

## **Educational Ethnography as Cultural and Religious Mirror What Do Researchers Really Learn?**

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Scholarly work is not infrequently imbued with emotional content. While not often revealed, there is passionate thought in scholars' research and creative endeavors (Neumann, 2006). Passion motivates creative work and springs from the whole being of the researcher. Work and life become intertwined; career and biography inform one another. One method of study in which this world of researchers' personal experience, beliefs and values may be more fully revealed is ethnography. The reason for this is that in order to arrive at a valid analytic description of participants' culture, the researcher's own beliefs must be externalized, examined and separated from the culture under study. In this vein Norman Denzin has argued that "self-reflexivity in ethnography is no longer a luxury." Ethnography does not present "an objective, noncontested account of the other's experiences" (Denzin, 1997, xiii), and must give clear voice to participants' own understandings. Rich ethnographic description and analysis should include both the voices of the researched and the undisguised voice of the researcher, who reveals herself and her subjectivity in the interpretive ethnographic account that she writes. This necessary process of externalizing the researcher's own beliefs can lead to considerable personal insight as well as sharpened insight into the culture under study.

My ongoing interest in subjectivity, personal learning and meaning in research has led to theoretical examination of different aspects of this issue (for instance, Court, 2004, 2006), as well as to considerable self-disclosure in writing about research process and results (Court, 2004a). Wanting to understand how other researchers relate to these issues, I am in the process of accumulating a substantial body of interview data with a broad range of researchers. The current paper looks at a subset of that work, the *religious* (as well as cultural) insights gained by five Israeli researchers who conducted studies of religious schools or studied aspects of religious education. Not all defined their work as

ethnography, but all studied aspects of religion, culture and education using qualitative methodology.

### **The Researcher Revealed**

It is important to note that my interest in this topic came about as a result of my own immigration to Israel. Before that I did educational ethnographic study in Canada, and my interest in the lives of teachers there certainly sprang from my own experience, though I seldom reflected on this. Taking up residence in a troubled, highly politicized, multicultural and multireligious society with unfamiliar cultural norms has been a life-changing experience. I began doing research in Israel at the time of “the second intifada”, a period of intense terrorist activity, and wrote the following in preface to an interview study of Arab and Jewish teachers who were studying in a course I taught on democracy and education:

This... search for decency and justice amid conflict has been going on since the first day of its existence in my adopted home, Israel. During the past three years many hundreds of Israelis and Palestinians have died. Every week Israeli parents and children bury their loved ones, blown to bits while sitting on a bus, walking to school, dancing at a discotheque, drinking coffee in a café with babies balanced on their knees. The immediacy of life and death in Israel is astonishing... I am an educator charged with teaching other educators, a researcher seeking a voice that is both reasoned and authentic. I am also a grandmother who would give anything in her power to see that her three grandsons [now four] have the chance to grow up safe and strong, to become kind, brave, wise men and to experience the same joy with their own grandchildren that I am privileged to know with them. Where are the signposts that show us how to be fair minded without denying our experiences and values? What are the rules for academic writing on subjects for which we feel passion, hope and sorrow?”  
(Court, 2004, 48-49).

While the levels of violence have been reduced since that time, the threat of violence, the cultural and religious clashes, competing claims and misunderstandings, together with earnest attempts at bridge building, never go away. For me the result has been, among

other things, new insight into the Canadian culture from which I come, new understanding of the complexities of cultural study and the insider or outsider status of the researcher (see Banks, 1998), and new engagement with my own religion, including more passionate prayer, more anger at God, leading to more intimate conversations, deeper engagement and more committed seeking for meaning. My career, biography and religious life have become inextricably intertwined and inform one another in sometimes conscious, sometimes unconscious and sometimes serendipitous ways.

Each in his or her own way, this is also true of the five researchers I interviewed for this study. In the section that follows they tell their own stories. In the final section I will draw out some commonalities in their stories and suggest implications for cultural research and religious education.

*Yasmin* is a Druze woman who lives in a Northern Israeli town. A former schoolteacher, she is one of the very few in her community to do academic work, and the first woman. Her doctoral research involved ethnographic study of the Druze school system in Israel and its role in shaping the identity of Druze adolescents. She chose ethnography because

when the researcher comes and sits with people and lives the situation with them, it becomes easier to know and understand them and to interpret the things one sees. It's not black and white, to come with a questionnaire and say good-bye. Ethnographic research allows you to live the situation and see things you did not see at the beginning. Along the way I saw things I didn't know about at the beginning, and they became the most important things.

Asked for an example of this, Yasmin told the following story:

I had not thought to investigate very deeply the issue of teaching styles, how teachers teach. I thought the content was more important. But gradually, as I observed lessons, I began to realize the incredible importance of what a teacher does with the content, what the teacher stresses and how. I was watching a lesson on Druze tradition, and the teacher was talking about the importance to the Druze of the land itself. She brought many different quotations from holy sources to support and illustrate this. And then she took them outside and said,

bend down, smell the earth, smell what earth is. Then she took them to a place outside the village and said, here, someone fought and died for us, here under another tree, a wise man used to sit and give counsel, here something else happened – she told them stories and history connected with Druze tradition that connected them, the students, directly to the land. She had gone to the elders of the village and asked for these details, and then prepared this very local and very land-related history and tradition lesson.

The Druze religion is secret and is not taught directly in schools, but this teaching of Druze tradition and history is a kind of precursor to religious instruction. Through making these connections some students may choose a religious life, and once they make that commitment they will study the Druze religion with the elders.

I asked Yasmin how and to what extent she was able to “make the strange familiar” in researching her own culture.

You go out to the research field and you say to yourself, this is all new. I have never seen this before. It was very, very difficult and at certain times I couldn't do it. For instance, I was with some students in a holy place, in the role of researcher who was there to do an observation. Without intending to, when the teacher said, “Feel that you are in a holy place”, I felt it. I couldn't not feel it. I had to experience the place as a Druze, with all my background as a Druze.

Yasmin tried hard to return to the role of objective observer after experiences like this. I asked her if her previous knowledge and personal experience was a liability or whether it helped her understand more deeply.

An outsider would not understand the meaning of this tree and what the Druze tradition says about a great prophet who sat underneath this tree, on this patch of earth. And so this place is holy. I must tell you something else: When you understand this from inside the culture, then as a researcher you can really understand the significance of this place for the students, how it affects and shapes them. An outsider would say, what are they doing here? A researcher from inside the tradition can do both: ask good questions, and also truly understand the answers... I'll give you an example. I observed a ceremony at the school, the ceremony for

Remembrance of Fallen Soldiers. Part of the ceremony is to go to the graveyard and visit the graves of fallen soldiers. I was standing beside a boy and he said, "How strange this is." I asked, "What's so strange?" and he said how strange it is to stand beside his own grave. Someone who doesn't know the Druze and doesn't understand how strong the belief in reincarnation of the soul is amongst the Druze, would say, what a crazy kid! What is he saying! We believe that at the exact moment a Druze dies, he is born. The soul moves to a baby who is born at that moment...I also remember things from my previous life... so when, as a researcher, I heard this young man say what he did, I understood because I am Druze and I had the same experience... This helped me to understand more how the Druze develop their identity and how they feel about the land and their lives. You could never understand the Druze without this. I know the exact moment my mother was born again, in the same place. Where we die we are born. This is what we believe. This enabled me to understand and interpret behaviors.

When I asked Yasmin whether she made new connections with her culture or her religion through this research she replied,

It really hurt me. I really cried about our village during my research. God in Heaven, we have almost no books written by Druze, and I felt, as a researcher, how much we have been disabled by the outside world. We have no academics, almost no researchers, no one who will take care of our needs. This also I discovered during my research – The people responsible for the Druze in the Ministry of Education are not high quality people, they got their jobs through connections. They are Druze. I was so very, very disappointed when I discovered how little they care and how little they do... This has made me work even harder with my daughters to make sure they learn and make something of themselves.

### ***Raphael***

Raphael is Jewish, a full professor who has done a lot of statistical research in the past. This interview study into Israeli young people's spirituality was his first major foray into

qualitative work. He did not define the study as ethnographic, but it had clear cultural underpinnings.

People talk about how the youth of today have no ideology, no sense of purpose, that they have lost their direction because of globalization, and it was our sense that this wasn't necessarily true, that they do have a sense of purpose, but it doesn't come out very well when they are talking to adults. We started talking to some teen-agers, sat with a couple of groups. One of them, an upper class, well-to-do group, confirmed this stereotype that youth today have no ideology, their only purpose is clothes and music, and even that isn't of any interest to them except for how it will impress other people. We were quite amazed. We went on to a second group, who were moshav (farming community) kids, a more heterogeneous group, and they disconfirmed the stereotype and more confirmed what we were thinking about, that kids do have ideologies and ideals, and a sense that there is something beyond them that is worth working for. And then we had a third group of Arab teen-agers from Yaffo, and what was amazing there was that they were very similar to the first group. Even in the area of Arab nationalism there wasn't much there and when there was it was mostly lip service. They were very similar to the first group. So we had the sense that it would be worthwhile looking into this more. We started looking at issues of spirituality because we wanted a broad notion of something that could be meaningful but beyond political, religious or nationalist ideologies.

We decided to study this among different groups in Israel, religious, non-religious, Arab, Jewish, and we did 35 interviews. We had maybe 10, 12 interviewers over time, men, women, Jews, Arabs. In many ways the Arab young people are very similar to the Jewish young people. There were more differences between the secular and religious people in the study than there were between the Arabs and the Jews. There was a great deal of similarity between the modern Moslem kids and the modern Orthodox Jews. And also a good deal of similarity between the secular kids and the Christian Arabs. The modern orthodox Jewish kids and the Moslem Arabs were like that group of moshav kids I mentioned at the beginning, they did have some sense of purpose, and the secular Jewish kids we had and the two Christians were similar to that upper class group I mentioned at the beginning, without a sense of something beyond the immediate enjoyment of clothes and music.

I asked Raphael if this research echoed in any way in his own life, and he replied,

I've always thought that we could learn a great deal from other religions in terms of religious thinking. We don't do that at all, and this research very much reinforced the idea in my mind that religions and religious thinking have very common sources and strivings, and that I can probably improve myself as a thoughtful, observant Jew if I were also to do something about thinking in a broader way, looking at sources outside of Judaism... it helped me say, I recognize in my life certain areas in which my thinking is really part of a larger pie, and we don't usually want to be part of a larger pie... I think we're uncomfortable with it. We live our lives without wanting to shake things up. We need the essence which is ourselves, but as long as we have that, why can't we be part of something larger? I think this research said to me, why not?

Raphael saw clear implications for religious education:

... our kids should be learning about other religions. Not learning other religions, but learning about them

in order to arrive at deeper understanding of their own religion.

The positive religious reinforcement Raphael experienced through this research contrasted with a negative outcome of the cross-cultural experience of working with Arab interviewers:

We had a number of Arab and Jewish graduate students working with us as interviewers. We had a terrible time with the Arab students, it was a very different mentality. Two of the women stopped in the middle of the work. This is an interviewer who you've invested in and trained. One just stopped, didn't notify us, just disappeared. She called me a year later wondering if I had more work for her, didn't have any sense that she had done anything wrong. The other one had to stop everything and help her sister prepare for her wedding for about four months. She didn't have a choice, it was an absolute necessity, a family expectation that there was no questioning. Had she not done it she would have had to leave home, literally, sever all ties with her family. She wore tight jeans, she did the whole Western bit, but she was absolutely a part of this traditional society where family loyalty is all. A modern girl from a relatively modern family. These problems were not the kind I would ever have with Jewish students. There would be different problems with them - maybe not doing

things in depth, not being completely reliable, getting away with things. The issue of two different cultures really came out - these were all graduate students, people of high intellectual capability – the differences were cultural, they were deep, and they weren't something we could talk about. This whole experience really dampened my sense that we can come to understanding between Arabs and Jews in Israel. The way we think, and the way we think about one another, is so fundamentally different, that even leading a common life one beside the other – it's not easy at all... it seems farcical to talk about all kinds of agreements when the agreements mean such different things to the two sides. It really dampened my spirits. I don't have any more animosity than I did before – I didn't have much before, and I don't have much now, but in terms of thinking about coming to some real understanding, I'm having a hard time imagining it... In the Arab population, the collectivism is a huge thing. If something happens to Arabs somewhere – Let's talk about the West Bank and Gaza as an example. The West Bank could be a paradise, we could help create a paradise, but if Gaza isn't, it won't make any difference. If I live in the West Bank and my cousin lives in Gaza, my cousin who I hate, I hate that person but I have to make sure he's treated with honor- I can treat him with dishonor but no one else can- it's a cultural phenomenon, and it's what we're living with right now.

These contrasting experiences, the sense of the connectedness of religious, and of an apparently unbridgeable cultural divide, led to Raphael to the conclusion that

I think this is one of the reasons I didn't follow up on the spirituality research. It was a good piece of research, and I learned from it, I grew as a person, and I don't feel I grow as a person from most of my research, but that one I did – why didn't I continue? Thinking about it, it was the negative stuff, the cultural insights that I got from working with the Arab interviewers, that took away my motivation. I couldn't carry on.

### ***John***

John is a psychologist teaching and researching Jewish education. In his study of parents as identity agents John interviewed Jewish Orthodox religious parents, on their parenting, in order to understand in what ways these parents see themselves as agents of identity formation in their children. I asked John where the motivation for this study came from.



Most of the identity formation literature in developmental psychology says that the correct, mature way adolescents form their identities is through self exploration and commitment. It's as if the person does it himself, and is the creator of his own identity. That didn't fit with what I thought about myself, and my friends around me, who put a lot of thought into issues of parenting and the creation of their children's identity. I thought, how can all identity be about the individual himself when this is a co-constructed process? So in a way, I had the conclusion before I started. This was something that was personally meaningful to me beforehand, that I knew, in a personal way, was important. It was missing from the literature and I decided that I would bring it. I knew intuitively and experientially that this was going on.

With this personal motivation, as a religious father, to understand the role of religious parents in constructing their children's identity, John began.

I started by calling some of my friends and saying, can I do an hour and a half interview with you? They turned into six hours. One guy said to me, this is great, it's just two middle aged males talking about what it means to be a father, and no one has ever talked to me about this before. It was so obvious that this guy was spending so much of his intellect and emotion being an identity agent, and no one is talking about it. So I spoke to parents about what it meant to be a religious parent in a religious community. What and how and why do they do what they do vis a vis their children's identity. Their activity and their reflectivity were the two main points that came out. The activity means they are actively doing it, they're not just letting it happen, and the reflectivity means that they are thinking about it. It's not easy to be doing it on both a, let's say, technical level, as well as a philosophical level. What does it mean in a post modern society to make choices for children, what is more important, what the child wants or what I think is correct? All sorts of these questions came up. That thought, and the decision making, is going on all the time, and that is not in the literature.

I asked John why this important area was not represented in the literature.

The literature focuses so strongly on the individual, and the crises of adolescence as Erickson laid out, so everyone is studying these, but they're not studying the precursors and what is happening in earlier childhood. Second, there is the zeitgeist of modern liberal society that puts it all on the individual. It's his choice, it's his prerogative, and it's not nice to interfere,

supposedly, in someone else's identity. The parents I talked to did not think this way, they thought to themselves constantly, it's my duty to my children, and to my religion, not to just leave them alone to form their own identity, to deal with these things alone. They also intimated that it's part of them, their generativity, to be an identity agent. These parents are thinking far ahead, and they're thinking now, and they've got goals and they've got practice, all of these things they're doing and thinking about. They're not saying, it's not my business.

I wondered if this was a unique group of parents. Surely all parents help shape their children's identity, but do all parents think about it so deeply? John replied,

Okay, these parents are operating in a specific socio-cultural context, but the themes you get when you speak to these highly reflective parents, who so strongly see the need to help their kids shape a religious identity in a post-modern world that largely operates against religious values, those themes may be echoed, in a smaller way, in the parenting of non-religious parents as well. I teach Jewish studies teachers, and I see that they, in their own somewhat different context, are wrestling with some similar issues. Actually, this was probably part of what aroused my interest in this topic. As a parent I found myself giving a lot of attention to these questions. I had a lot of discussions with my wife and with myself. But also, teaching identity, as I do in my courses, because we're in a religious community, I found that it's a lot more obvious to religious teachers that this is part of their job. So they were asking me what to do about a, b and c and I first said, take a look at the literature, and then I said, no wait, the literature doesn't talk much about what you as teachers do. You're supposed to sort of take a step back and let the kids form their identity, help them explore, help them ask questions. Then I said to myself, no, you're doing much more than that. That's something you see with qualitative research, there's what the literature says and there's what's actually going on in the field, and there's a gap, and that's where the good stuff is, in that gap. So again, it's because of my own personal involvement in this, and also because of the needs of these religious teachers who are supposed to help students form their religious identity. The literature says let kids ask questions, let them explore, go through crises, and this doesn't fit. what the teachers are doing and what they want to do.

I asked John what the implications for religious education in schools might be from his study of parents.

My next study will be examining teachers in schools and what they're doing. How is it similar to and different from what parents are doing? If identity is not just individual but is co-constructed and there are other agents around...teachers are not just social agents, not just blind replicators of the wider interests of society, they are in a strategic spot as enculturators on the one hand, but having the interests of the individual on the other – they are in a strategic spot to decide what yes and what no, and how yes and how no, they're not just automatic imprinters. My sense is that they have a strong role in identity formation, and religious teachers who think this through, their goals and how to achieve them, while relating to the specific needs and personality of each kid – they can have a strong effect which is probably secondary only to that of the parents. We can't talk about teaching religion without considering that real religion must become part of a person, an integral part of his identity.

***Karwan*** is a Falach Moslem, a religious woman who wears traditional Moslem dress. She is doing an ethnographic study for her Masters thesis (still underway at the time of our interview) and hopes to continue on to do a doctorate. She is studying how the culture of two elementary schools in the Negev desert may promote or prevent violence among students. For me, it was a learning experience listening to Karwan speak about the various cultural subgroups in her small desert community which I, in my ignorance, had simply divided into Moslems and Bedouins. Bedouins are Moslem but have some unique practices and are the traditional nomads of the desert. Karwan explained,

Some of the kids in these two schools are Bedouin, but most are Falachim, like me, along with other various cultural subgroups. Falach means 'farmer', so you can see right away that we are different from the Bedouin, who were nomadic shepherds and never farmers. Our accent is different and many of our cultural norms are different. The Negev Bedouin are very traditional, they still don't like women to work or leave the home. The Falachim are much more on the road to modernization. Here I am, as you can see!

I asked her if the high levels of violence in the schools in her community, the schools she is studying, are related to hostility or competition between different cultural sub-groups.

There is a lot of physical violence amongst the students, but it does not seem to be related to these groups. I have seen no such patterns. It seems to be more related to what each child

brings from home. Kids from lower socio economic backgrounds are often (but not always, of course) more violent. Kids from homes with weak parents or emotional problems bring those problems to school. Most especially, I am finding that kids from religious homes are less violent, better behaved, because they are taught those lessons at home and bring those values to school. The home seems to be the main factor. The school is where these things get played out, and the school has to deal with the problems.

In response to my question about whether the schools are actively using the teaching of religious values to lessen violence, she replied,

Religion is part of the structure of the school, and of the community. It's not like among the Jews and Christians, where there is a dichotomy, you're either religious or you're not. All Moslems hear the call to prayer five times a day, in every Moslem community, and everyone chooses their own level of observance, but no one is divorced from it, no one rejects it. The schools have an hour a day where they teach religion and students study religious texts. Every assembly starts with a reading from the Koran, sometimes a teacher reading and sometimes a student. Right now the schools are talking about Ramadan, of course, which is coming up, and if a student hits another student, teachers use this to say, that is not in the spirit of Ramadan. They do use religious values to try to improve behavior, but again, the most important teaching comes from the home.

I asked Karwan why she wanted to study schools in her own community

I chose to research my own culture partly because I am there, I teach in a similar school, some of the staff at the schools already know me. Given the climate in which we live, I don't think I would be accepted into a Jewish school, me, a religious Moslem woman in traditional dress – I would have to work very hard to prove myself, prove that I'm not there for some other reason. It would be very, very hard to be accepted. Perhaps in a Druze school, but they are very closed, they stay within their own framework, no one even knows what their holy books are, their religion is secret, they only marry one another – I doubt I would be accepted there to do research either. Maybe for my doctorate I will go farther afield. But in the meantime I want to look at my own culture, I am very concerned about violence, why it has taken root in our schools and what it will do to our next generation of adults. I want to understand this, and do something about it... As a researcher it is a challenge to neutralize my

previous knowledge and try to see things objectively. At the same time, being accepted as an insider will allow me to go deeper than I ever could in a Jewish school.

### *David*

David is a young assistant professor and a rabbi. He does not define his work as ethnographic but as hermeneutic. He sees all his work in education, which includes teaching Jewish philosophy, researching “chevruta” study (intensive work by a pair of students studying a religious text) and being a rabbi in a new, somewhat experimental congregation, as

...fusing and infusing, a complex set of activities and areas that affect what I do and how I look at myself...The typical Western dichotomy breaks life and work up into theory and practice. But it is only through practice that theory has meaning, only through experience that truth is met and one comes to understanding. What I’m interested in, what I’m doing, what I’m writing about, what I’m living, they’re all part of a package. Needing to experience theory in practice has made me rethink practice, chevruta study, for instance, having a conversation with a text, and the pedagogy of this. This also has to do with my religious life.

Because of this purposeful integration of life and work, David did not want in our interview to address a particular piece of research he had done. Rather, he sees all the parts of his work and life as research. He discussed self understanding through academic work in this way:

Unlike the modern myth of rationality, there is no such thing as understanding without preconceptions. Understanding is by essence informed by your existing knowledge and preconceptions. There is no other way to understand than to project. That’s a given, it’s not a bad thing. And you cannot become aware of all your preconceptions, certainly not through introspection. Ricoeur would say that the only way you can learn something about yourself is by engaging with a text, a piece of art, another person. In doing this you are projecting on the one hand and receiving on the other. It’s not only about you. For it to be a serious hermeneutical conversation you have to be ready to be changed. This is a huge thing, and it has obvious psychological implications. It brings in trust, openness, vulnerability. Only by engaging in this kind of hermeneutical activity as a researcher, an educator, a chevruta

partner, can you learn something about yourself... In terms of my own biography, I relate this first to the yeshiva world, which I know well. There you do not have a voice, you are delving into a text. You do not have a voice unless you are a great rabbi. That's one extreme of the map. The other extreme is the very cheap, post-modern version of learning, which is almost like a Rorschach test – it's all about me and there's nothing else out there. I find this very problematic, and in terms of my work in Jewish education, religious education, it's incredibly dangerous. I want to reclaim the ethical work of having a conversation with a text, with a chevruta partner. So how do you put this on the table? What are the pedagogical experiences you need to provide students and teachers in order to help them engage and learn in this way? This is my research, learning about practice.

I asked David how he manages this integrated, hermeneutical approach to work and life in a university setting.

This is very painful. Connection with other people sparks ideas, creativity and understanding, and I don't have that...There is something about the university setting that is totally counter productive, and totally counter to what I'm talking about. It's all about what sounds sexy, about grades. It's very hard to do serious intellectual and spiritual work in this setting.

Finally, he talked about how his own delving into pedagogical hermeneutics has changed his approach to prayer. He and two other young rabbis formed a new congregation

based on radical feminism, which means not just including women, but forming a real community. This means hosting people in your home on Shabbat, meeting one another, seeing that no one is invisible. We know that historically cultures made women invisible. How can we pray together and then let someone go home alone? This is not just philosophy, it is being... Last year before Rosh Hashanah we did "speed dating". Every person had to think of two things they would like to share, related to the Rosh Hashanah prayers, and the only condition was they had to speak to someone they didn't know. It was beautiful, first of all, to see the eight year old boy talking to the old grandfather. Then, during the actual praying on Rosh Hashanah, when people came to these places in the prayers they were making eye contact with each other. That for me is the practicality of the moment. Being in the moment with the words of the prayers. Orthodox people are so handicapped. They know

all the words of the prayers by heart, but they don't know how to be there, in the moment, when they are praying...So this has been my philosophical journey, through education, teaching, prayer, theory and practice. What came first, and what causes what, I don't know.

### ***Passion and Pain: Research from the Heart***

These researchers tell different stories about their work, but the common themes that run through their stories shed light on the nature of qualitative, cultural research and the role of religion and culture in a researcher's life. Unlike the traditional academic wisdom that research should spring from theory, these researchers' motivation came at least in part from their personal cultural or religious experience and only then did they find the theoretical basis for their studies. Together with an academic product, a published paper or graduate thesis, each person also reflected the results of his or her work back through a personal prism that in turn affected their research, teaching, cultural understandings and even worship. This kind of personal stake in academic work requires the researcher, as David said, to be willing to be changed.

*Yasmin's* "insider knowledge" of Druze culture and her personal experience of Druze religious beliefs like reincarnation, allowed her to understand in a more authentic way how Druze schools shape students' identities. Her own difficult passage to academic success made her even more committed both to using this insider understanding and to stepping back and donning the hat of the objective researcher, in order to arrive at a high quality piece of research. The process of *Raphael's* investigation of spirituality across three religions awakened a new pessimism in him that Jews and Arabs will be able to cross the deep cultural divide in order to take the same meanings from political agreements. Yet, his research also brought to light a sense of the common base of all religions, and the need for those committed to their own religious belief and practice to learn about others. Perhaps these insights will come together and in some way provide a seed for Raphael's future creative work. *John's* investigation of how Jewish parents help build their children's identity through conscious and committed teaching of religious values not only reflected back to his own parenting but led him to extend his thinking into

how teachers in religious schools engage in a similar, purposeful identity building with their students. *Karwan's* worry about youth violence in schools in her community led her to study this phenomenon in order to uncover patterns and causes, insights that she hopes will lead to change. She is very aware that her insider status as a religious Moslem woman enables both entrance as a researcher and experiential understanding of cultural norms among numerous local subgroups. Her new insight is the extent to which religious teaching in the home determines how children behave at school (an interesting link to John's study).

*David* expressed eloquently how academic work, and educational work in general, can lead to new self understanding: "...the only way you can learn something about yourself is by engaging with a text, a piece of art, another person. In doing this you are projecting on the one hand and receiving on the other. It's not only about you. For it to be a serious hermeneutical conversation you have to be ready to be changed. This is a huge thing... It brings in trust, openness, vulnerability. Only by engaging in this kind of hermeneutical activity as a researcher, an educator, a chevruta partner, can you learn something about yourself..." David made references to Ricouer (1981), who said that all experience, all human interactions (including those between researcher and researched) are a kind of text, open to interpretation and "written" to be read, engaged in, learned from.

Although these interviews look specifically at the experiences of qualitative-ethnographic researchers, "passionate thought in research, creative endeavors, and, sometimes, teaching" (Neumann, 2006, 383) is not restricted to qualitative researchers. Neumann's interviews with a broad range of mid-career academics demonstrated that scholarly work is "emotional in content and emotionally contextualized" (Neumann, 2006, 381).

Neumann's interviews revealed the extent to which dedicated scholars love their work, become engrossed in or even obsessed by it, and have "peak experiences" of discovery and insight that are almost transcendental and generate new creative thought. The physicist and philosopher Michael Polanyi also wrote about intellectual passion in scientific work and how that work changes scientists. "...creative scientists spend their lives trying to guess right. They are sustained and guided therein by their heuristic passion. We call their work creative because it changes the world as we see it, by



deepening our understanding of it. The change is irrevocable...Having made a discovery, I shall never see the world again as before. My eyes have become different. I have made myself into a person seeing and thinking differently” (Polanyi, 1958, 143).

Yet, the concept of *intellectual* passion, however gripping and generative that passion may be, is not adequate to encompass culture and religion. Intellectual passion bypasses or transcends these particularisms, because scientific research is by definition a striving for universal laws. A unique subset of scientific research, qualitative research may aim for generalized, theoretical understanding, as in the construction of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), which gradually builds general theory from contextualized detail, but it begins with particulars that demand the personal engagement of the researcher, who must come to “know” the culture from the inside. If the researcher comes from the culture under study, this means a deep revisiting of cultural knowledge, experience and feeling. After this revisiting, the final stage of analysis requires the researcher to “make the familiar strange”. If the researcher comes from another culture, the challenge is first to “make the strange familiar”, in order to approach insider experience. Cultural study requires a difficult and disciplined balancing of the researcher’s subjective experience and objective analysis. As Banks (1998, 6) writes, “the subjective and objective components of knowledge are interconnected and interactive.” The validity of cultural research comes *first* from insider experience, and *then* from a moving away toward objectivity. Inevitably, there is personal stake on the part of the researcher. When one researches one’s own culture this stake is probably greatest, but even when researching another culture that culture becomes a kind of mirror in which one’s own culture, beliefs and experiences are viewed. When religious faith and practice are also involved, there may be even deeper engagement, greater challenge to the researcher, and greater personal stake. Faith is not intellectual. As Paul Tillich wrote, “Faith embraces itself and the doubt about itself” (Tillich, 1955, 61). Religious researchers of culture and religion face the added challenge of integrating insights about faith into the complex research process of engagement, disengagement, experience and analysis.

This description of the qualitative researcher's work as deep engagement, risk taking and authentic interaction, together with intellectual work, can be applied also to our approach to religious education. As religious school teachers we need to help young people interact in this authentic way, with text (one's own religious texts and perhaps others'), with people, with cultures. Teachers should be examples of this commitment, truly engaging with their students and with religious texts, seeking in their teaching to celebrate and nurture faith while engaging in rigorous intellectual work.

This discussion also has clear implications for cross-cultural teaching and learning. Human beings and cultures need to know one another, from the inside as much as possible, in order to understand the nature of the chasms that divide us, to make bridges and plan political agreements that somehow include the world views of all parties in a workable compromise. This is not easy work (as evidenced by our general lack of success), but we may not survive without it. Cultural research and religious education both have important roles to play in moving humankind toward the illusive and persistent dream of peace.

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