



6-1-2006

# “The Times They are a Changing” 1 : Undertaking Qualitative Research in Ambiguous, Conflictual, and Changing Contexts

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### Recommended APA Citation

Kacen, L., & Chaitin, J. (2006). “The Times They are a Changing” 1 : Undertaking Qualitative Research in Ambiguous, Conflictual, and Changing Contexts . *The Qualitative Report*, 11(2), 209-228. Retrieved from <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol11/iss2/1>

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## “The Times They are a Changing” 1 : Undertaking Qualitative Research in Ambiguous, Conflictual, and Changing Contexts

### Abstract

This article explores qualitative research issues that arise when researchers engage in study within their own ambiguous, unstable, conflictual, and rapidly changing society. We explore the topics of the relationship between the researcher and the context, the difficulty in choosing relevant research questions under such conditions, and the relevance of generalizing or transferring findings from such contexts to other sites and populations. We present two research cases from the Israeli context: one that demonstrates an external conflict (between Israelis and Palestinians) and one that demonstrates an internal conflict (between Israelis and Israelis), analyzing them according to these three main issues. Our conclusions focus on the methodological implications that researching one’s ambiguous and conflictual “backyard” have for qualitative researchers.

### Keywords

Research and Context, Reflexivity, Researcher as Instrument, Palestinian-Israeli Conflict, and Generalizability and Transferability

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### Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Prof. Dan Bar-On and Prof. Shifra Sagy for sharing their research experiences with us and for their valuable comments on this article.

# **“The Times They are a Changing”<sup>1</sup>: Undertaking Qualitative Research in Ambiguous, Conflictual, and Changing Contexts**

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...Despite our recent attempts to historicize what we write about, our choices tend to settle on relatively stable objects of study: objects that will look more or less the same at least from the time of the ethnographic encounter until the time of its publication and a few years beyond. What needs to be acknowledged, however, is that what really matters to the anthropologist-ethnographer is not the relative stability of the ethnographic object but rather the relative stability of the theoretical claims made upon the object of study. Can our...ways of seeing an object survive into a second edition? Will our books be read for more than their value as period pieces? These are the questions which seek for a response that assures relative stability... In the Sri Lankan situation, events have changed and continue to change so rapidly that one does not need a span of fifty or even twenty-five years to relegate something to “history”. Concerns and issues that were characterized as burning become irrelevant within months or even weeks...

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Bob Dylan (1964) – “The Times they are A-Changin”

E. V. Daniel (1996, p. 11-12), an anthropologist and Sri Lankan who has studied the violence in his homeland.

### **Preface**

Traditionally, social science research has explored phenomena that stand the (relative) test of time. That is, as a rule, researchers choose to reserve their limited resources of time, energy, and money for the study of social phenomena that appear to be a “lasting” part and parcel of the society and culture under study, and that also appear to have important implications for their sites of inquiry. Therefore, researchers tend not to engage in the study of “passing,” one-time episodes: While they may be interesting, they are not generally considered as “worthy” of in-depth study.

This state of affairs is especially true of qualitative research, which by its nature, a long-term endeavor, one that often involves prolonged immersion in the field and reflective and complex processes of data collection, interpretation, and representation. However, how does the researcher know what events are “worthy” of study when the context in which s/he is working is uncertain, ambiguous, and constantly changing? Also, once a topic of inquiry is chosen, and the field abruptly and significantly changes on the researcher, how s/he deals with these rapid changes; changes which might result in a severe revision, or even worse, the end of the planned research. In this article, we will address these issues, by looking at methodological topics central to qualitative research and by demonstrating their problematics through examples from one such dynamic context – Israel.

Israel can be characterized as a society in which change and uncertainty are the norm and stability remains an oft-dreamt of ideal. The country is distinguished by on-again-off-again wars and peace initiatives and relations with her neighbors (Bickerton & Klausner, 2002), frequent elections, and the establishment and disruption of fragile coalition governments that are built on often-changing relationships between the political left and right, and secular and religious parties (“Political Forces. Country Briefings: Israel,” 2005) along with ongoing dramatic economic, social, and demographic changes (Lewin & Stier, 2002).

All this means that the qualitative researcher, whose field of study takes place within the Israeli context, is often faced with questions of what to study, who to study, and how long the specific field will be available for in-depth inquiry. When the researcher is an Israeli, studying his/her own “backyard,” the problem becomes even more complex. Given the intensity of political life, the small geographical size, and population of the country, and the social, political, and economic issues that affect the everyday life of every Israeli, the Israeli qualitative researcher is faced with a dilemma of how to keep some degree of distance necessary to be able to study and analyze this backyard, without completely becoming engulfed in it. As long as the researcher remains in the country retreat becomes impossible.

We became interested in the issue of researching uncertain and changing contexts for both personal and professional reasons. Both of the authors are Israelis: Lea was born and has lived in Israel her entire life, and Julia has lived in Israel most of her life after having emigrated 35 years ago from the United States. Lea's work focuses on issues within the Israeli context that are enmeshed in this ever changing landscape: couple

violence (Kacem, 2000, 2002); the Ethiopian immigrant population that has been dealing with their tumultuous acclimation into the country (Kacem, Soffer, & Keidar, 2005); the ways in which families from different ethnic groups cope with their children's recruitment into the military (Kacem & Soffer, 1997a, 1997b; Soffer, Kacem, & Shochat, 1993); and the impact of the dramatic changes in the high-tech industry on married couples who work in this industry.

Julia has studied the psychosocial impacts of historical and social/political events on Israelis. She has examined the long-term effects of the Holocaust on generations of families of Holocaust survivors and on adolescent Jewish Israelis (Chaitin, 2003; Lazar, Chaitin, Gross, & Bar-On, 2004); issues related to peace initiatives between Palestinians and Israelis (Chaitin, Obeidi, Adwan, & Bar-On, 2004; Litvak-Hirsch, Bar-On, & Chaitin, 2003); and the sense of personal and collective identity of Jewish Israeli young adults born after the Yom Kippur War (Chaitin, 2004).

Therefore, our research and living in Israel has made us acutely aware of the difficulties in studying sensitive issues in our culture. So while we are in agreement with Gubrium and Holstein's (1999) assertion that "qualitative research is distinguished by a commitment to studying social life in process, as it unfolds" (p. 129), we ask but what does this commitment look like, and what is the meaning of such a commitment if social life unfolds faster than we can make sense of it?

We will begin with an overview of three main issues characteristic of qualitative research that touch directly on the researcher and his/her place within the field of study. From there, we will then move on to a presentation of two examples from our work in the Israeli context that demonstrates some of the problematics of dealing with these issues once they arise. We will conclude with a discussion of the issues that we raise, tying them to qualitative work not only in the Israeli context, but in other dynamic and uncertain contexts as well.

### **Issues: Being Part of the Context, Choosing Research Questions and Generalization**

In this section, we discuss issues connected to three major concerns of qualitative researchers, especially those working in ambiguous and rapidly changing contexts: (1) the researcher's relation to the context, including the sub-topics of the relationship between politics and research, reflexivity, and the concept of the researcher as the instrument; (2) the difficulty in choosing relevant research questions in a rapidly changing and ambiguous context; and (3) the ability to generalize or transfer research results to other populations, sites, and cultures.

We will first turn to the relationship between the researcher and the context under study. When the researcher is part of the context s/he must be able to both get close enough to the population and site that s/he wishes to research, yet keep enough of a distance in order to be able to see needed, different, and nuanced perspectives on the topic of inquiry. Although in the follow excerpt Vidich and Lyman (2003) refer to ethnographic research, we see their assertion holding true for researchers working in other qualitative traditions as well.

...qualitative ethnographic social research ...entails an attitude of detachment toward society that permits the sociologist to observe the conduct of self and others, to understand the mechanisms of social processes, and to comprehend and explain why both actors and processes are as they are... (p. 56)

Being part of the context that one is studying has both advantages and disadvantages. One advantage to being an insider is that the researcher “knows” the context and therefore, often possesses information such as knowledge of the language, rites, symbols that the “external” researcher might not have (or, at least, not to the same fluent degree). However, prior “knowledge” and “understanding” can also be a disadvantage in that it may keep the researcher from being able to look at the context with fresh eyes, as it were, in order to gain new insights concerning what might still be hidden from understanding, yet needs to be uncovered.

What happens when the researcher is part of his/her field of study and that field is dynamic, diverse, unstable, and ambiguous? In such a case, it is fair to assume that the researcher will undergo the same changes, at least to some degree, that face his/her research participants. As a result, the researcher will face the same existential and physical concerns that his/her participants face.

Connected to this challenge is the issue of the relationship between qualitative work and the researchers’ political stances, an issue that has been discussed by a number of researchers (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Fine, Weis, Weseen, & Wong, 2003; Gergen & Gergen, 2003; Rossman & Rallis, 1998). As Gergen and Gergen note, rigorous methods of research were once conceived as being politically and value-neutral, and today we are acutely aware that separation of method from ideology is an impossibility. The authors state,

If inquiry is inevitably ideological, the major challenge is to pursue the research that most deeply expresses one’s political and valuational investments...[i]f science is politics by other means, then we should pursue the inquiry that most effectively achieves our ends. (p. 594)

Punch (1986) also draws our attention to the intertwining of politics and research.

...politics suffuses all sociological research...from micropolitics of personal relations, the cultures and resources of research units and universities, to the powers and policies of government research departments and...the state itself. All of these...critically influence the design, implication and outcomes of research. (p. 13)

How very true in the case in which the researcher is part of the research context.

Gergen and Gergen (2003) believe that researchers should explore all of the voices, including those of the privileged. This stance differs from that of Fine et al., (2003) who stress the need to focus on the traditionally marginalized, for example. However, Gergen and Gergen *do* press for honesty on the part of the researcher concerning his/her political and ideological stands throughout the entire research process.

As these researchers see it, one way to take a clear political stance *and* also be open to hearing, recording, and relating to dissenting voices is through the use of polyvocality

However, when a researcher is personally and politically invested in the context that s/he is studying, we can ask, how “realistic” of a demand is this? For example, can an Israeli left-wing peace activist, such as Julia, who believes that the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories is very wrong, *really* listen and give voice to right wing nationalists who believe that the West Bank and Gaza are part of Greater Israel? This is one of the challenges that has no easy answer that an Israeli researcher, working in her own backyard, must confront.

Undertaking field research in unstable and conflict-ridden areas can also, at times, put the researcher in physical danger. As Padgett (1998), Lee (1992), and Creswell (1998) have noted, rigors of qualitative research are enhanced by undertaking “prolonged engagement” in the field. However, this prolonged engagement may be difficult, if not impossible, if the researcher feels that s/he is in danger (Daniel, 1996).

Lee (1992), an “outsider,” who carried out doctoral research in Northern Ireland, discussed the emotional difficulty and stress he experienced when carrying out his study because of the need for security arrangements. He noted that while he, the external researcher, had the luxury of being able to “retreat” his participants could not. When discussing how to keep the fear from being an impediment to his work, Lee noted that lowering stress and anxiety by distancing oneself from the trouble spots is one way to reach higher levels of efficiency and more data production. However, he further commented that if the researcher chooses this option, thus refraining from covering important (yet potentially dangerous) sites, s/he also runs the risk of obtaining data that might be “thick-skinned” (p. 139). Daniel (1996), who is originally from Sri Lanka, but now, lives in the US, experienced similar concerns when he undertook fieldwork in his native homeland.

...My project was a benign one: to collect folk songs sung by Tamil women who worked on...tea estates...When I wrote my proposal [in the spring of 1982 – authors’ note], I was on a quest for an alternative narrative...about the history of labor and displacement...Little did I expect to find *another alternative* [italics in original] narrative, one that defied my expectations and plans. I had no idea that by the time I reached Sri Lanka...I would arrive on the heels of the worst anti-Tamil riots known in that island paradise to find that none of my singers were in a mood to sing, and to find my best singer rummaging for what she could salvage from the shell of her fire-gorged home...Before I knew it, defying all research designs and disciplinary preparations, I was entangled in a project that had me rather than I it...The challenge was to understand a state of utter discordance that had begun to be sustained by the relentless...violence. The...standard practice in anthropology, of staying put in one location for a certain length of time in order to study a place or a problem, had become impossible. I was urged to move on...to move away from where my continued presence could have spelled trouble for both my informants and me... (pp. 3- 4)

The Israeli researcher, studying his/her own society, like his/her participants cannot retreat as external researchers can. The country is small, the events come quickly one after another, and there is a high level of inter-relatedness. Furthermore, the connection between the political and the research is not always clear: It is safe to assume that the closer one is to one's fieldwork, the more difficult it might be for the researcher to gain clarity. As Schratz and Walker (1995) state, "The degree to which political issues saturate the research process is not always understood, especially by those directly involved" (p. 135).

This leads us to the second aspect related to the issue of the researcher-context relationship: How do researchers, who are an integral part of the ambiguous and dynamic context under study, be reflexive? Reflexivity, by all accounts, is multi-faceted. To begin with, field research requires one to reflect on one's own beliefs and understandings, pushing toward acute self-consciousness (Lee, 1992). Lincoln and Guba (2003), researchers who have extensively looked at the issue of reflexivity, expand on this theme when they note,

Reflexivity is the process of reflecting critically on the self as researcher, the 'human as instrument' ...[it] forces us to come to terms not only with our choice of...problem and with those with whom we engage in the research process, but with our selves and with the multiple identities that represent the fluid self in the research setting ...Reflexivity demands that we interrogate ourselves concerning the ways in which research is shaped and staged around the contradictions and paradoxes of our own lives. (p. 283)

Other researchers have stressed the histories, culture, and meanings that researchers bring to their research settings, and the effects that these have on their abilities to attain deep levels of reflexivity and self-consciousness (Gergen & Gergen, 2003; Scheper-Hughes, 1992; Vidich & Lyman, 2003). As Gergen and Gergen have noted,

investigators... demonstrat[e]... their historical and geographical situatedness, their personal investments in the research, various biases they bring to the work, their surprises and 'undoings' in the process of research...and... the ways in which they have avoided or suppressed certain points of view. (p. 579)

It is this "self-exposure" and this "moment to moment" confrontation that leads investigators to an in-depth exploration of the ways in which their personal histories saturate their inquiry. In sum, then, reflexivity is conceptualized as a conscious act, one that demands that the researcher situate him/herself clearly within the social and cultural context, and be willing to openly confront the self as the field work proceeds.



This idea brings us to the work of Shifra Sagy, an Israeli psychologist who has studied a number of political issues. Sagy has worked on studies that deal with the changing political situation in Israel, such as the evacuation of Yamit in 1982<sup>2</sup> (Sagy & Antonovsky, 1986) and Palestinian-Israeli relations (together with Palestinian colleagues) (Sagy, 2002; Sagy, Orr, Bar-On, & Awwad, 2001; Sagy, Steinberg, & Fahiraladin, 1999). She is currently studying the disengagement from the Gaza Strip that is to take place in August 2005. Sagy has thus had a great deal of experience with unpredictable and oft-changing research fields.

In Lea's interview with Sagy on this topic, the researcher recalled a collaborative Palestinian-Israeli research project during the mid-1990s (the Oslo Accord years). She spoke about the close personal and working relationship with her Palestinian colleagues, telling Lea that, at that time, she believed peace between Palestinians and Israelis was imminent. According to Sagy, these two perceptions prevented her from seeing the trend in the data that clearly showed that neither the Palestinian nor the Israeli participants expressed empathy toward the other (Palestinian/Israeli) and did not think they would be empathetic in the future. It was only much later, when Sagy had distanced herself in time and place from the research that she was able to "see" what was in the data. She had indeed "...avoided or suppressed certain points..." (Gergen & Gergen, 2003, p. 580).

Bronwyn et al. (2004) add another dimension to the discussion of reflexivity: These researchers discuss reflexivity as a process in which the researcher turns language back on itself to see how this discourse contributes to ways in which one constitutes one's world. When a researcher is reflexive, s/he sees both the object of his/her study and the means by which the object is constituted. These researchers note that when writing about one's work, there is a danger that the researcher may slip inadvertently into constituting the self in a way that may ignore the constitutive power of discourse. Therefore, reflexivity demands a constant awareness of this discourse in the analytical and writing stages.

While the importance of reflexivity is not debated among qualitative researchers, the difficulties, practicalities, and methods of being reflexive are rarely addressed (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003). As a result, the implications of theoretical and philosophical discussions about reflexivity, epistemology, and the construction of knowledge for empirical research remain underdeveloped. In order to combat this problem, Mauthner and Doucet offer that reflexivity needs to be operationalized throughout many stages of research, especially during data analysis.

The final aspect of the relationship between the researcher and his/her field of qualitative inquiry that we will discuss here is the notion of the researcher as the instrument (Rossman & Rallis, 1998). As Rossman and Rallis have noted, the researcher's biography shapes his/her work in many ways and it is through the biography that "...she makes sense of the setting and how the people she studies make sense of her" (p. 38). There is always a relationship between the researcher and the participants, the researcher and his/her audience, and, ultimately, between the researcher and society. This point has also been stressed by Gergen and Gergen (2003) in their discussion of the centrality of the relational aspect in post-modern qualitative research.

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<sup>2</sup> As part of the peace treaty between Israel and Egypt, Israel returned the Sinai Peninsula to Egypt and evacuated the town of Yamit, which had approximately 7,000 residents.

As our methodologies become increasingly sensitive to the relationship of researchers to their subjects as dialogical and co-constructive, the relationship of researchers to their audiences as interdependent, and the negotiation of meaning within any relationship as potentially ramifying outward into the society...We effectively create the reality of relational process. (p. 603)

As researchers reflect on their ongoing work, these reflections grow into examined and rigorous representations of their participants and research site. Therefore, it is important for the researcher to understand how s/he feels about the subject (Rossman & Rallis, 1998). In this context, Rossman and Rallis pose four questions to researchers: (1) Should the study be conducted? (2) Does the study have the potential to contribute? (3) Is the topic significant? (4) Is analysis of the data being undertaken as part of an ongoing project or mainly at its end (p. 62)? Given that the researcher working in a context characterized by change and ambiguity cannot *know* the answers to these queries, how the researcher relates to him or herself, his/her work, the research participants, the social science community, and society is constantly in flux.

Padgett (1998) speaks of the researcher, as an instrument, as having the ability to demonstrate creativity in her/his scholarship. This entails a need to maintain critical distance from the participants/site under study, to manage one's emotions, and the ability to be flexible and reflexive, to "go with the flow" (p. 20) as it were. As Padgett notes, "The most immediate concern for the researcher is emotional. Because we are engaged in the same emotionally intense encounters as our respondents, it would be impossible to avoid experiencing ups and downs during fieldwork" (p. 41). Therefore, Padgett advises us to "practice bracketing" (p. 41); that is, to put aside our prior understandings and emotions in order to allow for the flow of new emotions and understandings of the topic under inquiry. How does a researcher who shares the everyday ups and downs and ambiguity of their society with his/her participants practice such bracketing? How can we demand of her that she keep her emotions in check on a constant basis? Are such demands not impossible?

From the above, we can summarize that the "usual" guidelines that can aid the researcher in his/her qualitative inquiry are problematic for the scholar who is enmeshed in a backyard that is unstable and ambiguous, at times dangerous. Being able to be a deeply reflective researcher, to bracket one's experience and prior understandings, and to fully comprehend the implications of how one's research is impacting relationships with others becomes a very difficult undertaking.

The second major topic concerns choosing a relevant research question for one's work. How does one know that the chosen research question is meaningful for understanding the society/culture under inquiry when that society is in great flux? In other words, how do we know that the question that seems pertinent today will remain so tomorrow and the day after? This issue is connected to the demands often put on researchers by universities and funding sources to choose a topic that has "academic" importance. Perceptions of "importance," however, often differ between academic and funding institutions and minority or social justice groups that may be advocating for the study of burning social issues (Fine et al., 2003; Greenwood & Levin, 2003). As Fine et al. and Greenwood and Levin (2003) have noted universities tend to be conservative and

slow-moving bureaucracies, thus rendering them institutions that do not easily support non-mainstream research and that have difficulty to “go with the flow.”

Vidich and Lyman (2003) discuss difficulties in selecting pertinent research questions under “normal” conditions: “By what standards are we able to judge the worth of sociological research? ... (what is) meaningful about the world...for one person is not necessarily meaningful for another” (p. 58). As Daniel (1996) asks us in the quote which opened this article, the question of whether or not our research interest will make it into a “second edition” is one that tends to preoccupy those interested in stability, but may be less relevant for those who see the world through the lens of dynamics and change. We agree with Daniel’s evaluation that the relevance of any particular research question over time may be less important than the theoretical understandings concerning one’s research that should stand the (relative) test of time. However, we would like to extend this notion to include the importance of methodological understandings lasting into a “second edition.”

The final issue we will address here asks about the ability to generalize or transfer findings, from a study undertaken in a particular and particularly unstable context, to “similar” contexts. The issue of generalization has been debated among qualitative researchers with there being little consensus concerning whether or not it is possible, or even desirable, to generalize from qualitative research findings (Denzin, 1989; Greenwood & Levin, 1998, 2003; Rosenthal, 1993; Stake, 1995) Transferability is usually seen as a more relevant standard for qualitative inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For our purposes, we will adopt Greenwood and Levin’s (2003) notion of generalization in qualitative research.

...Given our position that knowledge is context-bound, the key to utilizing this knowledge in a different setting is to follow a two-step model. First, it is important to understand the contextual conditions under which the knowledge has been created. This contextualizes the knowledge itself. Second, the transfer of this knowledge to a new setting implies understanding the contextual conditions of the new setting, how these differ from the setting in which the knowledge was produced, and involves reflection on what consequences this has for applying the actual knowledge in the new context. Hence generalization becomes an active process of reflection in which involved actors must make up their minds about whether or not the previous knowledge makes sense in the new context... (p. 152)

Hence, our concern with understanding what we can learn from research in ambiguous and unstable contexts, which goes above and beyond insights concerning the specific context, has come (almost) full circle; back to the issue of reflexivity in research and to the relationship between the researcher and the field, and the researcher and the reader.

We will now turn to examples from research in the Israeli context that can help illuminate the points made above.

### **Examples from the (Israeli) Field**

Below we present two examples from our work in the Israeli context that highlight the difficulties faced when a researcher studies her own unstable and changing backyard. In the first case, we look at research within an external conflict situation (between Palestinians and Israelis), and in the second case we look at work within an internal conflict situation (Israelis and other Israelis). In each example, we briefly present the study and its aims, the context under which it was undertaken, and its overall design, and we relate it specifically to the three parameters discussed above. In addition, we discuss “strategies” that we used in order to deal with the contexts that changed so radically during our studies.

#### **Julia – Joint Palestinian-Israeli Research during Peace and Suddenly War**

The first example comes from Palestinian-Israeli research, carried out by PRIME, The Peace Research Institute in the Middle East (a jointly run Palestinian-Israeli research center) that studied non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that worked together on environmental projects during the mid 1990s, the Oslo years (Chaitin, Obeidi, Adwan, & Bar-On, 2002, 2004). Our study began in April 2000, a time when the Palestinian Authority (PNA) and Israel were involved in implementation of the interim arrangements that had been laid out in the Oslo Accords. Even though this process was not going as well as it had been envisioned, since Jewish-Israeli settlements were expanding in the occupied territories and there were terror attacks by Palestinians within Israel’s borders (Bickerton & Klausner, 2002), this period was perceived as a time of near peace, when a final agreement was at hand.

We aimed to learn about all the Palestinian and Israeli NGOs that had been involved in ecological work, with a focus on those organizations that had undertaken at least one joint project. Fida Obeidi and Sami Adwan were responsible for the Palestinian side, and Julia Chaitin and Dan Bar-On were responsible for the Israeli side. We sat together in PRIME’s offices at Talitha Kumi (located in Beit Jala, PNA) and devised a research plan, a strategy for learning about the NGOs, and an interview guide. After we mapped out the NGOs in both countries, we then carried out semi-structured interviews, based on this jointly developed interview guide, with the heads of approximately 20 organizations on each side that were perceived as being the most influential in the field. While we did not always receive answers to all the questions that we posed, we did not press our interviewees for their responses to these unanswered questions because we were aware that we were dealing with sensitive matters. Therefore, we did not want these directors, who had agreed to participate in our joint Palestinian-Israeli study, to feel that we were being critical of their work. Based on the interviewees’ tendencies to talk in generalities, we planned to undertake joint observations of NGOs engaged in cooperative activities in order to see for ourselves what these projects looked like.

During the interview stage, each side gathered information separately. We would then meet together every few weeks to exchange ideas and summaries of the interviews that had been prepared in English, so that all members could read them. These summaries included the interview transcripts and information about the NGOs garnered from the organizations' websites and/or publications. This stage continued through September 2000 because that was when the Intifada (the Palestinian popular uprising) began. Therefore, further data collection, including our planned joint observations, became impossible.

The violence took the Israeli team by surprise, but the Palestinian side much less so. As Fida and Sami told us the "writing had been on the wall" for quite a long time that the Palestinian "on the street" did not feel that any real end to the occupation was in sight. During the first month of the war we kept up contact mainly through phone calls. This was a very difficult time: Our Palestinian colleagues and their families were under siege, and we Israelis could offer little more than small words of concern. However, the problem ran deeper than this. For example, I (Julia) was in shock that war had broken out and was angry at the Palestinians for resorting to violence again when a peace treaty seemed so close at hand. While I was deeply concerned for my colleagues, I was angry and frightened by what others in their society had brought upon us. My counterparts, from their part, did not see things the way that I did and were often angry at me for not speaking out and demonstrating against the use of Israeli military against Palestinian citizens. Relations between us were strained. I think it is fair to say that they saw me as somewhat of a hypocrite, willing to speak peace in "peace times," but justifying the use of armed force against their people when times became tough.

After a month into the violence the shock of the war began to wear off (from my side) and I began to see the reciprocal violence as being more complex than I did previously. At that time, it also became clear that there was not going to be a quick resolution to the conflict, and that we would not be able to continue with our study as planned. The idea of collecting more data on joint ecological projects was not only impossible (since we were at war), but also seemed ludicrous to some degree: How important was it to learn about joint environmental work when people were being terrorized, injured, and killed on a daily basis? Therefore, we decided that each team would separately analyze what they had managed to collect.

As a result, the two teams did not analyze the material in an identical fashion. While this was far from optimal reminiscent of Daniel's (1996) experiences in Sri Lanka), we believed that it was important to complete what we could. The common goals of our research changed, no longer was our major aim to document the joint projects that had been undertaken in the 1990s, but rather to complete and publish our joint study during the current war. Our report, we hoped, would serve as a testimony that Palestinians and Israelis could still work together. Even though we worked on our analyses separately, we kept up some telephone and e-mail contact, sending our analyses to one another for review and comment. We also succeeded to meet twice in Jerusalem, since traveling to PRIME's offices in Beit Jala was too dangerous (the Palestinians could not always get travel permits and there were Palestinian snipers along the road that led from Israel to the city).

Writing up the final report for our donors (the German Science and Development Ministry, The Deutsche Bank, and The Peace Research Institute in Frankfurt) was not an easy task. I often saw the Palestinian analyses as being propaganda and as scathing attacks on Israel: The Palestinian partners, at times, saw my analyses as avoiding the real issue of the occupation and as being insulting toward their people and leaders. Many versions of the report went back and forth until both sides felt that the report was a document we all could sign. During that stage I was not as reflective as I would have been under “normal” research conditions: It is safe to say that the fear of the ongoing war and my political understandings at the time left little room for introspection or for trying to deeply understand the relationship between my colleagues and myself. It was only after a year or so, when I was out of the country, doing a post-doctorate in the US that I was able to go back to the materials and initiate a joint article. This work eventually resulted in two articles and one book (Adwan, Bar-On, Obeidi, & Chaitin, 2004; Chaitin et al., 2002, 2004).

As noted above, the importance of our research questions and project paled in comparison to the meaning that the daily killings, maiming, and destruction was having for our region. Perhaps the main conclusions that we reached from our joint venture is that the good relationships, which appeared to characterize the Palestinian and Israeli environmental partners, and also ourselves to some degree, were so fragile that once there was a renewed eruption of violence, the desire and ability to keep up any level of cooperative work was very difficult. While this is a specific “result” of our research, we believe that this is a lesson that can be applied to other intractable conflicts, hence adding the possibility of transferability from our study to others.

### **Lea – Why Should I Send My Kids to the Army if They Don't Send Theirs?**

#### *Research on how Israeli families cope with their son's recruitment to the military*

In 1992, I (Lea) began a study with two colleagues, Gita Soffer and Tama Shochat, whose aim was to explore how Israeli families deal with their sons'/brothers' recruitment into the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). Up until that time there was almost no public discussion within Israel about the difficulties and the fears connected to military service since the accepted norm was that military service in a combat unit was a source of pride for the family and the country. Most young adults saw military service as desirable: There was consensus in Israeli society concerning the goals of the army and the ways in which it operated. My colleagues and I decided to study the topic since, during those years, our children were serving in the IDF and from a personal standpoint, we began feeling uncomfortable with the IDF's goals and actions, especially against the Palestinian and Jewish civilian populations which it controlled.

The research was based on interviews with mothers and fathers from the “dominant” class, that is, middle class Jewish-Israelis who came from backgrounds similar to ours. In addition, we undertook observations of support groups of parents of soldiers that began to organize in different cities around the country, at that time, most likely as a result of this same “discomfort” that we were feeling. The first article (Soffer et al., 1993) was published in a Hebrew journal and bared this discomfort and the

difficulties that families of soldiers had dealing with it, for the first time to an Israeli audience. This article gave legitimacy to the social scientific study of this issue.

In 1995, I began the second stage of the research; the goal was to explore both the universal and unique ways in which parents and siblings of soldiers serving in IDF combat units, from different ethnic groups, coped with this reality. In this stage, family members from 10 different ethnic and social groups (Bedouins, Circassians, Druze, Ashkenazim, Sephardim, new immigrants from the CIS, Ethiopia, Argentina, and India, and kibbutz members) were interviewed. The specific characteristics concerning coping styles of each group were uncovered and analyzed. While I was undertaking the analyses, I realized that I could not use the results of the first study for comparison, since the social and political context had completely changed from the first stage to the second. The differences were:

1. There were cracks in the previous consensus concerning the actions of the army, mainly in the occupied territories and during the Intifada/ Occupation, and many youth no longer saw army service as a “national mission.”
2. The Islamic movement gained support among the Bedouin population, and this movement advocated against military service. As a result, Bedouin soldiers and their families were being shunned by their communities.
3. In 1995 – 1996, Palestinian terror attacks and the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin, the Prime Minister of Israel, led to a decline in motivation of young adults to serve and a decline in the motivation of parents to encourage their children to enlist in battle units.
4. I also hesitated to encourage my children to enlist in combat units since I no longer agreed with many actions of the IDF. I found myself pondering whether or not to encourage them to volunteer for such units or to try to evade such military service. I was especially angry that there were young men who were good candidates for combat units, but evaded it without suffering any social sanctions. These thoughts, which I had not had during the first stage of the research, exemplify the difficulty that a researcher (in this case, me), who is personally affected by the changes that my society was undergoing, has in researching such a changing context.

In the first stage, we actually contributed to the changing social and political context by breaking a social taboo and legitimating speaking out against problematic issues connected to recruitment of young adults into the army. In the second stage, the issue was already out in the open and had become part of Israeli discourse: The study was undertaken during a period of rapid and controversial changes of attitudes of which we were a part

As noted above, this study was never published, and I have often asked myself why not. Perhaps the answers are tied to the issue of reflexivity. At the time of my research, I think I was unable to honestly confront my biases and values concerning military service, and how these values might differ from the different legitimate beliefs and values of the people that I was studying. For many years, I took for granted that my perspective on combat service was the norm, perhaps even the ideal, and when I was confronted with parents who did not see it this way, I responded emotionally. There is no

doubt that my emotions colored my ability to deeply reflect on my own (changing) values, and to give space to the expression of differing values.

A second possible reason for not publishing the results of this study is that I felt that I had to distance myself from the materials and wait until my own children were no longer at the age for compulsory service. At the time, I was angry that there were parents who did not want to send their sons to the army at all, let alone combat units, and I was unable to really listen to their voices and to hear what they had to say. While I was sending my four sons to elite combat units, there were parents who were telling their children not to enlist at all. I was not emotionally ready to deal with this, not even on an academic level. The families in my sample were not only speaking about their deep fears of what might happen to their sons if they served in dangerous combat units, but they were also expressing deep criticism of the army, its actions and decisions, and behaviors of some of its soldiers. The voices of dissent were not only recurring on the "outside," but internally as well, however I was not yet ready to acknowledge these voices. Therefore, I "dealt" with this problem by avoidance, looking to distance myself from the issue, at least until my children had completed their compulsory army service. In this way, I could continue to safeguard myself from those same fears and anxieties.

A third possible reason was that I knew that the materials contained deep criticism of Israeli society and the army, and, at the time, I did not feel comfortable publishing such information. I was not ready to personally participate in this critique of my country, and I felt that doing so might also highlight the confusion that I was feeling; on the one hand, toward sending my children to elite units and on the other, criticizing what these elite units were doing.

While there is no doubt that the research question – how do family members cope with the army service of their children/siblings – is an important one, in this case, it was too difficult a question for me to explore, given the volatile and changing social and political context that characterized Israel, and my changing personal belief system at the time. The issue of the ability to generalize/transfer what was learned in this study to other research projects and contexts is connected to the choice of research questions and field of study. When researchers are personally involved in the context, from a methodological standpoint, we can generalize that it is important to have mechanisms that will help them distance themselves from the field so that the study can be completed and reported, and not remain in the drawer in a desk, as this one has. The topic may no longer be relevant, and may be more of a "period piece" than a topic of current interest because I was unable to see the study through to fruition (Daniel, 1996). However, the lessons learned from the experience of how *not* to engage in research can inform researchers working in other studies and contexts.

## Discussion

In this article, we have looked at the difficulties in undertaking qualitative research in an unstable social and political context, especially when one is a member in such a society. While we have mainly focused on the difficulties in such work, we believe that it is also important to see change and conflict as positive, not necessarily as obstacles that need to be overcome. For example, since it is a given that everything changes, attempting to understand how these dynamics are impacting the individuals,



society, and culture under study can be a fascinating topic for research. Furthermore, the researcher who is in the middle of such "action" may have quite a lot to offer not only to audiences from his/her society, and to audiences from other places around the world, but also to herself as she reflects on her special place within the society and within the research.

A case can be made that it is easier for qualitative research to study ambiguous and changing contexts than it is for quantitative research, since qualitative work not only looks at outcomes, but more importantly examines processes. Therefore, this may be one of the special contributions that qualitative research can make to the social sciences. Avoiding studying ambivalent, changing, and conflictual contexts just because they are a difficult and complicated undertaking, may lead to a continued lack of knowledge concerning such contexts. In addition, by avoiding such "hot spots," we run the risk of being "thick skinned" (Lee, 1992, p. 139) in our work.

There are researchers who not only explore existing dynamic and conflict-ridden contexts, but who actively pursue fields that have the potential for becoming volatile in the future. One such researcher is Dan Bar-On. Bar-On who has explored a number of issues that by all accounts are conflictual: He was the first Jewish Israeli psychologist to explore the impact of the Holocaust past on children of Nazi perpetrators (Bar-On, 1989), which opened the door to encounter groups (up until then taboo) between children of Holocaust survivors and Nazi perpetrators; he brought to the attention of the Israeli public the impact of the Occupation on soldiers serving in the territories (Bar-On, Yitzhaki-Verner, & Amir, 1996); and he conceptualized the development of identity among Jewish-Israelis that led to the theory of monolithic versus multi-voiced identity (Bar-On, 1999). He undertook all of these studies before they were part of accepted Israeli discourse, often exposing himself to criticism from academics and others in Israeli society.

When interviewed by Lea in 2002, Bar-On told Lea that it is very important to study compound and difficult topics because it is only through their exploration that we can arrive at a more complex and deeper understanding of our society. The researcher, who is a part of such contexts but avoids undertaking field work in such contexts because it is "too difficult" or too amorphous, runs the risk of reaching/perpetuating oversimplified understandings of societal and cultural processes. Therefore, while such research may not always add to the "popularity" of the researcher, it is one of the significant contributions that a qualitative researcher can make to his/her specific field and to the social sciences in general.

As we noted above, the successful exploration of changing, ambiguous, and conflictual contexts calls for sensitivity, on the part of the researcher, to the differing relationships involved in this work. As Gergen and Gergen (2003) have noted, qualitative research increasingly focuses on the relational aspects of the work. While these scholars have focused mainly on the relationship between researcher, participants, and audience, we extend this to also include the relationship between the researcher and self, between the researcher and the context, between the participants and the context, and between the researcher and other members of his/her team. By focusing on the development of these different relations, the researcher can fulfill a number of tasks and further our understanding of the relational process.

For example, in the case of the relationship between the researcher and participants, researchers can not only help their participants better reflect on their own changing context, but can also provide information concerning what others, outside of this context, are saying and feeling as well. In such a case, the researcher can become both an informant for the participants and for the outside (e.g., academic, social) world as well. This could be especially important in critical and action research (Fine et al., 2003; Greenwood & Levin, 2003). In a second example, concerning the relationship between the researcher and self, we can state that since the researcher is in the unique position to identify the dynamic changes happening in the field under study before others may, s/he can become a pioneer of new territory, as it were. However, in order to be a pioneer s/he needs not only be sensitive to these changes, in order not to miss them, but must also be highly reflexive to understand the impact that these changes are having on his/her "knowledge" and belief systems, as s/he collects and interprets the data. If the researcher is meticulous in the documentation of the changes in context, s/he can hone his/her ability to be reflexive (as recommended by Gergen & Gergen, 2003; Schepher-Hughes, 1992). This knowledge can then be passed onto others. In this way, the concerns of Bronwyn et al. (2004) and Mauthner and Doucet (2003) might also be partially addressed.

Based on the examples that we brought from our own work, we see how one's qualitative research can be impacted by working alone or working in a team. It can be claimed that Julia and her colleagues managed to finish (and publish) their work, since they were not alone in this endeavor. They did not have to confront their difficulties in completing the research on their own, since they had partners for their dialogue, which facilitated bringing the study to completion. On the other hand, Lea, who worked alone on the second stage of her research, had no such partner, and therefore, did not have the support to help see the work through to completion. When we compare the two cases, the importance of working within a team when undertaking research becomes clear, especially in fields that are characterized by conflict and rapid change.

The last point that we will discuss here is connected to the issues of choosing relevant questions for one's research, and the ability to generalize/transfer knowledge from one context to another. In contexts which are characterized by rapid change, it is difficult to know if an event under study is a "one time" and very local event or if it reflects something more stable in that context or something more universal within human experience. For example, Sagy and Antonovsky's (1986) study on the impact of the dismantling of Yamit on the children of that town was a one time and local event in Israeli history, which can now be used to inform present-day research on the disengagement from the Gaza Strip. Another way to address this issue is by undertaking longitudinal studies that situate these one-time events as points along an unfolding social process.

When looked upon in this way, we can suggest that the central question is not whether the results of our study of one-time and local events will carry over into a "second edition" (Daniel, 1996). While we may not be able to transfer content results from our study to other contexts, we can certainly transfer the theoretical and methodological insights that we gained to other projects, sites, cultures, and groups. Also no less important, we can transfer our new understandings based on the experiences that we gained as we went through this difficult research process.

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We would like to thank Prof. Dan Bar-On and Prof. Shifra Sagy for sharing their research experiences with us and for their valuable comments on this article.

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### Article Citation

Kacen, L., & Chaitin, J. (2006). "The times they are a changing": Undertaking qualitative research in ambiguous, conflictual, and changing contexts. *The Qualitative Report*, 11(2), 208-228. Retrieved [Insert date], from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR11-2/kacen.pdf>

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