Research Practices: Praxis and Precarity

Laura Fish, University of Texas at Austin

In December 2016, I traveled alone to Iran for research on my PhD dissertation on Iranian commercial cinema. The day I was supposed to leave, members of the Iranian intelligence agency questioned me, accused me of visa violation, provided me with photographic evidence of my violation, and confiscated my passport. I could not leave Iran until I had submitted a "report" of my activities. When they returned my passport, I immediately returned to the U.S. and was later warned by professors, colleagues, and eventually an FBI agent that future travel to Iran would be unwise. Previous to this trip to Iran, I had been to the country twice before in a group each time, and had been provided experiential information about a few other academics' travel and research in Iran.

Following my experience, I was hesitant to share with others in a professional context for multiple reasons. First, on a personal level, I was still processing the questioning and its consequences: possibly putting my sources' lives in jeopardy if they were discovered, having to change my approach to my project, and understanding that I would not be able to return to Iran. Secondly, from a professional perspective, I worried that I would appear naive about my field despite assurances prior to my trip that such an experience would not happen. Alternatively, by disclosing that this had happened in a Middle Eastern country, it might appear that I was conforming to orientalist tropes of the Middle East as an inherently dangerous region. While I knew of academics of Iranian descent who have faced questioning and arrest by Iranian authorities, in the year following my experience, I learned of other academics' interrogations, along with those that have occurred prior to my trip. Only since the publicizing of a Princeton student's imprisonment in Iran[1] did other academics begin publicly sharing their experiences. Had these experiences been made more widely known and scholars, myself included, not been encouraged to remain silent, countless scholars and I would have been better informed regarding the risks of visiting, how to deal with questioning, or would not have visited in the first place.

Within this response, I pose multiple arguments. First, within academic contexts, there needs to be a greater willingness to share and discuss risks that might arise for the researcher while they are in the field. For those hesitant to share because they fear they may face career repercussions or university censure, there needs to be an anonymous system for reporting unsettling or dangerous encounters in the field. A culture of silence surrounds the problems scholars have faced while researching outside of their institution that only perpetuates the myth that my and others' experiences with threatening political institutions or any number of risky situations are rare.

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[1] While the arrest occurred in the summer 2016, the student's imprisonment was only publicized a year later in summer 2017.

Secondly, I am arguing that changes to this culture and meaningful methods of preparing and training particularly junior scholars to enter fieldwork must come from professional associations. For scholars of the Middle East, while I have presented on researcher risk for the Middle East Caucus of SCMS, I suggest that organized attention come from the Middle East Studies Association as the center of the field. At the university level alone, scholars may face negative consequences for reporting issues in the field due to the university's attempt to avert their own financial responsibility to the scholar. Professional associations can pool resources to provide training and question/answer sessions about dealing with study in particular countries or populations, or generalized regions and from multiple disciplinary approaches. Further, their annual meetings provide the ideal setting for workshops to attend to issues related to danger and what to expect or how to respond when faced with questioning, harassment, or other interpersonal issues that may arise.

Lastly, I want to discuss the results of a survey I submitted to Middle East studies scholars about their experiences researching in the region. Overwhelmingly those who completed the survey noted experiences in which they felt at risk while performing research. Although these risks varied widely between isolated encounters and outright confrontation with government officials, less than half of the respondents noted that they could report on their experiences. Within the results there was a strong call for better training for all scholars about how to approach fieldwork that is less independently attained or relies exclusively on a small number of advisers who may not know the particular field. While better training does need to happen at the university and departmental levels, it must also come at the professional level to allow for greater openness about real risks that scholars, both junior and senior, have and will face.