

Challenges in Collecting Data from Family Sources

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In folklore research, data collection and its interpretation are ever a challenge. The actual experience of drawing someone out with the tape recorder on the table and notebook in hand, noting every word and grunt for posterity can prove daunting. For example: how does one don the mantle of an objective scholar to interview relatives? How best to account for the fact that interview comfort or discomfort reflects personal issues the interviewee may have had with one or the other of one's own parents?

The issue of relatives comes up because they were core elements of my 2005 research, "Personal Narratives and Ritual Observance: How personal narratives based on ritual observances shaped the family identities of two groups of second generation Ukrainian-Canadian sisters." The "sisters" in this case happened to be my aunts—one set from my mother's side (the R sisters) and the other from my father's side (the K sisters).

The challenges of collecting data from them, once I began to approach the project seriously, were many and complex. Assuming the mien of a scholar obligated me to completely overhaul my interview approach. I had been taping relatives' personal histories, but the burden of gathering academically sustainable, professionally conducted interviews that would prove integral to the success of my research was formidable. The methodology that allowed me to achieve this was the use of personal narratives.

However, as a niece for the two groups of sisters, I was both an insider and an outsider, and as an academic researcher, I was definitely an outsider. On top of this, all my "aunts" were either my mother's sisters or her sisters-in-law. For example, among the R sisters, Katherine, who had nurtured a warm relationship with my mother, was more than delighted to talk freely with me about her experiences growing up in a homesteading Ukrainian-Canadian pioneer family. The eldest, Nancy, somewhat estranged from my mother, was initially wary of being interviewed. She gradually warmed to the interview process when she saw that the questions clearly moved beyond family "gossip" and that she could be helpful. Ann, who like Nancy had distanced herself from

my mother and who, as an adult, was nearly a stranger to me, agreed reluctantly to be interviewed. She said very little during our time together. What is one to do, if in the case of Ann, her scholar-niece simply wants to know how Ann celebrated Easter as a child, but Ann cannot move past what sister Vera did that hurt her feelings in 1958, or vice versa? Alice, a younger sister and my mother's closest ally in the family, was eager to be interviewed but concerned that her memories were not as whole or entire as those of her elder sisters and thus, not "correct." At the farthest end of the spectrum, Margaret, the youngest of the R sisters, simply refused to be interviewed.

Because my father rarely spoke about his family, particularly his sisters, and because geographical distance had prevented familiarity, I had little or no contact with the extended K family. Nevertheless, Kay, who over the years had maintained a warm relationship with my parents through the mails, enjoyed getting to know me and personally gloried in recalling K family stories. She gladly introduced me as someone who could be trusted to her sisters Annie and Pauline, for whom I had previously been known only as a distant relative who happened to share a family surname. Thus, my interviews with all three K sisters, although different in length and substance became fulsome events in both content and tone.

Throughout, I was consistently aware of the reflexive quality inherent in my interviews. Some interviews felt as if I were performing brain surgery on myself. Interviewing my R and K aunts, I repeatedly found myself in circumstances almost identical to those described by Barbara Myerhoff in the context of her ground-breaking ethnographic study, *Number Our Days*:

Required by...circumstances to work...among my own people, I found myself doing a complex enterprise that involved ceaseless evaluation of the effects of membership on my conclusions....It was soon evident that I knew more than I needed to, or sometimes wanted to, about the people I was studying, that at every juncture, I was looking at my own grandmother, which was to say a variation of myself-as-her, and as I would be in the future. We even looked alike. I responded with embarrassing fullness to my subjects' uses of personal mechanisms of control and interpersonal manipulation...acknowledging over and over that indeed we were one. In time I began to realize that identification and projection were enormously rich sources of information but often painful and often misleading, requiring my constant monitoring.(1)

In the course of all of the twenty-four R and K interviews, I was consistently engaged in a battle with myself to remain a dispassionate

listener and researcher. On several occasions, under a barrage of dissonant and off-topic discussions, I found myself clinging, like a hermit crab, to the list of points I had hoped to cover.

In truth, every interview was its own entity. The dynamics of each interview were unlike those of the next interview, save for the questions I asked. How does one retain scholarly objectivity when one's family is involved? My gradually adopted solution was to work from a short list of basic questions; to ask each person the same list of questions, though not necessarily in the same order; and then to try to respect the process of the interview, to let each speaker simply speak; and to distance myself emotionally whenever a potentially painful comment was made. I refused to be used as a conduit for settling old scores, particularly among the R sisters. And this perhaps helped me to maintain a semblance of objectivity and to open my mind to the rich texture of each interview.

The "narrative ecology" of the R and K families, that is, the history of each family's attitude towards sharing family information through narratives, became another interesting challenge encountered in collecting data.(2) What if one family values detailed analytical description and the other does not? What if the group that favors analytical description is not gregarious, that is, not prone to story telling in collective situations; whereas the other family relishes social situations in which to unwind with storytelling? These are variables that affect the reception of personal narratives.

In the process of writing, I discovered a flaw in my methodology, for taped interviews alone do not capture the richness of the K sisters' experience or what they communicate about the K family. Because they took ritual activity for granted, the K sisters were reluctant to give detailed descriptions of their family's ritual observation. If I were to follow each K sister for several months using a tape recorder and a video recorder, all the while taking detailed notes to track her activity, I would be able to draw a portrait of a family in which Ukrainian-Canadian ritual observation, albeit of a more contemporary form, still carries spiritual and magical power. The K sisters do not articulate their attitude. Again and again in their narratives, they do not speak of all the activity that involved them and the K family, for example around Christmas—preparation and contents of the twelve meatless dishes, watching for the first star on Christmas Eve, reverential feeding of the livestock and other ritual activities. These activities were second-nature to early K family life, part of an accepted and completely absorbed rhythm of ritual observance. It was unremarkable because it was simply what one did. At

present, surviving K siblings continue to practice Ukrainian-Canadian rituals, modified to fit the 21st century. They have not rekindled their ritual practice in order to embrace a newly fashionable ethnic-chic Ukrainianism. They have continued to observe and conduct ritual events with the thread unbroken from their family's emigration from Galicia in western Ukraine. Furthermore, they are active and reverent church-goers and members, a line that goes back to their parents and grandparents. Thus, knowing something to be true even when the subject is unwilling to acknowledge the point of fact as a point of fact, for example that the K sisters had the capacity to describe their family's ritual observances in sparkling and faceted detail, I had to document it. But how does one document a vacancy? It is perplexing insofar as one must assiduously avoid trying to influence and thereby corrupt the material.

By way of contrast, the R sisters value a certain quality of analytical observation and description. In the taped interviews, the R sisters, for their part, can articulate what their family did and how. They clearly describe ritual observation in their family and at the same time maintain that Ukrainian-Canadian ritual held no interest for them or their family. Thus, they attempt to make it clear that early on they held themselves apart from Ukrainian-Canadian ritual practice and gradually dismissed it as old-world superstitions. This is communicated in their narratives.

Thus there is a difference between the two families in their narrative stance. The K family tends to perpetuate a tradition of telling stories. They speak easily by way of illustrating a point or generating humor with an anecdote or a narrative that is related to family events. For the most part, K family members are practiced in the art of narration and storytelling. Indeed, they welcome opportunities to speak in the rhythms of telling a story; whereas, the R family as a group is less attached to story telling as a means of expression. Unless asked pointedly, the Rs do not speak in terms of narratives related to family events. Many of the narratives on the R side in my study were stories that I had never heard before and I have been an integral part of the R family all of my life. In order to balance the discrepancies of descriptive detail and levels of affability (extroversion), I had to first understand that these differences existed and then to write about the differences clearly, lest the two families portray themselves as compass opposites, which they were not and which would lead the reader to form conclusions that the interview material did not support.

In conclusion, the strategies I developed to answer some of the challenges I faced can be summarized as guidelines for field research in a

complex and sometimes confusing environment. The guidelines I adopted for myself are as follows: standardize as much as possible—it helps to keep the field level, try to stay out of the way, if need be tell yourself you are someone else in order to maintain objectivity, and above all try to write clearly and descriptively about what you perceive. The goal, as always, is to gather data and to draw conclusions from it as truthfully and honestly as can be achieved using a recognized and viable methodology.

NOTES

- 1 Myerhoff and Ruby 1992: 340
- 2 McAdams 2004: 247

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