

On Being Kicked Out of a Field Site and the Other Lives of Ethnographers

Abstract:

Based on ethnographic fieldwork in two Sunni Muslim high schools in the New York City area, the author describes how the experience of being asked to leave one field site helped him in his work with another. The author uses the experience to frame three senses of “other lives” in ethnography: (1) the other lives the ethnographer encounters in the field, (2) the liminal “other life” the ethnographer herself experiences, and (3) the possibility for “other lives” doing ethnographic work in other field sites.

Introduction

This is a story about other lives: those ethnographers study, those ethnographers experience, and those ethnographers try again when they re-enter the field. It is also a story about being asked to leave a field site and how that difficult and emotional experience helped me in my later ethnographic work. While experiencing the events described here, I was informed by reflections on ethnographic method (Fine 1999; Fine 1993), ethnographers’ relationships to their respondents (Crowley 2007), and especially discussions of interaction across difference, particularly differences in gender (Fields 2013; Avishai et al 2013). This story builds upon those reflections and develops new ones, particularly on the importance of self-awareness (and not just others-awareness) during fieldwork (Cohen 2000; Meadow 2013).

Unlike many sociological articles about ethnography, this story is not an argument that attempts to account for variance within my data, which, despite the wide variety of ways to do sociological ethnography, tends to be what unites its various forms (e.g. Buroway 1998, Glaser and Strauss 2017, Jerolmack and Khan 2017, Eliasoph and Licherman 1999, Tavory and Timmermans 2014). In some senses, it is a “thick description” (Geertz 1977) of a series

of ethnographic errors and misrecognitions, and how they helped me better understand my field site and my broader work as an ethnographer.

As Venkatesh showed in his study of “doin’ the hustle” (2002) in his own ethnographic fieldwork, ethnographic miscalculations can be an important means of understanding respondents’ views of the ethnographer, and through that, their broader understandings of social life. Yet such misunderstandings are not just *analytically* important; they are also *emotionally* important, certainly for the field worker, and probably for those at the field site as well.

I should also make clear here that I am a white, heterosexual male who never felt at risk or in danger at any time in my fieldwork. My greatest fears were losing access to a field site and that I had offended a community which I had come to appreciate and enjoy. In this sense, my story is very different from those Hanson and Richards describe in their accounts of sexual harassment and objectification in the field (2017, 2019). As Hanson and Richards argue, these experiences of harassment help ethnographers to recognize the method’s problematic fixations on solitude, intimacy, and danger, reproduced in the training of graduate students and in published work. Yet while such experiences should never be viewed as “just one more hardship worth navigating to gather good data,” (2017: 588) they also teach us something about how the ethnographer is regarded and how that regarding helps us to understand the communities we study.

As Briggs (1970) describes in her classic ethnographic study of an Inuit family, it is often through errors and misunderstandings that the most interesting data is gathered, an insight paralleled in Garfinkel’s “breaching experiments” (1991) and Dewey’s emphasis on consciousness as arrested habit (2002). That does not excuse or by any means justify the objectification or harassment of fieldworkers or any other situation in which fieldworkers

encounter harm. There are kinds of fieldwork problems that are analytically useful that do not actually put the fieldworker in danger, and I recognize my privilege¹ to be reflecting on these kinds of problems here.

I want to tell the story of some of these problems, partially because they reveal important lessons about how self-awareness and interactional expectations work within the field, but mostly because I believe the story could be helpful for ethnographers and qualitative researchers in the same way that the works listed above were helpful for me. I want to show the possibility of another life. In so doing, I build on a tradition of narrative ethnography (Tedlock 1991) more common in anthropology (e.g. Bruner 1997) but not unheard of in sociology (e.g. Richardson 1990).

I use this image of “another life” in three senses. First, to describe the kind of “other life” ethnographers feel when they are in their field sites, experiencing a new series of relationships, values, and ways to render life meaningful (Linger 2010). Such experiences of difference are what make ethnographic work interesting and why many fieldworkers are attracted to it. By “other life” I do not mean worse life (or better for that matter). I simply mean a different way of understanding how life is to be lived. Such difference is, to some degree, found between any two individuals, yet the work of ethnography has generally been to look at how different communities experience life differently. Of course, “other lives” is a

¹ I use the word privilege here, and the obliviousness I share in the next section (and the obliviousness I share of another outsider later on) might seem to be a story of privilege and nothing more. While I would agree that these are examples of privilege, I would argue such acknowledgement is the beginning of a question rather than the end of an answer. The questions, then, are how privilege intersects with liminality, how it structures our expectations of what we can and cannot do in our field sites and what we can expect from our respondents, how it situates our emotional expectations as we give and take with respondents. Such privilege is cross-cutting and heterogeneous rather than unitary and consistent: certain bodies, despite their wealth, are more likely to be sexually harassed, just as certain bodies, despite their education, are more likely to be racially profiled. Different ethnographic *fields*—in both Bourdieu’s sense and the standard ethnographic one—allow for different forms of capital to afford different kinds of privilege. While I am interested in this point, and it is worth making here, I do have sufficient space to work on in this piece, though I am developing it elsewhere.

perspectival claim: these lives are often (but not always) “other” for the ethnographer and also often (but not always) “other” for her audience, though they are simply lives to the people living them. However, many respondents have reported reading about themselves or people like them in ethnographies and nonetheless discovering a kind of otherness, a spark of recognition of similarity through a lens of difference.

The second sense of “another life” I want to describe is the liminal space the fieldworker herself experiences, in which she is both part of the field site and yet also distinct from it, subject to some rules but not all, never entirely clear which rules matter and which do not. It is this second sense of “other life” that I will mostly discuss in this paper, and I want to reflect on it in two ways: first, the sense in which the ethnographer’s liminal experience is constantly being negotiated by the ethnographer herself, and second, the sense in which the ethnographer’s liminal status is a source of confusion, anxiety, and emotional stress for the community in which she does her work. As Venkatesh describes, the status of the ethnographer is continually being negotiated between the ethnographer and various competing interests within a field site (2002), and while such negotiation is true of any identity (Goffman 1982), it is especially true for ethnographers who seek to maintain an integrity to a previous self while simultaneously trying to observe and participate in various groups within a field site.

Finally, the third sense of “another life” I want to describe is the possibility of ethnographic reincarnation, going back into the field to a different site, but this time edified by previous experiences and better prepared—or so we hope—for the other lives to come. It is in this last sense that I will reflect on how my experiences at the first field site helped me to better navigate the tensions I describe in my second field site.

Context and Methods

This research draws from my dissertation work, which was a comparative ethnography of two Sunni Muslim and two Evangelical Christian high schools in the New York City area. During the calendar year of 2011, I spent about two days a week each at Al Amal (Muslim) and Good Tree (Christian). I was eventually asked to leave Al Amal near the middle of the Fall semester, though I still use my research there in my work. I continued working at Good Tree that semester and did interviews there for about one day a week during just about all of Spring 2012. In Spring 2012, I started fieldwork in two new schools, Al Haqq (Muslim) and Apostles (Christian), where I also went for about two days a week each.

Trouble Brews, or, Don't Play Basketball with Girls

The story begins on a day in April at Al Amal. I was teaching an SAT class afterschool to junior boys and girls (separately) and both groups of students had asked me to bring my guitar in to play some songs as the test day was rapidly approaching. I had already known that there was some controversy about music in the Islamic community, but so many of the students at the school talked about and sang popular music, seemingly without any repercussion, that I assumed it would not be a problem. I was praised for using my guitar as a teaching aide when I taught at an all-girls high school in inner city Brooklyn, and I knew it could be an effective way to build teacher-student rapport. When I brought in the guitar that day, the security guard saw the case and immediately told me it would not be allowed. I apologized profusely and sheepishly hid the guitar in the school's front office, where I picked it up again after school. This poor decision is a perfect example of the second form of "another life" I described above: I knew that playing a guitar had been helpful in my

previous life, and I also knew that music was somewhat controversial in this, my temporary life. Breaking the rules might not be the best way to learn them, but it is certainly the most efficient.

During lunch periods, many of the students sat together and ate outside, and as I walked out during the lunch period, a group of senior girls asked me if it's true I brought a guitar. I told them it was, but that I got in trouble, jokingly lecturing them that they tricked me. The girls laughed. One of the girls said, "Come on, join our circle!" and I sat down with them. A group of other girls came and sat down with us as well. I noticed this but didn't think much of it. We were sitting and talking about various things, and then a teacher came and asked them all to get up and leave. At first, I had thought they all had to go because much of the senior class had got caught skipping. Before they left to see the principal, they all stopped and said, "Wait, wait, we have to get our story straight. Wait!" But in hindsight, one of the secretaries who came to "break them up" might have been upset because I was talking to the girls at their level.

Then I was just by the door to the main building of the school, casually watching the girls play basketball along with a white male photographer who was doing a photo essay on Muslim students in the New York City area. He and I were talking and some other senior girls were trying to get him to play basketball. Both of us were saying no, no, that's not appropriate, and I said "Look I got in enough trouble with the guitar." But then the girls said "No, it'll be fine." I said, "Are you sure?" And they said, "Yeah, yeah, come on play," and I still said no, but then I saw the photographer playing and I said, "Okay, fine." We played basketball and I noticed other people noticing, but I figured they notice everything I do because I'm new and different, so I didn't pay much attention to it. The second sense of

other life affected not only my experience of myself at the school but also others' experience of me.

I didn't play too aggressively and I made a conscious effort not to touch any of the girls, making my style of play very different that when I played basketball with the boys. Eventually, a female teacher came and said we had to stop playing because she needed the court, which I did not think much of, but then the principal came out and said we had to stop. One of the girls asked why and the principal muttered "Men can't play basketball with girls."

I wrote the following notes that day. I will not go back and change them to fit the categories I developed for this article, but notice how even then I was thinking in terms of the liminality that captures the second form of other life.

You have to understand, the main play-area of the school is really a panopticon... [Foucault 2012]. People are always watching, and you never know exactly who is seeing you. Boys look from their windows, and girls look down from their windows or on the stoops. Plus there are always adults around. People are always, just always watching. You look up and inevitably see eyes. Yet what's interesting is the lack of degree to which this appears obvious: everyone is watching yet at the same time people seem to do whatever they want. You also have to understand that my whole time at this school-particularly in reference to the girls-I've felt like I was in a bit of a liminal space [Turner 2008]. After all, some of these girls-especially the juniors and seniors-are old enough to marry me in some of their parents' cultures, and their potential husbands might be around my age. They are simply not allowed to be friends with people like me because the school and often their parents do not permit cross-sex friendship. Add to this the fact that I'm non-Muslim, about which parents

also have differing opinions regarding fraternization, and there's a whole lot of problems. Yet I've felt, from the beginning, incredibly warmly accepted, *especially by the girls*. In hindsight, much of this might have been because I was a young man who is not hideously unattractive, and they were excited to get to know someone like that—I suppose I should have considered this, but I honestly didn't put a lot of thought into it. What I was struck by continually was that I was able to talk to these girls within the confines of the school—outside of the school they would not acknowledge me, or if they did, it was in a curt and purely official way—in a way that was as though I was just any American man talking to an American teenage girl—obviously nothing flirtatious or anything else—much the same way that I talked to my high school students [when I taught English at an all-girls Catholic school]. I wasn't sharing any personal information really (except pleasantries and small talk—are you married, what did you and your wife do last weekend, what are her and your interests, where do you and she work, etc.) and it felt warm and cordial... Yet I did notice that it was a bit different from other interactions of male teachers to the female students. I thought maybe because I was different this was allowed.

I walked into the boys' building and the assistant principal has me come into his office. We had a pretty long conversation, which I recount here without much interruption. Note the degree to which the first form of another life I described above—the rules and meaning systems of the communities ethnographers study—was in tension with the second form I also described, the liminal space in which an ethnographer feels simultaneously beholden to that community and not. Through this conversation, I learned the degree to

which I was much less liminal than I had thought and much more beholden to the rules around me.

“So, I’d like to talk about the matter of the guitar.”

“Right,” I said. “What happened was that the girls who I was teaching SAT to, they told me to bring it, and I said I would play some music for them, but then this morning I found out it was inappropriate, and so I immediately put it away. I’m very sorry for having caused any trouble.”

He nodded. “What I think this will show you, more than anything else, is that the students in our school—the boys and girls here—are just like any other American students anywhere in the country. They are Americans. They listen to American music and they talk to you like they are Americans. And that is something that is important for you to learn in your research. But this school is not just an American school—in our culture, music is something special that we do at weddings and things like this, but we do not just have music all the time, and we especially do not have music between men and women, because that could lead to other things that we do not want here.”

I was nodding and agreeing as vigorously as I could. I was also apologizing a lot. I certainly felt like an idiot. I could tell he felt bad about my feeling bad. “This is not a criticism of you. This is something you can learn for your research. You have to understand that there are two different cultures, and in our culture, the way men and women relate to each other is something that has to be controlled. We have to establish rules against ourselves, because we don’t know what we might do if we don’t follow those rules. And we also have to establish rules because the students might get the wrong idea if we don’t follow them. Like, if you were to play that guitar for the students, for the girls, they might listen to it and think that they have a relationship with you they don’t actually have, and that would

not be appropriate. You are here as a teacher, and if they see a male teacher playing a guitar, then it would be confusing for them. Is it a sin? Possibly it's not, the problem is it's a chain that started with music."

I nodded and apologized again. I said that in the future I won't bring the guitar again. He said, "But there is something else-have you seen a male teacher sit down and socialize with female students? Sit down at their level and just talk with them?"

I realized what's going on. "Oh," I said, "I'm sorry, I didn't realize-." He didn't let me finish. He was very calm.

"It is alright. You are a guest here. But as they say when in Rome, do as the Romans do. And here it is important not to socialize with the students like they are our friends, especially male teachers with female students. This is not just about you. When the students see you doing this, they think to themselves. If it's okay for a teacher to socialize with students, then why isn't it okay for me? We are dealing with the most dangerous age of all here-adolescents, this age is very dangerous, especially from 7th to 9th grade...they watch everything you do, and they are looking to see what rules they have to follow. That's why, as a teacher, it's important for you to talk in a formal context, you don't talk to them outside, you talk to them in a classroom, giving them the material and asking them questions to make sure they understand. As a teacher, do you do this? Is it important for you as a teacher to sit down at the students' level and talk to them? In your SAT class, how do you engage the students? Do you talk about your personal life with them on the same level?"

I paused. "Well, I see what you're saying, and you're right that as a teacher I don't need to do that, but as an ethnographer, I'd like to just talk to the students."

He paused. "Tell me-as an ethnographer, why do you play basketball?"

“Oh,” I said, “I’m very sorry-I was talking to the students, and they told me that it was fine.”

“Remember, when you are here, you are wearing many hats. You are an ethnographer, but we have also opened our doors to you, we have told you, yes, you can research here, what we have is yours, you are able to study anything. You are looking at different culture, yet when you are here, you are part of this culture, and the students are looking at you as part of this culture, from the perspective of a teacher-you wear the hat of a teacher.”

I nodded and apologized again.

“This is good for you as an ethnographer. It’s good for you to be learning these things. So today, when two different teachers came to the office to complain about you playing basketball with the girls, and some students complained, we realized it was important to come talk to you.”

I thanked him and asked him to apologize to those two teachers. He said, of course, but he also told me I don’t need to apologize.

“I want to show you the gray areas,” he said, “so this is not a problem for you again.” I apologized again and said that the girls had told me it was okay. “It’s not your problem,” he said, “it’s their problem, but then it becomes a problem for you. These children want to cause trouble; they want to get away with what they can. The 12th grade girls all skipped school a few days ago. So we can’t always trust the students. Sometimes they’re trying to manipulate you, they’re trying to get at us through you. They’re trying to create chaos and then they can just run off and say, oh well, and they’ll blame you and pretend they had no idea. I see this all the time-a students will tell a teacher there is no class today and then I will have to talk to the teacher about why there was no class. They’re challenging the

administration through you—they just think it’s a funny situation, but then when they’re confronted, they’ll shuffle it to you... the best message to deliver to your students is that you are their teacher and that is why you are there.”

After this, I wandered over to the principal’s office, where he was talking to the photographer in the lobby. I sat next to them and apologized.

“You don’t know a lot about women, do you?” asked the principal.

“I taught at an all-girls school for three years,” I said.

“That doesn’t mean anything,” he said. “You really don’t know anything about women.” He smiled. “They think they can control you, they are very manipulative, and you have to be aware of it! You have to know they are always trying to control you!” He laughed.

“No, you don’t know anything about women.”

The reporter was just watching with a bemused smile.

“Could you apologize to those teachers who came and complained for me?”

“I won’t apologize to anyone. If you apologize it will just make them think it is a bigger deal than it is. No, it is over. It’s fine.”

I talked to the biology teacher, Brother Ahmed about the situation later that day. Ahmed was probably my closest friend at the school and he nodded in recognition, telling me that if he could, he would avoid teaching girls altogether because of the possibility for problems. I told him I felt very bad about the situation and to convey my apologies if he heard any complaints.

If the story I’ve told so far makes it seem like I was completely incompetent as a researcher, I should be clear that it was quite an exceptional day: most days—including the rest of that academic year—went quite smoothly and I developed an excellent rapport with the vast majority of the school. Yet, as described earlier in reference to Briggs, Venkatesh,

Dewey, and Gafinkely, it is often the miscues and misunderstandings that provide the best data.

A New Principal and Problems Return

The issue appeared to just about disappear until about four months later, when I returned to the school in the fall. Apparently, the previous principal had been quite suddenly fired by the board and Ahmed told me I should introduce myself to the new principal and vet my research with him. The new principal, Ishmael, seemed a bit overwhelmed and nervous while I was talking to him, but he also seemed excited about the project. I learned that he was also working on a Ph.D. and he said, “We can help each other.”

Increasingly, however, Ishmael was nervous about my research, asking me to stay home until he sent out a new letter that I had drafted to parents about my work, and also asking for new forms from my university and from my advisor legitimating my work. At one of our many meetings, he said, “We have to be especially careful that all your research is safe and appropriate—you know what they say now, every student brings not one but two lawyers.” Ishmael had a hard time at the school.

Whereas my problems the previous semester had concerned my misreading of my liminal status, the problems this new semester—while partially the reverberations of my previous actions—were also the result of a new perspective on my liminality. I was another life among this community, and that other life could do or say anything in ways that were not entirely predictable. More importantly, there was no way of predicting how my “other life” would interact with the community this principal had committed to lead and protect. Another life can be a frightening thing.

When I finally was allowed to re-enter the school, all the people I ran into greeted me very kindly. Throughout the day, students and teachers said, I haven't seen you! Where have you been? and You're back! I saw the former principal who walked in and said "Hello Mr. [graduate school name]!" He asked how things were going and I said I had not been around because I had been waiting for the new principal to send out a new letter and he said "Well, when I met you I knew right away you should work here. That kind of thing wouldn't take me long at all-I'd just send it out." I looked uncomfortable, I guess, because I didn't want to say anything bad. "Well, different people have different ways of doing things," he said. That day I talked to the principal about giving him a permission slip from my graduate school to indicate that it's okay for me to be at the school. "Because you are sitting with the students and talking to teachers, it is important to protect you-in case the board forgets that you are here and they ask why is this person here." Various teachers and students complained to me about the new principal, saying he was rude, inconsiderate, and untrusting.

A few weeks later, the Islamic Studies teacher, with whom I was very close, asked me to get up and ask the students questions as I had done many times before. He had me sit down at the desk in the front of the class. While this was happening, or shortly beforehand, the principal was outside in the hallway. One of the girls asked, "What's he doing out there?" Another said, "He's looking in the locker."

"Make sure he doesn't look in our locker."

"Is he allowed to do that?" one asked.

"He's allowed to do whatever he wants," said another.

None of them went out to challenge him. He walked in and looked at what was going on, didn't say anything to anyone, and then went back out again. I was nervous about saying anything to the class because I was worried about the principal walking in and-lo and

behold-shortly after I asked the girls some questions, before a girl could even answer the question, the principal walked in and pointed at me. I stood up right away.

“You’re not allowed to be doing this,” he said.

I looked at the teacher, who didn’t know what to say. “I was asked to talk to them,” I said, awkwardly. The teacher didn’t know what to do and the girls all looked back and forth at each other.

“No,” said the principal, shaking his head. “You have the survey to do this.” He looked at the teacher. “He is not allowed to talk to the students without written permission, he has the survey to talk to them,” and then he looked at me again. “You know this.”

I told him I was not aware that was the arrangement and sat back down in the back of the classroom. I talked to a few teachers about the encounter later that day and they told me they told me about similar confrontations in front of their students, moments which had left these teachers feeling vulnerable and frustrated. “The main thing brother,” a teacher told me, “is to ask for him not to do things like that in front of the students.”

At the end of the day, I talked to the principal, apologizing for the confusion about my role. “I apologize for before,” he said, explaining the real problem was with the 12th grade girls. “They are acting unsupervised-they think they run the school and can do whatever they want.” I told him that I will respect whatever he wants me to do, but it is useful for me to be able to talk to students. He said that he can’t control what I do while talking to students outside of class but he doesn’t want me talking in class.

That evening, I got the following e-mail from another teacher, who I had not talked to that day (bold face not added):

Salaam Br. [Name]

I heard about what happened on Thursday and I feel obligated to apologize on behalf of our school, its staff, and students. We all felt embarrassed and concerned and want to tell you that **the principal's actions were not reflective of our school, culture, or respect towards our guests and friends** [bold his].

I wish I have the explanation for the principal's actions towards you but he has not discussed anything with us teachers. I'm not sure what happened after the class incident whether you had a chance to talk with him or not, but I hope things can work out. As you can see, this transition period with the new principal hasn't been smooth at all with teachers and non-teachers alike.

Please let us know how we can help.

Br. [name]

The principal never seemed to stop being nervous about me being at the school. In this case, even though I had worked hard to live my life at the school in as closely as I could to the other lives (in the first sense) that I was observing, it was the possibility of *my* other live (in the second sense) that was most terrifying to the principal.

One day in early November, I went down to talk to the principal about the questionnaire and he seemed a bit weird, even more uncomfortable than usual. He asked "Where are we on the questionnaire?" And I told him, "Well we decide that the first three questions on page five are offensive," and so we're going to get rid of that."

He nodded. I asked him if he needed a copy of the questionnaire and he said no. "I have a copy-I don't lose things. That's not something I do." I was looking at the questionnaire and ready to start talking about it. Then he said, "[Name], there is something I

have to tell you. I received an e-mail from the Board of Trustees. They have told me to ask you to stop doing research at Al Amal.”

“What?” I said. “I don’t understand.”

“It is a surprise to me as well. They did not tell me why, and I am trying to figure this out. How far are you in your research? You have not finished your research have you?”

“No,” I said. “I was going to be here until June.”

“And you have already been here a year?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Since January.”

He shook his head. “That is a shame. They should not have let you do research here if they did not want you to do research, but to stop you while you are halfway through-that upsets me, as a teacher, and as a researcher. I have taught college, I know what it is like. You are in the middle of your research.”

“I appreciate how kind you’re being,” I told him, feeling overwhelmed.

“Well, as a researcher, I understand. You have spent all of this time and done all of this work, and it is a shame you will not be able to finish it. This is not what I would want either-we should be able to have total transparency, to have anyone come in and see what happens at our school.”

I told him that I had the contact information for the president of the board, and he said “I would wait to do that until after I have talked to them. Wait a few days and I will ask the board to explain what is going on here.”

As I got up to go, I said, “I’d like to go say goodbye to some of the teachers I’ve gotten to know.”

He said, “If I were you, I would keep this very quiet and not get too many people involved. We do not want this to become too dramatic.”

I agreed, saying I'm not very dramatic. I walked upstairs, really upset, and gathered my coat, putting my computer in my bag in the science lab. "I have some bad news," I told the three science teachers, all of whom had become my best friends at the school.

The three were at the front table, Omar standing at my side and Nabeel and Ahmed behind the table, Nabeel at the computer and Ahmed grading.

Nabeel said, "It's weird they didn't come see us since we're the people who know you best."

"I don't think I did anything wrong," I said.

"No," said Omar, "except for that one incident with the girls and basketball, and we talked about that."

"Did you see the letter?" asked Nabeel.

"No," I said.

"The first thing I would do is get a copy of that letter," said Nabeel. "Just so you know what it says."

Omar didn't say that much.

I said, "I've felt nothing but welcomed from you and from this school."

Nabeel nodded, "I know, I know. But still-" he looked over at Ahmed. "It's weird, because [board member name] is always trying to get us to have relationships with the community, he has people from [the local hospital] come talk at graduation, so I don't know why he wouldn't support this."

Ahmed shrugged, saying with his eyes, I don't know.

"Look, this isn't over yet," said Ahmed. "Keep your head up, and if you need our help, we'll vouch for you. Watch a good TV show, sit back, just take it easy."

I nodded. Omar gave me a hug, and Nabeel and Ahmed both shook my hand.

I walked downstairs and went back into the office, going through the door and around the corner I saw the principal talking to the head of the PTA and I didn't want to explain to him what had happened as well so I figured I would just e-mail for the letter later. And then, as I walked out, I said ma salama [goodbye] to the security guard.

My Meeting With the Board

Here is a diary entry I wrote describing what happened afterwards with only very minor stylistic changes. Again, note how my "other life" was a source of threat and concern, particularly given the degree to which these Muslims thought of themselves as "other lives" to mainstream Americans.

Almost a full month later, I heard from the Principal of the Muslim school at which I'm doing research where I was asked, effective immediately, to stop doing research. I did so and, with the advice of my dissertation committee members waited some time before I contacted anyone at the school. In that time, I was contacted by a teacher friend who was checking up on me, a guidance counselor who wanted me to represent my university at the school's college fair (I had done that last year), and two students—a boy and a girl—who wanted help with their college essays, something which I had done regularly at the school. I responded to all of them in much the same way, thanking them for their concern and saying I will wait to hear from the Board before I have any role at the school, even helping with college essays or representing a university at a college fair.

Eventually, yesterday, at 11:00, I heard from the President of the Board of Trustees, who asked me to meet that evening at nine. After clarifying over e-mail if the meeting with him individually or with the entire Board (I has asked to speak to

the Board, but said I would be fine just meeting with him) he responded only saying “bot” which is the common way that the school refers to the board, saying b-o-t.

The Board meets, from what I can gather, weekly, which seemed a bit excessive to me until I realized that the role of the Principal appears to have none of the responsibilities typically accorded to what most high schools would call a “President” or “Superintendent.” So, for example at the Christian school the high school principal is in charge of academics and discipline while the Superintendent is in charge of development (he also has a full-time development person) and long-term vision. It appears that the Principal at the Muslim school, despite having a responsibility that more or less exactly parallels that of the Superintendent of the Muslim school—that is, he’s in charge of everyone on the campus and he supervises the assistant-principals for the high school, junior high, and elementary school—has a smaller portfolio in terms of long-term planning and development. This portfolio is picked up the Board of Trustees who therefore meets once a week. That said—and I haven’t been to a Board meeting for longer than the twenty minute I was there yesterday—it appears that the Board is also deeply involved with the day-to-day operations of the school, and in a way that bothers a lot of teachers and students, who often complained to me about Board meddling.

The Board is composed of ten members, all of whom were present yesterday (I think—to be honest, I didn’t count because I was too nervous, but in the cab-ride home, I did a mental check-list, and I’m pretty sure there were ten people around the table). The new principal was there as well.

I waited in the high school office while the Board was meeting and I heard them laughing while talking to each other. Out the door came a good friend from the

school, a very popular Sheikh who gave me a big hug. We asked about each other's families and he said, "I haven't seen you around for three weeks!" I told him, whispering, that the board had asked me not to do research and I was here to talk to them about it. The big smile on his face faded and he looked serious. "Yes," he said, as though nodding to the finality of the Board's power. "Keep me in your prayers" I told him as he left, and he said, "I will, brother, I certainly will."

The Principal, as always a bit nervous and not particularly talkative, invited me in to meet with the Board and they had me sit down. The President of the Board told me that the Board all knew me but they didn't know a lot about my project or what I'm doing. He asked me to explain my topic and I did, describing how I'm studying the similarities between science and scripture and prayer and technology, and I'm particularly interested in the ways that religious authority and scientific authority work. I mentioned that I'm Catholic, that my father-in-law is from Iraq and that I had lived in Syria, and these, among other reason, are why I'm interested in Islam. I told them that I was studying an Evangelical Protestant school and a Muslim school and part of what motivates my research is a desire to disprove stereotypes about both Islam and Evangelical Christianity in the United States.

The Board president told me to calm down. "You're among friends here," he told me. Apparently, I looked nervous. I certainly felt nervous, despite my best efforts not to.

The Board President and the man to my left asked that I provide proof I'm a student at [graduate school name]. I had already done this, both when I arrived at the school and when there was a new Principal at the beginning of the fall term, a fact I alluded to but did not make a big deal out of. They also asked to be able to read my

field notes as the research progresses. I tried to be as polite as possible and I did not tell them that one of my central worries about showing them the field notes would be that they could then use me to spy on their students and teachers. I instead said that I had never heard of that happening before and showing them my field notes would make me very uncomfortable.

The President of the Board nodded—I'm not sure if it was in agreement or just an acknowledgement that I wasn't going to show them the field notes—and said “there will be a dissertation, right? Could we see that?”

Another member of the board said, “If nothing else, we'd just want to make sure there aren't any errors. You know with the Arabic, or something like that.”

“Of course,” I said. I said that I obviously have a lot of mistakes in my Arabic, and I am still a novice to Islam. There might be a lot I don't understand, and I would welcome any corrections. I tried to be clear that I'm not going to change things only because they ask me to change them, though I will, of course, take into account everything they said. I reiterated that I don't mean Al Amal any harm.

The man to my left kept asking me to explain what I was doing in my field notes “since you won't let us see them.” He was trying to figure out why they were necessary, and he was also concerned that there might be some legal liability involved. I told him that I didn't believe I was asking anything uncomfortable or legally compromising, and I specifically worked with the IRB to ensure that was not the case. They asked to see copies of the IRB forms. I also told them I had only done four formal interviews with students at the school anyway. “But all of our students are minors,” responded a member of the Board, which was pretty clearly a reaction to the fact that I have had, up to this point, more open interactions with

students in the hallways, the lunch-room, between classes, and after school. In the future, they asked if I was open to have a board member or adult with me any time I talked to a student one-on-one, and I said that was fine. (I'm not sure that would work at all for the interviews, but then I suppose I just won't have student interviews, or else I'll think of them differently. However, at that point, I was more concerned about just getting back into the school in any capacity.)

The same teacher who was asking about the field notes asked again why they were necessary. I explained that I just watched how science and religion class work in a Muslim school. He said "But why is that necessary? How is that any different from a regular school?"

"It's not, really," I said. "And that's the whole point."

The Board nodded. Then some of them asked about the differences I saw in religion classes, and I said the major differences I was noticing between the two schools was about the theory of evolution, prayer, and the relative importance of memorizing scripture. (I should have mentioned Arabic, but I didn't think to at the time.)

One of them asked if I was disproving the stereotypes I set out to disprove. "That's the entire point of your project, right?" I found myself having a John Kerry moment, perhaps because I was nervous, and clarified that the point of my project was two-fold, that I also wanted to make an intellectual argument but was motivated personally to disprove stereotypes; I also said I didn't have these stereotypes. He seemed frustrated and said, "But are you finding the stereotypes are true?"

“I’ve been nothing but welcomed here,” I said. “And I’ve been overwhelmed by how kind everyone has been to me and how good of a relationship the faculty and students here have with the rest of America.”

The Board president suggested that if I were to continue to do work at the school, that I would come in in the morning with a list of classes I would like to observe and that he would arrange for me to be escorted to those classes. I said I would be comfortable with whatever the Board decides. I asked if I could continue to eat lunch with the science faculty, and the Board President said, laughing, “Well they’re not supposed to eat lunch in there anyways, but we’ll figure something out.” (I hoped I hadn’t gotten them in trouble—this is the problem with doing ethnography in a small place, you affect everything.)

One of the Board members called me “Brother [Name]” because “you’re one of us, you’ve been her for a while” and another one, talking about the school being open said that I know that because I’ve been with them for some time.

The issue of seeing what I wrote came up again and two board members said that they did not want me to feel like they were trying to censor anything. The Board president said he was just trying to protect the school’s reputation and to ensure accuracy. I said I meant no ill will to the school, and they all said they knew that and if they felt that was the case they would not have invited me to the school.

The only board member who was cold and aloof to me told me there are a few other things we have to talk about. He told me that “you mentioned you were Roman Catholic, and I know that you believe the same thing we do about the separation of boys and girls.” He asked if it was true that I had played basketball with the girls last year. As he was asking his questions, he was avoiding eye contact and

looking at a legal pad in front of him. It was the closest I felt to being interrogated in the entire process. I immediately said yes that is true, but I asked if I could provide a context. I then explained that I had been invited with the photographer (who was then there taking photos for a magazine photo-essay on Islam in America) to play basketball *by the girls*. I asked if it was okay and that I didn't want to do anything wrong. I repeated my question, and then played basketball until the principal came out and asked me to stop. I stopped immediately. "I apologized then and I apologize now," I said.

"Hmmm," said one of the board members, but nobody else said anything.

He then asked if it was true that I spent more time studying the girls than the boys. I said I wasn't sure that was true, and that I tried to study both sides equally. He nodded and nobody said anything to this. Then he added that I should know the school is very conservative and they're extremely concerned about their daughters.

Then another board member said "Also, you should know the reason we asked you to stop doing research is because we received complaints from parents of female students about how much time you were spending with the girls."

(I should have asked for elaboration then but I didn't. I supposed people has observed me just talking to the girls in a context that was not explicitly about teaching and they found it problematic.)

I started writing down a list of the forms they wanted me to give them on a reporter's pad I had brought in my pocket and the Board President stopped me. He said we will first decide together whether or not we will invite you to do work in this school again, and then we will have the principal contact you. You two can then decide together what your research will look like.

That was the moment to leave. I stood up and then the Board President stood up. I went to shake the hand of the man immediately to my left but then the Board president, who was to the left of him, had his hand out, so I awkwardly went to shake the Board President's hand first, and then the man to my left, and then everyone else's starting with the man on my right.

I then left and traveled to the all-boys school my wife teaches at. The school play, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, had just finished. Her school is one of the Catholic single-sex school the Board member mentioned, yet I was struck, as I met my wife at a restaurant afterwards, by the stories she told me of the boys and girls telling jokes and teasing each other in ways that appeared utterly platonic. It's the kind of thing that couldn't happen at the school I was just at, even if it did happen, just a few blocks away, as quite a few of the boys and girls hung out together afterschool. I looked around the Upper East Side of Manhattan (where she works and we both live) and felt like I had traveled for a lot longer than I had.

While I received many friendly notes from students and teachers, I never heard from the principal or board again, despite repeated requests for clarification.

While my experience devastated me, I soon realized I was not alone, and that being asked to leave a field site is a not uncommon experience for ethnographers. For example, both Calarco (2018) and Casper (1998) describe being asked to leave field sites early, and their experiences, like mine, were of organizational ethnographies in which a few key stakeholders can change an ethnographer's situation dramatically. My experience—like that of many—was a combination of many factors. I do not believe I would have been asked to leave, despite the eventful day I described earlier, had the principal not changed, but of course there is no way to know. At any rate, the board is famously mercurial, and few

principals have lasted longer than a few years. Yet I also know I made very clear mistakes, and some in the community felt I had to pay for them.

On the Possibility of Another Life

This experience informed my time at the second Muslim school I was at, Al Haqq, a research experience that ended much more successfully (I was asked to speak at the graduation, where I received rousing applause with the seniors chanting my name). It brought me no small joy to see Ishmael in the crowd that day. We greeted each other politely. I did not ask about his school.

I knew I had to be more careful at Al Amal, and at our first meeting the principal warned me about keeping my distance from female students. A lot of the boys shook my hand or said hello to me, particularly the junior boys since I'd seen a lot of their classes, but also other boys I could not remember meeting. The girls said hello too, yet the encounter was a bit more weighted, feeling vaguely dangerous. Some girls would say hi to me, often when I was at a distance, and I could tell that it's a slightly risky action for them because the other girls around them smiled at them or shook their heads or ducked, as though embarrassed for the greeters. Also, the tone in which the girls said hi was a bit louder, a bit more pronounced, making it seem like more of an *event*: it was not banal like when the boys greeted me. I became much more aware of the morally fraught nature of casual events, even when other people seemed not to be. I also became much more aware of the profound interactions between my liminal state (I was interesting, I was new, I was different) and the nonetheless coherent rules (especially of gender performance) in this community. I realized that far from excluding me from certain rules, my liminal—and therefore prominent—status made me even more beholden to them. Yet my gender difference and “outsider” status in

some way gave me greater insight into the community and greater permission to ask difficult questions (Bucerius 2013).

Near the end of my work at Al Haqq, I was sitting in the assistant principal's office, going over students' schedules to set up some interviews. The office was a small room always full of people, with a large desk for the assistant principal, a smaller desk for a physics teacher who doubled as the school scheduler, and a large table for tutoring and, when the room could be cleared, counseling. A male student was helping his female cousin in the same class on their English homework, and a short Jewish woman who works as an education consultant was sitting in the room too. She often mentioned her Jewish identity, usually as a means of trying to overcome certain tensions between Jews and Muslims related to the Israel-Palestine conflict. She told me once that she and the assistant principal could solve the whole crisis together. While we were all working, she asked me if I had gone to the school. "No," I said.

"But you're a Muslim," she said.

"No, I like Muslims, but I'm not a Muslim."

"Me too, she said, I *love* Muslims."

Issa, a jockey senior stuck in the assistant-principal's office all week for speeding in the parking lot, was sitting on the other end of the table. This is what the school usually did for in-school suspension. He appeared to be quite occupied with a video game on his phone, which nobody seemed to mind. He didn't say anything, but he looked up, perhaps annoyed. I said something like, "That's great," and we all went back to our work.

Later on, something else about Islam came up while the consultant was tutoring a younger boy at the school. I can't remember what made her say it, but she mentioned, "I think in a former life I was a Muslim. I just feel such an affinity to Islam."

“What’s a former life?” asked the little boy—I would guess he was maybe ten or so—to the assistant principal.

She said, “Some people believe that people existed in former lives. Muslims don’t believe that.”

I said, “Hindus and Buddhists believe in former lives.” I was tempted to say it was called samsara, but I decided that would be too pretentious. Everyone else was looking around, and I sensed a vague sense of discomfort to which the consultant was either oblivious or just choosing to ignore. She looked at me and said, “Well Mister Sociologist, I bet you used to be a Muslim too with all your interests.”

I kind of shrugged. There was another staff member there as well and she wasn’t really responding and then the consultant said, “I just have this sense I used to be a Muslim in another life.”

The little boy looked around for how people were going to respond. Everyone seemed uncomfortable. I said “*Allah hu alum*,” which means God knows in Arabic, and it is often used as a means of resolving difficult debates. The assistant principal said, “Yes, that is right. That is the best thing to say. It is only God who knows.”

I agreed. “Sometimes that’s really all we have,” I said. The tension appeared dissipated. And then people went back to tutoring and Issa stopped following the conversation, going back to playing games on his smart phone. It was only later that I realized I had somehow switched places, and now I was the one making the situation for the outsider a bit less awkward. Of course, I had been awkward in a former life.

Conclusion

In telling this story about being asked to leave a field site, I have tried to show the many “other lives” ethnographers encounter. There are, of course, the “other lives” ethnographers set out to study, the people in our field sites whose practices and values, meanings and motivations we are trying to understand. Yet there is also the strange “other life” that we ethnographers ourselves inhabit, becoming both ourselves and not, welcomed (or not) to the new communities we study even as we remain in older communities with family, friends, and colleagues. It is this second sense of an “other life”—the liminal space in which we are simultaneously in our “regular” world, in our new world, and also, actually, in neither—that I have described here. This “other life” is easy to mess up: an ethnographer can misread signals, overestimate relationships, or just forget she’s not as similar (or as different) as she had thought. As I found in my own work, the “other life” of the ethnographer is dangerous to the communities we study not only for what we do but also for what we could do. The other is a scary thing. Yet besides these two sense of other lives, I suggest a third: the possibility of doing fieldwork again. Like any skill, ethnography takes practice, and it’s always possible to fail. But it’s also always possible to try another life.

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