

ROUNDTABLE

Fieldwork in a Fractured Middle East

Memory as a Field Site: Interviewing Displaced Persons

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Six and a half years after the start of the Arab uprisings, the initial euphoria of popular mobilization and optimism in revolutionary change is an increasingly distant memory. While a few countries in the region are moving in the direction of greater openness, most are gripped by a resurgent authoritarianism that is ever more repressive. Some states are collapsing amid mass violence and humanitarian catastrophe. In others, threat of brutal punishment continues to enforce red lines against permissible speech and action, even as those red lines continue to shift.

It is not only locals who must navigate this new political landscape. Field researchers must also learn new ways to observe, ask, listen, and document without endangering themselves or the human subjects with whom they work. Marieke Brandt's insightful essay in this roundtable details how she has adapted to the inaccessibility of old field sites by engaging digital media and technology in a redefined, delocalized approach to ethnography. I have faced this newly "fluid research environment" in a different way, and focused my research since 2012 on carrying out open-ended interviews with displaced persons.

The motivating engine of this project was my interest in the Syrian uprising and my hope to research what did or did not bring people to participate in protest. As conditions inside Syria became perilous, the most safe and feasible way for me to gather stories of this sort was to interview those who had left the country. In summer 2012, I traveled to Jordan, where I spent six weeks interviewing any displaced Syrian I could. In 2013, I returned to Jordan and spent two months in Turkey. In 2015 and 2016, I spent several more months in Turkey, two weeks in Lebanon, and three months in Germany, Sweden, and Denmark. In addition to plans for two more summers of fieldwork in Europe in 2017 and 2018, I have continued to interview Syrians wherever I encounter them, including families newly resettled near my home in Chicago and decades-old residents of Dubai whom I met on the sidelines of an academic visit. Over time, my research expanded from its initial focus on protests to become a broader investigation of the lived experience of conflict.

My open-ended interviews have ranged from twenty-minute one-on-one conversations to group discussions involving several individuals over hours to oral histories recorded over days, and sometimes continued years later on a different continent. My goal was to obtain narratives in which interviewees described, in as much illustrative detail as

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possible, their personal experiences of the political phases through which their nation had passed, namely, authoritarian rule, mass nonviolent protest, war, and large-scale forced migration. Sometimes interviewees did not need an initial question to jump-start their testimonials. For those who required more prompting, I would ask a first question intended to provide a temporal starting point and anchor. I was struck that many people told me that they had never before recounted their life story. Remarkable in that context, most interviewees were able to speak for an hour or more, fluidly narrating one lived event after another, without any need for specific prompts beyond short, clarifying questions.

Whenever interviewees offered informed consent (which was much more often than not), I audiorecorded our conversations. I then recruited bilingual assistants to simultaneously transcribe and translate them from Arabic to English. This produced testimonials that, sometimes more than 20,000 words in length, I analyzed by inductively identifying themes and patterns that emerged across them. I have used this material to write a book that chronicles the Syrian conflict through personal stories, as well as articles and essays investigating such topics as political fear, participation in high-risk dissent, transnational diffusion of protest, rebel fragmentation, nonviolent actors in the Syrian conflict, and different dimensions of refugees' settlement patterns.¹

The upshot is that, more than 300 interviews and hundreds of pages of transcripts later, I have found myself working in a new field site. I have shifted from the physical soil of a Middle Eastern country to the terrain of stories, memories, and self-understandings. Gathered in various countries, these individual narratives coalesce into collective narratives of both the country left behind and the transformation of its now scattered people.

The scholarly potential of fieldwork grounded in testimonial data is significant. Open-ended interviews create space for people to provide information that researchers might not think to elicit in questionnaires, and thus can offer perspectives and local knowledge that go missing in official histories and universal theories.² Moreover, actors' self-understandings provide vital insight into motivation and decision making—that is, not simply what has happened, but also why. In relaying their stories, individuals decipher the pressures and constraints that structure their environments, trace the events that delineate their lives, and determine their paths as agents. In these and other ways, individuals' ways of telling their stories can open windows into values, thinking processes, worldviews, and thus identity. Psychologists who advance “narrative theories of identity” even propose that people come to be who they are as they locate themselves in stories that make sense of what they have lived.³

Personal narratives are of particular scholarly value for understanding life in authoritarian regimes. Analysis of such testimonials allows us to learn not only about the present, but also about a past obscured by citizens' prior reluctance to speak frankly about politics. Analysis of the act of narration, no less than narratives' content, displays processes of political agency and transformations. Ordinary people's willingness to tell their stories now—in ways that they might not have before the 2011 unsettling of the status quo—is akin to the opening of an archive into social attitudes and experiences under repressive rule; we should use it to reconsider what we thought we knew as well as gather clues about what lies ahead.

Work documenting and conveying refugees' voices is particularly important due to dominant practices that render them “speechless.” Liisa Malkii famously argued that

the desire to showcase refugees' universal humanity often privileges pictures of their bodies at the expense of their words. As an alternative, she called for a "historicizing humanism" that acknowledges displaced persons' "narrative authority, historical agency, and political memory."⁴ Fieldwork that showcases testimonials from the displaced can contribute to doing exactly that.

As a kind of field research, open-ended interviews thus offer various benefits. They also present challenges and limitations. I have grappled with two in particular. The first regards the representativeness of my interviewee sample. While I never aimed to undertake a scientific survey, I did seek a diversity of voices. Using a snowball sampling, I pursued multiple entry points into different social networks to access individuals of different backgrounds. As most Syrian refugees flee the borders nearest their homes, I did fieldwork in different countries to access people from different hometowns. As socio-economic class affects the likelihood of having made the journey onward to Europe, I sought to further diversify my interviewee pool with fieldwork on two continents.

This strategy allowed me to interview people who varied by age, class, gender, and region. However, it is believed that most refugees are antiregime, insofar as they have most typically fled violence employed by the Syrian government against individuals or towns challenging its rule or fled violence by extremist rebel groups that took control of restive areas after regime forces withdrew. My interviewee pool reflected this political orientation, which may also have been reinforced by the particular social networks that emerged as the most powerful conduits to new interviewees while I was in the field. Aware of this facet of my work, I have attempted to be explicit about its limits, adapt my research questions and conclusions accordingly, and continually ask myself how other social groups—namely, regime supporters and citizens who remain in Syria—might relay other views.

A second limitation of my fieldwork concerns the reliability of testimonials as a form of evidence. In describing decisions and events, people typically claim lofty values and motives rather than admit to base ones. Their memories can carry deliberate or inadvertent misrepresentations. Communities' ways of articulating experience can harden into social scripts, particularly during an ongoing conflict that produces and reinforces certain discursive terms of debate and contestation. Moreover, what these testimonies reveal is filtered not only through how individuals chose to represent themselves, but also how they chose to represent themselves to an American, female professor. While the potential distortions in oral testimonies also exist in written documents, and researchers' positionality affects all ethnography, these concerns might carry special complications in oral history-type work. In my case, informants were describing contexts and events in Syria that I had not witnessed and could no longer witness. This made me even more reliant on their testimony than were I conducting interviews about a place and time that I was also experiencing directly myself.

All of these complexities bear upon the testimonial product yielded by open-ended interviews. Though they do not necessarily invalidate such material, researchers must be vigilant in scrutinizing what it can and cannot teach us. Those working in an interpretivist tradition might dedicate analytical attention to their self-reflexivity as researchers, as well as the ways that the subjectivity of memory and intersubjectivity of communicating memories shape personal narratives. Those with a more positivist orientation might instead attempt to navigate and mitigate biases by cross-referencing a large number

of interviews both with each other and with other forms of written, audio, and visual data.

As a political scientist, I have largely attempted to take the latter route. I have thus compared the information conveyed to me by my interviewees with that emerging in a range of published sources, from daily press coverage to human rights investigations. I have also compared the kinds of themes, affects, and ideas that come to the fore in my interviews with those emerging in what some have dubbed Syrians' "renaissance of freedom of expression" since 2011. The wealth of new expressive works include films, painting, graffiti, banners, caricature, song, theater, satire, creative writing, citizen journalism, and self-expression on social media, among others.⁵ Triangulating among interview transcripts and other available sources has helped me assess how my interviewees' reflections compare with those of an exponentially larger number of Syrians, including those who are not refugees.

In addition, I have sought to compare what I recorded in the context of formal interviews to what I heard and saw in my general immersion in Syrian communities. During the months in which I carried out interviews, I spent countless hours with individuals, groups of friends, and families—sharing meals, talking in coffee shops into wee hours, visiting the injured in hospitals, hanging out in kitchens and living rooms, and so forth. I volunteered at an educational program for Syrian children in Turkey and at a shelter in Berlin. In these different spaces, I listened, asked questions, and absorbed as much as I could. Even though recorded interviews were the core of my project, these other dimensions of my fieldwork were invaluable and irreplaceable. They deepened the understanding with which I was able to contextualize narratives and critically analyze their layers. They also allowed me to compare what people said to me in an interview setting with what they said in less formal environments or what they said when they were addressing others. Most importantly, multisite, cross-temporal participant observation allowed me to approach narratives with an ethnographic sensibility, and thereby try to glean the meaning of behavior to the actors involved.⁶

A final dimension of field research interviewing displaced persons merits consideration, given the heightened vulnerability entailed with their dislocation. As with all work with human subjects, we who interview forced migrants have a duty to abide by principles of informed consent and confidentiality, and to avert exposing them to any physical, social, and psychological risk. Apart from the obligation to do no harm, I would add that it is requisite to show appreciation and respect for the people who share their knowledge and experiences with us. I have heard of displaced Syrians receiving queries from researchers who are crude in addressing them as data sources rather than human beings who have endured horrors. In our own example and our training of students, we must remember that courtesy and compassion are requisite fieldwork practices.

NOTES

¹See, inter alia, Wendy Pearlman, *We Crossed a Bridge and It Trembled: Voices from Syria* (New York: HarperCollins, 2017); Pearlman, "Narratives of Fear in Syria," *Perspectives on Politics* 14 (2016): 21–37; Pearlman, "Moral Identity and Protest Cascades in Syria," *British Journal of Political Science* (forthcoming).

²See Molly Patterson and Kristen Renwick Monroe, "Narrative in Political Science," *Annual Review of Political Science* 1 (1998), 315–31.

³Margaret R. Somers and Gloria D. Gibson, "Reclaiming the Epistemological 'Other': Narrative and the Social Constitution of Identity," in *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 38, 58–59; Dan P. McAdams, "Narrative identity," in *Handbook of Identity Theory and Research*, ed. Seth J. Schwartz, Koen Luyckx, and Vivian L. Vignoles (New York: Springer, 2011), 99–115.

⁴Liisa H. Malkii, "Speechless Emissaries," in *Cultures of Fear: A Critical Reader*, ed. Uli Linke and Danielle Taana Smith (New York: Pluto Press, 2009), 115.

⁵Inaam Charaf, "Freedom of Expression and Access to Information in Syria Today," Committee on Freedom of Access to Information and Freedom of Expression, 2014, accessed 1 April 2017, <http://www.ifla.org/publications/freedom-of-expression-and-access-to-information-in-syria-today>. See also Malu Halasa, Zaher Omareen, and Nawara Mahfoud, eds., *Syria Speaks: Art and Culture from the Frontline* (London: Saqi, 2014).

⁶Edward Schatz, "Introduction: Ethnographic Immersion and the Study of Politics," in *Political Ethnography: What Immersion Contributes to the Study of Power*, ed. Edward Schatz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 5.