

Lessons Learned

Posted on [February 15, 2010](#)

Tamar Katriel

University of Haifa

A passing remark made in casual conversation by one of my teachers (Tom Frenzt, then at the University of Colorado, Boulder) during my impressionable graduate years, struck me at the time and has stayed with me ever since. In addressing my concerns about my future research direction, he commented that one must decide about the kind of distance one wants to keep from one's object of inquiry. In my mind, the spatial metaphor he used has been translated into what can be called the issue of self-positioning. And, indeed, I believe some of the most meaningful lessons I have learned over the years concerning the conduct of what we now refer to as "local strategies research" relate to choices we make in positioning ourselves in relation to our object of inquiry. In ethnographic work, this takes the form of an acute awareness of our self-positioning in the field and with the possibility of strategically shifting our positioning in the course of research.

What do I mean by self-positioning? For me this term implies a number of intellectual and methodological moves that delimit our object of inquiry and shape the way we address its various dimensions. The first move is one of encirclement, the product of the kind of attention that turns social scenes into research sites, social practices and events into research topics. Encirclement is the fundamental move that governs the logic of discovery in ethnographic work. It is often experienced as an intuitive response to things observed and heard, yet often I find in retrospect that it has involved a specific, theoretically-guided kind of noticing, one that creates links between empirical details and forms of abstraction. It is, I have learned, often triggered by trained alertness to formal processes of reification in social life, which direct our gaze at such methodologically rich junctures as linguistic lexicalization, iconization of images, ritualization, and narrativization (look for the native term, the culturally focal image, the ritualized encounter, and the circulation of narratives). It is never just a matter of being in the field – though that is a must – but of being there in a particular way, not in the way of immersion but constantly attuned to its distinctive structural, emotional and aesthetic qualities.

Then there is the question of negotiating our distance in relation to our object of study once we have positioned ourselves within the field of inquiry. This is an experiential – affective more than intellectual – process. When studying the other, it involves undertaking a journey of growing familiarization. Moments of disorientation provide insights into alternative cultural constructions and sensibilities. These, in turn, invite us to interrogate the taken-for-granted assumptions we bring to our research field, much as we do in studying aspects of our own cultural world. One of the things I've learned is that the convenient distinction between the cultural study of the self and that of the other is a tenuous one. What we experience in the field is an ongoing play with distance that encompasses difference and familiarity. We move between the urge to acknowledge otherness (if not exoticize it) and the urge to search for

common ground as a path towards a deeper understanding.

To invoke Dell Hymes' formulation – one I have increasingly learned to appreciate — the reflexivity that allows us to be aware of, and play with, our positioning in the field makes it possible to encompass difference rather than eliminate it.

And finally there is the play of distance involved in addressing the multiple and shifting perspectives brought to life by the various players and points of view we encounter in the field. I've learned that my ethnographer's urge to make sense of the web of practices, voices and stances encountered at different junctures in my ethnographic exploration, the satisfaction I experience at seeing them cohere on my manuscript page, has to be always kept in check. The proverbial open-endedness of ethnography is a concrete invitation to re-visit familiar sites and issues, re-contextualizing them in both historical and cultural terms. Thus, for example, re-viewing my study of the emergence of *dugri* speech as an emblem of the solidarity-oriented Israeli identity project within a wider perspective, I came to see it (also) as a historically situated juncture in a broader struggle over cultural hegemony and as a highly gendered cultural formation. And similarly, in studying local heritage museums, I initially attended to the institutional voices of museum professionals and tour guides. Then, however, I began to listen to them from the standpoints of differently positioned audience groups, and the stories they were telling became refracted through each of their particular prisms. And, by re-viewing them in terms of the larger field of cultural production (including literature and theater, for examples), and the political field of struggle over Israeli nationalism, the meanings of these same stories shifted once again. Each extension of the study was a strategic move in the game of distance and self-positioning. Over the years, I have learned to incorporate such moves into my research program as well as to maintain my alertness at possibilities of such moves that emerge during fieldwork. The open-endedness of ethnography for me has come to mean the ever-present possibility of such a move, large or small.

A few years ago, my young friend and colleague in Haifa, Rivki Ribak, brought me an art book that she said represented for her my approach to ethnographic research. It was a wordless picture book by the Hungarian-American artist Istvan Banyai entitled "Zoom." Fascinating to children and adults alike, this mischievous book masterfully portrays the effects of "zooming", and the play of distance, context and perspective that the turning of its pages generates. As I enjoy leafing through it again and again, I feel this book does indeed capture much of what I have learned about doing ethnography as an art of zooming in and zooming out, and does it with much more flair than I can ever hope to do. I urge you to look it up.

This entry was posted in [Field NOTES](#) by [Center for Local Strategies Research](#). Bookmark the [permalink \[http://www.localstrategiesresearch.washington.edu/index.php/lessons-learned/\]](http://www.localstrategiesresearch.washington.edu/index.php/lessons-learned/) .