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How Qualitative Research Changed Me: A Narrative of Personal Growth

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Abstract

This piece recounts personal changes I underwent while collecting data for my dissertation. Stemming from my own personal experiences of anomie and feelings of not belonging to the languages and cultures of either Canada or Israel, this inquiry examined the collusion of my attitudes with the attitudes of advanced Hebrew learners of diverse backgrounds and beliefs in a Canadian undergraduate university class. As the themes of claims and ownership of the Hebrew language emerged between clashing sub-groups in the classroom, I examined my own biases and stereotypes regarding language, and ultimately grew into a peaceful acceptance of my position between languages and cultures.

Keywords

Language Claim, Ethnic Identity, Hebrew, Anomie, Second Language Acquisition, and Heritage Language

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How Qualitative Research Changed Me: A Narrative of Personal Growth

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This piece recounts personal changes I underwent while collecting data for my dissertation. Stemming from my own personal experiences of anomie and feelings of not belonging to the languages and cultures of either Canada or Israel, this inquiry examined the collusion of my attitudes with the attitudes of advanced Hebrew learners of diverse backgrounds and beliefs in a Canadian undergraduate university class. As the themes of claims and ownership of the Hebrew language emerged between clashing sub-groups in the classroom, I examined my own biases and stereotypes regarding language, and ultimately grew into a peaceful acceptance of my position between languages and cultures. Key Words: Language Claim, Ethnic Identity, Hebrew, Anomie, Second Language Acquisition, and Heritage Language

Introduction

My earliest memory of the feeling of displacement within the social group of my peers was in Canada, in third grade, when my Hebrew teacher handed me a stack of report cards and asked me to leave the room during the language lesson, to sit in the hallway outside of the closed door and lick and seal envelopes, ostensibly because she perceived that I was bored sitting in the class. I wondered why I was being punished, banished to the hallway like those who misbehaved. The following week, she went out of her way to acquire an advanced Hebrew workbook, which I was to independently complete, quietly at my desk, during her teaching of the rest of the students. She did not once ask about my work or check the workbook that year.

Now, as a Hebrew language teacher and language acquisition researcher, I am retrospectively disturbed by the indifference of this teacher and most teachers that followed during the years of my education. Since I spent time as a young child in Israel, where I was immersed in its language and culture, ownership of modern Hebrew language marked me as different from my peers in a Canadian parochial Jewish day school; most whose parents had never visited the homeland. My ever-constant feeling of displacement and abandonment between two languages, two cultures, and two identities led me to pursue doctoral work on this subject of linguistic, cultural, and social anomie. I was eager to elicit the opinions of those in similar positions, who likewise placed Hebrew in a primary role in the constructions of their identities. Living in Canada, in the Jewish Diaspora, how did others negotiate their dual linguistic, national, and cultural loyalties?

I began my thinking with three questions to explore in collaboration with participants. First, what framework of ethnic identity do participants structure in their lives? Rather than define identity specifically as Jewish identity, I chose the term “ethnic

identity” to ensure freedom and flexibility in defining senses of self, while limiting the subject area to the notion of shared ancestry, lineage, or heritage. Second, I asked how Hebrew language fits into participants’ framework of ethnic identity. Since the students, professor, and I committed time and effort to the study, teaching, or practice of the language, it clearly held a place of priority in our lives and, I hypothesized, their ethnic identities. Third, I wondered how these perceptions of the importance of Hebrew would be manifested in social interactions in the Hebrew classroom. In retrospect, I realize that underneath these initial questions, I was truly interested in how participants used Hebrew to negotiate a life in the Diaspora; more specifically, whether these individuals managed to build a sense of comfort, satisfaction, and belonging in Canada with my assumption of their deep connection to the Hebrew language and its indelible link to Israeli culture. If their experiences were similar to mine, how did they minimize the discomfort of anomie I had experienced?

I entered the Hebrew classroom with an awareness of the mutual reflexivity inherent in qualitative ethnography, and with an understanding that the social interactive nature of the study would cause my involvement in the lives of participants to naturally influence their opinions and responses, and, in turn, shape my understanding of themes the students would explore (Nightingale & Cromby, 1999). In my original dissertation proposal, I emphasized both the emic perspectives of my work because it was based on my insider knowledge of culturally specific ways of communicating (Trappes-Lomax, 2004). However, I did not initially embrace the position of the emic or insider. I was unaware of my actual closeness of experience and attitude to the participants, and hesitant to fully acknowledge and embrace a strongly emic position that I thought could obliterate any perspective of an outsider. I was convinced that although I understood the students’ and professor’s experiences, having studied advanced Hebrew and taught Hebrew language university classes, I was inherently different from those I studied.

This piece will examine the effects of the personal reflexivity and resulting growth and change I experienced because of my conversations with participants in an advanced Hebrew language class. My participants and I discovered that by using Hebrew, we constructed intra-group hierarchies and sub-groups to negotiate our senses of self. This research ultimately proved therapeutic in coming to terms with my own feelings of displacement.

Roots of Displacement

I always maintained a vision of myself that my peers in Canada did not see, the little girl in the sunshine overlooking a breathtaking view of the Old City of Jerusalem. In the early 80s, after I was born in Winnipeg, my family moved to Jerusalem. In the 1970s, my parents had both lived in Israel before meeting one another: My mother had been employed as an English teacher and my father had studied and worked on a kibbutz. Both were from rural Canadian communities and wanted more than the Canadian Jewish community offered. My mother said,

It was the desire to live as part of the mainstream and not to be in the fringe. You don't have to take time off for the holidays, and there is such a sense of vitality there. In Canada, I won't even know when it's a holiday, but in Israel, you can't not know. You live and feel the holidays.

My father said,

We moved to Israel because of idealism. We felt that we had to give it a shot. Israel was the best thing that happened to the Jews in a couple thousand years and our lives wouldn't be complete if we didn't try it.

Our first residence was a Jerusalem immigrant absorption center for English-speaking immigrants, known in Hebrew as the *merkaz klitah*¹. My mother worked as an English teacher and my father as a journalist for an English language newspaper. Most of my friends were children of English-speaking immigrants, and my father tells me today that it was very difficult to cultivate friendships with *sabras*². In the mid-1980s, they decided to move back to Canada. My father explained,

We didn't have the language; we weren't really plugged in. The *merkaz klitah* was an island. The Jerusalem Post was also an island of English speakers. We didn't have ties. It was also a time of great inflation. We would have had to buy an apartment and move from the *merkaz klitah*. We always thought of that Canadian passport...when things aren't going so well, you remember the good things about Canada- the lakes, the prairies, and our family was back here. But we still had the ideology and liked the idea. You're going from a higher standard of living in Canada to a lower standard of living and you really have to be *chazak, chazak*³.

Although I attended Jewish day schools all my life, I always felt quite different from my peers who did not share the same connection to Hebrew fluency and Israel as I. In high school, much of our connection to Israeli and Diasporic culture came from movies played in school such as *Yentl*, *Exodus*, and episodes of *Seinfeld*. The Hebrew programs consisted of completing the same photocopied grammar drill exercises year after year with no communicative, social interactive usage or exposure. I perpetually felt marooned in an anomic, in-between state of not belonging in the social group of my peers, who were not raised with Israeli cultural, linguistic, and societal influences.

When I arrived in Tel Aviv, after high school, 15 years after leaving Israel as a child, I instantly felt a sense of great familiarity and comfort when I discovered my ability to communicate with residents in a new language, on a new plane unreachable by my Canadian peers. After one year in a university in Canada, I moved to Tel Aviv in 2000. My parents told me to try living in Israel for one year, return to Canada to finish university, and then arrive at a decision regarding immigration. The most empowering element of living in Israel was feeling that I could fully function, attend classes, and

¹ *merkaz klitah*= immigrant absorption centre

² *sabras*= native-born Israelis

³ *chazak*: strong

successfully hold employment in another language and culture. I could lead a full and successful Israeli life, or an equally fulfilling Canadian life. While others had only one identity, I had two.

However, along with a feeling of ownership of two identities and cultures, due to proficiency in two languages, I alternatively felt in the in-between, anomic state of belonging in neither. I recall sitting in low-slung chairs on the sand of a Tel Aviv beach one evening with my Israeli roommate and two of her friends. We were quite close with no barrier of language, but I always felt like the token English-speaker when among her friends. That evening, her friends briefly attempted to practice their English with me, but frequently rambled in Hebrew about personal stories and army memories with no attempt to explain the context to me. After a few experiences like these, I would feel deflated and trapped in a state of anomie. Although I shared their ability in the language, I did not share their cultural history or experiences. I could not contribute to conversations about army experiences, current television programs, or local politicians, and felt that I would never fully integrate in Israel as more than the token English-speaker. I also began to realize that building a life in Israel, away from the support network of my immediate family, would be difficult and unglamorous. I missed aspects of life in Canada in which I played the role of the insider who did, in fact, belong. I returned to Canada to complete university, postponing my decision to immigrate to Israel.

I further deferred the decision by beginning a master's program in Hebrew Education at an American university, with a predominately Jewish student body and many Hebrew courses. I felt comfortable spending my time in the basement of the Hebrew department researching as well as working as a Hebrew language course instructor and teaching assistant. There, professors and staff lived in an organically constructed hybrid reality, constantly listening to Israeli music and news broadcasts, and speaking in Hebrew to one another within the larger outside American realm.

First Days in the Field

My methodological framework of researching the nature of identity development, in relation to the Hebrew language, included three months of participant-observation in the Hebrew class, individual interviews with 10 students and the professor, and one group interview to assess the social dynamics between the students, when discussing the place of Hebrew in their identity constructions. Upon entering the field, I immediately took note of three distinct groups in the class: Israelis, Russians, and Canadians. Through preliminary conversations with the language professor, I learned that students came from diverse backgrounds: Several were born in the former USSR, were raised in Israel, and immigrated to Canada as teenagers. Several others were born and raised in Canada and other countries, and had attended Jewish day schools all or part of their lives. I classified the students into three groups based on phonological accent features of their speech. The Israelis spoke quickly, fluently, and were unconscious of their language, which they used as a vehicle of communication; the Russians possessed equal proficiency, but their speech was marked with what I perceived to be a Russian accent; and the Canadians spoke slowly and laboriously in Hebrew with much English code-switching and pauses, conscious of the mechanics of their language.

I later limited my classifications to two groups: Israelis and Canadians. The “Russians” although speaking with accents, did not mention their Russian identity in discussions and did not ever refer to themselves using this label. Instead, they frequently asserted their Israeli identities.

Yana (student): *Tishmei-* [Listen-]

Aviva (professor): *Tishmei? Ani pochedet mimech* [Listen? I’m scared of you].

Yana: [LAUGHTER] *Kita shel Israelim* [A class of Israelis].

At this point, Yana motioned to students Marina and Tatiana, who sat beside her, attributing her forceful and, what some would consider, rude manner of speaking to the professor to her Israeliness. Although I subsequently discovered that among the “Canadian” students were American-born and South-African born students, those in the class constantly referred to the Canadian/Israeli dichotomy in class as articulated by Ravit.

It’s very Israeli versus Canadian [LAUGHTER]. A lot of the Israelis probably thought they’d get an easy credit out of it. I mean, it’s mostly the Israelis who talk in class, I find. So, I don’t know, I just feel like the Israelis want get their words out there, they want more practice. I think the Canadians are trying to just take it all in and learn from it.

I understood that the national labelings of “Canadian” and “Israeli” referred not entirely to nationality, but often to linguistic communicative ability. These two groups of students sat on opposite ends of the room, and chatted before, after, and often during class in English (among the Canadians) and Hebrew (among the Israelis).

Sub-Group Linguistic Divisions in the Classroom

I became exposed to deep animosity between the two groups of students in the class. Despite discovering great divergence in religious affiliation, knowledge of Jewish culture and history, academic concentration, and country of birth, communicative oral proficiency divided the class between the Israeli haves and the Canadian have-nots who felt disadvantaged because their investment in acquiring oral proficiency yielded very small returns (Norton Pierce, 1995) of poor grades and little linguistic progress, evident in this exchange between students.

Moshe: But just poll our marks in the class, though. I mean, they all score higher than us because they have the background.

Adam: Stop being coy, come on, it’s true.

Ravit: But you guys have the tools that we don’t really learn.

Adam: But what tools are those?

Yana: You have the grammar.

Ravit: Yeah, exactly, you have the grammar. And that’s what this class is, this class is grammar, and we didn’t learn grammar, we learned Hebrew. It is- we didn’t learn grammar, we didn’t learn these rules.

Adam: [SAME TIME] But it's intuitive though, come on, it's intuitive to you.

Yana: [SAME TIME] But like, you know-

Adam: Okay, I'll take, I'll take your intuition, over my skills, my apparent skills.

Naomi, a student born and raised in Canada, elaborated upon the relationship between the sub-groups within the class.

As much as they keep saying that it's easier for you in many ways because you're, you don't have to re-learn mistakes that they already may have, I really don't agree with that. I don't think it's true that they thought they'd have to put as much time into the class, and so, that effort they're putting in, it's like, "Well, it's just as hard for us." But like, we still have to put in that effort and I just don't agree that it's easier for us in more ways, I don't buy it.

Tension in the class escalated when Yana, a student born in the former USSR, who frequently and staunchly declared herself to be Israeli, made the following comment.

Im yesh benadam, ken, vihu lo medaber Ivrit viain lo shum keshser lisafah, ken? Ani lo yodaat, keilu ani lo [If there's a person, yes, and he doesn't speak Hebrew and doesn't have any connection to the language, yes? I don't know, like, I don't] I don't control him, but I don't really accept him to be Jewish. He's Jewish, but like, I think that if you're Jewish you have to know Hebrew. If you don't then I'll still accept you as Jewish, but the way I'm going to feel about you is different. I'm not going to feel the same connection with somebody that doesn't understand the language.

In this instance, Yana is not referring to a religious aspect of Judaism, but rather, the term "Jewish" as a marker of an individual within her social and linguistic circle. One student approached me, offended, following Yana's comment during the group discussion. He felt that her comment excluded and discriminated against those in the class who did not speak "perfect" Hebrew.

Hearing the "us" and "them" terminology, I became aware of continual "othering" occurring within the classroom, within this minority ethnic group of Jews in Canada. Although I was still convinced that I was at least a partial outsider, I searched for my place within these two groups. I was raised in the Canadian group's cultural milieu, whereas I felt a sense of comfort with the language, attitudes, and culture of the Israeli social group. I did not belong in either group, I discovered, and continued to feel displacement.

Anomie: A Space Becoming Ever More Crowded

Despite the dichotomous polarization caused by the sub-group "othering" within the class in social contexts, I increasingly noted themes of not belonging in individual

interviews. Yana recounted, “In Israel I would be ashamed of being Russian. Whenever you’re in Israel, you’re Israeli. Then even when you come to Canada, we’re all born in Russia, like Ukraine, whatever, but we still say we’re Israeli.” Interestingly, despite her assertion of Israeli identity in the social context of classroom discussions, her admission of being ostracized as a Russian in Israel displays a sense of not truly belonging when living in Israeli society. Amy, a Canadian-born and raised student, who planned to eventually immigrate to Israel, described her uncertain place between social groupings.

I don’t know how to describe the tie I really have to being Canadian, so I don’t know if I’d even identify as Canadian. The only time I really defend Canada is when somebody insults it. Otherwise, I don’t really think of myself as necessarily a patriotic Canadian. At this point in my life I feel like I’m a little bit like a nomad. I really don’t know where I’m going to live when I’m older, but right now the most desirable place is Israel.

When I conducted my interview with Aviva, the professor of the Hebrew class, I was quite surprised by her description of students in the class. I asked her to describe the dynamic between those who were self-defined and other-defined as Israeli and Canadian, to which she replied, “*Af echad mehem lo Israeli. Af echad mehem lo nolad baaretz.* [None of them are Israeli. None of them were born in Israel].” When I asked her to elaborate, she clarified,

Mashehitkavanti beetzem, zeh native speakers. Hem lo lamdu et haIvrit kesafa rishona vi lizeh hitkavanti. Hem kanireh ken Israelim, gam bamentaliut vigam im knas hagdara hachukit, ken, hem alu liIsrael vi kiblu ezrachut Israelit. Aval hitkavanti shehem lo dovrin yelidiim. [What I meant, actually, was native speakers. They didn’t learn Hebrew as a first language and that’s what I meant. They are basically Israelis, in their mentalities and in terms of the legal definition, yes, they immigrated to Israel and received Israeli citizenship. But I meant that they’re not native speakers].

Although students placed themselves in an Israeli social group, acting as gatekeepers in excluding access to Canadian students, the professor similarly excluded all members of the class from her perceived circle of true, authentic Israeliness. Although many of the students moved to Israel at very young ages and emigrated as teenagers (for example, Marina lived in Israel from age 5 to age 17), Aviva viewed herself as different from her students and “othered” them as well. Those students self-defined as Israelis are, in fact, native speakers according to Davies’ definition (2003) because of their full ability in the language and acquisition in childhood.

I felt a deep sense of empathy with these students who struggled to define themselves socially based on linguistic skills. Simultaneously, they dealt with identities imposed by others and restriction to exclusive membership groups by gatekeepers who claimed to be “authentic” members. I understood, finally, that my struggle to find membership in a group of true modern Hebrew speakers was hindered by others’ and my own definitions of language standardization and authenticity. In essence, these group

labelings had little relevance to linguistic ability, nationality, or religion; fully proficient and communicatively fluent non-Israeli born students were excluded as Hebrew speakers, those with citizenship and most of their life experience in Israel excluded as Israelis, and even those in the class devoutly spiritual and religiously observant deemed “not Jewish” by Yana (and perhaps some observant Jews would similarly exclude secular, non-observant but culturally Jewish Yana from membership in their defined group). I wondered if even Aviva, the professor, was excluded as an inauthentic Israeli by some because she had lived most of her life in Canada, having emigrated in her early 20s.

All of us clashed with one another in a fight to claim the Hebrew language as authentically belonging to us, and in doing so, instinctively excluded others from claiming the language. The “native speaker” is the speaker of the standard language, and vice versa- the standard language is the language that native speakers use. Elite speech communities decide who is a member for symbolic and imagined (not communicative) purposes (Davies, 2003). Similarly, national and religious groupings are imagined social communities (Anderson, 1991) in which members will never meet one another but feel solidarity among those they imagine to hold similar values and characteristics.

After completing my data collection and analyzing my findings, I have become aware of my own stereotypes and biases toward those in my community. In searching for my place in the imagined social community of authentic Hebrew speakers and Israelis, and excluded by elite gatekeepers as not possessing characteristics of a true member, I too, exclude others from that space. I initially labeled several students in the class as “Russian” based on phonological elements of their speech, although they did not wish to be socially grouped as such. I viewed myself as superior to the Canadian group because of my acquired fluency (a term itself in the eye of the beholder). For me, the Russians were initially excluded from the authentic Israeli native-speaker group because of my perception of their accents; the Canadians because of their disfluency and limited speech. For Aviva, those who did not acquire Hebrew as their mother tongue were excluded from the elite group: This makes the historical and present population of Israel, a land of many former dispersed Jews who came as immigrants, inauthentic Israelis. At present, I am not certain of the existence of a specific collectively agreed-upon set of characteristics of the imagined community of native Hebrew speakers, or what these characteristics are, or if instead, access is permitted or denied by individual gatekeepers. These gatekeepers are members of the community who define themselves as authentic or true native speakers.

I feel a significant change and ease within my state of anomie, comforted by the knowledge that so many others in my community flail within the same space. As all of us claim ownership and appropriation of modern Hebrew, we use “othering” to help place and classify ourselves within social contexts. We clash with “others” within our own small minority community because, we believe, We are not Them. As I continue to search for deeper answers to discover the precise points of divergence between sub-groups, I take comfort in knowing that others in my community and certainly within other communities search for an identity, a place, a belonging among others.

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