

A Collaborative duoethnography of two Academics in Diaspora amidst the Palestinian/Israeli Catastrophe

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We present a collaborative duoethnography on the intersection of individual identities, a research project on empathy, and external events. The Oct. 7th attacks on Israel and ensuing invasion of Gaza raised difficult questions surrounding identity and relationships for the authors, one (Hamdan) a Muslim-Palestinian American cis-women postdoctoral researcher with family in the West Bank, the other (Franklin) a white, American Jewish cis-male professor with parents and extended family living in Israel. This study reveals the authors creating a space in which difficult conversations can occur, with attention to explicit and implicit power differentials. Reflective and generative writings reveal themes of fear, concern for each other, and appreciation for how their research on empathy both facilitates and benefits from these conversations. The work concludes with implications for how physics education researchers can better support each other in the face of external political and geo-political conflicts and pressures.

These discussions are a form of resistance against the death and dehumanization that surrounds us, and the rhetoric that shies away from difficult conversations for fear of making things worse. --- Scott and Alia

I. OPENING PANDORA'S BOX

This situation is awful, and likely to get worse. If you want or need to talk, I'm here for you. ---Scott, October 9th, 2023

Scott is a Jewish American faculty member in the School of Physics and Astronomy at a technical university in the Northeastern United States. He has been a member of the physics education research community for several decades, with projects on physics and math content, the impact and intersections of identity and culture, and how empathy arises in academic settings. His K12 education was in an Orthodox Jewish day school and included religious and cultural Judaic education. His paternal grandparents fled Bratislava before World War II; much of that family either perished in the Holocaust or emigrated to Israel. His parents and cousins now live in Israel in Tel Aviv, Netanya, and Mitzpe Ramon.

When I got my advisor's message, I was surprised. I didn't expect anyone to say anything. I felt seen but also conflicted about how to respond. ---Alia

Alia is a Palestinian American Postdoctoral researcher in physics education whose research focuses on affective aspects of curriculum and culture. A practicing Muslim American, she has mastered the art of not taking up space, being present but never truly there, and constantly juggling which masks to wear and to what extent to contribute. Her grandparents escaped Lifta, a small town north of Jerusalem, to Jordan and Kuwait during the 1948 Nakba. When asked, she often says she is from Jordan to avoid the politics of Palestinian ancestry and still struggles with authenticity. Several of her extended family currently reside in the West Bank and Jordan.

Scott and Alia's research is on how physics faculty develop and show empathy in academic spaces. Their work [1] has shown how contextual information mediates empathy, advancing a model of empathetic pathways, and how and why faculty share information with students to build relationships [2]. Scott's message, sent two days after Hamas invaded Israel, opened space for deep personal and shared reflections that navigated positionality, identity, and power imbalance. This work describes those reflections, revealing a vulnerability rarely seen in physics, with implications for creating a more inclusive physics culture in an increasingly politicized world.

II. INTRODUCTION

Physics as a discipline is inextricably embedded in the broader political context, seen in member organizations'

(e.g. APS and AAPT) evolving relationships with political and social movements such as Black Live Matter (BLM), Me Too, and LGBTQ+ equality. These positions navigate diverse community preferences, attempting to represent the majority position while respecting minority opinions. The American Physical Society (APS) has a long history of engaging with the community as injustices arise, including calling out the Turkish president for the right of free expression for scientists [3], condemning anti-Asian racism [4], and taking positions on Supreme Court decisions [5,6] and the Russian invasion of Ukraine [7–9].

The conflict in Israel/Palestine has had a variety of impacts in academia. A science education graduate student was killed during the initial Oct 7th invasion [10] and over 219 educational facilities, including 29 UNRWA schools and all 12 universities, have been damaged or destroyed by Israeli bombardment, with 5,213/8,691 students killed/injured [11,12]. In the U.S., protests and counter-protests have swept college campuses, leading many students, faculty, and staff to feel personally threatened. Institutions have struggled to navigate these local conflicts [13], with police presence escalating tensions.

This duoethnography focuses not on large-scale response but rather on the intensely personal relationship between the collaborators forced to confront deep individual experiences around the cascade of horrifying events. In this, we advance the idea of physics as being done *by humans*, as further developed in [14]. We explore how researchers can work to support each other in the context of external circumstances, focusing on personal impact and how we as researchers and collaborators can co-create spaces of support, solidarity, and humanity. In this we find lessons relevant beyond the specific context of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, with implications for those embedded in LGBTQIA+ hostility in Florida, Texas, etc., navigating the consequences of the Dodd case and anti-abortion legislation, and the military conflicts in Ukraine and Israel/Palestine.

III. METHODS

A. Duoethnography

Autoethnography reflects on social phenomena by drawing on personal experiences [15]. Duoethnography shifts the case size from 1 to 2 and adds a layer of dialogue between authors to the data. Duoethnography encourages an autobiographical examination of self [16] to “assist [the researchers] and others in better understanding the phenomenon under investigation” [17], in our case, conducting research while experiencing external stresses or threats. Duoethnography employs a polyvocal, dialogical

approach, ensuring each researcher's voice is prominent during both writing and analysis phases. This dialog should challenge assumptions and disrupt overarching narratives, with *'the juxtaposition of stories together encouraging the reader to grapple with the tensions between them'* [18]. Duoethnography prioritizes and makes explicit differences between the researchers. In our study, the authors have different connections to Palestine and Israel with associated different political stances as well as power differences (Scott formally advises Alia) and different visible identities. A guiding principle of duoethnography is for researchers to collaboratively retell stories of the past that can inform the present, reflecting on one's experiences while creating stories that are accessible and meaningful to the reader. Trust is instrumental in this process, requiring authors be vulnerable in order to foster communication and enable deep and honest writing. Critically, empathy, care, and compassion allow the duoethnographers to bring meaningful insight into the phenomena at hand.

B. Data collection and analysis

This work aligns with "accidental" ethnography [16,18-20], a form of research which is often triggered by external events. In this case, there was no turning away from the catastrophic loss of human life that we were witnessing and the entanglement with our intersectional identities and research on empathy inevitably led to conversations. While conducting research interviews with physics faculty for the initial empathy project, Alia kept a reflective research journal. Prompts included a) How does your positionality impact what you can observe, b) How does your positionality impact how you relate to research participants? c) How did you feel while conducting interviews? These interviews are not part of the duoethnographic analysis, but explain the context in which journaling began.

As events in Gaza unfolded, the memos incorporated deep emotions surrounding doing research while bearing witness to unfolding atrocities. It became hard to ignore the impact on self and research and, through honest conversations with Scott, Alia began a second journal that focused on their reaction to news, videos, and opinions. Subsequently, the authors began collaboration on a joint document as they navigated their relationship and the effects on their work. The authors spent hours discussing issues and generated prompts for independent journaling. This created a collaborative document that included both individual thoughts and feelings around the prompt and also reflections on the joint nature of their experiences. Each author took time to digest the writings of the other, and the pair frequently met to explicitly discuss these data, creating space to co-construct meaning and address potential miscommunication. They also developed and continually

revisited communication norms, in particular allowing either to withdraw from the conversation without challenge or judgment.

Narrative analysis of these shared and individual journals identified major themes, critical incidents, and points of tension, with special attention paid to the complexity of experienced feelings [20]. Additionally, we ground the analysis in ethnographic practices that focus on culture, context, and holistic analysis [21] to seek out themes that intersected traditional academic discourse.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Initial fears around communication

A theme that emerges early in the writings is a shared fear around communication tied to positionality, identity, and static and fluid power imbalances. This arose from the very beginning, as Scott reflects on his first message:

I don't remember when I started grappling with how to reach out to Alia, but I remember spending the better part of a day writing and rewriting the initial message. It felt very fraught. Alia's identity as a Palestinian was clear. I saw that as a strength, but we had never discussed how our identities impacted our research. Now that couldn't be avoided, at least not if we wanted to be honest to our research motivations that valued empathy. In the end I wrote... And then I waited to see if even this would worsen the situation.

Alia mirrors similar fears while acknowledging her limited power within the PER community. She grapples with fears of being labeled an "outsider" or "bad" for saying the wrong thing or creating a depressive workplace:

Writing and talking about this inevitably tests the limits of our relationship. Throughout my academic career, it has felt like if I say one wrong thing, I would be placed into yet another bucket of "different" or "bad". It's personally hard to talk about the massive loss of life, utter destruction, and pain happening at such a scale that it seems incomprehensible because these are not things that are often valued in academia, but also because I do not want to bring any negative feelings towards those around me.

Scott recognizes that writing about the experiences in the shared document adds additional stresses, since the words will be read in isolation. He writes,

Reflecting on these experiences is difficult, for reasons related to why initial conversations were hard. There's a fear of creating more pain or stress or, worse, revealing a schism or disagreement that can't be reconciled with our care for each other as humans. Initially, that fear was around political beliefs about the region and the catastrophic

situation. Words are so laden with meaning, it feels like saying the wrong one could create a schism from which we can't recover. Now we're explicitly writing not only about our feelings but about the other person, and so that feels fraught as well.

Despite these fears, we see in journals a commitment to communication, with frequent (several times a week) check-ins that extend beyond simple research updates.

B. Embodying empathetic communication at the nexus of research and current events

Both authors acknowledge the need to move research beyond just discovery and into embodying the concepts. Scott outlines this by writing

The interaction between the research and current events is inescapable. Having spent 6 months talking every day about the importance of empathizing with others, it was impossible to not apply this to Israel/Palestine and the people within. The research gave us a language. Not necessarily specific words, but a framework for how important — necessary — it was to center the understanding of people involved.

Alia further reflects on how her conceptualization of empathy in research has changed through enacting it.

These discussions have acted as a framework for what an empathetic interaction can look like. Though scholars frame empathy as an individualistic “ability”, these conversations have grounded me, at least anecdotally, in how empathy is co-created. It's a social dynamic construct that is mediated through communication and entangled in both the cognitive and emotional. I feel like if either of us had chosen to step away from these conversations (which to be honest, I thought I would do at the beginning) then we would have missed the opportunity to get out of the intellectualizing of empathy and into a space where we can practice and learn.

There is a shared recognition that their academic research on empathy would be considerably lessened without a personal empathetic response to the situation. *Being empathetic was seen as a necessary part of doing meaningful research on empathy.* Equally interesting is their realization that their research has fostered and enabled vulnerable conversations that recognize and validate each other's emotions, in particular the shared helplessness and horror, and guided their efforts to “re-humanize” each other in the face of external political narratives.

C. Monitoring impacts on self and potential harms for the other

Throughout the reflections, we find an emphasis on care and concern for self and the other. The authors are forced to confront how the current political situation is personally

difficult for each, and they discuss their navigating local tensions and relationships. Scott reflected on how the Oct 7th attacks were framed in intensely personal terms, writing

On Oct 7 I awoke to the following e-mail from my parents: Good morning and Shabbat Shalom. We are fine, however, Israel's situation is quite serious. More than 3,000 rockets have been fired into Israel and Hamas has taken over several southern Israel towns; kidnapped approx 50 Israeli civilians and soldiers, holding them hostage in Gaza. There have been over 50 Israeli deaths and more than 500 wounded. The whole country is in lock-down with most of us confined to our homes or safe rooms.

He later learned that a cousin had been forced into their safe room for an extended time and several friends of a friend had been either killed or taken hostage.

Alia discusses their sense of living in an alternative universe, spending hours on the internet witnessing death and destruction but unable to look away. She articulated how it is to connect with others and maintain their research:

I feel distant from everyone. I want to walk over and engage and converse and laugh and pretend the world is normal, but how can I do that after seeing kids being killed? I should be doing research. My brain should be focused elsewhere and I have tried so hard to look away, to not think or engage but I can't force myself to disassociate.

By articulating these personal experiences, authors work through how they are attending to self-care. Conversations include questions about how they are sleeping, eating, and processing. In reflective writings we see touching concern for the other. Scott's reflection on his initial message includes other notes about the implicit pressure this creates on Alia to respond and his concern that he is adding pressure or stress. He returns to this theme in a later reflection on the duoethnography project:

There's a fear of over-centering the reflections on me, when I feel like I should be the least important person in this narrative. And also a fear that these conversations benefit/comfort me at the expense of Alia, adding stress or anxiety.

We see a reciprocal concern from Alia, who writes:

At this point what's the worst that can happen? I might get blacklisted from academia for this or other things I say? That's nothing compared to the struggle others are facing. Though, I worry more that this might have a bigger impact on Scott potentially being denied access to visit [his parents/relatives in Israel] by being added to the Canary Mission, which makes me reconsider what should/can be said more closely.

The fear of harming the other through stream-of-thought conversations has been observed in therapists and healthcare employees [22,23] and in faculty navigating active learning [24,25] and DEISJ [26-30] programming. Here we have shown strong supporting evidence of an intentional framing around care and empathy to allow authors to empathize more freely with each other and provide support in trying times.

Throughout the writing process, we actively discussed and acknowledged the power dynamics at play. This awareness was particularly important given Scott's position as a white male faculty member in a supervisory role over Alia. As illustrated in previous quotes, Scott was constantly aware of the potential for his power to influence the project. He openly communicated these concerns to Alia, who, despite not initially anticipating the need to engage deeply with her Palestinian identity, felt empowered by the ongoing dialogue. Scott's initial messages and frequent, careful follow-ups created a safe space for Alia to engage in meaningful reflection while feeling valued and respected. The decision to engage with these power dynamics permeated every step of the process. We constantly revisited the question of agency, ensuring that each of us could choose the level of our participation. Foucault's concept of "hidden" power effects [32] served as a reminder that power dynamics can manifest subtly and potentially undermine trust. By keeping these power structures at the forefront of our conversations and by being willing to engage in potentially risky self-disclosures, we strived to navigate the complexities of the situation and build a foundation of trust for collaboration.

D. Implications on current culture

Both authors report being surprised in hindsight in how needed these conversations were/are. This tacitly recognizes a culture that avoids difficult conversations and indicates the depth of the unexpected benefits. Alia states,

I don't think at the time I recognized how much I needed that outside acknowledgment. Scott opening the door to discussion allowed me to process that, yes this is really happening, no I am not being extra and, I am not invisible.

Scott echoes this, writing

What I didn't realize was how much I would need to talk and process, and how rare any conversations were that didn't devolve into the political.

While both find support and validation in having these conversations, Alia acknowledges a particularly personal sense of liberation that likely arises from her patterned behavior of "not taking up space and of being present but never truly there" (Section 1):

It is immensely liberating to say what I think and feel and know that the person on the other end is as equally involved. I might say things that hurt others

but I feel assured that we will be able to talk through it. That I will not be labeled and cast aside. Writing about this has become a brave space where it's okay to accept that things are messy. That these talks will not align with what you or anyone is used to writing, there will be sticky points and issues you will never agree on but to engage is to acknowledge, to be seen.

That physics is seen as a culture from which they need liberating is telling, and Alia notes the revolutionary nature of this in a short aside that

...breaking out of this mold of overthinking about what is "appropriate" feels revolutionary. I can't not talk about this, it's a part of myself and Scott's identity that cannot be ignored. I feel like creating spaces for community that is uncomfortable is breaking the status quo in academia.

Intentionally creating space and time to discuss what is going through each person's mind alleviates senses of alienation and dehumanization and yet is interpreted as "breaking" the status quo. This aligns with commonly documented modes of resisting as students navigate academia while being in a marginalized group [29-31].

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

We have presented the duoethnographic reflections of two researchers rooted in the intersection of identity, research, and external political events. Witnessing and engaging with news on Israel and Palestine had a significant impact on ourselves, our sense of community, and the physics education research on which we collaborate. It became critically important to create space that allowed difficult conversations, and reflections to illustrate shared concerns and fears and recognized and unexpected benefits.

In conclusion, our experiences illustrate the importance of engaging with *holistic* identities, incorporating care and empathy, and actively and explicitly working to humanize each other in the face of dehumanizing political narratives. We hope this work amplifies a call to academics to continue to explore ways to support researchers as people, recognizing the impact external events may have. We reiterate the opening quote that frames this work as resistance against the death and dehumanization we see in the world and the avoidance and silence that pervade academia.

VI. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We acknowledge the support of faculty, students and staff in RIT's Center for Advancing Scholarship to Transform Learning for allowing us the space to take on this project. We also acknowledge funding support from NSF award DGE#2222337.

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