



Not a “Typical Expat”: An Autoethnographic Account on Accessible Relocation

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Abstract

In this experience report, we report on the first author’s recent personal experience of relocation from Turkey to Germany as a postdoctoral researcher with a mobility disability. Here, we outline the details of the relocation process in three phases. In each phase, we share reflections on the relocation experience specifically outlining accessibility challenges. We focus on customizing existing and new access needs, dealing with language barriers as a blocker for interpersonal accessibility, but also discuss digital access, and visibility of access information in relation to connecting with local disabled communities. We refine our insights into lessons learnt from this process, outlining implications for policy makers, researchers and designers, academic community, as well as for the disabled community. Through this autoethnographic experience report, we aim to open a space to critically rethink accessibility on the move and the role of technology, specifically in the context of relocation.

CCS Concepts

• **Computer systems organization** → **Embedded systems**; *Redundancy*; Robotics; • **Networks** → Network reliability.

Keywords

autoethnography, accessibility, relocation, disabled expat

ACM Reference Format:

Zeynep Yildiz, Caroline Karmann, and Kathrin Gerling. 2024. Not a “Typical Expat”: An Autoethnographic Account on Accessible Relocation. In *The 26th International ACM SIGACCESS Conference on Computers and Accessibility (ASSETS ’24)*, October 27–30, 2024, St. John’s, NL, Canada. ACM, New York, NY, USA, 6 pages. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3663548.3688546>

1 Introduction

Even though the number of expats is growing, now making 3.1% of the population globally [1]; related research on expatriate and global mobility shows no data addressing race and ethnicity, religion and belief, sexual orientation, and disability [25]. At the same time, relocation is an integral part of an academic career, and it comes

with many challenges around cultural differences, language barriers, social and work related challenges, the burden of paperwork, challenges around adaptation, and many other technical issues for anyone. Since all these challenges also come with requirements, responsibilities, and new tasks, they involve another layer of issues for disabled researchers: ¹ accessibility challenges. Here, it is important to understand that for disabled people, sometimes even a trip to an unknown place in one’s own city or country might be overwhelming. For example, this can be due to a lack of accessible infrastructure and not being able to know the accessibility conditions of the place, what you are going to need or how you might solve these possible inaccessibilities. It is an even bigger challenge when a disabled person decides to relocate to and live in another country - something that is commonly expected in the context of academic careers - It comes with different physical, cultural, social and technical infrastructure, as well as different standards and policies around disability and accessibility which requires updating all the bottom-up strategies and personal ways of solving accessibility issues, coming up with new strategies, which is sometimes exhausting on a personal level, but insightful from a researcher perspective.

In this experience report, the first author (Zeynep), takes an auto-ethnographic account and outlines details of relocation experience and shares different strategies to deal with these challenges, also under consideration of the implications of different technologies and digital accessibility. Drawing upon the observations, we provide some useful and practical implications for policy makers, researchers and designers, research community, as well as for the disabled community.

2 BACKGROUND

Auto-ethnography as a qualitative research method defined as a both research process and research product, in which the research seeks to “describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience” by combining characteristics of autobiography and ethnography [8]. In Human-Computer Interaction (HCI), researchers mostly used this approach in the form of autobiographical design [22]. Autoethnographic research has the potential to generate rich personal insights rarely available through other research methods in HCI [7, 27].

Within accessibility research in HCI, auto-ethnography is also used as an effective methodology to reveal experiences of researchers who identify as disabled and document their experiences around



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ASSETS ’24, October 27–30, 2024, St. John’s, NL, Canada

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ACM ISBN 979-8-4007-0677-6/24/10

<https://doi.org/10.1145/3663548.3688546>

¹I prefer to use identity-first language, believing that distancing disability from one’s identity actually constructs a collective representation of disability in an ableist culture [27].

being a disabled PhD student [17, 30] or researcher [12], being a traveler [16], or using AT in daily life [9]. This body of work emphasizes that while designing assistive technologies for people with disabilities, designers, professionals or policy makers should be aware of intended effect and the potential side effect of these technologies [9], highlighting the context, in-situ changes in people's behaviors [17] and individual differences [16]. Existing work also highlights the importance of communities and effective collaboration between different stakeholders [17, 30], connection and interdependence [12] for creating access. These work provide rich insights regarding experiences of disabled people through diverse socio-technical infrastructure, showing the relevance of unique personal accounts contributing to accessibility research.

Motivated by this niche body of work that encourages disabled researchers to share their diverse experiences in different contexts and previous work that defines accessibility as a flexible, continuous, living and fluctuating concept [4, 5, 26], we aim to open a space for HCI researchers to critically rethink accessibility on the move, in case of relocation, where all the physical, social and technical infrastructure and therefore accessibility change and transform, and that requires making personal level in-situ accessibility arrangements through assistive and digital technologies and built environment.

3 METHOD

I am ² (the first author) a design researcher, and focus my research on accessibility. I am a person with a visible disability (110 cm tall, with an unusual spine structure due to a rare myopathy), since birth. I define myself as a disabled woman, which is an identity that I proudly adapted during my time as an undergraduate student. Although my condition does not always disable me, some occasions such as standing for a long time, walking for long distances, things placed too high can disable me. I use some assistive technologies and tools to drive my car, use my kitchen, reach to stuff placed higher than me in public places, or find routes to walk less. When I am able to design an accessible life for myself, I live alone and independently.

When I decided to relocate after completing my Ph.D., I decided to document my experiences I had in this relocation process. Since I am a person who engages in writing on a daily basis both for academic purposes and for creative writing, I already keep diary to reflect on my daily experiences. After making my decision to relocate, I carefully wrote down my experiences related to relocation each day during three months, starting from one month before I relocated, in January 2023. I took handwritten notes to a notebook, named "taşınma sürecinin defteri" (relocation process notebook), which is around 50 pages long (see Figure 1). For the analysis, I analyzed data using reflexive thematic analysis to reflect on my notes, which provides flexibility for centering researcher subjectivity, organic and recursive coding processes, and deep engagement with data [6].

4 FINDINGS

Here, we provide the themes of our analysis grouped into three chronological phases, with the aim of facilitating the narrative.

²Through the methods and findings, I, as a first author, use first-person language to share my background, research process and findings.



Figure 1: Notebook of my relocation process.

4.1 Deciding to Relocate and To-Do's Before the Relocation

In this subsection I provide my experiences before the relocation, including the decision making process.

4.1.1 Parameters of 'Decision Making': Is Accessibility a Consideration? In the process that I was writing my thesis, I already started to reach out to people to find a suitable postdoc position. During this time, the only thing that I was considering was finding a position that aligns well with my research topic. At this stage, I decided to exclude one of my options because I thought that for the first relocation process, it may be better to choose Europe instead of US or Canada, to stay closer to home. This was the only location based decision that I made during the decision making process. Since I was reaching out to people from the accessibility community in HCI, without any consideration which university they affiliated with or which city the university is located; I also did not do any research to decide whether the research lab, the university, the city or the country is accessible for me or not. I was also thinking that many accessibility challenges that I will be experiencing would be approximately similar in many contexts. Also, since my home country is not a very accessible one as well, I was thinking I have the skills to deal with many accessibility issues already. However, now, as a person who went through all the relocation process, I feel surprised how I did not really do research about accessibility of the specific city that I was planning to relocate to. One reason for that might be the challenge of finding accessibility related information of a place beforehand, without visiting.

4.1.2 Customizing Access Needs. Since as a newly relocated person you need to follow certain steps and things are in order for you to complete, what I could do before my arrival was not too much but I had already started looking for an apartment. I was surprised by the fact that apartment-searching websites offered the filter of "Barrier-free" (see Figure 2.), which was not the case in similar websites in Turkey. So I applied the filter and also created my profile to

make it visible that I have a disability and I am looking for barrier-free apartments. However, what is defined (or, only defined) for barrier free was around the needs of people with wheelchairs. I generally have more specific and different needs than a wheelchair user, even though some of the accessibility accommodations that are for wheelchair users are also useful for me, such as bathroom sinks or kitchen countertops placed lower. But, I am generally okay with stairs, if there are proper handles or I can use standard kitchens since I have a special assistive tool. So, my accessibility needs, which are unique, flexible, customizable (like all the accessibility needs), did not match with the standard filters for accessibility, sometimes limiting my options.

Figure 2: “Barrierefrei” (Barrier-free) filter in apartment searching platforms.

So, I started to search for apartments without the filter, which required extra effort around viewing and filtering many inaccessible options. However, I kept the information about my disability in my profile. When I find options that seem accessible to me, landlords get back to me saying that their houses are not barrier-free, since they were checking my profile. During this time, I was lucky enough to find a Turkish Expat community in Germany that supports each other for many challenges of relocation, and I attended their WhatsApp groups. Through the network in the community, I was able to find accommodation before I arrived. I was able to ask many details about the apartment with direct contact to the landlord and they provided me with videos of the apartment so that I can understand if it fits with my needs. I was also able to see the street of the apartment which is also a very important factor for me in terms of accessibility, which is majorly not visible on the apartment searching websites as well. Further, ensuring accessibility in my working space was the easiest, and resolved before my arrival with the support of the professors and the teammates that I will be working with (e.g. purchasing a stool for office kitchen, organizing the office considering my needs and buying a suitable laptop). Also, the relocation reimbursement included shipping my assistive tool that I used in my apartment (See figure 3., left), which was financially very relieving.

4.2 Moving in and First Days of Relocation

In order to make this relocation process as smooth as possible, one of my family members also traveled with me and stayed with me until I settled down and solved initial accessibility issues.

4.2.1 Making Access Information Visible. Although the Turkish expat community in Germany supported me in many questions



Figure 3: Assistive platform that I use in my kitchen and different types of stools I use at home.

that a “typical expat” might have and the city council sent a detailed PDF of which steps to follow in your first 30 days, I was still left with many questions that are related to accessibility. These were the times that I had a more clear understanding on how disability related regulations and procedures are really context-specific sometimes invisible, if you do not know the right person to ask, right place to check. The one “right person” for me was the disability office representative of the university, with the support of the professor that I work with. However, at the beginning, I was not able to receive any answers from them, despite continuous emails.

In later stages, we were able to meet the disability office representatives on another occasion, and after the in-person meeting, they immediately emailed me in later days supporting my application for using disability parking lot on campus and also applying for a “severely disabled” card (German: Schwerbehindertenausweis), which I needed to obtain for accessing some disability related advantages (e.g. tax benefits, using disabled parking lots, and for some medical procedures). Even though some information about this was also available online through the website of the disability related council of the city, there were a couple of different application forms, as well as different addresses to post the application documents, which was confusing. It was much easier for me when the people from the university supported me to fill the right application form and send them to the right address. However since I lost a lot of my time searching for the correct information, it took a lot to get my disabled ID card and I needed to pay a significant amount of parking ticket for parking in disability parking lots during the first 2 months. By this way, I also realized how much I relied on my disabled community in my home country to learn from their experience in terms of how to do ensure accessibility.

4.2.2 Leaving the Comfort Zone of Social and Digital Access. One other realization for me was to understand how I rely on daily interactions with people in the city to solve the accessibility issues I experience, due to inaccessible infrastructure. In terms of infrastructure, Germany had some advantages when compared to Turkey, such as well-reserved disabled parking lots, or smooth and step-free sidewalks. However, I still encountered some accessibility issues especially around reaching out to things placed higher, or when I needed to stand for long times to wait in a line. These were similar experiences to what I had in Turkey, but communicating these inaccessibilities and solving them via daily social interaction was a lot easier, which became harder in Germany due to language barrier. Here, I also considered using some of the stools that I already use in my apartment outside (e.g., in the grocery store; see

Figure 3., right), but they were not easy to carry around. This was where I thought interdependency might fail, but we need better design of infrastructure.

As a person with a mobility impairment, accessing many services digitally and by phone calls were my accessible comfort-zone in Turkey. This became a totally different experience in Germany. Due to a lack of digitalization [11] and strict regulations around data privacy, it is almost impossible to use many services that involve personal information such as opening a bank account, ordering internet connection, or registering to a doctor. All these processes involved in-person communication in some of the steps, which comes with accessibility challenges (e.g., going there, waiting in the line), as well as the language barrier again. Therefore, I needed to physically be in their office or branch to ask even a simple question, which was time to time exhausting for me.

4.3 After Two Months: Post Relocation Process

As I leave the first two months behind, I have seen that some of the accessibility challenges I had in Turkey were not an issue in Germany, but some new accessibility challenges arrived. Or, some of the existing solutions I had were no longer working well.

4.3.1 Discovering New Ways of Access. While adapting to a new environment, I started to come up with new ways of solving my existing or new accessibility challenges, such as finding new ways of communicating with people through using translation tools, new apps (e.g. an app that notify the staff of a fuel station before you arrive). After the first intense month, I also realized many of the challenges were in relation to me relocating from a non-European country to a European Union country. This is in relation to many bureaucratic aspects and financial ones (e.g. currency), as well as accessibility, since there are some shared rules within European countries such as disabled stickers for the car, disabled ID card, or even having a common key for using accessible toilets. Finally, being aware of the flexibility of creating access, I believe my accessibility related experiences during two years of living in another country will be evolving and changing all the time as well.

5 DISCUSSION

Using auto-ethnography as a methodology, we were able to deeply understand the experiences of Zeynep, while examining the nuances of her interactions in different contexts and over time, along with various factors that affected her experiences during the relocation process, similar to what is also discussed in previous literature [12, 17]. Our work shows that access could be improved through policy changes that address availability of (digital) information at the organizational, municipal, and international level. Based on the first-person experience, we below share our lesson learnt on rethinking accessible relocation and the role of technology.

5.1 Implications for Policy Makers:

As our findings show, technology can create access, but that it needs to be structurally supported (e.g., local government), and also used reliably by people who hold power (e.g. representatives for disabled people within the institutions). Relocation processes make the importance of being able to access accessibility related information in advance very clear. At the level of a municipality,

there might be documents and platforms that specifically informs new disabled residents about accessibility of the city, and disability related procedures that are mentioned through the findings. Also, findings show that accessibility-related information should be more specific and visible, and that online platforms should be used in a way that does not cause additional confusion. Previous research in HCI provides a rich ground for how to provide reliable and high-quality accessibility information for certain groups of disabled people [21].

Further, from the perspective of Disability Justice, “We are not only disabled, we are also each coming from a specific experience of race, class, sexuality, age, religious background, geographical location, immigration status, and more.” [15]. Our findings suggest that countries of the European Union have shared disability policies and accommodation solutions regarding accessibility, which make disabled people from non-western countries more vulnerable in terms of bureaucratic processes. Being aware of this, policy makers may take additional steps to support disabled people relocated from a non-EU country to EU country to make their transition process easier (e.g. providing relevant information) which can be supported through accessible digital platforms.

5.2 Implications for Accessibility Designers and Researchers:

In relation to having access related information beforehand, the importance of digital accessibility maps of campuses and cities becomes important, considering that available commercial maps only provides limited accessibility information [2]. Crowd-sourced apps that allows for pinning accessibility features of cities (e.g. Map4Accessibility [19] is available in 4 countries in Europe, PinGOin [13] is available in Turkey) seem to play a critical role in supporting planning for disabled people, in advance of their travel but these are not widely available yet. Current research efforts in HCI focuses on automatically constructed ubiquitous indoors and outdoors accessibility digital maps [2] or crowdsourced maps focusing on the potential participants who may have varying degrees of free time and motivation, with gamification approach [20]. We find such attempts important, while keeping in mind that urban accessibility is a socio-political problem and should be approached with a multi-stakeholder perspective [23]). Supporting this, findings of this autoethnographic account call HCI researchers as well as architects, urban planners, UX designers and city representatives to collaborate on developing better accessibility maps to support disabled people, especially in case of relocation when the person is unfamiliar with the physical and socio-technical infrastructure of the city.

For apartment searching websites, it seems really crucial to provide accessibility related filters that are customizable based on the needs of the user. Rather than having one static filter around “barrier-free” (see Figure 2.), users may be able to customize what are the features of the apartment (e.g. elevators, stairs with handles, walk-in bathtubs) and search accordingly. An accessibility need of a disabled person can be so specific and unique [10], the filtering systems on the platforms should be able to answer for this diversity. Further, since accessibility is not just about inside the apartment but also outside of the apartment is relevant, it might be helpful

if the platforms require outside photos of the apartment from the landlords when they first publish the description of the apartment. Further, as it was also same in Zeynep's case, disabled people also may choose to make their disability information visible in their profile. Apartment-searching platforms also need to be aware of any possible discrimination, as it is previously documented for some sharing economy platforms [3].

As shown through the Findings, Zeynep uses different forms of stools and platforms (see Figure 3.) especially around reaching items placed higher. However, one issue with these is they are not supporting mobility. Most of the portable stools are available as part of camping equipment, which are not diverse in terms of their design and also big platforms are not easy to move with. This highlights an everyday access need which relevant assistive technologies not exists or not easily available. Existing trends in assistive technology and accessibility research also do not seem to focus on individuals with low height [18, 24]. So, the question of how assistive tools and technologies aimed to increase height can be better designed to support mobility of disabled people might be relevant. Based on our insights, we suggest that such tools should be adjustable for different situations and contexts, and also should be easily movable in case of a trip and adaptable to different contexts and infrastructure in case of relocation. Here, discovering opportunities for new generation of rapid prototyping tools and online communities that can empower disabled individuals to gain more control over the design of DIY assistive tools [14] should be more in discussion.

5.3 Implications for the Academic Community:

International relocation is costly, and is even more expensive as a disabled person (e.g. someone may need to travel with disabled person, extra costs of ensuring assistive tools). Accessible mobility is important to encourage the participation of disabled researchers to conferences, and becomes more critical when it comes to relocation of disabled researchers, which requires many extra expenses to ensure accessibility that can be identified as invisible access work [5]. From the perspective of collaborative access that highlights sharing responsibility for access needs [15], it seems crucial for the research community to provide funds for supporting accessibility-related expenses of disabled researchers. This ensures smooth mobility for them, which remains an expectation in the context of building one's academic career. Also, our findings show how the research community positively supports disabled researchers (e.g. preparing an accessible workspace before arrival), which is a good example for practicing interdependence and collective access [15] in the academic context, an important determinant of success for disabled researchers in the lack of more systemic and institutional support systems.

5.4 Implications for the Disabled Community:

Our findings suggest that experience based information is crucial for accessibility related information, highlighting the importance of disabled communities that share experience in solidarity, as it is highlighted in Disability Justice movement [15]. Considering the contextual relevance of access related information, most of the disabled communities operate on the local level. Our findings show the need for making these local communities visible for people

from abroad, creating international communities around access that involve people on the move (e.g. who travel frequently or are relocated). Previous literature showed how online communities for disabled people can open a space to share experiences around assistive technologies, enabling community members to relate to others with similar experiences [28]. A similar international community might support each other on planning accessible trips, exchange information on disability related regulations and policies of countries, accessibility features of cities and consider accessibility while they make decisions. Here, it is important to design digital platforms that are accessible for all disabilities, for cross-disability and cross-cultural communication [29].

6 LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSION

In this experience report, we report on the first author's recent personal experience of relocation, which comes with new accessibility challenges around unfamiliarity with physical, cultural, social and technical infrastructure, as well as different policies around disability. One limitation to our study is that some of our findings are not specific to relocation and might be independent of relocation process. However, already existing inaccessibilities become more visible and challenging in extreme conditions, such as relocation, and provide good opportunities to realize and work on them. Based on our insights around these challenges and bottom-up strategies to resolve them, we outline implications for policy makers, researchers and designers, academic community, as well as for the disabled community to critically rethink accessibility on the move and the role of technology in the context of relocation.

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