Chapter 1: Methodology

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Our research adventure in Elmadağ started in a similar atmosphere: as inhabitants of Elmadağ we were participating in the everyday life of the neighborhood but as social scientists, we had an inevitable academic interest. Our attempt to leave behind the “cold and professional approach of an academic research” -which is taught as a sine qua non principle for a “scientific” research- became plausible with our inhabitant status in Elmadağ. Having the opportunity to focus on details or practices in our everyday lives and sharing the usual inhabitant problems with the others in Elmadağ, we made an effort to overcome the limitations of strict theoretical frameworks. We did not allow our preceding academic knowledge to impede our research and thus end up with “predetermined” conclusions. Rather than attempting to prove our theoretical knowledge with our observations on Elmadağ, we first tried to “see” what was going on in this neighborhood and then to formulate it through the lenses of our theoretical accumulations. Otherwise, why is there a need of bothering ourselves with the fieldwork?

In shaping and designing this project we very much dealt with the questions of how ethnography should be written as well as how fieldwork should be thought about. We are aware of the fact that ethnography is in the midst of a political and epistemological crisis and trying to get out of it through new writing techniques\(^1\). Although we admit that all these techniques try to reestablish a better ethnography, we do not disregard the problem that different modes of writing can easily reduce the problem to an ethical issue by falling into humanism by i.e, “being a better anthropologist who let the Others speak”. Believing that the problem is more important than this, our concern becomes that of challenging the sovereign status of researchers by questioning the very constitution of their subject positions and problematizing the relationships between them and the “Others”.

Who are we?

Edward Said suggests that in the ethnographic writings there is someone -an authority- who speaks and analyzes everything except her/himself. But who speaks? For what and whom? (Said, 1989, 212). It is the anthropologist, who goes to the non-Western countries, learns the language of natives and stays there in a period of time without giving up the
role of the observer by ‘distancing’ her/himself from the native people. Or it is the one who makes ethnographical work at home by interpreting the cultures of natives from the perspective of her/his own culture.

4 Following the arguments of Said, we claim that the researcher should interrogate her/his position as well as problematize the aim and execution of the project as prerequisites of an ethical question. Thus the class, cultural background and the attitudes of the researcher should be examined. Bearing this in mind, we can describe ourselves as well-educated, middle class women currently living in Elmadağ. We should admit that being female researchers facilitated our communication with the interviewees; while women interviewees shared the most intimate stories of their lives with us, men were more receptive to our requests to interview by perceiving us as less threatening than our male counterparts. However, we also experienced some disadvantages or lets say difficulties of being women researchers in the fieldwork when we faced some events, which created tensions and emotional subversions on our parts. Especially while “listening to men's stories on women”, we, as feminists sometimes fell into an ethical dilemma of whether to reveal our sincere feelings, or whether to listen to them while disregarding our very “subjective” feelings. The question of whether to be honest to ourselves or to others remained an unsettled and controversial problem throughout this project.

5 We have never assumed that we are unified, coherent subjects having full access to the knowledge of the other people. On the contrary, throughout this research we confronted the fact that our identities are fragmented and contradictory. Indeed, this experience served to amplify our self-awareness and provided an opportunity for us to confront some of our less-manifest characteristics. While conducting the fieldwork, we became aware of the fact that our long education process has already shaped us as modern western subjects and conferred upon us a pre-given privilege of “being respected” that positioned us apart from our interviewees. Rather than involve ourselves in a futile endeavor to deny this special and distant position -which could easily end up with a naïve but unethical claim of “we are just like you”-, we acknowledged the fact that we do not share the same historical, social, economical and cultural experiences as our interviewees. We were even conscious of the fact that posing questions to others signifies an authoritative stance, in other words, a position of power. Therefore, we tried to question the position of authority, which is often taken for granted by many researchers. For us, the only way to achieve this is always to interrogate our subject positions, our “privileges” and our “status”.

6 There were many reasons behind our motive to examine the neighborhood. One of the main purposes was to learn more about the place in which we live. As mentioned above, it has been easy for us to involve in participant observation during our daily lives. We thus observed not only other people living in Elmadağ but also ourselves as the inhabitants of this neighborhood. In other words, we turned our gaze to ourselves along with the others rather than distance ourselves and relegate the other inhabitants to a position of ‘objects of study’. In this sense, we are neither an outsider nor an insider, but both simultaneously, as Trinh T. Minh-ha expresses it:

“The moment the insider steps out from the inside, she is no longer a mere insider (and vice versa). She necessarily looks in from the outside while also looking out from the inside. [...] She refuses to reduce herself to an Other, and her reflections to a mere outsider’s objective reasoning or insider’s subjective feeling. She knows, [...] that she is not an outsider like the foreign outsider. [...] Not quite the Same, not quite the Other, she stands in that undetermined threshold place where she
constantly drifts in and out. Undercutting the inside/outside opposition, her intervention is necessarily that of a deceptive insider and deceptive outsider. She is this Inappropriate Other/Same who moves about with always at least two/four gestures: that of affirming ‘I am like you’ while persisting in her difference; and that of remind ‘I am different’ while unsettling every definition of otherness arrived at [...]” (1997, 217).

Our position of “both-in-one insider/outside” (Minh-ha, 1997, 217) also enabled us to challenge the basic binary opposition in the social sciences, i.e. the distinction between the subjectivity and objectivity of the observer. For us, the assumption of the researcher as some kind of independent objective or corrupted subjective observer should be abandoned. We reject the association with one of these binary pairs, such as subjective/objective insiders/outsiders. But rather, we situate ourselves in an in-between position that provides us with new perspectives of seeing social transformations, which cannot be grasped by either an outsider or an insider position. In brief, we admit that the attitude of “persistently holding an in-between position” which was offered and adopted by Öğuz İşik and Melih Pınarçoğlu (2001) in their path-breaking research in Sultanbeyli has guided us in our study in Elmadağ.

Fieldwork

We fundamentally based our research on in-depth interviews with the old and new inhabitants of Elmadağ. Faced with the fact that no historical study was available on Elmadağ, we first tried to map out the historical processes and transformations of the neighborhood by investigating certain institutions in this district. In this regard, we met with the officials of Surp Agop Hospital, Surp Agop Foundation, Artigiana Resthome, Notre Dame de Sion High School, Caritas Organization and the Vatican Consulate. At this point it is necessary to note that our goal was neither to conduct an oral history research nor uncover merely the history of Elmadağ. Rather we intended to go beyond both of these aspects without ignoring the importance and necessity of an historical analysis. Therefore, history is not the single most foundation of our work but one of the pillars upon which it stands and which inspires our sociological imagination.

In the second phase, we conducted in-depth interviews with our target group, the old and new inhabitants of Elmadağ to examine the neighborhood’s social structure and to gain insight about its transformation. Prior to the field survey, we implemented a pilot survey by interviewing the neighborhood headman, several real estate agents and shop owners. We employed the in-depth interview technique for its flexibility, although this method is more difficult and time consuming compared to other research techniques. We believe that unforeseen dimensions of personal experiences and social diversity might be revealed through this method.

The survey’s target group may be segmented into six different groups. The first group includes non-Muslims, the oldest inhabitants of Elmadağ who have lived there for years. People who have emigrated from different regions of Anatolia and settled in Elmadağ with the migration flow after 1950 constitute the second group. Kurds who settled in Elmadağ during the rapid internal immigration movement of the post-1980s form the third group. The fourth group includes international immigrants from Iraq and various African countries who have settled there with the aim of moving to a third country. The fifth group, which can be defined as the temporary population of Elmadağ, is comprised of university students, single wage earners and Bohemian bourgeoisie. Finally, the last
group consists of Muslim and non-Muslim individuals who have left Elmadağ and moved to various neighborhoods of the city for different motives. The sample is selected from these six groups and the sample size is forty-four. It is important to note here that the Gypsies dwelling especially in lower side of Elmadağ for long years, is another significant group that should be taken into consideration. Yet, in our study we were unable to conduct interviews with the members of this group due to the difficulties arising in the fieldwork. The most apparent obstacle is the difficulty to single out the members of this group in the neighborhood since many of the people neither like to be defined as Gypsy nor call themselves as Gypsy. Therefore, we try to compensate the lack of information on Gypsies by taking the ideas of other inhabitants about them. In brief, although our study is short of any analysis about the experiences of Gypsies living in this neighborhood, we make several observations and arguments about how other inhabitants in Elmadağ consider them and their presence in the neighborhood.

However, it is pertinent to note that we have neither assumed that each of these six groups constitutes a homogenous entity in itself nor considered the interviewees as the sole “representatives” of their groups. As Trinh T. Minh-ha rightly suggests “there can hardly be such a thing as an essential inside that can be homogeneously represented by all insiders; an authentic insider there, an absolute reality out there, or an uncorrupted representative who can not be questioned by another uncorrupted representative....” (1997, 217).

Otherwise, we would have fallen into the trap of freezing the identities of these people by drawing a one to one correspondence between them and the group of people that they were assumed to represent. Sometimes the overlapping of several groups necessarily led us to formulate our questions within macro frameworks other than within the trajectories of designated discussions. For instance, we came upon an Armenian family dwelling in Elmadağ whose members demonstrated almost all the features of Kurdish political immigration of the late-1980s. As we will discuss in the following pages, we evaluated their experience within the context of Kurdish immigration rather than as Armenians living in Elmadağ for years. Therefore, the complexity of our research reflected in this example was dealt with by adopting different perspectives such as explaining some events in terms of periods rather than merely in terms of ethnicity.

Interviews began with questions related to the demographic characteristics and socio-economic status of the respondents. We investigated residential mobility patterns and asked questions pertaining to where they moved from, why they chose Elmadağ and so on. Furthermore, we asked about the nature of the respondents’ relationship with the other members of the neighborhood, how they define other residents of Elmadağ, whether they are satisfied with the neighborhood and neighborly relations. Indeed, we hoped to discover whether social diversity and differentiation of Elmadağ has created any social tension.

We asked people who have moved out of Elmadağ about the reasons for their departure as well as their experiences and memories about the neighborhood. In order to make some estimations about the future of Elmadağ, we questioned the existing inhabitants whether they planned to stay there permanently, whether they felt they belonged to the neighborhood and how they defined and perceived different periods of Elmadağ. In addition, we asked about how they interpreted the process of functional transformation from a residential to an office area in Elmadağ. Lastly, we asked about the impact of the existing workplaces on the social relations of the neighborhood.
With the exception of two or three interviews, all the interviews were conducted by both of us in the languages of Turkish and English. During the interviews with the Iraqi people, we preferred to communicate in Turkish if it was possible. In the cases of difficulty in communicating, we made use of a Chaldean-speaking translator who is an Iraqi immigrant teenager. The interviews lasted approximately one or two hours depending on the potential and willingness of our interviewees. We believe that the majority of interviewees were receptive in terms of revealing many of their experiences and thoughts. We preferred to take notes rather than to record the interviews since we realized that the interviewees were less reserved and tense when their words were not recorded.

NOTES

1. James Clifford, in his article “On Ethnographic Authority”, examines four different modes of authority: experiential, interpretive, dialogical and polyphonic. The experiential and interpretive modes tend to suppress the dialogical dimension of fieldwork by assigning full control to the anthropologist. Dialogic texts which are composed of dialogues between the ethnographer and a native informant have “the effect of transforming the cultural text into a speaking subject, who sees as well as is seen, who evades, argues, probes back” (Clifford, 1986, 14). However, there is a frequent tendency for the native to appear as representative of her/his culture in these texts (Clifford, 1988, 44). Clifford proposes “polyvocal ethnographic writing” as an alternative in which anthropologist’s voice is one of many voices which serve to represent the cultures. Polyvocalic ethnography is composed of quotations and there is not a privileged informant as it is in the dialogical ethnography. However, in this alternative text the authoritative authorship can not be totally eliminated, since in this case the ethnographer takes up the role of the ‘editor’ who designs the order of text according to her/his will. In the last instance, it is the ethnographer who chooses the natives s/he would talk and the quotations s/he would cite in the text. Also one can criticize this type of ethnographic writing by asking to what extent the ethnographer can pluralize the voices within the text or to what extent such an attempt can be useful for the effacement of authoritical stance.

2. We have already explained these reasons in the Introduction part of this project.