roma who arrived through Sweden as early as the sixteenth century. In the nineteenth century, this group was strengthened by Russian Romani immigrants who have since merged with the Finnish *Kaale* (see Pulma, 2006, p. 215; 2012). The Finnish Roma, nowadays about 10,000—12,000 in all, lead a traditional way of life; there are also 3,000 Finnish Roma who live in Sweden, mainly in the Stockholm area (Markkanen, 2003, p. 262). The process of estimating the numbers of Roma in Finland is a problematic one. These problems are rooted in the general difficulties associated with counting so-called "ethnic minority groups, and mobile communities" (Clark, 2006, p. 19). During the 1990s, Finland became more multicultural than ever before. The growing number of foreigners coming to the country raised discussion about human rights, tolerance and discrimination. However, there is still very little information about the old minorities, such as the Roma, in the teaching materials of the comprehensive school, in materials for different occupational groups, or even in teacher training (Markkanen, 2003, pp. 264–265).

3. Why non-Roma researching the Roma

This is not only question about the Roma, but majority cultures have in fact influences the development and expression in all of cultural identity of minority in Finland as well as elsewhere, sometimes more than the minority themselves and members of the majority have wished to believe; either this has not been recognised or it has been ignored (Kopsa-Schön, 1996, p. 251). What comes to Finnish Romani music tradition the reason has partly also been research tradition. Roma, like other 'alien cultures' and communities have been studies from the perspective of divergence. Definitions and categories are repeatly created by which ethnic communities and minority cultures can be distinguished from one another. Not so often has been examined the influences by which various communities mould on another. For that reason for me they is no sense in speaking about the original sources of Romani music or essentealists theory or source of Romanies own customs and practises; it is more to the point bear in mind that the Roma have been in contact with numerous cultures of the World. This idea is of course a new one. The English gypsy scholar R.A. Scot Mcfie describes in 1908 that the gypsies have succeeded enimatic, partly because they are still made an object of mystery in literature and research, either unconsciously through lack of correct information, or consciously to suit goals of gypsy and cultural policy. One explation is roma exotism or as I sometimes want to call it "orientalism inside the Europe".

3.1. The Impact of Romani Exoticism on the Ethnography of Romani music

We know that the image of the Roma has gradually spread via literature to other genres, the visual arts and music in 19th centuries. In music, Romani stereotypes were applied to a major degree in both stage music and in entertainment for courts and the bourgeois middle classes. A connection with the world was actualized especially in Romani music and dance as all-encompassing freedom and as the authentic, natural, fiery and colourful characteristics of stereotypical 'Gypsiness' as the Hungarian composer and piano virtuoso Franz Liszt (1811–1886) described the Romani music that he heard and its manner of performance as deeply emotional, with its free chains of modulation, large intervals, oriental ornamentations and rhythms that gain pace. The virtuoso, artistic and colourful (emotional and fiery) character of Andalusian flamenco made the Romani entertainers of Southern Spain representatives of Spanish culture as a whole (Lindroos & Böök, 1999, p. 37). Romani entertainers quickly became popular all over Europe (Blomster, 2012).

Although the stage performance style of Romani music, or estrad style came relatively late to Finland if we compare it with the Romani population elsewhere in Europe, 'stage Roma' identity involving images and associations also influenced the picture of Finnish Gypsy dance. Descriptions of dance from the late 19th century and the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries are highly different from earlier ones. Now in archive we can read that relationship of the Gypsy dances with the Spanish chachucha is mentioned (the theory of the Roma as international). Also, the middle part of the dancer's body is often mentioned. In 1936, folklore collector Otto Harju describes the movements of the dance: The dancers snap their fingers, move the middle part of the body and remain in place performing steps in the manner of the *polska* etc., kicks, turns etc. Female sexuality – one of the strongest gypsy stereotypes - underlined in the descriptions of dance ('skirt pulled up

to the thighs') can be seen not only in terms of the international Gypsy stereotype of sexuality associated with Romani women, i.e. a sexually active, fateful and seductive Romani beauty, but also from a folkloristic perspective as part of the asymmetry of ethnic relations. The erotic humour and sexual comedy present in the dancing, whether as class or ethnic *eros* berating and humiliating marginal and socially inferior people (or vice versa), continuously considers the relationship of mental images with the opportunities provided by reality (Knuuttila 1992, p. 249). Accordingly, the Gypsy dances as performed by members of the majority express the mental images and fantasies of Finns regarding the uninhibited nature of Romani women. Dance produced by the majority with reference to Gypsy dance is specifically revealed by the fact that women's chastity has always been a subject of particular focus in Romani culture (Viljanen-Saira 1979). The change in descriptions of Gypsy dance may be associated more generally with the spread of stage music into Finland after the middle of the 19th century.

3.2. Finnish Romani music and the Exotism

Interest in the Roma emerged in Finland in the 18th and 19th centuries in both scholarship and the arts. A study by Christfrid Ganander (1741-1790) from 1780 is regarded as the first scholarly work on the Roma of Finland (see also Rekola, 2012, p. 47; Viljanen, 2012, pp. 375 – 377). It focused on the vocabulary of the Romani language, but also included interpretations of the origin of the Roma. The material consisted of published sources along with an ethnographic approach. After Ganander 'Gypsy Baron' Arthur Thesleff (1871 – 1921), known as a bohemian figure in research, compiled the first known collections of Romani songs in Finland, including songs in the Finnish and Romani languages (see Tervonen, 2012, pp. 89-92; Blomster, 2012; Åberg and Blomster, 2006). As a non-academic musicologist, Thesleff was not oriented towards comparative research, unlike his colleque Heikki Klemetti, who wrote of Oriental influences in Finnish Romani music. In his article *Zigenarmusiken* (Gypsy Music) from 1922, Thesleff makes the distinction between the 'own' Gypsy tunes performed among the Roma and their music-making that is primarily aimed at the majority population (Blomster, 2012, pp. 324–326; Åberg, 2015).

In the early 20th century, Finnish musicologists remained outside international discussion on Romani music. The few texts that appeared in this area were mainly on the orchestral music of the Roma of Central and Eastern Europe. In many texts, I call it 'romantic turn' of Finnish approaches to Romani music is attributed to a description of the performances of Romani orchestras from 1923 by the composer Axel Törnudd (1874 –1923), a trailblazer of musical pedagogy in Finland, who noted the creative nature of the performances:

Researchers of Romani music unanimously rejected the idea of a national dimension for it, focusing their attention on all phenomena characteristic of Romani music. In the spirit of Romanticism and in its wake, there was also discussion of the impression made by the music on its listeners (see Åberg, 2015). I would not claim that the interpretations of Törnudd, Väisänen and the researchers who followed them regarding the music culture of the Roma were fundamentally incorrect. Nonetheless, there is caused to regard them as inadequate in the sense that they describe culture in terms of general principles within which identity was understood as a project of belonging and collectively essentialist or promordialist theory of Roma culture. It is illustrative, however, that both in Finland and elsewhere in Europe questions of the origin of Romani music was underlined. they describe culture in terms of general principles within which identity was understood as a project of belonging and collectively essentialist or promordialist theory of Roma culture. It is illustrative, however, that both in Finland and elsewhere in Europe questions of the origin of Romani music was underlined.

4. Personal Orientation to the Music – A Shared Orientation

It has been typical of the ethnomusicological approach to consider music and cultural groups as entities, and therefore groups that are culturally "isolated" (either in the passive or active sense) have come to be chosen to be studied (Suutari 2007, p. 98). In these situations, it is readily forgotten that the multi-layeredness of identity is always associated with the idea of musical orientation. A perspective that is well suited to my research is the notion of tradition or "heritage" as an individual process of choice (see also Acton, 2004, p. 2). Elsewhere, Jeff Todd Titon (1980, p. 276), for example, has suggested that personality is the main ingredient in the life story "(...) Even if the story is not factually true, it is always true evidence of the storyteller's personality". In this

sense people also interpret music tradition from their own frameworks and commitment to a specific genre of music or musical environment does not exclude the possibility of other circles of tradition (see Åberg, 2015).

Modern people can move more easily than before between contexts that maintain different forms of tradition, transferring from one to another while changing forms of expression. Even musical life is no longer bound as before to given forms laid down by tradition. In many cases a certain style is only one focus of musical orientation for the individual among many others. Therefore, I apply as one of the theoretical frameworks of my study approaches utilized in orientation studies, such as traditional orientation (see Siikala, 1984) and the perspective of musical orientation inspirited by cognitive psychology. With reference to musical orientation borrowed from schematic theories, we could assume that the surroundings, life experiences and events also steer the individual's notions of music, musical values and choices of musical activities made within their sphere of influence. This means that there are presumably numerous influences on music orientation and its origins, beginning with music in the home and among the family, the environment, and the formation of personal musical taste, the musical self and the musical world view (Juvonen, 2000, pp. 27-28). The individual's musical orientation is also shaped by the strong emotional charge of music, its experiential nature, which has also been emphasized in recent anthropological studies. Ruth Finnegan (2003, p. 183), for example, notes, that experience is increasingly envisaged not as mysterious inner state or unthinking primeval impulse but as embodied and intertwined with culturally diverse epistemologies. As a universal phenomenon, music can combine personal, social and cultural meanings and relations of meaning, while serving as a mediator of the various forms and styles of human existence.

An interesting body of material, in both source-critical and experiential terms, consists of the recordings in which I have played music together with interviewees. In these situations, the recordings automatically included playful or more serious discussions – even debate – on the finer points of the techniques or variation of certain musical phenomena such as ways of playing or singing. Playing or singing as a form of artistic expression is also a flexible way to cross the boundaries of culturally regulated gender. This emerged in some research situations with the men withdrawing from the interviews and power given to the singers who were present and often recognized by the community. The men who could not sing gave the stage to the women, and so I interviewed them. Accordingly, when it is claimed that folklore reflects gender differences, we easily gain the idea that differences appear to everyone as similar and unchanging. During the fieldwork, however, I came to notice repeatedly that although gender roles seem, at first sight, to be distinct and given, conventional roles attached to gender were only the overall line of the situation. A closer look at the material revealed to me various ways of represented and negotiating gender identity.

The effect of my identity as a musician on the research situation depended on whether there were older or younger persons, singers or instrumentalists present among the interviewees. The Romani songs of which the older generation had complete command – as heritage generating a sense of community – maintained the role of an outsider researcher of the majority regardless of whether I was accompanying these songs or not. Compiling and recording the traditions remained my concrete task. In this respect, my role as a musician had no effect on defining my position. It is necessary here to underscore the significance of the age and gender of the interviewees as factors defining my role as researchers. Younger male informants, especially ones who can play instruments, broke down cultural boundaries by including me in the position of musician, and my category-bound activities included various accompaniments and often the performance of competencies associated with various styles of Romani music. In the latter case, we were often in the position of interlocutors throughout the interviews. In other words, we did not judge the cultures by pointing to their good or poor aspects or by comparing them with each other. Playing music together indicated interests along similar lines and generated a sense of community through shared action. Like other arts, music is a flexible way to break down the bounds of primordiality and to open new kinds of encounters between different cultures.

In the interview situations, I constructed for myself a researcher position of the above kind, not only when explicating the meaning of my study and my interest in the theme (the 'Gypsy music' of different countries, such as flamenco, Sinti or Manouche Jazz, the song of the Roma of Finland etc.) but also when identifying with Romani identity through the joint performance of music. This means that in my fieldwork, the musical instrument (acoustic guitar) was also an important element and potential means for roles and relationships in the field. With the instrument and through playing music I could consciously promote mutual interaction and even 'provoke' discussion. Although the guitar is a natural instrument for both men and women among the Roma, it inevitably functions as a masculine symbol of musical reality.

Playing music together had an emancipatory effect that broke down boundaries of gender. The feeling

of community with the interviewees that was created by playing depended on various factors: the instrumentalists, the singers, their age and gender and especially the music that was performed. In each specific context, masculinity had a different effect on how the empirical material was composed. At best, playing music together makes it possible to bridge dichotomy of the 'gap of alterity', but depending on musical orientation and competence it can also underline separation and difference. Depending on the music that was played, I found myself in different research situations to be simultaneously an insider and outsider: the former because of shared musical orientation and the latter because of cultural difference.

Religious faith (mainly Pentecostalism) is part of Romani life, in which religious music is also of major significance for ethnic identification (Acton, 2004, p. 3). Since the religious dimension and the worlds of Romani songs generally intersect to only a small degree, I was identified among people active in religious music in a marginal position regardless of my gender, as a non-believer. I also had a different musical orientation. The position of marginality should thus be understood here as remaining at the edges or set aside in relation to a centre, in this case religiosity and the contexts of religious or spiritual music. A different musical orientation, however, does not mean the deepening of different masculinities, but will in some cases promote the recognition of the relationship of oneself and the other as interaction, a bilateral process reinforcing both parties. In these situations, playing music together and discussing it served as a fruitful means of self-reflection whereby the recognition of the other could also lead to awareness of oneself and one's own masculinity. An individual who is an outsider is thus not invisible or hidden, but particularly visible precisely because of his or her marginality and associations related to it. Religiosity was underscored in these interviews on religious or spiritual music.

In the contexts of music performed in restaurants, a feeling of equality may be the best term in my fieldwork context to describe the socio-cultural feeling of self-esteem in which the various cultural perceptions of individuals are levelled. Conversations on popular music, its content and performance opened paths from culturally specific to the general. My role shifted between a researcher of Romani culture and a musicologist depending on the situation that arose. As a result, conversations in restaurants with dancing or karaoke bars thematically concerned only the skills of playing music or singing. In musical contexts, the researcher could readily place himself in the 'mainstream', i.e., in the centre in relation to the persons studied, while in other contexts the individual can be in the margins at the same time.

5. Some Ethical Issues

Fieldwork in ethnomusicology requires researchers to form interpersonal relationships with informants. Because of this, researchers must be aware of their own ethical responsibilities with the informant. These concerns can include questions of privacy, consent, and safety. Anyway, the ethical issues in the field of ethnomusicology parallel those found in anthropology. Mark Slobin (n/d, n/p), a twentieth century ethnomusicologist, observes that discussion on ethics has been founded on several assumptions, namely that: 1) "Ethics is largely an issue for 'Western' scholars working in 'non-Western' societies"; 2) 'Most ethical concerns arise from interpersonal relations between scholar and 'informant' as a consequence of fieldwork"; 3) "Ethics is situated within...the declared purpose of the researcher: the increase of knowledge in the ultimate service of human welfare." Which is a reference to Ralph Beals; and 4) "Discussion of ethical issues proceeds from values of Western culture." Slobin (n/d) remarks that a more accurate statement might acknowledge that ethics vary across nations and cultures, and that the ethics from the cultures of both researcher and informant are in play in fieldwork settings.

Summary

Conducting research across any cultural context requires intense attention to ethics. A cross-cultural research relationship inherently involves a dynamic of power. As members of colonial cultures, researchers have traditionally held power in forms of money, knowledge, and 'expertise' over their human subjects. Cascading from this foundation of power, the research relationship spawns other ethical issues of informed consent, control, research design, and data ownership. A community-based partnership project incorporating an ongoing process of communication and consent offers an ethical solution that is mutually beneficial to both researcher and cultural group members.

Power is a central aspect to consider in cross-cultural research relationship. Research with cross-cultural participants such as Roma for example, has often reflected a power imbalance that is rooted earlier colonialism. Poor people, gays and lesbians, youth and the members of other marginalized groups in western society has also been identified as lacking power in academic environments. I my opinion notion of power may be less problematic for a community when researchers join the community rather than enter as experts' interlopers. Creating a partnership with research participants – like via musical performance – and as a group may reduce the risk of unethical or unintentionally insensitive action or treatment. Additionally, research projects that are carried out using participatory methodologies may be more effective both in terms of ethical conduct and accurate research results. For example, ethics, in terms of research with Roma groups requires a special definition; ethics, in such a context, is a fluid context that requires constant re-examination and redefinition, within informant consent viewed and implemented as an ongoing process. Similarity cross-cultural research ethics cannot be singly defined because each group has its own conception of ethics, based on its culture, which must be individually understood by the researcher.

References

» Acton, T. (2004). Modernity, Culture and Gypsies' Is there a Meta-Scientific Method for Understanding the Representation of 'Gypsies'? And do the Dutch really Exist. In N. Saul & S. Tebbutt (Eds.). *The Role of the Romanies: Images and Counter-Images of 'Gypsies/Romanies in European Cultures*. (pp. 98-116). Liverpool: Liverpool University Press..

» Blomster, R. (2012) Romanimusiikki rajojen vetäjänä ja yhteyksien luojana. In P. Pulma (Ed.). *Suomen romanien historia* (pp. 290-374). Helsinki: SKS.

» Clark, C- (2006). "Who are the Gypsies and Travellers in Britain?. In C. Clark & M. Greenfields (Eds.). *Here to Stay. The Gypsies and Travellers of Britain*. Great Britain (pp. 10-27). Hertfordshire: University of Hertfordshire.

» Grönfors, Martti (1981) *Suomen mustalaiskansa*. Helsinki: WSOY.

» Juvonen A. (2000). *Johnnyllakin on uniformu, heimovaatte*et *ja kampaus. Musiikilli*set *erityisorientaation polku musiikkiminän, maailmankuvan ja musiikkimaun heijastamina*. Jyväskylän yliopisto.

» Knuuttila, S. (1994). *Tyhmän kansan teoria. Näkökulmia menneestä tulevaan.* Helsinki: SKS.

» Kopsa-Schön, T. (1996) *Kulttuuri-identiteet*in *jäljillä. Suomen romanien kulttuuri-identiteet*istä *1980-luvun alussa.* Helsinki: SKS.

» Lindroos, K. & Böök, O. (1999). Flamencon historia. In K. Lindroos, M. Helariutta, O. Böök, M. Huotari & A. Niinimäki (eds.). *Flamenco*. Tampere: Like- Kustannus.

» Markkanen, A. (2003) *Luonnollisesti* – Et*nografinen tutkimus romaninaisten elämänkulusta.* Joensuun yliopiston humanistisia julkaisuja n:o 33. Joensuun yliopisto.

» Pulma, P. (2006) *Suljetut ov*et. *Pohjoismaiden romanipolitiikka 1500-luvulta EU-aikaan*. Helsinki: SKS.

» Pulma, P. (2012) *Suomen romanien historia.* SKS: Helsinki.

» Rekola, T. (2012) Romanien varhaisvaiheet Suomessa: 1500-luvulta 1800-luvun puoliväliin. In P. Pulma (Ed.) *Suomen Romanien historia.* (pp. 18–83). Helsinki: SKS.

» Siikala, A.-L. (1984). *Tarina ja tulkinta. Tutkimus kansankertojista.* Helsinki: SKS.

» Slobin, M. (1992). Ethical Issues. In H. Myers (ed.). Et*hnomusicology: An Introduction.* New York: W.W. Norton.

» Suutari, P. (2013), Jälkisanat – Rinnakkaiset ja vastakkaiset Karjala –kuvat. In P. Suutari (ed.). *Teoksessa Karjala –kuvaa rakentamassa*. (pp. 438 – 444) Helsinki: SKS.

» Tervonen, M. (2012). Kiertolaisia, silmätikkuja ja rajojen ylittäjiä: 1800-luvulta toiseen maailman sotaan. In P. Pulma (ed.). *Suomen romanien historia*. (pp. 84–142). Helsinki: SKS.

» Titon, J. T. (1980). The Life Story. *Journal of American Folklore, 93*, 276–292.

» Viljanen, A. M. (2012). Romanikulttuurin muuttuvat muodot ja pysyvät rakenteet. In P. Pulma (ed.). *Suomen romanien historia*. (pp. 375-425). Helsinki: SKS.

» Viljanen-Saira, A.M. (1979). *Mustalaiskulttuuri ja kulttuurin muutos. Helsingin yliopiston suomalais-ugrilaisen kansanti*eteen *yleisen* et*nologian linjan lisensiaatin tutkielma.* Helsinki: SKS.

» Åberg, K. (2015). *These Songs Tell About Our Life, You see - Music, Identity and Gender in Finnish Romani music.* Frankfurt, Bern, Bruxelles, New York, Oxford, Warszawa, Wien: Peter Lang.

» Åberg, K. & Blomster, R. (Ed.) (2006). *Suomen romanimusiikki*. Helsinki: SKS.