

XV Convegno SeSaMO

Università degli Studi di Napoli L'Orientale

22-24 giugno 2022



SOCIETÀ PER GLI STUDI SUL MEDIO ORIENTE

**TITOLO/TITLE: Constructing Constant Crisis: Research Methodologies as Filtering Mechanisms**

**PROPONENTE/I – PROPONENT/s:** Odetta Pizzingrilli (Università LUISS Guido Carli); Irene Tuzi (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin); Patricia Ward (Technische Universität Dresden)

**DISCUSSANT/CHAIR:** Renata Pepicelli

**ABSTRACT (1500 parole/words):**

Social science increasingly represents a significant market and industry in the West Asia-North Africa region (WANA). The number of researchers in the region has proliferated, particularly over the past two decades. Increasing demand for data has expanded and created new labor markets for consultants, translators, 'brokers' and 'fixers' in turn, and conducting interviews and surveys became a marketable skill. Competition for research-related jobs has also increased, framed as 'desirable' employment and experience opportunities. However, in spite of the always increasing interest, reductionist accounts of the region in constant 'chaos' and crisis persist, and researchers often continue to delineate social dynamics in the region to a narrow scope of topics (e.g., refugees, authoritarianism, humanitarianism, oil) (Pascucci, 2017; Teti, 2009). What explains this mismatch? Why, in fact, might we even see an increased production of reductionist and ahistorical accounts of social phenomena related to the region?

Markets for research embed, and are often already embedded in, notions of WANA as 'chaotic', 'problematic', and 'static' in its design and structure (Hanafi, 2020). Such assumptions subsequently shape the scope of research in terms of topics, phenomena of interest and data collection. Moreover, the act and governance of data collection are informed and intertwined with multiple state and non-state actors' interests that shape understandings of 'best research practices' that in turn often reify and reproduce colonial and imperial hierarchies, and exceed the interests and power of individual researchers (Deeb & Winegar, 2015; Sukarieh & Tannock, 2019). Post-colonial feminist scholars (Haraway, 1988) have long emphasized the latter, and how claims of methodological objectivity obscure the power relations undergirding and embedded in the knowledge production process. Knowledge produced by the dominant group is needed to reproduce their worldview, while knowledge produced by marginalized groups is always 'outsider knowledge': the indigenous space becomes the 'outside', in "an oppositional relation to the colonial center" (Smith, 1999).

This panel draws upon this scholarship to subsequently consider how social science methodologies as 'best practice' contribute and produce these hierarchies in ways not

always anticipated. That is, how do methodological epistemologies and their articulations in day-to-day practices shape how researchers depict social phenomena and relations in the WANA region accordingly. Social science research techniques are often uncritically seen as 'objectively' representing the experiences and the perspectives of the 'researched communities' albeit acknowledgement that methodology is a cultural product (Gobo, 2011), and that meanings associated with social phenomena are relational and vary in different contexts as well (e.g., concepts of time and space). This panel considers the potential of 'filtering' as a concept that can be mobilized to systematically account for the various mechanisms embedded in social science methodology that clarify, but also obscure, articulations and understandings of social relations and power.

When we think of the term filter or filtering, definitions often focus on physical material "passing through a device to remove unwanted material". However, filtering also distorts, and leaves one with only a partial 'picture' of the original product. This distortion may also occur because filtering *organizes, sorts* and *directs* materials and information (e.g., radio and cell phone bandwidths). In this case, nothing might be missing from the original product, but the elements are reorganized in particular patterns, or directed to particular populations versus others (Britannica, 2021).

This panel extends this notion of filtering to social science methodologies by focusing on the following key-elements:

- The research tools that shape explanations and narratives about the region (e.g., Studying the social through independent-dependent variable frameworks, data collection techniques) between the risk of reductionism and the burden of exceptionalism;
- The role of language (verbal, written) as both a tool of research and a way of organizing and transferring ideas in particular ways and to particular audiences, in turn classifying information as 'valuable' and 'relevant' (Almaghlouth et al, 2015; Savci, 2016);
- Positionality: How researchers and participants' various and diverging cultural and social group statuses shape the research process (Bourke, 2014)? What is the role of personalities and relationships in 'filtering' our understanding of the field? How can we manage intersectional differences (e.g., gender, race, nationality, age, class, etc.) in the interaction with research participants?
- The presumed objectivity of Western-born social sciences and its colonial effects: How can we, for example, use filtering as a concept and instrument to 'decolonize' the social science episteme (Smith, 1999; Connell, 2007) including its methodological basis? How can the 'interview society' (Silverman, 1993; Gobo, 2011) be reconsidered and analyzed to counter methodological colonialism (Alatas, 2003)? What are the limits of Western qualitative methodologies used in non-Western contexts?

This panel welcomes submissions that seek to unpack these questions theoretically and/or

empirically, as well as submissions that expand on this basis and introduce new ideas related to methodologies and mechanisms of filtering from a critical perspective.

### References:

- Alatas, S. F. (2003). Academic dependency and the global division of labor in the social sciences. *Current Sociology*, 51(6), 599–613.
- AlMaghlouth, N., Arvanitis, R., Cointet, J. P. and Hanafi, S. (2015). Who frames the debate on the Arab uprisings? Analysis of Arabic, English, and French academic scholarship. *International sociology*, 30(4), 418-441.
- Amour, P. O. (2012) Practical, theoretical, and methodological challenges of field research in the Middle East. *Historical methods: A Journal of Quantitative and Interdisciplinary History*, 45(3), 143-149.
- Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "filtration". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 20 Apr. 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/science/filtration-chemistry>. Accessed 19 December 2021.
- Bolak, H. C. (1996). Studying One's own in the Middle East: Negotiating gender and self-other dynamics in the field. *Qualitative Sociology*, 19(1), 107-130.
- Bourke, B. (2014). Positionality: Reflecting on the research process. *The Qualitative Report*, 19(33), 1-9.
- Connell, R. (2007). *Southern theory*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Deeb, L., and Winegar, J. (2015). *Anthropology's politics: Disciplining the Middle East*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.
- Gobo, G. (2008). *Doing Ethnography*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publishing.
- Hanafi, S. (2020). Global sociology revisited: Toward new directions. *Current Sociology* 68(1), 3-21.
- Haraway, D. (1988). Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective. *Feminist Studies*, 14(3), 575–599.
- Pascucci, E. (2017). The humanitarian infrastructure and the question of over-research: reflections on fieldwork in the refugee crises in the Middle East and North Africa. *Area* 49, 249-255.
- Savcı, E., 2016. Who speaks the language of queer politics? Western knowledge, politico-cultural capital and belonging among urban queers in Turkey. *Sexualities*, 19(3), 369-387.
- Schwedler, J. (2006). The Third Gender: Western female researchers in the Middle East. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 39(3), 425-428.
- Smith, Tuhiwai, L. (2017). *Decolonizing Methodologies. Research and Indigenous People*. London: Zed Books Ltd. (Selected chapters).
- Sukarieh, M., & Tannock, S. (2019). Subcontracting academia: Alienation, exploitation and disillusionment in the UK overseas Syrian refugee research industry. *Antipode* 51, 664-680.
- Teti, A., (2009). The Middle East and the disciplinary (re)production of knowledge. In B. O. Firat, S. De Mul, S. van Wichelen (eds.), *Commitment and Complicity in Cultural Theory and Practice* (pp. 81-101). Palgrave Macmillan, London.

#### PROFILO ACCADEMICO DEL/DELLA/DEI/DELLE PROPONENTE/I – SHORT BIO OF PROPONENTS

**Odetta Pizzingrilli** is a Research Fellow in History of Islamic Countries at the Department of Political Science at LUISS Guido Carli University in Rome and Adjunct Professor of Arabic Culture and Literature at the Humanities Department of the University of Macerata and of Arabic Language at the Political Sciences Department of Federico II University (Naples). Her research focuses on nation/state building-process of the Arab states, national identity formation, minorities and minoritization processes. She gained research experiences in Syria, Jordan and Kuwait while working at her PhD project “State and Legitimacy within an Arab-Muslim context. Understanding the identity criteria in Jordan and Kuwait”. Among her publications: Pizzingrilli, O. “Circassians: An Identity in Exile. The Case of Jordan, a Minority at the Royal Palace”, 159-186. *Studi Magrebini*, XVI:2018. (02/2019); Pizzingrilli, O. “Transnational identity and Circassians in Contemporary Jordan (1991-2018)” in Maggiolini, P. & Ouahes, I. (ed.) *Minorities and State-Building in the Middle East: The Case of Jordan*. Palgrave Mcmillan, London (2020); Pizzingrilli, O. Translation of the novel *Shajarat al-bu's* (1944) by Taha Husayn, Istituto per l'Oriente Carlo Alfonso Nallino (2021).

**Irene Tuzi** is a sociologist of migration with particular expertise in ethnography, refugee studies, gender studies and the Middle East. She holds a double PhD in Social Sciences from Sapienza University of Rome and Humboldt University of Berlin (2021). She has been a visiting researcher at the Institute for Migration Studies and the Lebanese American University (2016-2019) and the Institute of Mediterranean Europe History at the Italian National Research Council (2015). She is currently a visiting researcher at MERGE Network and a lecturer at Humboldt University, Department of Social Sciences, where she teaches qualitative methodologies. Her PhD dissertation, titled “Renegotiating Gender Roles and Relationships in Displacement: Syrian Families in Lebanon and Germany”, used *agency* as a lens to analyze gender relations in forced migration.

**Patricia Ward** is a postdoctoral research associate at the Center for Integration Studies at the Technische Universität Dresden. Her research interests are in the areas of transnational labor, migration/mobility, and humanitarian aid and development. Patricia was previously with the Department of Ethics, Law and Politics at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, and obtained her doctorate from Boston University in 2020. Her dissertation, “How Humanitarian Relief ‘Works’: International Aid Organizations and Local Labor in Crisis Contexts” examined the reorganization of aid operations amidst a growing number of protracted displacement crises worldwide. She specifically focused on how these shifts affected national aid workers employed in the sector in Jordan as a major global aid hub.

## INDIRIZZO/I EMAIL/EMAIL ADDRESSES:

Odetta Pizzingrilli: [odettapizzingrilli@gmail.com](mailto:odettapizzingrilli@gmail.com)

Irene Tuzi: [irene.tuzi@hu-berlin.de](mailto:irene.tuzi@hu-berlin.de); [ire.tuzi@gmail.com](mailto:ire.tuzi@gmail.com);

Patricia Ward: [patricia.ward@tu-dresden.de](mailto:patricia.ward@tu-dresden.de)

## PAPERS

### **Shrunk and Online: The Challenges of Research in Post-Pandemic Jordan Between Economic Status and Virtual Spaces**

*Marta Tarantino, Ph.D. Candidate, University of Naples 'L'Orientale'*

Today's economic crisis and Covid19 pandemic in the WANA are inevitably shrinking and at times impeding exhaustive qualitative data collections. Starting from personal experience of field research on gender equality in Jordan, I identified two main issues, both relatable at different degrees to the question of positionality.

First, as interviews suggested, Western-born researches are often labelled as "hobby" or "recreational activity" by the informants: I argue that this element provides implicit informations on how economic crisis is challenging methods, languages and tools which should be employed by the researcher to enter a space of mutual understanding and trust.

Secondly, starting from Covid19 restrictions which forced many to turn to the Internet and social media for research, I suggest that new considerations on their role should be made, understanding to what extent they jeopardize and filter information exchange with practitioners and informants in a post-pandemic world.

### **Disrupting Decibels: A Consideration of Auditory Systems of Power in Research Methodologies**

*Patricia Ward, Postdoctoral Researcher, Technische Universität Dresden, Germany*

Researchers often frame 'gaining access' and 'building rapport' as autonomous, unidirectional acts that *they* do in accordance with 'best practices' (e.g., what *I* did to access my participants, how *I* was self-reflexive in my field site). Drawing upon sociological scholarship of the body, and conversations pertaining to decolonizing methodologies, this paper takes a different approach and looks at how 'the researched' *places researchers' bodies* in particular ways. In line with the panel's exploration of filtering, this paper focuses on the latter in terms of how sound(s) are 'heard', silenced and distorted as relevant data in these interactions, and how 'the auditory system' becomes a platform in which researchers and interviewees negotiate various articulations of power hierarchies embedded in the research process as well. Data collected from studies on labor relations in Jordan's humanitarian aid sector inform the discussion in this paper. In so doing, this paper contributes to ongoing conversations related to research infrastructures and industries in WANA and the various forms of labor, extraction and resistance they produce and entail.

### **Interviewing Outside the "Interview-society". Limits and Challenges of the Western-born Qualitative Approach**

*Odetta Pizzingrilli, Post-doctoral Research Fellow in History of Islamic Countries, Luiss Guido Carli University*

My aim is to investigate how the methodological (qualitative) approach itself and its tools, being products of Western academic culture, may negatively impact on data reliability and research outcomes when used in non-Western contexts.

By analyzing challenges and outcomes of my fieldwork experience, both in person, in Jordan and Kuwait, and online, with Iraqi refugees, I intend to focus on the tool of the interview to understand whether it fits the complex, multi-level Arab-Muslim context that mostly lacks the signature characteristics proper of the “interview-society” (Gobo, 2011).

Moreover, I will tackle the increasingly important aspect of “positionality” (Bourke, 2014), which indeed refers to the different positions occupied by the researcher and the participants, often not part of the same cultural and social community (Bourke, 2014).

Finally, following Smith’s account (1999), I will present Indigenous methodologies (IMs) and participatory action research (PAR) as ways of overthrowing methodological colonialism.

### **Self-reflexive Positionality as a Filtering Mechanism: An Opportunity to Decolonize Research in Lebanon**

*Irene Tuzi, Postdoctoral Researcher, Humboldt University Berlin, Germany*

Self-reflexive research approaches invite scholars to identify, construct, critique, and articulate one’s own positionality as part of the research process. A self-reflexive positionality can inform the researcher-participant relationship and mitigate methodological and ethical challenges. In this sense, a self-reflexive positionality can be used as a filtering mechanism to bypass reductionist and exceptionalist understandings of the field. Through data collected in Lebanon between 2016 and 2019, in this paper, I discuss how self-reflexive positionality can be used as a tool to examine methodological and theoretical tools used in over-researched environments and “fragile” research contexts as well as the power relations occurring in doing research with vulnerable and disadvantaged populations in the WANA region. This paper contributes to the debate about decolonizing research tools and suggests that self-reflexive positionality offers the opportunity to deconstruct given for granted assumptions and narratives, rethink categories, minimize the influence of cultural and social prejudices, and let participants’ experiences guide observations and analyses.