Negotiations in the Field: Citizenship, Political Belonging and Appearance

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SEZER İDIL Göğüş, APR 21 2020

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In ethnographic research, we always talk about fieldwork, our conduct and the encounters in the field. Coffey states that fieldwork has 'identity dimensions' (Coffey 1999, 1) and it is personal. Because the researchers are 'human beings with specific histories, capacities, and characteristics' (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012, 67), their identities have an impact on the research (Lavis 2010; Chege 2015). Fieldwork is also 'social and relational' (Hume and Mulcock 2004, xxii; also see Gupta and Ferguson 1997). In that sense, it is a two-way sense-making (Chege 2015) process, in which researchers and interlocutors try to comprehend each other: researchers aim to grasp the realities in the field, and the interlocutors attempt to understand who we are, our actions and interests (Chege 2015). In other words, a negotiation occurs between the researcher and the researched, in which both sides would try to estimate how much and in what way they will/could fit in with others (Chatman et al. 2005). Katherine Verdery states that such interactions can cause a reciprocal identity creation (Verdery 2018, 23). Hence, new identities can be assigned, created and formed for the researcher by the interlocutors and/or by themselves (Lavis 2010, 317).

During my fieldwork in Turkey in 2016, I also had to face several negotiations. I spent two months (April and May) in several cities and districts in Turkey (Istanbul, Ankara, Muğla and Rize) and conducted explorative field research focusing on political socialisation practices amongst members of the ruling party – the Justice and Development Party (AKP). I aimed to analyse and understand the perspectives of the party members and their reasons for supporting the party in spite of growing criticism of its politics, both at home and abroad. I visited party offices, participated in party events and conducted interviews with members. Although I was aware of possible challenges I might face in the field due to the political situation in Turkey, I did not expect major difficulties, because I was doing ethnography at 'home'. However, I noticed tensions between my interlocutors and me based on various assumptions regarding my person and my interest. My place of residence, my interest in learning their perspectives, and even my eyeglasses both hinted at parts of my identity and created new versions of me. Therefore, in this chapter, by documenting stories from my fieldwork, I aim to reflect on challenging incidents, which represent moments of negotiations in the field.

Native or Foreign?

During my fieldwork, I visited one of the small holiday towns in Muğla. The town is overcrowded in the summer but becomes deserted in the winter. When I visited in April, the tourist season had not started yet, and the town was still quite empty.

There, I had the chance to talk not only with women but also with men who are active in party politics. They were eating lunch, drinking tea and coffee, or discussing politics in the common area. On the first day I spent at the office, I talked with several people of various ages: a young woman in her early 20s; women in their late 40s and 50s; and men in their 50s and 60s. Reaching various members of the party was uncomplicated: while I was sitting in the room, different faces came by, commented on a subject of discussion and then left the room. Many of them were quite open

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to explaining their views on Turkish politics, the AKP and why they chose to work for the party. While the atmosphere was relaxed and people were generally happy to speak with me, I was also asked by some party members to show an official document from my university to prove that I was really writing a dissertation. Many of them also did not allow me to record our conversations.

When I explained that I was associated with a German university, a few people pointed at a retired couple from Germany, suggesting that I should talk with them. The next day, I went to the office again to meet with this couple. They told me that they had lived for some years in Germany and possess both German and Turkish citizenship, but are currently living in Turkey. When I asked their permission to carry out an interview, and asked whether I would be allowed to use a recording device, he [the husband] did not want to see the official document from the university and allowed me to record our talk.

When I started to work on the data I had collected, I realised something else in my field notes on the elderly man: I saw myself as somebody from Germany, not as someone living temporarily in Germany. Regarding this situation, I commented in my journal: 'He [the husband] was quite interested in my research and asked me if I could send him my thesis afterwards because he would like to learn from my results […] Interestingly, he was using German words in his sentences. I think it was some sort of reference to his background in Germany or maybe he thought I would understand him better. He might have found me likeable because I am from Germany' (author's fieldnotes, 22 April 2016; emphasis added).

This realisation about how I defined myself made me think about what it means to be a 'native', a 'halfie' and a 'foreign' researcher, and/or what the advantages and disadvantages are of each. Ohnuki-Tierney states that native anthropologists have a 'more advantageous position in understanding the emotive dimensions of behaviour' (Ohnuki-Tierney 1984, 584). Indeed, native anthropologists might have intimate or in-depth knowledge of the interlocutors' daily routines and are likely to be familiar with their culture. Similar to being native, being a halfie – or bicultural – can also imply an insider perspective as halfies or biculturals can position themselves in two communities (or maybe even more) (Abu-Lughod 1991).

Indeed, having insider perspectives might be desirable, but it could also be challenging: a native researcher might therefore face more difficulties in separating themselves from the research than a foreign researcher would. Halfie/bicultural researchers may also face representation issues in the field regarding the 'self' and the 'other' during interactions with the interlocutors: 'Are you a native or a foreigner?'

In my case, what was surprising was the realisation of the shift from being native to being a foreigner and then accepting becoming bicultural. Before I stepped into the field, I had assumed that I was a researcher from Turkey who was currently residing and working in Germany and who, at the same time, had an insider perspective. But through interactions with the people in the field and due to their perceptions of me, I became a hybrid: a Turkish-German. Following that, I received explanations from my interlocutors about Turkish history and the country. Interestingly, my interlocutors' perceptions of me were echoed subconsciously in my field notes. Even though it was a discovery of my identity, it also made me concerned about whether I had lost the insider perspective on the country and its people.

Some Kind of Team Member?

The head of the AKP's women's branch in another small town in Muğla invited me to an informal coffee meeting with the other active female members of the party. In this small group setting, I was able to grasp their views on the party and why they think their 'public service can only do well for Turkey's future' (interview with Women's Branch Muğla, 28 April 2016). After two hours of talking, and when I thought it was time to leave, I received a request from one of the women there: they wanted to take a photo with me and put it online on the party webpage. I sensed that they were quite sure about my support for the AKP and believed that a possible future collaboration would also be of interest to me – I had approached them and shown interest in getting to know them so I must, therefore, be a party supporter.

Being photographed was a big dilemma for me: firstly, I did not want to turn down their request and risk breaking the

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trust I was trying to build; secondly, I did not want to have any kind of connection to the party, which I do not support but rather criticise. I refused the request and argued vaguely that it might harm my impartiality as a researcher. That was the turning point for our relationship. I wondered whether they were disappointed and/or if they started to see me not as one of them but as some 'other'. In my journal, I noted: 'They also wanted to know my view on the issues about which we were talking: on the AKP, the future of Turkey, the success of the AKP'. The head of the women's branch, Songül, said, 'It is now our turn; we will ask you questions'. They wanted to hear more about my own political views and my family's political background. I realised that being from Turkey and doing research in Turkey puts me in a complicated position: 'They were curious about my background and whether they could relate to me' (author's fieldnotes, 27 April 2016). This situation might have been similar to that of a foreign researcher; they might have to talk about themselves and their political views as well. However, as a native researcher, I could not avoid giving a proper answer. They were familiar with the political history and the polarisations in the country, and I was as well. Thus, I was afraid that my answer might damage the relationship: if I told them the truth about my political views, I might not have the chance to get 'deep hanging out' (Geertz 1998) with them. At the same time, I was also concerned that not revealing my honest views to them might create ethical issues. In hindsight, I recognise that my vague answer might have been equally unsatisfying and that I should have strongly stressed my mere interest in their views, opinions and answers. Also, my actions should not have been so influenced by my fear of failure and of losing my connection with them because it is indeed in the nature of fieldwork that you sometimes build trust and in other cases you lose the contact.

It is mainly discussed that ethnographic research should be conducted from the position of 'some kind of team member' (Reiter-Theil 2004, 23; Lewis and Russell 2011, 400). However, during such highly politically charged research, it is not always possible to be a team member or be entirely embedded. This case forced me to question both the limits of my embeddedness in the field as a researcher and my political identity as a Turkish citizen.

Unintended Impressions

After a three-hour journey from the Istanbul city centre, I arrived in an area where big skyscrapers and business towers stand next to textile factories in a modest, conservative and slightly poor-looking neighbourhood. The bus ride showed me another face of Istanbul, which I had heard of but had not seen very closely before. The neighbourhood, called Başakşehir, is a newly established part of the city. Previously a village outside of the city, rapid construction had turned it into one of the new faces of the so-called 'change' and 'strong Turkey'. This neighbourhood is also seen as a stronghold of support for the AKP and Erdoğan. In turn, Erdoğan has also declared his support of the neighbourhood on various occasions.

My interview partner, Sermet, was a local to Başakşehir and proud to be a part of this neighbourhood. He stated that he had been able to observe the changes that had taken place there and was also involved in the political youth work of the AKP. He described himself during our talk as a 'strong-willed person who can resist other attractions' – meaning the temptations of a less religious lifestyle, which he had seen during his master's studies abroad, or other political orientations (interview with Sermet, 25 May 2016). During the talk, I realised that he was stressing that he and I come from different backgrounds and that he assessed my political and religious views by my appearance. He offered his opinion in a kind manner: 'I have four sisters, and all of them wear headscarves. I would not like it if one of them decided to unveil. It would indicate that the person had lost her values. But it would be beautiful if you decided to wear a headscarf' (interview with Sermet, 25 May 2016).

His assessment of my appearance was not only about my choice of consciously wearing or not wearing religious clothing, but also about an insignificant (or at least insignificant to me) accessory: my glasses. So I wrote in my field journal: 'He somehow shows me my limits in this research […] He said that even my glasses give him a clue as to which political view I might support or which part of society I am from'. During our talk, he also said that he would not send me to his other friends in the AKP youth organisations. I stuttered and tried to ask, with a nervous smile, why. He did not give me an answer, and I did not repeat the question. I noted in my journal later: 'His assumptions on my political view might have played a role in this decision' (author's fieldnotes, 25 May 2016).

In this interview, I felt that I was the one who was being observed, interviewed and assessed. In a way, the

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researcher became the research object. This experience also showed me that such assessments of me are out of my control. Goffman argues that individuals assess others based on their past experiences, and they put on a performance as if they were actors on a stage. They may or may not be aware of their performance, but through such performances, they will be assessed (Goffman 1959). In a similar vein, the researcher also puts on a performance in front of her/his research subjects, and, without noticing, she/he can be assessed as the 'other' or 'untrustworthy', although it was not her/his intention. In my case, Sermet made an assessment on my political view and identity based on my glasses.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I showed several incidents I faced in the field, which indicate different negotiations and how new identities surfaced and were assigned to me in the field: I started to see myself differently, i.e. I became a bi-cultural researcher; my interest in the researched group was interpreted as political belonging; and seemingly insignificant objects such as my glasses hinted at a particular belonging to a group and played a role in accessing or not accessing people. In particular, these experiences showed me that the important feature of these negotiations was for testing the level of trust between the researcher and the interlocutors. Further, I realised that the researcher's identities can be assigned by the interlocutors to the researcher beyond the researcher's intentions.

Overall, these negotiations indicate the complexity of the fieldwork situation. Indeed, such complexity and challenges based on the researcher's identity can force the researchers to state self-critical questions on their practice in the field. Negotiations of identities can create tensions (Lavis 2010) and doubt of the self (Verdery 2018). However, as the reflexivity tradition accepts that researchers are observers in the world and bring their own background in the research, such negotiations should be perceived as important sources of knowledge claims and analysed as natural parts of field research. In that sense, they are not failures in the field, maybe therefore – considering the researcher is equipped with all the necessary research tools – there are just good and bad experiences in the field, which can reveal good ethnography practice.

Finally, I want to make suggestions to overcome the feeling of failure in the field when faced with such negotiations. Firstly, it is important to be aware that possible negotiations can be faced in the field before entering it. Secondly, it is crucial to know that such feelings of fear, failure, and discomfort are part of the field.

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About the author:

Sezer İdil Göğüş is currently a Doctoral Researcher at Peace Research Frankfurt (PRIF) and a Ph.D. student in the Social and Cultural Anthropology Department at Goethe University Frankfurt. Her research focuses on the institutional forms and imaginary concepts used by the Turkish government on one side and people of Turkish origin on the other side to justify and position their political activities in Germany.