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Citation

Sholkamy, H. (2001). Why is Anthropology so hard in Egypt? *Isim Newsletter*, 7(1), 9-9.
Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/17494>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)
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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Research Approaches
HANIA SHOLKAMY

Why is Anthropology so hard in Egypt?

The political difficulties of writing anthropology and ethnography in Egypt persist despite the newly found fame of certain anthropological methods. These difficulties are about readership and about the consumption – not just the production – of texts. Missing from the ‘universal’ anxiety over power and representation, often referred to as post-modernism (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Rabinow 1991; Said 1991, 1989), are considerations of the anthropologist in her/his national setting when this is a non-Western one. Also missing is the problematization of audience and readership for the non-Western national working at home. The consequences of such collegiate exclusion can be explored by examining the structures and considerations marking the borders of anthropological research written by locals working locally.

An implicit assumption in recent post-modernist contemplation is that all researchers are writing for the same kind of audience. But how different is the problematic of power and representation in the absence of a Western readership and in an often less than sympathetic, sometimes oppressive national context? And how does the possibility of an other-than-academic/Western audience condition the diversity of discourses that could emanate from ethnographic and anthropological inquiries in Egypt? The possibility presents a double challenge. It challenges current theories in anthropology on writing, representation, and power. It also challenges the acceptance of anthropology and its qualitative methods by policy makers, development researchers, and other players in Egypt.

To make the point here, it is important to discuss the experiences of researchers who seek an audience and presence in places other than the corridors of Western academia. Many would like to engage in a dialogue with peers, executives, projects, and publics in our local, national, or regional contexts. In the absence of the traditions of reading and writing established in Western intellectual, political, and academic circles, from where can we derive security, support, and where can we engage in serious criticism?

The Egyptian setting

The travails of anthropologists in Egypt have been dwarfed by the tragedy endured by a fellow sociologist. The recent case brought against Dr Saad-Eddin Ibrahim, the prominent Egyptian sociologist, has brought into sharp focus the problems of research in Egypt, and perhaps elsewhere. This article is not about the merits of the case or the lack thereof. It is also not about the civil and basic human rights of which Dr Ibrahim has clearly

been deprived. The intention is to voice concern in light of this and many other incidents for the viability and mere possibility of social science research, particularly for a discipline as amorphous and vibrant as anthropology.

The issue at hand concerns the right of representation and the authority to shape and give currency to ‘truth’. The Egyptian press has atrociously covered the case of Dr Ibrahim. Coverage not only demonized the accused, it also criminalized his whole profession. They conveyed that it was not only Dr Ibrahim who was guilty of wrong doing, but all those like him who conduct research in towns and villages, defame the national image of their country and attend conferences abroad where they describe and share their research findings.

This sad situation expresses a crisis in the understanding of research and in the prescription of a censorship of its findings. It dramatically illustrates common misunderstandings prevalent among circles of readership in Egypt. Many appreciate the verbatim quotes that interviews and observations supply, with their ‘straight from the horse’s mouth’ colour and freshness. Focus groups are favourites because they can cram many subjects into busy schedules and because they are supposed to capture conflict, decision-making processes, and the complexity of human interaction. But venturing into the naturalistic context is unpopular, as are questions of multiplicity and relativity of truth and meaning. These tools are used in a positivistic framework and are made to render the same kinds of enduring facts and information that numbers are made to do.

Leaving aside the misuse of methods and looking at the difficulties of ethnographic and anthropological research, we can easily trace three reasons why it is held suspect. The first is the reign of modernist ‘scientistic’ thinking that finds strength and meaning in lots of numbers. This ideology of undisputed facts and streams of numbers is still prevalent in many academic and public discourses. This is in spite of, or perhaps because of, the way qualitative methods have inched their way into a degree of recognition as scientific, perhaps credible, and often useful.

The powerful few

The second reason for suspicion is a case of misconstrued intentions that politicize qualitative data collection and its use. Here the sensitivity lies in the details and the voices that are the flesh and blood of qualitative methods. Descriptions of poverty or of divergence from the norm are often seen as acts of denuding and exposition, as challenges to structures of authority such as the government or the family, or to idealized norms and customs. Moreover, the words of the poor, the dispossessed, or the suffering are too much, too vulgar, too disturbing. But they are the research subjects with whom many of us work. After all, an interview with an urban slum dweller is research; with a minister or another official, it is a proclamation to be read in the daily papers.

While anthropologists have always been interested in both the rich and the poor and have studied the mundane as well as the profound, the common along with the rare, they have always done so from critical perspectives that retain the potential to unsettle and question. Hence even the few studies that exist of the not-so-poor are still studies that question and, for some, are ones that expose.

The preference for ‘scientific’ research methods and the distaste for subjectivity and details are part of the third major problem, that of readership. Public consumption of social science research is very low for several reasons. The first is that reading is not a popular pastime among even the literate of the still largely illiterate public in Egypt. Another obstacle is that of the Arabic language and social science. Perhaps because of the practice of importing social science concepts or the lack of effort invested in using concepts in a reader-friendly manner, social science, anthropology included, makes for very unattractive reading in Arabic.

As long as readership is limited and specialized, and texts about daily life are distant, the current situation in which anthropologists do not write in Arabic – and when they do, as did Dr Ibrahim (through authorship or translation) they are judged by a powerful few – will continue. The term ‘powerful few’ implies here people who have access to and/or control of various public forums and media. This means academics, politicians, journalists, and policy makers; people who can dismiss work as being subversive, slanderous, Orientalist, biased, or dangerous in some other way. This proxy readership is perhaps the most obstructive element to the publication of ethnographies in Egypt and perhaps elsewhere. This brings to mind all the research that is written up in Egypt in English, but that goes un-translated because it is too ‘sensitive’ or because it is liable to be ‘misunderstood’. Some of the examples cited in the longer paper, from which this article is taken, illustrate the perils of powerful and limited readership.

In Egypt, it is as though qualitative methods and insights are acceptable if they are constructive and complacent, but not if they are unsettling or critical. Policy makers, journalists, senior and not-so-senior officials and development workers are interested in

knowing that mothers-in-law influence decisions concerning female fertility, for example, but are less keen on facing facts concerning the political threats posed by street sub-cultures. To re-phrase once more, one could say that the observations of anthropologists are fine but their analysis is unwanted.

Rendering readership problematic can draw attention to the serious dangers of limited readership whereby the powerful few read and can censor on behalf of the many. If more anthropology was written and read by specialists and non-specialists in Egypt, the sensationalism of intimate details and the impact of graphic renditions of daily life would lose their sting and become normalized in the democracy of interpretations.

Why is anthropology so hard in Egypt? My very personal answer is because I am as yet unable, whether due to circumstances or capabilities, to share my work with others in Arabic in Egypt without making changes and accommodations. If these changes were made to accommodate the privacy or sensibility of my studied community, that would be advancement. But they have been made on behalf of a readership that presumes the right to control and censor qualitative work by virtue of power or position. Meanwhile my fellow sociologist, who often chose not to make such concessions, is being prosecuted. ♦

The article is taken from a longer publication by the same name, which appeared in Shami, S. and Herrera, L. (eds.) (1999), Between Field and Text: Cairo Papers in the Social Sciences, Cairo: American University in Cairo Press.

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Saad behind bars at the trial with his wife Barbara next to him.

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