No Easy Answers: The Ethics of Field Research in the Arab World

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Because it is a slice of one's life as well as a method for gathering data and insights, and because it entails socio-cultural immersion and interpersonal trust, field research confronts political scientists with a special set of normative issues not encountered in libraries, laboratories, or home countries. This essay weighs four plausible yet fallible positions on the ethics of fieldwork overseas, with particular reference to American political science research in the Arabic-speaking world in the 21st century. I am raising questions I cannot really answer: specifically, amidst American military engagement and a good deal of spying by governments all around, can we, or ought we, practice scholarly detachment, reciprocity, activism, or, perhaps, espionage?

Field research combines extended direct observation of special events and everyday happenings with extensive semi-structured interviews, occasionally supplemented with more formal surveys and usually complemented by the collection of documents and by lots of casual conversations. Practicing a mixture of ethnography, journalism, translation studies, geography, and political sociology, and often gathering sensitive and/or controversial information through direct social interaction, field researchers encounter moral dilemmas that are all the more challenging in an era of highly charged American confrontation with the Arab Middle East. The normative standards nowadays enforced by institutional review boards at many American universities, drawn from the psychological sciences to protect individual subjects from pain, humiliation, or legal hassles, offer little guidance to field research that is not about individuals but communities, societies, and nations.

Long before the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the War in Iraq, and the heightened American profile in the Arab world, Arabist social scientists usually situated their fieldwork in one of several alternative normative rubrics, each with a strong ethical rationale but each more complicated in practice than the moral arguments alone would suggest. Sometimes we shifted paradigms as research progressed. Young scholars and those with very narrowly defined research topics often embrace the fly-on-the-wall model of the neutral, dispassionate recorder of apolitical information whose intent is to leave no impression on the subject of study. A second position, which might be called a reciprocity model, acknowledges that Northern researchers gain professional credentials from their research and obligates them to return something of value to the community. Social activists argue that while living abroad participant observers should stand on principle against public corruption, family violence, ecological despoilment, violations of academic freedom, and other abuses rife in the Arab world, especially since as Westerners we have greater latitude than our Arab colleagues to expose social and political wrongdoing. The fourth line of reasoning, that our moral obligations reside at home, actually leads to two diametrically opposed positions: that we have a patriotic duty to provide the American government with policy relevant information; or that Middle East scholars should oppose those of Washington's policies that are detested in the region. We had these debates back in the 20th century, but the ethics of field research for Americans in Muslim North Africa and West Asia have become far more complicated, and I think troubling, in the past few years. There are no easy answers.

1. The Fly-on-the-Wall Model

The idea of a value-neutral, unbiased, and minimally disruptive social science whose contribution is wholly theoretical is beguiling in the same way as the "take only pictures, leave only footprints" dictum of nature preserve hikers. The impartial researcher has an abstractly worded, often comparative set of questions and takes pains not to express opinions, take sides, or draw attention. One hopes to be as invisible as possible within the process being studied and to not influence events or outcomes. This is a respectful posture encouraged in the Arab world by bureaucracies established to grant or deny research permission or residency visas to foreigners, and often by granting agencies and home universities. It is also prudent: if there are street demonstrations, stay home. One still needs to request individual subjects' acquiescence to take photographs, tape-record interviews, make written notations, and name names, but the minimal-involvement model is very straightforward and suitably humble. Often, especially nowadays in the Arab world, it is linked to a desire to distance oneself from the American government.

The fly-on-the-wall model runs afoul of its own simplicity because even taking photographs and leaving footprints can be political acts. Anthropologists have mostly discredited the illusion that a foreigner amidst a remote primitive society is not merely socially disruptive but engaged in a construction of reality embedded in a larger power relationship.

Day-to-day choices about where to live, whether to hire a maid, to interview elites or the lunatic fringe, what to wear, to ride the bus or take a taxi, which guests come and go, whether to serve alcohol, what opinions to express, and a host of other seemingly personal, mundane decisions can provoke disputes or have symbolic consequences. Additionally, and especially in the Arab world, many of these issues, like photography itself, are gender-charged, leaving Western women and sometimes men faced with the dissonant complications of sexual mores.

Beyond the sense in which ordinary practices in a foreign, class-divided society can have political implications, moreover, the ubiquity of national security establishments in the Arab world creates suspicions and risks. Mere candor about one's research rarely suffices. To neighbors, corner grocers, and others without college degrees the word for "research" sounds like "investigation," and we may indeed look like we are snooping about. Speaking broken Arabic seems fishy; speaking good Arabic can make people more leery. Few will understand that they have been targeted via a random sampling technique. The more theoretical and academic the inquiry, the more it may seem like a devious cover story. In any case, real CIA agents have cover stories too. More pernicious than neighborhood gossip, however, is the fact that security agents, secret police, and ordinary snitches may indeed track a foreigner's moves and conversations. This can put foreign researchers at risk of losing visas, but more morally troubling is that neighbors, "native informants," and the bureaucrats who issue research permits may be called to task for the activities or presumed purposes of the foreign researcher they befriend. In many Arab countries it is common knowledge that telephones are tapped, for instance, and dialing a number, perhaps especially from abroad, may bring that phone line under surveillance. Mail is opened and read by censors. The principled quandary under these circumstances is whether one's colleagues will become targets of police scrutiny—or worse. All aspects of this conundrum—from suspicious neighbors to wire-tapping—have been aggravated by revelations that the U.S. government has recently resorted to the same abuses of privacy, due process, and decency that Arab governments have been committing for decades. All of this makes it difficult, or perhaps hopelessly naïve, for a political scientist or other foreign researcher to be a fly-on-the-wall.

2. The Reciprocity Model

The second normative framework acknowledges that scholars enjoy financial support for an intellectually and professionally enriching experience, publications, and the reputation for expertise and additional grants and opportunities that follow. The fact that field work is structured around an unequal exchange between the studier and the studied puts researchers in an awkward ethical relationship to their subjects. It is a difficult ethical dilemma to resolve because there is no easy way to either mitigate the imperialism of knowledge production or reciprocate the collective service rendered by Arab colleagues and counterparts, much less a whole nation or region. Some of us feel that we do so in creating a better mutual understanding, especially in the contemporary situation where merely correcting negative stereotypes of Arabs seems like a valiant crusade in its own right. So writing a good, serious book is a way of returning the favor, especially if it gets translated into Arabic. A sensitive, well-researched op-ed on the street demonstrations might be a kind of service. In particular, many Arabist political scientists consciously apply "normal," comparative social science methods of analysis and rational actor models to de-exoticize Arab political culture. (For reasons of conscience as well as access and personal safety many of us avoid matters related to security.) Others attempt some sort of material restitution by paying someone's

medical bills, bringing a promising student to the U.S., or helping prepare grant proposals to international organizations on behalf of a deserving community or organization. Such moves recognize a power and/or wealth differential, but attempt explicitly to work the system in an ethically conscious way.

3. The Activist Model

One step beyond token reciprocity, the activist perspective puts the participant in participant observation by advocating change within the society being researched. Whereas the value-neutral model is reserved and tends toward cultural relativism, the activist ethos is conscientiously engaged. The arguments in favor of activism begin with a rebuttal of the premise of neutral observation, acknowledge researchers' debt to the subject of scholarly research, and carry passions about issues such as ecological sensitivity, violence against children, animals, or women, or racism and anti-Semitism with them to the field. Fieldwork thus becomes an exchange of knowledge, an exercise in perhaps mutual if not parallel consciousness-raising. Specifically with regard to concerns about human rights, intellectual freedom, family violence, and public corruption, some American and Western scholars feel a special obligation to use the freedom of expression guaranteed by their passports to speak up for those trapped or intimidated in bad marriages or repressive political environments. Western women and sometimes men feel obliged to articulate feminist values. These are compelling claims, especially for researchers living overseas for extended periods. An engaged social science agenda might revolve around researching women's groups or enterprises as a form of advocacy in itself, for instance, or a researcher may coach girl's sports as a solidarity-boosting leisure-time activity. Or we may try to stop little boys from throwing rocks at dogs. Or join street protests, or interview jailed demonstrators.

But conscientious advocacy is not always appropriate for Americans in the Arab world, especially nowadays. Many of the observations above about surveillance or pejorative symbolism apply in spades to open political organizing. The high moral ground is a place of superiority, and for historical reasons Arabs are sensitive to foreigners' civilizing missions. Naive, patronizing, or self-righteous feminist activism seems especially prone to stumbling across resource disputes, provoking counterproductive conservative backlash, or insulting the intelligence of its purported beneficiaries. More generally, when activism on human rights issues and democratization echoes a vacuous Western political rhetoric and a generally Orientalist depiction of the Arab world it is likely to fall on deaf ears. Even cosmopolitan Arab intellectuals more often than not accuse Washington and the governments of former European colonial powers of double standards, for instance, in undervaluing Palestinian rights and overlooking Saudi Arabia's government-enforced misogyny while lambasting Iran's.

With the invasion of Iraq and subsequent revelations about disinformation, torture, arbitrary detention, civilian wire-tapping, civilian deaths, and other abuses of the Geneva Convention, the U.S. Constitution, and normal standards of decency these arguments of two-faced moralizing from the United States are all the more difficult to refute. To the extent that we speak as Americans, we are pots calling kettles black. And this brings us back to the issue that has sparked so much controversy within and especially around American Middle East scholarship, namely, our relationship to our own government's policies.

4. The Moral Obligations Lie at Home Model

Since the shock of 9/11/01, an explosive controversy has raged within the United States about the proper role of

American Arabist academics. A group called Campus Watch accused leading scholars of what Cold Warriors called anti-Americanism. The paucity of academic field investigations of terrorism was attributed not to prudence, ethical constraints, lack of theoretical significance, or methodological problems but Arabophile bias, while scholars whose field work in South Lebanon or the Occupied Territories put them in contact with Hizballah party members or Hamas charities were vilified as terrorist collaborators. In moments of national fever pitch students and pundits called us lackeys of Usama bin Ladin and Saddam Hussein. Meanwhile, federal monies for Arabic language and area studies, under attack in some circles, are justified on national security grounds, as though the purpose of teaching our specializations was defense intelligence not intellectual inquiry.

In the 12 or 18 months after 9/11, individuals inside a U.S. security intelligence establishment thrown into disarray by its own gargantuan failure turned to academics as never before. There was a deliberate reach beyond the relatively small, often ostracized cadre who had worked with American intelligence in the past, to anthropologists, economists, Palestinian sympathizers, critics of U.S. policy, and others who, for their part, would never have considered consulting for the CIA, or even associating with those who would. Some, citing past controversies within the Middle East Studies Association over the acceptance of CIA funding, refused on grounds of academic purity; others, out of patriotism or in hopes of setting the record straight, offered qualified analysis or advice. In any case, this outreach from the intelligence community was short-lived, for in the lead-up to the invasion of Iraq it became clear that experienced Arabist field researchers, who almost universally recognized the flaws in the WMD myth and predicted the pitfalls of occupation, were mostly not on board. Henceforth, communication was restricted to a rather few specialists in Shi'a/Sunni, tribal, or Iraqi politics: intelligence mavericks were muzzled, and dissenting views were again discarded in favor of sycophancy.

All these complicated issues and debates swirl around field researchers in the Arab world nowadays. Decisions about research sites, topics, and specific methods are more controversial than ever. Of course, there is an urge and an ethical imperative to proceed as always, with theoretically framed questions designed to contribute to the field of political science, and in this sense to insist upon personal neutrality in the War on Terror and the War in Iraq. There's also an urge and an ethical imperative to inform policy makers. But at what point does the latter preclude the former? Does accepting pay, writing a report, giving a briefing, or attending a conference make one into the sort of intelligence agent suspected by some neighbors and Arab security establishments all along? Is this not the ultimate in imperial information extraction? Or, contrarily, can we counterbalance disinformation and imperial impulses? Or are we simply to be damned if we do, damned if we don't? Should we evade moral peril, not to mention some risk of physical danger, by undertaking documentary or quantitative analysis from afar? Or is this also an amoral choice when the one thing that Arabists and Arab-bashers agree upon is that more understanding would be beneficial all around?