

Essay:

Work, family and life at the margins: How to see from below

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“Understandings of work, like understandings of family, vary greatly depending on who controls the definitions”.

Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, (2000, p. 46)

In her essay published in the collective volume *Sex, Gender and Politics*, the late Dafna Izraeli (1999), one of the most prominent Israeli liberal feminist sociologists, acknowledged that her earlier influential volume published in 1982 had not fully dealt with the depth of the inequality along gender lines in the Israeli labour force. She had realised, Izraeli wrote¹, that the stubborn persistence of gendered inequality remained a “mystery” that still needs to be “unravelling” by paying attention to the “unspoken codes and everyday practices in organisations.” Over the last decade, Israeli feminist scholarship has paid increasing attention to some of these “unspoken codes”, and the ways in which they structure an unequal playing field for women in the labour market (Benjamin, 2008, 2012) and in shaping Israeli families (Stier, 2010; Fogiel-Bijaoui, 2002, 2005). This growing body of recent feminist scholarship has encouraged the documentation of everyday stories, experiences and the context of individual lives, in order to make tangible the varied ways in which gender, family structure and labour are connected in a range of social settings. This greater attention to the varied experiences of women from hegemonic and non-hegemonic groups (cf. Benjamin, Bernstein & Motzafi-Haller, 2012) had offered an understanding of the *subjective* experience of women struggling to keep families and jobs intact under the shifting

contemporary forces of neo-liberal capitalism. Once diffracted through this prism, gender could no longer serve as the *only* meaningful analytical category, and the experience of women's employment outside of their homes must be understood within different contexts and social realities. This greater interest in *subjective* experiences as a legitimate basis of knowledge, coupled with the reliance on narratives recorded in interviews, opened the door for a different set of questions. These questions not only sought to document the different realities of women's lives but also, in critical analytical terms, the issue of the manner in which different categories of women construct differently the very meaning of 'family' and 'labour' in their lives. In line with this more recent development in Israeli feminist scholarship, the editors of this volume declare an interest in what they termed a "phenomenological perspective" to our understanding of the various processes that shape families, gender relations, and work within and outside homes.

There is no doubt that such a phenomenology of everyday life is more effective in communicating to readers the tension and the pain, the sense of evolving selves, and perhaps the ways in which Dafna Izraeli's "unspoken codes" actually operate. Yet, committed to the recording of the "subjective" phenomenological perspective as they state this to be, this recent feminist scholarship – at least within the disciplines of sociology and anthropology² – seems to have paid limited attention to the thorny epistemological questions related to the very process of eliciting the "voices" of such subaltern subjects. Very little has been written about the uneven power relations between researcher and research subjects (cf. Nagar-Ron & Motzafi-Haller, 2011); even less about the complex process of producing subaltern *kinds of knowledge*, and the significance of producing *alternative* kinds of knowledge (Hill Collins, 2000) in the context of power (policy making) and empowerment (local activism). The critical question that remains under-developed in this more recent turn to documenting the subjective experience is not merely "methodological", but deeply epistemological. The feminist theorist Dona Haraway articulated this more than two decades ago, when she asserted that "to see from below is neither easily learned nor unproblematic" (1988, p. 584). There is a sense, when reading much of the recent feminist scholarship in Israel that relies on interviews, that the recorded voices are unproblematicized and are treated as "authentic" or "natural" data.

In this brief essay, I wish to complicate this underlying approach to the documentation of voices and everyday experiences. Following post-positivist feminist scholars – and in particular, the rich literature in postcolonial feminist scholarship³ – I want to draw our attention here to the types of data and interpretive frameworks that are not limited to interview settings. I propose that feminist ethnographic methodologies are a productive site for eliciting subjugated knowledge and what Dona Haraway described as "modes of denial through repression, forgetting, and disappearing acts."

I offer Israeli feminists a glimpse into a research methodology that insists that the terrain of subjugated knowledge is often not readily available in interviews, and must be culled from moments of silence; from deconstructing the coded behaviour of our subjects and not merely through listening to their statements. And ultimately, I wish to demonstrate here that every research encounter is, in Haraway's apt phrase, a "shared conversation in epistemology." To illustrate my argument, I will draw on my own research experience among Mizrahi working-class women carried out between 2000 and 2004 in Yeruham, a small desert town in Southern Israel.

The question that stood at the centre of my work considered how the working-class women residents of the town have juggled families and jobs in an increasingly precarious neo-liberal economy. I asked how, in the context of these larger forces of social exclusion and economic marginalization, these Mizrahi working-class women have redefined the meaning of family, work, and their sense of self worth. I argued that in order to be able to first grasp the subjective meanings of family and labour and then attempt to represent and draw analytical insights based on this historically-specific process, we need to place the women and their worldview at the centre. I needed to develop an ear for complex messages, not always articulated in plain words. The moments with Esti, one of my main protagonists, on market day, is an example of how communal frustration and pain about a life of endemic unemployment is articulated and resisted locally.

A. "Why, had I ever worked?"

"Hey, Esti, how are you? Did you find work?"

What do you say Chief...How are things? Going forward on 'reverse gear'? ha ha...' 'Work'? What 'work'? Why, did I ever had a job that I now will have one"?

I followed Esti, a 34 year old single woman who had become one of my main interlocutors in Yeruham, to the local market, held in an open parking-lot once a week. Her joy at the warmth lavished on her by the vegetable merchants standing behind their temporary stalls was palpable. Esti never missed market day, a communal event in the quiet life of the small isolated town in the Israeli Negev desert. Every week she left her small apartment, where she lives with her older sister – also a single woman – and walked among the few buyers who take their time picking up fresh fruits and vegetables, in a manner that says they are in no rush to get somewhere. Esti seldom bought produce in the market. She was there to socialise, to enjoy herself. "*They all know me here,*" she told me with a huge smile. "There is no one, nobody who you see here, that I don't know who he is and who is his father." She beamed as she greeted

each person warmly, making her listeners smile at hearing her characteristic puns and twists of phrases. I walked behind Esti like a shadow, never a part of the lively exchanges she performed. But once we moved away, and as the person with whom she had exchanged laughing warm greetings has drifted out of ear-shot, Esti told me in a hushed tone: *"This one, don't see him like that...he had been recently fired from his job in the factory...the poor guy has five children to feed."* Or, after we had met an elegantly dressed woman, Esti would tell me: *"This one here Pnina, poor thing, her husband is a drug addict... she must work cleaning houses to support her children."*

The glaring gap between the openly celebratory and joyous tone of the exchanges in the market day, and the running commentary Esti shared with me depicting the lives of people we met and the painful reality of deprivation and a struggle to make ends meet, was striking. What I learned after many such walks in the market is that local conduct dictated that one was not expected to speak openly about one's private pain at being unemployed. The hushed, not-in-your-face explanations of the social context of pain hidden behind an elegant facade and a smiling face were reserved for me, the outsider; the one who does not know what they all know but are barred from making explicit. It is unbecoming to speak openly about one's personal experience of deprivation. One needs to put on a brave face and present as good a façade as possible in order to hide, to repress, to forget the local experience of humiliation at being unemployed. The only way this collective pain and frustration about the lack of jobs and the endemic unemployment in their remote town is allowed to be expressed is through such loud, bitter-sweet banter with Esti, a woman who broke local rules and refused to get married, hold on to a job, or act "seriously".

When asked if she has found a job, Esti knew the question to be in jest; the person who posed this question assumed that she was still unemployed. Her response was self-deprecating: *"Why, had I ever worked? So why will I begin working now?"* By over-playing her personal experience of unemployment, Esti (who had worked since dropping out of school at the age of 13) ridiculed, made explicit the on-going reality of endemic unemployment in the local setting. And just to bring the message more firmly home she added, to the sound of the loud laughter of her listeners: *"This is Yeruham...have you ever seen 'work' here?"*

Esti's quick, flippant tongue created a space, a brief moment, where the pain and the desperation of these local, mostly lower-class Mizrahi residents of the remote development town Yeruham, could be uttered.

In a statement she wrote for me about the issue of "work" in her life, Esti said: *"It is a pity there are no places of work here. Maybe (if there were jobs) people might have stayed in Yeruham and not leave for other places."* Esti, who loves her hometown, lamented the fact that anyone who can afford to, leaves town; that families fall apart because Mizrahi working-class men are less able to support their families in the

extremely marginalised labour market of this remote desert town. This moment in the market speaks loudly about the local sentiments of frustration and hopelessness, about ways in which larger economic processes are felt locally. In order to grasp the meaning of the retreat of the Israeli welfare state, the growing impoverishment of the working poor, and the impact of loss of jobs in Israel's peripheral spaces, one needs to be able to decode local ways of articulation. "Local moments" (Falk Moore, 1987) like this one in the Yeruham market day offer an entry-point into the analysis of larger processes, whereby the income of working-class Mizrahi women cannot compensate for the loss of Mizrahi men's incomes. It points to the need to analyse working-class Mizrahi experiences-- experiences that have been mostly invisible within Israeli sociological scholarship (Gerbi & Levi, 2000).

In the following ethnographic vignette, we learn about one of the strategies for survival of women in a locally depressed labour market – course taking. It seems that while openly articulating an urge to increase their marketability in an extremely limited local job market by taking many courses, the women end up diminishing, rather than increasing, personal material resources. However, a more layered interpretive framework for understanding this seemingly contradictory strategy of "course taking" needs to deconstruct verbal open statements, and thus offer a grounded critical reexamination of the meaning of this praxis in specific settings. How to *hear* voices and local realities becomes a complex challenge, one that engages mining situated and embodied kinds of knowledge.

B. Nail-construction courses.

Many Mizrahi lower-class women, young Israeli-born women in their 20s as well as their mothers, women in their 50s or even 60s, boast colourful, often elaborately decorated glued-on nails. The cost of these synthetic glued-on nails ranged, at the time of research (early 2000), from 120 to 200 Israeli Shekels (the average wage for a day of cleaning work at that time stood at about 140 Shekels). Every few weeks, a thin layer of silicon needed to be applied to the growth area of the nail. The cost of this monthly top-up treatment was an additional 50 to 100 Shekels. Women often spoke about how well-groomed (*metupakhot*) these glued-on nails made them feel. Cleaning ladies in my university office (who travelled daily to work on the University campus, some 20 kilometres away from their Yeruham home) insisted that their long glued-on nails did not get damaged by the cleaning detergents they dipped their hands in. On the contrary, they seemed to enjoy showing off their manicured nails, which stood in contrast to the grey or blue working gowns they were obliged to put on over their clothes while performing their menial work. Their nails (and hair, often dyed blonde – another practice I discuss elsewhere) made a personal statement about individual style

that could not be erased by the grey uniform. Women compared their nails and debated the relative artistic skills of their preferred nail-building professional. In the winter of 2001, I attended a nail-construction class held in the community centre of Yeruham.

Sixteen women, all Israeli-born, ages ranging from 19 to 35, paid 1600 Israeli Shekels each to attend this nine-session private course. The course was being offered, for the third time, by a beauty salon owner from Beer Sheva, the Negev capital city about 30 minutes drive away from Yeruham. The course fees (almost half a month's salary for most of the women, when employed) did not include an additional fee of some 900 Shekels, needed for the purchase of a kit containing a nail-filing electric machine and the materials necessary to perform the act of gluing, filing, and painting silicon nails. A simple calculation suggested that there were already more than fifty "graduates" of the class in this small 9000 people-strong town. Economically, I concluded, it made little sense to hope to earn a living – even partially – from mastering and practicing the art of nail-gluing. I also noted that many of the women who attended the evening class came at the end of a hard working day, and needed to juggle pressing domestic duties and child-care arrangements in order to attend the class.

During the first few sessions I attended, I kept asking the women *"Why are you taking this class?"* and *"Do you really hope to make it your new profession?"* Initially, they balked at my questions. They rejected the way I formulated their choice to attend these classes in material, economic-maximization terms. Their fragmented answers made it clear they knew all too well that very few women would be able to use their newly acquired skill of nail-construction to generate income in their small community. The phrase I heard in response to my stubborn questions was: *"one never knows."* Several women offered an explanation that suggested that nail-construction might prove a useful skill if one should lose one's job, or a good "profession" to have after giving birth, should one not wish to take on cleaning or full-time factory jobs – the two most common kinds of employment available for women locally.

Women spoke about the course as one among a whole range of courses they had taken in order to improve their employment options in the extremely limited local job market. *"You never know,"* beamed one woman in her early 30s, a mother of two young children, *"I say, 'take as many courses as you can, have as many 'diplomas' as you can have' ...learning is good, and maybe, one day, I will be lucky and I will find a good job using one of these skills."*

These individual struggles to improve one's "marketability" were not easy. I heard many stories about the sacrifice women made in order to make time, not merely spare the money necessary for paying the fees for these evening classes. *"Do you know how hard I worked when my kids were small, running between my cleaning job in the University offices (where I met her) and my evening classes?"* asked Michel, whose life story I explored in detail in an earlier paper (Motzafi-Haller, 2004). She described

a complex and stressful daily routine, of depositing her children with her mother-in-law after picking them up from their day-care centres and schools; of bargaining with her husband who needed to bring the kids home after his work shift was over when she was “in class” or, in rare cases, paying for a babysitter from her limited income if her mother-in-law could not help her out.

It was through participating in this class and listening to their informal conversations that I was able to grasp the urgent and determined desire of these young women to build a solid economic basis for themselves and their families. Their hopes for better-paid, semi-qualified jobs that could be relied on in times of need or in addition to their present blue-collar employment were rarely realised, however. So why did they spend their limited time and resources taking so many courses? What I needed was a way of documenting a kind of knowledge that was not easily accessible through a simple question-and-answer interaction. The question of *how* to see from below, as Haraway (1988) insists, is an epistemological problem that requires “much skill with bodies and language” (p. 584). Following Haraway I propose here that a critical feminist ethnography, one that is able to bring in evidence coded in the body, in the silenced ways of making your point felt in the world, is necessary here. The kind of knowledge I needed to decode and grasp was one that records not only what women said about their choices of taking vocational courses in general but also what attending a nail-construction course said through their bodies and the process of crafting new resisting selves in a reality of endemic unemployment.

What Michel and the women in the class I attended articulated – and what I needed to be able to decode – was a burning desire not merely to look well, to be “groomed” (*metupakhat*) in a reality where one’s work uniform flattens one’s individuality and threatens to mark one as a sexless body that cleans and performs routine assembly-line tasks. Course-taking also marked one’s desire to “develop oneself” (*lehitpateakh*). These young women who dropped out of the educational system were now engaged in the act of “studying”, of “taking courses” and of securing “diplomas” – the kind of social behaviour that had failed them in the past – a failure that had marked them as blue-collar workers. This very behaviour of “studying” is adopted now in new circumstances, and is made to sustain a new kind of self. Success in securing diplomas – even if these non-academic diplomas have little marketable value – is critical for these women who are engaged in a process of redefining their self-worth in the face of humiliating dominant forces. By becoming “learners”⁴ they emerge as “achievers”, and thereby resist their former relegation by the education system that defined them as “failures”.

In terms of changing family structure, the act of taking courses – and in particular the nail-construction beautifying class – also played a role in transforming gender relations, roles and duties within the family. *Listening* closely to the stories about how difficult it is to make time to attend these classes, and about how “supportive”

husbands are of their wives' individual efforts to study also speaks about an effort to develop a new kind of self, one that extended beyond their roles as wives and mothers. It speaks of independent women "improving" themselves, of women who in their efforts to "study" are supported by new kind of men. The "supportive husband" is not only credited for being an open-minded (middle-class-like) 'new man', but is also asked to take part in household and child-care chores, due to the absence of his "course-taking" wife. By taking courses these women are "coming to voice" (Hill Collins, 2000). They redefine themselves and their families. In the larger frame, by expressing a renewed deep desire in "learning" and in engaging in an activity of self-improvement, they challenge a hegemonic system that made them drop out of school.

These are observations that are rarely made about the lives of working-class Mizrahi women in Israel. In fact, very little is known about the lives of working-class women in Israel, especially when class formation as a process is analysed as part of a deeply gendered ethnic discourse. What I suggest here is that such multiple, mutually formative process of ethnic and class formation is best analysed from the perspective of the women, the subjects, who experience and act upon these larger processes that shape their lives. What an *embodied* rather than abstract kind of knowledge allows us to grasp and depict is the ways in which class, ethnicity, and gendered positions are mutually articulated in peripheral spaces. Partial, hesitant, never fully or openly stated, this kind of knowledge needs to be recorded, I argue here, not merely for its "vivid" and "authentic" nature, but for serious analytical reasons. Placing this kind of subjugated knowledge at the centre of analysis has dramatic implications for analysing the intersections of family, work and the process of crafting selves in this specific working class Israeli setting. In the full analysis I offer elsewhere (Motzafi-Haller, 2012), I argue that these working-class ethnicized Israeli women were engaged in an ongoing negotiation with controlling images and popular objectifications. They had hope. One day, they will not need to clean houses and offices, factory floors or attend to assembly lines.

Now, if we take their perspective, their *alternative knowledge* seriously, we can suggest that these Israeli blue-collar working women, unlike the working class lads of Paul Willis' classic ethnography (1977), or even the English working-class women in Beverly Skeggs' studies (2008), have *neither* developed *nor* internalised an explicit working-class consciousness. What they seem to be implying by insisting on taking these alternative courses, skills, and 'diplomas' is that their current employment situation is temporary and does not *define* who they are; it is something they only do until they succeed in securing a better position. The implications of such analysis for understanding the nature of the Israeli ethnicized Jewish working class in the turn of the 21st century are critical for any sociology of Israeli society. Israeli sociology had paid very little attention to the question of class and what was published tended to construct

“class” merely in material, quantitative static depiction of inequality. Documenting the ambitions of working-class Mizrahi subjects using feminist ethnographic methods enables an analysis of a social process grounded in an empirical depiction of shifting definitions of family, labour, and selves.

Conclusions: Expanding our methodological tool-kit

I have taken two local moments-- one depicts conversations in the market day with Esti, the other is a setting of a nail-construction class—in order to illustrate an interpretive approach, and a way of documenting and decoding local knowledge and its constitutive categories that are not easily or openly articulated in simple interviews. It is the kind of knowledge that is articulated in more than plain words uttered during an interview. I argued that local knowledge is often articulated in acts of silence, of ridicule, in behaviour that at face value has no material, logical explanation. I proposed that the ability to grasp local realities and to depict the meaning of alternative kinds of knowledge *not* produced through centrist categories is a complex act of being able to *hear* and then to interpret what we heard within larger frames of meaning.

The larger research project from which these two moments were taken include detailed stories of the ways in which Mizrahi working-class women have perceived work outside their homes as a necessary and fulfilling part of their lives. Unlike their immigrant mothers, these Israeli-born women do not view their role as mothers and spouses as confined to the domestic sphere. What becomes clear is that the second generation Mizrahi families are undergoing a significant transformative process, one that redefined gender relations within their families and that the way they experience and conceive employment and families should be understood within local settings embedded in historically specific processes.

NOTE

- 1 The full statement, in my translation of the Hebrew original is as follows: “There is still value to the explanation we had raised in our [1982] book...but these had actually touched only the bare bottom of the phenomenon...we were naïve as to the extent of the depth of the discrimination and the invisible resistance to [the question of] gendered inequality” (1999, p. 167).
- 2 I am particularly aware of the work of cultural studies scholars like Orly Lubin and others, that have in fact been raising the question of the ability to “listen”

to women's voices in their full complexity. The point I am making is directed at most of the empirical research carried out by gender studies scholars in sociology and social anthropology who have, as I suggest in this essay, not dealt with such complexity.

- 3 The body of theoretical work is large. Suffice it to cite here a few particularly useful reads for the uninitiated reader. These include the classic essay by Haraway (1988), Lorraine Code's book (1991), Sandra Harding's 1986 classic and Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought* (2000).
- 4 The verbs learning and studying are not distinguished in Hebrew—both are *lilmod*.

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