

Blog Like an Egyptian

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I'm not sure about you, but I have always loved stories. Regardless of my role in one—reader, writer, observer, experiencer, or inspirer—the mere notion of a narrative has never failed to brighten my eyes and put a smile of remarkable goofiness on my face. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that I have spun this study into a bit of a story, because it is, in the end, just that. A true tale to be sure, but an interesting one; a tragic tale at times, but there's hope for a happy ending.

This is a story about moving—moving to another place, or standing still while the world moves around you. It is a story about changes—those you do not want, those you cannot help, and those you cannot help wanting with all your heart.

It is also a story of twos and ones—two viewpoints you try to squash together, two sides you are torn between, two brothers battling over a single birthright. Two groups, one wall; one winner, one end result, one final product.

The thing about twos and ones, though, is that they each—or both—take on different meanings at different times. Finding “just” two cans of Classic Coke in the refrigerator may horrify you beyond belief when seven snobbish sisters-in-law fill your living room, but if you're house-sitting for your brother's family and hanging out with their dogs and a good book, the second carb-filled can may seem like a bonus. And while it is often said that “one is the loneliest number,” it doesn't have to be, for it can also represent unity or strength.

So it would seem that this is a tale of multiplicities—in the form of mixed emotions, divided loyalties, double- and triple-standards, have-nots and have-a-lots. Normal, everyday stuff to be sure, and not

uncommon in the least. Cultures do often shift to embrace—or at least accommodate—technological advances, don't they? Naturally, those things considered to be cutting edge (or just plain edgy) by previous generations might seem commonplace, even outdated by today's young people; and generational conflicts notwithstanding, clashes will undoubtedly arise as some push for even more change—while others struggle to keep up with (or battle) the shifting cultural climate.

But now let us add the element of geographical shift to this tale. The plot thickens, because it's not just a question of how one *culture* will shift anymore. Rather, it's a question of how a person's way of *life* will shift—or not—in a new location that has its own culture (and cultural issues) to deal with. The individual who has relocated to a new home that does not feel like home might grapple with identity issues, unfamiliar boundaries, and communication barriers with native and nonnative host-landers.

KEY DEFINITIONS

Acculturation: Often called “second-culture learning,” acculturation involves the changes that occur to a group based upon their prolonged contact with members of other cultures.

Home-land: The land in which a person was born.

Host-land: The land that a person has moved to.

The subject of acculturation is, therefore, a significant one with potentially far-reaching implications for individuals—and the surrounding communities in their new homes (which still may not feel like home). Furthermore, while the particulars of acculturation struggles may vary from one culture to another (and one person to another), acculturation itself can (and does) somehow affect many or most immigrants—regardless of their home-land and particular circumstances.

As a budding scholar, I was intrigued by the implications of communication, culture, and psychology for acculturation and decided to build my doctoral research (at Florida State University in 2008 and 2009) around them all (Bishai, 2010).

Research Purpose

I have a confession to make: The real reason I chose to study acculturation had nothing to do with the scholarly implications and everything to do with the fact that my parents immigrated to Florida in the 1970s, and raised me in the Egypt of 1955 or so (I'm not complaining, by the way). It would appear that mine were not the only Arabic-speaking parents who accomplished this bit of amateur time travel in their child rearing, as evidenced by the relatively recent glut of television programs made for and by Arabic speakers in the Middle East and the diaspora.

KEY DEFINITIONS

Diaspora: Any place on the globe that (1) houses people from another country, and (2) is not the country in question. For example, the Egyptian diaspora could, theoretically, be located in every country but Egypt.

Hyphenated: Term used to refer to a person representing more than one culture in her/his identity, though there is no standard formula for the blend denoted by that label, and the hyphen isn't always written. For example, the labels of Egyptian American, Egyptian-American, and American Egyptian might be used to denote immigrants from Egypt living in America, American-born children of Egyptian immigrants, or bicultural individuals with one Egyptian parent and one American parent. Egyptians that have never lived anywhere but Egypt would not be considered hyphenated, however, unless they are also bicultural.

Dialogical model: A model that uses, allows, or emphasizes dialogue between voices or elements.

Copt: A highly contested term that is rarely used to mean "Egyptian," but usually refers to a Christian Egyptian, and nearly always refers to a member of the Coptic Orthodox Church. For example, most would consider me a Copt, but since I'm Presbyterian and not Orthodox, some might argue with my Coptic status.

These programs—which appear on satellite television and the Internet—often feature Egyptians and other Arabic speakers (hyphenated and not) who are using such technologies to publicly articulate

their struggles with identity confusion, collectivist clash, and communication incapability, among other things. The always-rich discourses on culture tend to splinter in many directions—including religion, mate selection, and psychological health. These natural categories lent shape to the early stages of my dissertation, and I was compelled to use the dialogical model for my study's theoretical underpinning. From that grew three goals of research, which were attained through the investigation of four main research questions.

THREE GOALS OF RESEARCH

1. An exploration of the acculturation strategies of Egyptians in the diaspora
2. An understanding of current attitudes, anxieties, and/or "dreams" held by Egyptians (living in Egypt or the diaspora)
3. A discovery of participants' manifestations of the dialogical model of acculturation through an examination of three communication dimensions (Identification, Cultural Orientation, and Communication Style)

Research Questions

The four main research questions that guided my study were as follows:

1. What are the acculturation strategies that Egyptian Christians in Egypt and the diaspora use to negotiate their identities?
2. What are some of the positive (goals, wishes, desires, "dreams"), negative ("cultural anxieties," conflicts, tensions), and/or neutral issues in the lives of Christian Egyptians in Egypt and the diaspora?
3. How do Christian Egyptians in Egypt and the diaspora negotiate any tensions or conflicts associated with their own desires and/or cultural anxieties?
4. How is the dialogical model of acculturation manifested in Christian Egyptians in Egypt and the diaspora with respect to the "three communication dimensions" (Identification, Cultural Orientation, and Communication Style)?

Investigations included descriptive questionnaires administered online, and qualitative interviews that were either administered online (synchronously and/or asynchronously) or conducted face-to-face and videotaped. In addition, the review of online blogs from eight bloggers (one Coptic Orthodox, seven Egyptian Muslim) provided additional insights, achieving validity through corroboration and triangulation.

Despite my reliance upon several technological tools during the stage of data collection, I will only be mentioning those relevant to this qualitative case study. They included Yahoo! Messenger (for synchronous online interviews), SurveyMonkey (for descriptive questionnaires that preceded the interviews), and Blogspot (which revealed other facets of certain participants).

With regard to data analysis, the method used was grounded theory, which yielded an almost-unnatural number of theories and/or significant findings. Due to the nature of this chapter, however, I will only be discussing those obtained through the use of real-time online interviews (and the aforementioned other two methods, where appropriate).

Research Design Overview

GUIDING THEORIES

While the notion of acculturation has been in circulation since Plato's decial of cultural contamination in *Laws* (Rudmin, 2003), the definition of what acculturation (and particularly "successful" acculturation) is has changed several times. To Redfield, Linton, and Herskovits (1936), acculturation happened when people or groups from one culture had firsthand and prolonged contact with those from other cultures, resulting in changes to the customs of one or both groups. To Gordon (1964), acculturation was a one-way process, a unidirectional model (UDM), where the immigrant simply had to give up the old culture to take on the new one. To Berry (1980), the UDM became "assimilation," while the concept of shunning one's new culture in favor of old was called "separation." Berry's fourfold model, also called the bidimensional model (BDM), further stipulated that a person who balanced both cultures well was in a position of "integration," while the person who shunned home and host culture equally was displaying the position of "marginalization."

Both uni- and bidimensional models have drawn some criticism in the years since their respective debuts, leading to the reworking of previous models and the introduction of completely different ones.

KEY DEFINITIONS

Dialogical self theory: Identity is made up of the dialogue between multiple strands.

Polychronic culture: Relationships are emphasized, time is elastic, and multitasking is a way of life.

Monochronic culture: The opposite of a polychronic one. This culture is rooted in efficiency, focusing on one goal or task, and getting the job done.

Collectivist culture: Emphasizes interdependence.

Individualist culture: Emphasizes independence.

One model in particular has begun to gain support from the varied fields of psychology and literary criticism, in which this model is rooted. The dialogical model of acculturation (DM), adapted from Hermans' (Hermans, Kempen, & van Loon, 1992; Hermans, Rijks, & Kempen, 1993) dialogical self theory, reflects the multiplicity of incompatible cultural positions within a single person (Bhatia, 2002), and also allows for the concurrent existence of multiple strands (Bakhtin, 1930s/1981; Said, 1999) of language, thought, and self. This is accomplished when some or many of these cultural strands dialogue with one another.

The dialogical models (of acculturation as well as self, for that matter) may seem counterintuitive to the Western notions of a "solid" or "core" identity (Raggatt, 2000), though they do generously lend themselves to the already-polyphonous lifestyle of polychronic collectivists.

For example, as Chaudhary and Sriram (2001) explain,

For the Indian psyche, the dialogical self is a reality. . . . The notion of a dialogical self is inherent in the social milieu in which Indians grow up, are socialized and live, and on which they depend for physical, social, and spiritual sustenance. (p. 380)

In other words, their culture is already operating under the dialogical model, by virtue of the fact that it is already multistranded and multitasking.

An example of the way the DM would work within an acculturation setting might go something like the story of Miriam.

MIRIAM'S STORY OF ACCULTURATION

Miriam and her family moved to California from Cairo when she was 2. English is her stronger language, but she prefers Arabic food and follows the traditional-but-unwritten guidelines of a "proper" Egyptian girl (i.e., no dating, no slumber parties, lives at home while attending a college in the same city her parents live in). One day, she meets her very own Prince Charming at the hospital where she has now secured a residency in nephrology. He, too, is an Egyptian American physician, and they discover much in common. It turns out, however, that he is a committed Protestant while she is Coptic, Orthodox-born but currently a nondenominational Christian. Her devoutly Orthodox parents would not allow this marriage to happen, since the Coptic Orthodox Church does not recognize marriages to members of other denominations. Because Miriam is torn between her various loyalties—to herself, to her family, to the faith she was born into, to the faith she actually practices, and to Prince Charming himself—she unwittingly uses a dialogical approach to think through this sociocultural and ethno-religious issue. "If I marry him, I get shunned from the church, and the parents might disown me for shaming them. If I don't marry him, the boat isn't rocked . . . but I'm gonna be pretty bummed! If I marry him and get disowned, then maybe the parents won't want to meet or become involved with my children, which would be sad and horrible, but also inconvenient while I'm building up my career. And I'd never ask him to convert—not because he would refuse it, which he would, but because then his family would disown him and then we'd be back at square one! Hmm . . ."

The Eastern version of the dialogical model is not so much about the various options one may select from, but the fact that many or most of the options presented to Arabic speakers and people from similarly collectivist cultures (such as India, Pakistan, South Korea, and Iran) are "loaded." In other words, deciding to go with a college major or potential spouse that the family does not approve of may result in long-lasting conflicts (or shunning).

All in all, many elements are represented within past and current models of acculturation, but the DM's emphasis on polyphony made it a natural choice for examinations of a polyphonous culture like the Egyptian one. The only problem was that the DM brilliantly

explained or depicted the cultural conflicts we Egyptians often face—but then stopped short of making an actual difference. The solution soon presented itself to me: “Ground the theory tweaking in the collected data!” So I did just that.

METHODOLOGY

To refine the dialogical model of acculturation, I relied upon grounded theory (GT) to approach data analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Jorgensen, 1989; Scott, 1995). GT stresses “the discovery of theory from data—systematically obtained and analyzed” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 1).

Very basically, a researcher using GT first collects all sorts of data and then does a great deal of staring. The idea is that notions will emerge from the data, suggesting themselves as theories or bits of theory. Much testing, tweaking, and retesting occur, followed by the birth of a shiny new theory.

In my study, the data included more than 10,000 pages of qualitative interviews, blog postings, and results from the aforementioned descriptive questionnaires. Not surprisingly, dozens of notions emerged from my data (but more on that in the research findings section).

SAMPLING APPROACH

While the overall population of Christians in Egypt has dwindled over the centuries, the people themselves have persevered, whether in Egypt—where they live with or battle against the religious persecution they are often subjected to—or in the diaspora. Despite our tenacity and ubiquity, we are grossly underrepresented in the literature on acculturation, Arab Americans, arranged marriages (which are not uncommon in the Egypt of today, though we tend to call them salon marriages), and “Middle Easterners” in general—hence, my intention of focusing upon Christian Egyptians.

Recruiting was done either face-to-face, online, or by phone. The physical “hunting grounds” included churches, religious conferences, and the homes of social contacts where my associates (parents, sisters, cousins, and friends in Egypt; relatives throughout America)

and I happened to be. Once leads had been generated, we followed up via e-mail, Myspace/Facebook postings, and messages targeted to fellow Egyptians.

DATA COLLECTION

Qualitative data has long been revered for its “thickness” and “richness” (Bryman & Bell, 2007, p. 313). To this end, a number of data collection methods have become available to the qualitative researcher. These methods include observation, descriptive questionnaire, textual analysis, and qualitative interview.

These and other methods have been devised because qualitative studies generally have an even greater need for corroboration and validation than do quantitative studies (Bryman & Bell, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 1978). For this reason, I was intent upon triangulating my data and devised a three-pronged approach to meet the goal. The first prong consisted of a descriptive questionnaire, the second involved the review of publicly available blogs found online, and the third and final prong was the real-time, qualitative online interview.

Some triangulation came from the fact that each participant had to complete both questionnaire and interview; another method of achieving triangulation involved the document review and textual analyses of English-language blogs maintained by Christian and Muslim Egyptians in Egypt and in the diaspora, only two of whom actively participated in the study (through the questionnaire and interview).

With regard to the first prong, I used a questionnaire because it allowed me to collect qualitative responses and demographic information straight from the primary source, but did not require my direct involvement in the process. While questionnaires are the most frequently used method in quantitative research (Frey, Botan, & Kreps, 1999, p. 99), they are sometimes used to collect information—such as self-reports and others’ reports—that can be qualitatively and/or textually analyzed (Frey et al., p. 96).

The questionnaires were asynchronously administered online via SurveyMonkey.com, and were completely anonymous in nature—though participants did have to create a distinct username that later functioned as a password. Preceding the username-creation page, however, was an electronic consent form. During the first few days of the study, would-be participants were required to click “Yes, I agree

and am ready to begin!” to view the questionnaire at all; but after 50 people gave me the slip (clicked “yes” and then failed to complete any questions), I decided to make the questionnaire available for review (as a pdf) and added a “not at this time” choice to the consent form.

With regard to the questionnaire’s contents, items were both direct and indirect, involving scenarios as well as straightforward questions. Response types included multiple choice-multiple response, multiple choice-single response, and short answer.

All told, more than 70 participants identifying as Christian Egyptians completed my descriptive questionnaire. This format increased the efficiency of data collection and management, while the anonymity of the questionnaire’s inquiry into sensitive topics yielded particularly insightful results that may have been difficult or impossible to capture during an interview. I should note, however, that 7 would-be questionnaire takers were unable to physically fill out the form (due to issues of language, literacy, and/or technology). In each of those cases, I filled out the questionnaire while an audio or audio-visual recorder captured the speech of the participant, who was sitting beside me.

Shifting to the next form, the document review, I read and dissected 8 publicly available blogs maintained by Egyptians in various parts of the world. In 2 cases, I had the opportunity to chat online with the bloggers, hence my mention of this largely asynchronous data collection method.

Finally, the synchronous online qualitative interview only worked for about 20 people, due to scheduling conflicts, alleged unfamiliarity with the Yahoo! Messenger chatting interface, and various other reasons. Additionally, close to 30 participants (from the more than 70 questionnaire completers) responded to my last-minute idea of transforming the questions originally intended for my semi-structured qualitative interviews into a sort of asynchronous “short essay” type of “questionnaire” (complete with electronic consent form), which was also posted on surveymonkey.com.

DATA ANALYSIS

Before I could immerse myself in the fascinating sea of collected data, I first had to do some tidying up. This included the transcription of any audio or audiovisual conversations, and the verification of my own translations of spoken, written, or transliterated Arabic.

TRANSLITERATED ARABIC

Transliterated Arabic is the use of another alphabet to write Arabic. For example, writing the greeting *Ahlan 7abibi* ("hello, darling/dear" in English) is considered transliteration due to (1) the use of the English alphabet to write an Arabic word, and (2) the use of "7" to replace the Arabic letter *ha* (which has no accurate equivalent in English).

Once transcription of conversations was complete I was able to begin my transcript-based analysis. To accomplish this, I first read and reread each interview, all while consulting a list containing the questions I needed answered. These questions—one representing each topic of interest—included the following:

1. What cultures, media preferences/likes/dislikes were mentioned? (IDENTITY)
2. What were their feelings about biculturality and/or changing cultures of residence? (CONFLICTED IDENTITY)
3. From their comments, did their communication seem more "high context" or "low context" or both? (COMMUNICATION STYLE)
4. From their comments, did they seem individualistic or collectivistic, both, or neither? (CULTURAL ORIENTATION)
5. What were some examples/stories they shared about these things (i.e., culture, cultural orientation, communication style, identity, biculturalism, etc.)?

After using up well over 100 fluorescent yellow markers during several go-rounds with the dizzying number of words, a sixth question arose, and I revisited the transcripts once more. The question was

6. Did they make any mention of experiencing confusion, closeting, conflicts, or any other sort of distress tied to cultural things? Have they ever sought or received professional help and/or medication for any of these things? If so, did such strategies work? (NEGATIVE DIALOGICAL STATE)

At this point, the maddening stacks of paper were only sorted (alphabetically) by participant; that is, if Mr. X had given me a five-minute interview on Yahoo! Messenger, its meager transcript was

secured with a cheery metallic binder clip, while Ms. J's section of my living-room floor held a towering stack of hard copies including her descriptive questionnaire, e-mails to me, the transcripts of all 15 of our chats on Yahoo! Messenger, and a printout of her entire blog (each entry secured separately). As the number of relevant snippets (concerning one or more of the above-mentioned themes—Identity, Communication Style, etc.) kept mushrooming, I was struck by the need for two types of organization. The first type involved the themes themselves, and the management of those relevant snippets. The second type of organization was to do with emerging themes, associations, demographics, and identifications.

Eventually, I created several experimental forms on surveymonkey.com, each one aimed at streamlining everything. The first form was 37 pages long, and consolidated all the themes I'd been looking for. It also provided me a place to paste in all of the snippets supporting my claims about those themes. The behemoth also had checkboxes of every theme and subtheme that had appeared in any blog, interview, conversation, or questionnaire. In this way, I could easily create graphic representations of trends shared between all participants, certain groups of them, or a single one. As I began to use the form, the unneeded features stood out very clearly, and I was able to make necessary alterations.

Once I had every last scenario-based question memorized and dissected, I created yet another form using my new or updated categories for each theme. Upon the completion of my data entry for every participant's response to a particular question, I was able to create various charts that displayed any overlaps or grey areas. This allowed me to (again) tweak my models and (yet again) adjust the form to reflect any changed categories.

Following this process, I created new scenario-based questions (corresponding to the final categories) and released two versions (open- and closed-ended) of the new questionnaire. So far, I've had close to a hundred (mostly new) participants complete them.

Technology Choices and Rationale

INTERNET-BASED SYNCHRONOUS COMMUNICATION: ONLINE CHATS

This study's qualitative, in-depth interviews were conducted through Internet chats via Yahoo! Messenger (Gaiser & Schreiner, 2009).

Participants had been asked to add me to their contact list using a non-identifying Yahoo! screen name. They also had a schedule of times I would be online and were told to message me whenever they had 15 minutes to chat. I would inform them that they could pass on any question, and that they should signal the end of their responses with “And that’s all.” I would then begin with the first question and wait for their signal. In some cases, I asked follow-ups, while in others, I would move to another main question that flowed well with the previous one, and then return at a more appropriate time to any questions that had been missed.

The greatest strengths of this method included participants (ostensibly) feeling freer to share the personal details of some scandalous tales, the convenience of having ready-made transcripts of some rather lengthy conversations, and synchronous chatting seeming to aid the process of building rapport. Chatting in real time, participants could make jokes or respond to mine. The speed with which a person answered (or didn’t) sometimes gave me a sign that I had touched upon a topic of great interest (or ire, as was often the case).

Shifting to the other side, the weaknesses of real-time chatting without audio or video included the inability to conclusively verify that participants were actually the ages, genders, and/or at the language proficiencies they claimed to be, and the inability to witness and/or record their nonverbal communications.

INTERNET-BASED ASYNCHRONOUS COMMUNICATION: SURVEYMONKEY.COM

In cases where a synchronous meeting proved impossible, I used an online questionnaire containing the same interview questions I had been asking the synchronous interviewees. I called this the “alternate form” of the qualitative interview and set up a link and advertisement for it on my website and Facebook/Myspace pages. Participants would click on the link, sign the consent form, and create a username (or provide the one they had created for the questionnaire).

As before, the strengths included freedom of speech and lack of transcription time, while weaknesses included lack of verifiability and the inability to note nonverbal communications. Another weakness of this method was the inability to ask targeted follow-up questions. A final weakness was the total inability to build rapport using this method (despite the jaunty comments made by a handful of participants).

Ethical Issues

ESTABLISHING IDENTITY

As previously mentioned, the fact that I could not actually see my interviewees most of the time presented me with an ethical dilemma: How much trust could I (or should I) place in what they were telling me? After all, it could be the same two people sitting in a computer lab somewhere. But to what end would such skulduggery be committed? If they were doing it to sabotage the numbers or findings of my study, they would fail, for other people had participated in front of me, and I did have access to a log of Internet protocol addresses. If they were doing it to help me out, then they need not have bothered, for I was interested in accuracy, not a convenient and insignificant finding.

In the end, I decided two things: First, it did not matter to me if they had changed some details about themselves, because in this study, I sought the absence or presence of a particular something—a process, actually—and not the precise circumstances that brought it about. Second, even if one or two or ten people had falsified some actual instances that seemed to support that particular something I was looking for, I know and have known dozens of people (in real life and online) who have shared stories similar to the possibly falsified ones, so even if some fabrication snuck into my data, it was based on a grain of truth somewhere.

This may seem a bit sketchy, since I was (and am) interested in empirically supporting a brand new theory. But the truth is that (1) at such an early stage, even one bona fide case would have been significant to me (meaning the difference between 8 and 18 bona fide cases wouldn't be completely disastrous), and (2) anything at all can be falsified—from Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) to criminal insanity to love.

On the flip side of this issue were individuals who seemed intent upon letting me know who they were (a few even said their own names, though I suppose someone could have used someone else's name as a joke). In these cases, said participants sent me all sorts of messages about their lives, their families, and their reputations—among other things.

Research Findings

The study provided a veritable bonanza of significant findings. The hardest-hitting findings had to do with identity, namely, the *confusion*

and *closeting* of research participants. *Confusion* in this context refers to the person who is unable to resolve the question of “who am I?” *Closeting* in this context refers to the person who knows very well who she/he is, but is unable to *live* that self—in front of relatives and/or other Egyptians anyway. People in both groups reported and hinted at stress galore—though the closeted ones seemed to have less.

The confused individuals displayed a phenomenon I termed the *Negative Dialogical State* (NDS), which often (but erroneously) resembles clinical depression. In the regular or normal dialogical model, voices representing conflicting cultural, demographic, and/or psychological positions might be at odds with one another; but a winner finally emerges, and the person goes with the decision of the winning voice. This is not to say that the person is necessarily happy with the result, or that negative things do not occur as a result of whatever decision is made—only that the particular dialogue in question does not hinder further dialogue.

In this Negative Dialogical State, however, the individuals do not merely ask “who am I, anyway?” and then feel sorrow over the inability to answer that question conclusively, or perhaps stress out over the fact that they are unable to be who they “really” are; rather, the dialogue ends. To put it another way, if the dialogical model of acculturation is based upon an internal dialogue between two or more perspectives, the voices in a person with NDS might never shut up, or they might stop talking altogether—effectively ending the discussion for some time.

Some might argue that *no* particular discussions (between various facets within a person) deserve special distinction or categorization, since the notions of “positive” and “negative” are subjective ones. My justification for proposing a negative category is a diagnostic one. In other words, the dialogical model’s inherent lack of valence makes it unhelpful to the ordinary, everyday, garden-variety immigrant or bicultural individual, whereas a “diagnosis” of NDS could at least offer a direction—in the form of strategies, resources, and hope—to that person.

Thirteen participants’ responses suggested that they were afflicted with NDS, and every one of the 13 had been diagnosed with depression at some point. Each had also embarked upon some form of regimen (therapy, medication, “self-medication,” etc.) to beat the condition—which they were unable to do.

Some other points of interest that I look forward to investigating further include the fact that every single one of the 13 either stated or hinted at another something that seemed to appear quite frequently. I dubbed this phenomenon *cultural fluctuation syndrome* (CFS)

because such individuals did, indeed, seem to go through orthogonal phases of preoccupation and disenchantment with one or more of the cultures they identified with. In almost all of the cases, participants seemed to have their acceptance and/or identity as a “true” Egyptian withheld by someone else, usually a parent or older relative that set him- or herself up as the Grand Arbiter of All Things Egyptian.

An interesting observation about NDS and the form of contact with the participant is that each of the 13 in question had conversed with me synchronously (on Yahoo) or else “spilled their guts” on a blog. The reason I find this interesting is that both forms seemed to encourage—or at least permit—a tidal wave of emotion, while the other forms (descriptive questionnaires and asynchronous interviews) did not reveal any cases of NDS—even among the “afflicted” participants. This may have been due to people wanting to hurry up and complete the instruments, but it may also have been because I wasn’t there to gently nudge (aka shove) them in a direction that had intrigued me; perhaps my interest ignited their desire to vent to someone, anyone. Or maybe they wanted to get the advice and/or feedback of an Egyptian sister who’d not only been there herself, but who’d been researching and writing about the topic for almost a decade.

Another major finding involved communication style. This style was actually a particular form of venting that was revealed to be a common strategy for dealing with cultural and noncultural woes. This particular form was broken down into five different (but non-mutually-exclusive) styles that accomplished five communication acts or purposes.

An example of this was found in the fact that every single non-blogger participant afflicted with my proposed NDS not only stayed far longer than the 15 minutes I originally advertised (several interviews went on for 3 hours or more), but also made some comment about our conversation being “better than therapy” or helping them to “feel a whole lot better.”

Whether those participants’ improved states resulted from the catharsis that often accompanies a venting session, from hope renewed by my suggestions and/or advice, or from the mere fact that I did fully understand, sympathize, and in some cases, empathize with their cultural woes, I cannot say. What I can say, however, is that I am grateful for their trust and hopeful that their situations improve.

Limitations, Lessons Learned, and Recommendations

The first main category of limitations was that of the sample; very simply, additional cases of similar data may have yielded further theoretical output, or at least more support for those theories arising from the current data. Apart from a less-than-optimal sample size were the twin issues of participant quality and commitment. One main contributor to these issues may have been the lack of tangible incentive.

With respect to the “quality” of participants, I must confess to having initially feared that the opinions voiced might represent a somewhat biased population—due both to self-selection and the snowball sample—but it turned out that most of the bloggers and several of the face-to-face interviewees actually were far enough removed from me that my fears of self-selection and “the snowball effect” were put to rest.

The second main category of limitations involved the questionnaires and interviews. More specifically, I should have streamlined the process, avoided too much duplication, and provided details without worrying about putting words in participants’ mouths. Both questions and directions could have been more concise and much less confusing.

The reason I had originally disallowed free movement within the questionnaire involved a fear that people would get scared off when they saw the nature of the questions. Interestingly, after de-requiring that would-be participants fill in every single answer, I noted that some people who came across as “respectable” by Egyptian standards—church-going, advanced degrees, relatively conservative—left the saucier questions blank, while others took the opportunity to lecture me on Egyptian culture, and/or about why the question was offensive. Just as interesting, those in the former category (the “respectable” ones) indicated that they were over 50 years of age, while those in the latter category (the “lecturers”) tended to be in their forties or late thirties.

Some people had issues with the instructions, as well. For example, my original usage of the term “meaningful password” suggested to some that I was asking for their e-mail password, rather than a unique identifier that would be used to link their questionnaire and interview together. This necessitated a modification early on, and “meaningful password” then became “UNIQUE USERNAME,” with the additional instructions that names be “nonidentifying, easy-to-remember,” and difficult for someone else to come up with or guess.

With respect to the questionnaire's checkbox-based questions ("check all that apply"), these worked quite well, though in some cases, I regretted allowing participants to check more than one response. For example, in the demographic question, two participants did not specify a gender, one checked male and female (!), and another indicated both single and married (!!), resulting in a range of response counts.

In terms of the actual questions asked, I had 17 participants make statements or express frustration regarding what I was "really asking." For example, some complained that "I don't understand what is it that you want to know" or asked me to "hold on . . . I'm trying to understand what you're asking," while others commented that "the questions are a bit vague, would like some more details, please," and one very clever participant quoted my favorite play, *Madrassat el Moshaghbeen* ("School of the Troublemakers"), asking "*Fein el so2al? FEEEEIN EL so2AAAL???*" ("Where is the question?").

With regard to the scenario-based questions in the qualitative interview section, I believe that my wording confounded the results. In the "traitorous brother" question, for example, I should not have asked, "What would you *say* . . ." (emphasis added) but "How would you *feel* if your brother walked in and announced that he had just gotten engaged to someone you've never heard of from him before? And what would you *say* to him?" Happily, a majority of those answering the question denoted what they would say and what they would think.

Conclusions

I have learned many things during this study. A majority had to do with the execution of effective qualitative and online research, though I did gain a few insights into acculturation, as well as a handful of findings about cultural shift, and a few factoids regarding the New Egyptians. And while my fumbblings with the DM have not yet resulted in a fully baked model that actually makes a difference, I am nowhere near giving up on my self-appointed task.

The strongest advice I would send back to the Sally of 2008 and 2009 includes the following tidbits:

1. One size does NOT fit all potential participants (in terms of best data collection method).

2. It's far, far better to have rich data from anonymous participants than thin, watery, and sanitized data from people you (might) know.
3. Sometimes it is better to let participants lead the discussion.
4. A lot of times it is better to have several sessions—each devoted to a topic of their choice—instead of attempting to stuff a dozen subjects into one monstrous session that could jeopardize the relationship.
5. A synchronous online interview will net better results if you make the chat take center stage and use data from blogs and questionnaires as sources of supporting information.
6. Finally, remember that triangulation will ALWAYS help you, so do not be afraid to bring in those supporting players and collect sheaves of great data!



See the Appendix for suggested readings and resources on the software, methodologies, and methods discussed in this case.



Find More Materials on the Study Site! See the book website for related resources, materials, discussion, and assignment ideas.

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CRITIQUE AND ANALYSIS OF BISHAI'S "BLOG LIKE AN EGYPTIAN"

Allison Deegan

The Reality of Online Reality

AN ONLINE VETERAN

This is a very interesting chapter, and a number of aspects of the underlying study parallel the one I conducted (see Chapter 3). One key difference, however, is the vast online expertise of Sally Bishai. I did a little research on her (using Google, of course), and she has a wealth of experience over many years, in *virtually* all sectors of the online world (pun intended!). Being a neophyte in online research (and even in some basic facets of modern online life, like chatting and navigating social media networks), I learned much from reading her work and discussing it with her.

I was fortunate to have the chance to chat in real time with Sally using Yahoo! Chat. Because she is such a veteran chatter, I did get the feeling that I was speaking directly with her, even in a discussion of weighty research topics. Her humor, interest, and energy came through loud and clear and I suspect that is how her research participants perceived her as well. I can see how she gained their trust and how her experience online was a key asset in her study.

Why Research Online?

Among the topics we discussed was her decision to gather data online.

Allison Deegan (5:41 PM): A. Did you ever think of *not* using an online facet to gather data, given your experience with the technology? And how do you think your study would have been different if you had?

(Continued)

(Continued)

- Sally Bishai** (5:41 PM): hmmm. . .
- Sally Bishai** (5:42 PM): shall i give the briefest answer that's coherent
- Sally Bishai** (5:42 PM): OR
- Sally Bishai** (5:42 PM): "the real answer" ?
- Allison Deegan** (5:43 PM): Real, please – I am verbose and don't know what brief is. That's why I'm such a bad chatter.
- Sally Bishai** (5:43 PM): yay, glad to hear it! that's why we're qualitative, and why qualitative *rocks*! ☺
- Sally Bishai** (5:43 PM): so . . .
- Sally Bishai** (5:44 PM): if you looked me up online, you may have seen a book i wrote many years ago...
- Sally Bishai** (5:44 PM): Mideast Meets West:
- Sally Bishai** (5:44 PM): On Being and Becoming a Modern Arab American
- Sally Bishai** (5:44 PM): that was my master's thesis
- Sally Bishai** (5:44 PM): I did it almost completely face-to-face, with some phone interviews as well
- Sally Bishai** (5:44 PM): but i learned so much from the experience...
- Sally Bishai** (5:44 PM): both in terms of interviewing (in general)
- Sally Bishai** (5:45 PM): and in terms of Egyptians, Egyptian culture, and Egyptian fears/paranoias
- Sally Bishai** (5:46 PM): (which I'm subject to, by the way, hence my sensitivity to it now... and the resourcefulness I had to obtain and use when dealing with this tricky population)
- Sally Bishai** (5:46 PM): anyhowoodle, that book, like the dissertation of doom, was based on identity.
- Sally Bishai** (5:47 PM): but the biggest mistake I made all those years ago (let's call it "2003") was that I actually thought people would answer me correctly
- Sally Bishai** (5:47 PM): i don't mean just accurately
- Sally Bishai** (5:48 PM): in terms of scrambling the details in order to protect their reputations
- Sally Bishai** (5:49 PM): online, however, they didn't feel like a person who could identify them would automatically know what they were trying to hide...though they (in some cases) didn't get my questions, or didn't think something applied to them when it *so* did...
- Sally Bishai** (5:49 PM): by the way, feel free to interrupt with any follow-up or clarification questions at any moment, we

	egyptians love to pursue several slightly connected convos at once . . . 😊
Allison Deegan	(5:50 PM): I think that kind of sensitivity is real for a lot of research participants, but the research forum doesn't always allow for it – in that way, online research can provide a bigger window to speak the truth.
Sally Bishai	(5:50 PM): agreed!
Sally Bishai	(5:50 PM): but with egyptians...
Sally Bishai	(5:50 PM): (and this is one thing i don't think i was able to stress enough, because in the west, people aren't prone to our kind of insanity . . . 😊)
Sally Bishai	(5:51 PM): it's like, if mrs. x told me that she held hands with a guy she wasn't married to, she could be dumped (divorced) or disowned over it
Sally Bishai	(5:51 PM): a seemingly-tiny thing can not only haunt the person in question, but her or his whole family and all the people "unfortunate" enough to be their friends...
Sally Bishai	(5:52 PM): so in a way, online research was literally the ONLY way i could have asked certain things
Allison Deegan	(5:53 PM): And maybe having that removed from in-person scrutiny can help them change. Who knows. Can the internet save the world (moments before it destroys it)?
Sally Bishai	(5:54 PM): so, i guess the 'one-line' answer is, "Having experienced certain difficulties with the same general population in my previous studies, I realised that the anonymity "promised" to participants would have made a big difference in those earlier studies; furthermore, I believe that the current study was—in many cases—greatly aided by the online format."
Sally Bishai	(5:54 PM): maybe!
Sally Bishai	(5:54 PM): hmm, i think it already destroyed it!
Sally Bishai	(5:54 PM): but mayhap there's still hope 😊

In her study, Sally was committed to triangulation of data and thus used multiple online data gathering methods. This added a lot of depth to her study. She was also very flexible and even nimble, as one needs to be when using online methods, so she could respond when things changed, participants were not available in the originally

planned setting, when survey participants needed extra clarification, and even when online texts or in-person interviews needed to be translated. Things change in these kinds of studies as the data-gathering process is very dynamic online, and researchers need to be responsive if they do not want to miss valuable opportunities.

Blogs as Data

Another key aspect of Sally's study was the utilization of reviews of blog sites as part of her data-gathering strategy. She developed a collection of very insightful tools and review templates to use in sifting through tens of thousands of pages of blog entries. Given the proliferation of online identity invention, we discussed whether or not blogs could provide more "real" insights into participants than interviews could.

Allison Deegan (6:28 PM): I love the idea of blogs as data sources – do you think they provide a more free discourse or even a different approach to revealing personal details than you could gather through a survey – are bloggers more "themselves" when they blog (and self-direct the content) or when they are asked deeply provocative questions (like the ones you seemed to ask)?

Sally Bishai (6:29 PM): i love this question! ☺

Allison Deegan (6:29 PM): I wish you had been on my committee!

Sally Bishai (6:29 PM): well, i did like the self-directing aspect of it, coz in that case, it meant that it was something that was affecting THEM, and not something i had pushed on them

* * *

Allison Deegan (6:31 PM): Still recovering. Do you have a blog, and do you feel free when you write it?

Sally Bishai (6:32 PM): but you know, my provocative and hellish questions DID provide me with something [of] interest, and that is the reaction of the person

Sally Bishai (6:32 PM): i have several blogs, actually

Sally Bishai (6:32 PM): and i only feel truly free when i write under a pseudonym

- Sally Bishai** (6:32 PM): ☺
- Sally Bishai** (6:32 PM): but then, i've gotten death threats and junk
- Sally Bishai** (6:32 PM): coz i used to write about religion (i'm Christian but most Egyptians are Moslem)
- Allison Deegan** (6:32 PM): Would you rather a researcher just read your blog or interview to find out your true feelings?
- Sally Bishai** (6:33 PM): it depends on what their intention was
- Sally Bishai** (6:33 PM): because i might not be inclined to lecture and/or provide background/cultural whatnot to an audience, whereas the researcher might need to know stuff to make sense of it
- Sally Bishai** (6:34 PM): and it also depends on what they were trying to find out
- Allison Deegan** (6:34 PM): It is a unique format – a public diary – that may provide a unique kind of data
- Sally Bishai** (6:34 PM): i agree
- Sally Bishai** (6:34 PM): but i also think that some bloggers create a persona
- Sally Bishai** (6:34 PM): and use their popularity as that persona
- Sally Bishai** (6:34 PM): to gain confidence in the real world
- Sally Bishai** (6:34 PM): like they might be unpopular in real life
- Sally Bishai** (6:35 PM): but wow, they got 10000 hits this month!
- Sally Bishai** (6:35 PM): i started to do a study on gamers who used their prowess at a game to build their confidence levels IRL
- ***
- Sally Bishai** (6:37 PM): but re: blogging, it's easy to throw words into a vortex you may never see... but saying words to some people, you have to see their face/reaction
- Sally Bishai** (6:37 PM): hear their disapproval (if it is "dis")
- Sally Bishai** (6:38 PM): with a blog, you slap the words on the "paper" and if someone reads it, you know they "cared" enough to read it
- Sally Bishai** (6:38 PM): it's not like someone will read a blog and then say "why did you tell us that? what a waste of space!"
- Sally Bishai** (6:38 PM): coz the blogger can come back and say "well, why did you READ it then, genius?!"

The Concept of Diaspora

There were many other very significant points in Sally's chapter. Among them was the notion of defining the diaspora as a place rather than a movement or a phenomenon. I think this is a great analogy for the online world and the way it defines itself, in part, even though it lacks a physical place. We discussed whether it was even possible to sustain the notion of diaspora since we are all moving everywhere and can be in contact with anyone nearly anywhere.

Knowing Your Population

Sally's experience with this population (Egyptians, Egyptian immigrants to the United States, and Egyptian Americans) provides a great foundation from which to understand and ultimately interpret what the study participants are saying. Although she did not know her participants personally, she knows their culture and has shared many of their experiences. This makes her a highly credible analyst of the data they provided and one who could effectively and quickly bridge the distance between an online research subject and a participant. Her interactions with research participants online provided very rich data. A researcher can gain insight from being a new, objective observer in an online world, but there is also much to gain by interacting and studying a population that you are a member of in some way. Although she expresses concern about the veracity of the responses or the true identity of some of the participants, she seems fully able to ferret out anything that does not ring true for this population.

We also discussed the idea that the Internet can foster great connections and how, for some who are critically at risk or truly isolated, it can be a lifeline. But it can also keep us apart, if we are not presenting who we really are to a world of "friends" we do not really know (meaning we do not ever or hardly ever see them). I have mixed feelings about this. I want to maintain my appreciation for everything that is good about online communication while clinging to my concerns about all the ways in which it seems to keep us apart. Sally also expressed her belief that there are hugely beneficial and very worrisome aspects of living online.

Connectedness

Other themes, such as comparing acculturation to marginalization, and describing that process as being akin to depression, provide

critical insights into the immigrant experience and how it is being expressed in online forums. In addition, Sally describes modern life as a “concurrent existence of multiple strands,” and that resonated deeply with me. Multitasking, always being connected—the more these stresses impact our actual lives, they will wend their way into online research and may prove to have a significant impact on research data gathered in that arena. I believe, as a research setting, the online world is free of many of the constraints that all researchers face. In that way, the logistical benefits are huge. However, it is likely also the cause of a whole host of other concerns that are unique to online discourse. I believe that online research methods can become part of the study, beyond just vehicles we use to gather data.

There is so much more that I could say about this chapter, which mirrors some of the challenges Sally faced and probably a cause for concern for all online researchers—there can be a ton of data and we must locate and even develop methods to manage it all.

CHAPTER 2

FRAMEWORK COMMENTARY: “BLOG LIKE AN EGYPTIAN”

Janet Salmons

In this qualitative, grounded theory study, Dr. Sally Bishai successfully generated new theory based on her analysis of data collected online. She used multiple approaches—all text based—to interact with and learn from the research participants. This flexibility allowed her to accommodate participants’ schedules and preferences, and provided triangulation needed to substantiate the data.

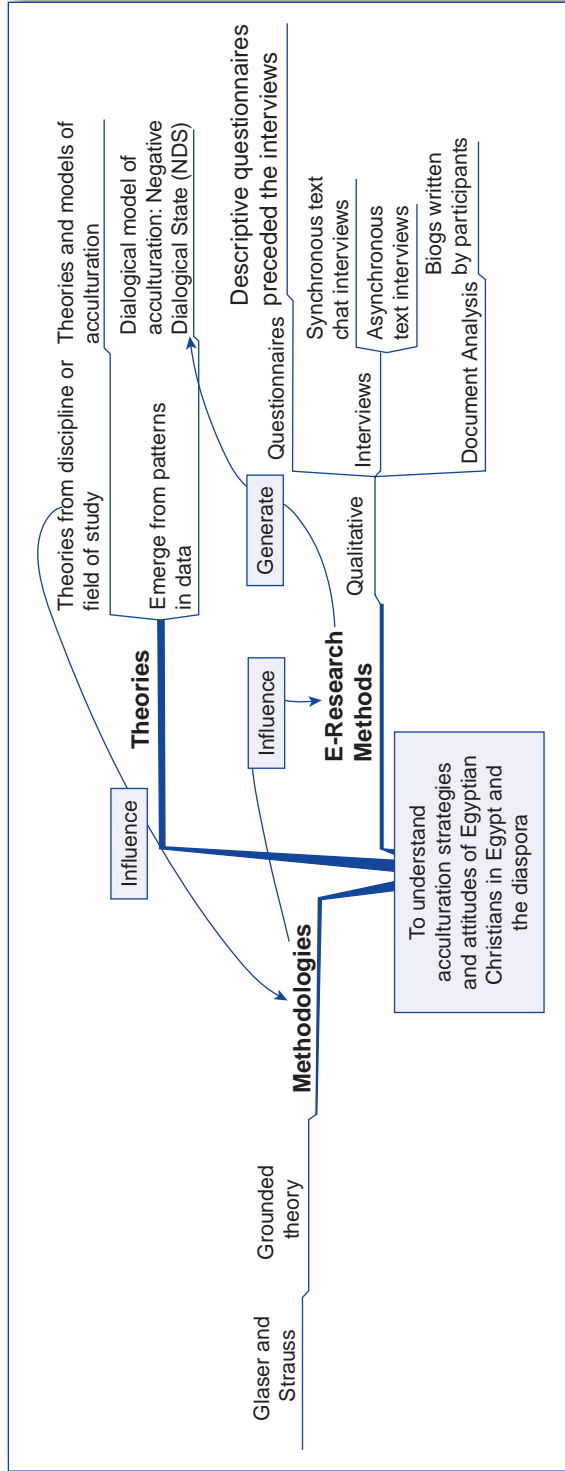
Bishai chose to use online interviews because her study population is geographically dispersed. The behaviors and attitudes central to her study—cultural adaptation—are not behaviors that necessarily occur online. In other words, the purpose of the study was not to explore acculturation issues in online environments, rather to study the attitudes and experiences of everyday life in the diaspora. In this circumstance, the ICT selection priority was to choose an easily accessible, familiar communications technology.

Given the potentially sensitive nature of her study, the text-based approach allowed participants a layer of privacy. Bishai used synchronous, near-synchronous, and asynchronous approaches so participants could, if desired, pause to reflect on the questions and their experiences before responding. While text-only communications might be considered “lean” according to Media Richness Theory, a recent study by Hertel and colleagues suggests that shy people (or those anxious about discussing sensitive issues) may be more forthcoming in text-based forms that allow time for thoughtful written responses (Hertel, Schroer, Batinic, & Naumann, 2008).

For participant recruitment, she used a snowball approach and relied upon word of mouth, and family and religious or cultural places where participants who met the study’s criteria might be found. Participants were recruited through both online and face-to-face interactions and referrals.

Even with this network of referrals and contacts that would suggest certain known factors about the research participants, Bishai expressed some concern that some of the individuals she interviewed

Figure 2.1 Research map for “Blog Like an Egyptian.”



may not have been fully honest in some respects. She decided that some possible misrepresentation was acceptable: “It did not matter to me if they had changed some details about themselves, because in this study, I sought the absence or presence of a particular something—a process, actually—and not the precise circumstances that brought it about.” She felt that her larger, personal understanding of the research population—together with triangulation of the data from multiple sources and interactions—would make it possible to overcome minor discrepancies.

The researcher’s ability to discern what was real or not, what mattered to the study or not, relates to the researcher’s position vis-à-vis the study. She was an insider, someone who shares many characteristics and experiences with the research population. Using a metaphor for researchers’ roles defined by Kvale, she “travelled with” the research participants to generate data (Kvale, 2007; Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). Stake describes emic issues in case studies as those research questions revealed by the actors of the case, who may include the researcher (Stake, 1995). While Bishai did not contribute data, her insight into the research population allowed for a level of understanding an outsider researcher may not have been able to achieve. This level of insight may have also allowed her to grasp the significance of research participants’ responses, even through a lean, text-only medium of communication.

A key lesson learned from this study is the need for flexibility when conducting research online. If one technology did not work, Bishai shifted to another, selecting options that would allow for comparable data collection. She also noted the value of several shorter, more focused sessions, rather than try to cover all topics in one session. This point may be particularly true in text-based interviews, where keeping the participant’s attention and interest in typing potentially long responses could be a challenge.

By using e-research methods, Dr. Bishai was able to collect data from far-flung research participants. Face-to-face interviews would have been logistically difficult and cost-prohibitive. It is hard to say whether she would have been as successful at collecting data on sensitive, personal issues with other interview approaches, such as telephone interviews. As a result of her study, a new theory is proposed and that may be of value to future researchers who are interested in the process and impact of acculturation.

Table 2.1 Summary: Key Factors in the “Blog Like an Egyptian” Study

Motivation for Choosing E-Research	Sampling and Recruiting	Interview Style and Structure	Technology: Issues, Features, Lessons	Ethical Issues
Bishai selected online research to enable interviews with geographically dispersed participants, and to foster dialogue on sensitive topics.	Criterion and snowball sampling were used with online and face-to-face recruitment.	Semi-structured and unstructured conversational interviews	When synchronous interviews were not possible, Bishai offered an asynchronous option.	Possible identity issues with participants were addressed by triangulating the data.
Bishai selected online research methods to study phenomena that are not Internet related.		Synchronous, near-synchronous, and asynchronous text-based interviews	She used text-based interviews; did not collect visual data.	

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