



SESSION ABSTRACT

Purposes of the Production of Knowledge and the Positionality of the Researcher in the Middle East and Beyond: Methodological and Theoretical Approaches

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Classic Presentations: The session shall be held in a format of classic presentations. Each contributor will be provided with a 15 minutes slot for his/ her presentation followed by a discussion.

Abstract

Since the past century until today, the Middle East as a region has been associated with different crises which are inflicting great suffering on its people. War zones, political instability, social inequalities, and economic weakness are amongst the most pressing problems in countries such as Syria, Iraq, Yemen, or Palestine. In this workshop, we seek to understand the multiple theoretical and methodological approaches that are applied in this particular context.

There are different methods that anthropologists use in order to understand the social and cultural context by adopting emic approaches when engaging with people in the field. This helps them to uncover knowledge from within a phenomenon rather than imposing their own understandings and paradigms.

Anthropologists are predominantly rooted within research institutions of affluent societies. From this perspective, is studying people's mindsets and actions under precarious circumstances legitimate? Whom do we really serve by answering our research questions? Can our work contribute to the improvement of the lives of the people we study, or is anthropological research rather a vanity? What kind of knowledge is manifested during the research and how does it contribute to the wider understanding of human lives?

Emanating from a particular region, the session addresses insights from bottom-up research conducted in the Middle East and beyond. In addition, designs of "meaningful" anthropological endeavours and ethical considerations will be discussed.

SESSION SCHEDULE

Wednesday, September 30, 2020 | Slot 3 | Room 3

Lisa Lenz-Ayoub: *Is Listening Enough? Thoughts on Doing Research with Participants under Precarious Circumstances.*

Niloofer Hooman: *Iranian Transgender People; Lived Experience and Body Surveillance.*

Ronald Stade: *The anthropologist as megaphone: Giving voice to Syrian refugees in the Middle East*

Konstantin Aal & Sarah Rüller: *Towards an Interventionist Research Approach.*

Noura Kamal: *Fieldwork in Palestine: A Reflection on the positionality of the researcher and ethical issues.*

Wednesday, September 30, 2020 | Slot 4 | Room 3

Open Discussion

SESSION PAPERS

Is Listening Enough? Thoughts on Doing Research with Participants under Precarious Circumstances.

Lenz-Ayoub, Lisa (Austrian Academy of Sciences, Vienna, AUT)

Doing ethnographic research on Yemen is not an easy task right now. Whereas previous generations of researchers could physically visit and do ethnographic research on the ground, Yemen's precarious political and economic situation renders research on-site impossible. Therefore, alternative research approaches are necessary to continue studying political, social, and cultural transformations in war-torn Yemen. Apart from that, whether engaged in remote, digital or physical ethnography, researchers might have to deal with the impression that the research participants have something better to do than contributing to the researcher's project. This presentation aims to raise a discussion of various underlying purposes and aims of research which is closely linked to the positionality of the researcher. An important question that has accompanied me since my first ethnographic research experience is how anthropologists can deal with the question of legitimizing intruding the participants' lives for the sake of their own academic projects/ career/ publication, etc. The fact that anthropologists increasingly need to adopt digital and remote research approaches might further add to the reflected discomfort.

Iranian Transgender People; Lived Experience and Body Surveillance.

Hooman, Niloofer (McMaster University, Hamilton, CAN)

This article discusses gender-based oppression and the resulting psychosocial and social difficulties experienced by many transgender individuals in Iran. The

discussion advances a critical analysis of the traditional dichotomous gender paradigm, which is oppressive, especially for transgender people whose sense of themselves as gendered people is incongruent with the gender they were assigned at birth. The article argues that the transgender community is an at-risk population in Iran, and they have to hide aspects of their private lives to avoid transphobic violence. I illustrate the points made in this paper by drawing from interviews with transgender people who live in Tehran, Iran. Through this paper, I pose questions about the role of cultural, religious, and social contexts in shaping the transgendered folks' lived experiences. In developing this argument, two central points will be defended: (1) transgender people are oppressed in Iranian society (and, therefore, are a population of concern to human rights activists); (2) binary gender models are the foundation on which transgender oppression (and several other oppressive systems) depends.

The anthropologist as megaphone: Giving voice to Syrian refugees in the Middle East

Stade, Ronald (Malmö University, Malmö, SWE)

At intervals, UNHCR and other international organisations conduct telephone interviews with Syrian refugees in the Middle East to find out what percentage of them plan to return to Syria in the near future. The results of these surveys are used to allocate resources in countries like Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq. More importantly, they served as the basis for shifting resources from these countries to Syria, despite the fact that the vast majority of Syrian refugees in the Middle East do not plan to return to Syria in the foreseeable future. An ethnographic study I conducted in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey had the premise that Syrian refugees in these countries are security experts of their own lives and that their expertise needed to be communicated to national and international actors in the field of humanitarianism and aid, which it was.

Towards an Interventionist Research Approach.

Aal, Konstantin (University of Siegen, Siegen, GER) & Rüller, Sarah (University of Siegen, Siegen, GER)

We have a background in what we call socio-informatics (Wulf et al., 2018), which in essence means we concentrate on the human part when interacting with technology, digital tools and 'machines' in general. Therefore, research in the area of Human Computer Interaction (HCI) is in its nature focused on the human and social part a design is made for. By following this approach, each of our projects is bottom-up and includes all relevant stakeholders (future user/participants/NGOs/community centres/Grassroot movements/Religious & Political actors) from the start. The amount of involvement of users or stakeholders from the field may vary drastically depending on the project, hence the term participation should be used carefully.

Our contribution addresses the goal of the session by presenting our computer club concept, which we established in the past years in two refugee camps and one village in Palestine (in addition: one in Morocco and several ones in Germany) (Aal et al., 2018, 2015; Rüller et al., 2019). With the establishment of the educational ICT intervention we offered meaningful interactions and were therefore welcomed in the very sensitive context of the refugee camps. By providing weekly sessions in the

computer club with meaningful projects for the participants (Weibert & Wulf, 2010), we learned a lot about the inhabitants of the refugee camps and could also participate in a dialogue with them. If we further reflect upon the approach of establishing a meaningful intervention, it shows the potential of this approach: on the one side it provides access and trust but on the other side you can also “give something back” to the community you are doing research about. Over the last years, we could provide many new opportunities for the participants in the computer club: they had access to new technology to try out and gain new skills and they could exchange ideas with tutors who were university students and attended the computer club sessions (Yerousis et al., 2015). Researchers from different disciplines often collect data and insights about sensitive topics and publish about this, while this is our “daily business”, it also has negative connotations.

Fieldwork in Palestine: A Reflection on the positionality of the researcher and ethical issues

Kamal, Noura (Austrian Academy of Sciences, Vienna, AUT)

Conducting fieldwork in lands that suffer from daily violence – be it political, social or economic (Kleinman, Das, and Margaret 1997) - is considered a huge challenge for any researcher and scholar (Carolyn & Robben 1995).

For decades Palestinians have been suffering from the violence imposed on them by the Israeli occupation. This raises multiple challenges for any researcher in the field, whether as a native or non-native researcher. In this presentation I will reflect upon my experience in the field in Palestine as a native researcher. During 2012-2013 I conducted my first fieldwork for my PhD research project which dealt with Nablus city in Palestine under siege and occupation. Currently I am working on a new project which is about humorous art as away of resistance in Palestine.

Building on both projects, the positionality of the researcher will be explored and identified within the wider social, political and economic context. Positionality can influence a wide array of areas - from the purpose of the research to how we communicate with people in the field. In addition, the connection between the aim of the project and the methods employed will be addressed in relation to ethical issues which can arise during the process of research.