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What is This?

Negotiating Fluid Identities: Alliance-Building in Qualitative Interviews

Na'amah Razon[1] and Karen Ross[2]

Abstract

This article emerges from struggles we, two American–Israeli women, have encountered while conducting research in Israel on issues related to Jewish-Arab dynamics. Since beginning our research we have faced a single question in nearly every interview: "Where are you from?" Embedded in this question are a whole host of other queries: "Are you American? Israeli? Jewish? Arab?" "What is your native language?" This article engages in the methodological consequences of our responses to these questions and broader identity-negotiations during qualitative interviews. What happens when we, as researchers, foreground or background, particular identities? Furthermore, how does the fluidity of our identities inform the specific information we gather? We analyze two case studies in which the fluidity of our identities unfolds during an interview to highlight the coconstruction of interviews and the active process involved in presenting facets of ourselves, a process that conditions subsequent data collection and knowledge production.

Keywords

identities, interviews, power, Israel, Palestine

Introduction: "Where Are You From?"

This article emerges from a struggle we have encountered while conducting our dissertation research in Israel. We are two American-Israeli, Israeli-American Jewish women, raised and having spent significant portions of our lives in both countries. We both have dual citizenship. We both grew up speaking both Hebrew and English, and have been studying Arabic for numerous years. As graduate students, we have been pursuing research on issues related to the relationship between majority and minority groups in Israel (in education [KR] and health care realms [NR]) as part of both personal and professional commitments to understanding the dynamics of conflict and cooperation in Palestine/Israel.

Since beginning our research in Israel we have faced a single question in nearly every interview: "Where are you from?" Embedded in this query are a whole host of other questions, including "Are you American?" "Are you Israeli?" "Are you Jewish?" "Are you Arab?" "Do you speak Hebrew or English?" There is always a moment of pause when this question is asked, an external silence coupled with an internal flurry of activity as we try to sort out how to respond. What we have realized as our research projects have progressed is that this question has multiple dimensions and consequences. At an immediate level, the query (in its various incarnations and in our responses) shapes our

relationships with individual research participants. It serves as a political barometer, a proxy through which participants measure our distance from their own identity claims and worldviews. Furthermore, this question, demanding of the researcher to locate herself in relation to her participants, also raises important methodological issues of alliance building, power dynamics, and the coconstruction of data. Like a chess game, the questions asked and the responses we give—in other words, the identity we "present" and the one(s) we are "given" by interviewees—have consequences in terms of the alliances we build, the questions we can ask, and ultimately what sort of "data" we collect.

What happens when we, as researchers, bring forward, or move to the background, particular identity claims? How are these identity claims interpreted or received by our research participants? Furthermore, how does the fluidity of our identities inform the information or data we gather? In this article, we reflect on our foregrounding and backgrounding of identity claims throughout the process of conducting fieldwork in Israel, a context where language and ethnic

[1]University of California, San Francisco, USA
[2]Indiana University, Bloomington, USA

Corresponding Author:
Karen Ross, Department of Educational Leadership & Policy Studies,
WW Wright School of Education, Indiana University, 201 N. Rose
Avenue, Bloomington, IN 47405-1006, USA
Email: ross26@indiana.edu

politics make issues of identity particularly challenging and ubiquitous. In doing so, we introduce the notion of *fluid* identities as a way of filling what we see as a gap in the literature on identity politics in qualitative research. We suggest that the negotiation of identity, both personally for the researcher and between researcher and participants, has implications for the overlap of methodology, politics, and identity in qualitative interviews. Drawing on two cases in which the fluidity of our identities unfolds during an interview, we analyze these case studies to highlight how we coconstruct interviews and identities with our participants, and how this active process conditions subsequent discussions with our participants. We conclude the article by considering how these methodological questions arise in this specific Israeli-Palestinian context and how the fluidity of identity that we raise becomes a tool to be used by our participants as well as by ourselves.

Stuck in the Middle: Defining Our terms

Fluid Identities

Identity politics have become a prime site of inquiry for many qualitative researchers (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992). A large body of scholarship addresses questions related to insider-outsider status of researchers: in other words, being part of, or identifying with, the research community while also maintaining a particular distance as an investigator. Yet much of this literature views the researcher as either one or the other, suggesting that a researcher's identity is *fixed*, in the sense that the way one presents oneself remains the same over time or throughout a study (Cassell, 2005). Even in calls such as Peter Collins' (2002) plea for researchers to "view the relationship between 'insider' and 'outsider' as less of a dichotomy and more of a continuum" (p. 78), identity is still perceived as either inside, outside, or a hybrid of these two. Moreover, even in scholarship that stresses the multiple identity of researchers as both insiders and outsiders (e.g., Narayan, 1993), this multiplicity remains stable, rather than different parts of identity being negotiated, highlighted in some points, or discarded all together in particular moments of research: what we refer to as *fluid* identity. In this article we therefore employ the term *fluid identities* to capture the flexible, overlapping, and at times conflicting identities researchers and participants hold. We use fluid to signal movement rather than bounded-ness of insider/outsider dichotomies or hybrid notions of identity (Bhabha, 1994). We also use the term as a way of capturing the way that our research participants categorize us, and our choice, in turn, to accept or challenge those categorizations.

Little attention has been paid to the methodological issues that arise as a result of fluid identity claims. Literature in the feminist tradition has emphasized the connection between methodological approaches and epistemology, suggesting that our knowledge of the world is partial/contingent on a particular standpoint (see, for example, Harding, 1995; Hartstock, 2004). Rather than viewing research as simply emerging from a particular or "situated" point of view (Haraway, 1988), however, we want to consider research as a dynamic process in which identity claims of the researcher (and interviewee, as we discuss below) constantly move forward and back. The large body of research on identity politics in fieldwork, even that which acknowledges "multiple planes of identification" on the researchers' part (Narayan, 1993, p. 676), falls short in addressing the methodological quandaries that emerge because of researchers' negotiation of identity. Specifically, this literature does not attend to the way that identities influence the relationships built between researchers and their participants, and ultimately the data collected for scholarly analysis.

A varied body of literature exists focusing on both macro- and micro-level elements of the intricate ties between researchers and their data. At a micro level, this literature addresses interview discourse and how the stories told during an interview are the byproduct of negotiation between the researcher and her participant (De Fina, 2009). For example, Enosh & Buchbinder (2005) emphasize the negotiation occurring in relation to specific questions and responses (see also, Rapley, 2001). In addition, Saville Young (2011) draws on a psychoanalytic framework to discuss the interplay between researchers and their data, particularly in terms of how historical norms shape, and limit, the types of interactions and data collected. At a contextual level, literature acknowledges the presence of researchers in the data collection process and addresses the creation of their identity as researchers (Cassell, 2005; Tedlock, 1991). Yet despite the nuances presented in this scholarship, there is very little discussion regarding how a researcher's presentation of self can influence the narrative produced. If such a discussion does occur, it focuses more on how the researcher frames his or her research questions and specific questions, rather than how he or she presents his or her own identity *during* the interview process.

What our experience reveals, however, is that issues related to self-presentation and what aspects of a researcher's identities are highlighted (or backgrounded), play an important role in qualitative research and ultimately in the process of knowledge production. Moreover, such issues have important implications in other aspects of the research process, such as those related to the power relations always present between a researcher and her research participants. As Enosh and Buchbinder (2005) point out, these power relations are a negotiation: we as interviewers can direct questions, but our participants choose if and how they might shift the conversation, conducting what Phil Carspecken (1996) calls "setting shifts."

We acknowledge that discussions about the collaboration between researcher and participant are not new in academic research, particularly scholarship informed by feminist, postcolonial, and science and technology studies' theories. Patty Lather (1986), for example, argues eloquently about the importance of participants taking an active role in the collection and publication of data, suggesting that the absence of their voice creates issues of validity in qualitative research (see also Fortmann, 1996; Lavie & Rouse, 1993). Scholars such as Annemarie Mol (2002) and Bruno Latour (1999) have also stressed the active role that nonhuman objects take in the production of science and data. We engage with this scholarship to delineate that there is more to researcher–participant dynamics than making choices to collaborate with or publish with participants. Instead, we wish to highlight the fact that *data itself*, as collected in qualitative interviews, is always the result of interactions between researcher and participant. Interviews—with individuals and in group settings—are a contingent process in which spontaneity and creativity, as well as tension and conflict, are produced on the parts of both interviewee and interviewer.

Building Alliances

Defining our own identities as *fluid* highlights the contingency and movement of how our identities unfold and the degree to which we disclose information about ourselves as researchers. The embeddedness of our own research in a setting where tensions are prevalent makes our presentation as allies especially important in enabling participants to open up or shut us out, in interviews: failing to build rapport with participants may result in interviewees keeping from us perspectives that address the very questions that our research explores. Thus we use the term "alliance building" to capture the process in which researchers highlight or downplay particular aspects of their identities *during* an interview to develop rapport with their participants. This highlighting/downplaying might manifest itself in decisions about the language in which an interview takes place (in our case, Hebrew, Arabic, or English); the location of an interview (a participant's home? a coffee shop?); and most centrally, our utterances and silences during the interview. These micro choices, we suggest, have macro consequences in terms of the types of knowledge that coconstructed from interviews.

The issues we raise are significant in all research settings. Yet we wish to emphasize that in the Israeli/Palestinian[1] context where national, linguistic, and religious identities play such a large role in maintaining norms that reflect an ethos of conflict (Bar-Tal, 2000), it is particularly important to consider the coconstruction of narratives. At first glance, the underlying assumption in Israel is that for most individuals identity is (relatively) clear-cut: Jewish or not, native Arabic speaker or not, Palestinian or not.[2] In

many ways, even scholarship problematizing the very concept of clear-cut identity in the Palestinian/Israeli context serves to reinforce the arbitrary religious/ethnic/national boundaries that divide the region—as if these categories of Palestinian, Israeli, Jewish, Arab have clear boundaries, and as though any individual's experiences can be neatly captured by these categories. For example, Zvi Bekerman (2003) reflects on his challenging experience, or what he refers to as a constant suspicion, while conducting research on Arabic-Hebrew bilingual schools in Israel:

> Those who reside within [Israel's] physical borders are continually defined and confined by national, religious, and ethnic boundaries. Although arguably imaginary, these boundaries become painfully real in Israel. People and circumstance are perpetually occupied with the work of marking them. Even in those rare instances when steps are taken to reinterpret the meaning of differences, there seems to be an unwritten rule that states that to transcend painful boundaries one must first affirm them, thereby jeopardizing the healing process. Indeed, in Israel there seems to be no way out. You are always a national, religious, or ethnic something and you stick, or are stuck, to it. (p. 137)

In many ways, Bekerman's statement reflects a critique of identity markers in the Israeli context. Yet his perspective reinforces existing boundaries even when it seeks to challenge them. In the following pages, we problematize this point of view and suggest that from a methodological standpoint, emphasizing the fluidity of identity is crucial for better understanding researcher–participant interactions during interviews and their consequences for qualitative data collection. Our two case studies delineate such fluidity and its manifestations, and implications, during our fieldwork.

Cases

To investigate the fluidity and alliance building during qualitative interview, we turn to our interview transcripts. We have discovered that in reexamining transcripts with questions of identity in mind, these documents serve as useful artifacts to investigate the intense negotiations taking place and the hedging that occurs between interviewer and interviewee. In this section we present two interviews that provide examples of such negotiations.

Na'amah

As researchers we spend much time unpacking our research questions, developing methodologies, and worrying about how to explain our aims so participants can understand our interests and questions. Yet what we too often fail to consider is how much the questions we ask, and the answers we

receive, remain contingent on who participants assume we, as researchers, are. The following interview provides a case study of the coconstitution of data and the interviewer's identity. I met Daniela Hadad[3], a former Israeli state employee working on Negev Bedouin affairs, in her office in Tel Aviv. I introduced myself as a graduate student from the United States working on a dissertation project on health care allocation to the Bedouin community and the role health care services play in shaping the relationship between the State of Israel and the Bedouin community. I was interested in Ms. Hadad's perspective, as an individual who had worked within the government for many years, on how service allocation and the relationship between the community and the state have historically changed. After talking for over an hour, the conversation neared an end and Ms. Hadad apologized for not offering me anything to drink, and then asked:

DH: So, wait a second, where are you studying?
NR: I am at . . . in California, in San Francisco, Berkeley
DH: Nice. What are you studying exactly?
NR: Medicine and anthropology
DH: How did you get to the Bedouins? Here [to Israel]?
NR: How did I get here? I was here [in Israel] as an exchange student ten years ago.
DH: And what, are you Jewish?
NR: I am Jewish.
DH: Not Israeli.
NR: I was born there [in the United States].

My conversation with Ms. Hadad had taken place in Hebrew, and I had assumed that she knew that, while I am a student in the United States, I am both Jewish and Israeli. Yet her question of *where* I am a student indicated to me that much of the information she told me in the previous hour was contingent on the fact that she placed me as a foreigner. Ms. Hadad did not ask me whether I am Israeli, but rather presumed that I am not. And rather than correct her by saying that I am Israeli (as well as American), I provided a different answer: that I was born in the United States. With this response I circumnavigated the binary yes/no answer into a different plane of investigation. It is only through her questioning of me, the interviewer, that I come to understand her assumptions about me: foreigner, not Jewish. It was in this brief exchange of roles, the swapping of interviewer and interviewee, that I found myself questioning my next question. "How much of my personal history does she need to know? And how would her reactions have differed if she had known that I am Jewish and Israeli?" When Ms. Hadad finds out later in our conversation that I live in a Bedouin town, the negotiation between interviewee and interviewer emerges again. As her questions indicate below, she uses her position as "an expert" to claim that the

community I live with is actually not Bedouin although they self-identify as such.

DH: [W]here are you [living] in Israel now?
NR: Right now I live in Tel Alrhurub.[4]
DH: Really?
NR: Yes.
DH: In Tel Alrhurub?
NR: Yes.
DH: With who are you in Tel Alrhurub?
NR: The Aghrani Family
[. . .]
DH: You know they aren't Bedouin.
NR: Yes? It depends who you ask.
DH: What?
NR: It depends who you ask.
DH: You.
NR: So why do you say they are not Bedouin?
DH: Because they are not Bedouin.
NR: And, and what is the definition?
DH: They belong, the Bedouin, there are three kinds of populations. There are Bedouin, and this impacts the medical issues by the way.
[. . .]
DH: And how do they accept you in the family?
NR: Totally fine. My father was just here on a visit and he came to visit there.
DH: And, you are paying them something?
NR: Yes, I am renting a room.
DH: Oh, you are renting a room from them.
NR: Yes.
DH: And in terms of water, electricity, you have everything, everything is okay?
NR: You know this well, overall, things are fine. There are a fair bit of water shortages. There were last month, now it's better.

Ms. Hadad is surprised that I live in Tel Alrhurub, and her questions about how I get along, if there is water and electricity, reveal her simultaneous knowledge of the area (that indeed there are water and electricity shortages) and her assumptions of who should and should not live in particular areas (And how do they accept you in the family?). Furthermore, repositioning me within Tel Alrhurub leads her to revert to the state's description of the Bedouin community in the Negev.[5] The Israeli state has a long history of dividing Palestinian communities into subcategories, such "Druze," "Circassians," "Christians," "Bedouins," and "Israeli-Arabs." This division, as scholars have noted, reveals more of the Israeli state's historic control of the community than the demography of the community (Falah, 1989; Kedar, 2003).

Through Ms. Hadad's questioning, I shift between the overlapping position of researcher, household member, and yet of someone who Ms. Hadad assumes lacks in-depth knowledge of the community, by asking me whether I

know they are "not Bedouin" and about my knowledge of the socioeconomics of the community in terms of access to infrastructure and social services. As the interviewer, I am the one questioned, and I am faced with the dilemma of deciding what aspects of my identity to foreground or dim. How much do I challenge her statements, to bring into relief what the Bedouin community sees as discriminatory state definitions and policies of unequal land allocation and municipal funding? Finally, how much do I consider her answer to be the product of the non-Israeli she assumes I am? Like Ms. Hadad's questions above regarding where I am from, rather than addressing her question, I turn the question to her, avoiding inserting my own personal stake in the conversation.

In reflecting back on my interview notes, I have pondered why I answered this way and how the conversation unfolded. What would have happened had she known that I am both Israeli and Jewish (which as our conversation continued I did disclose)? And how may have our rapport changed had she known from the outset that I was living in a Bedouin town? Having reexperienced this interview through my transcription, I am struck by the tense backdrop of this interview, and the alliances I feel myself navigating. I imagine the interview as delicate moves on a frozen pond, each one of us carefully testing the other. During this interview I am keenly aware that I don't want to alienate either my interviewee or the Bedouin community I live with. And my fluid identity as a Jewish-Israeli woman and as an anthropologist living in a Bedouin town places my allegiances in both camps. It is drawing on these different experiences and realities, highlighting some while minimizing others, that helps shed lights on the manner identity flows and shifts depending on the currents of the interview.

Karen

Toward the end of an interview with Iyas, a Palestinian activist, I am asked, "Do you live in Yaffo?"[6] At a very superficial level, this might seem to be an offhand remark. Yet in this case, it follows a soliloquy in which Iyas has just told me how infuriated he is by the Jews who come to live in Yaffo, while the Arab population there has no resources to rent the apartments whose prices rise with their in-migration. With this question, therefore, I am faced with the dilemma of sorting through identity commitments and facing the consequences of the choices I make.

How do I respond? I think to myself. I do not live in Yaffo—I live in a southern Tel Aviv neighborhood close by. In an effort to seem not-too-far-removed from their reality, my automatic tendency when asked by research participants where I live is to say, "on the border with Yaffo," out of solidarity with the Palestinian community with whom I am interacting. And yet, in this case, such a response might provoke exactly the opposite of the response I might hope for. "In Florentin," I finally say, naming the neighborhood in

south Tel Aviv where my apartment is located. I choose to name the neighborhood rather than just saying "southern Tel Aviv" so as to highlight my geographic proximity to Yaffo, which Florentin borders. "Oh, I know that neighborhood," Iyas responds. "A friend of mine lives there . . ."

The conversation continues: "So tell me a little bit about you." This statement is made by Iyas, asking me about my own background after we've spent the past hour talking about his. I think about what to say and choose my words carefully. "I'm from a half-Israeli and half-American family, I grew up in both [Israel and the United States] but mostly in the USA . . ." I explain how spending time in Israel in high school, segregated within the Jewish community in Jerusalem, and my return to an economically, racially, and nationally diverse community in New York State, opened my eyes to nuances of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and led me to become active in this field. In giving this explanation, I think about how I might phrase my response in a way that doesn't challenge what Iyas has said to me in the last hour but rather foregrounds my status as an "activist," as someone engaged in many of the same struggles as he.

"And now you live in Israel," he asks.

"Now I live in Israel . . . I'm here talking to people, like we've been talking this morning . . . but most of the time I live there [in the United States]."

It is only in retrospect that I am able to understand the significance of this part of my conversation with Iyas: at the time of the interview I do not recognize, as I do in hindsight, the way that Iyas' query demonstrates his potential questioning of my background and possible suspicion of my status as an ally. This part of our discussion raises questions similar to the ones that arise in nearly every interview I conduct, and often in various conversations outside of my immediate research context, as well. My research participants and conversation partners want to know what brought me to them, to the topic of my research. "How did you end up studying in the USA?" often means, "Are you American? Are you Israeli? What's your background and how do you fit into this context?"

My response to these questions varies from discussion to discussion, depending on the individual's own background and the connection we've created together in the conversation. In this particular case, I reflect carefully on Iyas' comments about Jews overrunning his Yaffo home and consciously phrase my response to the "Where do you live?" question in a way that I feel will retain the comfort level I sense we have built together over the past hour and help me present myself to him as an ally. My own background, as an Israeli *and* an American, as a Hebrew *and* Arabic speaker, as someone from this region but not quite a part of it, enables me to foreground different aspects of my identity as I feel the situation necessitates. In this case, I walk the line between presenting myself as a Jewish Israeli (which, given that the interview was conducted in Hebrew and that I speak the

language without an accent, I had previously assumed was his perspective of me, and which I fear might distance me from him as an ally in the struggle for Palestinian rights) and as an American (more distant from the conflict and potentially more "neutral," but also less invested in what happens in this corner of the globe). I choose to emphasize neither aspect of my identity but rather to focus on how my background has led me to the research I conduct and the work in which I am engaged. This choice reflects an underlying uncertainty that despite the easy, bantering tone present for much of our interview, the attempt to emphasize my status as an ally may not match the impression of me Iyas has built. In other words, I am conscious of the fact that though I highlight certain aspects of my identity and try to use fluidity to my advantage, my perception of success in doing so is always one-sided, or is limited to the way that my participants' responses indicate it is received.

I also choose my words carefully in response to Iyas' question because I am aware that how I respond makes a difference in terms of what subsequent parts of our conversation might look like. My data—in the form of his commentary and responses to my questions—is contingent on the comments I make and how I present myself to him. In this particular case, the questions about my background come at the end of the interview, when my own "data gathering," so to speak, is more or less "officially" over (although Iyas' "data gathering" has just begun). But in many cases such questions come at the start or in the middle of interviews, and as such they have the potential to frame, and subsequently shift, the conversation in significant ways. How I present myself makes a difference in terms of how my participants present themselves, facilitating—or constraining—my data collection process.

Our conversation continues a while longer. "I always say Americans live in a film," Iyas says. "What does that mean?" I ask. Iyas responds, "They're not at all connected to the real world. Everything is clear there, either Black or White. You're either with us or against us. There's nothing in the middle."

I suggest that the reality in the United States is a little more complicated than Iyas presents it to be. "Maybe," he says.

> But you know, from everything I hear and see . . . the United States is huge, not like here. It's the north, it's a superpower, it's not a small country. But you know, it's like the war in Iraq. We're also . . . you know, it's not that there are bad guys and good guys. But with the American's it's always they're the good guys and everyone else is the bad guys. If you're not with us then you're against us, and you're bad and we're good. Just like in the movies.

I wonder what leads Iyas to make this comment. After all, I have just told him that I spend most of my time in the United States, and yet, somehow in this discussion he seems to be in the position of "expert" on the topic of American foreign policy and decision making. Upon reflection, his comment seems to tie into the question of power and alliances in interviews: Iyas is clearly comfortable enough to make the comments that he does even after he hears that the United States is my home—perhaps even *because* he hears me say this. In making this comment, Iyas limits the fluidity I have offered of my own identity. He also turns the standard power dynamic in research interviews on its head, positioning himself as the one among us who knows about the United States. Moreover, Iyas' statement encapsulates the complexity of identity and the way its fluidity shapes the research process. His distinction between Americans and others—as "good guys" and "bad guys"—raises questions about how he perhaps perceives me (as an American?) and the degree to which he accepts—or not—the persona I have attempted to embody by foregrounding and backgrounding certain identity claims during our conversation. Again, it is not clear whether the way *I* understand the fluidity of my identity matches Iyas' perception of who I am or who I represent. As our discussion ends, I wonder not only about his perceptions of me but also about his assumptions regarding how I have come to categorize him (or not). Success in the presentation of selves, for both of us, remains unclear.

Discussion

Boundaries

In his reflection on identity issues as a researcher in Israel, Zvi Beckerman (2003) writes, "Indeed, in Israel there seems to be no way out. You are always a national, religious, or ethnic something and you stick, or are stuck, to it" (p. 137). In this article we challenge the permanence of the boundaries that Bekerman and other scholars writing about and researching in Palestine/Israel have highlighted in their work. Our experience conducting fieldwork argues against this permanence and entrenchment of identity. Rather than identity being something of a digging in of our metaphorical heels, we see and experience identity here as a dance of sorts, an exchange, a sizing up. And rather than research necessarily playing a role in further entrenching these identities, we ask, what would happen if we loosened up the grip of these identity markers? What sorts of theoretical questions, and personal and professional alliance could emerge, if these lines became hatched?

Academic circles have done little to help answer these questions. Sufian & LeVine (2007) present Israel–Palestine as a case study to rethink questions about borders. They argue that borders extend far beyond geopolitical lines and that new attention must be brought to the "constantly shifting" nature of borders. Their recent edited volume *Reapproaching Borders* (2010) aims to move beyond the "dominant concern of territorial borders found in much of the scholarship

on Israel–Palestine" to emphasize a "multilayered under-standing" of the region (p. 2). Yet their text maintains the binary: Israel *or* Palestine. Upholding this territorial/national duality reasserts, and further sediments, the binary fallacy (or a trap of binary) in this region. All identities, boundaries, and categories seem to fall into one of these two options. In this article we offer a contrast to this duality, emphasizing the power of temporary alliances and fluid identities.

We are certainly not the first qualitative researchers to attend to the challenge of identity in this region. Many ethnographic works on Palestine–Israel question national and geographic boundaries by investigating how they are produced rather than taking them as a starting point; yet in doing so, they do not transcend dichotomous identity markers. For example, In *Overlooking Nazareth* (1997), Rabinowitz examines how Jewish Israelis, who he terms "bigoted liberals," come to hold, perpetuate, and practice exclusionary actions against their Palestinian neighbors. As he explains, the text "focuses on the capacity of liberals to engage in marginalizing and racializing practices" (1997, p. 10). He studies specific sites—education, real estate, medical care, and sports—where exclusion, politics, and relationships are negotiated, and where liberalism comes to a halt. Nonetheless, Israelis for him remain either Jewish or Palestinian. Rebecca Stein's (2002) ethnographic work on the role of tourism and material culture in shaping Israel–Palestine relationships similarly tracks along the binary options of Israel–Palestine or Jewish/Arab. Nadia Abu El-Haj (2001), who takes on archeology as a productive site to examine how scientific expertise by Jewish-Zionist archaeologists erases Palestinian claims to land and citizenship rights, reasserts the boundary in her work between Jews and Palestinians.

Beyond failing to transcend the identity boundaries hemming in the region, none of these authors take on their own background as a serious component of their work. In particular, we find it curious that none address how their training or growing up outside of this region has shaped their own identity, work, and relationships to their material. As a result, they do not question what could happen if a different line of inquiry were taken: one that does not neglect the division between Palestine–Israel or Jewish/Arab—which do indeed mark many of the dynamics in the region—but that considers how a different identity (or identities) might challenge these binaries and open a new line of inquiry. Samer Alatout's (2009) work presents one such example by taking water, as a resource, as a tool to reorient inquiry into the region.

Our aim is not to reassert a longheaded call for positionality. Rather, it is to draw attention to the complex manner that identities are created and negotiated during qualitative interviews. Attention to this fluidity may help to intervene on seemingly dead-end binary characterizing scholarship on the region. Our critique of these texts highlights for us the struggle we ourselves have faced in trying to transcend this boundary and categorization.

Given the multifaceted—and not easily discernible—nature of identities, how we choose to present ourselves, or who we are assumed to be and how we address these assumptions, plays a large role in determining what data we can collect. Furthermore, how we introduce ourselves has even larger implications for our data collection in this context than it does in other places where one's national or religious identity is not central to an ongoing identity-based conflict. While, as we have stated, the fluidity of identities is not unique to us, in this setting, our negotiation of identity offers a new direction for challenging the dominance of a taken-for-granted identity binary in the region, and for questioning the possibility for building true alliances, both in terms of academic scholarship and in the qualitative interviews we carry out.

Method

Beyond this article's implications in this particular geographic context, a number of issues arise in these two case studies that highlight broader methodological issues at work in qualitative interviewing. In the pages above, we highlight the choices we make in responding to (or circumnavigating) interviewees' questions, and how these choices reflect our desire to build alliances. In addition, however, these choices are contingent on assumptions that we make as researchers regarding our own worldviews and those of our interviewees. Karen's response to Iyas' question about where she lives reflects one such assumption (though admittedly one substantiated by information Iyas has just provided). Her decision to name the location of her apartment as a neighborhood in southern Tel Aviv, rather than in Yaffo, reflects an assumption that Iyas will be unhappy, perhaps even visibly upset, if she *as a Jewish Israeli* tells him that she lives in the neighborhood he has claimed as Palestinian. Na'amah's response to Ms. Hadad's comment about the family she lives with not being Bedouin is another example of how our assumptions as researchers influence our choice of words. Ms. Hadad's statement seems to make her perspective clear: The Bedouin family Na'amah lives with does not "count" as Bedouin according to the State. Na'amah, not wishing to contradict this, responds to Ms. Hadad's statement with a noncommittal statement of her own ("It depends who you ask") to maintain rapport with her interviewee and to further understand why Ms. Hadad would characterize this community as "non-Bedouin."

The broader issue here is the way that we as researchers frame our words—and our silences—in ways that we hope align with our participants' worldviews, or that do as little as possible to contradict them, a process we have been calling "alliance building." In other words, we emphasize our own perspectives when we believe doing so will help create a sense of solidarity and comfort; when our own perspective clashes with what we believe about our participants' worldview, however, we remain silent, make vague statements, or

turn the discussion back to them in an effort to refrain from making this contradictory perspective heard. Nagar-Ron and Motzafi-Haller similarly draw attention to silence in interviews as an important site of interrogation. In their work with first generation Mizrahi women in Israel, Nagar-Ron and Motzafi-Haller suggest that interviewees' silences and fragmented answers to their questions were a response to viewing the narrative form as another mode of domination and marginalization (Ron-Nagan & Motzafi-Haller, 2011). Thus silence can serve as a strategy for interviewer and interviewee to negotiate identities in the qualitative research process.

Yet this raises issues about what our role as researchers *should be* and what happens when alliances are mixed. Are we there simply to listen and document? Should we be challenging and/or questioning our participants when we disagree with their perspective? This is a particularly salient question to consider as we attempt to build long-term rapport and elicit information—data—that will be used for our own purposes, perhaps with input from our participants, but ultimately to facilitate our own understanding of the research questions we ask.

Power

Finally, our cases highlight the way that questions of power arise in interviews. The place of power between interviewers and interviewees is critical in considering the ethics of research, particularly in the context of the anthropological call to "study up" (Gusteron, 1997; Nader, 1972). In our research, the question of power arises in three ways. First, as we note above, the issue of "expertise" is prominent in both of our cases. Here the traditional notion of the researcher as expert is turned on its head as both of our interviewees take on the role of experts—in one case about Bedouin community life and, in the other, about life in the United States. In both cases our participants' role as expert emerges following our responses to their questions about our backgrounds, creating an interesting dynamic. On one hand, our participants are continuing the conversation by showing some knowledge about the places where we live and come from. On the other hand, in doing so, both of our participants claim a status that seems to effectively contradict our presentation of selves in earlier parts of the interview. In other words, in both cases, our participants claim expertise status despite the fact that immediately prior in the conversation we have made it clear that we have concrete experiences (living in a Bedouin community and growing up in the United States) to which our participants are not privy. This highlights the complex dance that occurs in the negotiation of power during interviews, in particular when considering how each of us responds to this claim in our respective discussions. Neither one of us contradicts our participants, in part out of our desire, discussed above, to emphasize alliance building. Nonetheless we are left with ambivalence,

not quite sure what part of our identity remains salient for the interviewee. Such comments and responses are not unique to these two cases, but should be considered broadly in terms of their contribution to the power dance that is negotiated throughout qualitative interviews. For example, as Ursula Plesner (2011) points out, even when "studying sideways," that is, conducting research with individuals of equal status and background, issues of power shape the construction of knowledge that occurs through interviews. We might question, then, how the "power dance" might have been navigated were the status of our interviewees equal to ours, and how this might have shaped our alliance building and, subsequently, our process of data collection.

Second, while these interviews highlight the fluidity of identity, the cases we present also delineate the difficulty we find in determining whether we have negotiated our identity claims successfully. We, as researchers, have the power to choose which aspects of our identity we will foreground or background in any given conversation. The feelings of ambivalence we are both left with at the end of our interviews, however, suggest that perhaps our conversation partners are skeptical of our presentation of selves. At a broader level, such discomfort also points to our lack of tools for successfully negotiating mixed allegiances and ambivalence in our relationships with research participants.

The final power dynamic at play in these cases, which again touches broadly on qualitative interviews in general, relates back to the question of who dictates the interview process. As researchers whose fluid identities come to fore in this setting, we have the power to choose how we respond to participants' questions, how we present ourselves at the outset of an interview, and what elements of our identity we foreground or background to create a space in which (we hope) participants are comfortable and open. Yet emphasizing this power on our part should not come at the expense of highlighting that our participants similarly choose their remarks. Another interview I (Karen) conducted this year also highlights the way that this power dynamic comes into play. In this life history interview, I asked a participant to tell his story, a story that, as it was told, clearly emphasized Israeli politics, social change, and political participation. The participant finished telling his story and the interview ended. Only later, through another interview conducted with someone who was friends with this first participant, did I learn that one of the participants' parents was a prominent member of Knesset (Israeli Parliament). During the interview, he chose never to mention this aspect of his background. This example highlights the fact that our interviewees, like us, have the power to move the conversation in different directions. In other words, we as researchers have the power to present ourselves in certain ways that we hope might influence for good the data we collect, in as much as our words and silences create a space for open communication. However, Sigal Nagar-Ron and Pnina Motzafi-Haller (2011) point out that their

research participants use silences and fragmented stories as strategies for countering power differentials and oppression. Thus they demonstrate that our interviewees are free to choose their words, and silences, just as we are. Ultimately, the data we collect is contingent on their choices as much as ours, which begs the question, who is really in the position of power?

Moving Beyond the Dichotomy

Finally, we again draw attention to a question embedded throughout this article: "How do we move beyond dichotomous boundaries?" We, as others, are careful to refer to Israel–Palestine and Palestine–Israel, Israeli-American and American-Israeli, Jewish-Arab and Arab-Jewish. Yet, even in making these multiple references, marked off by backlashes, we fail to fully capture the fluidity between the identities formed and reformed in this region. Given this, we wish to conclude by posing the query to others in the field: "How can we move beyond the limited, yet seemingly all-encompassing boundaries that define this region?" "What is our vision of a framework in which we did not need to address these categories?" We see these questions, and this article, as a basis for moving forward the conversation among scholars in the field, so that we might also contribute to a shift in the realities we study.

Author Note

Both authors contributed equally to this paper in all ways.

Notes

1. The research both of us are conducting takes place within the "Green Line," or Israel's borders prior to the 1967 war. Thus, even though both of us conduct research on issues that relate to Palestinian identity and belonging, we refer to the context of our research as "Israel."

2. Use of the phrase *Palestinian* here refers to a group that has been termed, among other things, Arab Israelis, Israeli Arabs, Palestinian Israelis, and Palestinian citizens of Israel. This group is made up of individuals of Palestinian descent who, by virtue of the geographic location of their homes, live within the boundaries of the state of Israel and carry Israeli citizenship.

3. All names of informants have been changed to protect the privacy of our research participants.

4. The names of this location and of the family are pseudonyms.

5. Prior to the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, approximately 100,000 Bedouins lived in the southern Negev region. About 11,000 remained in the newly established state and became Israeli citizens (Morad et. al., 2006). Between 1948 and 1966, many of these Bedouins were relocated onto one restricted military zone. Over the next decades, seven state-planned towns were established as part of Israel's sedentarization process of the Bedouins (Dinero, 1999; Fenster, 1997; Marx, 1984; Meir, 1997). Today, half of the 200,000 Negev Bedouins reside in these seven towns, while the remaining half live in 45 settlements beyond the townships' jurisdiction on land not designated by the State as residential, and therefore deemed "unrecognized" by the government (an additional nine "unrecognized" villages are currently in the process of being recognized). The seven state-planned towns are consistently among the 10 poorest townships in Israel (CBS, 2001). The socioeconomic situation among the unrecognized villages is even worse, as the villages and the people who reside there are denied basic social services such as connection to water, sewage, or electricity.

6. Yaffo is the Hebrew name for the ancient city of Jaffa (Yaffa in Arabic), located in present-day Israel immediately south of Tel Aviv. The city was united with, or absorbed into, the Tel Aviv municipality (now the Tel Aviv-Yaffo municipality) in 1950 (LeVine, 2005).

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Bios

Na'amah Razon (BA, BSc) is an MD/PhD candidate in the Department of Anthropology, History, and Social Medicine at the University of California, San Francisco. Her research examines the dynamics of citizenship and health care reform in southern Israel.

Karen Ross (MALD, MS) is a doctoral candidate in education policy studies and in inquiry methodology at Indiana University. Her work and research focus on conceptual and methodological issues at the nexus of education, peace building, dialogue, and social activism.