Urban Matters

Commentary



In the field: Notes on the eviction stories in an informal settlement

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Issue: Evictability- Displacement as a systemic condition and an everyday lived experience

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I was raised around stories of eviction in an informal settlement. No surprise that I returned to my childhood place and studied eviction in my dissertation. I wanted to bring together the individual stories of residents and analyze how evacuation, or the possibility of being evacuated, affected them. My fieldwork took place in a squatter (gecekondu) neighborhood (Limontepe) in İzmir, Turkey. This place was announced as an urban renewal area in 2012, but an agreement has yet to be reached between the residents and the state. Therefore, the transformation has not been solidified yet, and the future for the residents is still ambiguous. Here I share some methodological notes on how the life stories of Limontepe residents have so far contributed to my research on urban transformations.

In this research, I weaved together methodological approaches of life stories, walking as a method, different technics of ethnography, and the materiality and phenomenology of constructing a home/neighborhood and its relation to evictability. In this multilayered methodological setting, I decided to extend the interviews into conversations that involved neighbors' meetings, individual encounters inside the houses and outside, while walking up and down the neighborhood and observing how the different spaces within the neighborhood are organized and reorganised. The dynamic structure of everyday life affected, changed, transformed and enriched my encounters, shaping my methodology and leading me to continuously reframe my questions. After having conducted a number of pilot interviews that helped me to get an outline of the neighborhood topology, I recognized the indispensability of a multi-layered, fragmented and variable methodological approach to better understand this geography where settlement and displacement are intertwined.

In 2016, eight years after my family had moved from the neighborhood, I visited this place with my husband. I wanted to show him where I was raised. At that time, my cousins were still living there. My mother also joined us. We all walked around the neighborhood and talked about our childhood. Since "Walking, like telling stories, is the movement between places [and memories]" (Hein, High, 2011, p. 218), we remembered and shared some childhood memories and talked about how the place was implicated in our lives then and now. On the evening of that day, I decided to write the story of the neighborhood before the city destroys it, as a marginalized asset, as the periphery that is open to urban interests (Suttles, 1968, p. 11). Within the span of a couple of months, I visited the neighborhood on a daily basis as a researcher; I walked its streets alone and with research participants; I sat on the corners of the neighborhood and watched the passers-by during the rush hours; I sat on the balconies and watched the mid-day rhythm of housewives, boys and girls. I revisited my past and present in the neighborhood. I gathered the residents' life stories and conducted auto/ethnographic research.

As someone who has lived in the neighborhood for quite some time, I am aware of the importance of making residents' voices heard (Daniels, 2002, p. 56). This added another methodological layer to the research. I started my fieldwork by listening to my mother's (55) life story and realized how much the fear of eviction is at the centre of her place-making practices. According to my analysis, having very limited resources can be an important part of this fear. However, constructing their houses with their hands (and

“nails”) is the most important reason for their infinite fear. For example, Sadegül (45) tells how the building of the house affected her and her husband’s life and the sacrifices they made for it:

It is highly possible that my hair turned grey in constructing every single part of my house. Maybe it’s just a squatter house for others, it’s small, but I wouldn’t change my house to a ten-story building because I put my labor all over it. I did it; my husband did it. My husband ate simit (Turkish bagel) with ayran (made of yoghurt and water) to build it, and I baked and ate my bread outside in the tandoor.

Hanife’s (54) narration also exemplifies how she embodies the construction of her house: “We sacrificed our youth here. Most probably, the sand of this house is still in our nails. Your mother knows. We scraped the sand and stone with our nails.” Sacrifice is an often repeated phrase in women’s narratives, and it speaks to their anxieties about the eviction: “We got up one day, dozers came. Police arrived, too. Everyone was crying. We only had a squatter house. They demolished most of the squatters” (Hatice, 58). Neslihan was one of the residents whose house was destroyed: “We already had nothing and barely did anything. We were very sad when it was destroyed” (Neslihan, 53). In informal settlements, the narrations of construction and destruction go hand in hand.

Those narrations are quite precious and, in some ways, private. This is partly why it was difficult for me to listen to the life stories of the urban poor in my field, the Limontepe residents. Listening to narrations of poverty and deprivation was quite hard. But these narrations help me as a researcher to have a deeper sense of social processes through the actors directly involved. Thus, I listened to inhabitants’ life stories and located their experiences of eviction, poverty and precarity into the gecekondu landscapes, rather than opting for simple and/or sophisticated answers to predetermined questions. Life stories demonstrate that experiences of eviction, poverty, and precarity go beyond being mere instances but a total engagement with life itself. It is these stories that create scientific knowledge; moreover, these experiences are not specific to certain periods but parts of the gecekondu life. Thus, collecting life stories is an important source for my research—based on memory, recall and narration, life stories help one to have an – in-depth understanding of the place in question. While listening to the life stories of Limontepe inhabitants, I kept in mind that “memory is not always friend[ly]”. Instead, memory “reveals partial truth and is sometimes unreliable and unpredictable” because it “selects, shapes, limits, and distorts the past” (Chang, 2016, p. 72). Nevertheless, it was the only way to collect the feeling and experience of eviction and how the awareness of the possibility of the loss of the place shapes one’s existence in place.

During the life storytelling, I tried not to interfere with the narratives as I proceeded in line with certain themes that I created, such as domestic relations in childhood, education life, marriage decisions, immigration decisions, house building, having children, providing the house with basic services, and the urban transformation process. After collecting their narratives, I turned to different questions about the neighborhood. Answering these questions, some of my respondents once again returned to their life stories.

An in-depth understanding of the experience with the place can also be reinforced by

visual material – after all, memory, as it works in words, has a certain corresponding image in our minds; words appearing in images, images talking through words. So, I took time to go over the family albums with the participants. Talking about the photos is a powerful tool for filling in the blanks in the stories. Photographs help to create a more valuable discussion environment than one-on-one interviews about life in the settlement (Daniels, 2002, p. 63). They made it possible to have an idea about the face of the region in the relevant period as well as placing the bodies in their already told settings.

I reached out to residents beyond the initial group with whom I made the first contact and whose life stories I heard first. I approached this second group through the narrations of the residents in the first group and with their help. This way I could access more life stories, a wider variety of narrations of the place and its transformations, and more contributions to a narration. I prefer to express this method with the metaphor of lace: Each life story creates a motif of lace. Here lace reflects different hand skills (by quoting the interviews extensively), not that comes out of one hand, by adding motifs end to end, each piece of which is knitted by others. I argue that this method is the only resource available in informal areas where access to official data is almost impossible.

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