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**Memory, History, Identity:
Life History Interviews with
Palestinian Migrants to
Canada**

Rebecca Lash

- ❖ My project examines the significance of camp experiences on the memories and everyday life choices of Palestinian refugees in Canada.
- ❖ I conducted Interviews with Palestinian refugees that have lived in camps in the Middle East and have now moved to Canada

MAIN RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- ❖ 1) how do Palestinian refugees remember their lives in refugee camps and describe their choices for leaving the camps.
- ❖ 2) How do refugee experiences of leaving the camps inform their understanding of political tensions amongst Palestinians with respect to the Palestinian national movement?

METHODS: LIFE HISTORY

- ❖ I used life history methods to illuminate the relationship between political and personal experiences of Palestinian camp life.
- ❖ A life history interview structure invites participants to reflect on their experiences and frame their interpretation of life events in their own words, starting with a chronological account (Blee, 1994; Dubois, 2014; High, 2014).
- ❖ Personal memories provide important context to national memory

INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE MEMORY IN LIFE STORIES: RAHMAN

- ❖ When Abdelrahman was a child, a young Egyptian deputy commander named Gamal Abdel Nasser knocked on the door of his family home in the village of *Iraq Suwaydan* in Gaza.
- ❖ “Give him 20, 30 soldiers with two trucks to move his things,” the young Nasser said. Later, when the revolution in Egypt occurred and Nasser rose to power, Rahman’s father saw his photo in the newspaper. Rahman told me how, “my dad, he bring the newspaper with him, and he ask me, Rahman- you remember this guy? Now he is the ruler of Egypt.”

RAHMAN

- ❖ “They fill the jars, and [on] their way back... there was plants... a kind of cucumber... and I want to take one. I was a boy, and the man who was standing there- I think he was not meant to hit me, because that man is my father friend- Ibrahim, and... he hit me. And my aunt was so angry, and she took a stick from the ground and went and hit him... then the problems start...”
- ❖ Rahman understands this conflict with his father’s friend as a sign of wider trouble in the region.

NOSTALGIA

- ❖ Nostalgia connected migrants' personal histories to their future goals for a secure family life or a just solution for the Palestinian people more broadly.
- ❖ Expressions of loss and wistfulness for experiences that migrants both lived and inherited from elders contributed to their understanding of themselves and their positioning with respect to their national identities.

NOSTALGIA: KAMAL

“At that time we don’t have internet or TVs, just stories about our hometown, how they fled... the stories of the village, even I can draw now a picture about my village, based on that story....”

“Ali was a good man, lived in Palestine, so they made a shrine for him and they go there just [for] getting some blessings, from that holy place. So they keep talking about Palestine, and how wonderful their life was, going to their fields, having plenty of place to circulate, and compare it to the situation in the refugee camps, they lost everything.”

KAMAL

“they kept telling us about our village and comparing the situation now,” he says, “and urging us to keep that in our memory and to transfer this to the new generations, to keep in mind that we had a village, we had land and now the situation is temporary and one day we can go back to that village.”

ADAM

- ❖ Liked the stories about food: “maybe because it’s scarce, and it’s something that people try and find humour in, or find something to laugh about, even when you think about it it’s something sort of upsetting.
- ❖ “It wasn’t until later on... that they understood that what they had eaten was mayonnaise, because they didn’t know what mayonnaise was, so they thought that it was cheese.”

- ❖ Adam missed the solidarity of his parents' generation: "one of the nicest things, like one of the things that I actually missed the most, is how it would feel like its just one family, like the whole camp is one family."
- ❖ "they'd all like bring the flour, and they'd bake the bread together and then they'd distribute it amongst each other so that it's equally distributed amongst the houses in the community."

INSIGHTS INTO MOTIVATIONS TO EMIGRATE

- ❖ While leaving the camp was not an explicit goal that most participants expressed having, receiving an education or gaining socio-economic mobility through employment certainly was.
- ❖ Each participant had their own unique way of achieving that mobility, whether by going to university or by working their way up from entry-level jobs. Gaining this mobility required moving in and out of various places at different points in time.
- ❖ The act of “leaving” for many participants was not a single, linear act. Rather, it was a prolonged process of small migrations and returns. The near-impossibility of accessing secure citizenship in the gulf- and for some- lack of support upon arrival to Canada, compounded participants’ need to leave, come back, and leave again.

CONCLUSION

- ❖ Kinship and social networks tie together personal goals and conceptions of collective belonging
- ❖ People were committed to the needs of those around them, and migration enabled a future that was otherwise limited in the surroundings in which they were raised
- ❖ Social relationships are central to the formation of collective memories and identity

- ❖ Ideas of national liberation were tied to personal and family experiences
- ❖ Political identity was personal for migrants, and vice versa
- ❖ Arguments question the “finality” of migration decisions, as there are multiple “homes” for Palestinian refugees
- ❖ Migration was not a single act, but an ongoing and cyclical experience

THANK YOU!