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ETHNOGRAPHY'S CONTRIBUTION TO  
NEWSPAPER ANALYSIS:  
CLAIMS-MAKING REVISITED

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## ABSTRACT

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Newspaper data are a popular data source for studies across the social sciences. This paper empirically examines the widespread criticisms that this data is hampered by selection, description and researcher bias. It does so by taking one of the most authoritative European comparative research projects ‘Mobilisation on Ethnic Relations, Citizenship and Immigration’ (MERCIC) as its case study given that the resulting publications have inspired many researches on both sides of the Atlantic to apply the so-called ‘claims-making’ method (e.g. Koopmans, Statham, Giugni and Passy 2005). Drawing on the author’s familiarity with the Dutch part of the data set and field specific expertise, this paper qualitatively re-analyses the claims recorded for Surinamese, Turkish and Kurdish migrants in the Netherlands and reviews the conclusions for migrant transnationalism and integration in particular. It reveals how an ethnographic approach can tackle description bias and researcher unreliability and brings selection bias into full view. While offering concrete suggestions for incorporating ethnography into newspaper analysis, it also exposes the limits of these methods for the study of cross-border activities such as migrant transnationalism.

**Keywords:** content analysis, claims-making, ethnography, transnationalism.

# ETHNOGRAPHY'S CONTRIBUTION TO NEWSPAPER ANALYSIS: CLAIMS-MAKING REVISITED

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## INTRODUCTION

Over the past decades newspapers have emerged as primary sources in scholarship on collective action, social movements and conflict studies as well as in more recent work on European integration and party politics (Earl, Martin, McCarthy and Soule 2004; Koopmans 2007; Koopmans and Statham 2010; Helbling and Tresh 2011). Facilitating comparative, historical and quantitative research, newspapers today are a fully recognized and legitimate source used by scholars on both sides of the Atlantic. Yet as newspaper analysis has grown in popularity, researchers have questioned the quality of the data and suggested limitations of its utility, pointing to selection, description and researcher bias. Critics argue that whatever measures are taken to overcome these hurdles, problems with the data remain.

Rather than offering an additional critique, this paper assesses the merits of existing criticisms on the basis of empirical data. It proposes to complement quantitative instruments to address the three biases with an ethnographic approach to improve research based on newspaper data. Specifically, it advocates the inclusion of field specific expertise in order to validate the data and to interpret regularities and causal mechanisms emerging from statistical analysis.

These suggestions are based on an in-depth re-analysis of a sample of claims from the completed 'Mobilisation on Ethnic Relations, Citizenship and Immigration' (MERCİ) research project, in which newspapers have been the primary source

of data (see Koopmans, Statham, Giugni and Passy 2005). MERCİ has been selected for two reasons. First, Koopmans and his co-authors developed and fine-tuned 'claims-making' and now rank among the most-cited authors in sociology and political science, especially within the subfield of migration and ethnic relations. Their book *Contested Citizenship* and a range of articles based on the MERCİ-data have become scholarly landmarks.

Second, the choice for MERCİ is based on my familiarity with the data collected for the two main sending countries for migrants in the Netherlands, Turkey and Surinam. In 2002 I embarked on a study of the transnational politics of Turks, Turkish-Kurds and Surinamese. Back then transnational scholarship was almost exclusively based on ethnographic case studies and heavily criticized for 'sampling on the dependent variable' and the lack of systematic comparative work (see Waldinger and Fitzgerald 2004; Vertovec 2009; Waldinger forthcoming). After an initial analysis of the data for my population I saw the MERCİ data and the coding provided by the research team as a compelling approach to addressing this criticism. During the years that followed, I encountered the majority of the actors and events that had been coded from newspaper articles in the MERCİ sample. Gradually, the actors got faces, I came to know where they held their offices, and I learned about their political activities, internal struggles and allies in the homeland. In interviews with these actors I asked respondents to reflect on the specific events that were covered by MERCİ. With one Kurdish actor who was most quoted in the newspapers I systematically reviewed all claims collected for Turks and Kurds during a four-hour interview. Subsequent triangulation with other sources confirmed the interpretations that surfaced in this original interview.

Over the years, I developed detailed expertise in the politics of the migrant groups under study. The data I collected included a survey in the Netherlands (N=101), 241 in-depth interviews and partici-

pant observation during numerous political events in the Netherlands, Turkey and Surinam. Additionally, I learned Turkish and the Surinamese *linguae francae*, Sranantongo, for research purposes and I closely followed the daily news in Turkey and Surinam through newspapers, television and radio. Furthermore, I kept research diaries – approximately 2-3 pages per day in the field between 2003 and 2005 – in which I described in detail what I had experienced during the day: people I met, conversions I had, anecdotes or gossip that I heard (Mügge 2010: 207-210 for an overview of the methodology). When my data collection was finished, I reviewed the initial analysis of the MERCI sample. I complemented my expertise and interviews which addressed the claims with secondary sources such as the additional newspaper articles, periodicals and academic accounts to place the claims in context in both the host- and homeland. On this basis I re-coded the data and arrived at two conclusions. First, ethnographic expertise is a powerful tool to correct the main biases in newspaper analysis. Second, it provides indispensable background for the interpretation of the results.

The results of this analysis are presented in the body of this paper. The following sections first review established critiques on the use of such analyses, describe the political claims-making method based on newspaper data as developed by Koopmans et al. and summarize their conclusions for transnationalism. I then show how I recoded all claims collected for Turks, Kurds and Surinamese in the Netherlands. To demonstrate the value-added of an ethnographic approach eye for the interpretation of data I place the Kurdish claims in a broader context and evaluate how these insights amend to Koopmans et al.'s (2005) conclusions. Finally, I present concrete ethnographic tools for the improvement of studies based on newspaper reporting.

Content analysis of newspapers to list activities that identify actors, events, and actions has been already employed in the mid-1930s. Use of the technique, then as so-called 'event catalogs' rose enormously in the 1960s and 1970s (see Davenport 2010: 4-9 for a full literature review). The design of these catalogs has always been 'straightforward': researchers developed 'explicit coding rules that defined the behavior of interest as well as specific characteristics that were identified during the coding process' (Davenport 2010: 6). This type of data collection allowed researchers to easily collect and compare data which could be examined in multiple ways.

Despite these advantages several limitations of this strategy have repeatedly been pointed out over the past four decades (cf. Davenport 2010). Critics stress that newspaper data is sensitive to three biases (McCarthy, McPhail and Smith 1996). First, newspapers report only a handful of many possible events: more violent, larger, or longer events are more likely to be covered (selection bias) (Kielbowicz & Scherer 1986 cited in Olzak 1989; McCarthy, Titarenko, McPhail, Rafail and Augustyn 2005). What ends up in the newspaper depends on editors' professional networks and their instincts about what will appeal to readers (Ortiz, Myers, Walls and Diaz 2005). Second, errors occur in the descriptions reported events (description bias). Third, the reliability of the choices made by researchers has been questioned; no matter how advanced the codebook the risk remains that researchers interpret codes differently depending on their personal knowledge (researcher bias) (Franzosi 1987).

Scholars have recognized that the utility of newspaper analysis depends on the question being asked and the availability of sources (Franzosi 1987; Koopmans and Statham 1999; Earl et al. 2004). To

overcome the specific problems outlined above, they have suggested the triangulation of media sources, the use of electronic archives and methods employed in survey research to address non-random response rates (Earl et al. 2004). More recently, Koopmans and Statham (2010) have suggested that description and selection bias can be reduced by drawing on multiple newspapers; others have relied on interviewing journalists (Fillieule and Jiménez 2003). In his study on the Black Panther Party Davenport (2010) demonstrates that the frequency and type of events are bound up with the sources one uses. In order to disclose which type or aspect of events is missed he suggests that researchers expand their search to different information sources in order to bring together as many ‘eyes’ on an event as possible (Davenport 2010: 182-185). In spite of their merits, these remedies have not put to rest criticism of claims-making analysis based on the three biases outlined above (e.g. Ortiz et al. 2005).

## POLITICAL CLAIMS ANALYSIS: DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The political claims-making method was developed to fine-tune the conventional protest event analysis (PEA), which aimed to systematically map, analyze and interpret the occurrence and properties of large numbers of protests through newspaper content analysis (Koopmans and Rucht 2002; Hutter 2010). In line with the above literature review, PEA has been criticized for presenting a highly selective and biased view of contentious politics, for its rigid distinction between challengers and establishment, and for failing to capture the discursive side of claims-making (Koopmans and Statham 1999). Still, its advocates argue that PEA provides valid and reliable information if conducted properly. They also acknowledge that

PEA does not mirror in a representative way the universe of all protests that actually take place.... [S]mall and very moderate protests tend to be strongly underreported by the mass media, whereas virtually all very large and very violent protests are covered... (Koopmans and Rucht 2002: 232).

For Koopmans and Rucht, objections to PEA on grounds of misrepresenting ‘reality’ are unwarranted: ‘It is based on a constructed reality... of extreme importance for both policy makers and the wider public.... In a certain sense, protests and other events that remain unreported are simply “non-existent”’ (Koopmans and Rucht 2002: 252).

Political claims analysis takes individual instances of claims-making by public actors as the unit of analysis. In contrast to other types of media analysis, it is expected to provide information about who addresses whom on which issues (Koopmans 2007: 189). The demands of for example ethnic organizations or elites are expressed in the form of collective identities, like: ‘We Muslims have the right to housing’. Claims consist ‘of the purposive and public articulation of political demands, calls to action, proposals, criticisms, of physical attacks, which, actually or potentially, affect the interest or integrity of the claimants and/or other collective actors’ (Koopmans et al. 2005: 252).

Koopmans et al.’s study was based on the MERCI project, which compared political claims-making in the Netherlands, France, Germany, Switzerland and Great Britain. The source for political claims in the Netherlands was the leading liberal daily, the *NRC Handelsblad*; claims were coded from the Monday, Wednesday and Friday issues for the period 1992-1999. The coding focused on events that had occurred in the previous two weeks and excluded retrospective coverage of previous claims. Each claim

was coded once – the first time it was encountered. Repetitions in subsequent articles were not coded separately, although additional information was used to complete the data on the origin claim (Koopmans, Statham, Giugni, Passy and Duyvené de Wit 1999; Duyvené de Wit and Koopmans 2005; Koopmans et al. 2005).

The authors explicitly address the selection, description and researcher biases (2005: 254-65). First, they concede that newspaper coverage is neither undistorted nor a complete mirror of reality; only a small part of the claims made on a daily basis are actually covered. This, however, is precisely the part of claims-making that interests them: ‘the part that can have an impact on the perceptions of the public or on policy making’ (Koopmans et al. 2005: 25). Second, they hope to minimize description bias by coding only factual statements and events and excluding additional comments by editors and reporters. Third, the authors assure us that inter-coder reliability has been enhanced by a codebook with numerous examples as well as by regular discussion of problematic cases. The resulting data set is thus claimed to be suitable for macro-level comparative analysis and for focusing on the qualitative aspects of particular actors and claims (Koopmans et al. 2005: 27).

Among others, Koopmans et al. (2005) apply the method of political claims-making to examine immigrant political activities that focus on their countries of origin. Migrant ‘transnationalism’ became a buzzword in migration and ethnic studies in the early 1990s, giving rise to numerous qualitative case studies. This strand of work often sampled on the dependent variable: searching for instances of transnationalism, researchers inevitably found it (Vertovec 2009). Koopmans et al. correctly criticized these early accounts of transnationalism for relying on ‘one-sided and unsystematic evidence for supposed new trends that undermine the nation-state’ (Koopmans and Statham 1999, 2001: 64, 2003;

Koopmans 2004). To my knowledge, they were the first to conduct a systematic, international comparative study of transnational politics, focusing on the transnational claims-making of different immigrant groups living in the Netherlands, Great Britain, Switzerland, Germany and France.

Two conclusions stand out from their study. First, in political arenas open to ethnic minorities – and despite recent trends, the Netherlands is clearly one of them – claims by immigrants only rarely address the country of origin. Strong transnational orientations are responses to traditional, exclusionary citizenship regimes, such as in Germany and Switzerland; exclusive policies, in particular concerning citizenship rights, thus sustain homeland-directed extremism (Koopmans et al. 2005: 143). Instead of seeing transnationalism as driven from ‘below’, the authors stress the importance of ‘top down’ institutional and ideological frameworks. In this view, homeland influences are

relatively marginal to understanding patterns of migrant claims-making. Our argument for the retention of national citizenship approaches... is not a normative one, but a factual one. Our evidence simply shows that national citizenship shapes transnationalism (Koopmans and Statham 2001: 95, 2003: 232).

Second, Koopmans et al. (2005) argue that homeland-directed claims tend to be more radical than claims focusing on the country of residence. The political opportunity structure for such claims is usually closed because the country of residence generally does little to accommodate them, while the homeland regime cannot be addressed directly. The action repertoire of homeland-directed claims is also likely to mirror the cultural repertoires of mobilization that prevail there. Many of these homelands suffer

from high levels of repression and political violence; homeland-oriented claims-making will therefore often display similarly radical features (Koopmans et al. 2005: 136-7). Due to the violent nature of these homeland-oriented claims, they conclude that strong homeland orientations among immigrants are detrimental to their integration in countries of residence (Koopmans et al. 2005: 142). Yet despite the sophistication of the method and the rigorous analysis of the research team, their findings are more specific and less generalizable than they suggest. The next sections outline how the quality of the data can be improved with ethnographic tools to address the selection, researcher and description biases.

## BIASES

In total the MERCI sample included 54 Turkish, 41 Kurdish and 19 Surinamese claims in the Netherlands, covered in 40, 28 and 11 newspaper articles, respectively. I have studied these 114 claims entirely regardless of their scope (national, transnational or supranational), I examined the MERCI codebook, the database including the codes and the summaries of the claims and collected the original newspaper articles in LexisNexis.

For *transnational* claims-making, the code ‘foreign: migrant homelands and exile’ is particularly relevant; it refers to both issues and actors, the latter including homeland political parties as well as organizations of political exiles in the country of residence that aim to intervene in homeland politics (Koopmans and Statham 1999; Koopmans et al. 1999: footnotes 34, 139). MERCI coded 18 out of 54 Turkish claims as ‘foreign: national homelands and exile’ (8 in scope of the actor, 6 in scope of the issue, and 4 for both). In the Kurdish case, 27 out of 41 claims were coded ‘foreign national: national homelands and exile’ (10 in scope of the actor, 9 in scope

of the issue, and 8 for both). None of the Surinamese claims was coded as such.

However, the scope of the actor could not be established for roughly half of the claims. MERCI was unable to establish whether the first actor was a ‘national’ or a ‘foreign national’ in 28 out of 54 Turkish claims, 20 out of 41 Kurdish claims, and 7 out of 19 Surinamese claims. This biased the sample as crucial information on the identity of many actors was missing.

### *Selection Bias*

What and who is covered by newspapers depends on several factors: the interests of reporters and newspapers in particular events and actors as well as the networks at their disposal to get first-hand information. Reporters remain the ‘gate keepers’ of claims. This creates two selection biases.

The first concerns the coverage of events. The Kurdish case confirms that violent claims considered a threat to domestic security are more likely to be reported than non-violent claims. For example, most claims were recorded at the height of the Kurdish conflict in 1999; no claims were registered in 1994 and 1998 (see Table 1). This does not necessarily mean that Kurdish actors were transnationally inactive in 1994 and 1998, but only that their activities went unreported. A Kurdish activist retrospectively explained in a 2004 interview that the media only paid attention to demonstrations that turned violent while many peaceful marches did not receive the attention they had hoped for.<sup>1</sup> Multiple claims in a particular year were often made in the same week, even on the same day in the same article. This suggests that the reporter was following the issue that week, but not during the rest of the year. Selection bias explains why no claims were recorded for Turks

in 1998 and for Kurds in 1994 and 1998, even though both groups in the Netherlands were transnationally active in those years (auto-reference).

Second, newspapers are biased in which actors are named and interviewed. Actors must be considered newsworthy and must be part of a network that extends to reporters. The claims of radical actors appear much more often than those of their more modest counterparts. A closer examination of the Kurdish actors shows that the four claimants – though formally representing different organizations – belong to the same organization, the PKK. The PKK and its affiliated organizations were continuously monitored by the Dutch Intelligence Service in the period under study (BVD, 2001); the PKK had also been placed on the list of terrorist organizations in several European countries. From my own field research, I know that the Kurdish spokespersons mentioned in the MERCI sample can all be found at a single address in Amsterdam. The key individual, whom I interviewed extensively in 2003 and 2004, had a personal network that extended to the Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs at the time. It was hardly surprising that he commanded media attention. He had a prominent place in the address book of *NRC* reporters and was often the first to be contacted for reactions to specific issues.

The selection bias created by reporters' address books is evident when we compare *NRC* coverage with articles on the same events written by a journalist of Turkish descent in the Dutch multicultural magazine *Contrast*. These articles cover a much broader spectrum of Turkish claimants (e.g. Develioğlu 1995). Cross-checking mass media coverage with the movement's own media can be an effective way to see how reporter address books bias the selection of events and actors. The objection that such media 'only preach to the converted' (Koopmans 2004: 385) is actually an advantage in this respect.

### *Researcher Bias*

Coder unreliability stemmed from a lack of in-depth knowledge of Kurdish, Turkish and Surinamese immigrant organizations in the Netherlands as well as of homeland political organizations. This led to systematic coding errors and inconsistencies. First, coding assistants were unable to identify many actors. Without knowledge of the claimant's identity, one cannot establish whether their scope is transnational or not. In other cases, full names were given by reporters but wrongly identified – 'foreign national' or otherwise – by the coders.<sup>2</sup> Coding was also inconsistent: the same actors were coded 'foreign national' in one claim but not in others.<sup>3</sup>

To appreciate how coding errors and inconsistencies emerge, consider this Turkish claim summarized in the MERCI database as follows:

T. Cetinkaya of the Turkish political party nationalist movement MHP says that they "are no fascists and racists. We follow the Dutch law; we are no terrorist organization. It seems we never get rid of this stigma" (summary by MERCI, my translation).

The actor of the claim (T. Cetinkaya of the MHP) is coded 'foreign national'. The issue of the claim (to change the image of the MHP in the Netherlands) is coded 'national'. The original newspaper passage was:

Two to three thousand Turks were present at the semi-official meeting of the nationalist movement MHP in the *Haagse Houtrusthallen*. Rumor has it that the undisputed Al-

parslan Turkes [leader of the extreme right party MHP] would come over from Turkey to give a speech. This did not happen. The organiser, T. Cetinkaya, said in The Hague that ‘we are no fascists and racists. We follow the Dutch law; we are no terrorist organisation. It seems that we never get rid of this stigma’ (NRC 1995: my translation).

In this extract, T. Cetinkaya is not explicitly described as a MHP member. Additional research reveals that T. Cetinkaya is the spokesman of the Turkish Islamic Association, a local immigrant organisation in The Hague.<sup>4</sup> The code ‘foreign national’ is incorrect.

The correct coding for the scope of the issue would have been ‘foreign national’. It falls under the type ‘transplanted homeland politics’, which occurs when homeland conflicts enter the receiving country (for the typology see Koopmans et al. 2005: 126-7). MHP sympathizers complain that they are labeled as fascists by Turkish leftists in the Netherlands. The conflict is imported from Turkey, where leftists routinely characterize the MHP as fascist. As an extension of homeland conflict, it has a clear transnational dimension.

### *Description Bias*

In-depth interviews and the study of secondary literature show that in a number of cases, reporters misinterpreted events. Sometimes organizations and events were mistakenly connected, as in the example above. This, however, had a negligible effect on Koopmans et al.’s results.

These examples show the value of ethnography for

assessing the MERCI sample. The overarching question emerging from this exercise is whether political claims-making as reported in newspapers is a useful method to study migrant transnationalism once coding errors have been corrected.

### IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS OF POLITICAL CLAIMS-MAKING

This section first presents the general findings of the qualitative analysis of all claims and then zooms in on the Kurdish claims. I turned to the original newspaper articles to examine the actors and issues in the MERCI sample. Reading the articles, I could not identify all the actors. Journalists often referred to the Turkish or Kurdish community as whole. But through additional research on specific claims in other newspapers, I could identify more actors than MERCI.<sup>5</sup> As part of my fieldwork I had personally met most of the actors registered by MERCI and systematically reported on those meetings in my research diaries. This allowed identifying the organizations with which actors were affiliated. In the end, I was able to identify around three-quarters of the Turkish (40 out of 54) and Kurdish (31 out of 41) collective claimants and nearly all of the Surinamese ones (18 out of 19). The majority of unidentified claimants are individuals who did not act in the name of an organization, for instance a storekeeper interviewed by a *NRC* reporter.

I recoded the claims, making use of the original articles, additional news coverage, my own interviews, research notes and secondary literature. In most instances where my codes differed from MERCI, I labeled the issue as transnational whereas MERCI did not. The actors which I identified as ‘foreign national: migrant homeland and exile’ were organizations or representatives of organizations that were formal extensions of political groups in Turkey. I did not label migrant organizations with informal

Table 1 Recoded Turkish, Kurdish and Surinamese Transnational Claims

	All Turkish claims	Transnational Turkish claims	All Kurdish claims	Transnational Kurdish claims	All Surinamese claims <sup>1</sup>	Transnational Surinamese claims
1992	5	-	6	6	-	-
1993	4	-	5	5	4	-
1994	1	-	-	-	3	-
1995	10	9	3	3	-	-
1996	1	-	1	1	-	-
1997	17	9	10	9	2	-
1998	-	-	-	-	7	-
1999	16	4	16	16	1	1
<b>Total</b>	54	22	41	40	17	1

<sup>1</sup> Two Surinamese claims included in the MERCI database are left out as they referred to the same actor and issue.

or invisible ties to such political groups, for example *Milli Görüş*, transnational. Even with this conservative coding, I found much more transnational activity than the MERCI study.

Most of the issues summarized in the MERCI database concern transnational activities *visible* to the Dutch public and of interest to the broader Dutch debate on immigrant integration. The same general themes emerged in the interviews that I conducted in the Netherlands, Turkey and Surinam between 2003 and 2005. For example, one of the red threads in Turkish and Kurdish claims-making is tension between the two groups. I had asked both Turkish and Kurdish organizations to elaborate on their relations in the 1990s, and had extensively interviewed the one respondent involved in the majority of the Kurdish claims.

The re-coding revealed that when simply counting newspaper mentions of actors and events, it was impossible to know *who* and *what* exactly was counted. This only became fully visible after the claims were placed in a broader – in this case trans-

national – context. This exercise led to three conclusions. The first finding has been that without background information, the number of actors is likely to be overestimated. For instance, the analysis showed that the majority of Kurdish transnational claims in the period 1992-1999 were a response to political developments in Turkey. Yet, as Table 1 shows MERCI registered no transnational Kurdish claims for 1994 and 1998. More than half of the Kurdish claims were made by (adherents of) political parties in exile, such as the PKK (12), KIC (11) and ERNK (1), while the Kurdish migrant federation FED-KOM made 6 claims. But as mentioned above, these seemingly diverse actors all point to one person who at the time represented the PKK in the Netherlands. The remaining 10 transnational claims were made by individuals or collective actors whose identity is unknown.

The second finding is that an in-depth analysis based on as many sources and expertise as possible enables researcher to explain concentrations of events in specific periods. For example, the Turkish transnational claims in the MERCI sample are more

concentrated in specific periods. This is hardly surprising since 16 out of 22 – often violent and therefore newsworthy – were responses to preceding Kurdish actions. For instance, the establishment of the Kurdish Parliament in Exile (PDKW) in 1995 led to unrest among Turkish organizations; in 1997 a Turkish concert in Schiedam was disturbed by Kurds; in 1999, Kurdish actions on Dutch soil inspired Turkish organizations to position themselves publicly. Although the six Turkish claimants were more varied than the Kurdish claimants, it was a very selective part of the Turkish community; five were connected through a Turkish advisory organ for the Dutch government. They were actors with strong political convictions about the Kurdish conflict in Turkey, thereby attracting the attention of Dutch newspaper reporters and editors.

Third, in line with Davenport (2010) – who primarily emphasizes cross-checking written sources (e.g. different newspapers, police reports) – a combination of data and expertise is crucial to demonstrate what is *not* covered in the newspapers. This can be best illustrated by the scarcity of Surinamese claims. After re-coding, I found only one Surinamese claimant to be transnational in scope. This seems to imply that Surinamese were not involved in transnational activities. In my other work, I show that in fact they were, but in non-violent ways (auto reference). Surinamese living in the Netherlands had easy access to homeland media to express their claims. In this case, the sample is skewed because Surinamese did not turn to the Dutch media to advance their transnational claims.

The following subsection presents further background on the Kurdish claims. Although my overall findings also draw on the analysis of the Turkish and Surinamese claims, the purpose here is to demonstrate my argument that researchers need more information than what is generally presented in newspaper articles to validate their data.

The Kurdish claimants in the MERCI sample all point to one organization – the PKK – represented by several people working under the banner of different organizations at one address in Amsterdam. This section first describes the identity and ties between the actors to show the interconnections between the Kurdish claimants, which the *NRC* reported as different actors. It is followed by a narrative of the Kurdish claims.

The four Kurdish claimants PKK, ERNK, FED-KOM and KIC are all directly or indirectly linked to each other through formal ties (also see Poulton 1997; Özcan 2006). The PKK (claimant 1) is a professional organization consisting of the party proper, its military wing and its political wing ERNK (claimant 2). The ERNK commanded an international network with member organizations, including the Kurdish federation in the Netherlands FED-KOM (claimant 3). Over the years, the PKK became more involved in lobbying in Europe, supporting the establishment of the Kurdish Parliament in Exile (PKDW). The latter's inaugural congress took place in The Hague in 1995 and was co-organized by the Kurdish Information Centre - KIC (claimant 4).

FED-KOM (claimant 3) gathers existing Kurdish social and cultural organizations under a single umbrella and took over the functions of the KIC (claimant 4) when the latter dissolved in 1999. Both organizations (claimant 3 en 4) were directed by the same person. The KIC was established to inform the Dutch public about the Kurdish people and the conflict in Turkey. A related motive for its creation was to improve the negative image of Kurds: 'There were a lot of prejudices about Kurds. People saw us as terrorists.'<sup>6</sup> The KIC was part of a dense network of Kurdish Information Centers that existed in several other European countries as well. These centers lobbied for an independent Kurdistan and functioned as mouthpieces

of the PKK (claimant 1) (NRC 1999b; Van Bruinessen 2000). Knowledge of who the actors are enables us to re-analyze their actions and correct coding errors. The context also allows us to see how concentrated the claims are on particular days, suggesting heightened interest of the reporter.

### *Kurdish Claims 1992-1999*

In the first year under study, 1992, the majority of the claims (five out of six) are registered on 23 and 24 March when PKK followers protested in front of Turkish consulates and attacked Turkish companies. They wanted the Netherlands to oppose Turkish military action against the PKK and support an independent Kurdistan. The claims were a direct response to Turkey gathering its troops to fight Kurdish insurgents, the so-called ‘Spring Operation’ (White 2000: 164-66). The original newspaper article states that the ‘spring offensive’ was announced by Kurds in Turkey rather than by the Turkish government – a clear reporting mistake (description bias).

In the following year, 1993, the majority of the claims (four out of five) were made on the same day (26 June) and in the same article. For 1995 three claims were counted, one each in March, June and July. The first was made on 21 March (*Newroz*, Kurdish New Year): ‘The police in Rotterdam prevented a confrontation between Kurdish and Turkish protesters. Turkish Kurds participated in a demonstration on the day of anti-racism. They shouted anti-Turkish slogans and burned a Turkish flag’. It is not surprising that the Kurds protested against racism on 21 March; for Kurds this is *the* day to protest against state oppression of the Kurdish identity. In Turkey *Newroz* traditionally leads to clashes between Kurds and the Turkish army, these tensions are transplanted to the host society. The KIC spokesman told me his organization had coordinated Kurdish participation

in this demonstration and reacted:

We never burned a flag! Of course you can always find a lunatic somewhere, but not where I was. Turks also participated in this organization; some Grey Wolves [extreme nationalists] among them attacked a group of Kurds. Then the [anti-Turkish] slogans started....<sup>7</sup>

The additional information points to probable description error in the newspaper. First, the interviewee nuances the claim that Kurds in the demonstration collectively burned a flag; it may have been an individual act. Second, it suggests that the anti-Turkish slogans were a response to Turkish nationalists also present.

Another claim was made in April, on the day of the inauguration of the Kurdish Parliament in Exile (PDKW) in The Hague. I had asked the KIC spokesman why the PDKW was established and why they choose the Netherlands for its inaugural congress.

A large group of Kurdish intellectuals found refuge in Europe and were exploring the possibilities for a civil administration. On the military side there was of course the PKK, they dominated everything. But [the parliamentarians in exile] were looking for alternatives, it was their idea to form a Parliament in Exile and I organized it. So the idea was launched, but in which country do you install such a Parliament? In most countries there was a problem with the laws....we said the Netherlands as suitable.... According to Dutch law it was just a conference, organized by the KIC. In fact it was the installation of the Parliament in Exile....<sup>8</sup>

What the above passage reveals, and was not mentioned in the original *NRC* article, was that the KIC was closely involved with the foundation of the PDKW. It shows the close ties of the KIC to the PKK, its National Liberation Front (ERNK) and the Kurdish Democratic Party. The passage also underlines the comparably favorable political climate for Kurdish nationalists in the Netherlands, contradicting Koopmans et al.'s conclusion that transnationalism is above all a reaction to limited political opportunities in the country of residence.

The last claim in 1995 was a hunger strike by 100 Kurds in solidarity with 10,000 Kurdish prisoners on hunger strike in Turkey. No organization was mentioned in the original article. The identity of the claimant thus could not be established MERCI. The interview with the KIC spokesman exposed that his organization was involved: 'I didn't realize that we played such an important role! But it's true, we were the only spokespersons here...'<sup>9</sup>

In 1997 more claims were recorded than in previous years. In April of that year massive fights between PKK adherents and Turkish nationalists at cultural festivals put the Turkish-Kurdish question on the Dutch political agenda. Several politicians expressed their concerns and argued that the confrontations between the two groups were a threat to national security, which started when the Kurdish Parliament in Exile was allowed to install itself in the Netherlands (NRC 1997a). The KIC spokesman denied tensions between Turks and Kurds and argued that the Turkish state was responsible for all provocations (NRC 1997b). He clarified to me: 'Kurdish lobbying against the Turkish state was so strong ... the Turkish state had to do something. What could they do? So they started to mobilize Turkish associations, the Turkish community here [in the Netherlands] ....'<sup>10</sup> In this quote, the spokesman elaborates on how (in his view) Turkish immigrants representing the regime were 'assigned' to obstruct Kurdish nationalist activities in the Netherlands. This explains his argu-

ment that although violent clashes between Turks and Kurds in the Netherlands were commonplace in April 1997, there was no conflict between Kurds and Turks, but between Kurds and the Turkish state represented by certain migrant organizations. This shows that the events were driven by homeland conflicts and thus, according to the MERCI codebook, should have been coded as transnational if this information had been available.

Again in 1999, the majority (13 out of 16) of the claims are highly concentrated. All in the third week of February, they relate directly to the arrest of the PKK leader Abdullah *Öcalan*. The claims reflect the hierarchal organization of the PKK in Europe, with members obliged to follow party instructions; the claimants responded to an appeal of the PKK Central Committee to Kurdish patriots around the world to stand up for their leadership (PKK 1998 in: White 2000: 181). This appraisal of the overall situation in spring 1999 leads to different coding for 12 out of the 16 claims recorded by MERCI.

## POLITICAL CLAIMS ANALYSIS AND TRANS-NATIONALISM

Is political claims-making, after re-coding and qualitative analysis, useful in explaining the driving forces of migrant transnationalism? Koopmans et al. (2005) had concluded that transnationalism is primarily driven by exclusion from host country political opportunities. The political opportunity approach understands each form of collective action as part of a larger political process, shaped by the opportunities and constraints offered by the political environment (Koopmans et al. 2005: 16). In addition to institutional variables and discursive opportunities, Koopmans et al. consider field specific opportunities. Field-specific opportunities are sensitive to the characteristics of particular issue fields and collective actors, for in-

stance immigrants. It thus acknowledges that opportunity structures can vary enormously from one issue field to another and may differ significantly between collective actors.

After re-analyzing the Kurdish case it emerges that for political opportunities developed specifically for migrants – the so-called field specific opportunities – Kurds indeed feel excluded as these opportunities cater to (ethnic) Turks. But qualitative analysis of the claims shows that ‘exclusion’ from field specific opportunities was hardly the driving force behind Kurdish diaspora politics. Rather, it was the very inclusiveness of the Dutch legal system that allowed the Kurdish Parliament in Exile to be installed in the Netherlands. Here we see that transnational political orientations are reinforced when general political opportunities are open and field-specific opportunities are closed. Be that as it may, the openness or closure of host country general or field-specific political opportunities is hardly the sole factor driving transnational claims-making: events in the homeland clearly matter.

Although the Turkish claims were largely reactions to Kurdish claims and thus responses to homeland conflict, other dynamics are also evident. When Turkish organizations found themselves forced to take positions on the Kurdish conflict, tensions emerged between them. While these tensions were indirectly fuelled by the Kurdish conflict, a more important explanation lies in the transnational ties these organizations maintain with political parties and movements in Turkey. Ideological conflicts in Turkey and the generally open political opportunity structure for particular homeland claims were decisive for the Kurdish transnational claims. For the Turkish claims, it was the conflict in Turkey alongside the political differences between Turkish groups that gave most of the transnational claims their shape and direction.

The second main conclusion of Koopmans

et al. is that transnational claims are generally violent because they mirror homeland action repertoires. In recoding the claims, I found only a quarter of the Turkish (5 out of 22) and Kurdish (10 out of 40) transnational claims, and none of the Surinamese ones, to be violent in nature. While Dutch field-specific opportunities did not support Kurdish homeland claims, this did not deter Kurds from creatively making use of the general political opportunities provided in the Netherlands. Transnational Kurdish repertoires thus did not mirror action repertoires in the homeland; on the contrary, they mirrored action repertoires in the country of residence – a sign of political integration in and of itself.

While the re-coding and qualitative analysis of the MERCI sample could correct researcher and description bias, it could not address selection bias. The latter creates a skewed picture of the transnationalism-integration nexus since only specific forms of transnational politics are included in the newspaper sample. Violent instances of transplanted homeland politics – when homeland conflicts play out or are transplanted to the host country – were over-represented. Selection bias explains why none of the claims could be classified as homeland directed politics (when immigrants try to influence developments in the homeland) or transplanted immigrant politics (when skills and organizations are transplanted to the homeland). Such influence on Turkish or Surinamese politics is of no interest to the NRC and its readers. The picture would look radically different were Surinamese media included in the sample (cf. [auto-reference]). Surinamese immigrants in the Netherlands are extremely visible in Surinamese newspapers, with some dailies dedicating a whole page to Dutch news.

If one studies migrant transnationalism only at one end of the transnational axis – in the case of Koopmans et al. (2005), in the host country – the home-country will be peripheral to the dependent variable. I agree with Koopmans et al. that migrant

transnationalism does not take place in a deterritorialized ‘post-national’ world; nation-states clearly matter. But for the first-generation migrants in their sample, it was political opportunities provided by the homeland – including political developments, organizational structures, conflicts, institutions and nationalism – that were decisive in shaping their transnationalism.

In sum, claims making can be used to show what is visible of the political debate in the newspapers under study. It has proven to be a powerful method to study transnational activities that may have direct consequences for the host country: in this case imported homeland conflicts. However, the method does not allow drawing general conclusions on transnationalism and on the impact (or lack thereof) of the sending state. Koopmans et al. find domestic politics in these countries to be driving transnationalism, simply because they leave out countries of origin from their analysis. In this sense they, too, sample on the dependent variable – their fiercest critique of scholarship on transnationalism. For studying global phenomena, such as migrant transnationalism, host country newspaper data fall short. These type of studies requires a research design that is multi-sited and reflexive about taking nation-states as natural units of analysis, so-called ‘methodological nationalism’ (Gille and ‘O Riain 2001; Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002; Glick Schiller 2003; Amelina, Nergiz, Faist and Nina Glick Schiller 2012).

## INCORPORATING ETHNOGRAPHY IN POLITICAL CLAIMS METHODOLOGY

As we saw, ethnography can enrich the toolkit of scholars making use of the claims-making method and relying on newspaper data more generally. The initial question relevant for such work is whether the research question can be answered with newspaper

data. Ethnographic analysis of a partial sample can answer this. If research goals cannot be met with the data, scholars need to adapt their aims or opt for alternative approaches. This exercise can easily be incorporated in a pilot study.

If such a pilot study shows that the research aims are compatible with newspaper data, ethnography can be employed in two complementary steps. First, *validating ethnography* can corroborate data from other sources as varied as possible and help to identify biases. Second, ethnography can reveal the limitations of newspaper data and how these limitations influence analysis. In large N studies, scholars can do this by re-examining extreme cases (e.g. a very high or low number of claims in a particular period). Such re-analysis should address a range of questions as proposed by Fillieule and Jiménez (2003): how systematic is the bias? Does the rationale for selection vary over time and contexts? If so, how? International comparative projects need to be particularly sensitive to whether selection bias follows comparable patterns across countries.

In contrast to ethnography in its established anthropological form (e.g. Bernard 2006; Robben and Sluka 2007), *validating ethnography* is guided by large N analysis. The newspaper guides the ethnography by pointing to actors and events. Ethnography lays bare what is invisible to the general public and journalists but may be crucial to the research. Validating ethnography also provides depth to recorded phenomena, helping to understand and interpret the findings, even if it does not reveal what newspaper reporting misses.

The second step is to use *explorative ethnography* and statistical analysis simultaneously. Depending on the topic and selected cases, ethnography may include on- and off-line participant observation, open interviews or archival research. The observations should take the shape of ‘thick descriptions’ (Geertz 1973) and narratives. In contrast to validat-

ing ethnography, explorative ethnography can go beyond the boundaries of newspaper reporting to establish activities, links or other relevant factors unreported in the newspapers. Although ethnography is time-consuming, the inferential strength added through the analysis of a small number of cases may be worth the costs.

## CONCLUSION

Newspapers provide researchers across the social sciences with a wealth of opportunities to compile large-N data sets for diachronic and cross-national comparative studies. Facilitated by search engines and online databases such as LexisNexis, it is a relatively inexpensive tool to conduct systematic research. Despite these advantages, scholars have criticized newspaper data for its presumed sensitivity to selection, description and researcher bias. Spanning these points critics underscore that its usefulness depends on the research question posed.

This article has set out with a double aim. First, by taking one of the most prestigious completed research projects in the field – the so-called MERCI-project – as its case, this article has presented an empirical re-analysis of these common critiques to assess their validity and relevance. Second, it demonstrates how field-specific expertise and an ethnographic approach clarifies the data, provide depth through which we can really understand what is going on and bring what was not reported in the newspapers to light. The re-analysis has generated several conclusions. With respect to the commonly addressed biases it found that the description bias was negligible and the ethnographic approach is very effective in solving researcher bias. Furthermore, it demonstrated that ethnographic methods and expertise brings selection bias in newspaper data into full view, even if they cannot solve it by themselves.

Concerning the specific research question posed, this paper studied the two main conclusions of Koopmans et al. (2005) based on the MERCI project regarding migrant transnationalism: 1) citizenship models in the host country determine transnationalism, and 2) transnationalism is often violent and thus detrimental to integration. Additional knowledge of the specific cases under study demonstrates that host country newspapers alone are not sufficient to study transnationalism in its full diversity. The MERCI project data pioneered systematic comparison in the study of migrant transnationalism, a field which so far had been predominately led by ethnographic case studies. At the same time, the ethnographic analysis of MERCI shows that due to the nature of the data it only sheds light on a small and specific group of migrants: those who are transnationally active and who attract media attention because of their radicalism or because lobbying in the host country for their cause is part of their strategy.

Taking the MERCI-data as its case this paper has shown how ethnography can enrich the methodological toolkit of ‘event catalogs’ or claims analysis. However, the value added of ethnography reaches far beyond the realm of ethnic minority claims-making. First, an ethnographic case study is useful to validate newspaper data and it is an instrument to judge whether certain biases in the data are negligible or not. The novelty of this form of ethnography is that it is guided by large N studies and that it provides an in-depth analysis of extreme cases. Second, ethnography can be used exploratively in combination with statistical analysis. The strength of this method is that it shows what newspaper data is missing.

Sociologists increasingly embrace ethnography (Snow, Morrill and Anderson 2003). As it outgrows its anthropological roots, it not exclusively used anymore in single-case studies but gradually applied to comparative studies (Fitzgerald 2006; 2012). However, ethnography is seldom included in quantitative, hypothesis-testing research designs. As this paper

has shown, it can be of big value there. But to realize its potential ethnographers and quantitative scholars will have to appreciate the complementarity of their methodological and epistemological paradigms and engage in a dialogue much more than they have done so far.

## ENDNOTES

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1 Many Turkish actors have also complained about the difficulty of accessing quality Dutch media. Some organisations have created their own press agencies in Western Europe, while Dutch politicians of Turkish origin make use of Turkish TV to reach their constituencies via satellite.

2 For example, the Turkish workers organisation ATIB in Almelo, a local Turkish immigrant association, is coded 'foreign national'. Likewise, knowledge of Surinamese history and elite networks suggests that one of the few Surinamese claimants who was not coded 'foreign national' indeed was. As one of the founders of the Surinamese nationalist movement in the Netherlands in the 1950s, he belongs to the Surinamese elite in both the Netherlands and Surinam. At the time the claim was reported, he lived in Surinam and was only visiting the Netherlands.

3 For instance, the Turkish women's organisation ATKB is coded as 'national' in one claim and 'foreign national' in another.

4 The Turkish Islamic Association is formally attached to the Turkish Federation (HTF). Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, HTF frequently invited politicians of the Turkish nationalist party MHP to their congresses. The reporter of the article characterized the meeting as a semi-official MHP party congress. In reality, this meeting was a congress of the European umbrella organization to which the HTF is attached.

5 For example, I have personally met the spokesman of the claimant 'Turkish community in Venlo' (claim reported in NRC, 21 July 1993), who represents the Turks Sociaal-Cultureel Centrum. Also see Trouw (21 July 1993).

6 Interview with KIC founder and FED-KOM chairman, Amsterdam, 9 March 2004.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

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