WORKING WITH THE ATHENIAN ROMA: CONTEMPORARY RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES FOR A COMPLEX FIELD

Othon Alexandrakis
Rice University

Fieldwork is undoubtedly one of the most intellectually demanding aspects of anthropology. It has been described variously as an exciting (often) location-based research endeavor punctuated by moments of chance leading to illuminating discoveries, and even as a period of deep and sometimes challenging embeddedness necessitating occasional disengagement from the field in order to retain one's academic purpose and vantage point. Each experience of conducting fieldwork is different. The techniques anthropologists employ vary according to the particular questions we seek to explore and the conditions we encounter in the field; we all, however, seek to gather data pertinent to our intended subject and also to any emerging, unforeseen, and even hidden phenomena relevant to it. This article explores both these dimensions of fieldwork, with particular focus on this latter, and more, challenging aspect, by way of preliminary reflection on the methodology I employed during my recent time in Athens researching the contribution Greek Roma make to local modernization and emergent understandings of citizenship and society.[1]

Over the past few years Athens has become a locus of increasing European Union and globalized socioeconomic flows, rapid minority[2] population growth, and Hellenic social change. While the sudden escalation of activity in and around Greece has certainly benefited Greek Roma economically and, to a lesser extent, strengthened Romani claims to equality in law with dominant society, this historically embattled group has also experienced increased hostility from non-Romani Greeks now in the grips of new-found nationalist zeal conflated with modern European aspirations. The opportunity for increased stability and prosperity provided by extra-national forces contrasts sharply with the increased social exclusion of and violence against Roma perpetrated by local populations. It is within this space that my work as ethnographer has unfolded and within which I developed a dual role as both academic and NGO worker.

This article, composed during my fieldwork as reflections on the evolution of my status as researcher among Athenian Roma, will reflect on the purpose and functioning of the NGO I co-founded, the navigational ability it afforded me in formal Greek public life and within the Romani private sphere, and the various (gender-related) communicative opportunities and hindrances NGO consultation with Roma presented, and will also explore a number of theoretical concerns associated with what can be termed "research perspective" in complex field settings. Additionally, I will consider a number of cases from the field to illustrate my various observations and arguments.

The Athens of "an irreducibly plural effect" James Faubion so eloquently described in his seminal *Modern Greek Lessons* is changing, and Greek Roma, a population largely unrepresented in the literature on Greece in general, are facilitating this new reality.[3] The various significances and anthropological subtleties at work within this complex field are fascinating, and so too has been the process of their discovery.

My departure for the field was, per standard anthropological practice, preceded by lengthy, careful planning. I had prior experience with the Athenian Romani community, and I sought to add to my previous research a much deeper understanding of the private Romani experience of living and being productive in the city. I designed my methodology in order to gain access to official structures and key individuals responsible for setting the social and economic policy in Greece that influenced Romani daily life,

---

[1] Of note, my forthcoming dissertation focuses equally on Roma and non-Romani Greek minorities, but for the purposes of this article I will focus on the former.

[2] I use the term 'minority' to describe self-identifying collectivities (based on "ethnic", "cultural", or other perceived distinguishing characteristics). I consider Roma to be a Greek minority. Greece does not officially recognize any minority with the exception of a small Muslim population in Northern Thrace.

[3] Faubion, 1993:55.

and conversely, which Romani daily life influenced. I situated this approach, in turn, in relation to the experiences of other, non-Romani minorities in the city,[4] and of course the dominant Athenian population.

Currently, the total Romani population in the Attica region of Greece is uncertain, although estimates suggest between 200,000 and 350,000 individuals, or two to three percent of the total population of Greece, the majority living in or near Athens.[5] Roma have been in Greece for centuries; there is, however, no official Greek-Romani history nor are Greek Roma well-represented in official histories of Greece in general, a grievous omission considering the importance of the Romani community to Greek arts (particularly the *laïko,* λαϊκό, or folk tradition, which they helped establish) and state formation (especially the war of independence in which they were instrumental as freedom fighters).

The vast majority of Greek Roma identify themselves as both Greeks and Romani. The Romani aspect of their identity can be very complex. First, Roma claim belonging to specific master clans such as Yifti, Turko-Yifti, Rudara, Kalpazaya, Handuriya, Filipijiya, Fichirya, Erlides, Sepechides, among others. Second, individuals claim particular regional identities, such as the Kavala Roma, Halkida Roma, and Patras Roma. Some of the Roma living in the area I work claim membership to several of these categories simultaneously. Linguistically, most Roma in the country are Greek-speakers who retain a small core of Romanes words, some communities mostly near Thrace speak Turkish primarily, and a small number of Roma in the North of Greece speak Romanes. Almost all Romani communities observe a core set of internal Romani customs including marriage celebrations, coming-of-age rituals, and death ceremonies, although the particulars of these customs range widely from group to group.[6]

Perhaps the most visible Greek Romani characteristic, and the one most often cited by non-Romani Greeks as definitive of Romani culture, is the style and preferred arrangement of homes

found in most Roma settlements across the country. Roma tend to construct their homes in an urban wattle and daub manner, utilizing discarded building supplies and other materials to cobble together semi-permanent homes.[7] These homes are built within a space selected by the Roma, which can be referred to as a compound given that it is both a safe, guarded space (outsiders typically avoid Romani camps) and a space which they are forced to occupy (it is very difficult for Roma to live apart from the collective). Within compounds, Roma organize themselves in what may seem to an outsider to be a random manner, though upon closer examination, homes and the items within and around them are arranged according to a particular experience of space and relationship with material goods. Compounds are quite complex and dynamic sites.

The Alpha compound, within which I carry out my research, is located in one of the northeastern suburbs of Athens.[8] It is situated centrally within the suburb, though isolated from it by short tracts of unkempt land, refuse piles, and a fence.[9] Within the compound live roughly fifty families, according to seasonal work opportunities and the actions (such as evictions) of the surrounding local authorities.[10] There are several families at the Alpha compound that have lived there for over 30 years Some of these families have managed to secure steady work in the area and enjoy a level of financial stability uncommon among their Romani neighbors. The majority, however, live day-to-day, work at unsteady jobs, and rely on support from neighbors and family.

Conducting fieldwork among Greek Roma can be very challenging for three main reasons: many Athens-area Roma are very poor and suffer from overt injustices that are difficult to witness, most practice myriad resistance strategies when dealing with non-Roma, and all are stigmatized in such a way that the ethnographer's involvement with Roma often draws censure and even hostility from the non-Romani community. The standard "rigorous hanging out" method employed by many anthropologists in the field is simply not an option here. One must seek a means of moving in and out of both communities without

---

[4] For more on this aspect of my research, please see my forthcoming dissertation.

[5] This population estimate is based on the data collected by various local NGOs and activists. There is currently no official population figure available from the state.

[6] See, for example, Daskalaki 2003.

[7] Karathanasi 2000.

[8] The name of the compound is a pseudonym.

[9] Alexandrakis 2003.

[10] For example, forced evictions in one area may lead to a temporary population explosion at the Alpha compound.

members of one or the other, MERIA has also allowed me several additional advantages. First, along the lines of access, operating an NGO has provided a gateway to certain levels of government and to international bodies and organizations that would otherwise be difficult to engage. These contacts range from ministers and mayors to professionals from the private sector, all of whom I have no informal contact with nor have informal contact with any of their larger social networks. Yet, through MERIA's partners it has been possible to meet and conduct research among this difficult set of consultants.

In Greece, once a professional working relationship has been formed, it is possible to move among one's contact's professional network, acting as a private researcher, following and remaining sensitive to the same social protocol that shapes relationships in the informal sphere. Of course, obtaining interviews by this method raises important ethical concerns, especially regarding the power the researcher has in the field. In my work, interviews with corporate contacts are strictly for academic purposes, are confidential, and declared unrelated to MERIA activities. Here I am careful to protect my consultant, the professional who referred me to the consultant, and also the beneficiaries of MERIA. For this reason I establish an academic, informal relationship with the contact through, for example, adhering to the code of behavior that governs informal relations, thus ensuring that my symbolic gestures (such as seating position, language, etc.) reinforce that the power in the relationship lay with the consultant. In the case where the contact wishes to explore my professional activities I have found that it is important in the Greek context to be forthcoming, but ultimately I refer them to others within the organization should they wish to pursue an official working partnership. If a professional partnership is formed between the contact and MERIA, the research relationship changes.

Once an informal contact (in this case, one referred to me by a formal contact) enters a formal partnership with MERIA, my dual academic/professional identity becomes more difficult to manage as the issues with complicity and power mentioned above become more pronounced and direct. This is unfamiliar territory for many anthropologists in the field. In my case it has been important to recognize the following: once a formal relationship has been formed, it will always be professional and even "off-the-record" exchanges are likely to reflect the particular

interests of the contact's organization. Thus, the main difficulty in managing the dual identity is to realize that, in fact, one has a single identity as far as the contact is concerned, that the range of data available is dictated by the formal corporate relationship, and that the interpretation of this data must be sensitive to that fact. The research relationship has been formalized, as has the individualistic ethic of gain.[12]

Conducting interviews with Roma as a private researcher/NGO representative has also been challenging, although very rewarding. I had a previously established relationship with the majority of the people living at Alpha compound as a researcher, and my return in summer 2006 as a representative of MERIA was not unexpected by the local population, as I had discussed this possibility with them during my prior visit. Today I am treated as a researcher (and private individual) first, and as an NGO representative second. To begin this exploration of the Romani aspect of my fieldwork, however, it is useful to consider one of the unexpected benefits the organization has lent my fieldwork.

While in the field I discovered that MERIA serves as a meeting point for various experts in the areas of, for example, advocacy, healthcare, law, and government. The opportunity to create focused dialogue between people of various areas of expertise and background has been tremendously advantageous. The NGO acts as a kind of "center of study" involving academics, professionals, and local consultants (grassroots intellectuals). The issues the group explores are always focused on MERIA initiatives and community needs, but often stray into more theoretical areas to do with policy, history, and social change. These conversations also serve as useful starting points for private interviews. Interestingly, Roma have been the most enthusiastic participants in these dialogues, which was unexpected considering the usual reticence some researchers encounter from this community when exploring subjects concerning suffering and injustice.

---

[12] The contact will be mindful of professional advantages and disadvantages presented by the researcher/professional. Data collected and contacts gained will typically be determined on this reality.

According to my Romani consultants, MERIA meetings (formal and informal) are considered safe discursive spaces where the details of sensitive areas of private life can be shared with non-Roma. I would like to suggest here that the Romani participants deem discussions in the context of NGO consultation safe for two principal reasons: first, the organization and those that belong to it have proven themselves to be sympathetic towards the community (there is little fear that comments might produce negative repercussions); and second, these exchanges approximate the conditions of "true speech" in which Romani men often engage. True speaking refers to a particular style of discourse that occurs at times when men are experiencing moments of heightened fraternity and sense of collectivity.[13] Stewart explains that true speech occurs when Roma recount personal hardships and difficulties, and moreover constitutes a discursive space used to demonstrate trust. For the anthropologist in the field participating in true speech with Romani consultants, or even participating in an exchange that approximates true speech, allows access to intimate experiences, personal opinions, and notably, preservation strategies as conveyed through, in this case, desired initiatives, concerns, requests, and recommendations. The aim here is not to infiltrate or trick one's way into private lives by mimicking local communication styles, but rather to be sensitive to internal dialogical conventions, which are in fact performed openly within Romani compounds. The goal is to foster productive research relationships, and in this case also constructive relationships.

The fact that I am well known to the community has also facilitated my inclusion and the inclusion of other MERIA personnel during true speech times. When I first began research with this Romani group, I was not permitted to join in these exchanges as I had not yet gained the trust of the community nor had I yet effectively demonstrated my singularity and unbiased positionality (non-Athenian and non-Romani, therefore neutral). Once my identity was known, I began to participate in increasingly important instances of true speech where individuals with "fresh wounds" would seek solace and where individuals would strengthen their sense of connection to the Romani collective following symbolic and actual separation from the group (like time in jail, military service, invasive hospital treatment, and the like). Rarely do the MERIA meetings operate at these levels of cultural significance (for example, NGO personnel are not invited to join the strengthening of the Roma collective); however, having experienced the range of true speech instances, I have been able to recognize its more simple form and the significance it carries. Knowing and understanding modes of Roma communication has been very important in maintaining MERIA. It is likely that many NGOs fail with the Roma because their members do not understand these subtle codes. For example, moments where the Roma are building these trust relationships may be dismissed as complaining or manipulating for more benefit. Of note, some other communication styles are even more difficult to manage, particularly ones employed at times of perceived threat as when NGO personnel and others, like anthropologists, first make contact.

An example of this kind of communicative style is performed by Romani women. The Romani women living at the Alpha compound and, according to personal experience and the accounts of others, other Romani women across the Attica region in Greece employ a particular resistance strategy that makes communication nearly impossible. Specifically, these women, contrary to the rather reticent Romani men, forcefully beg, yell at their friends while ignoring outsiders, and will gather in very large numbers around non-Roma they find in the compound asking questions loudly and often getting into fights with each other. Regardless of the broader anthropological significance of this practice (which is considerable, but beyond the scope of this work), it can be stated unequivocally that Romani women accomplish a definite power shift in their favor by making outsiders uncomfortable and often confused. These practices deny the target speaking space or sometimes even the opportunity to orient oneself within a social situation – outsiders often report a sense of talking to nobody and everybody at once. Interviews with the general non-Romani population living outside the compound have confirmed the effectiveness of this power-shifting strategy with most consultants reporting they try to avoid Romani women claiming they are "noisy," "hostile," "disrespectful," or "impossible." When I first began my work at the Alpha compound I encountered this form of communication nearly every day for a month. Needless to say it was very challenging. Eventually, I formed closer relationships with women in the compound

---

[13] Stewart 1992:146, 1989; see also "formal speech" in Alexandrakis 2003:78.

through introductions by men or simply when they approached me individually, and these women would intervene and disperse groups forming around me. Of note, in the event where my close contacts were not present, other women who recognized me would intervene, declare my relationship with their insider, and the group communication style would change almost spontaneously so that I could participate. MERIA personnel also had to endure this power-shifting communication strategy until they managed to each form positive relations with the local community.

Currently I conduct interviews, sometimes with individuals but often with groups of women. The subject matter of these group interviews has ranged widely and it seems few issues are taboo. It has also been common for men to join in these conversations. Even children take part on occasion. It is clear that when on my own the women regard me as a private researcher, but when I approach them with another MERIA member they treat me as a representative of the NGO, likely because the other members have not achieved the degree of familiarity with the Roma that I have and so some personal topics like compound gossip and private family affairs are not referred to. To protect my Romani consultants and to maintain their trust, I keep private conversations and research interviews strictly confidential, even when the data gathered could benefit MERIA. My prior relationship with the women of Alpha compound has made it possible for me to assure them that our private conversations are truly private. In the event where this confidentiality was to be breached, I am certain I would loose the intimate research relationships I have formed with these Romani women.[14]

---

[14] Of course, this begs the question whether a researcher approaching a Romani group initially in association with an NGO can form the same intimate relationships an independent researcher might. Based on my observations at the Alpha compound I would argue that making this transition would be more difficult as the Rom would be wary of the transition from client/provider to consultant/researcher, being uncertain as to whether the "outsider" had something to gain. Greek Roma are very familiar with the client/provider relationship with non-Roma (both at work and in relation to non-Romani service providers), a relationship that comes with strict rules and boundaries maintained by the Roma for their own protection.

Beyond verbal communication, Greek Roma are also very sensitive to non-verbal communicative cues. Interviews often begin outside of houses and sometimes migrate indoors at the invitation of the homeowner. Learning to negotiate Romani space was initially a challenge. Anthropologists familiar with the early work on the Romani body, especially by Sutherland, will recall studies of Romani pollution/pure and inside/outside dialectics and the resulting complexity of Romani spatial organization.[15] Greek anthropologists studying the Roma have also noticed the manifestation of these dialectics, especially in social organization, treatment of material goods, and even in Romani architecture.[16]

For example, in the Alpha compound, stolen or discarded building supplies and large pieces of wood refuse and cardboard are used to create flimsy walls and porous roofs for houses, but no home is built unless a solid cement slab floor is laid to keep the perceived ubiquitous polluting dirt out (especially dirt originating from outside of the compound). Following this pattern, rooms can be added endlessly to homes, but not without cement floors, especially when these rooms are given doors to the outside. Moreover, only Romani men and women are permitted to build Romani homes: the help of an outsider is considered bad luck (although outsiders are permitted to supply the building materials). All the houses within the Alpha compound are oriented with their doors generally away from the surrounding neighborhood (even when it means the door of one house opens onto mud holes, back wall or bathroom of another house, etc.). Loud noise in the form of music from stereos or televisions and noise from yelling provides a constant audible form of insulation from the outside. Also, most every externally originating object, including beds and cookware, is handled with disregard, but certain items like photographs or gold (the former depicting family members or close friends and the latter in the form of jewelry such as that given and worn during celebrations) are cared for closely because they are considered "internal" and/or purifying.[17] Non-Roma must always remain aware of their position relative to these manifestations of the "inside/outside" dialectic and to never become offensive by, for example, asking their Romani hosts to turn down

---

[15] Sutherland, 1977; see also Miller 1975: 43; Okely 1983: 33-34; Stewart 1997: 207-208.
[16] Karathanasi 2000.
[17] See Alexandrakis 2003.

music, tracking dirt into homes, touching sensitive items without permission, or make negative comments about particular building choices (such as the placement of doors and windows). This may seem straightforward at first, but consider that sometimes these rules can change.

As a non-Rom, there is no question that I am considered an outsider to the community despite my prior relationship with them, and as such my movements within the camp are subject to a set of informal rules that follow the inside/outside dialectic mentioned above. For example, it is impermissible for me to enter a Romani home without being bidden to do so. This may appear at first to be self-evident; Roma themselves, however, do not observe a strict border between the interiors and the exteriors of their homes except when an outsider is nearby. The Roma at the Alpha compound are content to leave doors open day and night, to have holes in walls, park cars partially indoors and sleep and cook in their yards and in the yards of neighbors (if the word 'yard,' with all its connotations, can be applied to describe the area in front of Romani houses); when a non-Romani individual appears, however, the camp becomes spontaneously populated with forbidden zones. The interior of houses is one such zone, but also the spaces behind houses and in the Alpha compound the section of land where houses back onto a fence furthest from the main access are off limits to those not escorted by a local resident. Add to this that forbidden zones often shift and change depending on how nearby families feel or if people move or leave. Learning and respecting internal borders has been extremely important, not to mention difficult. With time, experience, and by learning how to read body language and verbal cues, the borders become more apparent and more easily avoidable.

Currently, I and other MERIA personnel experience mostly politeness and tolerance from Roma, and we in turn have become more accustomed to the particulars of internal Romani communication and the complexity of Romani space, and have developed an effective means of communicating sensitive questions and requests. Sometimes, of course, communications break down or unexpected situations arise. This occurs most frequently when Roma from other compounds come to stay, and when we come to conduct research at sensitive times such as when internal feuding has escalated or when celebrations have lead to considerable drinking. In the first two cases we rely on our established relationships and reputation in the compound to aid us in defusing

potentially explosive situations. In the latter, rather infrequent case, MERIA personnel are instructed to skip the day's work and I go in alone to collect research data only. In times of celebration, while many inhabitants of the compound are intoxicated, there are always a number of others who are sober and very excited to discuss the event.

In sum, the productive research relationship I enjoy with the Roma would not have been possible without my prior experience at the camp, nor would MERIA be able to operate successfully. MERIA has allowed me to do fieldwork with both informal and less accessible formal Greek consultants while providing a solution for the major difficulties facing anthropologists conducting research among Greek Roma: it has allowed Roma a venue where they can voice and seek solutions to the problems they face every day; MERIA has allowed me the space to both avoid Romani resistance strategies based on my prior relationship, and to study them and overcome them as they arise occasionally based on the organization's credentials and my experience; and finally MERIA has neutralized the censure and exclusion one typically experiences from the mainstream Athens population when they discover one works also with Roma. Yet in addition to these benefits, running this organization has provided another advantage that I wish to consider presently.

Accessing and Understanding Codes, Flows, and Change in the Field

MERIA has provided a platform from where I can examine specific issues from a perspective perhaps unavailable to many other researchers. Recall the concept of poetics; that is, studying local meaning through close examination of narrative and performance.[18] Narrative and performance are observable phenomena, but how does one become participatory at the level of unobservable phenomena? How can participant observation be reconceived so that one may study the myriad forces shaping local meaning in the field more directly, to learn how these forces help negotiate a particular reality, or whether they truly are at play? Of course, traditional fieldwork is adequate here in that one may study larger structuring forces (how ever one wishes to define

---

[18]Herzfeld 1988: xv, 10.

them) through any number of analytical models simply by observing people. Studying forces directly, or codes and flows defined here in the Deleuzean tradition[19], however, may be facilitated by the invention of a vehicle that allows direct access the particular cross-section of codes and flows pertinent to the research question. MERIA has proved to be such a vehicle, given the way it operates in the field.

When approaching a particular field site as a representative of MERIA, the confluence of codes and flows the organization represents elicit a particular reaction at the site. That is, some flows come together while others are resisted or operate neutrally. By analyzing the encounter between the field entity and the control (in this case MERIA), the codes and flows that coalesce in the former become evident. Consider an example: I approached a local health organization on behalf of MERIA to request vaccinations for some Romani children. The manager in charge of operations in the Attica region was very enthusiastic, positive, and sought to develop a program with us that ensured "sustainability," was based on "outreach," and developed "community partnerships." The way she conceptualized a working relationship with MERIA, the way she spoke about her current initiatives, and the way she spoke about Roma (as stakeholders, as victims of broad discrimination, etc.) indicated that she, and by extension her organization, was very much in line with current European development industry concepts, concerns, values, and ideals (which are in turn indicative of particular identifiable codes and flows). MERIA's profile of values and ideals was completely congruent with those represented by the manager.

Our second meeting, this time with the doctor and social worker assigned to our project, however, was completely unproductive. Our expectations, our understandings of local needs and effective solutions, and even our understanding of what "outreach" is and how it operates were completely different. In fact, the very idea that Roma could benefit from a vaccination program seemed nonsensical to the doctor and social worker. While the local organization employed the current EU terminology, they nonetheless oriented, or

---

[19] For the purposes of this work, Deleuzean codes and flows can be thought of as pre-actualized forces and processes capable of facilitating change at given sites.

redefined the concepts so they fit the established local systems of thought. Consequently the partnership failed: The organization operated based on a philosophy and strategy indicative of a different cross-section of codes and flows from those represented by and which guide MERIA. In trying to negotiate a working partnership despite this initial stumbling block, it was possible to identify exactly how the two organizations differed. For example, aspects of Greek sociopolitical history were affecting local understandings of minority-hood and equity. This history, in addition to a collection of embedded codes (in language and the media), engendered a particular reaction to MERIA and our program proposal. Despite the failed partnership, exploring how we could come together allowed local codes and flows to interact with our controlled (known) codes and flows, and I was able to better understand how they influence that particular site and the field in general.

Without MERIA, it may have been possible to gather this data, especially if a foreign organization were to have approached the local organization to cooperate on a given project. MERIA, however, allowed me to accomplish the same end in an expedited manner while inviting my consultants to creatively examine the particular set of codes and flows pertinent to my research question directly, and on the terms and the environment with which they are familiar. Other advantages MERIA has offered to date include the ability to move around the field and apply the particular cross-section of codes and flows MERIA represents at various sites (at, for example, other local organizations and government offices) providing an immediate starting point for analysis and basis for comparison. Finally the organization has also allowed me to experience how particular codes and flows influence practice in the field, outside of partnerships with other organizations, but in basic operations (interacting with private citizens, the media, volunteers, and the like).

It should be repeated at this point that the advantage of a vehicle like MERIA simply adds to standard field practice. Even though the data one collects through such a device is pertinent to the analysis of all field phenomena, it cannot and in fact should not replace standard field research methods, but rather be seen as supplementary to them. Beyond increased access to information pertaining particularly to codes and flows,

however, MERIA has provided two notable additional benefits.[20]

The knowledge generated through MERIA – that is, details regarding the presence and functioning of particular codes and flows – helps the researcher to understand morphogenic process, or simply, social (and other) change in the field. Some anthropologists have reported difficulty seeing social change or the potential for change while in the midst of conducting fieldwork (especially in complex locations like cities and when working in difficult conditions), on the grounds that they become focused on particular provocative phenomena following traditional field methods pursuant to their research question and loose sight of what can be thought of as broader generative potentials, gathering assemblages, or generally, processes leading to change. These researchers eventually leave the field and must later reorient their data or place it within a dynamic model developed outside of the field. Of course, this is not a problem for every researcher, and especially those returning to the field after having spent time there before. A research tool like MERIA can offer, even to these experienced anthropologists, an opportunity to remain more directly connected with morphogenic process which might otherwise be obscured by one's subjectivity: expectations and reactions to situations and conditions in the field, which is a real concern for researchers working with disadvantaged populations such as Roma that endure sometimes extreme discrimination.[21] Let us consider this point further.

Beyond those researchers who witness injustice, discrimination, and other difficult conditions in the field that can certainly elicit particular response and sometimes shape investigation, other researchers also apply a particular set of expectations to reality on the ground (wittingly or unwittingly). It is folly to think that the researcher can abandon these perspectives or somehow leave them behind when conducting research. Some anthropologists have embraced this situation and advocate for a "follow your astonishment" technique thus formalizing the projection of expectations and subsequent exploration of particular deviations.[22] In interviews with researchers who follow this technique, it has become clear that on its own, this strategy can limit the investigator's perspective and in the worst cases skew analysis. MERIA, however, has allowed me to gather data that reveals forces operating beyond the level of subjectivity (the researcher's, or the consultant's, for that matter). Thus, as I might project expectations onto the field, the data gathered through MERIA serves to reorient my inquiry and analysis.[23] Indeed, understanding the myriad forces that influence a particular phenomenon has helped me to place that phenomenon relative to other observations often revealing subtle connections between sites or making apparent broader contexts I had not previously considered.

Recall the example above concerning the vaccination program. I was struck by the major difference between my understanding of effective outreach and that of the staff of the other NGO. While the MERIA staff had proposed a program where medical personnel travel to the camp every two weeks to do vaccinations and to consult with anyone who had medical concerns, the local health organization wanted to do a single visit for some vaccinations but mostly to encourage the local population to seek help at hospitals. Funding was not an issue and the medical personnel and means of transportation were available. My initial

---

[20] These operate in addition to those advantages provided by other strategies practiced by fieldworkers currently, explored most famously in terms of "embeddedness," "investment in the field," and "halfie" perspectives (Shweder 2000; Said 1978, 1983; Abu-Lughod 1991). Using a research device like MERIA simply enhances the research conducted through traditional methods.

[21] I do not suggest here that MERIA somehow cancels or neutralizes my reactions to particular situations in the field; on the contrary, the organization indeed helps me to focus my reactions in a constructive manner that will not harm my research, consultants, etc. I simply mean that MERIA, in addition to this, helps me to remain focused on broader processes that might be otherwise obscured by my expectations and reactions (conscious or not) to the conditions in the field.

[22] Shweder 2000.

[23] MERIA has also allowed me to formalize my expectations of the field to some extent in the operations strategy and in the corporate mission statement. This formalization makes a number of my biases and expectations obvious to me and to my consultants, which has proven quite productive. In some cases my consultants will suggest an alternative line of inquiry or will challenge my emerging understandings of certain phenomena.

reaction to this situation was surprise that our two definitions of outreach were indeed so different. I began to examine the concept in the broader Greek context, but was having difficulty finding examples of outreach programming or programming in general that could be considered outreach. Interestingly, most people I interviewed from hospitals and from some local NGOs gave me definitions of outreach that were very close to those circulating within the EU development community, but were not aware of any actual programs running in the country, while others claimed never to have heard of such services. I was intrigued by this situation and my investigation became a hunt for an explanation as to why and how the EU definition of outreach was being adapted and applied. Eventually, however, I turned to the notes I had collected through MERIA.

During the various meetings with the doctor and the social worker from the organization we had originally approached, I discovered that they viewed minority groups from an ahistorical perspective, as ever-present collectivities without particular claims for special treatment or protection justified by past discrimination, and that they considered programming around particular local needs like those of Greek Roma discriminatory to the broader Athenian population. These perspectives were affected by a cross-section of historical flows associated with particular Greek national narratives having to do with civil liberties and *ethnos,* which were also affecting other aspects of the organization's operations. Their attempts to negotiate a particular working relationship with MERIA were informed by their understanding that "outside" concepts must be adapted to fit the local Greek reality. To accomplish MERIA's goals, including the development of an outreach program in line with the EU vision with this group, it would have been necessary to challenge the underlying embedded flows that informed their perspectives on national identity and understanding of cultural relativity. Instead, we turned our attention towards finding an organization that shared more of the same flows MERIA represents. In so doing we came across a multinational NGO that shared our views and which was in fact quite actively trying to challenge Greek understandings of minority rights and development programming. They were contributing to a national discourse on the subject and were gathering quite a lot of support. This group was in fact generating potential for broader change as their initiative was part of a larger

national conversation affecting the same constellation of codes and flows at play in the local development sphere but which also shaped broader understandings of citizenship.

Without the insight provided by MERIA, I would have pursued local iterations of outreach, but would not have immediately realized that these local iterations are part of a larger process of defining citizenship. MERIA helped me to uncover this larger negotiation, or generally, the motion or morphogenic process in the field.

Thoughts and Directions

In conclusion, I will discuss briefly two important additional observations relating to MERIA: one practical/theoretical and one concerning this methodology's relevance to broader disciplinary trends. In terms of the former, MERIA has tended to reorient my investigations away from examining 'collectivity' with reference to 'culture,' thus avoiding potentially limiting categories. This has been a tremendous advantage especially in Greece since Culture is such a total category, a concept used commonly to define everything and everyone including minority groups such as Roma, and which can include phenomena like dress, customs, history, architecture, or art, within its delimiting language. Moreover, Greek Roma themselves have a very closed community which on the surface seems to be defined by what could be termed cultural identity, or a particular set of practices and dispositions. It is very easy to slip into these categories, to reproduce them in one's notes, and to conduct research around their logic. MERIA makes plain, time and again, however, that the intersection of forces pertinent to a particular research issue actually affects a large cross-section of the local population and that it is possible to consider larger aggregates, such as population collectivities, when gathering data or later for analytical purposes.

For example, looking at issues of access to healthcare services and specifically, issues related to access to official structures, it has become evident that Athenian Roma are subject to the same modes of exclusion that affect certain other minority groups living in Athens. This has become an important issue as my research continues, one that was not apparent at first but made evident through a number of MERIA activities. As this large group continues to experience resistance in medical settings they have

developed ways of circumnavigating obstacles to healthcare in order to access what they need. Interestingly, the strategies these groups employ, while differing in manner of execution, all target a particular cross-section of dominant narratives to do with Greek understandings of health-making, the body, and civil liberty.

In terms of the latter observation, beyond research strategy and advantages during analysis, MERIA has offered one perhaps unexpected bonus that should be mentioned. The organization has been invited to partake in provision of policy recommendations for a certain branch of the federal government concerned with the welfare of (unofficial) minorities and other internal subaltern populations. Policy is of course not necessarily a new area for anthropologists, yet MERIA has made the task of effectively translating anthropological thought for use outside of our discipline easier and so this advantage should be noted. MERIA makes larger structuring forces plain leading to more holistic and sustainable solutions; it provides the analytical scope to know when policy is necessary or when targeted initiatives are more appropriate (based on an understanding of emergence); provides the capacity to identify and utilize relevant and diverse data (recall the center of study advantage discussed above); and makes it easier for the anthropologist to write recommendations that will be appropriate to more than one (cultural) group. It is important to stress that this policy aspect of the MERIA advantage is independent of the research and analysis phases of a given anthropological project; it can be argued, however, that a lot of anthropological data is inaccessible or at least lost in translation between the researcher and those it might interest or who might benefit from it outside of the discipline. A research device such as MERIA may help to correct that problem by providing the anthropologist with the tools to present a more accessible analysis of a given reality, when appropriate.

The Roma of Greece are a fascinating group to work with in the field, although those familiar with the exercise will attest that this is not always easy. Beyond the resistance strategies, trust issues, problems with access, and needs for analytical freedom in dealing with a markedly unconventional population, the anthropologist must also deal with the sometimes intolerable conditions Greek Roma endure.

One afternoon while discussing a project with several consultants at the Alpha compound, we were interrupted by a car full of non-Romani teenagers yelling, "tell us the future, Gypsy!" and throwing garbage. My consultants shrugged off the affront, but it has always stayed with me as a potent example of why anthropology is necessary and how the knowledge we create is unique and important. MERIA has simply given me the opportunity to better understand the field in which I work and to make a positive contribution to it. The organization has also helped me to understand that anthropologists must work to expand the concept work we engage in and to make anthropological thought accessible to other disciplines for the future of our discipline and for the future of our consultants – however each individual researcher chooses to accomplish this. As my fieldwork continues, I look forward to learning more about the sometimes enigmatic Romani population and the changing city they live in and help create.

References

Abu-Lughod, Lila. 1991. Writing against culture. In Recapturing anthropology: working in the present. Richard Fox (ed.). Pp. 137-162. School of American Research Press: Distributed by the University of Washington Press: Santa Fe, N.M.

Alexandrakis, Othon. 2003. Between Life and Death: Violence and Greek Roma Health and Identity. Masters Thesis. Dept. of Anthropology, The University of Western Ontario. London, Ontario.

Daskalaki, Ivi. 2003. Experiencing Distinctiveness at the Margins of the School: Relatedness, Performance, and becoming a Greek Gypsy. Ph.D. Dissertation. Dept. of Anthropology, Goldsmiths College, University of London. London, England.

Faubion, James D. 1993. Modern Greek Lessons: A Primer in Historical Constructivism. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Herzfeld, Michael. 1988[1985].The Poetics of Manhood: Contest and Identity in a Cretan MountainVillage. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Karathanasi, Effie (Καραθανάση, Έφη). 2000. Το Κατοικείν των Τσιγγάνων: Ο βιο-χώρος και ο κοινωνιο-χώρος των Τσιγγάνων (The Home of the Roma: The Natural Environment and the Social Environment of the Roma). Athens: Gutenberg.

Miller, Carol. 1975. American Rom and the Ideology of Defilement. In Gypsies, Tinkers and Other Travellers. Rehfisch (ed.). Academic Press: London.

Okely, J. 1983. *The Traveller-Gypsies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

OMCT: World Organization Against Torture. 2002. Greece: Evictions of Roma as part of the Preparation for the 2004 Olympic Games. Press Release. OMCT: Geneva.

Said, Edward. 1983. The world, the text, and the critic. Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Said, Edward. 1978. Orientalism. Pantheon Books, New York.

Shweder, Richard. 2000. The Astonishment of Anthropology. In Moral Disagreements: Classic and Contemporary Readings. Christopher Gowans (ed.). Pp. 102-112. Routledge: London and New York.

Stewart, M. 1997. The Time of the Gypsies. Westview Press: London.

Stewart. M. 1992. 'I Can't Drink Beer, I've Just Drunk Water': Alcohol, Bodily Substance and Commensality Among Hungarian Rom. *In* Alcohol, Gender and Culture. D. Gefou-Madianou (ed.). London: Routledge.

Stewart, M. 1989. 'True Speech': Song and the Moral Order of the Vlach Gypsy Community in Hungary. Man, NS 24(1): 79-102.