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UNPLEASANT RELATIONS DURING FIELDWORK: JUST DEAL WITH IT?

From «Machismo» in the field to «Machismo» in Academia

Text: *Anna Elisabeth Kuijpers*

Keywords: *Stereotypes; Patriarchy; Fieldwork; Academia*

Introduction

Unpleasant, conflicting or awkward relations between researchers and informants in anthropological fieldwork settings are complicated and delicate matters to define. What is an unpleasant relationship and for whom? How to approach this problem without being ethnocentric, especially in places that differ significantly from our own cultural setting? How to handle conflicting situations without endangering relations in the fieldwork setting and thus the research? Although this article cannot provide an answer to all those questions, I realized it is important to pay attention to this topic after I had a problem with one of my own informants during my fieldwork. It made me aware of the profound effect this can have on the wellbeing of the researcher, and hence on the research. I also realized how much this issue is being tabooed in academia and it puzzled me why.

In this article I argue, based on my own experience, that although establishing unpleasant relations is not what we aim for during fieldwork, it can sometimes be an unavoidable part of it. These relations we prefer to avoid can expose important information on certain topics. In addition I claim that although harassment is becoming more documented in anthropology it is still a neglected topic in the methodological literature and in the teaching of anthropology. This lack of attention is related to the taboo that rests on discussing this topic openly within the discipline in general. The aim of this article is to create more awareness and open up the discussion within anthropology on unpleasant relations in the field.

In what follows, my personal fieldwork experience will be outlined; subsequently, I will relate this experience to what it can tell about asymmetrical power structures in a patriarchal society, existing stereotypes in my fieldwork setting, and how these stereotypes legitimized the incident that happened to me. Finally, I argue that these existing patriarchal power structures in the fieldwork setting are also discernible in academia and are responsible for tabooing the issue.

Personal Experience during Fieldwork

Currently I am a PhD student at the Department of Social Anthropology and Cultural Studies at the University of Zurich. My research is set in a small village in the southeast of Turkey. The village is part of a massive dam and irrigation project and 3 / 5 of it has been flooded due to a dam constructed 14 years ago. People used to live from agriculture and fishing. Nowadays, due to the infrastructural changes caused by the dam, tourism has become the most important means of subsistence. My research is focused on the effects of tourism on social life and kin relations in the village.

The southeast of Turkey is characterized by a strong patriarchal social structure. Men within this system are considered to play the dominant role both in- and outside the formal structures (Kaser 2008: 34), and there is a strict division of the public and private realm in which the women are mostly confined to the latter. In the private domain the patriarch has the power over all females, junior males and children. The

patriarch is the representative of the household for outsiders and morally responsible for the behaviour of his household members. Female honour is related to family honour, and a married woman is only permitted to have a sexual relation with her husband (Yalcin-Heckman 1991: 159).

During my fieldwork I tried to adapt my clothing and behaviour to the local customs and expectations the villagers have of females as much as possible. I have stayed in the domain of the women and my daily activities consisted of spending time with the women of the village at home, chatting while drinking tea or cooking and eating. Whenever men were present it was always in the context of the family. Even though I adapted my behaviour and clothing I could not escape the prejudice some men in the village had about foreign unmarried women being seen as sexually promiscuous. This was in stark contrast to the local women who are considered to be chaste. This view on foreign women is in strong relation to the incident that happened to me.

At first glance the actual experience I had seems relatively innocent. I have not been physically intimidated or verbally harassed like Sampson and Thomas (2003) during their fieldwork on a ship at deep sea. In my case, the incident entailed an invitation to meet late at night for a drink in a car, and was sent via text message to my mobile phone. A message of this nature would never be sent to women of the village because they don't drink since drinking is associated with licentious behaviour. That is why the message could only mean two things: first, I was not perceived as a woman from the village and second, the sender was trying to find out if I was interested in having an encounter of a sexual nature with him.

The message was sent by the father of the family I had the main contact with during the first weeks of my stay in the village. In fact, he functioned as an important gatekeeper who introduced me to other people in the village. Also I have spent much time with him and his family. Due to this incident, however, I started to feel uncomfortable being around him even though it was never in a one-to-one situation. As harmless as it might seem the incident had an impact on my emotional wellbeing. Since I had just arrived in the village and the family was the only one I knew, there was no one else in the village I could confide in.

With a total population of 800 people it was impossible to avoid the family when going outside of my house. Initially, the only solution was to withdraw from social life and stay in my room. According to Sharp and Kremer (2006: 324) avoidance of potentially dangerous situations or circum-

stances is the strategy most often used by female researchers. In my case time turned out to be a good friend, and in due course the problem blew over by remaining silent about the incident in the village.

Exposing emic perspectives, patriarchal structures and stereotypes

The incident with my key informant was not a nice experience and it changed my way of being in the village for a while. On the one hand unpleasant experiences with informants during fieldwork are sometimes impossible to avoid, and researchers have to find a way to deal with them. On the other hand these relational «frictions» can give us important information: «through discovering how the locals react to one's own behaviour, one obtains an early hint about their way of thinking» (Eriksen 2010: 27). It can expose (contrasting) *emic* perspectives of both the researcher and the researched on a certain issue.

This was also the case here, because even though I was not doing research among males at the time, and it is not uncommon for women of the village to enter the public domain, I entered as a Dutch unmarried female researcher. This position made me come into direct contact with certain stereotypes that exist among some men in the village about «foreign» women. The power of stereotypes lies in the fact that they are generalizing behaviour or traits of other groups that are conventionally believed to exist (Eriksen 2010: 278). The stereotypes here were concerned with foreign women being seen as sexually promiscuous and «easy» in contrast to the women from the village who are chaste and monogamous.

I once talked to a young local man that has had some sexual relations with girls from Europe while doing seasonal tourist work in the south of Turkey. He told me that for casual sex he would never approach a girl from the village, or a Turkish girl for that matter, but rather a foreign girl. The girls from the village are the ones that are marriageable, the foreign girls are «free» and «easy going». Here conflicting views between him and me on how European women behave sexually came to the fore. The notion that a foreign woman is not looking for casual sex does not fit into the view certain men in the village, including my informant, had.

Due to the incident I realized that gender relations are organized in the village according to certain unwritten (patriarchal) rules by which women are not «actively» involved in establishing contact with a strange man. It not only made me conscious of the strong patriarchal structures present in this

society but it also made me realize how I positioned myself as a female researcher in this patriarchal society. As David Berliner states: «... A pitfall among researchers is to import «one's own gender essentialism into the field, yet even trained anthropologists acknowledge that avoiding this may be easier said than done» (2008: 139). I had unintentionally crossed a line on how to establish contact with men according to the rules of the village by using my own, and that triggered a signal by my informant to send me this invitation.¹ The legitimization of this behaviour is based on the above-mentioned stereotypes on non-Turkish women being seen as promiscuous.

The incident can be categorized as a form of sexual harassment, which is gender related and happens in general mostly to female researchers doing research among males (Sharp and Kremer 2006: 320). In hindsight I understand how unusual it is for a woman in the village to have contact with a man who is neither a husband nor a relative, even if she is spending only time with his entire family. I was not conscious about it until I received the text message. It made me realize how the above-mentioned stereotypes legitimize certain behaviours, and are part of preserving asymmetrical power relations in this patriarchal society.

Why is harassment a tabooed issue in academia?

When doing participant observation we ourselves are our most important research instruments. On the one hand the way we position ourselves in the field is of crucial importance for a successful research and respectful treatment of the field, on the other hand it makes us vulnerable because we expose our entire selves to other people and surroundings that are often not familiar to us. Liza Mügge (2013) underlines in her article that there is a taboo within the discipline to talk about the fragile position of the researcher. In scholarly debates the inequality between the powerful researcher and powerless researched has been discussed in detail, but power and pressure exerted by the researched over the researcher in terms of for example age, social status or gender is something that is hardly mentioned. A reason researchers keep silent when certain relational problems occur is because they are afraid it can lead to bigger repercussions in the field: for example being shunned or excluded through the spread of gossip. Due to this fear (legitimate or not) talking to someone about it from the host population is often not an option.

But not only researchers are responsible for tabooing the issue, also the academic research culture is accountable. Sampson and Thomas state: «We believe however that it is also symptomatic of the research culture in which we operate. This in our view under-emphasizes the personal health and safety of researchers [...] whilst fostering an atmosphere in which there are pressures to venture into even more remote, exotic, bizarre and importantly unsearched settings» (2003: 171). According to Amy Pollard, «there is a macho sense of doing fieldwork.... you go through hardship and struggle and you have to get through it» (2009: 4). The authors underline here the fact that the academic work environment is partly responsible for feeding the taboo on talking about the problems in the field; because it is simply «part of the job» we as researchers have to deal with.

This «macho» sense of doing fieldwork is cultivated by asymmetrical power structures that exist between professors and students. There is a misuse of influence and responsibility discernible by the ones in power, and one can question why that is allowed. One factor is the pressure that can be exerted by supervisors pushing the student to do fieldwork in circumstances that can be stressful, or even dangerous, for the sake of prestige. Another factor, related to this, is that students feel they cannot talk candidly about their fieldwork experiences because: «Speaking openly about the difficulties of fieldwork was seen as a profound risk to students' burgeoning reputations as academic professionals» (Pollard 2009: 15). Here unequal power relations between the supervisor and the student are responsible for the silencing, so as not to lose face or damage one's own reputation as a young researcher.

In academia the established, mostly male professors, promote a «macho» research culture and underemphasise or taboo the fact that a researcher can encounter problems, or can feel uncomfortable in the field. Going against that as a student can be a risky exercise. Even though universities claim their working environment is based on equality and objectivity in reality they «embody fundamentally male values and interests» (Thomas 1996 in Harley 2003: 378) and an «academic machismo» is visible (Harley 2003). This masculine feature not only explains existing unequal power relation between younger, inexperienced researchers and older, established professors, but also shows how gender inequality between female and male academics still exists. Similar power asymmetries are discernible in the village in southeast Turkey. Both worlds are driven by uneven patriarchal power structures, which are reproduced and legitimized by the ones in power.

¹ It is important to underline here that I am not condoning sexual harassment in any form. In this article I try to understand what happened by analysing the situation.

Due to these asymmetrical power structures in the realm of academia the problems researchers encounter during fieldwork are also under-emphasised in the anthropological literature (Sampson and Thomas 2003: 184). Liz Mügge states (2013) that ethical guidelines pay very little or no attention to the circumstances of the researcher. These guidelines focus solely on the wellbeing of the researched, which is of course the most important actor. Nevertheless, adding a section on awareness of problematic relations in the field and how to handle it accordingly would be useful. Mügge also pleads for full attention to these kinds of problems in the methodological curricula of the discipline (2013: 542, 545). This is complemented by Sampson and Thomas (2003: 185) and Sharp and Kremer (2006: 324) who both claim researchers should get the opportunity to discuss the subject of harassment with colleagues before going to the field. I agree that a better preparation before going to the field will contribute to creating awareness among less experienced researchers about certain dangers they may encounter in the field, and will make it easier to deal with them when these occur.

Conclusion

Due to my personal experience with an unpleasant relationship during fieldwork I became aware of this issue and the limited attention given to it in the discipline. It made me question why this subject is kept muted in academia since it is a problem researchers can be confronted with in the field. Although it is not the aim of anthropologists to establish unpleasant relations it cannot always be avoided.

I argue that this unpleasant experience, at the same time, revealed information on how gender relations, hierarchies in the village and stereotypes some men have, about European women in this case, are envisioned in my fieldwork setting. It showed how power asymmetries are part of the societal patriarchal structures in the village, and how they are being expressed and legitimized. But also it uncovered how I, as a female researcher, positioned myself towards men according to my own standards, even though I tried to avoid that.

In addition, I underline that there is a taboo in academia on the issue of talking about problems during fieldwork. Power asymmetries between supervisors and students provide the breeding ground for an «academic machismo» within the research culture in which students and young researchers cannot talk freely about problems or obstacles that have occurred in the field. When students do open up this can have severe consequences for their career. Also, this «macho» work environment emphasizes the inequality that still exists between

both genders in academia. These uneven, patriarchal power structures in academia are similar to the ones I encountered in my fieldwork setting.

Experiences with unpleasant relations between researchers and informants are manifold. That is why it is hard to find ready-made solutions, but at the same time it is important to share experiences with fellow researchers and open up the topic for discussion. By doing so we can learn from the experiences of other colleagues in the field, and find ways to deal with the matter in the best way possible. This would contribute to the wellbeing of both the people that are being researched and the researchers themselves. Moreover, it would make it possible to approach the problem in a respectful way, in accordance to local manners in the field under study.

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