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Citation for published version (APA):
Grassiani, E. (2023). 'You are one of us', but I wasn't: Managing expectations and emotions when studying powerful security actors. In N. Weiss, E. Grassiani , & L. Green (Eds.), *The Entanglements of Ethnographic Fieldwork in a Violent World* (1 ed., pp. 59-62). (Routledge Studies in Fieldwork and Ethnographic Research). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003333418-6

6 'You are one of us', but I wasn't

Managing expectations and emotions when studying powerful security actors

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Relief. That is what I would feel every time I walked out of an air-conditioned office of one of the security CEO's I interviewed or away from the security fair grounds I did observations at. I literally would let out a sigh of relief when walking outside and feeling the scorching hot sun on my skin again. I would be free again, to go about my own business. But what was I relieved about? And why were these interviews and observations so uncomfortable? Why did I suffer so much during this research? In this short piece, I will explain what I came to understand as reasons for my discomfort leading up to and during an interview or observation and the relief afterwards. I will trace my emotions in the field during my research project on the Israeli security industry through my positionality and the subject matter at hand. The bottom line is that who we are, what we believe, what we study and what we feel are all interconnected.

Studying people of power is still not very typical for anthropologists, but it has been done for many years. Laura Nader already called upon her peers to study up and with this to gain more understanding in power relations in the United States in the 1970s (Nader 1972). Her idea was for anthropologists to do ethnographies of corporations and other actors within the capitalist system. As Gusterson (1997) writes, there were few takers and I believe this is still true today as it has been in the decades past, with some exceptions of course (e.g. Abbink and Salverda 2012). And there is reason for this, besides anthropology's continued focus on the 'far away' and the exotic, studying the elites brings a host of difficulties with it especially concerning access to the field. Here I want to add another layer to such difficulties of studying the powerful, namely the emotional costs it can have. This is especially true when studying the military or the security elites of our world (Gusterson 1997).

I studied the Israeli security industry and its global reach. I wanted to understand how Israeli security as a commodity is marketed, how it sold and what messages are conveyed when doing so. Most of my fieldwork was in Israel; I would interview security actors from the industry. But I also visited such Israeli professionals in Nairobi, Los Angeles and Rio de Janeiro. These interviewees were mostly senior employees or CEOs of security companies they founded themselves after enjoying an early retirement from their military

career or their career in one of Israel's secret agencies. They were mostly white, Ashkenazi[1] men in their forties or fifties and they obviously had better things to do than talk to me. I was 'welcomed' more than once by a grumpy 'so what do you want from me'. But they talked to me, often because one of their other friends had sent them to me and they felt obliged. Good for me.

I would go to their offices in ugly buildings in industrial zones in the centre of Israel by bus mostly, with students, pupils and lower-class wage workers. I would want it to be over before it began. Finding my way to their office with a knot in my stomach. Sitting down and trying to make clear what I was interested in, without giving away too much about myself and my political opinions. These opinions are tricky in Israel. But when asked, I did emphasize that my family was from a kibbutz in the centre of the country. This personal heritage is perceived as great social capital in the world of Israeli security. People from the kibbutz (especially my grandparents' generation) are seen as the heroes of the nation, as the founding fathers of the 'real Israeli' with his feet in the earth and a gun in his hand (women were crucial, but not THAT crucial in early Zionism).

I would go to do observations at security fairs. I would walk around the stalls of a range of companies, selling weapons, cybertechnologies, uniforms and helmets, and their security consultancy services. Most attendees at the fairs were men. The women were usually only there for the sales, not for the detailed explanation about how the weapons and defence technologies worked. Men with (combat) experience were brought in to do that. Men explaining the use of weapons, the need for technologies, emphasizing threats like terrorism; it all fell so far outside of my comfort zone. I wanted to see what was happening, what they were selling, how they were selling it, but it depressed me at the same time and left me utterly uncomfortable and out of place.

During an interview I nod, or half nod, or try not to nod when hearing the things I don't want to hear. They are important to hear; it is my work to hear them, but it makes me sick sometimes to hear it. All this talk about weapons and sales and convincing people they need weapons and security, and only Israel knows how it is done and there is a need for all these security technologies. 'You know. Right?' 'You know' '*at yoda'at*'. 'You are one of us', they seem to tell me. But I don't feel like I'm one of them. It is only their assumption that I'm one of them.

These assumptions have to do with who I am: a white, Jewish, Hebrew-speaking Israeli woman who is, on top of that, from a kibbutz. As such, I am perceived as a member of the Israeli elite. The same elite that is in charge of the security industry in Israel. An elite with a large amount of securitizing capital (Diphoorn and Grassiani 2016) to secure their privileged place in society. These men assume I have no doubts about the superiority of Israel in global security development. They are sure I support Israel's efforts in the Occupied Territories to, as they believe, 'counter terrorism' and defend Israel's borders.

These assumptions are also closely related to the Israeli political mainstream. Real criticism about Israel's government and its occupation politics, its human rights violations and its racist policies are heard only from minority voices in the Israeli public landscape. The vast majority of Israelis, even those who in 2020–21 relentlessly protested against then Prime Minister Netanyahu, support the broad lines of Israeli policies of self-defence and its security discourse. This discourse legitimizes every kind of imaginable injustice in the name of national security.

Between feeling uncomfortable during the interviews and the assumptions my interviewees had of me I sometimes realized I also experienced feelings of betraying them. They thought they were talking to someone who was sympathetic to what they were saying, but in reality I was very critical of the industry and their role in it. Was I betraying them? What would that mean for my professional role as a researcher? Or for the ethical dilemmas that come with it? While I felt a sting of disloyalty, I knew I wasn't really betraying anyone. Elsewhere I have written about the methodological aspects of doing research with people you don't agree with and/or don't like (Grassiani 2019). In that chapter I come to the conclusion that in order to do such research one (or at least I do) needs to keep some kind of distance that is atypical for anthropological studies. Importantly, in terms of responsibility for the people we study, there is a big difference between doing research among oppressed people and, for example, CEOs of security companies who earn millions. I am in no way advocating any sort of lying or disrespect towards the people who open doors for us in order to do our research. But giving research participants insights into our motivations is often not needed in order to have a truthful and respectful relationship in the field.

I guess I did the opposite of what Robben (1996) has warned us about: being seduced when studying perpetrators of violence; beginning to like them because they are friendly and amiable. The men I interviewed perhaps expected me to be seduced, but my political position was already too grounded to let that happen. I knew what I wanted from them, what information interested me, but I wouldn't get closer than that (see Grassiani 2019).

But still, the emotion of relief every time I finished an interview or after walking out of a security exhibition in Tel Aviv's big convention centre was intense. I can still see myself coming back home to Tel Aviv after finishing an interview or an observation. The freedom I would feel of having done the work and now being able to 'be myself' again; to be able to talk to my friends about politics and my critical opinions concerning Israel, and about going to protests against the occupation. Was it a relief from the 'role' I played? Or was it just a relief of being away from a context that was so far from my comfort zone? I believe it was a combination of these; I felt, on some level, that I 'faked' it, that I was indeed performing while interviewing. That people thought I was someone else, with different opinions and ideas from those I actually had. This is related to the fact that indeed this context

of businessmen dealing in weaponry was very far from the places in society I find comfortable.

I have often felt like a bad researcher. And definitely a bad anthropologist. What anthropologist doesn't like to go out interviewing? Who doesn't like to come back from the field and go through all their notes? I didn't. I left my interview transcriptions and my field notes on a corner of my desk and in a not easy to find folder on my laptop for many months. Questions about my fieldwork after I came back I usually answered with: 'it was OK, I'm glad I'm back though'.

I guess that doing fieldwork always makes you leave your comfort zone. Makes you go to places, meet people who you would not socialize with in daily life. But fieldwork can also leave you utterly uncomfortable, and anxious. Not because of the difficult situation your research informants are in, but because of who your informants are and what they stand for. In my case these feelings were amplified by assumptions about and expectations from me that I could not fulfill. My fieldwork was then heavily influenced not only by who I was, but also how I was seen, misguided assumptions about my positionality, my moral and political standpoints and the research questions I wanted to answer. I realize I put myself in complicated position, and I will probably do it again.

Note

1 Ashkenazi refers to Jews of European descent (and who are white). In Israel they have historically had a dominant position, both in politics and the military.

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