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## Autobiographical experience as a tool of ethnographic study into the hidden world of Saudi women

### Autobiografia jako narzędzie badań etnograficznych i klucz do ukrytego świata saudyjskich kobiet

**ABSTRACT:** The purpose of this paper is to discuss subjects pertaining to an ethnographic research, active biography, autobiography, the concept of oral history and the matters of researcher's objectivity or subjectivity. The analysis will relate to a research carried out in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), is still an unexplored field for an in-depth study of women. The opportunities for entry in to this country are very limited and the overwhelming state control, together with the sensitiveness of the subject, prevents scientists from exploring the situation of women in the Kingdom. Because the female social world is restricted to a very private sphere, it is almost impossible for an unrelated male to penetrate this hidden world (due to gender segregation in public). An overarching rift between Western and Saudi cultural codes, makes effective research even more of a challenge. A two-year anthropological study in the Kingdom allowed for an immersion in to the hidden world of Saudi women, yet only revealed a part of what a Saudi woman would take for granted. To reach a balance and gain a more holistic view, other autobiographical books written by females from different religious and ethnic backgrounds, including a Saudi national living in Saudi Arabia have been taken into consideration. This paper will demonstrate why the autobiographical material is so precious in achieving a true reflection of what it is like to be a woman in Saudi Arabia.

**KEYWORDS:** ethnography, biography, autobiography, oral history, social bias, women.

**STRESZCZENIE:** Celem pracy jest omówienie zagadnień dotyczących badań etnograficznych, biografii aktywnej, autobiografii, koncepcji *oral history*, czy też znaczenia obiektywizmu i subiektywizmu badacza. Podjęte analizy bezpośrednio związane są z badaniami autorki przeprowadzonymi w Królestwie Arabii Saudyjskiej.

W Polskiej literaturze naukowej istnieje widoczny niedosyt głębokich badań dotyczącej sytuacji kobiet w tym kraju. Ograniczenia wizowe oraz ścisła kontrola państwowa i delikatność zagadnienia stanowią przeszkodę dla naukowców zainteresowanych zbadaniem świata kobiet saudyjskich. Z uwagi na to, że przestrzeń kobieca ograniczona jest do sfery prywatnej, wstęp do tego „ukrytego świata” jest praktycznie niemożliwy dla mężczyzn spoza rodziny (z uwagi na segregację płci w sferze publicznej). Rozbieżność pomiędzy zachodnimi i saudyjskimi kodami kulturowymi sprawia, że badania stają się jeszcze większym wyzwaniem. Dwuletnie studia antropologiczne w Królestwie pozwoliły na zanurzenie się w ukrytym świecie kobiet, obnażając jednakże jedynie część tego, co Saudyjki uważają za oczywiste. Dla zachowania równowagi badawczej i osiągnięcia jak najbardziej holistycznego obrazu przestrzeni kobiecej, sięgnięto po publikacje autobiograficzne kobiet o różnych korzeniach wyznaniowych i etnicznych. Z niniejszej pracy będzie można dowiedzieć się dlaczego materiały autobiograficzne mogą być cennym źródłem poznania w kwestii: co oznacza bycie kobietą w Arabii Saudyjskiej.

**SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:** etnografia, biografia, autobiografia, oral history, uwarunkowania społeczne, kobiety.

## **Ethnography, oral history and individual experience**

Ethnography should provide knowledge of the so-called “unknown others”, by making significant symbolic elements of one culture meaningful in terms of the other. Clifford Geertz (1973) reads culture as a text defined by the ethnographer who becomes a cultural translator in a meaning-making practice immanent in the flow of socially situated discourses. Transforming biographic experience into narrative, makes the biographical actors sharing their experiences both reflexive and flexible, however they still operate within structures of social inequality (Roer 2009, pp. 185-199).

Basil Bernstein (1972) focuses on the importance of studying language and culture in-use, in contexts of everyday living, as a part of socio-cultural life. He describes the concept of cultural codes as patterned processes of social action. He distinguishes two types of conducting social lives: elaborated and restricted. Although his observation is mainly directed at linguistics that in his view shape personal and positional roles, it may be linked to Saudi social sphere, where one would class “female sphere as restricted” and “male sphere” as elaborated.

To be a woman in Saudi Arabia is a complex affair. To concentrate on a singular status category would limit the outcome of the study. There are significant differences between social classes and castes amongst Saudi women that effect their standard of living, ideological upbringing and the life choices available to them. There are also differences between so called “second” and “third country nationals”, reflected in their lifestyle and the level of restriction placed on them by local customs and religion. An interesting discovery may be made that in a society completely based on religious credentials, status based on birth superseded the religious connection between women, which became a secondary conditioning.

Women in Saudi Arabia live within strictly defined rules and roles, which are internalised in the process of socialisation, through a united message from home, the school system, mosques and local media (comp. to Odrowaz-Coates 2012). Their behaviour, identity and life style are framed by cultural codes, difficult to understand and decipher for Westerners. It is only by tracing individual life stories that connections can be documented between the general system of economic, class, sex, and age structure at one end, and the development of personal character at the other. This is achieved by the mediating influence of parents, brothers, sisters, and the wider family or peer groups, neighbours, schools, religion, newspapers, the media, art and culture (see: Thompson 1978, p. 262). The possibilities of oral history provide an underlying current towards a history which is more personal, more social, and more democratic (Thompson 1978, pp. 264-265).

There are limited publications about women's life in Saudi Arabia. One of the contributing factors is the complete segregation of genders and restrictions placed on speaking to women, due to the Wahhabi (Odrowaz-Coates 2012) based social order. Another difficulty is that of obtaining a visa for entry to the country. There are no tourist visas, unless for Muslim pilgrims on a Hajj or Umra. The only other way to acquire an entry visa is an employment contract or visiting a relative. In the last two cases, one needs an invitation from a Saudi sponsor and visit visas do not exceed 90 days. It is harder for women to get their visas granted, especially if they are single or when married if they travel alone and therefore most scientific publications present only a male point of view on cultural matters and life in the Kingdom. On the other hand those visiting for religious purposes represent only a Muslim point of view when discussing Saudi social aspects. Saudis tend to publish in Arabic, which makes their writing less accessible abroad and only if their work passes through strict religious censorship.

The author of this paper was privileged to spend two years in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia exploring the "women's world" from an "outsider's" perspective. Her autobiographical experiences, recorded in an ethnographic diary, were tainted with her own ethno-cultural bias. To overcome this issue and to gain a more holistic view, analysis of autobiographical books by authors from diverse backgrounds were carried out. The using of their testimonies, with the Oral History methodology, against author's own ethnographic diary, allowed for a critical assessment of what is factual and what is emotional. Taking into account that a biography is an individual fate of the human-being, spread between birth and death, together with acts of their own creative activity (Lalak 2010, p. 39), the author has studied written biographical testimonies.

The most interesting was (recently translated into Polish) the autobiography of Rajaa Alsanea (2008) entitled: "Girls of Riyadh", which contains the life stories of five friends, Saudi girls, who lived in Riyadh in 2004. Alsanea and her friends represented a modern-thinking, young generation of Saudi women. This publication was shocking to read in places and therefore must have been received either as out of date, cheap sensationalism or even complete fiction by the casual reader. However, for those who spend a significant amount of time in Saudi, it does not feel either fictional nor outdated. Indeed, it is so realistic and therefore controversial, that it was banned in KSA, which means that it is may not be sold, or owned and the owner may be fined and the book confiscated. Alsanea's narrative considered her whole life story, whilst other authors discuss a particular period of their lives, time spent in KSA. Quanta Ahmed (2008), a Muslim medical doctor of Pakistani origin, born in the UK and trained in the US, who worked in a Saudi hospital, also provides a comprehensive outlook on life in KSA. Her perspective allows for a more open interpretation, as being a Muslim who comes from the Western world, she has a completely different point of view. Yet another excellent autobiography comes from Carmen Bin Ladin (2004), who also is a Muslim of the Shia denomination, originally from Iran, but who resided in Switzerland. She married Osama bin Laden's brother and moved to Saudi Arabia for a decade. Her perspective on being a Saudi wife, immersed in Saudi family life is enlightening. She is a skilful interpreter of Saudi customs and traditions. Another book revealing cultural aspects of women's life in KSA is the Australian journalist, Geraldine Brooks (2007), who for many years travelled through the Middle East. Ayaan Hirsi Magan Ali, a former African Muslim, who wrote "The caged virgin; Muslim women cry for reason" (2006) and "Infidel" (2007), also spent some of her childhood years in Saudi Arabia until she found political asylum in Holland and then in the US. To counterbalance these authors, one may be tempted to use testimonies of a Canadian nurse, employed in Riyadh hospital, Mary Doreen, who wrote a book: "Surreal in Saudi" (2006), which contains highly questionable testimonies, prompting readers to query their factual value. However, having been immersed in local customs and traditions, it is tempting to believe that her biography is true. In biographical materials one may include Robert Lacey (2009) with his historical-political book based on in-depth analysis of historic evidence and interviews and observations carried out during his years in KSA. Finally, one has to mention the "Culture Shock! A Survival Guide to Customs and Etiquette Saudi Arabia" (North, Tripp 2009), created by two Westerners employed for years in Saudi Arabia. All these books not only widen the perspective by various personal inclinations of the authors

(„personal bias”, “gender bias”, “cultural bias”), but also help to confirm the unbelievable, which in Western perception may sound too peculiar to be true.

### **Triangulation in biographical research**

To complete the picture the author carried out interviews with 124 (N) Saudi female respondents of diverse age and marital status, twelve of them were in-depth interviews, the remainder was a part of participant observation. Women were interviewed “in vivo” in everyday life situations during 2010–2012, in the Taif (93) (Mecca province) and Jeddah (31) areas. Their autobiographic experience, testimonies and opinions were used to explore their position in society and family. Renato Rosaldo (1989) writes about the mutuality of cultural understanding and reciprocity of the common cultural interpretation. This universal understanding that unites members of one cultural group can be defined in terms of “cultural codes”. The interviewer has a social presence, even when not revealing any explicit opinions which could influence the informant. This poses some concern about the effect of ethnic diversity. However, according to Thompson this can have advantages when one allows for this bias when analysing research material (Thompson 1978, p. 118). One may expect that informants would give a different answer to a person from their own ethnic background. However, R. Lacey perceives it as a positive role of bias. It allows Saudi respondents to be less restricted within moral cultural codes that would not normally allow them to speak their mind. They felt more at ease discussing the real state of affairs with someone who they did not fear the judgement of (Lacey 2009, p. 274).

Social surveys are normally based on carefully chosen samples designed to secure a group of informants as representative as possible. This confronts the oral historian with a dilemma. Thompson’s theory that this creates material of lower quality is quite convincing. In his view, willing participants generate much richer materials (Thompson 1978, p. 124–125). Moreover, a strict structure of the interview is perceived as disadvantageous. Therefore, one leans towards interviewing “in vivo”, in real life situations, creating an open space for new discoveries. The negative stereotypes of foreigners held by many Saudi Arabians, supported by the education system, mass media and mosques, fill average Saudi citizens with a degree of fear, a degree of animosity, but also a high level of curiosity. This has proven to be helpful when meeting with groups of unknown women. They felt safe in a group and excited to meet someone who they suspected to be, in line with their teaching, a porn star, a prostitute and a deviant temptress. They sometimes admitted that they

questioned the teaching that the author could be decadent and rotten, whilst she seems a nice stranger with children, married and obviously in love with their Arabian country.

Due to the remote location of Taif, there are only a few western women around. They stand out due to the lack of a hijab and often the lack of a headscarf. Their lavish exposure of ankles, necks, hair and faces only confirms the common preconception that they must be sexually provocative and therefore “morally fallen”. This fascination often superseded their fear and became an advantage when meeting random strangers. Many were keen to secure their own place in heaven by converting this “unknowing infidel” onto the right path, which also stimulated opportunities for prolonged conversations on cultural issues. A small percentage of the female respondents lived abroad prior to their meeting with the author and in the majority of cases, their exposure to western culture in a “natural environment” helped to overcome negative attitudes towards westerners. Moreover, it filled them with a desire to pursue some of the principles of the West such as freedom of thought, freedom of movement and freedom of speech. All these principles, suppressed in KSA, worked as a stimulator for women to become friendly towards “the stranger”. Their views and testimonies often led to interesting evidence and unexpected conclusions. Women of Bedouin descent always seemed more welcoming and friendly, and fascinated with “the unknown other”. They were honest in sharing of their life stories and explaining how things work for them.

The enabling of biography in scientific writing is a process of communication and therefore is a social process, even if the biography reflects the experience of a single actor. Bringing together the individual biographies of several people helps to broaden the perspective and discover both common ground and conflicting ideas present in the narrative. Danuta Lalak (2010, p. 15) is of the opinion that autobiography is the richest and the most comprehensive type of biography. She has also stated that in a meaningful biographical research one should use a variety of perspectives. The perspective of the person whose biographical experience is analysed, is considered to be the first degree of observation. Second degree concerns the researcher’s perspective. The third degree represents unbiased biographical data, official documents, statistical data, historical and personal testimonies (Eadem, pp. 318–319). The use of these three different perspectives is considered to achieve a holistic and objective view and this triangulation, rather than the traditional triangulation of research methods, was obtained in this ethnographic research.

## Methodological dilemmas

“An interview is not a dialog or a conversation. The whole point is to get the informant to speak” (Thompson 1978, p. 209). Therefore there should be no parity in the cultural exchange, nor in the information flow between the respondent and the researcher. This was very true in the case of long, profound interviews that took place in homes, at parties or in a work environment. However, it may not always be feasible. A vast range of significant information can also be collected in live situations when the researcher comes into contact with local people only for a momentary interaction. During the ethnographic research, by asking the right questions directed at discovering cultural codes and mentality, it was often possible to find singular answers with only brief contact with a variety of people. The information collected in this way could be later reinvestigated in a traditional interview with the main sample, fulfilling Thompson’s instruction. “In many societies, community or clan history is the vested interest in particular people or a designated caste, such as the «griots» of West Africa. They will often adapt their accounts to a particular audience, tailoring it to focus on the ancestors of their listeners” (Perks, Thomson 2006, p. 144). Collecting data ad hoc, in everyday life situations eliminates that possibility.

Lalak wrote that “Active biography is a biography in «statu nascendi», that reflects the fluent character of human reflexivity” ([a translation from Polish], *Ibidem* p. 83). In the case of the autobiographical experience described here this was and is true. Since leaving KSA, author’s own perception of cultural differences and what seemed challenging at the time was re-evaluated. This is why the ethnographic diary that was used to document author’s experiences is valuable material for analysis now, some time after the events. Not only is it possible to find facts that otherwise might have been forgotten but it also allows to rediscover emotional attitude towards them at the time. Some of the experiences encountered during the research were so unbelievable that had they not been written down one would doubt one’s own sanity, as many of these events were so unsettling that human mind would rather erase them.

The difficulty with the described research in Saudi Arabia was to put emotions to one side and to record factual information without personal bias. When writing about personal experiences, one may allow these sentiments to be present. Biographical research methods allowed for use of the emotional charge to one’s advantage, as it widened the perspective and made the material more “authentic” for the reader. Moreover, it allowed for the testimonies to come to life and in effect to present both the factual and the personal side

of events. This agrees with Maria Theiss' views, that active research advances towards participatory action research (Lalak 2010, p. 46). Experience, action and development are deeply imbedded in social pedagogy and have significant influence on biographic reflexivity (Eadem, p. 46). The power of reflexivity depends on self-awareness and social orientation in surrounding social relations, hence the employment of multiple biographies and variable perspectives used in the research of this hidden, women's world. There is antagonistic opposition between the existence of an "asocial" subject, who is often read as bio-logistic and de-individualised society. The biographical approach sees itself as a solution to this antagonism, achieved by linking the concept of biography with Leontiev's (1979) concept of activity (Roer 2009, p.187). Furthermore, an individual may be perceived as a "tabula rasa" who becomes a person imprinted by social conditions (Eadem, p. 186). The described study of Saudi culture validated this statement.

Performance ethnography requires a bias approach, which may be judgmental, however this encourages agency and avoids artificial attempts to analyze cultural acts in a social vacuum. This would lead to false conclusions without a clear understanding of the context. Auto-ethnography incites authenticity, reflexivity and agency. It is completely different to learn from literature or to blindly trust the media, than to learn from one's own experience and to discover the aspects of everyday life, which would otherwise be difficult to comprehend. One may agree with Benson, that "there is no such thing as objective history – such thing would be like reading a telephone book" (Grele 1973, p. 85).

Gender can be an inhibiting factor and as a general rule interviewer and narrator should be of the same sex (Slim, Thompson, Bennett, Cross, 2006, p.145). That was achieved. The racial/ethnic barrier between the interviewee and the researcher worked to an advantage by provoking honesty and a certain level of "freedom" to express what women really thought. If the researcher had been a Saudi, they would have been more guarded and would not have wanted to say anything that would be considered unacceptable by the strict social control standards. Similar opinion can be found when an Egyptian social worker talks to Robert Lacey (2009, pp. 274–275), saying that she feels Saudis with addictions find it easier to talk to a foreigner to avoid internal social judgment. Women felt more open to share their secrets with a complete stranger, who provided a degree of anonymous experience sharing. This is very interesting taking into consideration the very low level of trust amongst Saudis toward anyone from outside their closest circle of relatives (Odrowaz-Coates 2013). Shame and hypocrisy has to stay hidden behind closed doors. However, a "cultural stranger" poses no threat, since their testimony is worthless when



counterbalanced with one of a Saudi national. A similar testimony can be found in Susan Burton's research amongst Japanese women in England. In Japanese society, foreigners are always clearly distinguished from membership in various internal groups. They stay on the cultural "outside" and are not a part of the circle of evaluators, gossipers, colleagues or relatives who judge (Burton 2006, p. 166.). This means that embarrassing confessions will not come back on the interviewees. The separation from mainstream society allows confidentiality and therefore allows for honesty and openness.

### **Unquestioned advantages of autobiography**

The main advantage of autobiographical data collection is that it allows for information to be gathered first hand, live and up to date. Ethnocentric bias can be clearly detected and therefore the researcher's position is open and clear to the reader. Personal experiences, emotions and opinions make facts more vivid, interesting and more contextual than dry statistics. The researcher concentrates on exploring the culture, immersing oneself in the natural environment and almost inhaling the nuances, otherwise invisible to an "uninvolved" observer. Bronisław Malinowski, Radcliff-Brown, Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, Norman Denzin and many others put huge emphasis on collating data first handed and on describing the overall climate of cultural exchanges necessary for dense description. Clifford Geertz calls this a "thick description (1973, pp. 3-30) and claims that it is the most appropriate way to achieving an understanding of different cultures.

In some societies a one-to-one interview may not be acceptable, particularly for women. Indeed, most of the Saudi respondents felt more comfortable in a group. This served an additional function of testing and cross-checking information, as observers interrupt to challenge or correct the interviewee (comp. Perks, Thompson 2006, p. 145)<sup>1</sup>. In the majority of cases there was no censorship nor intimidation, because of the reason above and that the groups were female only and comprised either of close friends or immediate relatives who knew each other well and were trusted. Concentrating on the hidden world of women in Saudi Arabia, the research enabled the "silent", unseen and unheard group to express their own views and often contradict the western perception of some cultural customs. Moreover, the female point of view seemed to be influenced by the paternal system's ideology,

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<sup>1</sup> Based on: J. Mitchell and H. Slim 1990.

but it was interesting to hear it perpetuated from a female perspective, instead of the usual male one.

As demonstrated in this paper, complete objectivity is neither possible or indeed advantageous as confirmed by Beth Hess and Myra Ferree (1987): “The image of science as establishing mastery over subjects, as demanding the absence of feeling, and as enforcing separateness of the knower from the known, all under the guise of «objectivity», has been carefully critiqued even in reference to the physical sciences” (Ferree, Hess 1987 quoted after Perks, Thomson 2006, p. 62).

According to Paul Thompson (1978, p. 265), Oral history leads towards a history, which is more personal, more social and more democratic. This can certainly be achieved when combining different points of view. Had one not used this method, one would not have been able to discover the aspects of women’s life that contradicted one’s own personal view. For instance, one might not have concluded that Saudi women embrace their cultural heritage and in majority of cases, feel happy and fulfilled within the life choices available to them. One might have taken an Eurocentric point of view, concentrating on discrimination, restrictions and abuse. One would not notice that Saudi women were fluent in understanding and using cultural codes to their personal advantage. Although displays of individuality or attempts to overcome existing customs is nearly always suppressed by the family and society, individuality is possible amongst women themselves within the boundaries of the separate women’s world. One would not have seen it, if one had not been invited “inside”. Saudi cultural codes are based on regional tradition and religion and therefore are taken for granted and unquestioned by the majority. Almost all women who took part in this research used religious legitimization of social practices. Saudi cultural codes appear to be highly resistant to change regardless of technological innovations, scientific progress, globalization trends, reform claims from the government and the critique of the Saudi education system. Evaluation and monitoring of change through women’s testimonies was invaluable to collect up to date information that enriches scientific material from the past. According to Dewey (1972), quoting from Lalak (2010, pp. 31–32), development does not happen thanks to increasing theoretical divagations, but thanks to practical experience and natural experimentation. Social progress is possible due to the continuity of human memory. All in all, one would hope that the biographies and autobiography used in this research will contribute to positive social change. One is also hopeful that the presented study will demystify the hidden world of women in Saudi Arabia by either confirming or dispelling common myths and beliefs about Saudi culture.

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