

## **On depression, anxiety, and looking for the silver lining in short term fieldwork**

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### **A foundation of cognitive dissonance**

One of the defining points in my memory of being an undergraduate was seeing the television news coverage of Operation Cast Lead, the 2008/9 Israeli military bombardment of the Gaza Strip. For 22 days I found myself glued to my television, watching continual loops of airstrikes, hearing experts and talking heads debating what this meant for regional stability and the prospect of a peaceful resolution to the Israel-Palestine conflict. One thing that no one seemed to be talking about were the people on the ground, no one on CNN or MSNBC seemed to care what the conflict meant for those people. I was horrified by Operation Cast Lead, but also enthralled.

I was a white Midwestern American college kid, whose upbringing could not have been more removed from international politics and the Middle East. Still, the winter of 2008/9 left me feeling like I needed to know what it was all about, and I felt like I needed to see it first hand. So, in the Spring of 2010 I boarded a plane bound for Tel Aviv, ultimately heading to the West Bank city of Birzeit to begin an academic year abroad at a local university. The experiences of that time abroad that stuck with me most were the stories I heard from people, stories about their daily lives and how they navigated what seemed to me to be the utterly unbearable realities of military occupation. These were stories that I never heard back home, this was the life that CNN never covered, but it was reality for millions of people.

When I returned to the United States I realized that I wanted to go on to graduate school. As I finished an undergraduate thesis on different forms of resistance portrayed in Palestinian literature, I wondered if I could merge what was then a burgeoning interest in language with a larger desire to

understand the realities and stories that I saw and heard in the West Bank. What I did not realize--despite being aware of the larger importance of the work I was soon to initiate--was that conducting research on language and political conflict in Palestine would entail a complex process of wrestling with my misgivings about anthropology, America's presence in the Middle East, and the nature of field research in general.

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Fast forward to the Spring of 2013. I sat drinking hot tea and swatting flies off my face just outside the Rafah Crossing, the border between Egypt and the Gaza Strip. After what seemed like an eternity, with Egyptian officials scrutinizing my passport and paperwork, I was told I could enter Rafah terminal. Then came hours more of waiting, staring at hundreds of other people crammed into the perpetually too small Egyptian departure terminal at Rafah. My passport disappeared into a back room somewhere for additional scrutiny while I sat and watched dozens crowd the border guards who slowly returned passports to those given permission to enter Gaza. Finally, an Egyptian border official called my name and as I stood, he casually tossed my passport back at me from 20 feet away. At the Gazan side of the crossing, after another 15 minutes of questions and a quick call to my primary contact, my passport was stamped and the well-dressed security official who had been questioning me formally admitted me into the country with, "*ahlan wa sahlan fi ghazza*" or "Welcome to Gaza".

My previous field research in Gaza focused on conducting interviews with both indigenous Gazans and Palestinians who fled their homes in 1948, coming to Gaza as political refugees. Despite believing that there was an inherent value to my work in Gaza, collecting oral histories and documenting the lived experiences of war and protracted conflict, I left Gaza feeling deflated, uncertain about my own positionality in the conflict. I was an American, a citizen of the government who

provided the material and military support necessary to exact the very violence I worked to document.

As this earlier fieldwork trip became more distant in my memory, as my own misgivings about the research faded from my consciousness I decided that it was time for me to return to the field. It is probably true of all research trips, but Gaza left me with more questions than answers. One of those questions was how the linguistic reality and lived experiences of Palestinian refugees in the diaspora, outside of historic Palestine, were similar to, or different from their compatriots in Gaza. Those questions brought me to Jordan. I wish I could say that I thought Jordan would somehow be a different research experience. But in truth, I expected the uneasy memories of my time in Gaza to reemerge. As my time in Jordan progressed, those feelings did resurface. My depression and severe anxiety came rushing back, along with deep misgiving about the very nature of the research for which I had just traveled thousands of miles.

### **Case Study and Background: Gaza Camp, Jordan**

Despite months of meticulous planning, petitioning for ethical approval, and developing a research methodology to maximize my time and productivity in the field, when I landed in Amman three hours late off a flight from Istanbul, very little about my two month fieldwork trip in Jordan was solidified. I had a contact who had agreed to help me facilitate my work, but I still knew very little about where I was staying or what my field site was actually really like. This was inevitable, given that so many aspects of fieldwork cannot be anticipated and simply have to be solidified from the field. I have come to understand that no amount of planning will ever truly prepare you for fieldwork. You just have to be there, and over time things begin to fall into place.

I came to Jordan to follow up on my earlier fieldwork

in the Gaza Strip in 2013. With Gaza as my mental backdrop, I found myself barreling down the highway, heading an hour north from the capital to Jerash, the city adjacent to where I would be conducting research during the summer of 2015.

The first three weeks of my trip in Jordan proved an immense learning experience, both in terms of becoming a more effective field researcher and also coming to terms with the aspects of my work that were inherently problematic in their focus and execution. I left Tucson with the goal of collecting sociolinguistic and ethnographic data on a community of Palestinian refugees originally from the Gaza Strip. All available evidence pointed to this population living in a refugee camp in northern Jordan since 1967. However, when I arrived in Jerash, the city of over 40,000 located near the camp, I realized that the research plan I had meticulously laid out in the months leading up to my trip was based on incorrect data.

It was quickly revealed to me by members of the local community that my field site, referred to by everyone in Jerash and the surrounding area as “Gaza Camp”<sup>1</sup>, was actually only home to a handful of Gazan Palestinians, at most six families out of a total camp population of over 30,000 people. This came as a shock, since all of the available information on the camp suggested that it was mainly populated by Gazan refugees who fled the Strip in 1967. This is actually true, in a manner of speaking.

I did not time it, but I think it took me about 10 minutes of being in Jerash before I learned, once and for all, that one cannot fully trust anything that the United Nations (UN) says about the demographic makeup of their refugee camps. What the UN means when they say that the camp was established “for 11,500 Palestinian refugees and displaced persons who left the Gaza Strip as a result of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war,”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The official name for the camp given by the United Nations Relief Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees is Jerash Camp.

<sup>2</sup> Retrieved from: <http://www.unrwa.org/where-we-work/jordan/camp-profiles?field=13>



**Figure 1.** Map of historic Palestine during the British Mandate Period. This map is reproduced with the permission of the Applied Research Institute of Jerusalem (ARIJ).

is that these individuals were already refugees in Gaza when they fled. The reality is that this community represents one of a number of Palestinian refugee communities that has been doubly displaced.

The vast majority of the residents of Gaza Camp were initially expelled from their homes in various areas of historic Palestine during the ethnic cleansing that coincided with the creation of the State of Israel in 1948. At that point, this population fled to the Gaza Strip. Many are originally from areas surrounding Gaza, but a great number of them were also from locations further north and east like Ramle, Lydd, or Bir as-Sab' in the Negev Desert region. When the Six Day War of 1967<sup>3</sup> began in June of that year, these Palestinians were already members of Gaza's statistically overwhelming refugee population. When it was founded Gaza Camp was one of a number of "emergency camps" set up in the period surrounding the Six Day War to house Palestinian refugees fleeing the fighting. The original group of 11,500 people that came to the camp were then taken in by the Jordanian government and the UN. The Gazan origin of the original refugees gave "Gaza Camp" its unofficial name. These Palestinians have, since 1967, lived just outside of Jerash city next to the Jordanian village of Al-Haddadah.

When I realized that almost no one in the camp was actually from Gaza I had a brief moment of terror, visualizing my research plans torn to shreds. As someone researching Gaza and specifically trying to uncover information about Gazan Arabic--a variety of Arabic that scholars know virtually nothing about--the reality that there were hardly any speakers of that variety of the language around was sobering.

Following a brief existential field crisis, I remembered

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<sup>3</sup> The Six Day War occurred between June 5-10th, 1967 with Egyptian, Syrian, and Jordanian forces engaging in combat with the Israeli Defense Forces. The conflict began after Egyptian forces were mobilized in the Sinai Peninsula, not far from the border with Israel. As a result, the Israeli military launched pre-emptive strikes against Egypt which resulted in full scale conflict (Oren 2002).

a piece of advice given to me by one Anthropology faculty member at the University of Arizona not long before I left for the summer:

*I tell all my students the same thing when they go into the field. If you come back having answered the questions you set out to answer, then you've failed at doing your fieldwork. That tells me you didn't listen to the people you were working with.*

I was being cued in to one of major tenets of conducting anthropological research, continual attention to the issues, experiences, and outlooks that are important to the individuals one is working with, even if they rest outside of the scope of my primary research questions. Point taken, but I still had to figure out how to adjust my plan for the summer and figure out who exactly I should listen to.

I began by conducting some initial interviews with the *actual* Gazan Palestinians of the camp. Based on those interviews, I learned that the majority of them are originally from Gaza City. In fact, most were originally from the *šaja'iyya* (pronounced, "sha-ja-iyya") neighborhood in the east of Gaza City: coincidentally, the place where I spent the most time while I was in Gaza in 2013. These interviews alerted me to a number of Gazans living outside the camp in Jerash, who were originally from *šaja'iyya* as well.

Even though they are the minority, since I had done most of my earlier work in *šaja'iyya*, speaking with these people made for an interesting comparison with my earlier research. It also gave me the unique opportunity to follow up with some of the questions about the history of Gaza City and its residents that I forgot to ask when I was in Gaza. In this way, I was able to at least partially rectify some of the naïve mistakes that I made when I was just beginning my Gaza fieldwork.

Outside of the small handful of indigenous Gazans with whom I was able to make contact, I had to decide how to handle the linguistic side of my fieldwork for the remainder of my time in Jordan. Talking to Gazans, I was cued in to the wider demographics of the camp. Based on interviews, I learned that up to 70 percent of the camp's residents are originally from Bir as-Sab'<sup>4</sup> (today the Israeli city of Beersheba) and the surrounding areas. They were also forced to flee in 1948 and became refugees in the Gaza Strip. The camp includes both residents of the city of Bir as-Sab' itself and the surrounding rural areas. A substantial portion of this group are also from a number of Bedouin tribes that historically lived in the area of Bir as-Sab'. When speaking with Bedouins in Gaza Camp, most describe living in areas in the south of the Gaza Strip as refugees prior to their arrival in Jordan. Based on my earlier work in Gaza I learned that even today most of Gaza's Bedouin community remains in the south, close to the border with Egypt and the city of Rafah.

Although Sabāwiys (people from Bir as-Sab') and Bedouins make up the bulk of the community, there are Palestinians from all over historic Palestine who ended up in Gaza Camp. I met speakers whose families were originally from Al-'Abāsiyya, east of Jaffa, as well as speakers from areas in the *sāhil* on the Mediterranean coast (as far north as Haifa). In addition, there are residents of the camp originally from areas near Al-Khalīl (Hebron) and Nāblus, both today part of the West Bank of the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

### **Weighed down by privilege**

I realized that, although it wasn't going to be the exact group of people I thought I would be working with, I had a lot to learn from the people in the camp. They could tell me a great deal about historic Palestine and its residents not documented

<sup>4</sup> Beersheba: retrieved from <http://www.palestineremembered.com/Beersheba/Beersheba/index.html>

anywhere else, at least to my knowledge. Once I came to terms with that realization and I began interviewing in earnest, I started to feel a different kind of unease about the work I was doing. It started while sitting with an elderly refugee who had consented to be interviewed. Over the course of our interview, the individual began to tell me about how desperately s/he needed surgery on one eye where s/he had completely lost vision.<sup>5</sup> However, this person could not afford the high cost of surgery in the local hospital.

It hit me then, much as it did while in Gaza, that my research often still feels weighed down by my inherent privilege and intellectual curiosity, while offering little to the communities in which I work. Intellectually, I know that on some level my work helps the Palestinian community through documenting oral history. This is particularly true for the elderly generation whose memories and accompanying stories will soon fade as they pass away; crucially, this is information that illuminates the linguistic outcomes of their forced migration. However, it typically never feels that way to me when I am in the field. At best, it feels like I am only helping the limited community of scholars who actually care about these issues. In conducting my work, I often feel that I am simply a white American male researcher, someone with relative socioeconomic wealth, and blessed with a passport that afforded me easy research access to Jordan. I am privileged in so many ways. I am one amongst many who have expressed an intellectual interest in the suffering and oppression of the Palestinian community. I am someone who has shown up for a limited period of time in a refugee camp in northern Jordan (or in the Gaza Strip) to ask questions about language, culture, traditions, history, and how those areas of life have changed as a result of decades of protracted conflict and occupation. In many cases, my conversations with the community dig up harsh memories of war and loss. They get at how things have

<sup>5</sup> I use gender neutral pronouns purposefully, to avoid unintentionally providing identifying information about the individual.

changed as a result of conflict and brutally highlight the differences between life *then* and life *now*.

On top of all of this, I leave these locations as easily as I came. I arrived in Jordan on a tourist visa, paying my 40 Jordanian Dinar at the airport in Amman without even a question as to why I was there or how long I wanted to stay. My privilege as an American researcher makes it possible for me to show up in a refugee camp to do my work, but every day retreat to my studio apartment miles away to sit at my MacBook and write. This is a reality beyond the reach of most residents of the camp.

These feelings are not unique to my own situation. They form the backbone of sociolinguistic and anthropological research to a large extent. However, the fact that this particular trip is short-term--lasting only a couple of months, conveniently fit into the summer break from my doctoral program--exacerbates the way that I feel about the work I do. Having now taken multiple short-term research trips, they strike me as especially problematic in terms of what we as researchers get from the community and how little it seems we can give back. For most of us, short-term research is all that is practical. In my case, Jordan was a pilot trip, and summer is the only time I can realistically complete the work. Even for more advanced scholars, the duties of their jobs, their spouses, their kids, and their lives keeps them tied to their universities and homes. This is even if they would prefer to spend a year or more in the field in order to build a connection to their research site that extends from admiration and empathy as much as intellectual interest.

I think that feeling this way is healthy. Maybe it shows that I am aware of my position in the larger anthropological project, one which is still deeply troubled in its relationship to larger social power structures and its historical ties to colonialism, racism, and oppression. Self-reflexivity is a good thing, right? Checking your privilege is crucial and it is something

that we all too often neglect in the course of our work. I know that those things are all true, but after being in Jordan for a few weeks I did not want to leave my apartment. Not because I do not want to work, certainly I do. I traveled thousands of miles to do work and collect data. But, I am keenly aware of how little good I am doing rolling into a refugee camp in a Ford Explorer, sitting down with refugees for only a couple of hours, and then leaving. Even if I come back over and over, my trip still ends. Theirs does not. I have a return ticket to Tucson, but many of their homes have been wiped off the map. I care very deeply about the people I meet in my work; I am genuinely interested in getting to know them and hearing their stories. Those stories are ones that need to be heard and told by Americans like me, to be consumed by those who have no knowledge of or basis for understanding the experiences of forced migration and refugee camps. Even though I know all of that, when I step back and look at my work I cannot deny that these people remain an object of research interest for me and that makes me feel horrible.

### **Discussion: A Path Forward**

Even after returning from the field and reflecting more significantly on my experiences, I cannot help but shake the uneasy feeling. I see my work as important, I see it as valuable, but I also see it as deeply troubling. Ultimately, my freedom of movement within a refugee camp, amongst people who are stuck and whose homes have been destroyed, reinforces larger social structures. Another question I regularly asked myself during this trip is whether it is even reasonable to talk about my research as work “with” a community. This question bothers me still. The realization that I do work “on” a community is sobering, but that is the reality.

So, what are we to do? Is it better if I shift my research focus? Do I just avoid fieldwork entirely? Do I write these

feelings down, file them away, and carry on full steam ahead towards a dissertation? I do not have a solution. I wish I did. Even publishing my notes and reflections on these experiences feels to me like a pat on the back for pausing to think for a moment about my position. Robert Borofsky (2015) recently argued that we should acknowledge as an intellectual community that simply “doing no harm” may not be good enough in showing our appreciation to the communities who allow us in to conduct research.

Instead, Borofsky points out that we should start to focus intently on “doing good” in the community. In my case, I think this comes back to the advice I got prior to heading to the field about the importance of actually listening and hearing what people were telling me while conducting my research. That certainly involves being flexible in the direction my work takes, but more than that, listening for ways that I can use my skills, my background, and even my privilege to do something that might benefit the community. Even in some small way. The ways that we, as anthropologists, can do the most good in our research is something that each of us has to assess and implement individually. There is no blue print for success when it comes to things like this. I honestly still do not know how to move forward in dealing with these issues in my own case. I may never figure it out, but Borofsky’s point about shifting our focus towards doing good feels like the end of a thread, and it is certainly one worth pursuing.

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