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To cite this article: Liza M. Mügge (2013) Sexually harassed by gatekeepers: reflections on fieldwork in Surinam and Turkey, *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 16:6, 541-546, DOI: [10.1080/13645579.2013.823279](https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2013.823279)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2013.823279>



Published online: 13 Nov 2013.



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Sexually harassed by gatekeepers: reflections on fieldwork in Surinam and Turkey

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(Received 8 March 2012; final version received 15 April 2013)

This research note focuses on the intersection of gender, sexuality, and age relations with gatekeepers by concentrating on explicit and implicit forms of sexual harassment and intimidation by male gatekeepers toward the author, a female researcher. Comparing fieldwork experiences in radically different cultural settings (Turkey and Surinam) shows that the general dynamics are strikingly similar: being (seen as) powerless can be both a bane and a boon in getting access in the field and information through gatekeepers.

Keywords: gatekeepers; sexual harassment; gender; sexuality and age in the field; research strategies; fieldwork

Introduction

As in any other professional field, women academics also experience sexism, sexual intimidation, and harassment in their work life.¹ During my PhD research on a male-dominated field – politics – being sexualized by many of the men I encountered in the field, including gatekeepers, was the rule, not the exception. Among the more ‘bearable’ instances were compliments on my looks, explicit flirting, asking me out, personal questions or treating me like a ‘clueless little girl’ who needed some help understanding how politics really work. More unbearable, were the nightly phone calls, attempts to kiss me, hands placed on my knee during an interview and indecent proposals, such as sharing a hotel room or having a shower with an informant.

Over the past few decades, the social sciences have developed strong traditions of scholar self-reflexivity during the different phases of the research cycle, including data collection and the analysis, interpretation and dissemination of the findings (see for e.g. Ackerly & True, 2010; Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Mruck & Breuer, 2003; Robben & Sluka, 2007). For instance, feminist scholars have emphasized the unidirectional flow of influence: the researcher exerts power over the researched (Thapar-Bjökert & Henry, 2004). Ethnographic accounts often recognize researchers’ dependence on gatekeepers and their ability to manipulate or hinder research through their willingness or otherwise, to cooperate (see for e.g. Hammersly & Atkinson, 1996; Rutten, 2007). However, regardless of the stance scholars may take on the diffusion of power in the field, they commonly overlook how researchers are

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in fact *vulnerable* when gatekeepers are able to exert power on the researcher and on the research process, on the basis of age, social status, and gender. In this context, implications for scholars' safety and wellbeing are rarely given much systematic thought.

Researchers are expected to heed ethical guides across disciplines, to safeguard the privacy and wellbeing of research participants. Guidelines are laid out by professional organisations such as the American Anthropological Association (Gusteron et al., 2012) or the American Political Science Association (APSA, 2008). Interestingly, in ethical guidelines and publications on methodology little reference is made to the wellbeing of the researcher in the field – when s/he is away from familiar institutional bodies – on how to report sexual harassment, for instance. Regarding the latter the APSA states that:

[s]exual harassment is an unethical and unprofessional activity involving persons of unequal power, authority or influence. Sexual harassment is, furthermore, illegal under Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and Title IX of the 1972 Educational Amendments. It is the policy of the American Political Science Association to condemn sexual harassment. (2008, p. 27)

The importance of these guidelines notwithstanding, it is unclear how researchers should deal with sexual harassment taking place outside the academic environment, in a foreign country by people who are not colleagues.

This research note examines how the intersection of gender, sexuality, and age shapes relations between the researcher and gatekeepers. In analysing instances of sexual intimidation and harassment that I experienced at the hands of male gatekeepers during field research in Surinam and Turkey, I argue that power relations between researcher and gatekeeper are not clear-cut. Although I felt and was treated as powerless, power was – in Foucauldian terms – much more dispersed, fluid and continuously negotiated. I did not openly challenge sexual intimidation in the field in the ways I would do outside the field. Rather, by reflecting on my behavior in my fieldwork diaries and discussing sexuality with locals, I developed strategies which enabled me to complete my research. The next section outlines why my research methodology required a strong reliance on gatekeepers and sketches theirs and my own identity. Subsequently, I reflect on my experiences and describe the tactics and strategies I developed over time to deal with sexual harassment in the field and, therefore, to shift power relations.

Reliance on gatekeepers

For my PhD research on the transnational politics of migrants in the Netherlands, I conducted extensive fieldwork in Surinam and Turkey in several rounds between 2003 and 2005 (see Mügge, 2010). In mapping political ties between migrants' country of settlement and their country of origin, I adopted a 'transnational snowballing' method, thus having to heavily rely on gatekeepers. I identified key individuals in migrant organizational networks in the Netherlands and asked them to share their political contacts in the homeland with me. I would then proceed to interview those contacts in their countries of origin. Conversely, I asked spokespersons of all significant political parties in Turkey and Surinam to name people in the Netherlands, whom I would contact upon my return.

Transnational snowballing from the homeland to migration destination countries was particularly important in the Turkish case, where ties between migrants and their homeland are relatively hierarchical and status-based. When I approached Turkish respondents in the Netherlands, pointing out that it was ‘their’ leadership (in Turkey) that had referred me to them, an interview would not be refused. Radical political and sometimes illegal groups and parties – whether or not in exile – were more suspicious of me and my project. Moreover, political elites outside the realm of formal party politics were difficult to identify because radical political groups tended to pose as ‘cultural’ organisations. In the Surinamese case, politics was more informal, therefore, family and friendship ties played a much bigger role. Only trust and social capital could open access to my interviewees. In short, I was again dependent on gatekeepers.

The vast majority of the ‘big linkers’ occupying key positions in the transnational networks were men above 45 years of age, holding powerful positions in Dutch, Surinamese and/or Turkish politics. These included directors of migrant organisations, members of parliament and of municipal councils, mayors, ministers, and leaders of political parties, trade unions, and civil society organizations. In contrast, I was a white, blond Dutch female PhD student, in my late twenties at the time, and I looked younger than my age, was unmarried and had no children.

Finding a contact in the homeland and identifying the person who had enough authority to arrange access was time-consuming. In the Netherlands, it required multiple interviews with members of the same political groups, and attending events, such as demonstrations or festivals, organized by the organizations in question. Sometimes this form of participant observation allowed me to establish contact with the right persons, simply because I was fortuitously introduced to them by someone attending the same event. In other instances, a gatekeeper would make a phone call in my presence and arrange the desired appointment directly. In such situations, I was often introduced as ‘a pretty girl from the University of Amsterdam’ who needed some help. The ad hoc nature of making appointments made planning in advance complicated.

In Turkey, meetings always took place in public spaces or offices. There, it is also common to invite guests for something to eat, whether this is lunch, coffee with pastries, or dinner. Particularly during the early phases of my fieldwork, I was frequently unsure whether turning down an invitation before or after an interview would be rude or inappropriate, or whether accepting such an invitation was a silent agreement to turn the professional meeting into something akin to a date. In Surinam, meetings generally took place in peoples’ homes. Being alone with a gatekeeper in such an intimate space made me feel uneasy, not least because the houses of the Surinamese elite are commonly surrounded by high fences and the windows are barred.

At the beginning of my fieldwork, when I was getting acquainted with local mores and did not have an understanding of the power relations in the political networks, I felt vulnerable. I tried to remain professional at all times, not to show any emotion of fear or anger, and to ignore gatekeepers’ transgressing behavior whenever possible. This defensive approach was reinforced by my worry that gatekeepers would speak badly about me in their networks, and foreclose all my options for gaining access to my research population.

Strategies and tactics: negotiating power

My initial negative experiences forced me to reflect on the intersection of my age, gender, and sexuality and develop strategies to deal with it during the entire research process. Every night in the field I would write down my experiences in a research diary (see Mügge, 2013). This included a factual description of what had happened during each interview, and an analysis of the implications for gaining access to further interviewees.

I analyzed my emotions, wellbeing in my diary, and reflected on the way I handled each situation. What worked, and what did not. What would I do differently next time? I started experimenting with my behavior. I started to wear serious business-like suits to look older; I tried not to laugh during interviews, and to look more serious. However, none of this had any effect, because I was not being myself. Wearing a fake wedding ring got me into more trouble. In Turkey, it raised questions: if I was married, why did I not have any children? In Surinam, a gatekeeper asked me whether I was really married, pointing at my ring. I explained that it was my fake wedding ring which I used in Turkey to keep men at a distance. He responded: 'Well they have quite some respect in Turkey. Here it is the other way around. We think: a married woman is already hit.'² And indeed when he dropped me home later that day after a long trip he took his chances:

'Are you going to take a bath?', asks B. when we arrive in front of my house. 'Yes, after such a trip.' 'Are you going to do that alone?' 'Yes.' 'Will you manage?' 'Yes, I will manage just fine.' 'Isn't that too cold for you?' 'No.' 'Oh, what a shame, I would have washed you.' I quickly get out of the car, I am disgusted.³

I started to share my frustrations with my Turkish and Surinamese female and male friends. Not only did they give me useful advice, their reactions to my stories helped me understand some types of local gender roles and sexuality in relationships. When we were going out or went on a trip I closely observed their interaction with the opposite sex. Surinam is a small society with a population not exceeding half a million: 'everyone' knows one another. The country has a thriving *mofokoranti* – literally 'mouth newspaper' – and social informal networks on every level are essential for survival. This means that people are careful not to offend anyone whom they might need for a favor in the future. The way my female friends dealt with unwanted male attention was friendly; they successfully rejected men with a big smile and did not offend them.

I realized that in order to adapt I had to be more relaxed about being sexualized. I learned that a playful smile or comment was more effective than being the 'cold' European lady declining or disappointingly ignoring any reference to flirtation and sex. While my 'European way' of declining men seemed to embarrass or humiliate them, they simply accepted a less direct and more subtle 'no'. Men did not usually push things further if I acted more in line with the Surinamese sexual rules I had observed among my Surinamese friends. In Turkey, I learned that a small lie now and then was socially acceptable, and helped to avoid an intimate dinner. It was better than going along, then rejecting requests for follow-up dates or physical contact. In both Turkey and Surinam, I could avoid sexual harassment – to a certain extent – by playing the game without outright rejecting gatekeepers.

From that point on, I could see the advantage of my gender, sexuality, and age for my research. The existing power channels remained, but I had learned how to

navigate them in my favor. I got easy access to contacts, information, and events – such as the inaugural reception of the president in Surinam or high profile party conferences in Turkey. Because many of my gatekeepers wanted to impress me, and sometimes even wanted to ‘show me off’, I was not seen as a threat. Retrospectively, I see that the majority of the male gatekeepers talked relatively openly about political sensitive issues – more openly, I suspect, than they might have done with male researchers.

Discussion and recommendations

Intense reflections in my diary and with Turkish and Surinamese friends prepared me for the most unpleasant situations, and I learned how to navigate the power relations that emerged between me and the gatekeepers I encountered. Fieldwork often requires leaving our academic institutional, occupational, geographic, and cultural spaces. Many young female academics may experience various forms of sexual harassment from older men in powerful positions in their home universities. However, most universities have institutional channels, however imperfect, to address such instances. Such protection is normally absent in the field and, therefore, deserves full attention in the methodological curricula of the social sciences.

To prepare students for sexual harassment and sexual intimidation, we need to treat this as a methodological issue. Here the recommendations of Sluka (1995) for dealing with danger in the field are particularly useful. His advice is to think about ‘acceptable levels’ before you venture out: What are one’s limits? At the same time, researchers should realize that ‘danger’ management can prevent some problems, even if difficulties inevitably remain. For me, this acceptable level meant that I could tolerate flirting, but no physical contact or explicit verbal sexual proposals.

Outside a research setting I would have *never* accepted the way the majority of my male gatekeepers in Turkey and Surinam treated me, but I learned to play according to the local rules. Some feminists would argue that one should always stand up and never tolerate being sexualized. While principled, such an approach would have simply made my research impossible. Gailey and Prohaska (2011, p. 379) experienced a comparable dilemma, but argue that they took back some of the power by obtaining data and publishing their findings. As such they had the last word. And so have I.

Acknowledgments

Guita Hourani’s encouragement to address the sexual harassment I experienced in the field in a guest lecture I gave on methodology at the Lebanese Emigration Research Center in 2008, greatly inspired me to write this research note. I thank my friends Ine Apapoe and Paul Tjon Sie Fat in Surinam and Umut Azak and Yasin Torunoğlu in Turkey for their advice and reflections on gender roles and sex in my interactions with men. I thank the *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* reviewer and the guest-editors for their constructive comments on earlier versions.

Notes

1. See a special section on gender and fieldwork (Women/Politics, 2007).
2. Research diary, Surinam, 8 August 2005.
3. Ibid.

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