
A Zone for Deliberation? Methodological Challenges in Fields of Political Unrest

KARIANE WESTRHEIM & SØLVI LILLEJORD

University of Bergen, Norway

ABSTRACT This article outlines certain problems and challenges facing the qualitative researcher who enters fields that are either extremely difficult to access or potentially hostile towards outsiders. Problems and dilemmas in such contexts are highlighted by reference to fieldwork research among PKK (Kurdistan Worker's Party) guerrillas in North Kurdistan, Turkey. The article is part of a larger study on knowledge production and identity development in the PKK. The theoretical foundation draws on the Freirian tradition that is also labelled emancipatory or liberating research. The article discusses challenges within this particular line of research and presents the idea of a 'zone for deliberation' as a potential arena for developing intersubjective understanding in cases when the experiences of informants and interviewer are culturally and politically diverse.

Introduction

Within education research there is a renewed interest in politically motivated research, questioning the meaning of 'objectivity' and 'elimination of bias' (Cameron et al, 1992). These questions are also central within critical theory and critical pedagogy, which are the broad theoretical perspectives underpinning this article. Major research positions in politically motivated research are promoting methods of inquiry, conducted *for* and *with* relevant agents. Conducting research *with* somebody has an undeniable qualitative aspect, pointing to the dialogical relation between the researcher and his or her informants. This characteristic is also clarified when Fielding (2004, p. 251) argues that field research is never something one does *to* research subjects but something done *with* them, using dialogue and participation.

A characteristic of qualitative investigation is that new understandings emerge and new knowledge is being constructed through dialogues between researcher and informants (Kvale, 1996). This meaning-making process presupposes the development of an intersubjective location for inquiry and dialogue, a *zone* for deliberation. We argue that in this kind of field the zone also entails a political socialisation process containing an educative element, challenging the parties involved to critically reinterpret and reformulate their political positions. However, this process requires a foundation of genuine, mutual respect. In this article we ask if mutual recognition (Honneth, 1995) is at all possible when individual experiences and frames of reference are extremely diverse. And what are the particular challenges for emancipatory fieldwork in fields where political unrest and conflict are present?

In order to show how the concept zone for deliberation makes sense in emancipatory research, we will throughout the article be drawing on experiences from fieldwork among fighters in the PKK (Kurdistan Worker's Party) guerrilla forces. In the presentation of findings from this fieldwork, we also will discuss ethical and practical dilemmas in research on the margins. Even though the political aspirations of the PKK organisation as a whole have been thoroughly described by other researchers (Van Bruinessen, 1988, 2000; Robins, 1993; Kutschera, 1994; Hassanpour, 1994; Gunter, 1996; Ergil, 2000; White, 2000; Koivunen, 2001; McDowell, 2004; Alinia, 2004; Özcan, 2005; Westrheim, 2005) and by the organisation itself (Öcalan, 2003), the voices of

individual members are seldom heard. The interviews conducted with former PKK guerrillas referred to in this article clearly show the importance of uncovering the micro level of the organisation for our improved understanding.

There is little research on Kurdish issues. Especially lacking is research on the consequences of the ongoing war between 1984 and 1999 (Koivunen, 2001). Only a few years ago, all visitors had to seek permission from the local authorities in order to enter the region, and in most cases access was denied. Local contacts or informants risked punishment, detention or even their lives by talking to, or helping foreigners. Even though the Turkish government has initiated reforms after 2002, fieldwork in this region is still a major challenge. In 2002, when Westrheim first visited Amed (the Kurdish name for Diyarbakir), a city situated on the banks of Tigris and regarded as the capital of the Kurds, there was no need for entry permission, but she was under constant police surveillance, and her interpreter had to report his activities to the local police. During the next visit to the region in 2004, this state of emergency was lifted, but there was a tacit popular understanding that this was little more than a strategy change. Every step outsiders took was watched, while people feared for their lives. Amed is, due to the war between Turkey and the PKK, like an open prison, surrounded by military bases and police units. Military aircraft control the air space and there are 'secret listeners' everywhere. Still, people carry out their everyday activities.

Koivunen (2001) writes that for Kurds, warfare and early death are part of their shared collective memory. They still fear reprisals and the police. This was obvious when Westrheim, after having climbed the steps of a building in total darkness, finally entered the flat where the interviews were supposed to take place. She was immediately told to turn off her cell phone because of surveillance. For the researcher in this situation the cell phone was of course a 'lifeline', the only means of communicating with the 'outside world'. While deeply engaged in the conversation, a sudden spontaneous illegal demonstration on the street brought all the informants to the balconies, leaving the researcher behind with her tape recorder running. This and other surprising events during the interviews with the guerrillas made this fieldwork different from the structured interview procedures described in Western research literature.

The various strands of politically motivated research are often grouped and generally termed emancipatory research (Humphries et al, 2000, p. 3). In emancipatory research, the researcher is normally interacting with people who are, in one way or another, marginalised. Marginalised people do not necessarily live *outside* society, but rather on the margins, and marginalisation can just as well take place *inside* a society that is oppressive and alienating (Aronowitz, 2000, p. 13). Marginalising processes are therefore also found *within* marginalised groups. Due to the contemporary rapid processes of globalisation and a subsequent need for more intercultural understanding, research on the margins seems more needed than ever. In this line of research, with its various conflict lines and potential conflicts, Booth (1996, in Truman, 2000, p. 26) reminds us of the importance of regarding informants as people with their own stories to tell, and not solely as a source of data for the researcher's narratives. This idea of looking for the story within the interview is in line with the obvious connection between predominantly oral cultures and narratives (Lillejord & Søreide, 2003) and with Plummer's (2001, p. 1) call for a revival of a humanistic foundation for social research basing itself on life stories.

There is a multitude of theoretical perspectives in emancipatory research. The three main perspectives are founded in *humanistic psychology* (Humphries et al, 2000, p. 4), *feminism* (Weiler, 1991; hooks, 1993/2000, 1994; Martin, 1994) and *critical theory* (Freire, 1972; Shor, 1993; Harvey, 1990; de Koning & Martin, 1996; Truman et al, 2000, Westrheim, 2004). All these perspectives are in certain respects linked to Freirian concepts and critical pedagogy. Critical theory provides a framework for analysis of power relations intertwined in oppression and marginalisation that through dialogue, reflection and praxis enable the individual to initiate changes (Aronowitz, 2000). Hatch (2002, p. 17) argues that one of the purposes of critical inquiry is to raise the consciousness of those being oppressed as a result of historically established structures tied to race, gender, and class. Increased consciousness may provide improved understandings of personal or social situations and lead to action and social change (Freire, 1972; Giroux, 1988, 1994; Carr, 1995; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997; McLaren, 1997; Hatch, 2002; Mertes, 2004), and it might therefore be assumed that participation in social movements has a liberating potential.

A Fieldwork Based on Trust

The aim of this study is to outline some challenges to the use of emancipatory fieldwork in situations of political unrest, and to show how the researcher can deal with these challenges when individual experiences and frames of reference are extremely diverse. The fieldwork referred to in this article was conducted during spring 2004 in North Kurdistan, in the city of Amed, which is regarded as the Kurdish capital. The city has a city wall – the second largest after the Chinese Great Wall. Fearing riots and PKK support from the Kurdish population, the Turkish military and security police have taken control of much public and private life. Their presence is highly visible wherever you go in the Kurdish region.

It was in these surroundings that interviews with a group of five former PKK male guerrillas between 22 and 34 years of age were conducted. They were all present during what became a lengthy conversation lasting for almost two days. Two of the informants had stayed with the guerrillas for five years. They were also the ones who spoke most freely. During the first part of the interview one of them, a young man of 27, dominated the conversation; mainly, he talked about the background, aims and ideology of the PKK. Because of his eager enthusiasm, and because of the obvious respect others had for the PKK ideology, it became somewhat difficult to direct talk towards the main theme of interest for the researcher, namely, how the former guerrillas perceived the outcome of their stay with the guerrillas with regard to their own political awareness, socialisation and knowledge development.

The group of informants was heterogeneous. While the older informants seemed to know the aims and scope of the organisation quite well, the youngest used idealised, normative narratives to talk about friendship among the guerrillas and the love and respect they, as newcomers, were shown by the older guerrillas and commanders. Towards the end of the second day, the researcher encouraged them all to tell a story about something that had made a profound impression on them, i.e. a critical incident. This triggered off emotions, and with tears in their eyes, they narrated elaborate stories about courage, sacrifice and eternal friendship. While the interviewer expected to get more details about the educational programme of the PKK and how the organisation trained its cadres, the informants were more concerned with specific phenomena, for instance, certain battlefield incidents, relations between male and female guerrillas – how they as traditional Kurdish men were taught to respect women through the radical and political thinking of the PKK – or the way they learnt to behave in specific ways in order to become better persons, and, finally, how all this gradually transformed their lives. The five informants spoke around the same three themes: devotion and fidelity to Kurdistan, the Kurdish people, and the need for the armed struggle. They also claimed to have learnt to see and judge things *differently* in the guerrillas, meaning they were no longer inclined to take for granted everything they were told. Even though the PKK declared a ceasefire in 1999 (which was resumed on 1 June 2004), these former guerrillas were quite nostalgic about their life in the guerrillas, where they felt accepted and respected for the first time in their lives. They would readily leave their families, jobs and other commitments to join the PKK again if they had to.

This fieldwork and the interviews with the former guerrillas raised some fundamental questions which are worth discussing. While we argue for the importance of meticulous preparation for interviews, we will also show how all this preparation, however necessary, may be futile when the interviewer faces unforeseen and unforeseeable events. Most confusing in this specific fieldwork was that the term 'interview' did not seem to adequately describe this long two-day conversation with the PKK guerrillas. A more proper description of the interview situation was the gradual emergence of a *zone for deliberation*. In this completely unfamiliar field, it was necessary to start with a reconstruction of the informants' universe to establish a foundation for the dialogue between informants and researcher. Also, the idea of a zone for deliberation might be perceived as a productive context for learning environments more generally. In the wake of globalisation processes, institutionalised education all over the world has to accommodate a diverse student population. Increased diversity challenges schools and universities, which subsequently have to broaden their repertoire for educational dialogues with students, in particular on topics that are ethnically, culturally and politically sensitive.

It should be noted that due to its highly politicised character, the fieldwork we describe presupposed a high level of trust; in various ways sanctioned by the PKK. As we will show later,

both the informants and the interviewer were under constant surveillance. If anything had been interpreted as out of line, the research process would probably have been aborted quite abruptly by external actors. Research in this conflict-ridden environment presupposed that the PKK trusted the researcher. Without their trust, the fieldwork could never have been carried out. This, of course, restricted the researcher's room to manoeuvre and inevitably colours the interpretation of data. While contextual constraints influence and regulate any kind of research, they were omnipresent throughout this particular fieldwork, focusing on the PKK guerrillas and knowledge processes.

The Interview as a Zone for Deliberation

In qualitative research the role of the researcher is not that of a distant observer (Hatch, 2002). Rather, as Kvale (1996) shows, the researcher actively participates in the co-construction of data with his or her informant(s). In this understanding of the research process, it is assumed that knowledge is always mediated through the positioning of the researcher. The researcher is always, in one way or another, situated in the context in which the research is carried out, even when the researched field is an unfamiliar battlefield with strong political tensions. The researcher is neither distant, nor embedded, but strives to maintain a balanced, deliberate, interpretative stance throughout the research process. This trait was particularly obvious in the fieldwork that is being referred to in this article.

When interviewer and informants have different cultural and political backgrounds, the challenge is to establish a foundation of mutual recognition that facilitates dialogue. Geertz (1994) explains the frustration when the researcher needs to give voice to what appears alien. Carol Kramsch (1993) proposes the concept 'contact zone' to describe important learning and development that takes place as people and ideas from different cultures meet. Rommetveit (1974) refers to a 'temporarily shared room' for mutual understanding and Homi Bhabha (1996) talks about 'the third room', a locus where cultural expressions and meaning are translated and interpreted in a way that supports intersubjective meaning (Rutherford, 1999; Westrheim, 2004, 2005). Plummer (2001) describes a 'hallway' with a variety of entrances composed of narratives and stories. We suggest bringing these perspectives together and propose the concept a *zone for deliberation* because it resonates with the descriptions of communication between researcher and informants in some recent research literature. We also see it as more in line with the theoretical perspective in this article. The zone of deliberation is a *locus*, a temporary meeting place that should be used to air different and differing perspectives. When the meeting between researcher and informants entails co-constructing intercultural meaning, there will always emerge a zone for deliberation where researcher and informants struggle to understand each other. As long as there is dialogue and communicative action (Habermas, 1981), this zone is an area for *potentially improved* understanding. The concept of a zone for deliberation is, in other words, contextual and communicative rather than idealised or empathic. It presupposes trust and open-mindedness. Processes within the zone are dialectical and dynamic and may be experienced as frustrating because of the lack of firm ground. One has to negotiate for a more solid foundation, actively exchange and question perspectives, views and positions in search for better arguments.

Several of the Kurdish informants said that, in order to fully comprehend their situation, a person would have had to participate in the movement. We will, however, insist that it is possible to understand other people without sharing their life situation and experiences. The interviewer's ambition is to try to understand what appears strange and unfamiliar to outsiders, and an alternative approach is to enter a zone for deliberation and engage in the informants' reflections and experiences. Kathleen Blee (1991) describes particularly challenging fieldwork that she did on women's involvement in the Ku Klux Klan. While Blee expected to have negative feelings for her informants, she was surprised to learn that, except for most political topics and questions of religion and race, she shared many of the everyday assumptions and opinions expressed by her informants (cited from Back, 2004, p. 272). Katrine Fangen's studies of neo-Nazis (2004) also show how studies of extreme groups presuppose a *zone* or *space* where researcher and informant can develop a shared understanding. Fangen admits that had she encountered her informants in other settings, she would not have wanted to interact with them. During her fieldwork, however, she managed to move beyond a barrier of dislike by trying to get to know and understand the person behind the

group attitudes and actions. When a researcher follows a group of people over time, they gradually become individuals with sympathetic and unsympathetic characteristics (Fangen, 2004, p. 134) and no longer primarily representatives for a category. Similar sentiments may be experienced by an interviewer who is entering a strongly politicised field, and this variety of conflicting perspectives is a primary characteristic of the zone for deliberation.

It is, therefore, important to underline that entering a zone for deliberation does not necessarily imply that we have to accept the other's values altogether. The goal is to learn more and understand better, not to reach consensus or become an enculturated (Wenger, 1998) member of the group. Within this intersubjective zone for deliberation, understanding develops through interaction between researcher and informants. In order to respond to the interviewer's questions, the informants are obliged to think, formulate an answer, listen and reformulate. The researcher undergoes a similar process listening to the answers, trying to understand and reframe questions in order to avoid misinterpretations.

In order to illustrate this point, we will use an excerpt from the interview where one of the guerrilla fighters speaks. The informant (I) talks about a transformative experience that the interviewer (W) struggles to understand:

W: You tell me that you have become a 'new' person. Can you explain how this happened?

I: Before I joined the guerrillas I was no one. I wasn't aware of anything. I believed everything they told me. Now my eyes are open. I can see clearly, I can see and understand.

W: But are you not still the same even if you understand more or see things from a different perspective? How does this make you another person?

I: No, you don't understand. You can't understand because you are not a part of the PKK. You haven't been there. To understand you have to be a part of it.

W: But can you try to make me see what you see?

I: In Turkey they will always make you believe the official version of what is going on in Kurdistan. You are influenced through media, politics and educational institutions. People don't understand so much of what is going on; they believe what they are told. PKK changed this – they made people more conscious of who they were and what was actually happening to the Kurds. When I talk about being a new person, I talk about this process. PKK is telling the truth.

W: But what about the influence of the PKK – have you thought of the possibility that they are actually manipulating you to believe what they want you to believe?

I: No, they never tell you what to believe or think. They urge you to think for yourself, to discuss and think critically.

W: But again – isn't it a bit drastic to call this process transformation to a new person?

I: I know it is difficult to understand, but when you understand something, you just add it to what you knew before. You just see more of the same. When the Kurds finally experienced that they had something of their own, they wanted to get rid of the oppressive attitude that they usually face from most levels of the Turkish society and in all fields. In a way this experience was like a new birth for the Kurdish people. This is transformation.

The conversation went on and, even if the concept of transformation still was viewed differently, the two parties managed, through deliberation, to move beyond their own presuppositions in order to try to understand the other's perspective.

A Rare Kind of Field

In the preparatory stages of fieldwork it is important to identify potential field-specific problems and work out how to respond to them. There are, however, situations – and even fields – where

preparation is more difficult than in others, simply because the field where you seek answers to your research questions is filled with unforeseen and unforeseeable challenges. The field research surprises you! In the fieldwork reported here, the field seemed to challenge the overarching scheme of interviewing techniques itself.

In qualitative research the researcher wants to find out how people act, feel, mean and think about certain phenomena, and encourage the informants to articulate their experiences. This is not always as simple as it sounds. Sometimes fieldwork is carried out in environments characterised by unwillingness, open resistance or even hostility towards the researcher and the research being done. Fielding (2004) has conducted several studies in hostile environments, with the British extreme Right in the early 1970s to recent research on the police corps. His research shows that the groups exercising the strongest social closure and sometimes also hostility are not necessarily extreme out-groups, but might also be professionals within medical and health-related trades, the law or religious groups.

Similar experiences can be reported from the PKK fieldwork that was carried out in an extremely hostile environment. In this case, however, the hostility is interwoven in the surrounding political context and not within the organisation itself. Researchers who study political out-groups are often welcomed because the groups seek support from and are dependent on the goodwill of the outside world. However, groups may also become hostile if they feel that the researcher confirms established and negative attitudes towards the group or if there seems to be a lack of commitment from the the researcher's side. On this note, Goffman (1989) reminds us that there will always be a structural asymmetry between researcher and informants because the researcher is free to leave the field while the informants are not (Fangen, 2004, p. 132).

Resistance is sometimes an intrinsic part of the research process and can turn out to be an important way to understand the culture being researched. Preparation for fieldwork and entrance to the field is a process of negotiation. In qualitative research we are always negotiating access (Fielding, 2004, p. 250), and thorough knowledge of the field facilitates this process. Even if you prepare yourself for the unexpected, there will always be situations that are impossible to imagine and for which you consequently are not prepared. Finding yourself in a situation remote from your previous experiences, you have to improvise. Westrheim's first meeting with the former PKK guerrillas took place in a political party's office. With 15 men seated along the walls, she was supposed to present her research project. Towards the end of the session, she was interrupted by one of the participants, who abruptly said: 'This is a party office and has nothing to do with the PKK'. This statement came out of the blue and was totally unexpected. She thought she was addressing her informants, and a written presentation of the project had also been sent to the local contact person weeks earlier. In hindsight, and in light of the hard sanctions against people who are regarded as PKK sympathisers, this surprising statement makes sense. People generally do not dare to admit their sympathies for the PKK; for others, it is even difficult to expose their Kurdishness. The situation, however, required some kind of immediate response from the researcher. Had she misunderstood the appointment or got the address wrong? Was she actually talking to a group of people with no connections to the PKK? What about her trustworthiness now? For a moment she was bewildered, but decided to stay calm and continue with the presentation. So, in the middle of a second try, a young man suddenly got to his feet, telling her that they were ready to go. She followed him, and they went down the stairs to a car where the real informants were waiting. The meeting in the office was just a way of observing the researcher, to get a sense of her intentions, and to gain time in case the PKK would change their minds. The interview situation, presumed to be controlled by the researcher, was in reality in the hands of the group she was studying.

Silenced Stories

Marginalised people often perceive themselves as excluded from participation in democratic social processes. This was also the case for the informants in this study, who claimed that their experiences, language and culture had been suppressed and marginalised by a hegemonic culture. At the same time, they expressed the view that their own excluded narratives, experiences and voices were revitalised through critical discussions and political agency in a social movement. Researchers also have experienced that informants find it liberating to tell their story to an outsider

for the first time (Woodward, 2003, p. 37). Even though the informants made it clear that they regarded themselves as part of the organisation, their stories reflected personal experiences, loss, sadness, and also hopes for the future. The young men from the PKK were astonished to be asked if it was the first time they as individuals talked about their stay in the guerrillas to an outsider. They were so used to a collective way of acting, thinking and talking that a question requiring an individual answer for a moment totally perplexed them.

What turned out to be more of a group conversation required improvisation from the researcher. While the idea originally was to conduct individual interviews, it soon became clear that as a member of the PKK, you never talk for yourself. Your voice is the voice of a collective, so to have individual conversations on PKK issues was pointless. The hours spent with the Kurdish informants introduced the researcher to a world very remote from her own and illustrated the point made in the research literature, that as a researcher, you have to be context-sensitive.

Language problems necessitated interpretation. The interpreter, who was hand picked by the organisation, obviously perceived himself as a gatekeeper, trying to keep the communication as fluid as possible. There are, as Saunar (1996, p. 155) argues, 'keys and locks' to communication, such as words, acts, symbols or performances that either introduce a person into communication or expel the person from dialogue. As a researcher you are a stranger and an outsider, and the atmosphere in which the interview takes place is crucial for success or failure. It seemed as if the interpreter understood these problems and tried to assist the researcher.

Sitting in the small living room ready to talk, the atmosphere was tense and it was difficult to get started. The researcher got the impression that to the informants she was the personification of a Europe that had always let them down. Only after they had heard the researcher's view on the Kurdish question did the informants start to talk. From that moment on it became almost impossible to stop them. Instead of trying to control the situation, the interviewer encouraged the informants to talk freely (Terkel, 1978). This resulted in a conversation that took many directions and lasted for nine hours the first day and seven hours the next. The informants, nevertheless, managed by and large to keep within the main theme of the project. They seemed pleased to get the opportunity to talk about their experiences and the researcher tried to be open and intuitive in her listening, not interrupting with too many questions. These two days ended with a shared meal on the floor, and the researcher was even invited to stay overnight, which she politely declined and went back to her hotel.

By marginalised groups, research may be perceived as an opportunity to 'tell the outside world' what the group is 'really' like (Fielding, 2004, p. 251). Towards the end of the interview, the PKK informants urged the researcher to 'tell Europe' the true story of their struggle. As pointed out by Fielding (2004) and Pieke (1995), people who live in areas of war or political unrest sometimes expect the researcher to act as a messenger. In this way the research is not only of interest to other researchers, but may also be of use to the people studied – and for people in similar situations. With reference to the Kurdish question, Koivunen (2001, p. 51) argues that research may serve as a tool for local people to decontextualise the events constituting their lives and give future relevance for their society. It could, therefore, be argued that it is the moral obligation of the researcher to act as a citizen and use the knowledge produced through research in the best interest of the people who are being researched. Having seen hundreds of children die in a Brazilian shantytown in the 1960s, Sheper-Hughes (1992) felt that her anthropological research should be active and committed and a field of knowledge as well as a field of action (1992, p. 15). Writing can thus be a process of resistance, or 'writing against terror' (Koivunen, 2001). Interviews with the PKK informants confirmed this. One of them asked the researcher to add her voice to theirs – an act that would strengthen the message and maybe help them to move from silence to speech, so the researcher left the field with new questions, dilemmas and responsibilities.

What made this fieldwork and interviews different from others? The guerrillas showed a strong commitment and engagement when talking about the struggle, what they had learnt and how the knowledge obtained influenced their lives and self-perceptions. But it was also striking how unfamiliar it was for them to talk about *knowledge* as part of a political and armed struggle. When the themes circled around ideological and political topics they seemed relaxed and willing to talk, but when the interviewer touched on their individual stories and life world, they looked annoyed and struggled to find words. However, this attitude changed little by little and they became more

willing to share their experiences and personal reflections. Being allowed to talk freely about issues familiar to them, they could use their own language, rich in allegories and metaphors. These proud young people were far from the informants earlier in the interview. They tried to make the researcher see the world from their perspective and understand why the struggle must go on until they have gained their rights. To achieve this, they were all willing to die for the cause.

The informants also took control of the recording. Technical tools can be treacherous things. In the middle of an interview the minidisk failed, leaving the interviewer quite stressed. Luckily, the old fashioned tape recorder that was brought along as a back-up saved the situation, but then there was a need for breaks to turn the cassette. The informants noticed it, so after the first change of a cassette one of the informants simply took charge of the recording. Afraid of losing valuable data, the researcher also took notes of everything that was said. Writing turned out to be difficult since there was no electricity in the building and part of the interview was carried out in dusk or darkness. This, of course, had practical implications, but the bonus was a growing feeling of togetherness that actually seemed to ease the differences between interviewer and informants.

Whose Knowledge Counts?

A major challenge in qualitative research within the area of political conflict and social change is that it may be hard to comprehend this field from an outsider's perspective. The further away from our own everyday perspectives the informants are, the harder it is for the researcher to understand how and why they see things as they do; *what* they understand. The greatest distance between people is, it appears, not space, but culture (Ladson-Billings, 2004, p. 267). The challenge is therefore to understand a different worldview altogether, and this is where a zone for deliberation is most needed. Worldviews and systems of knowledge are symbiotic – that is, how one views the world is influenced by what knowledge one possesses, and what knowledge one is capable of possessing is deeply influenced by one's worldview (Ladson-Billings, 2004, p. 258). Everyone has certain presuppositions and biases that affect how we perceive life and reality; formed by our upbringing, education, the culture we live in, the books we read or the media and movies we absorb. The researcher, therefore, has to be well prepared *and* open minded, that is, prepared to be surprised.

A prominent work within political anthropology is the studies of the researcher and Jesuit priest Richardo Falla (1994), who spent years with escaped Maya Indians in Guatemala. He argues that it is impossible for a researcher on political violence and conflict to be objective. The researcher can not be neutral, but *has* to choose a side. In line with critical methodology, Falla argues that truth is always described from someone's point of view, but the important thing is that the researcher has to keep an open mind as to from whose perspective he or she is investigating the situation (Falla, 1994; Koivunen, 2001, p. 48). The question of 'ownership' in relation to knowledge, interpretations and representations of knowledge becomes prominent – *whose* knowledge are we referring to (Lillejord & Mashile, 2004). Within a zone for deliberation questions of ownership may be investigated. Because qualitative approaches direct our attention towards the meaning that is being expressed in what is being said, interpretation and understanding are central concepts. The qualitative research interest aims at trying to see something *as* something (Hanson, 1969), not as it *is*, with an overarching goal to get a more profound understanding of the investigated object. Data should be treated as stubborn things that might surprise you and even strike back (Latour, 2000).

In a sensitive and politicised research field, research ethics also must be always present. This calls for the researcher's increased awareness on the situation. According to Brinkmann & Kvale (2005) the qualitative researcher should cultivate his or her ability to perceive and judge 'thickly'; that is, to see events in their personal and value-laden contexts, and describe them accordingly (Geertz, 1973). In her studies of West Bank Palestinians Netland (2002) claims that focus on the social and cultural context in which the events occur may lead to a better understanding of how events of political violence are experienced and reacted to.

Concluding Remarks

Building on fieldwork experiences among former PKK guerrillas in North Kurdistan highlighted and enabled discussion of particular problems and challenges facing the qualitative researcher who enters fields of political unrest. The theoretical foundation draws on the tradition from Paulo Freire and critical pedagogy which provides a relevant frame of analysis when studying individuals and groups that, in one way or another are marginalised and excluded from participating in society, as was the case of the former PKK guerrillas who were interviewed.

Examples used in the article are from qualitative fieldwork among former guerrilla fighters, with a particular focus on the fighters' experiences and narratives. Most literature on guerrilla movements draws the attention to the organisation as such, not to the experiences of the individual fighter. In this article we have argued that mutual understanding between researcher and informants is possible even if individual experiences and frames of reference are extremely divergent.

When researcher and informants have different cultural and political backgrounds it can be extremely difficult to establish a foundation for mutual understanding. In complex and challenging fields the traditional qualitative interview may seem insufficient, and under the circumstances described, the researcher had no choice but to initially let the conversation flow freely. It seemed necessary to transcend the boundaries of mistrust in order for a new understanding to develop. This procedure, which Terkel (1978) also suggested, along with Kvale (1996), resulted in the emergence of what we describe as a zone for deliberation. Only after the informants had had the opportunity to explain how they interpreted their own situation could the interviewer formulate her own questions.

Scholars have used different metaphors to describe this space of intersubjective understanding, such as 'the third room' where meaning is translated and negotiated, a 'hallway with many entrances', or as we term it – a *zone for deliberation*. As mentioned, the expected outcome of the 'stay' in a zone for deliberation is not consensus, but recognition, and it is crucial that the parties respect the position and arguments of the other. True dialogue has, according to Freire, the power to change, but this also requires that the parties agree that the intention is to listen, understand and learn.

Experiences from the conversations with the guerrillas show that a zone for deliberation is necessary when individual experiences and frames of reference are diverse. There are, however, some critical factors that the parties should be aware of. We have highlighted three of them. One is to establish some kind of *mutual trust* regarding the intentions of the other. Without trust, it is difficult to get access to the informants' personal narratives. This became obvious in this particular fieldwork after researcher and informants had stumbled their way through the initial part of the conversation. A fragile foundation of trust was established, but only after the researcher had presented what she knew and how she felt about the organisation. As experienced by other researchers in marginal fields, the researcher is frequently regarded as a messenger by the informants. They therefore do their utmost to make the researcher understand what their situation is *really* like. In this way the conversation becomes a deliberation, an exchange of positions, views and perspectives, with improved understanding as an overarching aim. Knowledge transformation and political socialisation are elements embedded in the same process. While literature on qualitative fieldwork seems to concentrate on how to carry out the fieldwork step by step, this article clearly shows that the most important lesson learnt for researchers who conduct fieldwork in marginal fields is the importance of a zone for deliberation where the subjects investigated can be participative in the research process.

The second critical factor is the question of *transparency*, where we argue that the power relations between researcher and informants must be as transparent as possible. Normally, the researcher defines the procedures and frames for the research. In this case, the researcher entered a field where the vast majority of people are illiterate. As a consequence of oppression and war, the area has for years been closed to the outside world. The researcher was supposed to be in control. But power relations shifted when the researcher faced recording problems and accepted the informants' assistance in her attempts to tape-record the conversation. This was also the case when the researcher came to the first contact address. Believing that she was observing her informants, she was herself being observed – maybe as a counter-strategy or a way of demonstrating counter-

control by letting the researcher believe that she was meeting her informants. While much literature on qualitative research seems to fail in adequately addressing the issue of power relations between researcher and informants, this article shows the importance of transparency in turbulent fields. It also shows that it might as well be the informants, and not the interviewer, who are in control of the situation.

A third factor is the *individualistic* approach the researcher had to interviewing. She planned for individual interviews, which she also was promised by the local contact. When meeting her group of informants, however, the question of individual interview was never raised. For the informants it was obvious that they should stay together and talk with one voice. They thereby were in control of the interview situation and each other, which in this particular fieldwork turned out to be a prerequisite for the emergence of a zone for deliberation. This zone might not have emerged if, for instance, the researcher had insisted on carrying through a traditional interview.

All research fields are ripe with surprises, obstacles, challenges, joys and worries and it would be an impossible task to prepare for every foreseeable or unthinkable situation facing the researcher who approaches the research field. Even in fields of political unrest, which are difficult to access, the researcher faces many of the same hindrances as in other research terrains – only differently. While literature on qualitative research argues that the *unforeseen* has to be taken into account by the researcher when planning the research design, we have argued that it is not only the complexity of challenges in the field that causes problems or dilemmas, but rather *how* these problems are being handled by the researcher in the specific situation and particular cultural and political context.

People living under oppressive regimes causing political unrest are often used to analysing open or hidden strategies, intentions and attempts at manipulation. This does not mean that they are openly hostile to strangers; it should rather be perceived as a counter-strategy that is linked to survival. When researching *with* groups that are exposed to a multitude of oppressive techniques, it is obvious that the attitude of the researcher will be closely watched and that she at one point will be either included or excluded. To be included in dialogue calls for a transparent and decent research approach.

Marginalised groups often regard people from the outside as potential spokespersons for their cause, no matter if this person is a researcher, a journalist, a politician, an educator or even a tourist. By presenting their case to the outsider, he or she is then regarded as having added his or her voice to that of the group. This may cause an ethical dilemma for the researcher. On the one hand, the researcher may wish to support the groups being investigated. On the other hand, he or she has to maintain some sort of distance because, ultimately, he or she still is a researcher, not a friend or comrade.

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KARIANE WESTRHEIM is Associate Professor at the Department of Education and Health Promotion, University of Bergen, Norway. Her research interests include critical social theory, critical pedagogy, multiculturalism and education in marginal contexts. Her current PhD work focuses on the educational foundation of the Kurdish PKK guerrilla in Turkey. *Correspondence:*

Kariane Westrheim, Department of Education and Health Promotion, University of Bergen, Christiesgt. 13, N-5020 Bergen, Norway (kariane.westrheim@iuh.uib.no).

SØLVI LILLEJORD is Professor of Education at the Department of Education and Health Promotion, University of Bergen, Norway. Her research interests include education policy, educational leadership, multicultural education and information and communications technology and learning. *Correspondence:* Sølvi Lillejord, Department of Education and Health Promotion, University of Bergen, Christiesgt. 13, N-5020 Bergen, Norway (solvi.lillejord@iuh.uib.no).