Ethnographic Biography: Tracing Paths Across Multiple Times and Spaces

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Abstract
In this article, we propose “ethnographic biography” as a research strategy designed to address the basic difficulty of qualitative studies in capturing the temporal dimension of human action and experience. This difficulty is particularly salient when the subjects are dispersed in space and their contacts with the researcher are repeatedly interrupted. To overcome these discontinuities in space and time, the “ethnographic biography” combines complementary research tactics: Alongside biographical follow-up interviews — the commonly acceptable approach to resolving the temporal challenge — we propose two additional ethnographic methods: focused observations of social events and ongoing interactions with the subjects in virtual spaces. The advantage of that set of methods lies in that each method which locates the encounter between the researcher and the subjects in a different space and captures a different temporal dimension.

Keywords
Ethnographic biography, young adults, time and space, longitudinal study, ethno-class identity

Introduction
Multiple methodologies are common practice in qualitative research. Many researchers select several methods out of the available methodological toolkit to create the pragmatic combination suitable for their research purposes (Lamont & Swidler, 2014). Our aim is to conceptualize our own experience and offer a research strategy we call “ethnographic biography” as a solution for coping with temporal and spatial discontinuities involved in long-term studies. More particularly, this strategy has been found effective when the subjects are not restricted to a given location, but rather move across geographical space, constantly changing spheres of activity, occupations, and roles.

The leading methodological tool is follow-up biographic interviews, enabling the researcher to follow the interviewees as they disperse in space and maintain ongoing contact with them. To enrich the knowledge acquired in the interviews, which is retrospective, we applied two ethnographic tactics: focused observations of social events and frequent virtual contacts with the subjects. These enable us to “zoom in” on the subjects’ lived experiences in greater proximity to their occurrence and in their “natural” life spaces, whether virtual or real. We claim that the combination of these three research tactics connects various dimensions of space and time and thus strengthens the study’s temporal dimension and expands our ability to explore lived experiences.

The Story of Biographic Ethnography
This research strategy grew out of a study that wished to follow the paths of young adults from different two groups in terms of ethnicity and social class in Israeli society (Tabib-Calif, 2021). More particularly, the research examined whether and how young adults mobilized their ethnic identity in various social spheres (space) and over the long term (time).

The first author met the subjects for the first time when conducting an ethnographic study in an integrative public high

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school located in central Israel. Her research focus was on how students perceived, interpreted, and acted upon their ethnic identity in school’s daily reality (Tabib-Calif & Lomsky-Feder, 2014). Next, we sought to understand the meanings of this identity outside school and in later life. The desire to follow the subjects after graduation as they grew into adults met with difficulties. Traditional ethnography, which had been highly effective in exploring their ethnic identity at school, was unsuitable as the young adults were in constant movement in geosocial space and regularly changed occupations and social roles. In their effort to pave their path to adulthood, they were drafted and discharged from military service, traveled around the globe, moved from one temporary job to another, entered and left various institutes of higher education, changed apartments frequently, and spent long periods in remote locations, often abroad. Due to this spatial mobility, no distinctive fields were available to us for observing them and learning how they managed their ethnic identity in everyday life. We turned to the most common and accessible research tactic used in these cases — the open-ended interview — to learn from their perspectives how ethnic identity changed with the life course and how it gave meaning to trends of change and continuity.

We made two decisions to overcome the immanent difficulty of the open-ended interview in capturing the temporal dimension (Lamont & Swidler, 2014). First, to conduct a biographical interview, assuming that its retrospective and narrative nature would highlight or even structure the temporal dimension. Second, to construct a longitudinal research design of follow-up interviews to allow us to examine change and continuity processes over time (Hermanowicz, 2013; Read, 2018).

We interviewed 12 young women and men from two distinct groups: Mizrahi Jews of Middle Eastern or North-African origins (Mizrahim), who grew up in families of low socioeconomic status (SES), and Ashkenazi Jews of European or American origins (Ashkenazim), from medium to high SES families, who had all graduated from a uniquely integrative high school. Over a 10-year period, we interviewed them five times: while they were still in high school (at age 16–17); some 4 years later (20–21); and from then on three more times at approximately 1-year intervals. By the time the study ended, some were in higher education, others began establishing themselves in the labor market, and many had already married.

The repeated interviews formed significant and ongoing relations between the researcher and the subjects. The researcher’s curiosity about the subjects’ lives between the interviews and the latter’s desire to share significant experiences in real time led to interactions beyond the interview setting. These included mainly virtual encounters through emails, phone calls, and social media contacts as well as actual meetings in social events to which the researcher was invited, such as weddings. Based on the methodological pragmatism approach (Lamont & Swidler, 2014), we realized that what grew spontaneously should be adopted systematically as part of our working methods. Thus, the biographical follow-up interviews — that had formed the main methodological tool — were combined with ethnographic elements that brought the researcher and subjects together in shared temporary spaces, whether concrete or virtual.

Integrating Ethnographic Aspects in the Biographic Interview: Theoretical Background

The combination between ethnography and biography attracts growing attention in the anthropological literature, suggesting the researchers’ concern with the gap between the subjects’ dynamic experiences and the insights elicited by the ethnographer. This trend is articulated in an article collection dedicated to the issue that addresses this gap in various ways, common to all of which is the attempt to promote biography as integral to ethnography (Carsten et al., 2018). In articles adopting this approach, ethnography remains the leading methodology, but the researchers borrow biographic tools to bring it closer to the subjects’ inner world. This allows the researchers to expand the space–time dimensions beyond the ethnographic context.

Particularly relevant in this regard is Beatty (2019), whose book proposes a research approach called “narrative ethnography.” Having studied emotions in two different communities in Indonesia, Beatty relies on the unique qualities of ethnography. However, his focus on the emotions has confronted him with the limitations of ethnography, as he writes: “We need to reintegrate conceptual critique with ethnographic analysis, bringing theoretical concepts closer to practical realities [...] A shrinking from the ethnographic actuality and a retreat into definitional debates have vitiated both theory and the reporting on which it is based. We have taken our eye off the ball” (Beatty, 2019, p. 15–16). To “restore the heartbeat” (Beatty 2018, p. 17) to ethnography, Beatty (2018) seeks to include in his work biographic elements that add the dynamics of emotions and memory to ethnography.

Staples (2014) takes a step further in bringing ethnography and biography together. Based on an extensive ethnographic fieldwork, his study tells the story of Das, a Tamil Brahmin born in postcolonial India of the early 1950s. Like Beatty, Staples criticizes the ethnographic product as academic and inaccessible to the point that the subjects may not identify themselves in the researchers’ description. His use of biographic elements enables him (and his subject) to break the “large” life events into smaller units, revealing the dynamic nature of cultural categories usually perceived as fixed and “natural.” Thus, narrative ethnography seeks to extend the researcher’s perspective to include spatio-temporal dimensions related to the subjects’ inner world, which usually remain hidden in ethnographies.

While these studies integrate biographic elements into the ethnography, we propose the opposite by combining ethnographic elements into the biography. This approach, which we call “ethnographic biography,” is based on the open-ended interview as the leading methodological tool supported by the ethnographic elements. These elements expand the researcher’s
In the biographical interview, the subjects convey their life narrative as a sequence of events and experiences. The story links the narrator’s past, present, and future and gives meaning to this sequence. Although the story is personal, it always incorporates various cultural models and group memories that reflect the narrator’s intersectional social positioning and its historical context (Bruner, 1987; Denzin, 1989; Linde, 1993; Lomsky-Feder & Sasson-Levy, 2016; Spector-Mersel, 2010).

Assuming that identities “arise from the narrativization of the self” (Hall, 1996, p. 4), young people constantly tell themselves and others their life narrative (Dunn, 2017). Yet, the interview wherein the interviewees are asked to tell their life story is a clear example of a life narrative as an intentional and reflexive act (Watson, 1976). By examining their life experience in retrospect, the subjects assess their lives against their expectations and dreams, compare their experiences with those of other young adults, and interpret their achievements in light of the values of their parents’ generation. This examination impels the narrators to deal with processes of change and continuity and encourages them to offer some explanations of their life course as young adults.

The power of the biographical interview lies in being situated outside the daily flow of life — but therein also lies its weakness. This location empowers the interviewees’ reflexive gaze, but at the same time pulls them away from the minor everyday decisions that often shape the life course in practice. This characteristic is particularly salient in the case of recurring interviews, as evident in our research, where interviewees were asked to describe major events, experiences, and processes in relation to the previous interview. Moreover, these interviews covered multiple issues as they attempt to trace the interviewees’ integration in the various spheres of life and activity arenas. Therefore, the interviewer went to great lengths to encourage them to present their lived experiences in a panoramic manner characterized by emphasis on the “big” moves in life. The interviewees, on their part, internalized the interviewer’s expectations, presenting an overview that essentially skipped the banal and quotidian and what they took for granted (see also Sherman Heyl, 2001).

In general, the narrators seek to share with the interviewer the experiences and life events that seem particularly significant in their mission to fulfill the cultural expectation for self-realization (Bauman, 2000). This expectation pushes the narrators to organize their life events as a linear, teleological sequence, with the psychological discourse dominating as the interpretive models that provide meaning to that sequence (Illouz, 2007). The research interview is part of a broader social phenomenon called “interview society” (Atkinson & Silverman, 1997), where it is used as an arena of confession and self-revelation in popular culture. The biographical interview, therefore, produces texts that have undergone intensive cultural editing. Conducting repeated interviews softens the biographical construction processes, however, since the distance between the lived experiences and their narration narrows and we obtain “rawer” texts that fortify the study’s temporal dimension.

Two examples will serve to illustrate the nature of the materials produced in these interviews. The first is that of Yossi, a young Mizrahi man of lower-class background. During the research period, Yossi had an ambivalent attitude to higher education. While for young, middle-class Ashkenazi higher studies are integral to their identity, for Yossi this was
not the obvious path. Given a family and community environment in which most young adults did not seek higher education, Yossi was torn between the values imbued in high education, and the actual learning experience, which was difficult for him. Fear of failure led him to dissociate higher education from employment:

Learning is something that passes through my head and out of it approximately every ten or 15 minutes. I don’t know what to tell you. It’s like I want to study, but more for myself than for the degree and for academic success, or for finding a job [...]. You know, learning is always good. It’s like, you saw me at school, I wasn’t mister perfect but I did well. I’d say that in retrospect, I should have tried harder. (June 2009)

This fear is not unfounded. In an interview 2 years later, he speaks about his difficulty passing the entrance exams and shares his doubts about higher education:

I was admitted to college but only provisionally [...]. When I finish my degree, I will be thirty – go start your life then. [...] I don’t have any support. No... I am not waiting for something to fall from the sky. If I have support, then I will be able [to graduate] and if not... If not, then I won’t... (July 2011)

In an interview conducted 1 year later, he is more optimistic, and explains to the interviewer the advantages of college studies:

In the meantime, everything’s fine. [...] I went there, they admitted me, I told myself, like, that’s the last thing I’m trying in terms of studies. I mean... I’ve had it. And... touch wood, I’m extremely pleased, both with the quality of studies and from the courses and most of all with the guys. It’s like I have to really good friends with me, and we spend the entire year together, we study together, and we all have good grades, and that’s one of the things I am most pleased with. (July 2012)

The consecutive interviews reveal a complex, dynamic, and often contradictory reality. We see how the ethnic identity and class position is manifested in concrete decision-making and how the subject’s attitude toward higher education repeatedly changes over time.

The second example is Shira, who comes from a similar social background. While Yossi’s case demonstrates the dynamics in time in a single sphere of action—higher education—in her case, ethnic identity operates across different spheres. In her first interview after high school graduation, Shira tells much about her military service. She has served as a service conditions NCO—a coveted position held mainly by women soldiers that is similar to that of a social worker, with responsibility for the welfare of individual recruits, mainly of low SES background. Since most of her colleagues came from stronger social groups, the encounter with them strengthened Shira’s ethnic identity and social awareness:

When I look at that group of service conditions NCOs who were in the course with me [I see] rich kids who grew up with a silver spoon in their mouth. And next to them, I see a girl who grew up in [a poor neighborhood in Jerusalem], with lots of social awareness, from a school that mainly let her say what she thinks to allow her to express herself and what she believes in, entering a military setting with 100 girls... who have no idea what you’re talking about [...]. What used to be so obvious at school was suddenly unclear elsewhere. (June 2009)

Although she comes from a lower social class, Shira feels powerful and even superior to her colleagues because of her well-developed social awareness. In that sense, military service has considerably empowered her. Things change, however, when she is discharged and begins her academic studies. In this arena, she feels marginalized:

When I’m feel I’m getting behind [in my studies], then I feel very much inferior, I feel stuck, then I ascribed it to my Mizrahi-ness, and then I’m not willing to let go of that discourse; and when I succeed and I pull it off and I’m smart… then I’m still Mizrahi, but now in a much less emotional sense. (December 2010)

Like Yossi, higher education is difficult for Shira and she attributes her difficulties explicitly to her “Mizrahi-ness” (a common word in Hebrew), that is, her social background that lacks the appropriate habitus. She overcomes the difficulty and completes a university graduate program.

Shira’s ethnic identity is present not only in public spheres, however, but also in her intimate relationships, becoming particularly evident when she dates an Ashkenazi partner. While Shira tries to underplay the importance of ethnic and class gaps, the environment keeps reminding her:

“So? You got yourself an Ashkenazi, eh?!”, my friend told me [...] and when it came from her I got terribly offended. What she said infuriated me [...]. My Mizrahi-ness is what I am and that’s what I bring into my relationship with Jonathan, it’s on the table, it’s something we’re talking about [...]. And I would like to believe and hope that a person’s lover for another is more powerful than that discourse. I mean... True, this discourse exists, and it manages me and it’s part of who I am, in certain places, but I would like to believe it would not get me stuck... (December 2010)

Eventually, Shira breaks up with her Ashkenazi boyfriend and marries a Mizrahi man, albeit of higher social status. We will return to them later. From the interviews with Shira, we learned about her ethnic identity as it changed with time and in the various spheres of action (military service, higher education, and intimate life)—sometimes it is central and sometimes it is marginal; sometimes it is empowering, and sometimes it makes Shira feel inferior. Clearly, this identity is interwoven in Shira’s life course and the repeated interviews reveal its various expressions.
The biographical follow-up interviews turned out to be highly productive, as they created a sense of continuity—in each, the interviewees referred to the time elapsed since the previous one. This encouraged them to delve into details and sharpened their reflexive gaze on process related to their lives (Sherman Heyl, 2001). Moreover, the repeated interviews refined the interpretive lens not only of the interviewees but also of the researcher since they required her to be constantly open to new interpretations and challenges posed by the subjects themselves (Thomson & Holland, 2003).

The encounter with the subjects over time heightened also the ability to locate biographical life events within a socio-historical context. When subjects portray their lives, it is not only the individual who is drawn but also the environment of which he or she forms part. The context places the subjects in space–time coordinates and inserts them in a historical moment and in circumstances that are necessary to adequately decipher the subjects’ lives. This quality refines the researcher’s ability to analyze the interrelations between the various levels of action (micro, meso, and macro), thereby identifying opportunities and structural barriers in various institutional contexts. Moreover, it enables to map differential paths of entering into adulthood with relation to intersectional social variables of ethnicity and class (Hermanowicz, 2013; Thomson & Holland, 2003). For example, our analysis has extracted two distinct paths to adulthood according to ethnic identity and class position: whereas Mizrachi young adults are preoccupied with achieving intergenerational social mobility, their Ashkenazi peers struggle to retain their parents’ status (Tabib-Calif, 2019).

Using the follow-up interviews also exposed global and local historical events that were most accessible to the researcher, enabled the closest follow-up on the subjects’ lives. Reading their posts allowed her to catch a glimpse of the personal life flow of each—it was a way of observing them from afar. While reading the posts was passive and unidirectional, chats, as well as emails and phone calls, enabled active and dialogic encounter with the subjects. It is the latter who usually initiated the contacts and timed them to follow major experiences. Their personal/subjective time, rather than the research time, determined the schedule of the virtual encounter. For example, Yahli updated the researcher on his global trip:

Yahli: How are you?
Researcher: Are you in Europe?
Y: I did not see you in Amsterdam [reference to the researcher’s trip to Amsterdam the same month].
R: I’m good. I’m resting a bit
Y: I’m in France now.
R: France? I’m jealous. So where have you been to so far?
Y: Just Spain and France. (September 2011)

The subjects did not only talk about where they were in geographic space but also about where they were in terms of achievements in life, employment, marital status, etc. Tomer, for example, was admitted to graduate studies in London, and emailed the researcher an excited update on the significant transition:

Moving to London for a year! You’re more than welcome to drop by, we’ll have a drink and watch a match. Gonna be studying at King’s College and play English football, new adventures are just around the corner! (September 2014)

Ohad also contacted the researcher to inform her of a significant turning point in his life:

Ohad: I saw that you’d be completing your PhD soon! Good for you!
Researcher: Thank you, I’ve submitted it already. How are you?
O: How crazy it must be to be after something like that! Good job! And best wishes for the new member of the family, she’s awfully cute! I don’t remember when we last met, but last week I found a legal practice. I’m going to train in the Supreme Court—I couldn’t ask for anything better, and I’ve been living with my friend for several months now, so on the whole, all is well. (April 2015)

Online Contacts: Virtual Space and Subjective Time

One major way of maintaining continuous contact with the subjects was through various virtual platforms. Facebook, which was most accessible to the researcher, enabled the closest follow-up on the subjects’ lives. Reading their posts allowed her to catch a glimpse of the personal life flow of each—it was a way of observing them from afar. While reading the posts was passive and unidirectional, chats, as well as emails and phone calls, enabled active and dialogic encounter with the subjects. It is the latter who usually initiated the contacts and timed them to follow major experiences. Their personal/subjective time, rather than the research time, determined the schedule of the virtual encounter. For example, Yahli updated the researcher on his global trip:

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Virtual meetings mean more than just exchanging updates, however. For the interviewees, they also serve as an opportunity to continue addressing issues raised in the biographical interviews. Major events in their lives make them want to share with the researcher in real time, and talk about things in-between the interviews. To illustrate, let us return to Yossi and Shira.

As we have seen, after having been indecisive about higher education and having experienced admission difficulties, Yossi talked in the interview about his satisfaction with college studies and particularly about how the learning experience was better than in high school. The ambivalence with regard to academic studies remained, however, and in a chat he had initiated, he shared his doubts with the researcher:

Yossi: How’s it going?
Researcher: Writing, writing…
Y: What are you writing?
R: My dissertation.
Y: Aren’t you tired of that already?
R: 😊
Y: I’ve had enough of this degree, and I haven’t given it even 50% of my ability. I won’t study anymore. I’ve had it! Nothing comes out of it anyway. At least not in Israel.
R: Why?
Y: Because it used to guarantee you a respectable employment and quality of life and today, even those who have an academic degree can’t make ends meet and live with dignity […] (January 2014)

Eventually, Yossi left school. He felt the need to share this decision with the researcher in a telephone call, made after the formal conclusion of the research:

I left school because I moved in with dad. He’s sick and I can’t leave him alone. Listen, I won’t put my dad in a nursing home or dump him. The least I can do for him is to be there for him. If that means I won’t continue studying or start working, then that’s what it means. (May 2015)

Yossi’s final decision is made due to family constraints. He posits education against the family and within that normative conflict he chooses the latter (see also Lamont, 2000; Sasson-Levy, 2005).

Shira has also talked about her academic difficulties in an interview. In a phone call of her own initiative, she illustrates that by telling the researcher about an incident at the university that had agitated her:

You don’t understand how hard it is for me at school. I have a course where every week we analyze our educational practice, and yesterday a guest lecturer came and we started arguing. So the course lecturer says: “Shira is always angry”. You realize how hard it was for me to hear this, because it confronts me again and again with the place I’m coming from. I don’t want to be labelled […] Yesterday I really came back home crying. I want to believe that this is not all about my Mizrahi-ness. (January 2013)

Shira uses the ongoing contact with the researcher not only as a source of support but also as an online site of reflection that enables her to locate and relocate herself in the reality of life.

The virtual encounters have thus been important because of the continuity that is dictated by the subjects’ personal time, as opposed to the interviews that are tied to the research time. Therefore, the information we have received about the subjects through the virtual contact is essentially fragmented and nonlinear (Dunn, 2017)—much more so than that received from the biographical interviews.

Social Events: “Natural” Space and Social Time

Another way of expanding the study’s temporal dimension was through face-to-face meetings around social events in the subjects’ “natural” environments—mainly weddings, which are one of the hallmarks of social maturity, but also casual meetings like family dinners. These encounters, which were less frequent, had an ethnographic character in the traditional sense of the word. For example, in an interview held in Dudu’s home that stretched into a lunch with his mother and sister, the researcher shifted from being an interviewer to being a participant observer. Over lunch, Dudu spoke about the difficult condition of the neighborhood due to the entrance of “Ethiopians” (Jews of Ethiopian descent who are dark-skinned and predominantly low class). His mother joined in:

Nobody takes care of them. You decided to bring them? Then take care of them. They’re miserable, they really are […]
Dudu: They dumped them here, real nice, they gave them houses…
Mother [interjects]: They dumped them. Just like that. The Russian [immigrants] are being promoted, but they left the Ethiopians here. They’re just miserable. Go see what’s going on in the neighborhood, it’s really scary to go downstairs. They’re scary. And lots of Sudanese [asylum seekers]. Even now, there are […] Ethiopians and Sudanese there. They’re creepy, those Sudanese. You don’t know the half of it. (May 2012)

The atmosphere around the table and Dudu’s mother’s entry into the conversation expanded the researcher’s understanding regarding the new social hierarchy in the neighborhood where he lived—an aspect lacking in the “ordinary” interviews with him. Following Margaret Kusenbach (2003), this conversation could be seen as a “go-along” interview, meaning that the interview was displaced from a disconnected and static space and moved into the interviewee’s natural and dynamic space.
Another example for a go-along interview was when Natalie and her partner invited the researcher to a tour with American guests. Natalie, who was very fearful they would not be able to manage an entire day of English speaking, asked the researcher to join in and help them play host. This gave the latter the opportunity to meet Natalie’s partner Kfir, who was Mizrahi, but of a higher class, and observe Natalie in her daily life. The following excerpt is taken from the field notes:

The tour revealed gaps between her and him. Sometimes, Kfir was mad at her for fooling around during a serious tour, or for “gossiping” about the guests who did not understand Hebrew. Indeed, she behaved a bit childishly during the tour. She kept giggling, probably out of embarrassment. She refused to go inside churches, stating that as a traditional Jew she never enters these places. (November 2011)

Unlike the biographical interviews, where Natalie expresses great confidence in her identity, during the tour a more vulnerable aspect is revealed, and her behavior conveys lack of confidence. Her attempts to gossip behind their back and her refusal to enter churches highlight her boundary work vis-à-vis the others in the tour.

As mentioned, the researcher has met subjects in their natural environment also at weddings—one of the main life events that mark the transition into adulthood and connect the personal time with the social time (Zerubavel, 1976). To illustrate, we now describe two weddings of Mizrahi interviewees of medium-low class.8 Despite the interviewees’ similar ethnicity, the weddings were highly different, indicating different identity work by each. Natalie’s wedding had been meticulously planned for a year, and was an elaborate and expensive event that cost the couple considerable money—despite the fact that in the interviews with her, Natalie kept talking about her difficult financial situation. The ceremony took place in the evening, in a magnificent wedding hall, with 500 guests. A variety of dishes were served, the music was strictly Mizrahi, the couple made a dramatic entrance, Natalie changed her dress to a dancing outfit, and various gimmicks such as fireworks or stands where the guests could choose souvenir photos were included. The ceremony itself was religious, as described in the field notes:

Kfir and Natalie’s entrance to the chuppah [the canopy under which the wedding is officiated] is accompanied by a trumpeter wearing a tight-fitting white suit with a red cummerbund. The chuppah itself is luxurious, adorned with white flowers. The families are already waiting underneath it, as is the rabbi, dressed in a long white robe, with decorated miter on his head [a form of dress used by Mizrahi rabbis only] […]. The ceremony itself was conducted according to the Moroccan tradition. The rabbi, who turned out to be a “singing rabbi”, sang the ceremonial blessing, and also invited family members, men only, to bless the Seven Blessings [in the traditional version]. (November 2013)

The wedding fits the normative model of a lower-middle-class Mizrahi wedding (Kaplan, 2001), that combines a traditional religious ritual with a spectacle that manifests community power and respect. In a phone call with Natalie after the wedding, she returns to the familiar, harsh economic reality. When the researcher asks her how she feels after the wedding, she responds: “I don’t know… Now somebody has to pay for all that wedding. Maybe you have a job for me?”

Shira, on the other hand, used her wedding to promote a different identity agenda. Her wedding was also planned carefully and long in advance, but unlike Natalie’s, it was planned as an alternative to the traditional “normative” ceremony, one that adopts middle-class cultural markers. The wedding was held in a museum, on a Friday noon, and only 200 guests attended. According to the field notes,

The guests were invited to 11:30, and the wedding began some 2 hours later. During that time, quiet classical music was played in the background by a string quartet […]. Shira joined the guests—a skinny bride, smiling abashedly, wearing a secondhand dress borrowed from a friend […]. Shira walked around the guest tables and patiently kissed each one, exchanged a few civilities and thanked them for coming. In the open area was a small and plain chuppah Shira and Ron had decorated the previous day. Only a stills photographer was invited, with one of Shira’s friends responsible of the video photography […]. The ceremony was conducted by an Ashkenazi rabbi known for his egalitarian weddings. The two spoke to each other, and their main messages were love, respect and mutual responsibility. The meal was relatively modest with a limited choice of dishes. A Mizrahi activist friend who was invited to the wedding together with me told me: “I have never been in such a wedding. This is really taking it to the extreme […]. This wedding is too reflexive. (June 2014)

Clearly, Shira’s main effort was to display her social mobility by acquiring a new type of cultural class capital. She did not conceal her ethnic identity, which was expressed mainly at the end of the event in the form of classical Arab music, but her wedding was tailored to the model of the middle-class ceremony: it was simple and restrained in terms of food and dress, and egalitarian and modern in its approach to the religious ritual and in giving personal voice to the young couple (Kaplan, 2001). In a phone call made after the wedding, Shira explained her choices to the researcher:

The wedding really – but really embodied us. I was not willing to have a video photographer – I wouldn’t spend that money. A friend filmed the wedding ceremony and the reception. I borrowed the dress from a friend. We saved in everything we could save. It’s all about where you choose to put your money – in a dress for one day, or in a week of honeymooning abroad. We played Arabic songs near the end; we had Umm Kulthum7 […]. If I look at the wedding and the way we did it, then in the end what we both wanted came out, reflecting our values, and that’s what’s important to me. (June 2014)

Each in her own way, Shira and Natalie leverage the wedding event in order to make a public statement of their
aspirations as adult women. Natalie expresses her desire to be economically mobile while clinging to her traditional Mizrahi identity, whereas Shira expresses the desire for class mobility, combined with an attempt to introduce new contents into her Mizrahi identity. As opposed to the biographical interviews where they only talk about these ambitions, participating in the wedding gives the researcher the opportunity to observe how these are embodied in the actual space of their lives.

The methodological strategies reviewed hitherto—biographical interviews, virtual encounters, and participant observation in social events—bring the researcher together with the subjects in different spaces governed by different temporal regimes, whether it is the research time or the subjects’ personal and social time. This movement in space and time helps maintain continuous contact with the subjects, also affecting the nature of the relations between them and the researcher.

**Relationship Continuity: Commitment to the Study, Ethical Pitfalls, and Over-Interpretation**

Sherman Heyl (2001) places a high priority on the relationship that develops between the researcher and participants during follow-up interviews. She believes these relationships are motivated by respect, openness, and empathy, leading to deep involvement by the subjects of the research project. Indeed, in the present study, the subjects have shown involvement, with some even becoming active informants. In the following chat, Daniella, for example, informs the researcher about a new novel published by a school graduate, which she believes can be valuable for the study:

Daniella: Hi dear. Have you seen the story in the “Haaretz” supplement?? (You probably have, but I’m writing to you anyway)

Researcher: I haven’t, actually. What’s it about?

D: It’s a piece about a girl who wrote a book about her difficult experiences at Givat Gonen School. She’s called Michal something. I can keep the newspaper and bring it to you. I think you’ll find it very interesting. (May 2012)

Tomer leaves the researcher a message following a televised news story about corruption among public officials:

Hi, what’s up? I home everything’s all right in your studies/work/family and in life in general. I wanted to share something with you: yesterday I watched the Channel 2 news, and I couldn’t ignore the fact that a particularly high percentage of the criminal items involved Mizrahi suspects at senior positions, such as mayors, police chiefs, a Shula Zaken and more [...]. I wanted to ask you if there is talk about it in Mizrahi circles. I turn to you both as a friend and as one who is an expert in these matters, and not by virtue of you being what’s called Mizrahi. I hope you understand, although I’m sure you do. Good night. (October 2013)

Tomer “demands” the opinion, outlook, knowledge, and professionality of the researcher, which do not allow her to be transparent or taken for granted.

The continuity in the researcher-participant relationship can also raise ethical issues and emotional pitfalls (Irwin, 2006). For example, when the researcher responded to a photo posted by Shalom on his Facebook page several months after their interview—showing a cake he had baked—he wrote back sardonically: “You’re always welcome to visit!! Oh, sorry, there’s no interview scheduled, so why should you come?” Shalom expressed the participants’ expectations that the researcher maintain a friendly relationship beyond the boundaries of the research, indicating that the boundary between instrumental and friendly relations became blurred. In another case, the researcher came to comfort the bereaved in Yossi’s house after his mother had passed away, he asked her, only half jestingly, “Wait a minute, did you come to me because of the mourning or did you come here for your research?”

Finally, a long-term relationship between the researcher and the participant can also lead to “hyper-reflexivity” and over-interpretation in the research (Thomson & Holland, 2003). Thomson and Holland warn against “relentless introspection” (p. 239): the fear is that the longer the research continues, the frequency and intensity of contacts would lead the researcher to intervene in subjects’ lives and even result in events, situations and experiences reported by the subjects being subordinated to the research objectives determined by the researcher in advance. One way of mitigating such pitfalls is to set clear boundaries and even maintain conscious formal distance between the researcher and subjects, as well as encourage them to speak up about the impact of the research on their lives, as indeed has often been done in the present study.

**Conclusion**

**Ethnographic Biography—Detecting Changes over Time and Observing Lived Experiences**

In this article, we proposed ethnographic biography as a research strategy designed to address the basic difficulty of qualitative studies in capturing and adequately representing the temporal dimension of human action and experience (Lamont & Swidler, 2014). This difficulty is exacerbated when the subjects are dispersed in space and the researcher is unable to reside in a certain location for a period long enough to follow-up on her subjects. Consequently, the contacts between her and the subjects are repeatedly interrupted. To overcome these discontinuities in space and time, we have developed a research strategy that circumvents the need for actual, ongoing physical presence of the researcher in the field. The combination of complementary research tactics detailed above meets this difficulty: together with biographical follow-up interviews—the commonly acceptable approach to resolving the temporal challenge—we propose two more methods: focused observations of social events and ongoing virtual contacts with the subjects.
The power of that set of methods lies in that each locating the encounter between the researcher and the subjects in a different space and extracts a different temporal dimension. The varying combinations of space and time allow the researcher to learn about the subjects out of various social contexts, further bolstering the study's temporal aspect.

Biographical follow-up interviews are the main method used to follow-up on the subjects over time. The encounter with the interviewees is held in constant intervals, with the timing and frequency determined by the researcher, according to the research needs. The interviews are positioned on the coordinates of research time, creating a space disconnected from the subjects’ natural lived reality. This space enhances the subjects’ ability to look at their own lives retrospectively and reflexively.

The integration of additional ethnographic research tactics is designed to compensate for the dominance and implications of the research time and space and allows the researcher to meet the participants in-between the scheduled interviews in spaces integral to their “real” lives—virtual spaces and social events. These meetings maintain continuity in the relationship with the participants, ensuring their ongoing commitment to the research. Their importance lies, however, in not only maintaining interpersonal contacts but also in that they introduce additional space–time dimensions that enrich the researcher’s knowledge and understanding of subjects’ lives. Unlike an interview, the virtual and social meetings are not regular or regulated but dictated by biographical events. While the interview is governed by the research time, the meetings in the other spaces bring to the fore the subjective sense of time and promote the constructions of social time. While the interview is located outside “real life,” the meetings in the other spaces are integrated in subjects’ daily reality. Therefore, leaving the interview space to venture into others helps the researcher become exposed to “raw” experiences as they occur, enabling her to observe rather than just be reported about behavior and to attend to the “minor” and banal events that tend to become engulfed in the retrospective nature of the biographical interview.

To conclude, ethnographic biography interweaves ethnographic elements in-between the follow-up interviews, allowing the researcher to move in various spaces and different experiences of time. These movements bring the researcher closer to the subjects’ daily lives, expands the lens with which she observes the personal-cultural nexus, and refines her ability to detect changes over time and narrow the gap between what the subjects tell the researcher about the world and the way they act in it.

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Notes
1. Since all participants were Jews, all were required to enlist after graduating from high school.
2. In Jewish-Israeli culture, it is customary for discharged soldiers to spend long months or even years abroad, particularly in developing countries and often in groups.
3. Studies that adopted a similar methodology of following subjects over time include, for example, (Gordon & Labelma, 2003; Lareau & Weininger, 2008; Smith, 2014; Thomson & Holland, 2003).
4. Despite attempts to maintain constant intervals, the interview schedule often had to be adjusted to the participants’ limited availability, particularly because they traveled often and frequently changed residences.
5. Note that the use and documentation of all informal media (Facebook, phone calls, emails, etc.) have been made with the subjects’ consent, and no materials have been borrowed without their knowledge and consent.
6. The Ashkenazi middle-class participants did not marry during the period under study, and there is a distinct class difference in that regard.
7. Egyptian singer (d. 1975), still one of the best known and popular in the Arab world.
8. Haaretz is an Israeli newspaper.
9. Shula Zaken was the office manager and confidante of former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert. Deeply involved in the crimes in which he was eventually convicted, she testified against him in return for reduced punishment.

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