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At home in the field, in the field at home? Reflections on power and fieldwork in familiar settings

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Abstract

Critical epistemologies and methodologies have over time challenged the static and mono-dimensional approaches to fieldwork, allowing researchers to contemplate and conduct their research in spaces of in-betweenness. Despite this important shift, the essentialist idea that both 'the field' and 'home' in a fieldwork setting must be actual places persists. In this article, we challenge the conceptualization and operationalization of 'home' not only as the juxtaposition to 'the field', but also as the embodiment of a place in a specific temporality. We argue that the postulation of 'home' as a constant disregards the non-predetermined and unpredictable nature of fieldwork relationships that are often complicated by implicit and explicit power dynamics, especially in places researchers identify as 'home'. We demonstrate that unequal power relations, especially (1) between the Global North and Global South, (2) between majority and minoritized groups, (3) among genders, and (4) between elites and non-elites, require us to envisage 'the field' and 'home' in relative terms. We propose the reconceptualization of fieldwork place as a hybridized space that conjoins 'the field' and 'home' as 'field-home', particularly at a time when research mobility is restricted by the COVID-19 pandemic. In this way, we extend the literature on issues related to power, positionality and reflexivity in qualitative research, and provide practical insights for those preparing for fieldwork.

Keywords

field-home, fieldwork, home, positionality, qualitative research, reflexivity

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Introduction

Fieldwork is widely considered an essential part of research in social sciences (see Amit, 2000; Bailey, 2017; Burgess, 1984; Krause and Szekely, 2020; Scheyvens and Storey, 2003; Wolf, 1996). From its anthropological roots, 'going to the field' traditionally required going to a foreign land, living among foreign people, and producing 'objective' knowledge about these people in a detached fashion (Forster, 2012: 14). The field was where the 'other' was and where anthropologists went to study the 'other' (see Gupta and Ferguson, 1997). Fieldwork was 'somehow equated with being cut off from one's home, one's friends, one's "world," the separation deepening as the field-world gradually becomes a "second home"' (Fortier, 1996: 307). In other words, 'proper' fieldwork was understood as the process of studying the 'other' in an unfamiliar setting and returning to the familiar setting after passing through various spatial, temporal and cognitive boundaries in a planned amount of time. In this equation, the boundaries between one's self and the other, as well as 'home' and 'the field', were clearly delineated.

The colonial legacy of anthropology, reflected in the appetite of colonial powers to know more about the populations they aimed to control (Munthali, 2001: 115), has played an important role in the development of this conceptualization. Thanks to the process of decolonization in many parts of the world in the aftermath of World War II, both the relationship between colonialism and anthropology and the Eurocentrism embedded in anthropology have been under scrutiny. From the 1960s onwards, many anthropologists have begun to study their own societies from a 'native' perspective, a position of close affinity (see Peirano, 1998). Native anthropology has provided Western anthropologists with a more 'economic' research option. More importantly, it has provided non-Western anthropologists with an opportunity to deconstruct the colonial distortion of knowledge on their own societies (Jones, 1970, cited in Forster, 2012: 16). In this way, the institutionalized view that a 'genuine' field research must focus on the study of the 'other', such as 'primitive' communities or 'exotic' people, in foreign places has gradually changed (see Messerschmidt, 1981). Even though most fieldworkers still seek displacement from the familiar to identify and single out the objects of their inquiries, the tendency to exoticize people and places has become weaker (Katz, 1994: 68).

The softening of the field/home distinction has also opened new debates about the dynamics of being an 'insider' or 'outsider' in research. Scholarship influenced by critical and feminist theory, postmodernism, postcolonial critique, multiculturalism and participatory and action research has challenged the static understanding of insiderness/outsiderness, emphasizing that the relationship between the researcher and the researched cannot be pre-determined based on 'objective' and *a priori* categories of insider/outsider (Kusow, 2003: 597). The critique is based on the idea that the binary of insider/outsider 'ignores the dynamism of positionalities in time and through space' (Mullings, 1999: 340) and that the roles and identities of researchers are fluid and context-dependent, allowing them to be insiders, outsiders or both simultaneously in spaces of in-betweenness (see Acar et al., 2020; Breen, 2007; Chavez, 2008; Katz, 1994; Kusow, 2003; Merriam et al., 2001; Mullings, 1999; Narayan, 1993; Nast, 1994; Sherif, 2001; Sultana, 2007; Till, 2001). The critique acknowledges that one's biography shapes the research process, redefining the insider/outsider status in terms of one's positionality vis-à-vis age, class, ethnicity, gender, marital status, religion, and so on (Ergun and Erdemir, 2010: 18).

The contextual dimension of being an insider/outsider in a familiar fieldwork setting has received ample attention (see Chacko, 2004; Gilbert, 1994; Kanuha, 2000; Mandiyanike, 2009; Mughal, 2015; Munthali, 2001; Narayan, 1993; Sultana, 2007; Till, 2001; Zhao, 2017). It is particularly highlighted that a researcher might as well 'find himself or herself in the position of an insider in a foreign land or an outsider in his or her own land' (Ergun and Erdemir, 2010: 34). The reason is, the insiderness/outsiderness of researchers is not contingent upon the way they see their participants, but rather on the way participants see them (Herod, 1999: 323). While researchers might consider themselves insiders for their high level of identification, participants might consider them outsiders, even 'undesirable' researchers who represent everything they despise (see Visser, 2000). Having roots in a locality might not always translate into easy access to, and rapport with, people without changing the status quo (Narayan, 1993: 675).

The increasing acknowledgement of the porosity and fluidity of identity boundaries between 'insiders' and 'outsiders', as well as of spatial boundaries between 'home' and 'the field', is indeed a critical challenge to the dichotomous thinking on fieldwork. It is an important step towards the recognition of the complex and dynamic nature of fieldwork relationships and, thereby, the opening up of more room for researchers to think and move freely in states and spaces of in-betweenness in their fieldwork. Despite this significant contribution to the theoretical and practical debate on multi-layered boundaries, such as 'the boundaries between "the research" and everyday life; between "the fieldwork" and doing fieldwork; between "the field" and not; between "the scholar" and subject' (Katz, 1994: 67), both 'home' and 'the field' continue to be largely essentialized as actual places. The normative idea that 'home' in a fieldwork setting is supposed to be a place with clear boundaries still persists. Consequently, field researchers are left with little or no option but to construct their identities and anchor a spatial position based on an *a priori* understanding of 'home', a supposedly familiar, convenient and easy to navigate domain towards which they feel a sense of belonging and connection.

In this article, we seek to challenge the conceptualization and operationalization of 'home' not only as the juxtaposition to 'the field', but also as the embodiment of a place in a specific temporality. We argue that the postulation of 'home' as a constant disregards the non-predetermined and unpredictable nature of fieldwork relationships complicated by implicit and explicit power dynamics. We unpack how these dynamics can overturn the relationship between us – the researchers – and our research participants, particularly in places we perceive as familiar and/or identify as 'home'. Based on our own fieldwork experiences, we argue that unequal power relations, especially, but not limited to, (1) between the Global North and Global South, (2) between majority and minoritized groups, (3) among genders, and (4) between elites and non-elites require us to envisage 'the field' and 'home' in relative terms. We contend that embracing a critical and reflexive approach that challenges and problematizes structural and contextual power dynamics, boundaries and socio-political realities throughout the research process is essential to cope with the challenges, dilemmas and complications induced by our own positionalities. We propose the reconceptualization of fieldwork place as a hybridized space that (a) moves beyond the dichotomy of 'the field' and 'home', (b) essentializes neither 'the field' nor 'home', and (c) conjoins 'the field' and 'home' as 'field-home'.

We maintain that a transition in our approach from field/home to 'field-home' is also timely because the COVID-19 pandemic has severely restricted the mobility of researchers since 2020 (see Wood et al., 2020). Even though COVID-19 no longer 'constitutes a public health emergency or international concern' as of May 2023 (World Health Organization, 2023), the pandemic has made the conduct of ethnographic work more challenging in many ways. First, there is still a high degree of uncertainty about both the epidemiology of the pandemic and its economic, health, political and social repercussions. Second, the pandemic has wreaked havoc on people's lives and increased their vulnerability, requiring fieldworkers to make radical changes in their methodological, theoretical, logistical and ethical approaches to research. Third, the government-imposed social distancing rules and the bottom-up social distancing norms have made it difficult to engage in close social interactions, particularly in crowded places. Fourth, the pandemic has changed the definition of research safety and research ethics, as the mere presence of the researcher might be enough to unknowingly spread the virus and put others at risk (Wood et al., 2020). Fifth, the pandemic has rendered it difficult, even irrelevant in certain contexts, for researchers to work in a physical, traditionally defined 'field' that they can regularly access (Ghosh, 2020: 2). As a result, a growing number of researchers have become inclined to redefine fieldwork along the lines of the 'new normal' as well as to employ digital or online ethnographic methods in their research (Ghosh, 2020: 3–4). While on-site field research is not likely to disappear anytime soon, it is likely that the new status quo changes the way ethnographers tackle issues related to familiarity and unfamiliarity, insiderness and outsiderness, 'the field' and 'home', pushing them to imagine research practices taking place in networked landscapes, both online and offline. This article, therefore, not only extends the literature on issues related to power, positionality and reflexivity in qualitative research, but also provides critical and practical insights for those preparing for fieldwork in a period marked by relatively restricted research mobility and deteriorated research safety.

In the rest of the article, we discuss in what ways power relations are embedded in, and experienced through, fieldwork practices carried out in familiar settings. We follow a reflexive approach and, thereby, engage in the 'self-critical sympathetic introspection and the self-conscious *analytical* scrutiny of the self' (England, 1994: 244). We acknowledge that reflexivity makes us sensible of the risk of constructing or perpetuating unequal research relations (Bott, 2010: 160) and help us conceptualize research as something that is conducted 'with' instead of 'on' people (see Pillow, 2003), something that involves the 'co-construction' instead of 'production' of knowledge (see Breen, 2007). Finally, we discuss different ways to move beyond an either/or thinking in fieldwork contexts in general, and an essentialized conceptualization of 'the field' and 'home' in particular, and make our concluding remarks.

Contours of 'home': Insights from our fieldwork

Before we elaborate on our fieldwork experiences in which unequal power relations of different shapes and scales neutralized and, at times, reversed the advantages of doing fieldwork in familiar settings, we will briefly talk about our own positionalities and fieldwork activities.

Arda has a background in development studies, security studies and international relations. He mainly focuses on water politics, hydraulic infrastructure development and the

linkages between conflict, security and development. After completing his higher education in Turkey, the United States (US) and Germany, respectively, he has taught at various institutions in the US and the United Kingdom (UK), where he currently resides. Since 2013, he carried out many field trips to Turkey, including southeastern Turkey, a politically sensitive environment for being the epicentre of the Kurdish issue that has led to the killing of more than 40,000 people since the early 1980s (Gunter, 2021: 299).

Anita studied international and Arab politics in the US before moving to Egypt to work in international development and refugee support projects for a decade. After receiving her doctorate in anthropology from a US institution, she continued to live and work in Cairo, teaching and leading programs in forced migration studies, and carrying out fieldwork together with Sudanese and other refugees in Middle Eastern cities. An academic position in the UK, where a large number of Sudanese refugees settled, led to multi-sited research on the Sudanese diaspora and an appreciation for transnational fields. Currently she is based in the US and pursues research on mobilities, diaspora, forced migration, urban integration, and refugee home-making in the US.

Even though we differ from each other in terms of our positionalities, we realized during our conversations about our fieldwork experiences in places we felt we were familiar with that we in fact faced similar challenges throughout our research. Below, we explain how unequal power relations that are crystalized in certain divides at a global, national, and individual level can turn our places and spaces of belonging into unfamiliar and even hostile terrains. We discuss how these divides, which by no means are fixed and objective but rather dynamic and subjectively constructed, can make us feel like we are complete outsiders, 'intruders' or 'double-agents' in these places and spaces. We focus particularly on the ethical and emotional aspects of fieldwork in contexts where we cannot easily anchor our positionalities due to unstable power dynamics.

Inequalities between the Global North and South

In both material and symbolic terms, the political and socio-economic divide between the Global North and South is alive and well. Through (neo-)colonial representations, mechanisms and structures, the North continues to permeate and influence almost all aspects of political, economic, social and cultural landscapes in the South. The politics of knowledge production in academia has not been immune to this hegemonic relationship, as epitomized in the widespread (mis-)perception that knowledge produced in/by the North is of higher quality and legitimacy than knowledge produced in/by the South (Bilgen & Uluğ, 2022: 15).

This (mis-)perception has largely shaped the dynamics of not only North-South research partnerships at an institutional level, but also field research at an informal level. Relationships become more complicated especially if the research is conducted in/on the South by a Northern researcher or by a Southern researcher educated in the North. In such contexts, researchers are usually approached with suspicion because where they come from, where they work and how they act may remind the participants of the history and legacy of colonialism in their countries (Bilgen et al., 2021: 10). The negative connotations of the North and everything it represents may discourage

participants from opening their personal spaces even when the researcher pays attention to the sensitivities of participants in compliance with ethical research guidelines.

Arda often experienced this challenge during his fieldwork visits in Turkey. The unfavourable image of the North generally left him with little power to give a balanced impression of himself and to get the acceptance he expected in settings he thought he related to. This was not without reason. Turkey stands at the intersection of the North (West) and South (East), combining geographies that resemble both constructs due to wide inter- and intra-regional differences and inequalities across the country. Despite (or because of) this, ambivalence has been the defining characteristic of Turkey's relations with the West. In the eyes of state officials and the public, the West symbolizes the highest standards in science, technology and human development. At the same time, however, it is referred to as an unreliable partner that has intentions to harm Turkey. In other words, the perception of the West has varied from the level of 'contemporary civilization' to the source of moral corruption, from a model to replicate to a rival to beat, demonstrating 'anger, frustration and resentment towards the [West], while, at the same time, desiring acceptance and recognition from it' (Sandrin, 2021). In keeping with this perception, most participants were curious to know what 'Westerners' thought about Turkey or how Turkey was seen from 'there'. At the same time, however, most of them had the perception that those who received their education or training abroad, including Arda, were alien to their own society and/or 'collaborators' of foreign powers. Due to his education and career trajectory, most participants thought he was 'too foreign' or 'not Turkish enough' to understand the economic, political, social and cultural dynamics and realities of the country (see Mutlu, 2018 for a similar experience).

This suspicion became more obvious during conversations about the long-standing sensitive political issues of the country, such as the Kurdish issue and transboundary water disputes. Nationalist politics determined the atmosphere of these encounters and, therefore, he was often considered a 'mouthpiece' of foreign powers. In one interview, for instance, a Turkish ultra-nationalist member of parliament terminated the interview when Arda used the term 'the Kurdish political movement', and asked sarcastically whether it was how 'we' were 'taught' abroad. On another occasion, a professor openly told him that he was suspicious of the 'agenda' of his research on the Euphrates and Tigris region, indicating that it could serve the national interests of Germany. Elsewhere, many participants 'reminded' him that his research had to serve the interests of 'our homeland', not its enemies. Overall, the gap between the North and South in general, and resentments arisen due to the historical process of how this gap has developed in particular, created different layers of barriers for Arda to claim insiderness in a supposedly familiar fieldwork setting.

The Global North/South divide is also alive and well for Anita, born and trained in the US. Due to her positionality as a representative of the dominant mode of social science praxis in the dominant North, she recognizes that coming 'home' to research in the US has led to her unexamined slide into once again occupying a privileged position vis-à-vis many of the groups and participants in her field research. This reflection has revealed that, despite her intellectual agreement with many of the granular issues raised in the introduction—the critique of the binary field of research as 'out there' and home as 'back here' for example—she at first found it easier not to question what might be characterized as 'Western ways of knowing' in areas such as research design

and methodology, language of instruction and publication, and the uncritical support of the Academy for particular types of vetting and evaluation. The line of thinking regarding tensions around clashing traditions of scholarship proposed by Arda, who faced resistance and veiled hostility towards his academic training in the North, presents similar dilemmas around exclusion from home-spaces due to the political taint of the North's colonial past as well as its ongoing ambitions in regions of the South. For Anita, these dilemmas manifest largely through the convergence of post-colonial intellectual concerns, racism and sexism within the US academy, and the continued reproduction of institutions that privilege Western academic frames.

Anita's experience is one of intruding in a space that is familiar, but no longer comfortable. In the case of global politics of northern dominance in the performance of field research – and the resistance of subaltern voices – Anita has come 'home' to the field as a member of the dominant white academic establishment, where her achievements also fit into mainstream narratives of evaluation. She regularly participates in evaluative processes fundamental to current university practice, including hiring, promotion and scholarly review, where concepts of academic rigor, bibliometrics and implicit expectations for success. As the daughter of a university professor herself, she absorbed cultural attitudes about key practices that her ongoing learning as an anthropologist of various levels and forms of marginalization – including the ways in which the reproduction of the academic status quo continues to sideline some voices in the Academy – seeks to understand and explain. She views her role within an American university setting as a type of double-agent, using the tools of academic inquiry to help rethink and reshape the Academy. It is clear that research as a practice remains divided between first- and second-class ways of generating and evaluating knowledge (Fábos et al., 2021; Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva, 2008). Yet, even while working to produce inclusive, community-engaged scholarship and praxis, it requires ongoing reflection and action to recognize, let alone resist, the academic structures that support these practices.

Inequalities between majority and minoritized groups

The denial, suppression and subordination of rights and identities of a group of people by another group of people has numerous political consequences, ranging from assimilation to violent armed conflict, expulsion and even genocide. Naturally, conflictual relations between the two groups influence how power operates between the researcher and the researched, especially if the former belongs to the powerful, dominant group and the latter belongs to the powerless, oppressed group. Here, we refer to these groups as majority and minoritized groups to be more inclusive of ethnic, racial, class and gender dynamics. Relatedly, we see 'whiteness' not as something fixed, biologically driven and phenotypical, but instead as 'a structural advantage, standpoint, and set of historical and cultural practices' (Faria and Mollett, 2016: 3). Due to asymmetric power relations and possible (reciprocal or nonreciprocal) resentments, a tense, extremely politicized 'us vs. them' atmosphere may develop in a familiar field site. As with the negative connotations of the North discussed above, meanings and representations attached to the dominant group might prevent the deconstruction of barriers between the researcher and the researched, neutralizing the said advantages of fieldwork in familiar places and spaces.

Arda went through this challenge during his research on the developmental dimension of the Kurdish issue (see Bilgen, 2018). As a Turk, he had to engage with many Kurds whose positions of power ranged from former ministers to farmers. Together with unstable security conditions in some parts of southeastern Turkey at that time, the ethnic divide between Arda and the participants required him to follow a conflict sensitive approach during formal and informal interviews. The politics of naming was everywhere; depending on the person and context, one's 'southeastern Turkey' was another's 'North Kurdistan', one's 'Diyarbakır' was another's 'Amed', and one's 'separatists' were another's 'guerillas'. Therefore, he had to go through a continuous process of un-learning and re-learning in order not to say or do anything that the participants could perceive as insulting, offensive and patronizing. Because ethnographic work carries the risk of exposing sensitive information about disadvantaged groups to those who might use this information against them (Katz, 1994: 71), he also had to be vigilant about what material to include and exclude when reporting.

Even though the idea that the researcher must 'be one to understand one' is long contested (see Merton, 1972), Arda's Turkish ethnicity was sometimes an obstacle to establishing rapport with some Kurdish participants. Similarly, even though linguistic capability does not automatically translate into cultural fluency (Chacko, 2004: 54), his lack of Kurdish language skills except for a few words and phrases made it difficult for him to build trust with them. Indeed, most signalled that they would prefer speaking to a Kurdish or Kurdish-speaking researcher, someone 'of their own'. Due to this majority-minoritized dynamic, some participants refrained from opening themselves up for a candid conversation where each side felt comfortable in sharing their knowledge and experience. In comparison to how his Turkish participants characterized him as 'too foreign' or 'not Turkish enough' to enter their lifeworlds, his Kurdish participants indicated that he was 'too Turkish' or 'not Kurdish enough' to understand their lived political, economic, social and cultural realities. Furthermore, in the eyes of the discriminated and minoritized, his Turkishness meant more than belonging to a specific ethnic group and rather represented the state – the sovereign power that carried negative connotations due to practices associated with the politics of denial, oppression and assimilation.

Anita is, outwardly, a member of the dominant, white, Christian, English-speaking majority. She speaks with a mainstream, middle-class whitened American accent, and has the professional credentials of the educated American elite. In her urban belonging projects, Anita's research brought her into regular engagement with refugee resettlement agencies, immigration advocates, academics and policymakers working on or adjacent to immigrant integration. As a person who passes as a member of the dominant majority, she is included in a presumably shared American perspective that immigrants bear a preponderance of the responsibility to develop the cultural competencies necessary for fitting into US society.

Anita's relation to these dominant ideas of belonging, widely accepted by policymakers, academics and practitioners in the field of immigrant integration, is complicated. The powerful narrative of immigrant assimilation to an 'American way of life' and pursuit of 'the American dream' shapes not only the experience of immigrants and refugees in the US, but has its echoes in her own family. Yet her blended multinational heritage has made it quite hard to identify with any one ethnic or national group. Feeling like an outsider 'at home' predates Anita's own migration experience as an 'expatriate' in

Egypt and the UK, as well as her academic specialization in migration studies. As a putative member of the dominant national group in the US, she nevertheless does not share the mainstream understanding of immigrant belonging – that people have roots in a place, that newcomers are responsible for fitting into the dominant culture to avoid being 'caught between two worlds' – either from a personal or an intellectual perspective.

Inasmuch as Arda's experience of feeling as though he was treated as a member of the dominant Turkish in relation to Kurdish interviewees, and yet was rebuffed by Turkish insiders as being insufficiently Turkish, Anita's acceptance as an insider with shared policy objectives within the realm of immigrant integration presumed her belonging to a shared homeland, while her own internal beliefs about belonging, migration and home resist or contradict these assumed similarities. It is equally uncomfortable. Arda experiences the feeling of being an 'intruder' while Anita feels rather more like a double-agent, but with the same conceptual and personal discomfort with other people's expectations of what doing research as part of the dominant construct of the national 'home' should be.

Inequalities among genders

Feminist scholarship has led scholars to interrogate how relational qualities between the researcher and the researched influence their research agendas and knowledge claims, how their works shape – and are shaped by – people and places that they study, and how engagement in specific economic, political, social and cultural frameworks and academic traditions informs the way research is conducted (Nast, 1994: 54). Feminist scholars have used their work to facilitate the engagement of the political, designing their research around the methodological principles of 'mutual respect and involvement, shared responsibility, valuing difference, and nonhierarchical ways of achieving ends' to bring about political and social transformation (Kobayashi, 1994: 73–76). Especially in the field of geography, these scholars have debated the relationship between power and knowledge production based on their own fieldwork experiences in both the Global North and South (see Faria and Mollett, 2016; Katz, 1994; Kobayashi, 1994; Nast, 1994; Staeheli and Lawson, 1994). Fieldwork, from this perspective, is understood as a means of 'understanding how patriarchy and power are carried through, and potentially transformed by, the body, the mundane, and the everyday, emphases that have traditionally formed the core of women's experiences' as well as of resisting patriarchy and similar forms of domination in ways that are in line with women's experiences (Nast, 1994: 60).

The question how gender identifications shape the dynamics of fieldwork is a contested one. One side maintains that patriarchy, particularly the lack of awareness of gender inequalities, brings a wide range of disadvantages to women fieldworkers and participants alike (see Momsen, 2006). In contrast, the other side maintains that the same gender structures and gender blindness cause women researchers to be perceived as innocuous and, therefore, allow them to have access to, and blend in with, people more easily (see Ergun and Erdemir, 2010). Despite being found naïve and challenged for overlooking the uniqueness of the issues women face, there is also the view that women researchers who work with women participants automatically enjoy an insider status based on their experiences that supposedly establish powerful bonds of 'sisterhood'

with their participants (Staeheli and Lawson, 1994: 97). There are also debates about the ways in which women researchers who study men and masculinities face theoretical, methodological and practical challenges on many fronts, as well as how these researchers can in fact reverse these power dynamics to have improved access to people and knowledge (see Wojnicka, 2020). Regardless of what gender the subjects and objects of research identify with, gender, the roles attached to it and the inequalities associated with it play a significant role in constructing the field and configuring the set of relationships in fieldwork contexts.

It is sad to admit that being a male fieldworker in a patriarchal society provided certain advantages to Arda. In a context where 34% of women did not feel safe on street (One third of Turkish women, 2013), approximately 300 women were murdered each year (Wilks, 2022), and labour participation rate is 32.5% for women (World Bank, 2022), Arda's perception of security was different from women's perception of security, especially in public spaces and at night. Because government spaces (e.g. the Turkish Grand National Assembly), public spaces (e.g. streets) and private spaces (e.g. family) in both urban and rural areas were highly male dominated, he did not have to worry about his safety as much as a female fieldworker would do. He did not perceive any risk when he, for instance, visited farms in remote areas by himself, spent one-to-one time with some participants in their homes, took public transportation at night or hopped on someone else's car as a hitchhiker – activities that would be considered dangerous for women fieldworkers or travellers in his fieldwork site. In that sense, gender inequalities gave Arda a privileged position in terms of facilitating his ability to travel relatively more safely and freely, to penetrate closely-knit male-dominated groups marked by a strong 'bro culture', and to gain access to important and sensitive information through informal, off-the-record talks. Unlike many female researchers who may face the ethical dilemma of whether to use deception in terms of self-representation due to safety and acceptance issues (Momsen, 2006: 47), he did not have to use any deception tactics except, regrettably, staying silent against some sexist remarks to keep the conversation going. Also, his gender enabled him to avoid being treated as though he was a passive and compliant 'mascot researcher' (see Adams, 1999), someone who was thought to be in constant need of care and protection, and given special attention and treatment, due to his gender, race, ethnicity or guest status.

There were also occasions where the same patriarchal structures brought disadvantages to Arda, particularly in his research encounters with (Kurdish) women in settings marked by traditional and conservative values. As argued elsewhere (Acar and Uluğ, 2018: 190; Mutlu, 2018: 173), women researchers usually have a greater ability to access to, and establish rapport with, Kurdish women, specifically in conflict settings. Arda witnessed this in his capacity as a research assistant during a focus group discussion on the impact of the Kurdish issue on the everyday lives of Kurds. He did not realize that his presence in the room, along with the presence of other male participants, prevented women participants from sharing their views without self-censorship until the main researcher, who was a woman, told him later that women who were shy and/or silent during the discussion approached her later and shared their more personal and intimate stories while drinking tea in a smaller, all-women group (see Uluğ et al., 2017). Gender norms, along with some other traditional age and social status norms, also shaped the dynamics of his one-to-one encounters with other women in public spaces,

such as cafes and restaurants where interviews often took place, raising ethical and practical questions such as how to dress for the interview, how to salute the participant, whether to offer a ride to the participant, and who should pay the check at the end of the interview (see Wojnicka, 2020).

Anita presents as a female fieldworker in a patriarchal society with significant intersectional advantages due to her whiteness and professional status. While dominant gender expectations in the US are not as prominently marked by ideas of gender segregation and complementarity compared to Turkey, Anita has nevertheless not been able to benefit from an explicit 'home advantage' in terms of her gendered access to places and spaces of authority, power and research privilege. Insights as to how fieldwork is experienced in terms of her gender identity arise from two sets of institutional frameworks – the US immigration discourse, on the one hand, and the American academy, on the other – and their analogous gendered hierarchies. Both of these frameworks associate men with political action, strategic decision-making, and command of the public sphere, and women with particular modes of vulnerability/caring, traditions of knowledge production and domesticity. A feminist geopolitical lens offers a useful analysis for thinking about being out of place in home spaces and places for a woman professor in migration studies.

Migration management – the discourse associated with the global nation-state system and characterized by bordered and securitized territories, immigration laws, policies and practices and migrant integration and social engineering (Haines, 2010) – is gendered. Security and protection of territorial borders from outside threats (including, it seems, immigrants) has been a masculinized vocation and ideology in the history of the US (Enloe, 2004), while integration efforts, especially in highly formalized programs such as the US refugee resettlement program, tend to be feminized through ideas of refugee service provision and care work (Adams, 2010; Hester, 2018). This discursive framework influences the relative gendered prestige accorded to academic work on border and security studies (masculinized fields of political science and geography, in the main) and immigrant integration (feminized fields of anthropology, social work, and education, for instance). Anita's scholarly work intentionally bridges these gendered migration studies tropes with research that straddles geopolitics and enculturation processes, albeit from a feminist perspective. Presumably a person with a 'glocal' frame of reference of migration can fluidly navigate both masculinized and feminized spaces and places with ease.

However, Anita's appreciation and analysis of the gendered complexities of migration management in the US and in the American academy does not necessarily insulate her from personally experiencing the hierarchy of value attached to being a woman professor doing migration research in her home country. Indeed, her position as a 'returnee' from abroad generated many public observations about her slightly London-inflected accent (marking her in relation to other mainstream American faculty), her lack of knowledge of university curricular requirements, and her ignorance of US norms of status and rank. These 'microaggressions' had the effect of enhancing her awareness of power and gender in a higher education institutional setting, and in turn offered a conceptual bridge to the ways in which her research could engage with feminist geopolitics even through the small-scale participatory research projects on refugee integration and belonging in a small city in the US.

The 'home disadvantage' of being an American woman migration researcher in the US, where patriarchal gender norms are subtly and not-so-subtly enforced, fell away when the researcher was 'in the field' in Egypt. In that context, she experienced her gender identity as secondary to her positionality as a US national and, more generally, as a 'Westerner' by both research participants and host society. These ascriptions of identity and power have mediated access to male-gendered spaces that are much less likely to be available to Egyptian women; as McAllister (2013: 168) notes, women anthropologists in field are '[r]outinely […] placed in a "liminal category," in which they are recognized as women but because of their foreignness and perceived higher social status are treated as "honorary men"' (cited in Gaetano, 2016). Her own research on gendered propriety and ethnicity for refugees in Cairo found that, for some women, stifling or unquestioned gender norms in their home country were transformed by their forced migration to a different country. Ironically, although these women were at their most vulnerable in terms of their legal and social status as refugees, they were able to shift the discourse on gender and power among their displaced communities. In considering gender inequalities between home and the field, we again recommend a nuanced approach that takes into account the intersectionality of gender with other social positions, as well as the mutability of gender through mobility. This indicates to us that home is not necessarily a place, a point we come back to in our discussion and conclusion.

Inequalities between elites and non-elites

Usually considered superior to 'ordinary' people, the elite can be simply defined as a small group of (disproportionately) powerful people who, among others, occupy crucial positions in a range of sectors, play key roles in the decision-making processes and have control over symbolic and material resources (see Parry, 2005). Conducting research with elites is rewarding because they can provide valuable and rare 'insider' information about the power structure that cannot be easily found elsewhere. On the downside, research with elites is challenging because the researcher may not easily gain access to the domain of elites and, even if granted access, may not establish a horizontal research relationship. Therefore, unevenly distributed power and resources between elites and non-elites complicate the research process, leaving the researcher in limbo as to where to stand in a matrix dominated by vertical and hierarchical relationships between the objects and subjects of research.

Arda experienced the hardships of navigating through the power imbalances created by the elite/non-elite divide. In Turkey, as probably elsewhere too, the most basic challenge was to gain access to the well-protected world of elites. Arranging interviews with political elites was particularly difficult and mostly dependent on the approval of gatekeepers such as political advisors and administrative assistants. Arranging interviews with non-political elites was relatively easier, yet the access was usually made possible through the recommendations of other members in the same elite networks. After all, having long and in-depth conversations with researchers, especially if they were young postgraduate students or early career researchers, was of low priority for elites in their busy and fast-paced environment. Even when successfully arranged, interviews took place in a stressful atmosphere where many participants were reluctant to provide detailed information about the questions asked due to legal, institutional and political constraints.

Despite the guarantee of full anonymity and confidentiality, they usually did not want to be audio-recorded. Leading the interviews was also difficult because their powerful positions allowed them to not only dominate the conversations, but also circumvent the questions to talk about whatever they wanted to talk about instead.

The elite/non-elite divide also shapes the dynamics of encounters between academics and non-academics. Due to the elitist connotations of academia, researchers often receive mixed reactions when they disclose their qualifications during fieldwork. Hierarchies constructed based on one's qualifications might confuse them as to where they are positioned in the grids of power relations in the research environment. For instance, Herod (1999: 321) felt comfortable in using his 'Dr' title during his interviews with union officials in Eastern Europe due to the close relationship between academics and labour movements there, but worried that doing the same in the US would make him look like a 'disconnected academic in [his] ivory tower who has come down to "collect [his] data."'

Arda experienced a similar confusion during his fieldwork. On the one hand, many participants expressed their respect for his qualifications, implying during the interviews that he knew more than they did by beginning a sentence with compliments such as 'As you already know…' or 'Since you are an expert…' Even though he did not know most of the things the participants assumed he knew, this (false) impression helped him engage in conversations more easily. On the other hand, this educational hierarchy discouraged some participants to comfortably share their opinions due to the fear of saying something wrong. In these situations, Arda felt that the participants whom he considered elites thought of him as an elite based on his qualifications, while he did not qualify to be, or identify with, an elite at all.

Anita has experienced some of the same elite/people dynamics in her fieldwork in a key refugee resettlement arena in the US that in a sense demonstrate the flip side of the analysis put forward by Arda. In her work with state policymakers, members of the city government, and leaders of the main refugee resettlement agencies, she has observed a power dynamic with practitioners for whom research represents an unequal relationship with academic actors, and university professors may be seen as elite drivers of research in community-engaged projects. This divide has emerged particularly strongly in a participatory praxis project with city actors after the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a member of the academic elite, she benefited from the privileged reality that her university job and research did not require her to take health and safety risks, while her practitioner partners found themselves overwhelmed by the physical, emotional and socio-economic needs of their constituencies, as well as at tremendous risk of exposure to the COVID-19 virus. Their jointly-designed initiative instead fell into an elite/people divide whereby the academics on the project continued the work on everyone's behalf, inadvertently 'taking charge' and leading to a collapse and complete overhaul of the initiative. Meanwhile, a populist trend that gained ground in the US in conjunction with the rise of presidential candidate Donald J. Trump intentionally connected the academic profession with elitism and un-patriotic values, further generating suspicion for participation in community-building efforts. Anita's lack of attention to crucial power dynamics, her positionality as a representative of an elite sector of society, and a stubborn commitment to western academic approaches of organizing and structuring information and producing knowledge, all contributed to the loss of engagement with the project. The powerful 'home' advantages of ample resources and

project planning skills were quite useless in the face of resistance from the rest of the group. Rather, a new approach based on collaborative trust-building and mutual code-switching was required to rebuild our relationships.

Discussion

As our fieldwork experiences over the course of our academic and professional careers demonstrate, unequal power relations operating in economic, political, social and cultural domains at global, national and individual levels complicate the interactions and exchanges between us and our research participants regardless of how familiar we are with the field site. We argue that the (re-)distribution of power more equally among those involved in research, as well as the dismantling of the dichotomy of the field/home, can better mitigate the ethical, social and practical implications of field research. We propose 'field-home' as a methodological framework that, if employed, can help us moderate the complexities, uncertainties and challenges we face throughout the fieldwork.

Indeed, the reconceptualization of fieldwork place as a hybridized space that conjoins 'the field' and 'home' as 'field-home' as well as the operationalization of the concept of 'field-home' in research is not an automatic and immanent process. Among other things, it requires us to engage in conscious and intentional efforts to critically question and problematize the origins, workings and outcomes of a priori accepted distinctions widely used in fieldwork contexts. It requires us to challenge the normative perception that everyone must have a 'field' and 'home' terrain and feel belongingness to a specific group, community or place. It also requires us to rethink the beginnings, ends and in-betweens of 'the field' and 'home' which, in our experience, were far from being clear-cut and unambiguous.

The concept of reflexivity plays a crucial part in this process. Through being reflexive, we become aware of how our positionalities influence the research process, 'from the nature of questions that are asked, through data collection, analysis and writing, to how findings are received' (Carling et al., 2014: 37). We also become aware of how we themselves experience a transformation from the beginning to the end of fieldwork or how we sometimes transition from being an 'outsider' to being an 'insider' or vice versa in the eyes of participants throughout the process (Herod, 1999: 324). Reflecting on questions such as 'Who is represented, by whom and how?' and 'Who speaks for whom, why and how?' helps us gain a better understanding of ourselves, our participants, and our research environments. Once our awareness of our own privileges, biases and preconceptions increases through self-inspection, we are more likely to avoid reducing participants to 'data sources' without any consideration of their histories, characteristics and agencies. We are more likely to recalibrate our positions vis-à-vis the 'other' in a power-sensitive fashion and, ultimately, quit thinking in either/or terms. Relatedly, we are also more likely to acknowledge the politically situated, contextualized and fluid nature of 'the field' and 'home' (see Nast, 1994: 60) and, by that, embrace the amorphousness, randomness and 'in-betweenness' of 'field-home'.

Our fieldwork experiences have taught us that the socially constructed, subjective, fluid and essentially contested nature of 'the field' and 'home' makes it difficult to delimit the boundaries of both concepts. Therefore, we imagine the spaces, places and settings of research not necessarily as singular and spatio-temporally bounded entities. To be more specific, we imagine 'the field' and 'home' as a multi-sited and multi-scalar

constellation of ideas, practices and norms. Drawing on the literature on critical mobilities methodology, we suggest that 'home' can be imagined as an assemblage of life stories, relationships and experiences we accumulate at different places, times and levels throughout our lives. 'Home' might as well be 'trans-locational fluid entanglements of people, flora, fauna, things, languages, ideas, places and related memories' (Bier and Amoo-Adare, 2016: 17). Understood this way, 'home' may not necessarily signify a specific location (e.g. our birthplace), temporality (e.g. our childhood), community of people (e.g. our ethnic group) or social group (e.g. our family); it might imply all or none of them simultaneously. When decentred from its spatio-temporal foundations, 'home' becomes what we make of it, even in challenging situations where we are assumed to be 'stuck' in a limbo or a state of inertia (see Brun and Fábos, 2015).

While we have documented and analyzed our experiences of having our own understandings of place, identity and belonging mis-attributed by our research participants, it may be instructive for researchers grappling with similar issues to think of 'field-home' as an assemblage that allows us to explore a broader range of perspectives. Taking a page from multi-sited research methods pioneered by ethnographers of groups living in diaspora, we find it useful to explore our own engagements with multiple home-y places as well. The mobility turn in the social sciences helps us recognize the movement inherent even in presumably settled, stable populations. Along with recognizing our complex non-binary identities, acknowledging our multiple 'home' places and 'home' practices can contribute to a richer understanding of how power marks the limits and delimits of 'the field' and 'home'.

Indeed, engaging in self-reflection on our ways of thinking and doing and, consequently, changing our ontological, epistemological and methodological approaches in research is not easy. It is a challenging process that entails confrontation with the knowledge(s), conceptions and practices we have accumulated throughout our intellectual upbringing and professional lives. The process also entails willingness to change our perspectives if new information proves our pre-existing schemas inaccurate. However, we have found that even if such criteria are fulfilled, the process of self-reflection rarely follows a linear and unproblematic path due to the ubiquity of power, as well as the unequal distribution of power, in fieldwork settings. In other words, missteps, misunderstandings and failures have been an inherent and humbling part of our fieldwork experience in general, and our intellectual self-transformation in particular.

When Arda was repeatedly denied access to certain information, people and places in both elite and non-elite settings, for instance, he turned to self-reflection to have a better understanding of how others would possibly see him and why they would associate or dissociate with him – a process that culminated in the reconstruction of fieldwork as a two-way *exchange* of information, emotions and experiences rather than a one-way *flow* of data. In the example of Anita's failure to recognize her cross-cutting privilege during a pandemic project with community partners, she incorporated self-reflection into a collective analysis of the project from its inception, from where she and community representatives pivoted to a more equitable program. There is still much work to do, particularly with regards to meeting our obligations to disseminate the conclusions of our analysis beyond a scholarly audience. The possibility of miss-steps such as these, however, should not deter us from challenging the essentialist foundations of current understandings and practices of fieldwork, particularly towards dismantling the implicit and explicit hierarchies that shape every step of fieldwork, from its design phase to its dissemination phase.

Conclusion

With the increasing impact of critical epistemologies and methodologies on field research, the traditional idea of fieldwork that exclusively focuses on the study of the 'other' in an unfamiliar terrain has undergone multiple challenges throughout the years. Critical approaches to fieldwork have also challenged the simplistic dichotomies widely used in research, such as self/other, insider/outsider and field/home, continuing to shape the way many researchers think about, prepare for and talk about their fieldwork (see MacDougall, 2023). Taking this critique a step further, we argue for the deconstruction of the situated meanings of 'the field' and 'home' and then the reconstruction of both as de-essentialized entities based on assemblage thinking. As our own fieldwork experiences show, unequal power relations at different levels of subjectivity, as well as restricted mobility due to the long-lasting implications of the COVID-19 pandemic, blur the beginnings and ends of 'the field' and 'home' and make such stark distinctions increasingly less germane. Some even argue that researchers are 'always, everywhere, in "the field"' (Katz, 1994: 72). Therefore, a flexible approach that envisages the research space as a hybrid of two intertwined and fluid terrains, an in-between 'field/home', would better reflect and apprehend the complex and multifaceted dynamics of fieldwork.

As fieldworkers, we can make a 'field' out of every 'home', and a 'home' in every 'field' in our ethnographic work, whether it is traditional (on-site) or virtual (online). It is as well possible that we create neither a 'home' nor a 'field'. We can intentionally choose not to, or unintentionally fail to, relate to any place before, during and after our field research. In a context where critical approaches to fieldwork have challenged traditional approaches to fieldwork more than ever and where the pandemic has restricted research activities and mobilities on an unprecedented scale, changing our perspective toward the essentialized concepts of 'the field' and 'home' in research settings could not be more relevant. Consequently, imagining both 'the field' and 'home' as a complex web of interconnections across on-site and online spaces and places, as well as expanding our understanding of field/home to 'field-home', should not be understood as a fad, but rather a fundamental corrective to help transform field research into a more complete, practical and innovative way to build knowledge without compromising research quality, ethics and integrity. We trust that the introduction of 'field-home' as a guiding framework can serve this purpose, and help us rethink many fieldwork concepts, methods and applications we take for granted, leading to a more emancipated and inclusive practice and producing knowledge with greater utility.

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