

Chapter 10

Researching Sensitive Topics: The Case of Sexism and Gender Discrimination at Turkish Universities

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ABSTRACT

This is a methodological chapter, discussing various reasons why sexism and gender discrimination at Turkish universities might be a sensitive topic for research and how to overcome the obstacles associated with researching such a sensitive topic. The reasons why sexism and gender discrimination might be a sensitive topic for research include the research participants' possible identification with a victim position in a sexist environment and a resulting loss of self-esteem on their part as well as the university management's potential disapproval of having one of its faculty interviewed about perceptions of sexism. In this study various research methods are discussed and evaluated, ranging from various forms of snowballing to more randomized ways of finding participants. One tentative conclusion of the present study is that research on sexism and gender discrimination at the university requires the support of powerful academics willing to function as key persons.

INTRODUCTION

This is a methodological study of sexism and gender discrimination at Turkish universities as a sensitive research topic. One reason why very few studies have been made on sexism and gender discrimination in Turkish academia is

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-9163-4.ch010

that the topic is not only difficult to research but also sensitive. One possible explanation for the sensitivity of the topic could be that academic women to varying degrees internalize the norms and expectations of the surrounding culture and hence are prevented from recognizing that they are indeed subjected to discriminatory attitudes and actions. Another possible explanation focuses on how those informants who have been targeted by sexist and discriminatory attitudes and practices may find it hurtful and damaging to their self-esteem to reveal what they have experienced. Here one should also be aware of the fact that the unwillingness of informants to share their experiences of sexism and gender discrimination may be reinforced by the unwillingness of the surrounding society to be reminded of the existence of such phenomena. The present study will explore and elaborate on these explanations with the help of data collected from interviews with Turkish university academics.

BACKGROUND

In many Western countries, there are laws to protect and secure gender equality in all spheres of life. In these countries many studies have also been made on gender equality at the university in the last 45 years (Lewin & Duchan, 1971; Jones & Lovejoy, 1980; Tripp-Knowles, 1995) and according to the recent literature, there is no overt gender discrimination in the academia (Roos & Gatta, 2009). Instead, the difficulties that women face in academia are expressed in terms of hidden or subtle discrimination (Roos & Gatta, 2009; Morley, 2006).

Pettigrew (1998) has elucidated the dynamics behind the transformation from overt to subtle discrimination in Western countries. He suggests that this transformation is related to the pressure coming from the public recognition that discrimination and discriminatory expressions and practices are not acceptable. According to Pettigrew, under democratic conditions overt prejudice turns silent and hidden but still survives. The same should be true for sexism at the universities. Since gender equality has become the norm and since it is also common that women defend their rights, it should be harder to discriminate against them overtly. Hence, whatever kind of discrimination that survives could be expected to be hidden and subtle. However, this does not mean that sexism has disappeared in a Western context. For instance, even in Finland, with one of the the highest rate of women professors within the EU, female

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