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Two Ethnographic Researchers Embark on a Narrative Journey

Randa Abbas

Arab Academic College, randaabbas3@gmail.com

Deborah Court

Bar-Ilan University, Ramat Gan, debcourt@inter.net.il

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Abstract

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Keywords

Ethnography, Narrative, Druze

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Two Ethnographic Researchers Embark on a Narrative Journey

Randa Abbas

Western Galilee College, Akko, Israel

Deborah Court

Bar-Ilan University, Ramat-Gan, Israel

In this article two ethnographic researchers present a life story that emerged, almost against their will, as one of 120 in-depth interviews with Israeli Druze. The ethnographic study was designed to provide understanding of Israeli Druze society today through the discovery of thematic patterns. One interviewee, however, simply refused to follow the loosely structured interview format and told her story. Hana's story about the importance of her father in her professional success, and about her struggles to abide by the tenets of her religion, shed new light on the ethnographic data and taught these two researchers some new methodological sensibilities. Keywords: Ethnography, Narrative, Druze

Several years ago we completed an ethnographic study for the Israeli Ministry of Education¹. The theme was the generation gap amongst the Israeli Druze, and the goal was to understand the values, beliefs and practices of Druze men and women in their forties and fifties, as well as those of their young adult children, regarding higher education, Druze culture and continuity. We conducted 120 in-depth interviews, 60 with men and women of the parents' generation and 60 with their late teen and early twenties sons and daughters, and arrived at rich analytic understanding of the Israeli Druze culture today. As well as the extensive research report we wrote for the Ministry of Education, several academic articles came out of this large-scale study, focusing on Druze views on education, on the values and cultural norms that individuals, families and the community struggle to maintain amidst a tide of modernization and global communications, and on how the secret and behaviorally restrictive Druze religion is faring given rapid societal change. Arriving at these analytic understandings was the goal of our ethnographic study, and to this end we conducted ethnographic interviews. Our data analysis was aimed at identifying themes that would capture the views and experience of Israeli Druze today. What we did not do was look deeply at individual stories. One interview, that of a woman named Hana,² became a life story interview. One of the researchers, an outsider to Druze culture (called OR here, for outsider researcher), felt we had lost control of this interview, and in our analysis we put much of its detail aside. Hana stepped outside the loose structure that our interview questions imposed and simply talked and talked. The second interviewer, an insider to Druze culture (called IR here, for insider researcher), felt both at the time of the interview and later, during analysis, that this woman's story should be investigated as a full story and not only as a source of cultural material for the building of themes across interviews. Later we did begin to investigate this story and tried to learn how to look narratively rather than ethnographically. IR identified with Hana throughout, as someone who has followed a similar life path a generation later. This article presents Hana's story and describes our methodological learning as we attempted to honor and understand it.

¹ We thank the Israeli Ministry of Education for their funding of the original project.

² This name is a pseudonym, and some details of Hana's story have been changed to protect her anonymity.

The Israeli Druze

We will offer only a brief description of the Israeli Druze here, in order to supply the reader with the context necessary for understanding Hana's story.

Young Druze men, like Israeli Jews, do mandatory service in the Israeli army, unlike their Moslem and Christian counterparts, who may serve but are not required to do so. Druze army service and the subsequent inculcation into the broad labor market, based on friendships, connections and skills forged in the army, means that the young generation of Israeli Druze speak Hebrew as well as they speak Arabic, and as well as many native Israeli Jews speak it. This has implications for Druze identity that are creating new cultural and ethnolinguistic boundaries for the Israeli Druze (Isleem, 2015). As well, exposure through the army to the broad Israeli society outside the mountain villages where most Israeli Druze live, forges connections, worldviews and ambitions that work against the traditional Druze way of life.

The Druze religion is secret, and only those who live by the religious rules may study the religious texts. This means, among other things, that Druze women may not drive, mix with men or leave their villages unaccompanied by a first degree male relative, and that fathers and husbands who allow their wives or daughters to drive, which is almost essential for those women who pursue higher education, are excluded from most of the religious life. Mothers, too, who support their daughters' academic study outside the village, and the travel and interactions this entails, are subjected by the religious establishment to the same strictures. Army service, the internet and global communications, the breakdown of patterns of sustenance through local agriculture, and the increasing need for higher education for both men and women in order to support one's family – all these have led in the last few decades to profound changes in the Druze community and the lives of individual Druze (Court & Abbas, 2014; Dana, 2009; Weiner-Levi, 2008).

Our interview with Hana, a woman aged about 60, revealed a life whose early years were spent in the lap of tradition, but who, with her father's determined help, began her quest to study at an early age. Her story straddles traditional times and times of profound change. One of the insights we gained from this narrative exercise, the first for both researchers, was how one person's life story can reveal, in ways complementary to a collection of ethnographic interviews, the thematic patterns of a community, a culture, a historical period and a religion.

Ethnographic and Narrative Research

Ethnography involves the search for patterns in the lived human experiences of a group or culture under study (Angrosino, 2007). Ethnographic data collection techniques include participant observation, document analysis and semi-structured interviews, triangulation of data collection methods being widely recommended in order to strengthen internal validity. Central to these is the ethnographic interview, which offers "a way of shedding light on the personal experiences, interpersonal dynamics of cultural participants in their social worlds" (Heyl, 2001, p. 372), providing not an absolute or objective understanding of participants' meanings, but the results of conversations between the researcher and the participants (Kvale, 1996); the knowledge that is produced from ethnographic interviews is a product of that interaction. Thus the place of the researcher vis a vis the participants, including his or her position as insider, outsider or some combination of these positions in relation to those interviewed (see Banks, 1998) is important information that must be described in the research report. Our research with the Druze was conducted by an Israeli Druze, an insider to Druze religion and culture, and a Canadian-Israeli Jew, an

outsider. Our combined and sometimes differing insights shed greater light on Druze culture than either of us could have achieved alone (see Court & Abbas, 2013, for further exploration of these issues).

What we discovered as we looked at Hana's story was the compatibility and complementarity of ethnographic and narrative approaches. In fact, as early as the ethnographic work of Boas, narratives have "held a central place in the ethnographic enterprise" (Cashman, 2012, p. 182). Today, as Cortazzi writes, "There is increasing recognition of the importance and usefulness of narrative analysis as an element of doing ethnography..." The narratives that individuals tell "give researchers access to tellers' understandings of the meanings of key events in their lives, communities or cultural contexts" (2001, p. 384). Narrative is both "phenomenon and method. Narrative names the structured quality of experience to be studied, and it names the patterns of inquiry for its study... people by nature lead storied lives and tell stories of those lives, whereas narrative researchers describe such lives, collect and tell stories of them, and write narratives of experience" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2). Building on John Dewey's understanding of experience, Clandinin and Connelly (2000, p. 2) remind us that each point in a person's story "has an experiential base and leads to an experiential future." This is the basis for narrative research, which allows researchers to hear about events, incidents and feelings in the context of whole stories and to retain their contextual meanings in a way that snapshots of experience cannot do.

Narratives are individual stories, but they capture individuals' experience and understanding of social, historical and cultural times and events. There "are complex tensions between narrative as story and narrative as representation of social reality" and researchers need to "connect the historicized lifeworld and the textual structure as frames for understanding narrative" (Hall, 1999, p. 74).

Trustworthiness of this Analytic Presentation of Hana's Story

As in any qualitative research, issues of validity or trustworthiness must be addressed. In the conclusion to Loh's (2013) extensive review of writings on these issues he stresses the importance of methodological rigor and the need to convince readers of the knowledge claims in narrative studies. Narrative researchers "should pay heed to and utilise quality procedures that have consensus among the research community at large: Looking to and choosing from the techniques in establishing trustworthiness, analysing the narrative for its various contexts and from its various perspectives (i.e., "truths"), and ensuring that it resonates (i.e., verisimilitude) with and has use (i.e., utility) for the potential consumers of the study" (p. 12). In our large ethnographic study and in this single narrative exploration, we feel that the combination of insider and outsider researcher powerfully addresses issues of context and perspective, and here the use of Hana's own words lend verisimilitude. The question of utility is harder to address and is to a large extent dependent on the reactions of the study's "consumers" – policy makers, sociologists and anthropologists who study traditional societies, especially in regard to the changing roles of women. We feel that our presentation of Hana's story fits well with Polkinghorne's (1995) concept of narrative configuration: "the process by which happenings are drawn together and integrated into a temporally organized whole. The configurative process employs a thematic thread to lay out happenings as parts of an unfolding movement that culminates in an outcome" (p. 5). This is exactly what we have tried to do.

As we tell Hana's story below, we will include analytic comments, especially those of IR.

Hana's Story

Hana recently retired from her very responsible role as a country-wide educational inspector in Druze schools, the first woman to be chosen for such a supervisory position. She was also the first woman in her husband's village, where the couple lived after their marriage, to get a driver's license, in the late 1970's. Because of social ostracism surrounding this issue they could not live there anymore, and moved to the village where she was born. After she took her pension she became religious and canceled her driver's license.

When we arrive at her house to conduct the interview we are greeted with a full, hot meal at the table. This Druze hospitality cannot be refused. We eat, and then retire to the sitting area, a gracious area of couches, rugs, wall hangings and books. Other family members, a son, daughter-in-law and grandchildren, arrive and sit down to eat. Hana is covered to her feet in clothing except for her head; if she goes outside she will cover her head. Our first interview question is, how do you define yourself? Hana thinks and says,

I'll say it this way. First of all I am Hana, Hana (Maiden Name) in the past. I really care about my family. My father, of blessed memory, is the perfect example in my life. All my strength I got from him. I'll talk about him further. My husband is Vayil, an inspector for the Ministry of Education. I am the mother of four children, two sons and two daughters. One of my sons is married and has three children. My oldest daughter, the lawyer, is not yet married, she should hurry up! My middle daughter is a nurse, and my younger son has just finished his BA and he works in the private sector.

IR later says that she herself also stresses the academic and professional success of her daughters when talking about her own success. According to IR, the measure of success of a woman in a traditional society is inseparable from the success of her children. Without her success at raising children who both respect their own traditions and move forward academically and professionally as their mother has done, her own success doesn't "count" and she cannot be a model for other young people. To Hana we note that it is very interesting that she has two such well-educated daughters with such good professional roles, and ask where, in this traditional community, that comes from. Hana replies:

I think from the education at home. My father in '64, after I finished grade 8, which was usually the end of education for girls, decided that I was going to study further. First I was at home for two years, very depressed. My father took me to a psychologist and all kinds of doctors and therapies. My father was a welder, people came to him from all around. He was a very sympathetic man. Anyway, all the doctors told him I was fine. I finished my high school somewhere else, he took me every month to the place I was studying, and at the end of every month he came and got me. So no one could say I was traveling around alone. And his message was, you will study, you will advance. And the whole community was outraged. My father was under a *herem dati* (a religious excommunication) 8 years, during the whole time I was studying. He couldn't go to the *hilwa* (house of worship) or to any religious ceremonies. He was a religious man. But he believed that his daughter needed to study in order to prepare for the next generation, which my father knew was going to be different. After that I studied to be a teacher. The woman teachers in those days might have finished grade 10. But my father

told me to go to a college and get a teaching degree. The whole community rose up against us.

Hana was the only Druze woman at the teachers college. We asked where her mother was in all of this.

She was against me studying, she couldn't stand the *herem dati*. She went to the sheiks and said, I don't agree, do the *herem dati* only on my husband. (Turning to OR) - You know what a *herem dati* is, right? If you die they say "have mercy on **it**" (instead of on him or her) - as if you were are not a person...My mother wasn't in control, her husband was, so they released her from the *herem dati*.

A *herem dati* is an extreme punishment for a religious Druze, and Hana's mother was not willing to suffer it. Hana grew up with a strong father and four brothers. The unwavering support of Hana's father cost him a great personal price, being excluded from his religion and criticized by his community. The father's support of his daughter is key to her success in Druze society (Weiner-Levy, 2011). Hana's father appears at the beginning of her story and his influence is a constant in her narrative:

When I was in grade 10 my mother had an operation at the hospital. I went with my father on the bus to visit her. We had to take several different buses, and my father told me to pay attention at every place where we changed buses because he said that he couldn't always come with me and I would have to travel alone to see my mother. No one else, no one, thought of such a thing... Another story. When I finished the teachers' seminar and I would drive places with my father sometimes, and he would say, "Take the wheel, because you are going to learn how to drive." I was the first one. Everyone criticized me... I got a job teaching grade three in a non-Druze town. I said, I'll find another couple of girls and we'll get an apartment. My father went to the supervisor at the Ministry of Education and demanded that they find me a job teaching in a Druze school. The man apologized, and in the end I started teaching at a girls' school in my home town.

This is another key point: Hana's father arranged it so that she did not have to drive to her teaching job. He tried to help her adhere to every aspect of Druze womanhood possible. If she could work close to home she could drive less. But she did drive to teachers' workshops. She married and her new husband was modern and had a university degree. He did not worry about a *herem dati* because, though he respected Druze ways, he was not religious. He supported Hana, but in his very traditional village she was vilified:

Everyone in the village who saw me always said, where are you going?! Where is your husband? It was hard for me, I grew up as a free girl, I had a strong back from my father. I suffered there... The school I taught in was terrible and they gave me the worst classroom. It had no windows, only a door, and the kids had to bring their own chairs. There were no bathrooms, the kids went behind the building. I had nothing. After a week I went to the local council, I went in to see the man in charge of education, a religious man [this would be a Jewish man], a bit of a bully, and I cried and told him I had nothing and told him about my wonderful teaching program that I had to

advance for the sake of the children. It was a bit of nonsense but he went for it! The day afterwards a truck arrived at my classroom with all kinds of equipment and supplies – used, but still! I brought to my teaching everything I learned in teacher education. And I got things from the parents. I fixed things, built things – I found, begged or made everything, and my classroom was great! I gave everything. The year after that the principal brought all his family's kids who were of kindergarten age, to me. Because he wanted them to get a good education. And later that year the inspector came and observed the [Druze holiday] day that I arranged for the whole community. He was so thrilled, he brought other people from the Ministry. And I did it all from the children – they danced, they sang, etc. Today there is no such thing, you bring in some clown or something. I made the costumes, the food, I wrote the little plays – all from my own pocket. It's not like that today.

Hana went to university and got a Bachelor's and then a Master's degree, unheard of for Druze women at that time. Her husband, who was also an educator, got a job as an inspector.

Then the Ministry advertised for a new supervisor for the Druze sector. They asked, where are the Druze candidates? In the end there were a few, but only I had a degree. The Ministry came looking for me and asked me to take the job. At first I said no. I had a six month old baby. But Vayil wanted me to take it... I thought about it, and in the end I took it. I was 36 at this time. I was inspector for more than 25 years until I retired.

After telling us the story of her professional life Hana mused on her own background and how she achieved her success, against the tide of her community. She tried to keep Druze values of female modesty in dress and behavior, together with her career:

My father was very proud, and rightfully so. Only studying! You must study! I don't know where he got that from. There was none of it in his time or before, ever. He was a religious man, a real man...I grew up in a traditional religious household. Vayil did not. After I got married my sister-in-law said, why don't you wear pants? It's more comfortable. But I never did, I was always in a long skirt, always modest. Like you [She nods to IR, who has had similar struggles and successes.]. Suddenly one day my daughter said, Mom, all the teachers that come from this area are wearing pants! But not me, I wanted to keep our values. What my father asked me to do. He didn't want me to make any mistakes of that kind. I never went out to a café with another girl or with anyone from work. Work meetings I would only do at work. My father wanted me to be an example of what a modest, traditional Druze women can do and still be part of the modern world.

Hana's husband did not grow up in a religious household and he supported his wife in her education and career. He even encouraged her to wear pants. As IR noted, the husband's support must continue the father's in order for a Druze woman to travel this difficult path. Without male support a woman cannot succeed. But Hana's father played a more complex role, at a time when Druze woman were just beginning to move beyond their traditional roles, supporting his daughter's driving, education and career while encouraging her to keep every aspect of Druze feminine modesty. This bridging - women keeping traditional dress and abiding by behavioral rules as much as possible, while at the same time advancing

academically and professionally - is helping to ease Druze society forward and at the same time maintain, if somewhat uneasily, Druze cultural norms and values. Whether this will be enough to preserve Druze culture in the long run, given the religious restrictions imposed on these women and the parents and husbands who support them, remains to be seen (Court & Abbas, 2014).

Finally the conversation turned to Hana's life today. She wanted to have the *herem dati* that was imposed on her for almost 30 years, lifted, so that she could once again participate in her religion:

I sat at home for a year after taking my pension. I thought, I cried. Among the Druze, if a woman drives she cannot be religious. It's stupid! Why? It's just a rule. I need to travel and I have no one to take me places. I could even travel to advance my religion. But no. It was humiliating, I had to tear up my driver's license in front of the sheiks, and bring them the letter that showed I had canceled it... Why did I decide to be religious? I knew it would limit me, but I wanted to know what is in the books, what happens at the religious meetings, what happens in the *hilwa*. The secular woman can't know this. I wanted this knowledge. Today a woman needs to work, for the economic welfare of her family - we are not farmers anymore. The woman used to work alongside her family, with the olives, etc. No more. Now she needs to work, also to develop and feel good about herself. I visited the Druze high schools and encouraged the girls to work.... I also felt that our young people don't know enough about our tradition. I wrote a curriculum on the Druze holidays that is still used in the schools. I have also designed workshops for teachers in this area.... Women are not supposed to speak in mixed company, but when I was little my father invited me to participate in discussions, not remain silent. He said, if you don't learn how to talk, you won't be able to study. He thought about that from the beginning. He took me with him wherever he went and tried to help me learn from everything.

After this long, successful and trail-blazing career, Hana retired to be a grandmother and a religious woman. She was hungry to enter into the secrets and depths of her religion and in order to do so she had to renounce all her "modern" ways. She is angry that despite the strides individuals in her community have made, especially toward higher education, in the end the religious ceiling that restricts woman has not moved. She says that the only way to improve the situation of the Druze is through education, but

No one is interested! Not the mayor, not the prime minister, not the minister of education! We need to invest in education, starting at home! The parents have to take responsibility. But they are so ignorant... There need to be workshops for them, money and energy invested in educating the parents. The parents don't talk to their young children, don't play with them. They just say, don't touch that! First I blame the parent, then the teacher. The kindergarten teacher has to tell kids they can be doctors, engineers... So better teacher education! The whole system has to change. And the Druze leaders have to wake up! Why should our leaders just be religious men? Where are all of our educated people as leaders? There should be a committee, men, women, religious, secular, to discuss, plan, decide, each one contributing from his or her knowledge. I'm sorry we have no planning or direction.

Hana's two educated, professional daughters wear pants, which is forbidden to Druze woman. Of this Hana says,

They are a generation and I am a generation. What do I care if they wear pants? They take care of their behavior, they keep important values. No, it doesn't bother me, there are more important things.

Despite the advances of women like Hana and her daughters, Hana says angrily that Druze women cannot influence Druze society in any meaningful way.

No one listens to them [women]! I have very strong criticism of Druze society. Non-Druze people ask me, are you sure you're Druze? Because I see things so differently. Not my behavior, my world view. Girls need to invest in their careers and not pay attention to what people say.

Hana tells IR, privately and in Arabic (our interviews were conducted in Hebrew), that she is in fact very depressed now at home, after her career, isolated because she cannot drive, an intelligent, highly educated professional woman who has given up so much in order to be readmitted to her religion. Her father helped her find and forge her difficult path and her husband supported her, but in the end she has hit a religious ceiling.

Ethnographic and Narrative Research Revisited

In her discussion of the history of narrative research Chase (2005) notes that the feminist movement in the 1980's "played a major role in the renaissance of life history methods and the study of personal narratives" (p. 654); although feminists "resisted the idea that life histories and other personal narratives were primarily useful for gathering information about historical events, cultural change, or the impact of social structure on individuals' lives. Rather, they were interested in women as social actors in their own right and in the subjective meanings that women assigned to events and conditions in their lives" (p. 655). Interestingly, this in itself "opened up new understandings of historical, cultural, and social processes" (p. 655). This describes well what we came to see as we looked at Hana's story. Her story is hers, her experience of Druze and Israeli society is her subjective experience. Her struggles, achievements and pride are hers, as is her pain, now that she has renounced so much in order to be readmitted to her religion. But in listening (really listening, as we did not do at first) to Hana's individual story, we came to understand better the thematic patterns our ethnographic analysis had revealed. In addition, the motif in Hana's story about the centrality of her father, which had not been striking in our other interviews (but which was highlighted in the interviews of Weiner-Levy, 2011), opened a new line of inquiry that we hope to pursue, the role of fathers (and mothers) in the life stories of Druze women.

This brief narrative journey showed us how a life story provides holistic insight into a culture, time and place, in this case the struggles of Druze women and the power structure of Druze society. The rhythm, thematic flow and feeling of Hana's story communicated to these two researchers a depth that we had partially missed when we used parts of many stories as building blocks for shared cultural themes.

Hana's girlhood yearning to learn, the unwavering support of her father, his creativity in teaching her to observe every Druze norm she could while breaking through the major restrictions for women, and the price her father paid – these are the details of Hana's life. Now, in order to be readmitted to the religion she loves, she has given up everything

connected with her professional life, and she keenly feels this loss. The insider researcher in this study, younger than Hana by a generation, longs, like Hana, to be admitted to study the secrets of her religion, but at this she point longs more (much more) to grow academically and professionally, and to help her daughters forward into academic studies and professional life. Hana's story, uniquely hers, nevertheless is a story of and from her place, time, religion and culture. It is not representative, because a life story can never be that; rather it is one of many voices to which researchers must listen in order to understand. The insider researcher in this study sympathized and identified deeply with Hana throughout this interview. As we took this narrative journey IR's tried to "neutralize" her feelings in order to really hear Hana's story. She only partially succeeded. As Hana told the last part of her story she turned to IR, as another professional Druze woman but also as a researcher who might possess some overarching knowledge, and asked, "Is this what had to happen to me in the end? I had to give up everything because of my passion to enter into the secrets of my religion?" IR came to see that she could be both the researcher and one of the research population, and that while her insider feelings must not be allowed to overwhelm her research role, they lent empathy and personal identification which enhanced her understanding. IR's voice was necessarily muted, but it was a legitimate part of this cultural chorus. The outsider researcher learned, among other things, to curb her task-oriented impatience and listen to the story someone is telling, even if it does follow exactly the loose but pre-defined path laid out by the ethnographic interview questions.

As the poet and social critic Camille Paglia (1992, p. 116) has written in a somewhat different context, "All objects, all phases of culture are alive. They have voices. They speak of their history and interrelatedness. And they are all talking at once!" To paraphrase this idea only slightly, we conclude that all participants in culture are alive. They have voices and stories. They speak of their history and interrelatedness. And they are all talking at once! We need to stop and listen to their individual voices and stories, and by doing so we will understand better the music they make together. It behooves ethnographers, no less than narrative researchers, to attend to these voices.

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Author Note

Randa Abbas is a lecturer at the Arab Academic College and Western Galilee College in Israel. She studies Druze culture, Druze education and the status of Druze women. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: Randa Abbas at, randaabbas3@gmail.com.

Deborah Court is an associate professor at Bar-Ilan University, Israel. She studies religious education and school culture in various settings. Correspondence regarding this article can also be addressed directly to: Deborah Court at, debcourt@inter.net.il.

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