



**MAX PLANCK INSTITUTE**  
FOR SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY

# Not being an *El Adamı*<sup>i</sup> in Provincial Small Businesses

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Osman<sup>ii</sup>, who works in a company in Çorum as a senior salesman, is a man seemingly quiet in nature, giving the impression that he would not start a conversation with a stranger on his own. As part of his job, he speaks mostly on the phone, giving and taking sales orders, and negotiating prices. Otherwise he organizes the invoices and official documents. Osman is in his mid-30s, is married and has two small kids. Two years before starting to work in this company, he owned a computer shop for some years. At the end of 1990s, the IT sector was blossoming and looked promising. So, Osman decided to study computer programming. His dream was to start-up a business, to buy a house and a car before he turned 30. Although he achieved this dream to a certain extent, by 2014 the computer shop did not even make one thirds of the profit it did in 2006. The computer usage changed quickly and Osman could not really catch up with the sectoral developments by investing in the new systems. He had taken a bank credit to buy his house, was looking for a way to pay back his debt without taking any more risks, before he went into bankruptcy.



The organized industrial zone outside Çorum.

Then, his second degree paternal cousin, Fatih, approached him with a job offer in the company owned by their common second degree paternal uncle.<sup>iii</sup> In fact, several other employees working in this company belong to the same lineage as Fatih and Osman; otherwise many of them are the employer's co-villagers and non-kin employees are in the

minority. Fatih worked at the company since his adolescence and a while ago was appointed as the manager. The position he offered to Osman required skills in using certain advanced computer programs, in which Osman had no training. Still, both Fatih and their employer/uncle believed that he can manage it. Osman also felt encouraged as he had a certain familiarity, he explains, both because he provided IT services to this company in the earlier years and he had kin and/or village ties to most of the workers. He immediately started his new job.

In a few months, he learned how to use the programs, but he still did not think that he was talented enough to further develop these skills. At about the same time, the person who was in charge of sales in the company quit his job. Soon after, Osman was moved to the sales department and put in charge there. Other non-relative employees who worked there longer and had more experience in sales and accounting were not given any priority for this position. Osman had some experience since he had his own business before, but he didn't know the accounting programs, nor was he familiar with the materials purchased for the company. One way or another, he has been working in this new position almost two years now. Time to time, there were inevitable tensions caused by misunderstandings, conflicting character traits or simply by mistakes that people do. Whether it ever becomes a serious problem of course depends on how big the mistake is and if it caused any financial loss.



Inside a company office.

Despite the experience of the last two years, Osman is still struggling with job. He is frustrated by the fact that he might be causing disappointment to his employer/kin because he might not be fulfilling their expectations. He says that because he is related both to the employer and to the manager, they wouldn't lay him off the way they would treat a failing "*el adami*" (outsider). Another problem stems from his discomfort in taking orders from the superiors and not being able to act on his own; even in minor tasks he has to follow what he has been told. Osman feels this way primarily because he was previously self-employed, but he finds it increasingly hard to receive orders from family members whom he is not supposed to question. In his new job, he still thinks that he is not very well adapted to the workplace but tries to handle the situation as best as he can by working very hard. He recently finished paying back the bank credit, but soon after his wife had to quit her job at a garment factory to look after their two

small children, since both had otherwise long working hours and no support for child care.

Osman's story is exemplary for an ordinary man's struggle to live a decent life: his failed career as self-employed, his difficulties in adapting to the changing demands of the market, his idea of a good life based on ownership, his dependency on bank credits and the inefficiency of available child care services. All of which somehow led this man to work in a family business, which is familiar to him yet still hard to adapt to. Here I want to use Osman's case to start a discussion on the social organization of a company and specifically the dynamics of hiring family members, on the basis of "familiarity" and as opposed to being an "*el adamı*" in Turkey.

This issue has been addressed by Alan Dubetsky in his 1976 article which is based on ethnographic fieldwork in a then industrializing neighborhood of Istanbul at the end of '60s and the beginning of '70s. The factories he was studying were owned by immigrants from Anatolian provinces who preferred to recruit their kin and co-locals (*hemşehri*) as workers and placed their close kin in managerial positions. Based on this observation, Dubetsky problematized two main aspects of recruitment: Why they did not recruit kinsmen alone and why they did not do the recruitment solely on universal basis. Not all kinsmen could have the skills required in the manufacture industry and there were plenty of job opportunities then in Istanbul, especially for the first comers, were his answers to the first question. The answer to the second question was rooted in the social structure and the value system of the migrants under examination. According to Dubetsky, the social structure and values system is defined by the notions of cultural obligations felt towards the co-locals (especially in *gurbet*<sup>iv</sup>) and mainly towards people with primordial ties (in general). People felt that the proper way of relating to others was through familiarity based on common primordial ties or common geography. Their feeling of trust and loyalty was generated from these binding and personalized relationships. Accordingly, recruiting on a solely universal basis would be socially improper and cause discomfort in the social structure and familial relationships. At the same time, these relations of trust and loyalty can easily be converted by the employer into a rather modern expectation of higher dedication to work and productivity, since now the workers' obligation should be not only towards a co-locals or kin but towards the work itself.

Osman himself explains his decision for accepting the job offer from his uncle/employee as being based on his familiarity with the company. One might argue that in Osman's case of being co-locals or kin is not as decisive as it was in Dubetsky's case of migrants in Istanbul. However, as previously pointed out by both Stirling (1965) and Kıray (1964), villagers and townsmen in Anatolia view people born outside of their hometown as *yabancı* (stranger/outsider) and feel uncomfortable with them. In this respect, the role of familiarity in Osman's recruitment is still similar to the recruitment patterns discussed by Dubetsky, because the employer and the employees share a similar social structure and value system,

defining the bonds of trust and loyalty, and mutual obligations generated by them. It is the socially appropriate behavior, in fact, an obligation for the employer/uncle, to help Osman by hiring him for the company, especially if Osman would be otherwise unemployed or consider out-migration. In this way he would also avoid the risk of opening up to a 'strange,' uncomfortable and unpredictable world which is the opposite of what he terms familiar. In this respect, we can so make sense of why Osman would use his traditional family ties as a solution to his financial problems which are indeed very modern, be it the bank credits, difficulties in addressing market demands or problems related to deficient child care services.

In the same manner, for the uncle/employer, Osman's skills and previous work experience are secondary to their personal relationship in the decision of hiring him. He thinks that Osman would 'manage' the work, whether it is technical computer programs or sales, as long as he remains trustworthy and loyal, which are taken for granted in the family context. Not only in this specific case, but also in other cases, I have listened to employers complaining about the lack of skilled, experienced and professional workers, because they would not want to live in Çorum<sup>v</sup>, even if employers would offer higher salaries. Therefore, in a context in which employers cannot recruit from a pool of skillful and experienced workers, recruiting a family member such as Osman, with a university degree and some experience, rather than someone with the same or lower skills, is more preferable. In either case, the new employee would have to be trained for the specific job, but by hiring a family member the employer can expect the full loyalty and dedication to the job, more often than from a non-family member. Recruiting Osman is a traditional solution to a modern problem for the employer/uncle too, as well as it was for Osman. As a result, both parties have fulfilled their mutual obligations defined by the social structure and value system and seem to have solved their individual problems caused by the market conditions.

Following this logic, Osman was put in charge of sales instead of other more experienced workers, because he is considered as being more loyal to the workplace and is expected to show higher dedication and responsibility. Similarly Fatih after working 15 years with his uncle, became the manager recently. In fact, neither Osman nor Fatih are the only family workers in this company. Along with non-family workers whose number has been increasing in the past five years, the workers are mainly co-villagers, but those who are given the managerial positions are people who are close kin of the employer. Osman is considered as junior among them. The relationships between kin employees and the employer resemble more of a villager-*agha* (landowning-village patron) relationship than in a modern worker- employee contract. In fact, I have come across employees themselves referring to their employers as *agha* several times, in this company and in others as well. The *agha* (uncle in this case) is like the 'father' to all and the provider, whose orders cannot be questioned but only followed. Fatih, on the other hand, has become the right hand of the *agha* over the years with the responsibility to execute

these orders. In this paternalistic setting, it can be overwhelming for someone like Osman (also for any worker, but more so for family workers), who left Çorum for university studies, then came back to run his own business, but failed. The ideas of meritocracy and certain freedoms to follow your own mind are in conflict with the logics that this company is ran and the social structure the whole setting is embedded. This is even the case when you are given a responsibility, but then cannot freely fulfill it, because it has to be done in a certain way, as it is the case for Osman.

Osman can avoid risks of the outside world that he finds uncomfortable and unpredictable and deal with the uncertainties of modern life on the basis of not being an “*el adamı*” to a rich uncle. The uncle through owning a company can act in the given social structure for the best management of his family and his work. But Osman can only do so at the cost of compromising his self-esteem and individuality, struggling to adapt to rules he did not create and fulfilling roles he is not fit for.

## References

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## Notes

<sup>i</sup> “Outsider” in Turkish, it is a synonym for “*yabancı*.”

<sup>ii</sup> All names are anonymized.

<sup>iii</sup> He co-owns the company with a non-relative. I gave more information about its management and work organization in my previous blog post.

<sup>iv</sup> The situation of being away from one’s homeland.

<sup>v</sup> According to Turkish Statistical Agency, Çorum’s rate of net migration was -12% in 2015.