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ROUNDTABLE

DYNAMICS OF DISRUPTION: ETHNOGRAPHIC PRACTICE IN CONTEMPORARY TURKEY

"Why Is America Interested in Islam in Turkey?": Fieldwork and Problems of Gaining Trust in a Low-Trust Society

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When researchers think of access disruptions, they tend to think of factors exogenous to a field site, those emerging from nationwide events or global crises. Especially in semiauthoritarian contexts, such as Turkey, where ongoing historical contestations (over human rights, minority rights, and freedom of expression) as well as current political polarizations have created a volatile institutional and social environment, ethnographers are more likely to find their fieldwork disrupted. In this essay, I draw attention to a different kind of disruption, one that arises from the endogenous character of the local field site. In particular, I discuss the impact of low interpersonal trust on fieldwork. While gaining access and establishing trust are universal challenges in ethnographic research, the issue is particularly a formidable one in Turkey.

Both microlevel research and large-scale surveys find Turkish society to be one of the most distrustful societies in the world. For instance, Turkey ranked thirty-fourth out of the thirty-six OECD member states in 2014, and twenty-eighth out of thirty countries surveyed globally in 2022.[1] Compared to the OECD average, in which 40 percent of respondents concur with the view "most people can be trusted," only 14 percent of Turks agree with the statement. The discrepancy between Turkey and non-OECD countries regarding the interpersonal trust level is similarly large. According to a 2022 worldwide Ipsos survey, interpersonal trust is least prevalent in Turkey (along with Brazil and Malaysia), where less than 15 percent of respondents say "most people can be trusted" in comparison to the 30 percent global average. A thorough analysis of the issue is beyond the scope of this article, but the sociopolitical effects of low interpersonal trust are complex, ranging from slow economic growth to political corruption to social polarization.[2] Here, I focus on the relation between low social trust and ethnographic fieldwork. I examine the issue by drawing on multisited fieldwork I conducted between 2010 and 2012 in a state-funded religious Imam-Hatip high school, a formal Qur'an course, and various clandestine mosques, dormitories, and preschools in Istanbul, run by different subbranches of the Nakşibendi Sufi order.

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[1] "Trust," in *Society at a Glance 2016: OECD Social Indicators* (Paris: OECD, 2016), http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264261488-en; Aysegul Kayaoglu, "Determinants of Trust in Turkey," *European Societies* 19, no. 4 (2017): 494; Avital Livny, *Trust and the Islamic Advantage: Religious-Based Movements in Turkey and the Muslim World* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 13; Ipsos, "Interpersonal Trust across the World: A 30-Country Global Advisor Survey," March 2022.

[2] See, for example, Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000); and Eric M. Uslaner, *The Moral Foundations of Trust* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

When I began preliminary fieldwork in the summer of 2010, the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, henceforth AKP), a party with deep roots in political Islam, had been in power for eight years. As a sociology graduate student at the time (at the University of California, Los Angeles), I had been interested in the social determinants of national Islamist politics; in particular, how Islamist resistance was organized via different social fields, such as education, local municipalities, media outlets, charities, and mosques. I chose to focus on education, given this field's centrality to Islamist movements for recruitment and organization. But I had neither established networks nor prior contacts. During preliminary fieldwork, a chance encounter with a local sponsor facilitated access to an Imam-Hatip high school, which was located in a conservative, working class district on Istanbul's Asian side. This sponsor was the school's principal, who worked, first, as a teacher and, later, as an administrator, and who had, himself, conducted research on the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood while pursuing a master's degree in a prestigious divinity school in Istanbul. That said, the principal also made my access conditional on securing an official permission from the Ministry of Education, which I did after a long seven months of back-and-forth communication with the ministry.

The contributors to this roundtable have shown that the timing of research matters for both the strategies that fieldworkers develop to minimize them and the kinds of disruptions they face. Given the timespan of my research (2010–12), I was able to avoid externally driven disruptions that many contributors have faced, such as the 2013 Gezi protests, the 2015 resumption of armed conflict with the Kurdish Workers' Party (Partiya Karkeren Kurdistane or PKK), ISIS bombings in 2015–16, government roundups of academics in 2016, the 2016 coup attempt by the former allies of the AKP, and a global pandemic in 2020.[3] These events destabilized Turkey's political and economic environment and reduced the already small threshold for research permissiveness—both officially and locally. Prior to these events, Turkey had been experiencing high economic growth, and the AKP was increasing its level of electoral support and overseeing a critical constitutional referendum (2010). But avoiding the turbulence of post-2013 did not insulate me from a built-in feature of the field site: low social trust. In fact, trust was the primary determinant of my access to data as well as the many failings that shaped the course of my fieldwork.

Sources of Trust: Insider/Outsider Binary, Transparency of Rules, and Historical Context

Ethnographers study a single site or multiple sites for extended periods to access personal experience and subjective meanings in the context of ongoing social worlds.[4] During these encounters, researchers win varying degrees of trust from those whom they hope to study. Trust (or mistrust) manifests itself in forms ranging from voluntary support, vouching, and indifference to skepticism, avoidance, and outright hostility. This variation arises from a number of factors including, but not limited to, the insider/outsider binary, lack of clarity on local rules of research, and sociopolitical features of the field site.

Although an insider position might facilitate introductions or "open some doors," it can also be a liability for researchers. "Everyday categorization," writes Roger Brubaker, "is both [a] mental process and social practice"; it leads to "conceiving . . . someone *as* a member of a particular category" and to "*characterizing* . . . the identity of a person in this way."[5] Everyday

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[3] For an overview, see the collection of roundtable essays in this journal's August 2023 issue, introduced by Ilana Feldman, "Threats to Academic Freedom Are Global, and So Must Be Its Defense," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 55, no. 3 (August 2023): 517–19.

[4] Robert M. Emerson, ed., *Contemporary Field Research: Perspectives and Formulations* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2001), 1–26.

[5] Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity in a Transylvanian Town* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 209.

categorization, such as an insider/outsider position, may lead communities to hold the researcher accountable, especially those with the outsider status, for the actions of their perceived category. Conversely, in cases of an insider position, communities may expect more of the researcher, in following local customs or may tolerate less when she is perceived to fail. In this case, my identity as both a Muslim and a Turk eased certain barriers, especially in the early phases of contact with respondents. But being a secular, uncovered woman studying at an American university and conducting research with federal governmental and private funding created significant challenges.[6] Although I was an insider by national identity, I was an outsider in the religiously driven moral universe my respondents inhabited. In particular, I lacked my respondents' educational pedigree (provided by divinity schools, Imam-Hatips, and Qur'an courses), which was essential to shaping their religious commitments. In the eyes of many, I was a nominal Muslim: someone who professed to be of the faith but who had abandoned what it means to live according to Islam. At a broader level, I represented everything my respondents associated with the secular public, a public that jettisoned religious moral convictions in individual pursuit and in sociopolitical vision, and therefore gave up on the idea of ethical cultivation so critical to the formation of virtuous generations and maintenance of an authentic Islamic society.[7]

A second challenge for fieldworkers is lack of transparency regarding local rules of research. Ethnographers prepare for fieldwork long before immersing themselves in their sites, by acquiring the language(s) and learning about social institutions and conventions.[8] But familiarity with local language and practice is seldom a straightforward guide to rules of engagement once they switch from being a "guest" to a "fieldworker." In my case, I entered the field knowing that religious people I hoped to connect with valued learning and study. This orientation was not solely a function of their occupational status as teachers or students. It was also tied to a historical heritage, which rested on the Qur'an's emphasis on "seeking knowledge"; Muslims' conception of acquiring religious knowledge (ilim) as a form of worship; and incumbent rulers' commitment, since Islam's early centuries, to establish madrasas (Islamic schools) in support of this conception broadly, and instruction in Islamic sciences particularly.[9]

Despite the esteemed status of learning and research within Muslim societies, I discovered that support for research within my field sites was scant and in some cases hostile. True, I was a researcher, but not one interested in Islamic sciences; the modicum of respect I gained for "seeking knowledge" was confounded by my investment in scientific methods that differed from those commonly employed in the study of the Qur'an or Islamic sciences. How much trust could they extend to someone who not only did not partake in their moral worldview but who pursued unusual behaviors such as frequently taking notes, traversing gender-segregated spaces, and trying to converse about issues that might not naturally emerge in the course of daily interactions?

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[7] The topic of fieldworkers conducting research in their "native" communities is broad, and a short manuscript of this sort cannot possibly do justice to it. My point here is that rather than a stark insider/outsider status, for individuals researching within their native communities, we can expect different levels of nativeness, which in turn shape fieldwork experience in consequential ways. For a good discussion on the topic, see Kirin Narayan, "How Native Is a 'Native' Anthropologist?" *American Anthropologist* 95, no. 3 (1993): 671–86.

[8] Eric W. Schoon, "Fieldwork Disrupted: How Researchers Adapt to Losing Access to Field Sites," *Sociological Methods & Research*, 18 May 2023, 10, https://doi.org/10.1177/00491241231156961.

[9] The idea of learning, asking questions, and improving oneself by seeking knowledge appears many times in the Qur'an; however, some of the commonly referenced verses include Surat al-Alaq (96), verse 1–5; Surat al-'Imran (3), verse 18; Surat al-Tawba (9), verse 122; Surat al-'Ankabut (29), verse 69; and Surat al-Mujadala (58), verse 11; M. A. S. Abdel Haleem, trans., *The Qur'an* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016). The Islamic tradition of religious study is elaborated by Robert W. Hefner: "Introduction: The Culture, Politics, and Future of Muslim Education," in *Schooling Islam: The Culture and Politics of Modern Muslim Education*, ed. Robert W. Hefner and Muhammad Qasim Zaman (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 5–13.

In addition to the insider/outsider binary and lack of clarity about local rules of research, the sociopolitical context of a field site affects the degree of trust ethnographers can gain. The sites I studied were shaped by a long history of political struggle over Islam's role in social life. Moreover, a collective memory of repression, persecution, and concomitant clandestinity within national borders, and a bitter experience of colonialism within the region, had bestowed on the religious field a particular psychosocial character—one that took the form of strong distrust toward outsiders. Consistent with findings from social psychology research, the distrust manifested itself through conspiracy beliefs and suspicions about others' intentions.[10] For example, when a teacher introduced me to colleagues by saying, "This is Ms. Zeynep. She is conducting research in our school," some would respond not with, "Hello!" but rather with an outright, "Are you a spy?" When I tried to explain, in vain, that I had permission from the ministry to conduct dissertation research, I would hear, "There are many spies in Turkey with research permission."

In other cases, I discovered that those alleged to harbor mal-intent were not researchers but rather Islam's "enemies," including "the West," Jews, secularists who separated religion and politics, communists, atheists, or feminists. In Turkey, much as the rest of the Middle East, this list of "enemies," emerged from a particular historical context and political discourse. Since the late 19th century, prominent Muslim thinkers have popularized the view that Islam's decline was initiated externally by Western colonial powers and abetted internally by secular authoritarian rulers. This double assault on Muslim belief and lifestyles, they believed, led to the spread of secular and positivist values, perpetuated semidependency on the West, and ushered in a moral crisis within Muslim societies.[11]

These external forces were also perceived as having infiltrated the education system. An Islamic studies teacher explained to me that Turkish students' low academic achievement in international tests resulted from Turkey's lack of political, economic, and cultural independence, which was evident in "the employment of" what this teacher believed to be "at least twenty-five American nationals in the Ministry of Education." These foreigners, according to the teacher, wrote textbooks in a way that discouraged discipline and hard work. For example, they gave elementary school books titles like *Okuma Kitabı* (Reading Book), which, according to his reasoning, meant to evoke a subliminal message: those words in reverse order (i.e., *Kitabı Okuma*) meant, in Turkish, "Do not read the book." The alleged infiltration was also evident in the curriculum for older children, who for example were made to memorize (instead of utilize) the logarithmic table, as was the case under British colonial rule in India. As a result, young people were unlearned and disengaged from math.

It is well-established in the ethnographic literature that, among other factors, trust is bound up with respondents' perceptions, which researchers cannot entirely control.[12] But this connection has a particular salience in low-trust environments. As observed in the above interactions, the field sites I entered were environments where conspiracies circulated widely and suspicions about others' goals shaped the tenor of daily relations. This dynamic created de facto obstacles to gaining trust, and ultimately to collecting sound data. With some individuals surmounting these obstacles proved impossible, but with others transparency, repeated interactions, and patience enabled me to transcend them.

In the Imam-Hatip school, for example, one group of respondents harbored strong suspicions about my presence, which I was unable to shake during the eighteen months I worked

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[10] Existing research finds that low-trust environments are closely associated with certain psychological and social inclinations, especially displays of conspiracy beliefs and suspicions about others' intentions. Marcel Meuer and Roland Imhoff, "Believing in Hidden Plots Is Associated with Decreased Behavioral Trust: Conspiracy Belief as Greater Sensitivity to Social Threat or Insensitivity towards Its Absence?" *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 93 (2021): 1–13; Jan-Willem van Prooijen, Giuliana Spadaro, and Haiyan Wang, "Suspicion of Institutions: How Distrust and Conspiracy Theories Deteriorate Social Relationships," *Current Opinion in Psychology* 43 (2022): 65–69.

[11] Peter Mandaville, *Islam and Politics*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2014), 64–69.

[12] Barrie Thorne, "'You Still Takin' Notes?': Fieldwork and Problems of Informed Consent," *Social Problems*, 27, no. 3 (1980): 287–88.

at the school. These respondents periodically questioned the purpose of my research, wondering, for example, "Why is America interested in Islam in Turkey?" or "Are you working for the CIA?" I generally responded by explaining my motivation as being scientific but felt disconnected until I realized that these were not mere curiosities; they were rhetorical questions to validate particular historical visions. One teacher, in particular, tended to be sarcastic and frequently cautioned others, "Do not answer her questions. She is a [secret] agent." Another group of respondents had the exact opposite attitude: they were open, welcoming, and eager to volunteer their time and ideas, they sat down for extended interviews, and recruited students, friends, and acquaintances in and outside the school.

A third group was similarly supportive but for a different reason: in their view, I was conducting research on religion because I was on a personal journey, more than my self-understanding allowed, to discover divine truth. I did not try to correct such convictions. Like others, this group was concerned about my presumably weak level of piety, and so, both to "save" my soul and to "gain" blessings for themselves in the other world, they took it upon themselves to instruct me in Islam while willingly answering my questions on theology, history, and social relations. On one occasion, a teacher gifted me a book, *Introduction to Islam*, by the revered Indian Muslim scholar Muhammad Hamidullah (1908–2002). Another teacher, who was sitting next to us at that time, then enjoined, gently, "Ms. Zeynep, you should part with secularism, [and] convert to Islam" (*Zeynep Hanım bu sekülerliği bırakın, İslama geçin*).

Finally, a fourth group trusted me due to a mix of admiration and utilitarianism. Regarding admiration, it is not uncommon for ethnographers to receive support or sympathy because of being attributed certain real or imagined traits.[13] In this regard, I was a "model success story": a naïve and secular but hardworking young woman who had tested into a good college in Turkey and then matriculated in a graduate program in the United States. Respondents' support also was tied to certain expectations, although no one ever plainly articulated this link. From my perspective, such utilitarianism was welcome, because it gave me a chance to give back to those whom I studied. For example, I spent a good amount of time tutoring teachers in English, copyediting their articles, working on manuscripts (since some were pursuing graduate degrees while others were writing academic pieces out of intellectual curiosity), helping them in the classroom by running English conversation sessions, and counseling their students on preparing for university entrance exams, learning a second language, or studying abroad.

As these anecdotes show, the type and degree of trust are tied to a range of factors that ethnographers have to navigate during fieldwork. Low-trust environments can augment these factors, leading to major disruptions to fieldwork or requiring extended introductory periods. But in a counterintuitive way they also can help researchers gain an unexpected entrée. It is to these challenges and opportunities I turn in the final section.

Effects of Different Trust Levels on Fieldwork

Practitioners of grounded theory go into the field with a preliminary research design but an open-ended approach to data. Moving inductively, researchers allow early incidents and experiences to shape subsequent data collection around emerging themes and shifting analytic interests.[14] Similarly, my preliminary research design did not have a multisited character; yet, after spending time at the Imam-Hatip school and gathering recurring data on the multidimensional character of Islamist resistance (as taking place both within and outside of formal institutions), I needed to expand my research focus to different sites. A multisited data collection strategy meant diversifying the respondent pool and capturing the

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[13] Maxine Baca Zinn, "Insider Field Research in Minority Communities," in *Contemporary Field Research: Perspectives and Formulations*, 2nd ed., ed. Robert M. Emerson (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2001), 162.

[14] Kathy Charmaz, "Grounded Theory," in Emerson, *Contemporary Field Research*, 335–52.

complexity of Islamist mobilization. But it also meant securing access to additional field sites and satisfying the concerns of more people in an environment of remarkably low social trust. To return to the earlier point, varying degrees of trust determined data collection in critical ways and led to either preemption or eradication of site privileges or unusual access to hard-to-penetrate sites.

Similar to the experiences of contributors to this roundtable, some disruptions occurred prior to interactive data collection. For example, individuals in positions of authority in the Süleymancılar *cemaat* (religious network) or Erenköy *cemaat* were at first well-disposed to my interest in conducting research in their boarding Qur'an courses, before then abruptly rejecting my request. This was, as I later found out, due to their suspicions about my "intentions" as well as the "wrong" contacts I had—specifically, teachers from the Imam-Hatip school who only had only tenuous ties with these *cemaat*s.

In other cases, disruptions occurred during interactive data collection. For instance, when some individuals at the school discovered that my spouse was an American national, or when they saw my tape recorder on the desk, they ceased talking with me altogether and also prevented me from interacting with other group members they were close with. For many Islamists, the category "America" broadly represents the West, which, as mentioned earlier, they blame for the weakening of Muslim societies via colonial occupation. For others, the tape recorder signified secularist intrusion into religious lifestyles, a sensitivity Islamists have had due to such lifestyles being an object of political struggle throughout republican history. Discovering my personal life or such a device "inevitably" verified these individuals' suspicions. Nonetheless, these early encounters provided me with two insights: that strong, germane connections were necessary to access these reclusive sites and that establishing trust was not a onetime endeavor. More broadly, these encounters revealed that ethnographers can face unexpectedly thick barriers of access, and they have to constantly negotiate to enter diverse social circles, public arenas, or personal spaces.[15]

Researchers cannot entirely know what kind of data they miss by being preempted or dismissed from a field site. But, as Eric Schoon has demonstrated, researchers can utilize the very strength of the method, its flexibility, to minimize such loss.[16] The ways I responded to fieldwork disruptions paralleled two of the three main types of adaptations that Schoon identified ("pivoting" and "following").[17] Being preempted from Qur'an courses occurred when I was already in the field but prior to data collection. Utilizing existing networks, I pivoted to an analogous site, a formal boarding Qur'an course, also run by the Erenköy *cemaat* but located in a more remote neighborhood. Being dismissed from particular social circles within the field site, but not from the site itself, took place in the midst of interactive data collection. In this case, although I lost access to certain groups both socially and physically, by that time I had established trust with a sufficient number of other major groups. I adapted to this loss by continuing to follow those groups and their activities.

But looking back, I can see that two factors alleviated larger detrimental effects that such disruptions could have borne. For one thing, the multisited character of the fieldwork accustomed me to the idea of searching for new sites regardless of whether existing sites were available or had been foreclosed. In fact, until the very end of my fieldwork, I kept finding new sites but, due to time constraints, I did not utilize them all. For another thing, having an influential sponsor (the school's principal) and a circle of trusting individuals placed me in the field site to the extent of neutralizing the negative views of some others about whether my research should continue.

A final effect of trust ran in the opposite direction: gaining access to an expansive network of underground sites, which prior studies, to my knowledge, had not tapped into. These sites were hard to penetrate, as in the case of Qur'an courses; but, even more, they

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[15] Baca Zinn, "Insider Field Research," 161.
[16] Schoon, "Fieldwork Disrupted," 3.
[17] Ibid., 9.

did not officially exist. In this way, a web of individuals demonstrating great trust profoundly changed the course of my fieldwork. "Real [religious] education" they asserted repeatedly "does not take place in Imam-Hatips (*örgün eğitim*) but in informal sites (*yaygın eğitim*)." These individuals with strong connections to different *cemaat*s vouched for me; and, as a result, enabled me to enter into an array of clandestine mosques, seminaries, dormitories, preschools, reading houses, and home schools. Needless to say, such a transition in research focus, from an arena above the surface to sites underground, yielded crucial insights on the organization and mobilization of Islamist resistance in Turkey, topics that traditionally often had been studied through their public presence (e.g., parties, leaders, and municipalities) and direct challenges to the secular system (e.g., elections, rallies, and demonstrations).

Overall, although gaining access and trust poses challenges to fieldworkers, these issues are by no means restricted to field sites in Turkey. Therefore, regardless of their geography, ethnographers may benefit from dedicating as much time cultivating meaningful relations with potential respondents as they do writing fieldnotes, surveying sites, or collecting published sources. In the end, the level of trust a researcher secures is one of the single most important determinants of success or failure during fieldwork.