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Something for everyone? Changes and choices in the ethno-party scene in urban nightlife

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Chapter 4 Collecting material

Sometimes, the starting point for research is a well-developed theory, while at other times it is the absence of detailed knowledge of a phenomenon that is the driving force behind a study. My research questions were developed as a result of an unexpected discovery of a new research setting which could add important information to our current knowledge of the changes that are taking place in contemporary urban landscapes. In the period between January and May 2005, I gathered data on the urban nightlife in Amsterdam and Rotterdam. My main goal was to map this in order to divide it into separate spaces. This mapping of Amsterdam and Rotterdam was a very useful exercise when it came to learning more about these cities' diversity and variety. During this mapping process, I accidentally came across Moroccan and Turkish parties which were being organized regularly in popular clubs that belonged to the inner-city nightlife scene. This immediately caught my attention and, after some exploratory interviews, I realized that I had stumbled upon a dynamic and vibrant setting which had never been studied before.

What follows is detailed information on how I conducted my fieldwork. In the first section, I will provide insight into my ethnographic design, while in the three that follow I will explain my research methodology of participant observation (section 2), in-depth interviewing (4.3) and the collection of secondary data (4.4) in detail. Because gaining access is a very important factor in how successful and valid ethnographic research is, I will address this issue in paragraph 4.5. Finally, in the last paragraph, I will pay attention to the process of writing ethnography. This will deal with issues of data gathering during the ethnographic fieldwork, the analysis of the fieldwork and the process of writing up the study.

4.1 Ethnographic approach

In the previous chapters I have argued that most of the academic reports on nightlife lack the voices of ethnic minority young people. In most of these accounts, however, other voices, such as those of the club owners or bouncers, are well represented, while the ethnic

minorities are talked *about* instead of being actively involved in the research. A research design that gives a voice to all of the groups involved in nightlife must contain in-depth interviews and a detailed observation of the activities taking place. An ethnographic approach suits this purpose perfectly.

In recent decades, ethnography has gained popularity in branches of social research other than anthropology. In its most characteristic form, it ‘involves the ethnographer participating in people’s daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions, in fact collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research’ (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983: 1). Its primary purpose is to describe what happens in a setting, how the people involved see their own actions and those of others, and place this in the context in which the action takes place (Bryman 2004). Hammersley and Atkinson describe a setting as ‘being constituted and maintained through cultural definition and social boundaries’ (1983: 3). In this study, urban nightlife in the Netherlands is the setting of the research. An important boundary thereof is its historic situatedness. Research results can only be understood when the dynamics in wider society are integrated. When it comes to the nightlife experiences of ethnic minorities, the contemporary political and economic climates are important. The responses of the participants in this study must always be analyzed within their context and cannot easily be transported into another era or place.

An important research tool in ethnography is participant observation. Indeed, the definitions of ethnography and participant observation are often used interchangeably (Bryman 2004: 293). I use the term ethnography to apply to a research method in which participant observation is one of the most important methods of data gathering. Additional tools used in this study are: in-depth interviewing, the collection of secondary data and internet research. In the following section I will now provide a more detailed account of these research methods.

4.2 Participant observation

In this study, participant observation has been conducted at several parties within the three ethno-party scenes. As a participant, I observed how the ethnic clubbers dressed, danced and interacted with each other. More specifically, I paid attention to the structural characteristics (age, ethnic background, gender) of the dance crowd and their 'nightlife behaviour' (amount and types of drinks, drug use, dance styles, group size, flirting). I also gathered information on the size of the entrance fee and the prices of drinks. Outside and in the entrance hall I observed the process of entering the party by looking at the people who queued outside, and the behaviour of the bouncers and the style selectors. Furthermore, my presence at the parties also gave me information about the atmosphere, the music and the setting. As a tall, young white woman, who was slightly older than the average clubber, I could not blend in with the crowd at every party, particularly at events which had no other white attendees. Despite my somewhat negative feelings of standing out in the crowd at some of these parties, I tried to listen to and engage in conversations with staff members, bouncers, DJs, bar personnel and individual clubbers as much as possible.

Before going into a party, I would have already spoken to one of the organizers in person. During this initial contact, I always explained the purpose of my research. Typically, an offer was then made to put me on the guest list. As these parties are generally planned well in advance, most of the organizers were very pleased to actually see me at their event. As a result, they enthusiastically introduced me to other staff members and their friends (I will address the issue of access more extensively below). This enabled me to get in touch with and make appointments to conduct interviews later in the same week with other staff members, bouncers, DJs and visitors.

In addition to these often very useful contacts, I also engaged in conversation with my fellow clubbers. After presenting myself as a researcher of nightlife, I asked them brief questions about their age, friends, if they were enjoying the party and why they came to this event etc. At the end of these five minute conversations, I asked the individual clubber (and his or her friends) to participate in my research by making an appointment for an

interview later that week. In all three scenes, people reacted differently to my invitation to take part in the study. Overall, these brief conversations inside the venues proved to be a good way of getting in touch with different social groups of clubbers.

So that I could remember all of my observations and conversations, I made field notes on the spot, which I wrote out immediately after arriving home. This method of participant observation proved to be very useful, because I not only had the opportunity to observe the scene, but it also helped me to gain the trust of the organizers and make contact with the people involved.

Periods of fieldwork

My fieldwork into the Turkish clubbing scene took place between September 2005 and March 2006, when I conducted participant observation at seven parties. These were made up of two parties from each of the four organizations mentioned in Chapter 3 section 3, save for *Keyifland*, which I only visited once because it dropped out of the scene during the fieldwork period. During my visits to the Turkish parties, I managed to have brief chats with 43 clubbers, 25 of whom agreed to meet me later that week for an interview. I also kept in touch with important key individuals such as the DJs and party organizers during the entire fieldwork period. In general, Turkish clubbers were very open and willing to participate in my research project.

The fieldwork into the Asian party scene took place between September 2006 and May 2007. From September to December, I conducted participant observation at each of three parties, while between January and May a student took over the fieldwork. In total, we visited nine parties which were equally spread over the Asian party scene. During our visits we contacted and engaged in brief conversations with over 60 clubbers. Unfortunately, however, only nine agreed to be interviewed, and the research assistant had to deploy other methods to attract respondents. The bouncers and DJs were also reluctant to talk to us. Instead, the research assistant used her own social network of Asian friends and asked them to introduce her to young Asians they knew and who went to Asian parties.

The fieldwork into the Moroccan leisure scene took place from February to June 2007. Time constraints prevented me from

extending the research period. In this time I visited five Moroccan parties, three of which were organized by *Marmoucha* and two were Urban Raï Zone events arranged by the *Argan* youth centre. Unfortunately, I did not manage to visit the annual Hafla Shaabia organized by *SMP*. However, I was able to include this party in my research because I had a good contact within the organization and was able to obtain a detailed account from a fellow researcher of Moroccan youth. During my time at the Moroccan parties I managed to speak to many of the visitors. In particular, my conversations with the women went very smoothly and some of them even approached me to talk. In total I spoke to 46 people. Despite their openness and friendliness, however, none of them agreed to meet me later that week for an interview, instead offering to continue the conversation at the party.

4.3 In-depth interviewing

As an ‘outsider looking in’, my role of observer at the parties helped me to notice emotions, bodily movements and other information which helped me to ask the right types of questions during the interviews. In each ethno-party scene I conducted several in-depth interviews with party organizers, the DJs who frequently performed in that particular scene, bouncers, and clubbers.

I composed a topic list for each group of respondents (visitors, DJs, organizers and bouncers), which I used at all three scenes. The subjects for the party planners, bouncers and DJs mainly dealt with their experiences of a particular scene, and their opinions on nightlife in general and the ethno-party scene in particular. There were also questions about their future plans. The topic list for the clubbers was more extensive and contained more detailed questions. The first set identified the participants’ general characteristics, such as level of educational attainment, age, family situation and daily activities (school or work), in order to locate each respondent with respect to age, economic status and educational achievements. The second set of questions related to their nightlife activities in general, while the final set asked specifically about their experiences within the ethno-party scene. The interviews were conducted at venues chosen by the respondents, and right at the start the participants were informed about the purpose of the research. I managed to get a

spread of clubbers based on gender, age, educational level, favourite party within a scene and clubbing experiences. The complete interviews were fully transcribed and a qualitative data program was used to manage the analysis.

In the Turkish clubbing scene I formally interviewed the head of each of the four party organizations and asked additional questions during my visits to their events. I also interviewed three Turkish DJs with whom I kept in touch during the entire fieldwork period. They introduced me to their friends and every time we met we talked extensively about Turkish music and the Turkish clubbing scene. In total, I interviewed 25 clubbers varying in age from 17 to 26 years old, three DJs and four party organizers.

A research assistant helped me to conduct the interviews in the Asian party scene, managing to question two party organizations, two DJs and 21 visitors to Asian parties. I interviewed one DJ, one party organizer and six clubbers. Organizers from all three party organizations were interviewed, as was a former organizer of Asian parties. He turned out to be a key respondent, who managed to connect us to a very popular but also very busy DJ. He also helped us to make contact with the organizers of two of the Asian parties who had been difficult to get in touch with. In total, three DJs who often performed in the Asian party scene were interviewed, as were 27 clubbers varying in age from 16 to 22. We interviewed 18 young people of Chinese descent, two with Taiwanese origins and five with an Indonesian background.

In the Moroccan leisure scene, the organizers of all three party planning companies were interviewed. All of them introduced me to their co-workers with whom I conducted additional interviews. I also questioned two Moroccan DJs, and they gave me the contact information of their colleagues and friends. Unfortunately, I did not manage to carry out any in-depth interviews with any of the clubbers I talked to at the parties. Instead, I extended my brief conversations in the clubs and spoke to 18 men and women of Moroccan descent more extensively. These interviewees varied in age between 20 and 25. Due to the helpful contacts given to me by the organizers and DJs, I was able to conduct six additional interviews with so-called 'Moroccan leisure experts'. Two worked as volunteers at the *Argan* youth centre, one had just started his career as a DJ in the Moroccan

leisure scene, and two were involved in the organization of cultural activities for Dutch-Moroccan youngsters.

4.4 The collection of secondary data

Contemporary young people spend a lot of time behind a computer surfing the net. When I went on the internet to gather information about ethno-parties, I came across sites which were used by Turkish, Moroccan and Asian youngsters to talk about up and coming events. These written accounts helped me to formulate questions for the in-depth interviews and provided me with insight into the varied and often straightforward statements and opinions about the different parties. Furthermore, most of the party organizations have their own website upon which they announce and promote their forthcoming events. On all of the sites there is a separate section described as a 'photo gallery' which contains images of clubbers at previous parties. I visited these sections frequently and compared the people depicted and their outfits at each of the parties. This provided me with information on the differences in the cultural characteristics of the crowds. I was also able to gauge which parties were very popular and visited by many clubbers and which were less busy. Finally, I also collected flyers and posters. The lay-out of the flyers and the written texts proved to be very important. In the Turkish party scene, for instance, different languages were used on the flyer. One party organization promoted its events in English, another used Turkish and the third company only used Dutch. The pictures on the flyers also revealed much about the marketing strategies of the organizations. Some were of very sexy and provocative women, while others contained more neutral pictures of the companies' logo, a live band, or the DJs. I used the pictures, flyers and posters on many occasions when making presentations about my research

4.5 Gaining access

Access to the research field is not simply a matter of physical presence, and is about far more than the granting or withholding of permission for a study to be conducted (Hammersley and Atkinson 1984: 55). A club is a semi public setting where permission to enter is in hands of the bouncer or doorman. Because I generally fit the description of a favourable visitor (white, female and clubbing age)

I do not usually have problems getting into a club. Access to the ethno-parties was mostly even easier, because I was put on the guest list by many of the organizers. I was pleasantly surprised by their openness and willingness to participate in my research. Although I persuaded some of my friends to join me, I attended most of the parties on my own, which initially led to feelings of discomfort because I was not used to such an experience. This feeling was heightened because no-one else in the clubs seemed to be alone. I, therefore, immediately scoured the venue looking for a place where I could settle for a moment to absorb the atmosphere, look at the crowd and prepare myself for my task as a researcher.

At some of the parties it took me just a few minutes to feel more comfortable, while on other occasions these feelings stayed with me for the entire night. I soon realized that the ethnic composition of the crowd played a huge role in this. If I was the only white woman, I felt out of place and stared at, and it was hard to overcome my feelings of discomfort and approach people. So, although access to the research location was fairly easy, accessing the research group was sometimes more difficult. I especially felt out of place at the Asian parties, which was mainly due to the significant physical distance between the average clubber and me. Not only was I much older than the average crowd (I was 30 at the time of the fieldwork) and from a different ethnic background, but I was also much taller than most of the Asian clubbers, which made me literally stand out. My research assistant, who was of Chinese origin, fortunately had more success in approaching the clubbers. At the Moroccan and Turkish parties there were more white women like myself, as well as many men and women close to my age, which made me feel much more comfortable.

Another issue related to access is the extent of the cooperation I received from the research group. As I mentioned earlier, the DJs and organizers in the Turkish clubbing scene were very helpful, showing me around at their parties and even introducing me to their friends. Likewise, the clubbers I made contact with were also willing to participate in my research. The conversations at the clubs as well as the more formal interviews were very open and even 'fun'.

4.6 Writing ethnography

Immediately after visiting a party I wrote out my notes in my so-called fieldwork diary. In it, I also noted ideas, questions and detailed descriptions of outfits. All of the interviews were transcribed and coded. During the coding process I initially followed the topic list, which corresponded to my theoretical framework. In the process of transcribing I added several new codes which corresponded to the topics brought up by the respondents. For instance, many of the participants talked extensively about negative media reports and the growing tension between themselves and the native Dutch residents in the Netherlands. These items were placed in the topic of 'political climate'. I used the same codes in each of the three scenes. After my analyses of the first ethno-scene, I wrote down the list of codes with a description of their content. I used the software program Kwalitan to organize, store and analyze the fieldwork diary, the transcribed interviews and the internet information, including the pictures, flyers and photos.

Describing the research group

In sociology, and especially in ethnographic studies, it is important to be aware of the power relationships between the researcher and the researched. Not only does the researcher have a major impact on how the research material is presented, but he or she is also in a powerful position when it comes to representing the respondents. During the process of writing, I had to make several conscious decisions about the use of words. These days, words which are related to migrants and migration are neither neutral nor objective categories, but are instead contested and subjected to the political climate.

Throughout this book I predominantly use the words Turkish, Moroccan and Asian young people when referring to the consumers of the specific ethno-parties. With the terms Turkish/Moroccan or Asian, I am predominantly referring to the ethnic backgrounds of their parents, which plays a role in their cultural orientation at leisure times. The majority of the respondents were born and raised in the Netherlands, or moved here during the early years of their lives. These young people are also often defined as second or one and a half generation migrants. Although the terms

Dutch-Turks, Dutch-Moroccans or Dutch-Asians better reflect their imbeddedness in Dutch society, they are also problematic. Not all of the respondents have Dutch nationality or dual citizenship in both the country of origin and residence. Instead, whenever possible, and when the context is clear, I use the terms young people or youngsters. When necessary, for instance during the comparison and concluding chapters, I use the terms Turkish, Moroccan and Asian young people.

The terms, young people and youngsters, merely point to a stage of life instead of a fixed age category. Young people are those who are still involved in education or in the first years of their career. Most of them are aged between 16 and 35 years old, are unmarried, and do not have children.

The category of Asian young people also needs clarification. During the interviews, none of the respondents from the Asian party scene referred to themselves as being Asian. Instead, they identified themselves as Chinese, Taiwanese or Indonesian. However, at the group level, when they discussed the crowds at Asian parties, they often used the term Asian. Likewise, the Asian party organizations, which advertize their events as being for 'Asians', use this geographical definition to include a wide range of ethnic young people. Accordingly, when I write about the visitors to Asian parties on the group level, I will refer to them as Asian young people, and when I discuss their individual experiences, I will take into account their ethnic backgrounds by addressing them as Chinese, Taiwanese/Indonesian youngsters.

A final remark that I would like to make is that when I use terms such as Moroccan, Turkish and Asian young people or youngsters, I am referring to a specific category, namely the young people who visit ethno-parties. I do not intend to make statements about all of the young people in these ethnic groups. Not everyone visits ethno-parties. Accordingly, the outcome of this study does not necessarily relate to young people who do not participate in these scenes.