

XVI Convegno SeSaMO

Università degli Studi di Cagliari  
Dipartimento di Scienze Politiche e Sociali

3-5 ottobre 2024



SOCIETÀ PER GLI STUDI SUL MEDIO ORIENTE

**TITOLO/TITLE:** Female Researchers Conducting Fieldwork in Arab Societies:  
Reflections on Positionality in the Field

**PROPONENTE/I – PROPONENT/S:** ROLA EL-HUSSEINI (LUND UNIVERSITY) AND GIULIA GOZZINI (LUND UNIVERSITY)

**ABSTRACT (1500 parole/words):**

This panel proposes to look at the unique set of challenges women contend with when studying Arab societies. The panel is all female and includes: two Arab women, two “halfies” (Abou-Lughod 1991), in addition to two White women. These female scholars study how their positionalities impact knowledge production and scrutinize how colonial knowledge hierarchies and proximity to Western knowledge facilitate or hinder their access in the field and relations with interlocutors.

While Arab women’s experiences studying their societies of origin have the advantage of fluency in the local language, assumptions about one’s sect or religion, ethnicity, or political beliefs often impedes access to certain groups. However, access to respondents from the same sectarian or ethnic group can be facilitated by family networks and intuitive knowledge of the society. Nevertheless, a non-veiled appearance can affect the reception by Islamist respondents and can therefore affect the data.

Halfies (half-Middle Eastern, half white) face a different set of challenges: the two scholars presenting in this panel have different trajectories. One grew up and was educated in the West but does research in North Africa, while the other grew up in the Middle East but does research on MENA origin populations in Europe. The challenges these two scholars face are related to their positionalities and how they are “read” by their research participants. They can be perceived as insiders while studying the societies of their parent’s origin, which gives them both a challenging and privileged position. They are also outsiders when doing research in the West as they have the advantage of class, education and prestigious employment when dealing with populations of Middle Eastern origins.

White female researchers question the so-called “third gender” (Schwedler 2007) which alleges Western female researchers are not perceived as female in Middle Eastern contexts. They also reflect on how brief moments of ‘passing’ can impact data collection, both positively and negatively.

The main aim of this panel will be to draw insights from these multiple social locations on how to develop sensitivity to extractive knowledge practices and to guard against this exploitative form of research in one’s fieldwork. The concept of “intellectual extractivism” is at the core of this project. Extractivism originally referred to “a mode of economic production in which ‘natural resources’ are taken out of one geographic location – often on a colonial periphery – and utilised as ‘raw materials’, that is, as inputs to industrial processes elsewhere” (Szeman&Wenzel 2021). Intellectual extractivism takes the concept and applies it to the intellectual realm.

This is the third of a series of panels bringing together different scholars reflecting on their positionality and on the concept of “intellectual extractivism” in the MENA region. It will culminate in a special issue on the topic which will engage with intellectual imperialism, academic dependency, and possibilities for its reversal (Alatas, 2022), and with whether knowledge extraction is a “mislabeling” (Alcoff 2022).

#### References

Abu-Lughod, L. (1991). Writing, against culture. In R. Fox (Ed.), *Recapturing anthropology: Working in the present* (pp. 137-162). Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press.

Alatas, S.F. (2022). Political economies of knowledge production: on and around academic dependency. *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 35(1), pp. 14–23

Alcoff, L.M. (2022). Extractivist epistemologies, *Tapuya: Latin American Science, Technology and Society*, 5:1

Schwedler, J. (2006). The Third Gender: Western Female Researchers in the Middle East. *PS: Political Science & Politics* 39:3, pp. 425 – 428.

Szeman, I. & J. Wenzel. (2021). What do we talk about when we talk about extractivism?, *Textual Practice*, 35:3, pp. 505-523

### **Inside the Conflict: Unveiling the Ethical Challenges of Researching Syrian Armed Groups**

**Rahaf Aldoughli, U of Lancaster, UK**

Through 18 months of intensive field research in northern Syria and southern Turkey, this study delves into the ethical complexities I navigated while investigating the motivations behind Syrian fighters' engagement with Turkey-backed opposition armed groups. The research illuminates the multifaceted dynamics of the Syrian civil war, including the roles of formal and informal actors and the emotionally charged narratives permeating the political and research environments. As a female Syrian academic, I scrutinize the nuances of my positionality, addressing the identity polarization sparked by the protracted conflict and the intricate process of fostering trust in a deeply divided landscape.

This article elucidates the ethical quandaries encountered, particularly in data interpretation and dissemination, and emphasizes the necessity of data repatriation in a context where research funding and agendas are often entangled with political interests. My experiences reveal the complexities of establishing rapport with Syrian opposition fighters, where my secular appearance led to perceived religious judgment, thus complicating the openness of the narrative exchange.

The support from Turkey to these armed factions introduced a layer of security concerns, complicating fieldwork and interaction dynamics. Furthermore, the research process unexpectedly necessitated a foray into providing psychological support, confronting the hardened masculine identities of these men shaped by the brutalities of war.

This study not only contributes to the understanding of ethical field research in conflict zones but also provides critical insights into the interplay of gender, identity, and trust in war-torn societies, offering valuable lessons for researchers embarking on similar challenging terrain.

### **Questioning the Third Gender: the challenges of conducting fieldwork with male Islamists in Northern Lebanon**

**Giulia Gozzini, Lund university**

Empirical approaches to the study of Islamist movements pose unavoidable challenges concerning access to such a conservative and usually gender-segregated field in the position of a white, non-Muslim, female researcher. Drawing from my own experience with ethnographic research in Tripoli (Lebanon) on Salafi groups, I will reflect on how my positionality has significantly affected and reshaped my own fieldwork. Without aspiring to generalisation, yet emphasising the contextual nature of my reflections, I will argue for the need to problematise the concept of the Third Gender.

First, a major distinction is drawn between élites and non-élites research. Indeed, accessing and interviewing rank-and-file male members of Islamist movements, particularly in informal settings, might prove nearly impossible. Further, female researchers have rather limited access to male domains and spaces, thus facing insurmountable challenges when it comes to conducting participant observation therein. This is even more conspicuous in a context – like Tripoli – marked by patriarchal structures, and social and religious

conservatism. Physical mobility for female researchers is limited as space is ubiquitously gendered and social normativity dictates roles and expectations.

Nonetheless, many of the challenges female scholars face when interviewing male Islamists have sometimes less to do with gender than with tackling sensitive political issues. In a context of suspicion and reluctance to speak like the one I encountered among Tripolitan Sunnis, it is crucial to reflect on how specific features of one's positionality might affect the way people see you and eventually answer your questions, as interactions with foreigners may lead people to either 'hide' or perform certain narratives. As a result, other attributes than gender might prevail in defining the terms and conditions of this interrelationship: age, nationality, religion, class, educational and professional background. Also, preconceptions work on both sides. And interviews can rapidly turn into an open lecture, with the interviewer feeling constantly tested, if not "inferiorised." Subsequently, instead of playing on the alleged benefits of being an innocent ignorant outsider, a right balance of professionalism, knowledge, and deference is essential to gain respectability.

Positionality shifts all the time and changes according to interlocutors and throughout the fieldwork. While acknowledging the intersubjective and continually changing nature of the relationships we establish with our interlocutors, we must always be aware of the dynamics of power involved. Gender proves to be a determining issue when doing research on Islamist male actors as a white female researcher. The cost of entry is simply not the same for a male or female researcher, thus severely restricting the latter's ability to conduct certain types of research. However, a truly reflexive exercise should not downplay the significance of other attributes that are sometimes more decisive in shaping the conditions of this relationship.

### **Methodological implications of being a white, female outsider: addressing the question of ideal-types and situational complexities of researcher positionality in the Maghreb region**

**Johanna Kettenbach, U of Oslo/NUPI**

This paper analyses the methodological implications and challenges of being a western, 'white' female researcher when conducting research on gender and religion in the Middle Eastern and North African region. It analyses how this ideal-type outsider positionality creates possibilities in certain situations, but also how it can obstruct the collection of data when conducting interview-based fieldwork with the countries' national religious elites. Based on my personal research experiences in Morocco and in Tunisia, two post-colonial, non-democratic countries in the Maghreb region, I analyse how the different layers of my 'outsider' positionality impact my fieldwork.

To enable this analysis, I first give an overview over relevant contextual factors in the Maghreb region that shape how (potential) interlocutors perceive my presence in the field. I shed light on how national and imperialist politics have and continue to shape questions of gender, family, and religion in the region in a 'glocal' context. I then move on to examine how my own positionality resonates with these circumstances. To enable this endeavour, I class my positionality in different social categories (nationality, ethnicity, religiosity, gender, sexuality, age) and illustrate how the different factors impact the research. I then move on to breaking down how more ambiguous situations and aspects, (e.g. experiencing linguistic difficulties) can reformulate hierarchies based on post-colonial logic, and how brief moments of 'passing' can impact data collection in both positive and negative terms. I then briefly delve into the matter of how to address sensitive and politically charged questions, and how the reality of authoritarianism impacts the possibilities of fieldwork-based data collection. Lastly, I address potential mitigation strategies to moderate the negative effects of my positionality as a female, white, European outsider.

### **On the Challenges (and Perks) of Being an Insider**

**Rola El-Husseini, Lund University**

Conducting qualitative research in one's country of origin is not an easy endeavor. While one has the advantage of fluency in the local language, assumptions about one's sect/religion, ethnicity or political belonging/beliefs often impede access to certain groups. This autoethnographic presentation reflects on two decades of doing fieldwork in Lebanon. These fieldworks were conducted with different groups: political elites, Islamists, and upper middle-class women.

Contrary to expectations, the group that mirrors the researcher the most (namely upper middle-class women) was the most difficult to access, despite the use personal networks. Political Elites were not easy to interview especially because of gatekeeping by assistants/secretaries. However, the use of family networks facilitated access to elites of the same sectarian group and/or regional origin. Access to the highest circles of these was difficult especially compared to access granted to Western researchers doing contemporaneous fieldwork. Against all odds, meeting Sunni Islamist leaders and those active in Islamist circles was the easiest, even though the researcher is female and non-veiled.

## **Back in the Metropole: Reflections on Studying Europe as an Arab Ethnographer**

**May Tamimova, U of Leiden**

My contribution explores my identity as a half Lebanese, half Czech woman, raised and educated in the Middle East, while I pursue new intellectual endeavours in Western Europe. My research in the Middle East has been intuitive and pedagogically decolonial, with blurred boundaries between self and other as we share lives and similar perceptions of local and global injustices. I explore how such understanding of self and my own academic voice need reinterpreting and reorganizing as I shift my gaze back at Europe in a new context of studying EU countries.

I specifically unpack the implications of studying religion and security related issues both in the Middle East and Western Europe. As an Arab woman in the Middle East, this research has been facilitated by contacts who placed my gender, sectarian identity, age, and marital status at the centre of our knowledge exchange. As a white-passing European in Western Europe, my experience of studying security and religious issues is more formalized, and research interactions occur within the frame of distinct professions and institutions. While my “European” identity goes mostly unquestioned, a professionalized atmosphere, measurable in quantity of time and expertise, settles into research encounters.

Finally, the paper reflects on how intuition that often comes with Arab female researchers studying the Middle East is deeply connected to institutional informality on one hand, and personalized networks that come with studying one’s own. These methods need to be reconsidered when conducting research in the European context, where professional rather than personal identity facilitates research. This calls into question the possibilities of looking “back” at Europe through a decolonial lens.

**PROFILO ACCADEMICO DEL/DELLA/DEI/DELLE PROPONENTE/I – SHORT BIO OF PROPONENTS**

Rola El-Husseini is an associate professor with the department of political science at Lund University (Sweden) where she has been working since September 2017. She received her PhD from the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris (France) and was a postdoctoral fellow at Yale University (USA) before holding several positions at several American universities including Texas A&M University, CUNY Graduate Center, and George Washington University. Her areas of expertise include Middle Eastern politics, political Islam (especially Shi'ism) in addition to gender, Islam, and politics. Her first book Pax Syriana: Elite Politics in Post-war Lebanon was published by Syracuse University Press in 2012. She is in the process of finalizing her second book manuscript.

**INDIRIZZO/I EMAIL/EMAIL ADDRESSES:** [rola.el-husseini\\_dean@svet.lu.se](mailto:rola.el-husseini_dean@svet.lu.se)  
[giulia.gozzini@ctr.lu.se](mailto:giulia.gozzini@ctr.lu.se)