

# Field research and natural disasters in Folklore Studies: Issues and considerations

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## Abstract

A natural disaster due to climate change can be a field of research for the humanities, as it can cause significant changes in the society. What happens after a disaster? What are people's feelings? What will happen to them if something similar happens again? Then fear and uncertainty change the whole structure and function of the community. Floods are the second most common natural disaster after forest fires, and they cause serious effects on the societies that are affected. The Prefecture of Attica in Greece has suffered many disasters from dangerous phenomena in the last twenty years. As an example, the case of the flash floods in Western Attica is used for this research. On the morning of November 15, 2017, the sudden rainfall on Mount Pateras created enormous destruction in the settlements of Mandra and Nea Peramos. The phenomenon was local, and the bulk of the rain fell on the mountain. This is the third-largest flood in Attica, based on the number of dead. The analysis is based on qualitative research, on-site ethnographic research and is theoretically framed with the tools of the Science of Folklore, Anthropology and Ethnography. Narratives from victims who lived through the disaster are used to record their memories, the environmental impact on the areas, as well as their uncertainty about the area's past and future. Finally, special emphasis will be placed on the analysis of the emotions connected to memory.

**Keywords:** Natural Disasters, Climate change, Traumatic Memory, Narratives, Field Research, Orality, Folklore Studies, Emotions

## 1 Introduction

A natural disaster due to the climate crisis can be a field of research for the humanities, as it can cause significant changes in society. The science of Folklore can make a decisive contribution to the research of these changes, with the interdisciplinary contribution of the sciences of Anthropology, Ethnography, and other related sciences. This short article is a small part of some of my first observations, as well as reflections, regarding the conduct of the field research I am carrying out in the Attica region as part of my doctoral thesis entitled "Folkloristic approaches to natural disasters due to the climate change. A case study from Attica (2000-2020). Traumatic memories, narratives and collective representations"<sup>1</sup>. In Greece, as far as the science of Folklore is concerned, although the subject was touched upon for the first time by Nikolaos Politis in his work *Traditions (Παραδόσεις)* in 1904 (Indicatively: "Sunken places and towns", "The Weather"), there is no corresponding extensive study on major natural disasters.

My particular interest in natural disasters began with my involvement with the science of Folklore, during my postgraduate studies. Also, my interest in the issue of natural disasters is related to my professional capacity as a journalist. Constantly watching the Greek and international news, on the subject of natural disasters, I realised that

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**H.F.R.I.**  
Hellenic Foundation for  
Research & Innovation

**The research work was supported by the Hellenic Foundation for Research and Innovation (HFRI) under the 4th Call for HFRI PhD Fellowships (Fellowship Number: 9131 ).**

climate change can substantially change a community, the quality of life, habits, human relationships, the natural environment and create feelings of fear and collective traumatic memories.

The most common way of obtaining primary data is through field research, a scientific tool that aims to collect data and information. Conducting field research is a fundamental way of acquiring knowledge, and more specifically empirical knowledge, with its object at the heart of science which is human beings and their activities. The application of field research must meet two basic conditions: the documentation and defense of the way of collecting the research data, which presupposes that the researcher knows what he is doing, for example that he has the knowledge required to collect primary data, and of course, the data collected do not express or reflect the biases and opinions of the researcher. There are researchers who are collecting answers they want or hope to hear. Of course, it is a fact that every researcher has his own views and beliefs. Therefore, even unwittingly, there can be the corresponding partiality on his part. Of course, the opinion and experiences of the researcher are equally valuable in any field research. The personal characteristics of each researcher play a decisive role in the formation, focus, but also in the overall contribution of the field research.

## 2 Field research and the researcher in the field

I will start with the part of observation through ethnographic walking in the areas where I am conducting the research, mainly in Western Attica and in the field research so far, basically by conducting interviews with people who have experienced catastrophic events, mainly the floods in Mandra and Nea Peramos Attica in 2017, but also earlier or more modern times in the surrounding areas. First, the great difficulty in approaching the subject lies in the contact with the victims, their relatives or people who simply saw such images, without necessarily being hurt themselves (postmemory). Oral testimony is directly linked to memory. So, we cannot analyze testimony without analyzing memory. This fact makes memory present in a large range of studies interwoven with society. The first issue is the contact with the community and how to build relationships of trust with the researcher. For the interview to be successful, it is necessary to create a climate of familiarity and trust between the interviewer and the interviewee. The researcher must always psychologically prepare his narrator and inform him even of the necessity of recording the interview. This process creates anxiety for some narrators, and it is possible to create a negative climate and limit the narrative speech (Kakaboura, 2011: 115 - 116). Unbreakable communication and trust with storytellers must be established. If they feel offended for any reason, the investigation stops there. However, this is a commonplace, I am not referring to something new. However, if they have experienced such a catastrophic event, the issue is that they are not simply sharing a part of their lives, but the feelings of pain and uncertainty, which they are trying to suppress. So that's the issue in a disaster investigation: the feelings they try to forget - or have forgotten - and the researcher rekindles them and brings them to the surface. So far there have been a few cases in my research where people have politely refused to speak to me for this very reason. The questions, of course, despite the difficulty of extracting the data for the research, are never in any way misleading or uncomfortable for the interviewee (Mason, 2011: 104 - 105). In addition, the researcher's goal is to pick up on cues in the conversation and be attuned to the body language of the interviewee and listen carefully with real and not fake interest (Mason, 2011: 89). In this way, the researcher can better understand the researched and see reality as he constructs it (Kyriazi, 2004: 53). In the qualitative methods<sup>2</sup> of analysis, we do not only pay attention to the description of the message, but also to the hidden intentions of the narrator (Lydaki, 2016: 182).

But always, even if they do not accept it themselves, they will try to introduce me to another narrator to speak, because they want their experience to be recorded and they even ask many times specifically to have their truth about the events recorded. That's why if trust is built right from the beginning and real relationships and respect are established with the researcher, victims want to talk in my experience so far. They see it as therapeutic in some cases, perhaps even redemptive "as if they exorcise evil", as one of my narrators has said (see related articles by Carl Lindahl on the therapeutic nature of narrative). The researcher, of course, under no circumstances asks the interviewee to say his point of view and his thoughts "objectively", but listens to him carefully, even if his words do not correspond to the original goal of his research (Lydaki, 2016: 182). In addition, the purposes of the research

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<sup>2</sup> The main characteristic of qualitative research, in relation to quantitative research, is that it is based on a smaller number of cases with the aim not of discovering general trends (which necessarily requires many cases), but of forming an overall picture for each case and finding their common elements. Thus, qualitative research, entailed by in-depth analysis, leads to the gathering of detailed data on multiple aspects of the cases under investigation (Kyriazi, 2004: 51 - 52). The term *qualitative interview* usually refers to in-depth interviews, semi-structured or loosely structured, which appear to have an informal style, biographical or narrative approach and interactive data generation (Mason, 2003: 89 - 90).

are always explained in detail to the interviewees, and they are given the necessary guarantee that the interview will not be published in any medium, apart from academic purposes, if they do not wish to do so (Mason, 2011: 105). The same applies to information from third parties during the recording and in cases where the research is carried out in focus groups<sup>3</sup>, where their consent for the publication of the personal information they will provide is not a given (Mason, 2003: 127). At the same time, after the end of the research, they will be given full access to the research results (Iosifidis & Spyridakis, 2006: 221).

The researcher, therefore, is called upon in such a condition to distance himself from the facts, although it is not always entirely possible. The issue in such research is that the narrators do not simply share a story of theirs and are not simply called upon to describe an event, to tell a tale, their life story, etc. Even in cases where in other studies, where researchers have been asked to record burial customs and traditions, obituaries, etc. they may not have as much direct contact with human suffering because they are recording an event, even if it is being told to them. However, in the case of a natural disaster, I believe that the handling is completely different. It is not only the event, but also the traumatic memory, the remembrance and how this event is reflected in a second stage collectively within the community.

After all, can the science of Folklore have a relationship in the part of natural disasters? The answer is affirmative. It might be related. A natural disaster not only disrupts society, but also brings about changes in the operation of Cultural Associations (I am referring to the Association of Peramian Cyzikins of Nea Peramos Attica, as evidenced by interviews I have conducted with them), in the realization of cultural events, in human communication, in the economy, in the environment, but also in human relations. This trauma, I would say the “wound” in their soul, follows them, and will follow them. Time freezes and starts from the beginning. It is like an interval in the sequence and cycle of time that simply ceases to exist. Society straightens itself out (or not, depending on its vulnerability and adaptability) and starts over, or better continues on new terms. Moreover, the “traumas” in the physical space remain almost unchanged. Mud marks on shops, streams that were covered but reappeared, since water has a memory, shops that never reopened, Cultural Associations that stopped working. However, there is a bright side. The feelings of fear and terror are replaced by the necessity of survival and the power of life. But the most important thing is the cohesion of the community, where in situations of emergency it finally comes together and forgets its differences. Such examples and references are present in the narratives I have collected so far, although the narrators are concerned, as after the disaster they say people forget this unity until the next crisis comes to the community. Of course, somewhere here I must emphasize that my bibliographic and scientific analysis would not have been sufficient without the tools of Anthropology and Ethnography. I undertake an interdisciplinary approach, as beyond the theoretical analysis from studies of Folklore, the analysis of the material I collect also requires approaches that refer to trauma, memory, and emotions, as they emerge through the narratives. For the same reason, I also use a theoretical framework from the STEM sciences<sup>4</sup>, from the fields of Geology and Meteorology and other related sciences that touch on the issues I am examining, as such an analysis would at least be considered insufficient, since I use terms from these fields. Finally, in terms of finding appropriate data from secondary sources it is not always possible. That is, there are many cases where the needs of a research can be met only by collecting primary data, especially in a topic that may not have a corresponding literature. Thus, despite the convenience offered using secondary data, a researcher will at some point, in some of his studies, be obliged to collect the data he needs himself.

The second issue is the anthropo-geography of the place. In the first phase, my plan was to deal with the floods in Mandra and Nea Peramos in Western Attica in 2017 and the deadly fire in Mati in Eastern Attica in 2018. Now having expanded the field research<sup>5</sup> further in Western Attica, as I have included areas such as Megara, Kineta and Magoula, I am deeply concerned about the field of time and space. Anna Lydaki typically states that the original research plan can be reversed and changed. The different elements are not considered a mistake since this would lead to entrapment of research and not to new knowledge (2016: 182 - 183). The differences between the

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<sup>3</sup> “Participant observation is the basic method for qualitative research. At the same time, however, in addition to the researcher’s observations, the production of data is also required through in-depth interviews, individual and in focus groups” (Varvounis & Sergis, 2012: 449).

<sup>4</sup> At the same time, from November 2022, I am also a postgraduate student at the School of Sciences, Department of Geology and Geoenvironment of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens in the Program “Environmental, Disaster and Crisis Management Strategies”, in order to fill the bibliographic gap I have and to proceed to write an even more in-depth research.

<sup>5</sup> Field research will not be limited to a specific field but will be multi-sited, following the example of internationally followed practices of multi-sited ethnography.

communities in Eastern and Western Attica, even in how they perceive the pain from the disaster - if we make a first comparative approach - is completely different and has to do with many factors, such as the location of the areas, the living conditions, the economy, the distance from the center of Athens, the same people regarding their views, their culture, etc. Of course, at the same time, I am making some contacts with the community in Mati for future research, even if it does not fit into my thesis. Therefore, research even on such a scale may have to be strictly limited, as in this way accounts are lost and aspects of the events unknown, which will not possibly come to light by gathering additional material.

### 3 Discussion and reflective thoughts

Indeed, there are areas within Attica and all over Greece that are vulnerable to floods, fires, and other natural phenomena. This is not related only to climate change, nor of course to any “disaster” we invoke, and which unfortunately constitutes a fatalistic acceptance of our inability to operate in an organized and planned manner against natural phenomena that existed, exist and will exist. While scientists cannot predict the exact rate of increase in these phenomena due to climate change, the prediction of more extreme weather in the future will almost certainly lead to an upward trend in these disasters in the coming decades.

Reflectively, therefore, and not conclusively, since at this stage of the research there can be no conclusive or absolute results, I could only write this with certainty: the field of research on natural disasters is wide with many ramifications. I did not attempt an extensive bibliographical review or approach, as my aim in this article - perhaps not so scientific - was more to state my point of view and my opinion through my so far little experience in the field. In the future I hope to have more results and to list more detailed theories and observations.

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