**Research Training Paper III**

**Ethnographic Research Methods Case Study Report**

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# **1. Introduction**

This essay is a reflection about a recent ethnographic research I conducted, and the processes of the ethnographic methods selection, and developing analytic finding from it. The nature of this project, which deals with the study of the worldviews of elite group - intellectuals Zionist Liberals citizens of Israel, and the fact that it is conducted by a Palestinian women, requires deep reflections on the question of positionality, and the political difficulties encountered when conducting ethnographic research on a hegemonic elite group from an indigenous perspective in the shadow of on-going settler colonialism.

# **2. Ethnographic Background and Research Question**

In July 2018, the Israeli Knesset enacted the Basic Law: Israel—the Nation State of the Jewish People (the Nation-State Law). The Nation-State Law first section expressly declares that, “The land of Israel is the historical homeland of the Jewish people, in which the State of Israel was established,” and that “The State of Israel is the national home of the Jewish people, in which it fulfills its natural, cultural, religious, and historical right to self-determination (Knesset 2018).” The Nation-State Law continues with the edict that, “The right to exercise national self-determination in the State of Israel is unique to the Jewish people.” That is, as argued by many Palestinian scholars, this law is exclusively premised on the rights and interests of the Jewish people both in Israel and outside of it, alongside the disqualification of any values of inclusive citizenship guaranteeing the equal membership of Palestinian citizens of Israel (e.g., Ghanem, 2021; Jabareen & Bishara 2019; Jamal, 2019).

Many citizens of Israel, including Israeli Jewish liberals considered part of Israel’s Zionist Left (Zionist Left)*,* strongly oppose the Nation-State Law*.* In a large demonstration held in the summer of 2018, around the time the Nation-State Law was enacted, large numbers of Israel’s Zionist Left vehemently raised their collective voice in protest against the Nation-State Law and called for its repeal (e.g.; Ben Ozer, 2018).

Taking part in that demonstration, I noticed a puzzling that the very same group of Israeli Jewish liberals from the Zionist Left who oppose the Nation-State Law support simultaneously Israel’s Law of Return (1952). For many, Israeli-Jews and non-Israeli-Jews alike, the Law of Return embodies Israel’s exclusive Jewish character, defining the State of Israel as a Jewish state. As such, it is a central tool in determining Israel’s national character and the national majority empowered by it (Carmi, 2003). Most notably, under the Law of Return, the right to immigrate to Israel is reserved only for Jews. Palestinians, including Palestinian refugees, are not granted that right, and, consequently, they are unable to return to their homeland, and many of them, since the 1948 war, endure bad conditions in refugees’ camps.

The position of Israel’s Zionist Left – strongly opposing the Nation-State Law while unequivocally supporting the Law of Return –is an enigma to me. These two laws are fundamental to Jewish nationalism – Israel’s identity as the nation-state of the Jewish people – and represent an integral part of the Zionist enterprise (Mautner, 2021). How, then, can the same person support the Law of Return, meant to ensure that Israel remains demographically and substantively Jewish, while at the same time opposing the Nation-State Law, which defines the State of Israel as a Jewish state, and reiterates the principle of return, as anchored in its section 5 (Jabareen & Bishara 2019)?

This study seeks to understand this apparent tension or contradiction. It seeks to trace the ways in which the members of the Zionist Left make sense of it, and the strategies they choose to navigate their commitments to the liberal values, on the one hand, and to the national-Zionist values, on the other hand.

The point of departure of this study, however, is based on the assumption that the worldview of human beings is a complex system of propositions and statements, which are often in tensions, or even in apparent contradiction, yet human beings are able to create in their minds justifications and distinctions that allow them to hold positions that, may seem contradictory. That is, this study does not deal with the question of “how is it possible that there is such a tension?” Rather, it traces how members of Israel’s Zionist Left rationalize their stance, and focuses on the ways, and strategies, in which the subject settle that tension, and make sense of it. It also asks what distinctions and moral boundaries allow them to hold, at the same time, two contradictory and opposing ideological systems.

To answer this question, this study draws on a series of ten in-depth interviews conducted with legal public intellectuals who define themselves as belonging to the Zionist Left and who hold key positions in Israel academia, writing and teaching about issues related to those at the center of this study.

# **3. Literature Review in a Nutshell, the Selection of Method, and Theoretical Framework**

**3.1 Literature Review in a Nutshell**

In Israel, the tension between supporting the Law of Return and objecting to the Nation-State Law can be seen as a derivative of a far deeper discourse engaging with the complexity of the dual definition of the State of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state. There is a myriad of legal, historical, philosophical, and sociological works about Israel’s dual identity (e.g., Gavison, 1999; Smooha, 2002; Peled & Navot 2005; Gavison, 2012; Rabinovitch, 2018). Most of these works revolve around the tension that arises from the definition of the state of Israel as a “Jewish and democratic state,” and the tension that arises from the definition of Israel as a “national and liberal” state. Such discussions took place as early as 1950, but it is 1992, when the Basic Laws: Human Dignity and Liberty (1992) and Freedom of Occupation (1992) were enacted, which appears as a turning point. With these laws the state of Israel was defined as a Jewish and democratic state, which led to public and academic discussions dealing with Israel’s dual identity.

There were those who argued that it is impossible to reconcile the complex definitions of Jewish and democratic, or national and liberal, and given the inherent contradictions both pairs of terms are riven by, it is necessary to choose between them. According to these arguments, the state of Israel cannot be both Jewish and democratic, because a Jewish state is a religious state, and a democratic state is a state where the basis for the legitimacy of the government is the consent of the governed, not the will of God (Cohn, 1992; Feldman, 1995). In addition, according to these arguments, Israel cannot be a national and liberal state, since a state that defines its identity on the basis of one religious component, in this case Judaism, is not compatible with a conception of liberal democracy, which requires the state’s neutrality towards its various citizens’ identities (Tamir, 1993).

Another approach, associated with Ruth Gavison, assumes from the outset that the Jewish element does not harm the democratic element. Gavison defended the thesis that the ideal of a Jewish and democratic state is possible (Gavison, 2012). She rejected claims that a polity predicated as Jewish and democratic is either logically impossible or unjustifiable. Gavison also asserted that the foundations of Judaism and democracy are in fact different dimensions of a common structure. Responding to the view that a Jewish majority is a problematic factor in the realization of the democratic vision, she pointed out that it is similar to how a large Christian or ethnic majority in most Western countries does not threaten their democracy. In this regard, Gavison argues that “in other democracies in the West, the question of the identity of the majority is not seen as a factor undermining democratic values: neither should it cause a problem in the State of Israel (p. 25).”

Alongside these dichotomous positions, Aharon Barak, a former Justice of the Supreme Court of Israel, suggests an intermediate position. According to Barak, the Jewish element should be interpreted as referring to Jewish sources that confirm and anchor the democratic character of Israel (Barak, 2012; 2000). Although Barak points out that this duality will continue to occupy public discussion in Israel for a long time, he is attempting to put forward a formula according to which it would be possible to reconcile the two values at the heart of this duality. Barak argues that a proper constitutional conception requires an attempt to achieve complementarity between these values while seeking constitutional unity and normative harmony; this means trying to find unifying elements and common ground, while avoiding contradictions and reducing points of friction. Barak urges the discovery of a common denominator and a synthesis between the values of the state of Israel as a Jewish state and its values as a democratic state. Following from this, Barak suggests looking for a combination of the different values which can be seen to hold together. This complementarity has to be created out of the two traditions Barak proposes turning to: the internal sources of Judaism, on the one hand, and those of democracy on the other.

Criticism of the definition of Israel has also come from Palestinian academics and politicians. They have sought to point out the inherent contradiction in this formula, and sought to denounce the assumption that Israel’s definition as Jewish and democratic is a legitimate. A significant part of Palestinian criticism is directed at the Jewish element of the State of Israel and its formal definition as such, which – directly and indirectly – has a concrete effect on the lives of Palestinian citizens and non-citizens of Israel. As for Palestinian citizens of Israel, criticism emphasizes the lack of equality between Jewish citizens and non-Jewish citizens (Rouhana, 2006). This claim is based, among other things, on the fact that the State of Israel actually gives priority in allocating resources to the Jewish national group, and thus does not realize the principle of equality among all its citizens. So even if it aspires to have both a Jewish and a democratic character, in practice it fails to realize it. Other criticism also addresses the idea that the law of return and the Jewish identity of Israel affects thousands of Palestinians who live today in refugee camps under harsh conditions.

**3.2 The Selection of Methods**

In this study I seek explore the phenomenon of resolving internal tensions and contradictions in the worldview of cultural-social groups. Therefore, the desired research group for this study is one that faces significant tensions that are relevant to my research question, namely, the Zionist Left. The tension between the liberal position of the Zionist Left and their national Zionist position arises when we take into account that the Zionist nationalist position is historically inherent in the consciousness of the Zionist Left in Israel. This group led the project of establishing the state of Israel, and through the collective memory, woven into the Zionist narrative, and the history of the Zionist immigration to the land of Palestine\Israel, it succeeded in consolidating its power and justifying the existence of the State of Israel. Meaning, the inherent national position of this group, i.e., the unreserved commitment of the member of the group to the Zionist enterprise could be put under a complex test, against the universal liberal position, and increases the tensions that need to be settled.

This study, however, aims to propose new perspectives that have the potential to generate new insights into the aforementioned tensions, thereby enriching and adding insights into the academic discussion about the dual identity of the State of Israel as a Jewish and democratic, or liberal state: First, the academic discourse on the topic, some of it I surveyed in the previous section, has been focusing on the State and its institutions, remaining in the level of legal analysis of legislation and court rulings, an approach that is very common in legal academia. This study offers a different methodology instead of the dominant one. Drawing on ethnographic methods, this study locates the Zionist Left’s subjectivity at the center of its enquiry, and in order to understand the tensions and contradictions in the definition of Israel both as Jewish and democratic, it traces the values and the depth components in the worldviews of the Zionist Left subject. Second, as a Palestinian woman, this study aims to produce a unique double peripheral point of view on the subject. Although this peripheral point of view, as I show later, raises questions on positionality and the ways in which my identity as a Palestinian woman affects the interlocutors’ responses, and the ways in which they choose their words, it nonetheless has a significant contribution to the scholarly literature on the topic. For example, some questions, and therefore answers, arises just due to this encounter between a Palestinian and Israeli-Jewish interlocutors.

To examine their positions in relation to the law of return, one the one hand, and the Nation-State Law, on the other hand, I conducted a series of ten interviews with prominent Israeli legal intellectuals who hold senior positions in Israeli academia and belong to the Zionist Left. These legal intellectual are familiar with the legislation and scholarship of most relevance to this study, and whose work in the debates, both academic and public, are devoted to issues close to those at the center of this study. Furthermore, legal intellectual, experienced in conflict resolution, are by nature and occupation endowed with reflexive thinking, which enables them to formulate and present coherent explanations and arguments. Their knowledge and political positions, therefore, will help me reach insights into their unique process of reasoning.

**3.3 The Selection of a Theoretical Framework**

Theoretically, this study draws on Ann Swidler’s concept of “strategies of action”and her metaphor of a “toolkit” to describe culture (Swidler, 1986). Culture here is understood as a frame of reference to be used by individuals, offering them different toolkits with which to construct their strategies of action. Fundamental to this study is the assumption that while an individual’s worldview comprises a complex system of beliefs and principles that are often in tension, even in apparent contradiction, individuals can nonetheless devise justifications and distinctions allowing them to hold conflicting or inconsistent positions concurrently. An ethnographic approach therefore provides the tools to delve into the “strategies of action,” or the ways in which the Zionist Left reconciles these inherent incongruities and tensions.

Drawing on Swidler’s theory, I argue that the strategies of action of the Zionist Left originate in a cultural toolkit unique to the cultural group they belong to. The concepts of a cultural toolkit and strategies of action enable me to identify and analyze the ethnographic findings from my conversations with this study’s interlocutors, showing how the Zionist Left formulated three strategies of action from this toolkit to help them reconcile the contradictions and tensions arising from their support of the Law of Return (1950) alongside their opposition to the Nation-State Law (2018). The three strategies of action to emerge are: the blurred time, the binary space, and the absent character. The analysis of the findings and the expanding on them are beyond the scope of this essay. However, to mention briefly:

The first strategy involves blurring the components of time. The interlocutors perceived the history of the Jewish people as characterized by ongoing persecution and existential dangers, culminating in the Holocaust and remaining relevant in the present and future. While the interlocutors certainly had differences of opinion, the Holocaust was a common issue that everyone chose to address uniformly and proactively. Without exception, they were convinced that persecution and existential danger are an inherent part of their lives, and that every Jew outside the State of Israel is vulnerable to harm by non-Jews, both in the present and the future. This feeling has sometimes been attributed to the emergence in recent years of nationalism in different countries in the world. The second strategy concerns the perception of binary space, with the interlocutors distinguishing between “outside” and “inside,” between events that transpire outside of Israel and those that transpire within its borders. The perception is that any space outside of Israel is threatening and dangerous, while Israel, in contrast, represents a plank of security, protection and a life of “normalcy” for Jews. In the third strategy, which I define as the “absent character,” I was surprised to find that the Palestinian are not central figures in the story of the Zionist Left. In the eyes of the Zionist Left, Palestinian are “absent-present” in this story, an incidental backdrop to the central narrative of persecution and the Holocaust.

# **4. Practical, Epistemological and Political Challenges**

Anthropology as a discipline deals with the understanding of other cultures. It seeks to explain the complexity of cultures over human history, and aims to trace the life, and the human experience and existence in different societies. The assumption underlying the discipline, is that anthropologist, even if they do not belong to the same culture they are studying, are able to understand and interpret the social phenomena that characterizes the other culture. Many even saw that as an advantage highlighting the idea that the presence of a person outside the culture the person seeks to understand, may provide a huge contribution to the understanding of the culture. That is, a foreign culture is revealed in a deeper way through the eyes of another culture. The foreign researcher can present to the other culture questions that is didn’t present to itself, and therefore the foreign culture answers and unfolds before us new layers and depths of meanings.

However, it is important to point out the difficulties and challenges involved in this. Anthropology as a discipline is aware of these difficulties and challenges. There is an ongoing discussion within anthropology on this. For example, post-modernist theories, at their core, are opposed to generalizing theories, that have been prevalent in the modern era, and that are fundamentally positivist, about knowledge, science, and the world. The postmodern theories often take a critical approach, denying the possibility of one stable truth. Geertz, who is considered to be the father of the interpretive approach, according to which we need to extract the interpretation of the members of the culture of their own culture, and then give it our own interpretation, published his seminal book the interpretation of culture in 1973 (Geertz, 1973), which following him, many anthropologists began to make use of postmodernist approaches. As a result, and unlike their predecessors, they felt uncomfortable with the authoritative approach of the anthropologist, questioned it, recognized its limitation, and criticized its abilities to observe, document tell and represent. Following this critical process, they realized that when the anthropologist describes a culture different from his own, beyond the fact that he comes with cultural assumptions and will have difficulty representing a member of another culture, he himself is used as a research tool. If in the positivist period, the anthropologist assumed that his work was possible and easy, then the anthropologists of the late twentieth century perceived their predecessors and themselves as condescending, and radically as working in a discipline that is unable to represent the objects of its research.

However, the postmodern turn also gave rise to solutions, and one of them is the reflective turn that was developed out of the recognition that anthropologists do not merely observe and describe cultures, but they also interpret them. In addition, the ethnographer who enters the field, has a ‘self’ that is present in him and therefore the researcher is required to examine himself, his identity, his goals and the consequences of his actions on the field. That is, researchers actively examine how they influence the fieldwork and the relationships formed in it. Thus, the research also included the analysis of the power relations, the interaction and the politics of the fieldwork. This reflexivity enriched the fieldwork by making the ethnographer aware and attentive to the interactional processes and dynamics between them and their interlocutors, and the ways in which knowledge is acquired, learned and transmitted, and also to the ways in which they interpret the culture that they are researching (Abu-Lughod, 1993).

That is, along with the advantages of the ethnographic research, it also poses methodological and ethical challenges. Now I want to reflect on some of the challenges I encountered during this study that deals with the tensions and seemingly contradictions in the worldviews of legal scholars belong to the Zionist Left. In addition, I point out where there is a sort of head-on collision between the cultural-social-political world of the researcher, and this study interlocutors’ worlds. As I show, challenges as such are an inherent matter in ethnographic research, but in this study, however, they were intersectional and arose from arose from cultural, national, gender, and scholarly differences between me and my interlocutors, i.e. the fact I’m a woman, Palestinian, student, versus – men, Israeli-Jews belong to the hegemonic national group, senior academics.

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One of the main methodological challenges I faced during this study is undoubtedly the entering into a different culture than the one I belong to. Even if I born and grew up in Israel, I’m a Palestinian and therefore, I actually live “next”, rather than “inside” the Israeli culture. That is, I had to examine it as if I had come from the other side of the world. Along with the natural difficulty inherent in the entry of a researcher who comes from one culture, into a field that immersed in another culture, this study raises another difficulty what stems from the political, historical contexts of the study and my identity as Palestinian women interviewing them.

Many studies have dealt with the question of the asymmetric relationship between anthropologists and their interlocutors, and also the power relationship between them. Most of these studies assumed that in situation where power relations exist, it will be “in favor” of the researcher, because the power relations arise from and are anchored in the very research situation, in which the anthropologist is seen as someone who penetrates and even invades the interlocutors’ worlds, and in situations in which an interview is being conducted, then the researcher would be the one to control it. Added to this is the assumption that the anthropologist gives the interlocutor a “voice” and therefore the anthropologist comes from a position of power. Bourdieu argued that the social hierarchies, which exist outside the interview room, charge and feed the power relations expressed in the interview. That is, and contrary to the assumption described above, there can be a situation in which the anthropologist will not necessary occupy the position of power during the interview or any other interaction with the interlocutor, but the opposite.

Hence, in this study I faced two main dilemmas: first, “reversal of roles”, as a woman and as a Palestinian who belongs to a minority struggling to make her voice head in the Israeli space, I give the stage precisely to men from a hegemonic social group. Second, there was a fear that the research itself would be harmed during the interview, due to the complex power relations.

In recent decades, studies have been conducted, especially from a gender perspective that challenge the unequivocal perception of the superiority of the anthropologist in the field (e.g., Karniele-Miller, 2008; Dickson-Swift, 2006). These studies examine whether the researcher is in a position of weakness in front of the interlocutors, and how the research is affected by these power relations. According to these studies, it can be said that the gender gaps have a substantial effect on the course of the research, and on the relationships forged between the researcher and the interlocutors. Men interlocutors, for example, are less likely to cooperate and find it difficult to trust the researcher female, claiming that she cannot understand them and she is critical towards them. In addition, the motivation of the interlocutors to take part in the research, the dynamics during the interview and the ability to build trust with the researcher, are all affected by the fact that the research was conducted by a woman. At the same time, the relationship between the researcher and the interlocutors, in ethnographic research, is not completely defined and there are no clear lines describing the correct or the optimal relationships.

In this study, the following gaps were present: I’m a Muslim woman coming from Arab culture and Palestinian nationality. I grew up in a home characterized by a low socio-economic status and I myself a first generation of higher education. In contrast, all the interjectors in this study were men, Ashkenazi Jews, Zionist and Israelis who hold key positions in the Israeli academia. They have a lot of cultural capital that is above and beyond any capital that I carry. Hence, I assumes, in light of Bourdieu’s arguments, that the power relations that will be created within the framework of the interview will be influenced by those that exist outside of it. In addition, I assumed that my national identity would lead the interlocutors to prefer to censor, or avoid discussing certain issues.

Therefore, I took the decision to hold the first interview together with a colleague, who is a man, Jewish, Israeli, who is familiar with the topic at the center of my study. In this interview I realized that I was able to build trust and I conducted the rest of the interviews alone and independently. That is, I understood that my identity as a Palestinian would not necessarily create barriers, but I took into account that the gaps affected by cultural capital, could certainly affect the relationship that would be formed with the interlocutors. Here are some examples that reflect these challenges:

First, gaps created by differences in cultural capital undermined the degree of the interlocutors’ trust. In the example below, the social gaps was the main factor as Benjamin told me: “you are not part of the Milieu, so it will be difficult for you to understand”. Benjamin’s choice to use the word “milieu”, which indicates a closed social environment with a common background, puts the social aspect at the center. That is, Benjamin defined that the Zionist Left is a social group with unique characteristics, that anyone who is not part of it, will not understand it. It seems that Benjamin wanted to emphasize my “otherness”, the other who is different from him.

Second, I expected that the power relations would be affected by the fact that I am a young female student, compared to the interlocutors with a long academic resume. However, the interlocutors did not refer directly to this matter. Instead, they expressed their attitude to the social science discipline. For example, they shared with me that the theoretical-normative legal research is superior to qualitative-descriptive research. As Nadav said:

In your work, do you build only on interviews or do you also prepare background materials and take into account the theoretical writing of the interlocutors? Sometimes I think that anthropologist create the possibility of bias compared to work that draws on theoretical written texts. I know a writer who distorted an entire life story of a man and I wrote a review about her analysis.

In doing so, Nadav also expressed a degree of distrust in me as a researcher, and the methodological choices I made. This issue arose almost in all the interview I conducted. However, many of the interlocutors, especially Nadav and Benjamin, cooperated with me and revealed many personal layers of their personal and professional lives and their attitudes and opinions.

In some cases, however, interlocutors controlled the interview. The extreme example of this was in the interview I conducted with Jacob. I came to the interview with a sheet of questions that I had prepared in advance. At the very beginning, after a short and quick introduction, Jacob pulled the question sheet out of my hand and began to read it out loud and answer the questions very briefly. I would emphasize that this was done without my permission. In doing so, he simultaneously became the interlocutor and the interviewer.

After he finished “answering” all the questions briefly, he put the sheet down and continued talking about his research topic. Although I was given a private and instructive lecture on the subject of settler colonialism, though it Jacob gained control over the interview. First, I found a degree of irony in that his research deals with colonialism and at the same time he “occupied” the interview. Second, I wondered if he would have behaved this way in front of a male, Jewish, Israeli researchers. Did he assume that as an educated Jew, he should lecture the Palestinian, the complex picture offered by settler colonialism?

# **5. Conclusion**

In this essay, I sought to present the ethnographic research I carried out. Ethnographic research method gave me a new approach and illuminated new angles on a charged issue that was studied from different angles before. The semi-structured interviews provide a unique research phase, and provide a cultural, social, historical context within which an essentially social phenomenon takes place.

In this essay I presented challenges and difficulties that arose in the research process. Did the fact that I am not in the “milieu” make it difficult for the interlocutors to open up to me, or did it encourage them to share describe and explain without fear? Did a conversation with a master’s student at the beginning of her career, lead to an academicization and intellectualization of the answers? Or did the conversation with a Palestinian actually give rise to an apologetic discourse? Although these aspects were not present repeatedly and “overtly” during all the interviews, it seems that they were present event if inevitably.

In addition, the relationship between the Jewish majority group in the State of Israel, and the indigenous Palestinian minority group that lives within a state that defines itself in ethnic terms - a Jewish state, even if democratic, is complex and multifaceted. This is a particularly charged relationship, and from several points of view - historical, political, religious, economic and social. For me - as an anthropologist, on the one hand, as a Palestinian on the other hand - the research group that stands at the center of this work, constitutes a foreign but also familiar "other" towards which I am ambivalent. My national affiliation raised questions and concerns in me regarding giving validity and normative approval to the positions of the Zionist Left Group.

I admit that as a Palestinian who experienced the Jewish state as exclusionary and discriminatory, my entry point into the field was the assumption that the Zionist Left is in an internal contradiction that cannot be reconciled. However, in this research I aspired to suspend these assumptions and enter the field with a genuine desire to listen to the meanings that the interlocutors give to their world. I used Bourdieu's advice to treat the interviewees with an attitude of "intellectual love” (Bourdieu, 1999). This concept derives from Spinoza's definition of "the intellectual love of God" according to which the object of love is the knowledge of nature, or the love of science. That is, when we study subjects that our attitude toward them is inherently negative, such as abusers, racists, terrorists, colonizers, we focus on ensuring that our interlocutors have exclusive access to the information we need for deciphering our research questions. According to Bourdieu, "intellectual love" allows the researcher to be considerate, attentive and sensitive to the interlocutors, and it also pushes to be particularly active in order to extract from the interlocutors the rich knowledge they treasure within themselves.