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## 38 Doing research on sensitive topics: studying covered Turkish women

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Scholars studying sensitive topics encounter various challenges at different stages of the research. Although any topic can be perceived as sensitive, areas where the potential of physical and/or emotional threat to the researcher and the researched is substantial are generally regarded as highly sensitive. These include, for example, studies on terminal illnesses, death and dying (e.g., Alty and Rodham, 1998; Cannon, 1989; Johnson and Plant, 1996), deviant and criminal behavior (Bergen, 1993; Braithwaite, 1985; Herzberger, 1993) and political and interest groups (Brewer, 1990; Hoffman, 1980; Punch, 1989). Despite the fact that many of the topics that are addressed by the marketing scholars, such as the homeless (Hill and Stamey, 1990; Hill, 1991), aids (Raghubir and Menon, 1998), breast cancer (Pavia and Mason, 2004) and subcultures (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Kates, 2004) are all potentially sensitive, there is little guidance on how to conduct research on sensitive topics (Hill, 1995).

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss potential dilemmas that marketing researchers might encounter while studying sensitive topics and to present possible solutions. However we should stress that our discussion draws from our personal experiences and does not claim to encompass all possible complexities experienced during different phases of research. Specifically, we talk about the problems we faced while we were studying the consumption practices of covered women in Turkey. We believe that the study of covered women provides a good case to trace how methodological, ethical and political problems are interrelated and emerge unexpectedly at various stages of inquiry. Given the intricate and unpredictable nature of the research process, we prefer to present a self-reflective, critical and contextualized narrative of our fieldwork rather than a totalizing check-list of what to do and what not to do. In line with the spirit of critical and feminist ethnographies, our account seeks to emphasize the conditional nature of scientific investigation, the validity of personal experiences as a method of inquiry, the power dynamics influencing the research process and the importance of the subjectivities of both the researcher and the researched (Clifford and Markus, 1986; Marcus and Fischer, 1986; Nielsen, 1990; Roberts, 1981).

### **Studying covered Turkish women**

We have been studying the Islamist<sup>1</sup> consumptionscape in Turkey since 2000. Our project involved researching various domains of daily life, such as fashion, leisure, home decoration and entertainment in which differences between secularist and Islamist consumption styles are particularly visible. By exploring diverse practices and meanings, we sought to portray the plurality, hybridity and tensions which characterize the Islamist consumptionscape and advance our understanding of how individuals negotiate modernity and tradition through their consumption practices (for a detailed discussion, see Sandikci and

Ger, 2001, 2002, 2005). Our study has been an ethnographic inquiry with multiple sources of data and multiple methods of investigation. Over a period of five years, we conducted in-depth interviews with covered and uncovered women, interviewed owners and personnel of Islamist-style clothing stores, attended several Islamist fashion shows, carried out fieldwork at an Islamist summer resort, undertook observations at various sites such as shopping centers, mosques and women's associations, took pictures whenever we were allowed to, and compiled an archive that consisted of news articles, advertisements and company catalogues.

Although the population we are studying consists of men and women from different socioeconomic backgrounds, we are interested mainly in the middle/upper-middle, educated urban women who define and defend their decision to cover as a personal choice. There are a number of reasons for such a focus. First of all, one of the most prominent signs of the Islamist identity and consumption culture is the female headscarf. Beginning in the mid-1980s, a new style of head covering, *türban* as it is referred to in Turkish, emerged in the cities. The *türban* is adopted by urban, educated and relatively well-off young women, who wanted to set themselves apart from rural women who are covered out of tradition. Observing the increasing demand for headscarves and accompanying religiously appropriate garments, several companies catering to the urban women emerged. Soon, religiously appropriate dressing became a lucrative business field with several companies operating in the sector. The 1980s also witnessed the emergence of an Islamist bourgeoisie who developed a taste for conspicuous consumption. Hotels and summer resorts, hypermarkets and gated communities catering to the conservative clientele developed in different parts of Turkey. In almost all sectors of the economy Islamist companies competing head-on with their secular counterparts flourished.

Researching the Islamist consumption culture has been very rewarding and challenging. It has been rewarding because it exemplified a consumptionscape in which aesthetics and politics, modernity and tradition are continuously confronted and negotiated. What we found compelled us to question our own assumptions and re-evaluate existing theories. The study offered a rich case through which to rethink our understanding of the linkages between modernity, postmodernity, globalization and consumption in non-Western societies. The challenges, on the other hand, have been equally compelling. For us, two secular Turkish women, to research covered women in Turkey was an adventure. We faced numerous challenges at different stages of the research: some expected, some not. Researching the Islamists is a sensitive topic, not because of the private and sacred nature of religious practices but, on the contrary, because of their very public and political nature. Turkey has a secular legal system and covering is banned in public spaces and institutions including universities, hospitals and courts. While many rural and elderly women are covered in what is regarded as the 'traditional' style, the urban *türban* is perceived as the symbol of political Islam. For many, the *türban* represents a threat to the secular Republic and should be confined to the private realm. Images of covered students demonstrating in front of the universities, where they are not allowed access, frequently appear in both secular and Islamist media, aggravating the issue even further. Whenever there is an attempt to lift the ban, there is instant political turmoil in the country. Given the intense polarization of views between the secularists<sup>2</sup> and the Islamists, and the symbolism of *türban* and other forms of Islamist consumption practices, the topic is highly political and controversial. Furthermore, for those who study Islamists, there is a

significant threat of being categorized as a sympathizer with political Islam by colleagues, the media and the general public. In the following pages, we discuss some of the methodological problems that we and other researchers have encountered while conducting research on sensitive topics, and also point to some solutions.

### **Researching a sensitive topic**

Renzetti and Lee (1993) define a sensitive topic as 'one that potentially poses for those involved a substantial threat, the emergence of which renders problematic for the researcher and/or the researched the collection, holding and/or dissemination of research data' (p. 5). They argue that the sensitive character of a particular piece of research lies less in the topic itself but rather in the relationship between the topic and the social context in which the research is conducted. From this perspective, any topic can become sensitive, depending on the social milieu. Nonetheless the authors suggest that certain areas of research have a higher probability of being perceived as threatening and controversial than others. These areas include research that delves deeply into the private and stressful experiences of people; explores deviant and illegal activities; exposes political alignments and the vested interests of powerful persons; and deals with sacred and religious matters (Lee, 1993; Renzetti and Lee, 1993).

Sensitivity can introduce different issues at different stages of the research process. The problems can be methodological, ethical, political or legal, and can arise during the design and implementation phases or during the dissemination of the findings (Brewer, 1990; Seigel and Bauman, 1986; Sieber and Stanley, 1988). Adequate conceptualization of a particular topic, or finding informants who are willing to talk, can be difficult. Studying sensitive topics can be threatening to both the researched and the researcher; even the personal security of the researcher may be jeopardized. Trust often becomes difficult to maintain, especially when the research is perceived as threatening, and the relationship between the informant and the researcher can easily turn into one of concealment and deception. The fieldworker can even be perceived to be a spy (Warren, 1988). Nonetheless research on sensitive topics 'addresses some of the society's most pressing social issues and policy questions' (Sieber and Stanley, 1988, p. 55), potentially throws light on taboos and the darker corners of society, and challenges taken-for-granted ways of seeing the world.

Duelli Klein (1983) points out that 'the "what" to investigate must come prior to the decision of "how" to go about doing one's research' (p. 38). However, in many respects sensitivity can constrain what is studied. For example, powerful gatekeepers including funding agencies, universities and research institutions, and sometimes politicians, can impose restrictions on researchers (Broadhead and Rist, 1976; Moore, 1973). Furthermore asking questions about a particular social issue can have major social implications even if the research is never performed (Sieber and Stanley, 1988). How an inquiry is framed shapes the nature and direction of attention and, in some cases, may misleadingly affect conceptions of significant social issues. The framing of the research questions may also carry the risk of classifying the researcher as an accomplice or an apologist, in the minds of informants, colleagues or the public. Consider, for instance, the case of covered women. While there is a vast amount of literature on veiled women and women in Islam, this field of inquiry tends to focus on why women choose to cover themselves, and whether covering is emancipative or restrictive. While there are exceptions, many studies do favor one or the other, and become classified as sympathetic or antipathetic



towards covering and, by extension, Islam. In our own research, we shifted the question from why to how, and sought to understand how women who choose to cover of their own free will adorn themselves. Our interest was in the aesthetic and material aspects of the headscarf and other garments, and of consumption in general, yet, our colleagues, friends and the media kept questioning us about our position on the politics of Islam and whether we were Islamists or secularists; our informants had a similar mentality too. Despite our emphasis on the aesthetics and material culture, informants frequently drifted into discussing the politics of the headscarf ban and other issues during the interviews, and we were often required to clarify our position on the politics of the headscarf. However clarifying our position as an 'objective researcher' has been particularly challenging as we had our own identity politics, and 'objectivity', as it always has been, was rather illusionary and flimsy.

### **Researcher's position**

A major challenge was posed by our subjective positions. When we began the study, we engaged in lengthy discussions about our position as researchers, our biases and preconceived notions. While we were striving to be 'neutral' researchers and respect the way of life of our informants, we could not help but feel distaste towards the women we were to talk to, observe and understand. They were 'them' and surely different from 'us'? No matter how much we tried to empathize and see them as 'normal,' deep down, we could not. It was an enigma for us why modern urban educated women would choose to cover out of their own volition.

We employed a variety of interpretive methods to capture the diverse aspects of the lives and the milieu of the covered women. We observed women in public spaces such as the streets and shopping malls, at fashion shows, political party headquarters and in women's clubs, in the urban environments of Ankara and Istanbul, as well as at seaside vacation resorts. We spent an extended weekend at a popular summer resort for families of covered women. We swam in the all-female pool and eavesdropped on the conversations around us. We joined in their conversations about computers, sports and dieting. Yet we felt most comfortable when we were on the balcony of our room, watching them promenade below, at a distance. After we left the hotel and were waiting for our bus, we looked at each other and realized that we both desperately wanted the same thing: a drink. No alcoholic beverages were served at the resort and, while in our daily lives neither of us drink on a daily basis, and we sometimes go without a drink for a week or longer, those few days without a drink were different. We truly enjoyed that glass of cheap wine and we enjoyed being away from that environment that had not felt comfortable, even though the word we heard most often from the covered women when they talked about the resort was that it was a very comfortable place.

Similar feelings of discomfort existed during the fashion shows we attended and the interviews we conducted with retail shop owners and designers. We felt that they were being distant but perhaps we were being distant too. Interviews with women at their homes were more 'comfortable', maybe because they were uncovered at home. These interviews lasted between two and four hours and were accompanied by tea and cookies.

Furthermore, while not many, a few of our informants attempted to engage us in discussions about religion per se, the virtues of Islam and being a believer, and accused us of not practicing our religion. While we wanted to be unattached researchers, they wanted



to be missionaries. While we wanted to be participant observers at significant female gatherings such as book readings, theological discussion meetings and social meetings at clubs, we faced the awkward situation of being drawn into the position of being potential recruits. Hence we could not do the immersion or the prolonged engagement in the field that are typically the preferred ways of being in the (ethnographer's) field. Nor could we be participant observers in meetings and gatherings that had a religious significance for these women.

What did we learn? One can still obtain rich data despite not being able to be a fully-fledged participant observer and not being able to attain prolonged engagement with the same group of people. But this can only be achieved by spending a longer period of time in the field, talking to larger numbers of people, and observing a broader range of places and social contexts. Our study took more than four years to complete and entailed talking to over 60 informants in different contexts until we felt confident about what we learned. We also found that interviewing some of the informants as a team, especially in the earlier stages of the fieldwork, was very fruitful: while one of us focused on the interview, the other focused on the observations of the home as well as the nonverbal communication of the informant, that is, paralinguistics, chronemics and kinesics. Team interviewing not only improved our observations but also made us feel more comfortable in the informant's territory. Finally we each read and interpreted each transcription independently and then iterated our interpretations. Hence we could check and question each other's lenses.

### **Finding informants who will talk and gaining their trust**

We anticipated that access and negotiating the research relationship would be difficult. The way we look, that is, uncovered, placed us in a box in the minds of the covered women, just as they were in a box in our minds when we began the study. Given the political context and that we are professors at an institution, the university, where headscarves are banned, it was a major challenge to gain their trust. We knew that we would have to be ready to answer all sorts of questions and repel all sorts of suspicions. We could have been taken (and sometimes were) for journalists, or as spies working for secularist feminist organizations, or as political party members, or more commonly, just as the 'Other'. So we had to give a detailed account of who we were and why we were interested in their clothing and consumption practices. We assured them of confidentiality and anonymity, and offered them copies of their interview transcripts and the paper when it is written, which they could edit if they wished. This worked sometimes but not always.

However, before dealing with the problems of gaining access, we needed to deal with the basics: deciding who should be included in our study. There are well-developed methods and strategies for selecting respondents who are representative of the population under study or who are relevant for theoretical purposes. Sampling, however, becomes more difficult when the topic under investigation is sensitive. As Lee (1993) argues, when an issue is perceived as sensitive people tend to conceal their identities and activities; thus obtaining sample elements becomes both more difficult and costly. Furthermore, since the selection of informants and research sites is informed by theoretical purposes and expectations, sampling always requires a sound theoretical framework to begin with. In the case of researching sensitive topics, theoretical reflection and available knowledge can be limited (Lee, 1993), and complex patterns of social organization 'may not be obvious to the researcher *before* the research has begun' (p. 61, emphasis in original).

At the beginning, because their *türban* was more noticeable and prominent than anything else, covered women appeared to us to be a homogeneous group of people. The only available distinction mentioned in the literature was that between peasant women wearing *başörtüsü* (headscarf) out of habit and urban women wearing *türban* out of political motivation. This, of course, amounted to millions of women who looked alike but turned out to be, as any group, much more heterogeneous. There were further complexities to be resolved. In addition to the women who wore *türban* there were also a small number of covered women who wore the black chador, a loose garment that covers the body from head to toe. Should we include them in our research as well, or were they too marginal and distant from our middle-class focus? Black chador wearers are typically associated with *tarikats* (religious sects) which are regarded as highly radical and secretive. Gaining access would be extremely difficult, and potentially, dangerous. On the other hand *türban* wearers are associated more with the Islamist political party members and the middle class. We decided to focus on them, and get access to urban middle-class covered women. Below is the path to research (Sanjek, 1990) which we took.

We started out with a key informant who was the wife of an academic colleague. Our colleague was active in the Islamist party and, soon after, became a member of parliament and quit his job at the university. His spouse is a computer scientist with an MS degree. She comes from a family of uncovered women and she herself used to wear shorts when she was a young adult. We visited her at her home where she was wearing tight jeans and a t-shirt and had her long hair down, uncovered. She was already familiar with some of the research of one of the co-authors. After we explained to her what we were interested in she was very forthright and we had a pleasant conversation about clothes, fashion and consumption in general. She talked at length about different styles and patterns prevalent among different social groups and alerted us to the differences among university students, middle-class professional women, the wealthy and the newly rich. She was willing to introduce us to her female covered colleagues at work, so we succeeded in finding our first six informants, who in turn led us to other informants in their social milieu.

However things got more difficult after that. For example, how were we to find informants from among the wealthy and the newly rich? How were we to find students who would talk to us? In instances when those being studied are members of vulnerable, stigmatized or deviant groups or are difficult of access, snowball sampling proves to be useful, and 'it often represents the only way of gathering a sample' (Lee, 1993, p. 66). In snowball sampling the key informant initiates the links of the referral chain. While bias is almost inevitable in snowball samples, the issue of trust is better handled. As 'the intermediaries who form the links of the referral chain are known to potential respondents and trusted by them' they are 'able to vouch for the researcher's *bona fides*' (ibid., p. 67). Biernacki and Waldorf (1981) suggest that researchers pace and monitor chains of referral in order to maximize sample variability and the theoretical utility of snowball sampling. As they point out, while at the beginning the aim is simply to make sufficient contacts to get the project started, in the later stages, a variety of starting points needs to be utilized in order to ensure extensive coverage of the population. Eventually, certain referral chains may be developed in preference to others because they help in illuminating and developing theoretical formulations.

In the next phase of informant search, we sought to interview university students. Lacking a key informant who would refer us to others, we tried to contact covered students

at our university on our own. When we explained our research, we were politely refused or stood up. Disillusioned and disappointed, we asked our doctoral students to interview any covered women (university graduate or student, urban and covered by choice) they knew personally or could access via their friends, in order to throw a wider net for snowballing. We were able to get some informants but not many. Even when we were able to do an interview with a covered student, she would be anxious and very reserved. By that time, we had realized that it was important for us to interview students because it is during the university years that these women get involved in religious organizations, their convictions become stronger and they eventually decide to cover. So theirs would be a perspective different from the women who have been already settled into covering. However we had also discovered that both our doctoral students and we ourselves had an extremely difficult time finding university students who would talk to us in an open, sincere manner and without fear or anxiety.

Depth interviewing and participant observation, which rely on sustained or intensive interactions with those studied, appear to be ideal methods for building trusting relationships between the researcher and the researched. Yet, as Renzetti and Lee (1993) point out, 'the establishment of trustful relations is never easy', and '[i]n many situations, researchers face hostility and sometimes danger' (p. 101). In the case of sensitive topics, it is common for informants to treat the researcher with skepticism and provide only superficial answers. Several researchers have also noticed that exploration of sensitive information could lead some informants to lie (Bleek, 1987; Nachman, 1984). To minimize this problem, it is suggested that one engages in prolonged interactions with informants, observes them in their daily life, raises related issues after a while, and uses different sources to check the accuracy of the information (Shahidian, 2001). In our case, the difficulty we encountered was not informants who lied but informants who would not talk to us. Ultimately it was luck that got us out of this loop.

Through our contacts in other universities, we managed to locate a recent sociology graduate who was covered and looking for a job. We had a meeting and discussed at length and very openly with her what we were doing and why we needed her help. As she related the topic to the readings she had done, she became excited and was willing to help us until she found a job. She did about 20 interviews for us, all with university students. We worked closely with her, training her and sensitizing her to the theoretical concepts we were interested in, especially before and after her first interview, after the third interview and when she had completed all the interviews. She herself became a second key informant.

If it were not for these two key informants who trusted us, one of whom introduced us to her friends who in turn became our informants, and the second who actually conducted 20 interviews herself, we could not have completed the fieldwork. We were also able to reach several wealthy informants and feminists, again thanks to the spouse of the first informant acting as an intermediary. These two informants made us aware of the popular stores, seaside resorts and other spaces that covered women frequent as well as the fashionable brands of headscarves.

We also interviewed sales clerks and owners of stores that sell headscarves and clothing appropriate for covered women, interviewed designers and formed an archive of virtual, visual and textual material from the media and advertising. We learned about the popular books and magazines covered women read and the television channels they watch, the more intellectual/scholarly journals their role models read and write in. We



read those books, magazines and journals, and watched those programs ourselves. While these were not among the challenges of our research, the familiarity we were able to gain through these means about their social, political, cultural and ideological milieu and interests helped us deal with the challenging moments of the fieldwork. When we could refer to a popular Islamist novel or a television show during the interview, a smile often appeared on the informant's face, and we became less the 'Other'.

Hence finding even two souls who trust the researcher and who are willing to help because they find the topic intriguing makes the fieldwork possible, even in topics that are difficult to research, even when most people are unwilling to talk. What is invaluable is also the media: newspapers, books, advertising, television and magazines, as well as the websites and Internet discussion groups that sensitize the researcher to the mindset of the informants and the discourses that surround them.

### **Struggling with ethical issues**

Ethical issues such as harm, consent, privacy, anonymity and confidentiality (Berg, 2004; Fetterman, 1998; Lofland and Lofland, 1995; Silverman, 2005; Weiss, 1994) multiply and pose major dilemmas in investigating sensitive topics. Ethics provide the basis for conduct in any research (Punch, 1986) and 'research that harms or offends, or that appears to be conducted incompetently, invalidly, or without due regard for consequences, is likely to result in someone . . . questioning the prerogative of the scientist to conduct such research' (Sieber, 1993, p. 15). Perceptions of sensitivity and harm are highly subjective and it is likely that different groups perceive risks and benefits differently. Risks include the invasion of privacy, breach of confidentiality and embarrassment, whereas benefits can be in the form of information and services provided to the informants (Sieber, 1993). It is the responsibility of the researcher to make sure that participants fully understand what it means to participate in terms of risks and benefits; and that they are aware of their right not to participate or to withdraw from the research at any time. As Sieber points out, 'being ethical in the conduct of sensitive research also means being *culturally sensitive* in the way one designs the research and interacts with research participants, community members, gatekeepers, and relevant others' (p. 19, emphasis in original). This requires the researcher to be attentive to the life-styles of individuals being studied and respect their beliefs, habits, values and fears. Such considerations may make or break the research.

Even a basic requirement of doing any ethnography, the deep respect for people's way of life (Fetterman, 1998) can become very difficult in researching topics such as drug addiction or criminality, or even in consumption among Islamist women. As we discussed above, we constantly had to reflect upon our distaste and consciously attempt to empathize with our informants.

The simplest research tool, taking photographs, may become impossible for confidentiality and privacy purposes. We were confronted by ethical issues especially when we tried to acquire visual data. This was one research project where taking pictures or videotaping was next to impossible in most situations, except in the public spaces. Most of our informants did not want to be photographed, yet they allowed us to take pictures of their homes and their clothes on hangers. Whenever it was possible, we took pictures of women walking on the streets, sitting in cafes or strolling through shops. Even though we used these pictures only for investigative purposes and never made them public, we always felt somewhat intrusive and covert while shooting. As Lipson (1994) points out, asking for

consent may alter the course of events at times when certain events unfold in their natural setting and, in such situations, it is better to continue collecting data while making observations rather than interrupting the flow of actions. Deciding on how to proceed and use information gathered in this manner depends ultimately on the researcher's own code of ethics. However, it appears that 'the best way to proceed is to obtain post hoc consent to use the information as data' (Corbin and Morse, 2003, p. 349).

The extended weekend at the five-star summer resort, Caprice Hotel, posed many ethical dilemmas. This is a summer resort designed for Islamist families, with separate swimming pools for men and women, separate discos and separate beaches. Tennis hours alternate to accommodate male and female tennis players. Caprice Hotel frequently appears in the Islamist and secularist media, drawing both praise and criticism from the former and criticism from the latter. All of our informants had heard of this resort, had clear favorable or unfavorable opinions about it, and some had actually been there.

We put headscarves in our luggage although we were keen not to wear them, as we did not want to engage in any deception. But we did not pack as we would normally do when going on our summer holidays: we carefully chose the loosest clothes and long-sleeved shirts. We did not know whether or not we would be allowed into the hotel without headscarves. We were also wondering if and when we should tell the hotel management that we were there for research; if we did not we could not interview the managers and hotel personnel; but, if we did, what if they wanted us out? We decided not to say anything upfront. With our hair exposed, we walked in timidly and approached the reception desk slowly, watching the reaction of the people in the lobby. We registered with no questions asked and felt better from that moment on.

We saw that there were a few other uncovered women whom we eventually realized to be relatives or friends of the family they were vacationing with. Although we were not the only uncovered women at the resort we definitely were in the minority. We checked in and spent a day at the resort without telling anyone that we were there for research. However other hotel guests and waiters kept asking us why we were there, some speculating that we were likely to be journalists or researchers. We answered that we were researchers, academics, spending the weekend there. On the second day we made appointments with the public relations manager and another manager and interviewed them at their offices. We also interviewed sales clerks of the clothing shop located in the hotel.

At the pool, where no one is covered, we were able to be less visible. Since most people were there with their sisters, cousins or mothers, they were sitting in groups and chatting – a great opportunity for eavesdropping. However we could not take any pictures at the pool: no cameras were allowed. In the gardens, restaurants and cafés, we saw great photo opportunities but could not take any pictures even though cameras were allowed: it would have been too disruptive, too rude, and inappropriate. However, there was a professional photographer, as in all resorts, who was shooting constantly. He displayed his photos on bulletin boards located next to the restaurant area and the display looked like a goldmine. We selected about 30 photos and ordered copies. That night, still unsure whether we would be allowed to purchase them, we approached the counter. The photographer was not present. We handed in the receipt to his assistant. The pictures were ready; we paid, got the envelope and headed off for dinner. Fifteen minutes or so later, while we were still at the restaurant, the photographer approached us. He was intrigued by the fact that we were not included in any of the photos which we had bought. He asked if we were journalists

writing a piece about the resort. We disclosed our identities and assured him that the pictures would only be used for investigative purposes and would not be published. Despite our assurance he stated that he could not sell the photos to us for ethical reasons and insisted on having them back. We handed over the pictures; he gave us a refund and he walked back to his studio. Puzzled, embarrassed and somewhat frightened that we would be asked to leave the hotel as well, we sat quietly at our table for a while. Somehow, we had lost our appetite. Nothing else happened. All the visual data we have from the resort is video footage from the balcony of our room – everything was taken at a distance.

## Conclusion

Our aim in this chapter was to reflect on some of the particular problems which we have encountered when we, two secular (or uncovered) Turkish female academics, set out to study covered Turkish women. Even the choice of the word to describe ourselves in the preceding sentence, 'secular' or 'covered', became a point of discussion as 'secular' implies a more political stance than 'uncovered', yet it is associated with 'secularism', a dogmatic position which we do not identify with. What we discuss in this chapter is neither prescriptive nor prescribed but rather highly autobiographical. However our observations reiterate that doing research on sensitive topics involves many complexities, some of which are difficult to predict and often require a creative approach to resolve. In the initial phase of our research we wondered whether or not it would be at all possible to find informants who would talk to us. Being Turkish and female did not help us much in terms of access as the 'us' versus 'them' distinction lingered in the minds of our informants as well as us. Trust, however difficult, was eventually established and with the help of our two key informants we managed to gather data.

When we conducted interviews ourselves we often felt that we were perceived as interested newcomers, spies or potential converts. We realized, in line with Johnson (1975), that access is not an initial phase of entry but a continuing process of negotiation and renegotiation. Whenever our informants attempted to indoctrinate us, we highlighted our positions as researchers, not as potential recruits, and tried to cultivate distance in the interaction. Yet the pressure was strong, and after such interviews we engaged in lengthy conversations with each other in order to try and handle the culture shock and reflect upon the impressions that each of us had gathered. When our informants were hesitant, thinking that we were spies of the media or a secularist political party, we reiterated our role as researchers and talked about this research and other research we do. Once again, doing research with a colleague helped in the constant process of negotiating the field.

In sum, the challenges we faced included finding informants willing to talk, collecting visual data, gaining trust, respecting the informants, dealing with the way the informants perceived us and our own subjective position, and not being able to do prolonged engagement and participant observation in some situations. These issues, which are at the junction of methodological, political and ethical concerns, intermingled and appeared at various stages of the research. The way we attempted to deal with the challenges and the dilemmas was by reflexivity, teamwork and constant negotiation and renegotiation.

Ethical issues are ubiquitous in sensitive research. While it is impossible to foresee all ethical problems, it is important that researchers consider possible concerns and plan their course of action. Otherwise breach of trust, embarrassment and eventually withdrawal of the informant is almost inevitable. As Ayella (1993) states, 'Field research highlights the



researcher. Some researchers, like informants, are simply better able to establish rapport and to feel at ease in a new, let alone strange, setting' (p. 112). We were not one of them, not in this fieldwork. Unlike the case in any other research we have done and any other new and strange field setting we have been in, in this case, we felt uncomfortable in all the settings where we conducted our research, less in some and more so in others. We encountered several ethical problems. At times, we felt most embarrassed, yet we learned a lot. We learned not only the dynamics of the Islamist consumptionscape in Turkey, not only the intricacies of doing research on sensitive topics, but also about ourselves as researchers, our own prejudices and biases.

## Notes

1. We use the term 'Islamist' to refer to those who are politically religious, to distinguish it from secular Muslims who are believers without an affiliation to political Islam.
2. Secularists refer to both practicing and non-practicing Muslims and non-believers, some of whom are dogmatic in their view of secularism.

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