

GAINING ACCESS: COURTING MINORITIES IN POSTWAR BOSNIA¹

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The Type of Access Desired

For my dissertation, I sought deep access to ordinary individuals who live as minorities in Bosnia in order to understand their everyday strategies for negotiating relationships with neighbors and colleagues who are members of the majority nation. I used intensive interviewing to hear from minorities about narratives in their own terms; narratives that weave perspectives and experiences about inter-ethnic relations. In addition, I conducted participant observation of inter-ethnic interaction in neighborhoods. I sought intimate access to the everyday lives of four local families with whom I lived; I asked them to take me on visits to friends and acquaintances beyond their neighborhoods.

Hooks

I consider the hooks, strategies for gaining access, and means of developing rapport as inter-connected components of a *process* of cultivating trust. This process began in 1996, when I worked in Bosnia as a human rights officer for an inter-governmental organization. It continued during preliminary field research, and is ongoing to this very day. This process involved getting to know the needs, concerns, and cultural expectations of Bosnians. Rent was the most concrete hook I presented to the local families with whom I lived. In a post-war economy like Bosnia's, where unemployment hovers around 40 percent, and even those employed often only irregularly receive an average salary of some 180 USD/month,³ my host families viewed rent as a crucial boost to their financial security. Once living with host

¹ Chapter in Feldman, Martha, Jeannine Bell, and Michele Berger, eds., *Gaining Access: The Inside Story*, Lanham, M.D.: Altamira Press, 2003.

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families, I attempted to cultivate their trust through repeated and respectful interaction in and around the home. Otherwise, the only specific carrots that I used were limited services that I offered to several local voluntary organizations, whose work and network of contacts I judged important enough to warrant involvement. For one, I translated documents. For another, I taught conversational English. I wanted these small services to contribute something to members of the community from which I was taking. I also believe that these services helped me build rapport, because they fostered a more reciprocal relationship between my “subjects” and me.

In general, I believe that my hosts and NGO activists agreed to assist my work because of a tradition of hospitality, the prospect of benefits that might accrue from gaining a good reputation among foreigners (new subletters or aid), and their confidence in my commitment to listening and learning in a respectful way. Beyond the financial rewards I offered them, my host families may have consented to participate partly as a diversion from the hardship and tediousness of everyday urban life in Bosnia. One local gatekeeper,⁴ a local NGO activist, who embraces a culture of “helping” and who is familiar with my previous work in Bosnia connected me to a host family and some interviewees.

Strategies for Access

Given that many scholars⁵ and Bosnian minorities considered the war to be about eliminating minorities, I foresaw that access would be difficult. Not even preliminary fieldwork, however, prepared me for the exceedingly high levels of inter-personal mistrust

³ Bukvic, Nedim, *Economic Brief for Bosnia and Hercegovina*, Sarajevo: Resident Mission of the World Bank in Sarajevo, 1998.

⁴ A gatekeeper is someone who allows or denies investigators access into a setting. See Sieber, Joan E., *Planning Ethnically Responsible Research*, Newbury Park: Sage Publications 1992, p. 29.

⁵ Examples include: Hayden, Robert, “Imagined communities and real victims: self-determination and ethnic cleansing in Yugoslavia,” *American Ethnologist*, 23(4): 783-801, 1996; Donia, Robert, and John V.A. Fine, *Bosnia and Herzegovina: A Tradition Betrayed*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1994; and Gjelten, Tom, *Sarajevo Daily, A City and Its Newspaper Under Siege*, New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995.

that I encountered. One minority friend who denied me an interview warned me: “here in Bosnia, even breathing is political,” and thus controversial and dangerous.

My primary strategies for gaining access were living with minorities and participating in their everyday lives (for participant observation) and snowball sampling (for intensive interviewing). For participant observation, I rented a room in a minority family’s apartment for three months; this schedule allowed me to live with two different families in two separate neighborhoods in each of two Bosnian cities. To identify potential minority host families, I asked minorities with whom I had previously worked for suggestions. I told both the gatekeepers and potential subjects that I was trying to understand the perspectives of ordinary Bosnian individuals, including the problems they encountered in coping with their everyday lives – particularly their relationships with their neighbors – in such a difficult post-war period. I promised to listen intently, commenting that many foreigners spent too much time talking with politicians and too little time listening to ordinary Bosnians, whose concerns were important for building a sustainable peace.

I did not approach minority neighbors and activists for intensive interviews until I had conducted sustained “soaking and poking”⁶ and had repeatedly interacted with them over several months. I felt they would consider discussing personal experiences only after having an opportunity to judge my trustworthiness. In attempting to overcome a post-conflict atmosphere of intense distrust, I spent considerable time with Bosnians expressing interest in activities and concerns that stretched beyond my research interests. Once I participated in a minority NGO’s workshop on women in the media; I sat another evening for four hours with neighborhood women discussing medicinal herbs.

Those in the direst circumstances appeared more approachable than others. One Serb single mother who fled during the war and returned to Sarajevo afterward with her teenage

⁶ Fenno, Richard, *Home Style: House Members in Their Districts*, Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1978, p. 249.

son spent several hours one morning in a café sharing her personal experiences. She confessed that she was thankful for merely a place to sit so that she could give her son some privacy in the single room they subletted from an acquaintance. Her plight made her more willing to talk. In contrast, some slightly less desperate Bosnians who realized that I had nothing “concrete,” such as jobs or connections to influential people, to offer them were understandably hesitant to delve into sensitive inter-ethnic issues.

My attempts at gaining access were further complicated in the middle of my research by war in neighboring Kosovo. NATO bombing and violence by Serb extremists heightened anti-Serb sentiment in Muslim-majority Bosnia where I worked and anti-American sentiment by Serbs. It was simply not a good period for me to recruit new Serb respondents. Luckily, I had been working with local human rights NGOs assisting Serbs and socializing with a group of Serb families for months. As a result, I had already achieved a level of rapport that enabled me to continue participating actively in neighborhoods populated by Serbs and to conduct interviews with them.

A successful strategy in getting to know a few NGOs’ minority members was volunteering. To gain access to one minority NGO’s clients, I agreed to an activist’s suggestion that I follow closely several cases on which the NGO had provided free legal advice. Furthermore, after consulting with legal experts on the validity of one case alleging ethnic discrimination and at the request of the minority plaintiff, I observed a hearing. This provided an intimate look at interaction between a minority and majority officials, and even helped bring about progress in the case, though it jeopardized my impartiality.

Impact of Identity

One of my primary methods was ethnographic participant observation.⁷ While I knew I could never climb out of my own identity and become a Bosnian, I felt that gaining deep understanding and access demanded that I convincingly convey respect for Bosnian traditions and experiences and not call attention to my foreignness. I was pleased when one Bosnian friend described me as “part American and part Bosnian.” Through my observation of Bosnian culture, discussions with other investigators, and attention to the way Bosnians treated me. I estimate that many Bosnians considered me to be a “Western female student keenly interested in people in Bosnia and in reconstruction of multiethnicity there.”

In a tense environment and one where Bosnians believe that Westerns want locals to express cultural tolerance, I found participant observation to reveal more about inter-ethnic relations than a one-shot interview. Participant observation allowed me to build rapport over a period of time and to observe actions in a multitude of contexts and with a variety of people. This made it impossible for locals to tailor constantly their behavior to match Western hopes. Though most Bosnians assumed my views were infected by the bias of American policy, they did not impose on me the prejudices that Bosnians would attach to someone with roots in one of Bosnia’s ethnic groups. I endeavored to make the most of this relative neutrality by conducting interviews without a translator.

I found that women and older persons were more willing to discuss their inter-ethnic experiences than others. I attributed this partly due to gender roles and partly to the

⁷ On general discussions of participant observation, see: Dewalt, Kathleen M. and Billie R., “Participant Observation,” in Bernard, H. Russell, ed., *Handbook of Methods in Cultural Anthropology*, Walnut Creek: Sage Publications, 1998; Fetterman, David M., *Ethnography: Step by Step*, Applied Social Research Methods Series Vol. 17, Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1989; Glaser, Barney G and Anselm L. Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1967; Sieber 1992; Lofland, John and Lyn H. Lofland, *Analyzing Social Settings*, Third Edition, Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company 1995; and Kirk, Jerome, and Marc Miller, *Reliability and Validity in Qualitative Research*, Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, Qualitative Research Methods Series, 1986. For cases where scholars have employed participant observation and discussed that method in their cases, see: Fenno 1978; Liebow, Elliot, *Tally’s Corner*, Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1967; Rieder, Jonathan, *Canarsie: The Jews and Italians of Brooklyn against Liberalism*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985; Eckstein, Susan, *The Poverty of Revolution*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977; and Levine, Daniel H., “Popular Groups, Popular Culture, and Popular Religion,” *Comparative Study of Society and History*, 1990, pp. 718-764.

connection between their strategies of negotiating with “others” and their wartime experiences. For instance, I found it extremely difficult to talk with minority men of fighting age, whose wartime experiences were generally horrifying. Men beyond fighting age were more forthcoming. One young male minority who fought for the Muslim (majority)-led army declined an interview and hoped that I could protection to male respondents. But this rejection could not be explained merely by intimacy with horror, because several women told me of their experiences with rape, while some Bosnian men freely re-told war stories to male investigators. Instead, I believe gender roles in Bosnia made it unlikely that young men would share their feelings with women.

Building Rapport

In cultivating rapport and building trust, I attempted to respect Bosnians and to convey passionate concern about my research problems and their practical impact on peoples. On more than a few occasions, informants and colleagues mentioned that my early communication of enthusiasm influenced their willingness to speak with me. I attempted to be a good listener, which persons recently experiencing war particularly appreciate.⁸ Some Bosnians volunteered the view that my living with local families and knowledge of the local language demonstrated my willingness to listen and learn. Reflecting on my interview questions, several Bosnians commented that they were impressed by my knowledge of Bosnia and my unwillingness to settle with superficial responses. To help meet a few of Bosnians’ practical needs, I also offered tiny favors, such as connecting Bosnians with humanitarian organizations that might be able to assist them or giving them rides.

Access achieved

One indication of the access I achieved was the amount of time – sometimes four hours –some Bosnians spent with me discussing highly sensitive issues. On a more

⁸ Kent Jennings and David Jones reminded me of this.

worrisome note, other signs included the level of emotion that some of my subjects expressed, from sobbing during an interview to breaking out in a rash just after one. In other cases, my use of multiple methods exposed divergence between *opinions* expressed in interviews or coffee visits, and *actions* that I was able to witness as part of a neighborhood community. For instance, one minority informant repeatedly told me, “I’ve never paid attention to ethnicity.” But as I observed her neighborhood interactions, I noticed that she considered her new neighbors of the majority group as disrespectful and avoided them. In other cases, I noticed a progression in the level of trust. Toward the end of my stint volunteering, a minority NGO critical of interference by Westerners sought my opinion during a workshop. After living with one minority woman for two months, I was invited to intimate family gatherings.

Disengaging

Because I lived in four different neighborhoods within Bosnia, I had to disengage from Bosnians five times – once partly in each locality and then when I left the country. During my stay in Bosnia, I continued to visit former neighbors, including families and activists. I was not always able, however, to live up to my goal of properly disengaging in the end. In my second site, I missed teaching my last English class and thus my planned “good-bye” session because of illness from overwork. I tried to apologize to my students in a letter. Once back in the US, I have written notes and sent photos to informants and subjects; I also talk on the phone with my closest friends there. I will never completely disengage from the Bosnians who, though struggling to survive, brought me into their homes and lives. These people, their stories, and our experiences enrich virtually every day of my life.