

The Continuous Identity Crisis that is Fieldwork

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“Do your parents know you’re here?”

[‘Active community member’ (*faliyat*), author’s interview, Shabriha, 24 May 2013]

Fieldwork is exhilarating: the wealth of new perspectives and information; the warmth of people’s welcome; the surprises waiting around every corner. There is no doubt about it, however, that fieldwork – perhaps specifically qualitative fieldwork – also demands a constant reflection on one’s own nature, character, background and approach. In my case, three elements of my identity seem to specifically impact people’s perceptions of me (and hence my research): I’m a woman; I’m relatively young; and I’m an *azjnabiye*, a foreigner.

The main focus of my research is the relations between Lebanese and Palestinian governance authorities. And, to put it bluntly, political governance here is, in most instances, not ‘women’s business.’ The subsequent challenge is twofold. First, it is how to get access to the men’s world of governance. While the meetings where decisions are made and discussions are held naturally remain of-limits to me, the fact that I fall within the curious category of ‘Western women’ – who are clearly not men, but also do not fit within the cultural system determining local men-women relations – apparently makes it rather more acceptable for most men here to discuss governance issues with me they wouldn’t normally talk about with their wives or daughters (this of course is not solely related to gender, but also to the simple fact that as a researcher I am significantly more interested in such issues than most women I meet here). The second part of my challenge is to distill governance dynamics, in a perhaps more indirect way, from women’s perspectives. What can the topics central at the daily coffee meetings where the women of the village join up tell me about governance? Quite something, it turns out. Mothers are concerned for sons who cannot marry because they’re not allowed to build a house – or to work to earn the money to build a house – which touches on the informal deal-making between Lebanese and Palestinian authorities regarding the building of houses. They worry about another waste collection crisis when their migrated relatives return in the summer, a concern related to attempts by the popular committee to get further waste dumping guarantees from the union of municipalities.

Two other aspects of my identity that seem to be particularly significant in doing my research are that I am young – and for some reason even appear five years younger to the people here – and that I am a foreigner. Being considered young gives me the feeling of being systematically underestimated. People heave sighs of admiration if I take a bus to Saida, a city only 30 kilometers away, ‘on my own’ and are impressed by the fact that I am able to call someone like a mayor ‘in person’ to make an appointment. On the other hand, I feel continuously overestimated as well – something probably related to my foreignness. Such overestimation has two sides. Whereas a lot of people seem to think I can fix anything for

them, ranging from visa to jobs and transferring messages to European authorities – which, if not always for the right reasons, certainly opens doors – there is on the other hand the fear that I have the power to expose or ruin people by a stroke of my pen – which makes especially officials wary to talk (frankly) with me.

A final aspect related to my foreignness that has a distinct effect on my research is my limited knowledge of Arabic. By now, I can manage well in the social life, conversing about my favorite foods and asking friends about yesterday's party. Discussing complicated issues such as informal governance arrangements in unofficial camps, however, is another matter, which is why I am assisted by an interpreter. Beyond just being able to understand what is being said to me, the fact that there are two people present at each interview creates the opportunity to brainstorm, preliminary analyze and reflect jointly afterwards – a process turning out to be at least as valuable for my research than the actual interviews and observations. And having people talk directly to 'one of them' often makes them say more than they intended to say to a foreigner. People regularly tell my interpreter things which they then tell her not to translate to me – whether or not she should tell me these things afterwards is another (ethical) question, but it goes to show the added value of an interpreter beyond the simple act of translating.

In the end, for me, the process of reflecting on how the researcher's identity affects the research turns out to be not about establishing pros and cons, but rather about turning disadvantages into assets; being a Western woman might grant me (limited) access in both gender realms; the underestimation that comes with being young might actually help people to overcome their prejudices vis-à-vis Western 'institutions' with which I am inevitably associated; and not speaking Arabic well might in fact ultimately yield more (honest) data.