Discussion paper:

The Politics of an Anthropologist Studying Israeli Soldiers

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Introduction

"You are not objective; you do research on soldiers while you are leftist?!", "Why aren't you looking at the victims, the Palestinians, bust only at soldiers?" Comments and questions like this have come my way frequently in the last few years. They were reactions on my position as a) an anthropologist who b) studied Israeli soldiers while c) also being a political activist opposing the occupation these soldiers were part of.

In this paper I would like to discuss the manner in which we, anthropologists, position ourselves in the field (or are forced to position ourselves) when doing research within an ongoing conflict. While this positioning often seems to go without saying when researching the underprivileged or victims of violence (we stand on 'their' side, giving them voice, etc.), it is not necessarily so for those studying the ones on the other side of the power balance. We often come upon expectations from academia (and other institutions such as the media) to explain our moral position (as researcher or as activist) within the debates surrounding the conflict we are dealing with in order to legitimize our findings.

Such (moral) debates about conflict, perpetrators and victims are inherent to the field of study we involve ourselves in and our position is important and indeed often not reflected upon. Even within the field of conflict studies in anthropology, most of the focus of the researcher lies with the victims of violence, leaving the perpetrators only a place in a dark corner of the study. They are the 'bad guys' who do not deserve and get too much attention,

we are, in general, not interested in their motivations or ideas. Instead we want to do right by their victims. What we often forget, however, is that the categories of victim and perpetrator are not unambiguous. Victims can very easily be victimizers at the same time, while perpetrators often are also the victims of the system they live within. I believe that this realization should be accompanied by a lot more reflection from the side of us anthropologists.

Here I will discuss the issue of studying the perpetrators of violence, state violence in this case, and I will show how 'doing no harm' to the people you study can have different meanings within different contexts. I will furthermore argue for a more concentrated focus on our political stance, which is often overlooked when studying our 'regular' subjects. I will show , by using the concept of the 'trickster' that is should be possible to study a group you do not support or want to give a voice while 'doing them no harm' and also staying true to your political convictions without trying to neutralize these for the sake of 'objective science'.

The challenge here, I believe, is to stay true to our personal and political beliefs and research objectives and to our informants at the same time. While we should be acutely aware of the way our political ideas and positions influence the way we do research, who we study and the way we understand and write about our study subjects, this does not *necessarily* mean we have to perform 'activist researcher'.

At the same time we cannot forget the social reality within which our research is taking place. The choices we make when choosing our research subject already reflect part of our positioning and are ethical and political decisions in themselves. In the case of studying perpetrators while opposing the system they are part of, this allows for moral dilemmas worth examining.

I will make my points by using my own research experiences as a researcher of the Israeli military and the reactions I got as a result of it as a case study, in the hope that it can serve as an eye-opener for other researchers when it comes to political positioning within

anthropological research. The fact that my research topics raises questions of accountability and responsibility should wake up others as well, who are not questioned about their politics, but who should, I believe, become more aware of the ethics of their research.

My research and positioning

My research interests were directed at the moralities of Israeli soldiers, at the way they perceived and gave meaning to their daily surroundings within a-symmetrical conflict. In order to do this I interviewed Israeli combat soldiers who had served in the Occupied Palestinian Territories as conscripts.

Through my research I found several processes of numbing; on an emotional, cognitive and physical level which were closely related to the daily practices of occupation the soldiers were engaged in. These processes, I argued, resulted in a moral numbing of soldiers and their subsequent often violent behaviour.

I further reasoned in my work that this behaviour has a profound structural nature and as such the situation wherein the soldiers act should be examined critically and thus the occupation itself. Instead of this the Israeli government and military hides behind the slogan of "the rotten apple" after every incident of misbehaviour by an Israeli soldier that comes out into the public sphere.

At the time of conducting this research I was (and still am) also active as an engaged political activist. During my fieldwork in Israel I was actively taking part in protests against the Wall in the Occupied Territories, most of which took place in the village of Bil'in on Friday afternoons, planting olive trees in solidarity activities in the West bank and meeting Palestinian activists. When in the summer of 2006 the second Lebanon war broke out, I participated in protest marches through the Tel Aviv calling out for an end of the violence and

bloodshed. On one day that summer I participated in a protest in front of a military jail where conscientious objectors were held, young men who refused to join the fighting in this war.

Thus, at the time I was protesting the occupation of Palestinian lands and the activities of the Israeli military in Lebanon, I was also interviewing soldiers who had been active as combatants in the Occupied Palestinian Territories and who were sent as reserves into Lebanon that summer.

Reactions

Within the interpretivist tradition we anthropologists are more than familiar with, much has been said about reflection and the influence of the researcher on her research. We are expected to write about our emotions, experiences and personal crisis during our fieldwork in an effort to put our research results in the proper context. Notwithstanding, some issues that relate to ourselves and our position in the field continue to be rather taboo within anthropological research. These issues are related to our politics (our political ideas, convictions and activities) and the subjects we are choose to study.

I first encountered these issues when I entered the university with the idea of studying Israeli soldiers and I realized that I was immediately put into the 'bad guys' category by some of my new colleagues. As an Israeli researcher who studied the IDF (Israeli Defence Forces) could not possibly fit into the leftist ideal picture of an Amsterdam anthropologist. After learning about my politics, described above, I was eventually accepted.

The suspiciousness of my research topic became even more apparent during the last EASA conference in 2008. After a presentation about soldiers' discourse I was accused of being a rightist Israeli academic who did not care about the Palestinian victims. As I did not deem it necessary to mention my political ideas upfront when dealing with an unrelated issue, my work was not taken seriously by some.

My intensions for giving these two short examples are not to receive sympathy or to complain. They are merely cases in point to help me make my point clear and to show the taboos still in place when we consider the position of anthropologists in the field. Studying victimizers as opposed to victims, especially in politically charged context as the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is, still, seen as problematic and is only accepted when one has the correct political profile.

Besides this kind of criticism, however, there was another kind. Some critics felt that my open stance as activist on the far left spectrum of Israeli politics was no position for a 'good' researcher who was expected to be 'objective'. As an activist I could not possibly do 'fair' research about Israeli soldiers, because I was biased. Of course such criticism was easily tackled by explaining the interpretative nature of my work and the fact that objectivity is almost non-existent in ethnographic fieldwork. I thus explained that I would be biased no matter what political stance I adhered to. The point here is, however, that my activities as an activist were used to delegitimize my research by some.

From both sides I was thus forced to give accountability for the choices I made during my research, as an anthropologist and as an activist. I don't see this necessarily as a problem, but it does raise questions concerning the politics we are expected to have and the kind of research we are expected to do as anthropologists. It is time we start to explore our positions in the field more thoroughly, also when dealing with non-perpetrators.

Who do we study?

The position of the researcher can be very straightforward, but it is always build up from different layers and interpretations and sometimes the position of the researcher is questioned. In very general terms we can say that we anthropologists traditionally focus more easily on the underprivileged of society; the poor, the victims of political and economical upheavals

than on the powerful; the elites of our world or the victimizers within our wars. While the position of those researchers is often 'easier' to digest, the position of the ones who study the latter can be very ambiguous and looked upon with suspicion.

When studying violence and conflict it is important, as Nordstrom and Robben already wrote in the 1990s, to study both "perpetrators and victims…[who emerge as] core actors in the drama of violence and its resolutions (1995: 8). When trying to understand complex situations where violence is a daily experience it is important to look both at victims and victimizers, who cannot, Nordstrom and Robben justly argue, be identified as such in a black and while manner. Both are part of certain processes and both can take up different roles within different context.

It seems, however, that while in the field of conflict studies this is taken up somewhat more, most anthropologists still keep to their traditional fields. And probably rightly so, as victims, the poor and the powerless are often not addressed by other disciplines at all.

While not wanting to go into this issue too deeply, it is important to mention, because it is here that many misunderstandings begin and where certain expectations arise about our position as researchers. While not always seeking to be advocates and to 'be a voice for the weak', I believe that most anthropologist are still most comfortable within the setting of the anthropological other as described above. Not only is this safe in terms of our feeling good about ourselves, but in this way our politics are never questioned. When studying the underprivileged we will hardly ever be asked on what side of the political spectrum we stand. I see this as problematic as we should always question our politics while doing research. As mentioned before; victims are often not only victims, while perpetrators are not only victimizers. Roles are fluid and certainly not to be dichotomized easily.

When studying the powerful, or in my case the victimizers within a highly emotionally and politically charged conflict, however, this is still something unexpected from an

anthropologist. My experience taught me such a focus of research comes along with a need from the outside to legitimize this choice and to explain once politics in order to be accepted within (western) academia.

At the same time we want to 'do no harm' to our informants. In many cases this means we try to make sure we give voice to our informants and identify and sympathise with them. When we study victimizers this issues gets a twist. In my case I did everything to ensure the anonymity of my informants and I was honest about my intentions. However, I did not sympathise with their actions or goals in life. Often I was appalled by what they told me they had done during their military service. On the other hand I realized they were acting as part of a system and I had to see their behaviour in that light. I thus, on a certain level, identified with them. Not only as human being, but also as an Israeli with family members who were in the same situation as my informants were.

Politics of research

How then should we position ourselves in the field? Can we be both good anthropologists, while opposing the world our informants make part of, without ignoring our political ideas and maybe even responsibilities? I think we definitely can. To explain this I'll quickly discuss the work of some other researchers and their stands on this issue.

The first work I'd like to mention the work of Van Meijl (2005). Van Meijl did research among the Maoris in New Zealand. The Maoris are perceived as 'victims' and van Meijl talks about his position in supporting their cause. However he also mentions he was critical of the group he was studying. In his work he explains that as a social anthropologist, his position in supporting the Maori cause was assumed without questioning and he asks whether we should be committed politically to our sponsors (the group we research).

Van Meijl then argues for a position of the anthropologist as tricksters: we should stay in an ambivalent position which makes it possible to support but still criticize what we see at the same time. He uses the concept of 'professional strangers' a term by Agar (1996) who also writes about detached involvement within fieldwork (1980). The anthropologist can be an advocate for the people she researches, while at the same time being able to "take a step back and reflect on the construction, development and implementation of indigenous political strategies" (2005: 241). She is then "not a traitor, but rather a trickster" he writes "who embodies different roles in different contexts and combines both in the practice of what I would label critical ethnography" (ibid).

I think the position I identify with the most and that can serve in difficult situations as the one I found myself in is the one that has been described through the metaphor of the trickster, used by van Meijl (2005) and also by Pels (2000). Thus I argue we can be good researchers and be true to our informants, thus not betraying their trust and not breaking any confidentiality while still taking a step back and looking at the system they are part of and come out and say "this is not right" and be explicitly active against it.

The question is whether anthropological work needs to be politicized, should our work be a political act? I indeed believe that Israeli academics can and should speak out more about the situation in Israel and the OPT, because they are in a position to do so. However, I don't think this criticism means we can only do research that supports the weak. Understanding the system and wanting to change it goes hand in hand with doing thorough research on all levels; including the study of the powerful. At the same time we should realize who these 'powerful' exactly are: the soldiers I studied are not necessarily only perpetrators, they are victims themselves on a certain level. They are part of the system, a system we should study from every perspective possible.

To conclude

Here I tried to show, by exploring my own experiences, the way the researcher of victimizers is often forced into self positioning by her fellow anthropologists. I argued that this self positioning is crucial in any research, not only when studying perpetrators or victimizers. We should always reflect upon our political ideas, emotions and other aspects of our identity in the field and the way it directs our research and the way we write about those we study.

In order to get a grip on the way we can position ourselves in difficult situations I would like to use the metaphor of the trickster, albeit in a slightly different way than Pels and van Meijl used it. The anthropologist, as the trickster, is indeed an ambivalent figure who 'combines and either-or position with a both-and one' (Pouwer 1978 as quoted in van Meijl 2005:241). The way van Meijl uses it would mean to be an engaged researcher (engaged with the population you study) while still being able to take a step back and look at the processes this group goes through critically.

I would propose to turn those roles of the trickster around: the anthropologist should be able to study and understand the powerful, or victimizers without betraying the trust of her informants, while she should at the same time be able to take a step back and look critically at the situation her informants are part of and openly criticize it, even as an activist.

It is time that we as anthropologists realize that our work is never devoid of our political self; the political position us as researchers. Ethnographic practice is political in the subject we choose, the questions we asked and the way we write up our results. By using my own experiences as a case study I tried to show how this issue tends to come up when we study 'difficult' issues, but we should be conscious of it at all times.

References

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