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**Politicized and Depoliticized Ethnicities, Power Relations and Temporality:
Insights to Outsider Research from Comparative and Transnational Fieldwork¹**

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Abstract

The insider and outsider positions in migration studies have conventionally been approached in terms of ethnic or national belonging. Recently scholars have problematized the essentialist approaches to these roles by arguing for the inclusion of multiple intersecting social locations that are at play in the constitution of researcher positionality. Less attention has been paid, however, on how different ethnicities are constructed and how they can

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become politicized and depoliticized at particular moments during the research process. This paper discusses the fieldwork experiences of two “apparent outsiders” to the studied diaspora community. We show how a researcher’s assumed ethnicity can at times become politicized and depoliticized, and constructed in relation to other social categories. Drawing from our experiences in multi-sited and comparative ethnographic fieldwork on the Kurdish diaspora, we also show how our assumed ethnicities as “Turkish” and “Finnish” shifted within the actual empirical field, being relevant in one moment and less so in another. We argue that rather than taking insider and outsider positions as a starting-point to understand researcher positionality, scholars need to look at particular moments of insiderness and outsidership to grasp how the researcher’s assumed ethnicity becomes politicized and depoliticized during ethnographic fieldwork.

Keywords: Ethnicity, positionality, reflexivity, outsider research, transnationalism, diaspora

Introduction

In methodological research literature, the essentialist approach to ethnicity refers to the tendency to treat different groups, including ethnic communities, as stable units with clear-cut ethno-national boundaries (see Nowicka and Cieslik 2014). During the last couple of decades, efforts to problematize essentialist approaches that treat insider and outsider dilemma of researcher positionality in terms of ethnic or national belonging to a community have been rapidly gaining volume, especially in migration studies where scrutinising these identities has become all the more complex (Amelina and Faist 2012; Shinozaki 2012; Carling, Erdal, and Ezzati 2013; Ryan 2015). Scholars have started challenging the fixity of “insider” versus “outsider” positions that are usually associated with ethnicity/nationality by arguing that multiple, intersecting social categories (age, gender, generation, class and so forth) are at play

in the constitution of researcher positionality (Shinozaki 2012; Ryan 2015). However, less attention is paid to how different ethnicities are constructed and how they become politicized or de-politicized at particular moments in the research process, or even within an interview. When does the researcher's assumed ethnicity become a significant social category? How and in what contexts does the assumed ethnic belonging become politicized? In such instances, how does it relate to other categories of belonging, and how do such positionalities shift over time?

Our aim in this article is to contribute to this strand of literature that engages with the questions above. Amelina and Faist (2012, 1715) suggest using a multi-sited ethnography as an eventual tool to “de-nationalise” the empirical field as it better allows grasping the complexity of transnational phenomena. They further suggest that a self-reflexive approach “discloses a situational power hierarchy between the researcher and the researched” (ibid: 1716). We believe that our fieldwork experiences from multi-sited ethnography provide a basis to reflect upon how assumed ethnic belonging intertwines with other social categories in different national and transnational contexts, and what politicized and depoliticized meanings such belongings carry at different moments in the field. Such fieldwork, particularly when conducted in different national and transnational settings, necessitates self-reflexivity on power relations in the research field as transnationality “introduces yet another set of complications to the insider-outsider dualism” (Collet 2008, 79-80). Furthermore, building on Amelina's and Faist's observations, our fieldwork experiences show that conducting not only transnationally multi-sited but also *comparative* ethnographic fieldwork allows grasping how researcher positionality shifts over time, not only *spatially* between different research fields, but also *temporally* within them. Such spatial and temporal constellations that condition researcher positionality become particularly evident when conducting research on contentious topics in a context where rapidly changing political

circumstances affect the politicization or depoliticization of researcher's assumed ethnicity and other categories of belonging.

We have worked on similar themes related to the Kurdish diaspora for almost a decade now. Bahar has completed fieldwork in the United Kingdom, Sweden, France, the Netherlands and Germany (2008-2014) and conducted more than 400 interviews with first and second-generation diaspora members. She has examined conflict dynamics in the homeland, how they affect diaspora members' sense-of-belonging, mobilization and integration in the host society, and how the diaspora contributes to state-building and development in the homeland. Mari has completed fieldwork in Finland (2009-2011) and in France (2015-2017), in the course of which she has interviewed first and second-generation diaspora members and collected observation material. She has examined diaspora members' negotiations of belonging and identity in Finland, and their political mobilization and civic participation in Finland and France.

In this paper, we present insights into researcher positionality from a comparative perspective based on our experiences from multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork as two "apparent outsiders" ("Turkish" and "Finnish") to the studied community, and demonstrate how our assumed ethnicities became differently politicized and valued. We show how the political dynamics that surround the Kurdish issue and the contentiousness of our research topics have affected our positioning in the research field as insiders, outsiders and something in-between, all entailing nuances of ethnic, religious, social, political belonging or yet belonging to a language community.¹ Drawing from a comparative perspective, we argue that in order to understand researcher positionality in a more nuanced manner, scholars working on contentious topics need to adopt a reflexive approach to different positionalities in the research field, and to look at particular *moments* of insiderness and outsidership rather than taking insider and outsider positions as a starting-point for understanding researcher

positionality. We agree that conducting multi-sited ethnography allows to de-nationalise the empirical field, but suggest further that analysing particular moments is needed as it sheds light to the complicated multiplicity of transnationality. The originality of this paper is that it demonstrates how ethnicity can become politicized or depoliticized at particular moments during ethnographic fieldwork, and how it does so in relation to other categories of belonging. Furthermore, the paper also contributes to Kurdish studies, as methodological issues such as researcher positionality, reflexivity and challenges of conducting fieldwork have received little, if any attention despite the growing empirical literature in this field.

We start with the debate on insider and outsider dichotomy and the underpinning understandings of ethnicity, before examining the temporal and power dimension of researcher positionality. We then move to discuss our fieldwork experiences in a comparative manner focusing specifically on power relations that are reflected in the politicization and depoliticization of our positionality in the field. Finally, we show how the dialectic relationship between temporality and trust shaped our positionalities.

Insider and outsider dichotomy - from ethnicity to ethnicities

The insider and outsider dilemma has inspired an abundant body of methodological literature, particularly in migration studies, where it has commonly been considered in terms of majority and minority relations and/or of ethnic and national belonging (see Nowicka and Cieslik 2014). One tendency in such debates has been to discuss the insider-outsider roles in terms of the advantages and disadvantages. For instance, an insider researcher is assumed to have “perceived closeness” and a certain level of familiarity and shared attributes with the studied (ethnic) community and its members (Voloder 2014, 3). A long-standing assumption has been that insiders might have better access to the community, and may be more able to

gain in-depth insights and inside information inaccessible to an outsider. However, it has also been suggested that the relative social proximity or shared ethnicity may even increase the awareness of possible social divisions, such as class that exist between the researcher and the participants (Sultana 2007; Shinozaki 2012).

On the other hand, the outsider researcher has been traditionally celebrated as the “neutral” and “objective” academic, who is less likely to be emotionally invested with his/her research participants (Voloder 2014, 3). More critical approaches denounce such views as lauding outsiders, often “white” elites, who claim to be objective (Voloder 2014, 4). Moreover, Kusow (2003) emphasizes that outsider researchers are perceived to be less likely to understand the cultural complexities and the insights that might arise from this difference, although authors such as Bucerius (2013, 691) argue that researchers do not have to be insiders in order to access relevant information - sometimes they can be the “outsider trusted with ‘inside knowledge’”.

The debates on the insider and outsider dilemma in migration studies have diversified in recent years, with scholars aiming to move beyond such insider knowledge versus outsider objectivity claims (Amelina and Faist 2012; Carling, Erdal, and Ezzati 2013; Nowicka and Cieslik 2014; Ryan 2015). It has been argued that discussions on insiderness and outsiderness in migration research should go beyond “confessional testimonies” (Voloder 2014, 2) since such simplistic methodological approaches run the risk of reproducing essentialism (Amelina and Faist 2012; Carling, Erdal, and Ezzati 2013, 3). One tendency has been to diversify the debate by focalising on other social categories that interact with ethnicity, and how they affect the constitution of multi-positionalities (see Ryan 2015). For instance, Carling, Erdal, and Ezzati (2013, 9-13) suggest adding other social categories to the ethno-national ones and list specific markers that affect researcher positionality, including name, occupation and title, gender and age group, physical appearance, clothing style, language and use of language

skills, cultural competence, sustained commitment, religion and migration experiences.

Building on Carling, Erdal, and Ezzati's categorization (2013), we suggest that the methodological debates that are structured along the lines "insider knowledge" versus "outsider objectivity claims" tend to treat ethnicity as a static and singular social category instead of taking it as situational, constructed and plural. Without over- or under-emphasizing the significance of ethnicity in determining researcher positionality, we also need to be asking in what situations does ethnicity and which ethnicities become a significant social category. Why does the researcher's assumed ethnic belonging become more significant in some situations than others? How does it intertwine and shift with other social categories, for instance with the presumed class position or religious affiliation? How can these subtle shifts in researcher positionality be better understood?

Focusing on the moment

Alongside with positionality, a researcher needs to adopt a reflexive approach to understand the dynamics that underpin a research process and social interaction situations in the research field (Guillermet 2008; Nowiska and Cieslik 2014). Reflexive approach allows understanding the particular socio-spatial context that the researcher and researched mutually co-constitute and that is very much relational (Carling, Erdal, and Ezzati 2013). Researcher's assumed ethnicity and other social categories gain their meaning in relation to those of the researched, yet they can shift several times within an interview, or even from one moment to another.

Leung (2015, 4) accurately calls for a "higher sensitivity to time and space in analysing our relationalities with the people we study". She argues that temporalities, such as "age, generation, life cycle, time and frequency of research contact" need to be accounted for in

reflections on researcher positionality. We further suggest that researcher positionality needs to be understood along the lines of a spectrum with its own spatial and temporal constellations that may shift between different research fields, in the course of the fieldwork or even within a particular research setting, such as an interview. The fluidity of research positionality can be better understood by looking at particular *moments* during fieldwork, where a researcher is positioned in terms of ethnicity/ies (and intertwined social categories) and how those are valued in that particular space of interaction.

Positionalities are inextricably intertwined with the surrounding power relations (see Breen 2007, 163; Ryan 2015). For instance, Bahar's position as a "Turkish" majority member become suddenly politicized when she discussed contentious issues that touched upon the political context in Turkey and the Kurdish-Turkish inter-ethnic relations in it. Within the same space of interaction, her ethnicity could become depoliticized after other nodes of commonality become relevant, such as the assumed religious belonging or the shared language. Hence, we also understand the reflexive approach as involving a critical examination of power relations and politics in the research process, in other words, a consciousness of how politics and power are embedded in fieldwork and what impact it has on researcher positionality (Sultana 2007, 376). With such reflexive approach, a researcher can gain insights to the complexities of knowledge production on a specific topic, especially when the studied topic is a contentious one.

Working as an "apparent outsider" in a contentious research field

Kurdish minorities have experienced minority policies varying from assimilation to genocidal measures in their respective host countries since the early twentieth century. At times, there have been outbursts of violent conflict due to the suppression of the Kurdish

ethnic identity and the refusal to grant the Kurdish minorities political, cultural and linguistic rights.² In Turkey, the struggle turned into a low-intensity civil war between the Turkish Army and the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) in the 1970s, which first peaked and then subdued in the 2000s, before intensifying again in the summer of 2015. The conflict has caused significant Kurdish migration from Turkey to Europe over the years.

State-minority relations concerning the Kurdish diaspora have varied greatly in the European countries where Kurds have been able to take advantage of greater civil and political liberties. However, receiving states' attitudes to political activism, particularly of pro-PKK activists, have been varied. Whereas PKK-related activities are criminalized in France, Germany and the UK, Nordic countries seem to be more tolerant of them. The PKK is considered to be a "terrorist" organization in Turkey and in 2002, as a result of diplomatic pressure from Turkey, the PKK was added to the EU's list of terrorist organizations.³ Therefore, producing knowledge on this topic becomes a highly sensitive issue considering the stigmatizing impact it might have on the community. Conducting ethnographic fieldwork on a migration-related topic in a diaspora context surely requires reflexivity on researcher positionality. This is also the case when studying topics as contentious as Kurdish diaspora members' political activities that are shaped by homeland political conflicts.

In the following sections, we focus on our experiences on conducting transnational fieldwork with diaspora members and compare the challenges and advantages related to our researcher positionality as outsiders with different backgrounds. We illustrate how our positionality as "apparent outsiders" became constructed in terms of a certain set of social categories and how the values assigned to them shifted during the research process and between different contexts. For this purpose, we find Carling, Erdal, and Ezzati's (2013, 14-17) five types of "third positions" that deviate from the archetypal insider-outsider divide a

particularly useful starting-point to reflect upon our experiences as “apparent outsiders” in the field:

- (1) *Explicit Third Party*: the researcher has “a recognizable identity that is clearly neither part of the migrant group nor of the majority population”.
- (2) *Honorary Insider*: the researcher has cultural competence, sustained commitment (family ties) or language skills that might enable him/her to obtain an honorary insider status.
- (3) *Insider by Proxy*: the researcher can be considered an insider by proxy when s/he has some shared attributes with the participants that transcend ethno-national divides, such as having a migration background.
- (4) *Hybrid Insider-Outsider*: the researcher shares characteristics with both majority and minority groups, for instance in the case of a second-generation researcher of migrant parentage.
- (5) *Apparent Insider*: the traditional insider/outsider distinction based on assumed shared ethnic background, yet one that can become problematized through further contact with the participants on the basis of class or education background, for instance.

Building on Carling, Erdal, and Ezzati’s (2013) categorization that focuses on “ethnic belonging” as one of the determining categories for researcher positionality, we first illustrate how our ethnicized positionalities became to varying degrees politicized and depoliticized, and constructed in relation to religious and political belonging, as well as social class and language. Our outsider positionalities could change at different moments, even during an interview, and more generally so within the overall time period of fieldwork. We then discuss the dialectic relationship between temporality and trust, and show how Bahar became to be considered as the “trusted outsider” and even the “target pupil” in the course of his/her fieldwork, whereas Mari was more often positioned as the “benevolent outsider”.

Politicized/depoliticized ethnicities and power relations in the field: ethnicity and language as markers of researcher identity

Ethnicity was by no means a static social category although we were both positioned as “apparent outsiders” as a “Turkish” and as a “Finnish” researcher. However, our perceived ethnic belonging was to different degrees politicized and depoliticized due to the contentiousness of the Kurdish issue and how the contextual power relations in the homeland and the host country played out during fieldwork. Bahar’s assumed “Turkishness” positioned her as the representative of the Turkish state and she was seen to symbolize the “colonizer” and the “adversary other”. Mari’s ethnicity as “Finnish” was more neutral concerning the Kurdish issue, but at the same time she was positioned as the representative of the “white” mainstream host society in Finland, and as a non-majority member in France. Also language was closely intertwined with our assumed ethnicities and social class.

“The colonizer” - not only the outsider, but the “adversary other”

Before embarking upon my fieldwork, I was aware of the complexity of this topic, as Kurdish-Turkish relations remain a sensitive issue in Turkey to this day. I assumed it would be more challenging to gain the trust of my participants because I might be seen to represent not only the “outsider” but also, “the other”. By this distinction, I mean the one, who not only does not belong to the community, but also the one that belongs to the adversary community, or namely “the enemy” as some Kurds would call it. Moreover, I was aware that I might have various biases because I had been subjected to nationalist propaganda in Turkey from birth. It was to be my first encounter with “politicized Kurds” and would be in a diaspora context

with which I was neither familiar, nor comfortable. Differently to my colleague's experience, I could never be considered as the "neutral outsider". McEvoy (2006, 184) suggests that the respondent can assume the researcher is "on their 'side'", or belong to "the opposing ethnic group." Although several Kurdish interviewees were born in Europe and had no first-hand experience of the conflict, many had lost family members to the internal conflict in Turkey and had relatives back home, who participated in or were affected by the on-going political contentions in the country. Discussions about the conflict often evoked powerful emotions, making it more difficult to discuss certain issues during interviews as the interviewees always saw a "Turk" when they looked at me.

During the interviews, I was constantly reminded that I was neither a complete stranger, nor one of them. Some respondents assumed that "I would have a pro-Turkish approach to begin with," while others questioned the "ultimate aim" of my research. Some perceived me as "a representative of Turkish state" and directed their anger towards me during the interviews. At these moments, my powerful situation turned into powerlessness and I found myself feeling the burden of the "sins of the Turkish state". I felt the pain of collective guilt while at the same time trying to distance myself to come up with sound academic analysis. Many also expressed that they did not understand why I got involved in such a sensitive issue potentially risking my own status and freedom in Turkish society. Some interviewees questioned me about my political stance, and my knowledge of Kurdish history, the Kurdish movement and famous Kurdish nationalist actors (from intellectuals to well-known guerrillas).

As McEvoy (2006, 184) pointed out, "the ethnic identity of the researcher and that of the interviewee can present an important dynamic in the interview and may have a bearing upon data collection". I had to come to terms with the multiple identities I carried amongst Kurdish participants. Previously, I had never had to interrogate this aspect of my identity

because my background is that of the perceived dominant/majority group in Turkey and I thus had the luxury of living my life without ever needing to question my identity. However, during my fieldwork, I was obliged to put myself in a “Turkish” category and even when I refused to do so, my interviewees attributed identities to me. This process forced me to “turn inward in order to turn outward” (Whittaker 1992, 191) and I constantly reassessed how I positioned myself.

My biggest initial challenge was finding interviewees as I encountered a great deal of suspicion from some participants. Although I explained my educational background and the aims of my doctoral study, on several occasions, I was asked if I was working for the Turkish intelligence service. I was viewed as someone who had suddenly appeared to ask them questions about their personal life and political activities. Many also questioned their decision to talk with me, which is common when researching contentious issues (Crowley 2007, 617). Most of the time, I was not allowed to record interviews and in some cases I was even asked to remove the battery of my phone after I had switched it off. Interviewees were rightly concerned about the “true” nature of my identity. The Turkish intelligence service has been known to infiltrate Kurdish organizations and many have suffered as a result. Moreover, this trauma cast a shadow on their eventual level of trust towards me. To them, I simply represented the Turkish state or the “colonizer”; I was representative of the state that had deprived them of their rights and their land.

This is not unique to my case. As Collet explains drawing on Meredith Minkler’s work, there is “dialectic of resistance” between outsider researchers and communities that have experienced historical trauma and internalized oppression by the subordinating group: “...Even in cases where such outsider researchers purport to act in an emancipatory way by “giving voice to” the neglected and disenfranchised, communities may still reject such efforts on the basis of not wanting to depend on outsiders for their representation(s)” (Collet 2008,

78). Drawing on the previous work of David Bridges, Collet (2008, 78) argues that groups under study might think that in allowing members of the (former) subordinating group to cast their representations, they are reinforcing both the fact and perception of their subordination as well as exposing themselves to potential misrepresentation.

Language was also a strong indicator of such power relations, which became a venue for oppression and resistance. Many Kurdish interviewees refused to speak in Turkish, as it was perceived as the “language of the oppressor”. They used their right to choose the language of the interview and to make a political statement about using their own language *against* a “Turk”. In some cases, I felt “guilty” that Turkish was the only language we could communicate in, as I did not speak German, Swedish or Dutch. I conducted my interview in Sweden in English because several participants had either refused to learn Turkish as a form of resistance or to speak it with me, as they perceived it to be giving in to the “oppressor”. Such reactions shows the extent to which language use intertwines with “ethnicity” and can become politicized in ethnographic research.

I also realized that the comfort and ease of my mother language in some cases made me more of an insider, eliciting more emotional responses and blurring the boundaries between a professional interview and a friendly conversation. On the other hand, some Kurdish interviewees “othered” me because of the fact that I speak “Istanbul Turkish”, which was taken to be a clear indication that I was surely not “one of them”. My educational/social background also became an issue as being a graduate of one of the most prestigious universities in Turkey (Boğaziçi University) led to the categorization of my identity as a “white Turk”, which created distance between the interviewees and me from the very outset.⁴ I realized that (racialized) class was also a determining factor on how interviewees perceived me as a researcher.

Defining insider-outsider positionality has also become more complex in the field because I was conducting research on a transnational diaspora community (see Collet (2008, 79-80) that is not a monolithic actor but very heterogeneous due to many factors such as religion, class, political orientation and so forth. Since the term diaspora in itself already questions the meaning of home and belonging, how could I define myself as an insider or outsider to Kurdish communities? I surely had “the ability to interact naturally with the group and its members” (Breen 2007, 163), but at times I felt like a complete outsider. In the early stages of my fieldwork, I was not a “migrant”, and I considered myself to be a student who was simply studying abroad. I was definitely not an apparent insider as I was not a diaspora member - I came from the homeland. But in the host country, I could easily be categorized as “Middle Eastern”, “Muslim” or as a “migrant from Turkey” which would then put me in the same group as the Kurds. On the other hand, I could understand the cultural codes of the Kurdish community to some extent; but I was alien to such cultural codes that had been transformed by virtue of socialization in host countries. For instance, when we talked about political issues in Turkey, I felt like an insider but when we talked about their experiences as members of the “second generation”, I was the outsider and they considered me to be one too. I sometimes had the “illusion of familiarity” (Breen 2007, 164) when I predicted the context of their responses at the outset of my questioning, but I quickly rid myself of this notion through rigorous self-reflection following each interview.

To borrow from Carling, Erdal, and Ezzati’s categorization (2013), I was neither the “explicit third party” nor the “apparent insider” during my fieldwork. My experience was more like a pendulum shifting between two ends of the insider/outsider spectrum depending on numerous factors, primarily ethnicity, ideological background, religion and language. I experienced “moments” of insiderness and outsiderness even within one single interview, and my outsider positionality could change within or between interviews. Whereas there was no

great variation between the different national contexts, where I conducted my fieldwork, my positionality did, however, shift over time from the “colonizer” and the “adversary other” to one of a “target pupil” and a “trusted outsider”.

“White majority member” - language and racialized positionality

In the conventional understanding of insider and outsider positions, I was an “apparent outsider” to the Kurdish community as an “ethnic Finn” when conducting my fieldwork both in Finland and in France. This became visible in ways the interviewees narrated their experiences by “translating” and adjusting their cultural frames of reference with what they perhaps considered to be more familiar frames for me. For instance, one interviewee in Finland criticized the division of Kurdistan into different nation-states by asking me how I would feel if the geographical area of Finland were divided between Sweden and Russia. In this example, where “Russian Finland” and “Swedish Finland” corresponded to Iraqi and Iranian Kurdistan, it was evident that the interviewees employed dual frames of reference to “translate” their experiences to a researcher who was not a member of the Kurdish community. This rendered visible the different positionalities in the interview process, yet that could shift within an interview, for instance, when my knowledge on the Kurdish issue was put to test.

My perceived ethnicity was definitely relevant during fieldwork and structuring power relations within it, but not politicized in the way had I been of Turkish background as my colleague’s experiences illustrate. However, the positionality as an “ethnic Finn” contained a racialized dimension. This was visible when discussing identity-related issues, such as national belonging and “Finnishness”, when the participants usually positioned me as a representative of the “ethnic majority” and sometimes made references such as “you people”

or “you Finns”. My background as “white Finnish”, someone who can without risking contestation claim belonging to “the Finnish nation”, is very likely to have influenced the way the interviewees shared their experiences. Several references to “Finns” having fair skin and blonde hair, “like you” coupled with comments that the participants could never be considered to be “truly Finnish when looking like this and not like you”, suggested that my researcher positionality was constructed to some extent on racialized ethnicity and belonging to the majority community, but not shaped by the contentiousness of the Kurdish question per se.

On the other hand, these were the moments when the contentiousness of the research topic and researcher positionality most visibly came to the surface. For instance, due to the more sensitive political situation in Turkey and in Syria concerning the Kurdish populations when I was conducting fieldwork in France between 2015 and 2017, it seemed that interviewees were more reluctant to become research participants and treated my research with more suspicion than they did in Finland, where the study was met with enthusiasm and appreciation for the interest shown towards the Kurdish community. In France, I was frequently asked about who was financing my research, and even once whether I worked for the Finnish intelligence services. Most often, my university affiliation in France and in Finland and the fact that I do not work for either the Finnish or French authorities seemed to be a reassuring factor, and only in one occasion the interviewee declined the request to record the interview. Contrary to my colleague’s experiences, my researcher positionality was different in France and in Finland, not only due to my assumed ethnicity, but also due to the changing political context between the two fieldwork periods.

My position as the “apparent outsider” was at times interrupted when shared attributes came to the fore. The common nominator for all the informants was that they belonged to what is commonly referred to in the migration literature as the “generation-in-between”. At

times I felt like I was an “insider by proxy” - in reverse. Carling, Erdal, and Ezzati (2013) define an “insider by proxy” as a researcher who shares an immigration background with his/her research participants. However, because I was conducting research with members of the generation-in-between, I shared a certain degree of “Finnishness” with my participants, thereby making me an “insider by proxy”, albeit through different nodes of commonality than common immigrant background. This was evident at certain moments, when participants would make allusions to our common “Finnishness” by using familiar cultural references and stereotypes. One significant commonality was also the fact that we shared the Finnish language that most participants defined as their second mother language along with Kurdish.

Embedded power relations shaping both mine and the interviewees’ positionalities became visible through language. The interviewees in Finland spoke mostly Kurdish as a “home language” with parents and siblings, whereas Finnish was most often spoken outside the home environment. I conducted the interviews in Finnish, since the interviewees had lived in Finland for a minimum of ten years and were fluent in Finnish. However, in some cases, there seemed to be a certain level of discomfort among the interviewees at the very start of our interviews— a few interviewees explicitly expressed shame at their level of Finnish and felt the need to justify their noticeable accents. This situation would possibly have been different had I been a Kurdish-speaker myself, and not a representative of “mainstream Finns”. In this way, ethnicity became intertwined with language, accentuating certain nodes of commonalities, but also of differences at particular moments within an interview.

Contrary to my colleague’s experiences, language use became politicized only on rare occasions, and even then in the case of the Turkish language. I once heard a participant, whose family came to the country as political refugees, speak Turkish with her friends. I

started to speak Turkish with her, expecting a positive response, but instead she replied in Finnish, saying that she hated the language because she was forced to speak it at school in Turkey and was punished for speaking Kurdish. Therefore, Finnish seemed to be a more neutral language for us to communicate in. In this way, she made a clear political statement about her belonging and more significantly, non-belonging to the Turkish nation. It is also possible that she wanted to position herself more clearly as “Kurdish” in contrast to being mistaken for being “Turkish”, particularly when interacting with a “mainstream Finn”, who might not be able to tell the difference.

When conducting fieldwork in France, the issue of national belonging and ethnicity played out a bit differently than it did in Finland. In France, I was clearly the “explicit third party” in the sense that I belonged to neither the majority nor the minority. Being an “apparent outsider” was certainly a sum of several factors, but the fact that I was neither “French”, nor a native speaker, contrary to the second-generation interviewees, created a different set of power relations to the Finnish context. I was first positioned as belonging to the majority population, but later, my distinguishable accent in French marked me as “non-French”. Most often, I was asked where I originally came from, and whereas my “non-Frenchness” resulted to a translation of (French) cultural references, more importantly my assumed “Nordicness” was clearly invested with positive values.

Outsider positionalities changing over time: the dialectic relationship between temporality and trust

At times, the participants questioned both our motivations for conducting research on the Kurdish issue and our “undisclosed motives” showing that such inquiries went beyond mere “intellectual curiosity”, as referred to by Crowley (2007, 616). We both experienced

suspicion and mistrust, yet in different ways due to our ethnicized positionalities as “Turkish and “Finnish”. There were moments when our outsider position would suddenly shift and become differently valued, depending on the discussed issues and the political situation related to the studied topic during that particular moment in the field. Furthermore, our outsider positionalities also changed during the years we conducted fieldwork. Although at times we were “apparent outsiders”, at others we became momentarily “honorary insiders”, “comrades” or “hevals” (friend in Kurdish). Whereas with time Bahar became to be considered a “target pupil” or a “trusted outsider”, Mari was more often positioned as the “benevolent outsider”, thus seemingly depoliticizing our positionalities, but still in a differing way.

The “Turk” as the “target pupil” and the “trusted outsider”

Over time, I understood the historical complexities of my research and the reason why these actions were taken and what they were targeted against. These experiences gave me the luxury of becoming more and more open-minded and I realized that opening my heart fully to the research subject over a ten-year period actually made me as close as I possibly could be to an insider. Through time, people became familiar with my research and my close relationship with certain stakeholders assured other interviewees that I was not there to “spy on them”. For instance, the participants started talking to me quite openly about their migrant status, discrimination, criminalization of the Kurds and other issues in the hostland context. I was considered a “trusted outsider” at times when seen supporting the ideological struggle and Kurdish people’s right to self-determination. As my commitment to researching the Kurdish question became obvious, I stopped trying to create an illusion of neutrality in the field. My academic work was out there - a simple Google search could reveal my frame of mind and my approach to the topic. Since my fieldwork coincided with the peace process in Turkey, I

started publishing on this issue in non-academic venues as well which brought me significant visibility. The interviewees then had a chance to see “what and how” I write about “them”. My academic stance in these political matters in a sense “proved my innocence.”

At the post-doctoral stage, I have come to realize once again that there are no fixed categories of commonality when it comes to defining an insider or an outsider. I made peace with the idea that I would not be able to define myself as insider, outsider, honorary insider or with any other category. I became a researcher who was aware of her privileges and positionality and who was trying to conduct honest and solid academic work while carrying the burden of an at times politicized identity in the eyes of the participants.

The first years were the most challenging in terms of developing a reflexive approach. All this changed over time, as I became a more reputable researcher in the field as a result of my “sustained commitment” (Carling, Erdal, and Ezzati 2013) to the research topic. This reflexivity changed the dynamics of my fieldwork and made me understand that power dynamics and shifting positions will always remain one of the most vital determinants in the field. Ten years of experience on fieldwork has shown me that positionalities are never static, but that they shift within a set of fieldwork and between different fieldwork experiences.

As Guillermet (2008) states: “when you appear in this complex reality, people give you a status, they are seeking to find out who you are, what you want, what they can gain with you at the same time as you are searching for information”. While some were suspicious of my research aims, there were others who “appreciated” what I was doing. I was welcomed in several Kurdish circles (mostly leftist ones) due to my interest in the Kurdish movement. As also mentioned by Guillermet (2008), some interviewees saw my work as an opportunity to raise their voice about certain issues and openly answered my questions. Others took the opportunity to “educate me” on Kurdish history as they saw me as an “open-minded Turk”: I became the “target pupil” (Crowley 2007, 614) and they became the “teacher”. Such

reactions need to be understood against the invisibility of the Kurdish history, people and culture in the official Turkish state discourses. The interviews constituted a perfect venue for the interviewees to “teach” a Turk “who the Kurds are” while at the same time pushing my positionality towards as close as an insider could be.

The “Finn” as “the benevolent outsider”

In terms of Carling, Erdal, and Ezzati’s categorization (2013, 14-17) my researcher positionality shifted over time from “explicit third party”, to “insider by proxy” and “honorary insider”, and it did so in a very nuanced way. At times I was considered to be more or less what Carling Erdal, and Ezzati (2013) describe as the “honorary insider”. When asked about whether I had visited Kurdistan, I explained that I had lived in Turkey and during that time had visited the Kurdish region. Several participants seemed positively surprised by the fact that I knew some details of the Kurdish history or yet some cultural references that might be less familiar to “average Finns”. This seemed to position me in a different way to “average Finns”, who “didn’t necessarily know where Kurdistan was”. I was also at times introduced to other community members as “heval” (friend in Kurdish) or as “comrade”, which to a certain extent, suggested that I was deemed an “honorary insider”.

As with my fieldwork experiences in Finland, nearly all the interviewees in France were curious to know why I had selected such a topic. This question was sometimes detached from its politico-historical context and linked to an amazement that somebody “far from the North” would be interested in the issue, and at other times, it was accompanied with political undertones. When not concluding that it was for the purposes of completing an academic degree, I was questioned about my underlying political agenda and motivations. Despite this, I did quite easily become to be treated a “confidante” or an “ally”, to borrow from Crowley

(2007, 616), and as somebody, who was perceived as doing advocacy work for an ideological cause. At times, I felt like I was perceived as a potential spokesperson, as someone who would be able to gain greater visibility and coverage for the Kurdish struggle. On several occasions, participants in both contexts expressed their gratitude to me for conducting such a study. One participant phrased it to be “benevolent work for you, as for us it is our duty to work for the Kurdish cause”. My positionality was very much viewed as a “benevolent outsider”, who had no personal connection or historical burden in terms of the Kurdish issue.

Temporalities within the research field, but also between them mattered. The fact that the Kurdish issue had become more visible in the media and more politically salient after I completed my PhD also shaped my field experiences and positionality. The research field had become more contentious between the two studies: the fieldwork for the second study coincided not only with the Syrian civil war and Kurdish military troops’ combat against IS in Syria, but also with the Paris terrorist attacks by IS in November 2015. Furthermore, the criminalization of PKK-related activities in France and, at times, the fraught relations between the Kurdish community and the French authorities introduced national dynamics that were absent in my first study. I conducted my fieldwork for the second study in Paris where a Turkish citizen, who had infiltrated the Kurdish movement and gained the trust of its leading political figures, assassinated three Kurdish activists in January 2013. A later French investigation implicated the Turkish secret services in the assassinations. Several politically active interviewees knew or were closely acquainted with the three Kurdish activists and were understandably suspicious of the “outsider”, who had become interested in their (political) activities.

Being viewed as an “ethnic Finn” in this sense (and not Turkish, for instance), and coming from a country considered to be relatively neutral towards the Kurdish question, particularly when it comes to the criminalization of the PKK, was most likely an asset in

gaining the participants' trust. The fact that I was from a Nordic country was viewed in a positive light and they referred to the Nordic countries as "model societies" for providing extensive political and civic rights, including for Kurdish political actors, some of whom were their relatives. In this regard, I was positioned not merely as an outsider, but my positively valued "Nordic-ness" made my interest towards the Kurdish issue become to be seen as an expression of benevolence. Also this positive outsider position seemed to allow participants to discuss the contentiousness of the Kurdish issue quite openly. Then again, some seemed reluctant to discuss experiences of racism in Finland with a researcher, who belonged to an ethnic majority.

Conclusions

Drawing from our experiences in multi-sited and comparative ethnographic fieldwork, we aimed to look at how our assumed ethnicities shifted within the actual empirical field, being relevant in one moment and less so in another. Furthermore, we illustrated how ethnicities can become more or less politicized or depoliticized in particular moments during the fieldwork, and intertwined with multiple belongings (religious, political, social and language) that affect researcher positionality. We argue that the perceived ethnicity or national belonging of the researcher can be a determining factor for researcher positionality, although at some moments during the fieldwork, perceived ethnicity might play no significant role whatsoever.

Therefore, reflections on researcher positionality, particularly in migration studies, ought to resist the temptation of falling into "ethnicising" positionality, namely for two reasons. Firstly, when the researcher's perceived ethnicity becomes significant, it can also become politicized to different degrees and intertwined with other categories of belonging.

Secondly, researcher positionality based on assumed ethnicity can change in the course of a sustained and committed fieldwork and become politicized or depoliticized depending on the level of gained trust, familiarity or the changing political context in which the particular contentious topic is approached.

We argue that in order to understand researcher positionality in a more nuanced manner, scholars need to adopt a reflexive approach to different positionalities in the research field and to look at particular *moments* of insiderness and outsidership rather than taking insider and outsider positions as a starting-point for understanding researcher positionality. The paper contributes to the existing methodological literature on insider and outsider research by showing how ethnicities can become politicized and depoliticized in certain moments during the fieldwork and over time. It also provides insights into conducting ethnographic fieldwork on contentious topics, and offers original methodological reflections on researcher positionality to the field of Kurdish studies.

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¹ Within the constraints of this paper, we will only focus on the assumed ethnicity/national belonging and when relevant how it intertwines with assumed religious, social and political belonging.

² The Kurdish language was banned in Turkey until the 1990s as a result of decades long assimilation policies by the state.

³ See U.S. Department of State, "Foreign Terrorist Organizations": <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/other/des/123085.htm>

⁴ The term "white Turk" is used to describe a person who is wealthy, educated, Westernized, urbanized or a person who has a privileged status in Turkey.