Chapter 1: Methodological Framework: An Ethnography of Conflicts within Syrian Families in Germany

Introduction

Like many other close-knit communities, Syrian communities are governed by numerous norms and standards that render their ethnographic study rather difficult. This complicates the collection and access to data related to the group under study. Examples of these factors may include fear when the research project pertains to political issues, caution and suspicion when it is concerned with religions and sects, or shame when the research is related to sexual matters or the relationship between the two sexes, to name a few. Hence, many research topics might be considered taboo within Syrian communities. In fact, some researchers who conducted their studies inside Syria have noted this.[67]

The source of these norms of privacy varies. Many factors may have played a role in shaping them in one way or another. These include political oppression, religious or cultural considerations, and martial laws. Consequently, it is very common for Syrians to find justifications for their actions when these contradict the aforementioned norms. The oppressive nature of the Syrian regime has made people inclined to circumvent any patriarchal or political authority and, at the same time, to avoid crossing the so-called "red lines" demarcated by the security services of the state. This is especially the case when it comes to discussing liberties, corruption, or other issues related to the political system.[68] Indeed, the security authorities in Syria penetrated the traditional network of links between families to ensure its influence and tighten its grip on society, which caused Syrians to distrust each other.[69] Consequently, it was paramount to accord serious

67 See, for instance, what Worren wrote on sectarianism and Bornman on sexual issues. Worren, p. 7; Borneman, *Syrian Episodes*, p. 29, 146.

68 Worren, p. 7; Borneman, *Syrian Episodes*, p. 29, 146.

69 Asma Alghoul, 'Daily Life in Syria before 2011', in *Syria and Its People. A Series of Research Papers about Life in Syria Prior to 2011 (Arabic Version)* (Sharq organisation, 2019), p. 37; John Borneman, 'Fieldwork Experience, Collaboration, and Interlocution', in *Being There. The Fieldwork Encounter and the Making of Truth*, ed. by John

consideration for the optimal methodology that would help in gaining access and studying families in this context.

This chapter will discuss the methodology adopted to answer the research question and its main problem of generally understanding the challenges and changes experienced by Syrian families and scrutinizing conflicts within the Syrian family in particular.

First, it must be emphasized that the research rests on an empirical ethnographic approach, which is based on the qualitative inductive approach. While quantitative research focuses on experimentation to uncover the causes or consequences of certain phenomena based on numbers, qualitative ethnographic research keeps the research question open and is concerned with process and meaning.[70] Therefore, it is necessary to shed light on these open and inductive processes through which the phenomenon of conflicts within the Syrian family were studied.

This chapter will also explore the type of data that the research needs. It will review the researcher's position and the interaction between the researcher and the interlocutors in search for a deeper understanding of the emotions, ideas, and beliefs that permeated the course of the research process. This also requires the disclosure of the methods of data collection. The chapter also includes clarification of other processes that accompanied the data collection process including data analysis, coding, and topic classification, which ultimately form the structure of this research. The last section of this chapter will be dedicated to the main challenges and limitations that the researcher faced during fieldwork and to the strategies employed to overcome them.

1.1 Methodology

Methodology is the strategy that researchers use to conduct their research. It delineates and explains the researcher's work practices.[71] In the context of

Borneman and Abdellah Hammoudi (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), pp. 242–243.

70 Šmāḫī Ismaīl Maʿtūq Ǧamāl, 'Methodology of Ethnographic Research in the Field of Social Sciences', *Mağalat Anthropology*, 7 (2018), p. 68.

71 Jayne Pitard, 'A Journey to the Centre of Self: Positioning the Researcher in Autoethnography', *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 18.3 (2017); Richard Thorpe and Robin Holt, *The Sage Dictionary of Qualitative Management Research* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2007), p. 91.

this research, the methodology attempts to justify the reason for resorting to a specific research approach to answer the research question, and it makes clear who are the research target group and where the research was conducted.[72] Therefore, this chapter will delineate three topics that are deemed necessary to understand the methodology employed in this research. The first topic concerns the reason that prompted the researcher to choose ethnography as a methodology to address the research problem and the questions related to it. Meanwhile, the second deals with the research target group. Finally, the third topic is devoted to discussing the concept of the field in anthropology and the methods that have been relied upon to gather data and understand the research group in depth.

1.1.1 Why ethnography?

This question will be answered through three points related primarily to the Syrian refugee families - which are the subject of the research – and through the contexts they went through.

1.1.1.1 Family privacy

Researching "family conflicts" in Syrian communities is considered less problematic than studying other – in particular than political or sexual topics referred to earlier in the introduction of this chapter.[73] Rather, it may become an interesting conversation for some of the interlocutors as they might think that they are able to understand the causes of this phenomenon through their personal experiences and the experiences they had with such families. On the other hand, the issue of familial relations and conflicts are considered private affairs, which those outside the nuclear family or the extended family should not interfere with. This is the case as there are "walls" that separate families from each other due to the nature of the

72 The concept of methodology is considered problematic and all-encompassing at times. It refers to all the parts of this chapter including ethical issues related to the research, research and data collection and analysis methods; see Lisa M. Given, *The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2008), pp. 516–17.

73 Nonetheless, it is not possible to separate these topics entirely in many cases, especially when dealing with forced migration the causes of which are numerous.

security system as mentioned by Michel Seurat.[74] How is it possible then to obtain this type of data? The most important key to accessing such private data is to build a network of good relationships with the concerned families, or with those close to them. These close relationships between the researcher and the interlocutors are difficult to build without an ambiance of trust between the two parties. Consequently, if this trust could be created with the interlocutors, this could open doors for the researcher to find out what is going on within the family and to look at many details that may not be evident even to those who surround this family. Otherwise, the credibility of any data collected through formal interviews may become questionable, as these families are not obliged to share their private familial matters with strangers. The vital question in this context becomes as to how was the process of building a network of relationships based on trust with the interlocutors conducted? This is covered below in the section on fieldwork.

1.1.1.2 Understanding changing contexts of family life

When this research project was embarked on in 2018, some general ideas began to take shape in relation to the phenomenon of conflicts within the Syrian family. In light of this, a survey questionnaire was developed, which covered the main factors and causes related to this phenomenon. This questionnaire was based on information that were obtained through almost daily dealings with the various segments of the Syrian communities under research, that is, from hearing stories in sessions with them and in social media about marital disputes, such as infidelities, murders, problems about religious or financial issues. This is in addition to reviewing some studies that observed the state of divorce or family disintegration in the Arab world. Later, through conducting some dialogues and interviews before fieldwork, I discovered a certain narrowness and superficiality of these factors as they were often dealt with partially and in a separate manner from the contexts experienced by family members. For example, Stephen Castles has pointed out the relationship between violence and forced migration and

74 Michel Seurat, *Syria ad-dawla al-mutawaḥiša (L'État de Barbarie)*, trans. by Amal Sara and Mark Bialow (Beirut: Arab Network for Research and Publishing, 2017), p. 241.

often-problematic social transformations.[75] These causes or these types of relationships might not be self-evident when studying family conflicts, as the links between them are usually hidden and difficult to observe. Despite the importance of these apparent causes and the role they play in familial conflicts, it remains difficult to understand their contexts or underlying motivations and factors merely with numbers or when the researcher uses a paper and pen and asks the interviewee to choose an answer or express an opinion in response to a question. Therefore, it was necessary to understand these contexts or to explore the living reality of these families to understand any phenomenon related to them. The ethnographic approach was optimal for this task as will be explained in the next section.

1.1.1.3 The impact of the refugee and asylum experience on family life

The research and its pertaining study groups are concerned with Syrian refugee families who fled the war and have gone through various and complex experiences. Many of these families carry with them painful physical and psychological burden that might be difficult for the interlocutor to express in words. These families arrived in a new society that they knew little about and were confronted with a culture that they were unfamiliar with.[76] It can be said that the conditions that the interlocutors lived through – starting with the formation of the family until the immediate moment in which the researcher meets the interlocutor – will only emerge through a casual, informal conversation that does not solely focus on family matters but allows room for voicing immediate concerns related to the refugee and asylum experience as well. This can only be achieved in a spontaneous visit or an interview in which the interlocutor can express all these psychological or physical pain or the intellectual conflicts that he went through and brought him/her to what he/she reached.

Some of the interlocutors expressed their relief after talking about what they went through in their lives - especially during the war until they arrived in Germany, but also their suffering after their arrival - and they found the interview an opportunity to talk about what is going on inside

75 Stephen Castles, 'Towards a Sociology of Forced Migration and Social Transformation', *Sociology. The Journal of The British Sociological Association*, 37 (2003), 13–34 <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038503037001384>.

76 Dick Blackwell, *Counselling and Psychotherapy with Refugees* (London: Kingsley, 2005), p. 37.

them in a setting similar to what psychiatrists do during their counselling sessions. Reconstructing these facts and portraying them by the interviewee now cannot be achieved through quantitative data. Only a qualitative approach is able to collect this type of data that would help in understanding the research problem and its question in a deeper way.

1.1.2 Research group

As mentioned earlier, my study will focus on Syrian refugee families in Germany. According to the statistics of the city of Nuremberg - in which data collection was carried out - Syrians in the city constitute 1.2% of the total population, which stands at 543,000. Thus, the city is hosting to approximately 6 thousand Syrians.[77] The Syrians included in the study come from diverse ethnic groups, religions, and sects. There are, for instance, Syrians of Palestinian origins, Sunni Muslims, Christians, and concerning sects, it covers Ismailis, Alawis, and Druze.

The large number of Syrians in the city of Nuremberg, who come from varying ethnic, religious, and sectarian groups, yet also the close relationships that I built with the Syrian families in this city were the main motive behind choosing Nuremberg as a place for fieldwork and data collection.

The study also covers Syrians of different age groups, and most of those studied were between 20 to 55 years old. Some of those studied are adult children of the target group families (their sons or daughters), and the majority of the interlocutors are either married couples without children or parents with children. The research was not confined to families where conflicts arose and led to divorce or separation but also covered stable families. The data collected from stable families through their relationships or their knowledge of other families with divorced or separated spouses or of other family conflicts between spouses or between parents and children were of great benefit. It is worth noting that not all family members are as open and clear when it comes to discussing their own familial problems and the hidden details of what is happening within their families. As a result, the data was more profound and clear at times in this aspect when it came from a neutral party far from within the family, i.e. from another close family.

77 Stadt Nürnberg, 'Amt für Stadtforschung und Statistik für Nürnberg und Fürth', 2022 <https://www.nuernberg.de/imperia/md/statistik/dokumente/veroeffentlichungen/berichte/monatsberichte/2022/sus_bericht_m531.pdf> [accessed 28 February 2023].

Furthermore, the interlocutors come from different geographical environments. Some come from large cities such as Damascus and Aleppo while others from small cities, such as Jableh and Salamiyah, or from countryside and small villages. Their educational levels also differed. Some of them are academics or with higher education, and others are closer to illiteracy or attained primary education only.

1.1.3 The field site

In June 2016, I moved to Nuremberg, in the Franconia region of the state of Bavaria, as it is a large city that provides a good opportunity to learn German and to find work. The city was new to me, and I knew no one in the study group. After a short period, I joined a German language course, which gave me the opportunity to get to know a group of Syrians from families and some young spouses who were waiting to be reunited with their families. With the passage of time, my relationship with them strengthened well and turned into the exchange of visits or frequent meetings between us.

When the idea of the research evolved at the beginning of 2018, I tried to expand this network of relationships to include other groups in the city, especially families from other sects. Those were difficult to find firstly because of the presence of small numbers of them and, most importantly, due to difficulty in building communication with their families as a result of the sectarian or religious sensitivity that emerged in the aftermath of the Syrian war.

One of those opportunities aroused when I met a Syrian who is a member of the Alawis sect by chance in a bakery. After we got to know each other, he proposed that I join a group he formed, which was working on establishing a non-profit organization (NGO) that aims to showcase the cultural and artistic heritage of Syrians. I agreed to work with him, and at the same time I found it an opportunity to open a door for me to get to know more closely the world of other Syrian communities - especially from other sects - in the city with his help. Indeed, later this person introduced me to several families from different sects, Druze and Ismaili, with whom he had ties. In addition, in the same year I contacted some of the imams and interviewed one of them to better understand the phenomenon of family conflicts among Muslims.

1.1.3.1 Returning to the field

After building the network of relationships to which I referred, I left the city at the beginning of December 2018 and then returned to it again for the fieldwork that began in early October 2019 and ended at the end of March 2020.

Up until the time I came back to Nuremberg to conduct the fieldwork, the Syrians in the city did not establish any associations or civil institutions - with the exception of a religious association that was formed with the aim of establishing a mosque, a project initiated by a Syrian imam along with a group of fellow Syrians. Nor was there any housing complex(es) for Syrians. One of the Syrians informed me that, in spite of the city's housing crisis, the municipality of Nuremberg (Rathaus) had rejected the idea of building an apartment complex dedicated to Syrian refugees, which might become a haven for refugees looking for homes to live in the city. The German government has made sure not to repeat some of the experiences of other minorities in establishing their own "ghettos" in some German cities.[78] The 2016 integration law stipulated the restriction of the movement of refugees to their allocated place of residence (Wohnsitzregelung) and obliged them to stay in the cities to which they were allocated with few exceptions such as finding a job or obtaining a vocational training (Ausbildung) or university seat in the place to be moved to. The law was claimed to be an attempt to "promote their lasting integration into the way of life in the Federal Republic of Germany"[79], as stipulated by the law. This has restricted the ability of extended families to move or to gather in one place in the city. Families live dispersed all over the city, and they have no place to meet except on a small scale in a mosque or a church or some places run by German civil institutions to help in practicing the language and other things. This situation leads us to the idea of "the field" in anthropology. What form of field can an anthropologist study?

78 Kerstin Tanis, *Entwicklungen in der Wohnsituation Geflüchteter*, BAMF-Kurzanalyse, 2020 <https://www.bamf.de/SharedDocs/Anlagen/DE/Forschung/Kurzanalysen/kurzanalyse5-2020-wohnen.html?nn=404000>, [accessed 2 February 2025], pp. 7–8.

79 § 12a para. 1 of the Residence, Economic Activity and Integration of Foreigners in the Federal Territory Act.

1.1.3.2 The concept of the "field"

The field has recently become a significant subject of discussion and debate in anthropological circles in light of a mobile, changing, globalizing world.[80] The field in classical anthropology involved a physically limited space in which a group of people lived and formed a specific culture,[81] "a 'tribe', a village, some place you could get to know by covering it on foot and engaging with its people face to face. And it used to be self-evidently a matter of 'being there' – away, rather than 'here'. Now we do not seem to know what the field is,[82] or where it should be, if it is real or perhaps virtual, and even if there has to be one at all"[83], as rightly pointed by anthropologist Ulf Hannerz. But the field of this research does not have "there", and the research group is also not "there", as the research group has migrated collectively from "there" to "here". How does this fit with classical anthropological concepts and its study of groups? This is especially the case since we are not talking about a group that can be dealt with as a single block belonging to one environment. The study group belongs to different communities, and it is difficult to put it into the molds of national generalizations. Clifford Geertz concurs that such generalizations are "palpable nonsense."[84] Geertz further argues that "the locus of study is not the object of study. Anthropologists don't study villages (tribes, towns, neighborhoods …); they study in villages."[85] In this sense, the study group is the target of the study.

Nonetheless, another difficulty is still present in the context of "anthropology of migration or asylum", which is the subject of this research. Ap-

80 Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, 'Discipline and Practice: "The Field" as Site, Method, and Location in Anthropology', in *Anthropological Locations. Boundaries and Grounds of a Field Science* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 2.

81 David A. Westbrook, *Navigators of the Contemporary. Why Ethnography Matters* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), pp. 45–46.

82 Westbrook wrote, "While the contemporary anthropological imagination has traveled some distance away from fieldwork as the scene of encounter with a foreign culture, no similarly sharply imagined conception of the enterprise has emerged to take its place." Ibid., p. 100.

83 Ulf Hannerz, 'Studying Down, Up, Sideways, Through, Backwards, Forwards, Away and at Home: Reflections on the Field Worries of an Expansive Discipline', in *Locating the Field. Space, Place and Context in Anthropology*, ed. by Simon Coleman and Peter Collins (Oxford: Berg, 2006), p. 23.

84 Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 22.

85 Ibid.

padurai described this dilemma as follows: "As groups migrate, regroup in new locations, reconstruct their histories, and reconfigure their ethnic 'projects', the ethno in ethnography takes on a slippery, nonlocalized quality, to which the descriptive practices of anthropology will have to respond."[86] This problem of studying groups of forced migrations can be illustrated by the following question: Can ethnographic studies separate the effects of place and social contexts from the study group? The best answer to this question is the field itself; to be more precise, it is the study group itself that is present in the field. The same group is the best one to show all the transformations and changes that the field "there" and "here" had an effect on. And if it is proven that the field played that role in influencing the research group - as a spatial space in which all contemporary systems, politics, and cultures are intertwined - then, in the view of anthropologists, it should also be a goal, not just a symptom, to reach a relative understanding of a group.

One of the developments in classical ethnography in relation to the concept of "the field" is its interpretation as a "collaboration", in which "collaboration is a heightened contemporary ideology of practice in which many projects of fieldwork define themselves"[87], as explained by Douglas Holmes and George E. Marcus. They also indicate that the contours of ethnographic fieldwork are determined "by the relations the ethnographer establishes with the liaisons and the subjects who provide the material critical to the construction of her project."[88]

Based on the above discussion, one can argue that the concept of the "field" may not be the place as limited geographical space, nor is it the groups under study. Rather, the field could be the metaphorical space that the researcher creates for himself, manifested in a trinity of relationships between the researcher, the place, and the study group. The researcher asks himself: Who am I in relation to this place and group? What does the place constitute for the research group and the researcher? And what is the research group for the place and the researcher? Figure 1 illustrates

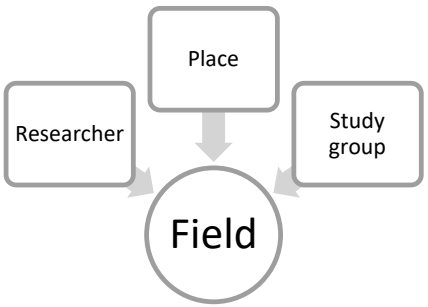
86 Gupta and Ferguson, p. 3.

87 Douglas Holmes and George E. Marcus, 'Collaborative Imperatives: A Manifesto Sorts, for the Reimagination of the Scene of Fieldwork Encounter', in *Collaborators Collaborating. Counterparts in Anthropological Knowledge and International Research Relations*, ed. by Monica Konrad (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012), p. 130.

88 Ibid., p. 126.

the creation of the field concept through a triple relationship between the researcher, the place and the study group.

Figure 1. Triple relationship of the "field" concept



This flexibility in understanding the field may help us dismantle the ethnography dilemma that Appadurai formulated in the context of his previous question: "[W]hat is the nature of locality, as a lived experience, in a globalized, deterritorialized world?"[89]

Understanding this triad of relationships will lead to a new question that can be formulated as follows: What are the mechanisms or means that enable us to understand the group of "here" without engaging with the "there"? Is that possible at all? In other words, is it possible to understand the study group in its new context without understanding its primary environment, from which it was displaced? It may be futile to try to understand the changes, challenges, and conflicts within the Syrian families by studying them in the new reality - the German context, which had great effects on the study group - without studying the contexts of its original environment. It is also vital to study the circumstances surrounding the study group during and after the war, the displacement stage up until the current moment.

This dilemma poses a major challenge to the researcher that makes the study of "there" in Syria - destroyed by the war - inaccessible. Consequently, it is vital to think about how that field (the "there") - with all its contexts - could be understood or how to shed some light on it at least for anthropology is not concerned with a specific cultural or behavioral phenomenon without its preceding or subsequent contexts or the relationships surrounding it. What distinguishes anthropologists from

89 Gupta and Ferguson, p. 3.

sociologists or psychologists is that they only "focus their main attention on trying to understand the overall patterns that underlie the whole range of cultural thought and behavior to understand the relationships among religion, science, economy, politics, art, health, technology, and history."[90] Building on this, it was imperative to cover the various spatial, temporal, and institutional aspects whether local, national, or international, current and historical, humanitarian and governmental that are linked to the movement of those forcibly displaced. This is in order to "understand how the refugee discourse shapes the local dynamics of social, identity and institutional change and how it is itself shaped by the specific historical and political context in which it is embedded"[91], as Backewell explained.

1.1.3.3 Study the "there"

This challenge to know these general patterns and to understand their complex relationships and the domains "here" and "there" led to three points that were relied upon to reach that knowledge necessary for research:

1) Relying on understanding this on the fieldwork itself, that is, on the study group in the first place, and restructuring that reality through biographical-narrative interviews which encompassed recollections of life in Syria.
2) The use of interviews conducted outside Syria with displaced Syrians in several countries such as Turkey and Lebanon.[92] These interviews were conducted by several researchers in the framework of the project called "Syria and Its People" which "explores diverse topics related to life and society in Syria before 2011."[93] These 120 interviews were with Syrians from various religious, ethnic, geographic, and economic backgrounds. They were divided into six main topics: daily life, education, freedom of expression, sects and minorities, the role of women, and

90 Christie W. Kiefer, *Doing Health Anthropology. Research Methods for Community Assessment and Change* (New York: Springer Publishing Company, 2007), p. 6.
91 Oliver Backewell, 'Researching Refugees: Lessons from the Past, Current Challenges and Future Directions', *Refugee Quarterly Survey*, 26 .3 (2007), p. 11.
92 It should be noted that the sections of the book have been translated into English, see 'Sharq.Org – Issuu' <https://issuu.com/sharq.org> [accessed 10 September 2020].
93 'Book: Syria & Its People – Sharq.Org' <http://en.sharq.org/book-syria-its-people/> [accessed 10 September 2020].

livelihoods.[94] I contacted the project director, Reem Maghribi, and we arranged a Skype meeting in October 2019. During the meeting, Reem talked about this project and other projects they are working on, including those involving Syrians in Europe. After that, I asked her to provide me with these interviews to use in my academic research. Reem agreed, and I received all of the interviews. This was done after I checked that all those interviewed had their consent obtained to publish these interviews or to assist other parties such as researchers. Consequently, the material of the book "Syria and its People" and some of the interviews that were relied upon in the publication of this book constituted a good additional source in understanding the Syrian societies before the war, that is, before 2011. The weak point in these interviews is that I did not meet the interlocutors. This takes us back to the ethical aspects of ethnography related to whether it is legitimate to use such data in research studies, as the researcher did not know the context in which these interviews were conducted or in which that story was told. He also is unaware of the conditions and emotions of the interlocutors, nor does he know how the questions were posed or the place and time of the interview, etc. Another weakness is that the interlocutors are dispersed over many countries where their experiences may differ from those refugees living in Germany. Consequently, the reformulation of that reality "there" may differ depending on the new context in which the person lives, as the interlocutor's narration is related to the present time in which he tells his story. In addition, many people tend to make comparisons that are bound to affect his/her reconfiguration of that reality. As a result, it was necessary to be careful in dealing with this type of data and in citing it for the purposes of this research, limiting this to the extent it supports the analysis related to this research.

3) Dependence on the researcher's background (the researcher's position). I always had a feeling of strangeness while studying the families of a society I belong to. Am I studying myself and seeing it with the eyes of others with all the complexity of their relations? With a lens,

94 These interviews or parts of them were enlisted in two websites: 'Syria's Stories', *Tarikhi* <http://tarikhi.org/> [accessed 10 September 2020], and 'Siar Syria', *Tarikhi* <http://tarikhi.org/> [accessed 10 September 2020]. Both websites were established by 'Shark' Institute. directed by Reem Maghribi, and it is indicated that permission is given to reuse these interviews under the condition that credit is given to Sharq, the organisation that conducted the research for non-profitable projects and institutions.

that recreates its various experiences and its exceptional stages? From a child who grew up in a rural family that was transformed from a nuclear family to an extended family and is related to other extended families in the village, to a youngster who grew up in his sister's house far from those extended families, to a teenager who was informally adopted by another family in the city, to a student living away from the extended family and witnessing its conflicts, customs, traditions, and norms, which he began to clash with. A village and two large cities (Damascus and Lattakia) and several families that I was linked with, all of this put me in one of those molds that I used to hear from the Syrian families I am interviewing, so my own story is reshaped again. This is confirmed by a question often directed to me and repeated by family members I met: "You know that in Syria there are such-and-such families." I nod positively to let them continue their conversation. When the anthropologist Abdullah Hammoudi studied religion, the religion he was brought up with became a subject for re-thinking, which placed him in a disturbing dilemma because he as "the practitioner of old gave way to an anthropologist who wanted to understand."[95] Then, studying the family put me in confusion and division about my position as a researcher: How could this 'I' ego be separated from the research? Or should it be allowed to manifest itself in and thus become part of its reflections? This identity of a researcher from a Syrian family, which is part of the Syrian society, could not but reveal itself in some parts of the research. The important question that I was asking myself: Am I that "insider" researcher to whom this concept applies? Or is my situation more complex than this characterization?

Given the importance of the researcher's role in the success or failure of dealing with the research topic, a controversy has arisen to uncover the advantages and disadvantages of the researcher's position as an "insider", a member of the research group, or an "outsider", a stranger. On the one hand, the "insider" researcher possesses an intimate knowledge and familiarity with the world of the study group, a knowledge that carries great positive aspects that help in explaining and analyzing the social and cultural processes of that group's world. On the other hand, having this

95 Abdellah Hammoudi, *A Season in Mecca. Narrative of a Pilgrimage* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), p. 40.

prior knowledge prevents the researcher from dealing with these processes as subjects for analysis, as for him they are uncontested.[96]

The research problem and its question are directed primarily to the Syrian refugee families in the German context. This means that the refugee journey that families went through and the new environment that revealed the phenomenon of conflicts - which are used in this research as a window to understanding the family, its functions and structures, and the changes and challenges they face - apply with all its complexities and ramifications also to the researcher who went through the same contexts. In other words, my journey and my presence in the German society opened the gate for inquiries for me and for self-exploration before I asked or explored the "other" which is the study group. This journey of questioning and exploration, beginning from the idea of research to conducting the fieldwork, has become a participatory process between the researcher and the study group. From here, part of me as an "outsider" researcher faced the same shock they experienced and was attempting to make sense of it with them.

In addition, the status of "insider" and "outsider" significantly influenced my relations with the research group. I mentioned earlier that my stay in Nuremberg before the fieldwork gave me an opportunity to form good friendships and bonds with some families. These families later became part of the study group. My fear was that these relationships would affect the type of data that is collected or the process of analyzing it, in other words that it would not be able to observe objectivity in dealing with these groups, which might negatively affect the progress of the research process. Thus it is another criticism leveled at "insider" researchers, as there is a possibility that the researcher becomes biased towards the research group as a result of his/her sympathy with the group individuals, thus compromising high objectivity and making him/her present a copy of the research group's world in his/her own lens rather than theirs.[97] The problem of relationships and ties between the researcher and the interlocutors is one of the daily ethical dilemmas that ethnographic researchers face in the field. The question that aroused always was to "how deep should a researcher's friendship with participants go without compromising the authenticity of behavior observed

96 John Hockey, 'Research Methods – Researching Peers and Familiar Settings', *Research Papers in Education*, 8.2 (1993), 199–225 <https://doi.org/10.1080/0267152930080205>, here pp. 201–202.

97 Ibid., p. 199.

or the validity of the researcher's interpretation of that behavior?"[98] During the fieldwork, I always attempted to create a distance between these personal relationships and the data collected for research whenever possible, while at the same time the proximity to these families was used to further deepen the understanding of the family. Two factors helped me to put this distance and use this proximity in collecting and analyzing data. I always questioned the ethical grounds for these two factors:

- The first is that families may be the object or goal of the study every time I meet with them, regardless of the purpose of this visit since I am in the research fieldwork.
- The second is my realization that there is the possibility of analyzing data and placing it in research contexts in a manner inconsistent with the interlocutor-interviewee's belief or his/her convictions.

Those two issues were a source of confusion to me and constituted an ethical dilemma for me. This prompted the question: Is there a kind of betrayal of those with whom I have personal ties despite my clarity with them?

The process of locating oneself within the study group sometimes or outside it at other times may be seen as a socially disruptive disorder. For "by resisting total integration and commitment to the social domains we are researching, by attempting to maintain our intellectual distance while also indicating our desire to 'belong,' we choose a socially anomalous identity that is fraught with inconsistency and ambiguity, both for ourselves and for our research participants. The personal and emotional costs of inhabiting such a space are often high", as Hume and Mulcock rightly argue.[99] Therefore, the practice of criticism or directing data in a direction that may contradict the orientations of those from whom this data was collected and who have deep ties with the researcher, requires boldness from the part of the researcher in the first place and a serious attempt to observe objectivity by putting himself outside the study group in the second. However, despite all of that, the ethical concerns that I referred to remain valid no matter how the researcher attempts to overlook or ignore them.

98 Margaret D. LeCompte and Jean J. Schensul, *Ethics in Ethnography. A Mixed Methods Approach* (Lanham: AltaMira Press, 2015), p. 159.

99 Lynne Hume and Jane Mulcock, *Anthropologists in the Field. Cases in Participant Observation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), p. xii.

Against these concerns, it should be noted that my "insider" identity has placed me in an advantageous position. The researcher's knowledge of the interlocutors' language and dialects and his having a good background of their customs, traditions, religions, and sects, all these saved a lot of time before and during the fieldwork, facilitated access to the interlocutors, and aided the process of understanding and analyzing the social processes associated with this group. Nonetheless, these processes did not go without some of the obstacles that I address in the last section of this chapter.

1.2 Methods

Finding responses to my research question went through a series of processes that included the use of various methods to collect data, then coding and analyzing it. This section of the chapter reviews the methods that were relied upon in data collection, the effectiveness of each tool, and the obstacles faced in using this or that tool. It also reviews the manner in which this data was collected. It should be noted that all data collection activities stopped in the last month of fieldwork (March) due to the Corona pandemic and the lockdown that took place in the city.

1.2.1 Participation observation

This method has been the defining tool of anthropology for many years and the main tool of the anthropological researcher in the field. Participation observation is defined as "a method of data collection in which the researcher takes part in everyday activities related to an area of social life in order to study an aspect of that life through the observation of events in their natural contexts."[100]

Participation observation goes hand in hand with the conventional concept of the field in anthropology. However, it will become of a lesser effectiveness when there are significant changes to the concept. The concept of the field in all its complexities referred to above and its reconfiguration through a tripartite relationship between the place, the researcher, and the research group will differ from the field that forms a single geographical area that includes one harmonious population group, which may differ in

100 Given, p. 598.

their ethnicities, religions or sects but belongs to similar cultural and social foundations and norms.

It can be argued that studying various groups in a geographical environment in which they are widely distributed as a minority within the majority, on the one hand, and their emergent and new presence in this place, on the other hand, will create a problem that undermines the effectiveness of this "participatory observation" method during fieldwork. Hence, this research did not rely heavily on this tool. Instead, other ethnographic methods dictated by the reality of the field have been employed in the study of "anthropology of asylum" in host countries.

Nonetheless, this tool was used to the extent the research allowed it, such as during informal visits to families with whom I have a friendship or in sharing Muslim holidays that were almost dedicated to Syrians: ʿĪd al-Fiṭr and ʿĪdu l-Aḍḥā. These two events were organized outside the mosque by a Syrian imam. Thus, most of the attendees were Syrian families who came along with their children to celebrate. I attended these two events in the year prior to fieldwork. The reason is that these two occasions are related to ramaḍān and al-Ḥağğ and that neither of them fell during the dates that extended from the beginning of October to the end of March, i.e., the period when the fieldwork was conducted. I also frequented most of the gatherings at the Arab mosque, where a large group of Syrians prayed. The disadvantage of observation by participation in the mosque is that men are separated from women and that there is a diversity of the nationalities of those present, which makes it difficult to communicate with them, especially if the researcher does not have prior knowledge of the person he meets in this place. Another place observation by participation practiced on a smaller scale was the church which I visited several times on Sundays and where I met some families with whom I had contact for short periods. I also participated in some social events (playing cards) that were taking place in the home of one of the families. Another of the occasions that I took part in was New Year's Eve, as I was invited by a family to celebrate with them.

Following the rise of refugee numbers in Germany, German churches (Lutherkirche)[101] played a substantial role in implementing projects aimed at strengthening the refugees' German language skills and introducing them to the culture of German society, thus trying to integrate them into

101 Nehemia Team, 'Kontaktcafé für Asylbewerber in Nürnberg – Nehemia Team e. V.' <https://nehemia-team.org/de/deutschland/kontaktcafe-fuer-asylbewerber-in-nuernberg/> [accessed 12 April 2021].

this society. The "Sprach-Café" or "Kontakt-Café" was created, a place where people - most of the families - met once a week. Some churches used to give preaching lessons in Christianity in addition to basic lessons to strengthen refugees' German language skills. A play room was also allocated as an outlet for children to play while their parents attend these lessons. I also frequented this place which was an opportunity for me to get to know some families through it.

What did I notice during these visits? The study group is the Syrian refugee families, and given that the public places in which these families were to carry out their activities are limited, I was trying to observe anything that emanated from them, depending on where they are. This included religious practices, their celebrations, and the activities that were taking place during that day for the children. The observation covers also the topics that were discussed in their gatherings at homes - such as language, religion, conditions in Syria or in Germany, building their future here - the role of both husband and wife in the home, their interaction with children, etc. In a nutshell, everything that allows the observer to deeply understand the family in its new context. An example of these topics would be the changes in their discourse, their behavior, their attitudes towards their presence here, the challenges they face, the changes that have occurred to them. It might also include the conflicts that take place between them or within the family, their personal interests in developing their language skills, finding a suitable job, obtaining a driving certificate, thinking about buying a car, watching football matches, etc. These are topics that shape and change according to the passage of time in their presence in Germany.

1.2.2 Qualitative interviews

The nature of the field of study - as indicated above - dictated the use of the second tool that is widely used in collecting data in ethnographic studies, namely interviews. Most of the data for this research have been collected using this tool. "The qualitative interview can be seen as a conversation with a purpose, where the interviewer's aim is to obtain knowledge about the respondent's world."[102] The length and shortness of this conversation depends on the type of interview to be conducted, on the interaction

102 Thorpe and Holt, p. 118.

between the interviewer and the interviewee mainly, and on the person's ability to speak.

1.2.2.1 Where and how were the interviews conducted? And with whom?

In total, I conducted thirty-two interviews, each with a different person. All interviews were recorded: sixteen were conducted with women, twelve were conducted with men. The remaining six interviews were with religious actors or experts. Four of those interviewed are sons or daughters of these families, aged between nineteen and twenty-three years old. The rest of those interviewed are husbands or wives, some of whom have children and others have not, some of them are from families of divorced spouses and others from families of non-divorced spouses. The duration of an interview ranged from approximately one to four hours.

The majority of those interviewed were Sunni Muslims, and to a lesser extent they were from other groups such as Alawis, Druze, and Ismailis, in addition to religious actors from mosque imams or those in charge of the Evangelical Church. Most of the interviews took place in the family residences, as I was hosted at the family home during the interview. Some of the interviews took place in coffee shops or religious places of worship. I also hosted some of them at home. Consequently, the places for conducting the interviews varied according to the wishes of the interviewees, as it was left for them to choose the location of the interview so that no one of them would be embarrassed, especially when I reached out to the wife without the husband, or *vice versa*.

The interviews were not conducted according to a pre-determined pattern. Some of the interviews were conducted in the presence of the spouses with their sons, which is what is termed "household interviews". Sometimes the sons participated in the interview by expressing their opinions regarding some of the topics in which the father or mother speaks, which was an added value - agreeing or rejecting their parent's views. Some of the interviews took place in the presence of both spouses together, as some husbands do not allow their wives to meet with another male from outside the family alone. Another part of the interviews was done with the husband and wife separately. Thus, the level of freedom a woman enjoys in the home plays a crucial role in determining this. As I mentioned above, it was not possible at times to meet the separated husband and wife (divorced or still waiting to obtain a divorce decree). Often, I would interview the divorced

husband without the wife or *vice versa* due to a number of considerations. This includes the husband's unwillingness to arrange a meeting for me with his wife so that I would not to hear the other narration that may differ from his version of the conflict. Sometimes the wife is in another city or country, Syria, for example, therefore the interview was done with the present spouse.

1.2.2.2 Type of interviews relied on to collect data

1) Biographical-narrative and in depth-interviews

"Biography is the process of accounting for an individual's life history or life story."[103] A narrative "is a means by which individuals account for themselves."[104] I add that this narrative process of the individual is not limited to his interpretation of himself only but may include his interpretations of others and his surroundings. The rhetoric that individuals use in the narration of their story is a microcosm of their consciousness, because "telling stories is essentially a meaning-making process. When people tell stories, they select details of their experience from their stream of consciousness."[105] Thus, this awareness "gives access to the most complicated social and educational issues, because social and educational issues are abstractions based on the concrete experience of people"[106], according to Irving Seidman. Hence, life stories are not limited to the details of the individual's own life but are seen as a social construct in themselves.[107] The narrator processes the data that he narrates through arranging and interpreting it as it appears to him now.[108]

As explained earlier, given the nature of the field of "refugee anthropology", i.e. in host countries, it is difficult to understand this field in sufficient depth by limiting the study to the "here", as the same study group must be

103 Melissa Corbally and Catherine O'Neill, 'An Introduction to the Biographical Narrative Interpretive Method', *Nurse Researcher*, 21.5 (2014), p. 3.
104 Ibid., p. 4.
105 Irving Seidman, *Interviewing as Qualitative Research. A Guide for Researchers in Education and the Social Sciences* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2006), p. 7.
106 Ibid.
107 Gabriele Rosenthal, 'Reconstruction of Life Stories: Principles of Selection in Generating Stories for Narrative Biographical Interviews', *The Narrative Study of Lives*, 1.1 (1993), 59–91, here p. 1.
108 Matthews Bob and Liz Ross, *Research Methods for Social Science* (Harlow, England: Pearson Education Limited, 2010), p. 265.

understood "there" in the first place. That is why I relied on biographical interviews to get the full picture of the two different worlds the refugees found themselves in.

To understand this full picture of their lives, these interviews often began with a basic key question: How was your life in Syria, your childhood, your engagement, your marriage, your family relations, your extended family relations with each other, the reason for your coming to Germany, what were the challenges and difficulties you faced and what changed for you? Imagine your life as a movie in which you want to show the most important milestones that you have gone through in your life, what would you include in it? I usually connected this key question with the previous ones in an attempt to encourage the interviewee to open his memory and begin to present his life experience.

Narrative biographical interviews involve two methods:[109]

- Non-interrupting interviews were used in the majority of interviews conducted for the purposes of this research. I used to take note of the important questions and points narrated by the interviewee in order to further explore and discuss them with him after he finished his story.
- Interrupting interviews were used with some of the interviewees, as the interviewee was asked to expand on some important topics that may have arisen during the conversation.

The disadvantage of autobiographical interviews is that not all interviewees have the ability to narrate stories of their life experiences. While some might have this ability, they may refrain from talking about these with the researcher due to many factors. A few of the interviewees could only speak about their life experiences for only five or ten minutes and thus preferred that questions were directed to them. Therefore, it was necessary to develop a set of questions that could be used in such cases, thus leading to the second type of interviews.

2) Semi-structured in-depth interviews:
Following the biographical interview, the researcher moves to utilizing the semi-structured interview tool, thus transiting from the passive researcher stage in narrative biographical interviews to the active researcher stage in semi-structured interviews.[110] The semi-structured interview is "a quali-

109 For more details, see ibid., p. 268.
110 Ibid, p. 220.

tative data collection strategy, in which the researcher asks informants a series of predetermined but open-ended questions."[111]

In semi-structured interviews, the researcher has a list of questions related to a series of topics that the researcher wants to cover.[112] Therefore, an interview guide was developed to address the main themes that might arise from an interview. The guide was developed before the fieldwork began and was based on information obtained through relations with Syrians in general and through some interviews that were conducted with some individuals from the research group. This was done to form a more in-depth picture about the research idea. A main set of questions to guide my interviews has been formulated in a way which addresses four main themes: social, educational, economic, and legal challenges.

Another set of questions for in-depth interviews with religious actors has also been developed. The objectives of the themes in these questions are:

- In-depth understanding of the family within the German context in case the interview partner focuses his narrative mainly on life in Syria.
- Exploring all the surrounding factors that may be neither apparent nor direct but still played a role in the emergence of family conflicts.

Although these questions were guiding the interviews, they were not necessarily asked directly to the interviewees, since many of those interviewed dealt with these topics through their stories before a question was directed to them. Consequently, the majority of questions were often skipped and focus was turned into what was not addressed. The interviews were also characterized by flexibility in terms of the way the question was asked, the moment it was asked, and the response to the interview. Sometimes the interview followed a line of discussion or dialogue initiated by the person being interviewed. In the second and final stage of the interviews, more emphasis was placed on the aim of the research by discussing the factors of family conflicts with the interviewees based on coding the open questions developed during the initial interviews. The aim of this was to form a more accurate and in-depth picture of the families' position on these factors.

111 Given, p. 810.

112 Rosalind Edwards and Janet Holland, *What Is Qualitative Interviewing?* (London: A&C Black, 2013), p. 29.

1.2.3 Focus group

The focus group was the third tool that was used in the field as a data collection tool. Edwards and Holland defined it as "a small group of people who participate in a group discussion of a topic previously selected by the researcher."[113]

I mentioned above that I visited some places that were a gathering center for some Syrian families that were established by churches in Germany under the name of "Sprach-Café" or "Kontakt-Café". I contacted those in charge of one of these projects at one of the church's locations in Nuremberg to conduct a focus group discussion among Syrian families, and they welcomed the idea. The focus group interviews were arranged for two sessions. The first was dedicated to explaining the project and to a discussion on the challenges and difficulties faced by the Syrian family in Germany. The causes of family conflicts were discussed in the second.

In the first session, there were seven women and two men present, and in the second session, eight women and three men. One of the things that hindered the smooth progress of the sessions was disruption caused by the presence of young children. Most of the women were Arab Muslims, both Sunnis and Shiites, and a woman and a man from Kurdish ethnicity. The two men were one Syrian and one Syrian-Palestinian. Participants were of age ranges from 28 to 60 years. Most of the participants had children. The dialogue during the first session was conducted smoothly, with most of the women participating in this dialogue. The session was recorded after obtaining participants' approval.

In the second session, the course of the discussion changed and participants became less active, due to the fact that one of the men in attendance - who did not attend the first session - gave an order to his wife, his sister, and one of his relatives not to speak. He also refrained from taking part in the discussion. I asked the attendees if their silence was due to the audio recording and offered to stop recording. Their answer was no. The man commented: Do whatever you want, but I will not speak. One of the women indicated that she could take part in the discussion if the audio was stopped, and indeed the recording was stopped. Nonetheless, the man, his wife, his sister, and a female relative remained silent throughout the discussion even after the recording was stopped. Despite the intensity of this behavior and the distress it caused to some of the attendees and those

113 Edwards and Holland, p. 36.

in charge of the project, the incidence was a rich experience that uncovered many possibilities. It might be that, since these participants belonged to Šīʿa community, this may have prompted them to be very suspicious and wary of this discussion - despite the fact that the topic of study is social. In addition, the same women actively participated in the discussion in the first session when the corresponding male - husband, brother, and relative - was not present. However, the situation changed in the second session with instructions issued by the man whispering to his wife outside the room and gesturing to his sister with his hand after the speech. This attitude revealed the presence and power of patriarchy and male authority in the family even in the German context.

In addition to these two sessions, a discussion was held with a small focus group in the home of one of the families. The discussion group was limited to three husbands, whose wives were sitting in another separate room inside the house and did not take part in the discussion. In the session, the causes of marital disputes in Syrian families in Germany were discussed. I would like to point out that this session was spontaneous and without prior preparation, but it was of great benefit, and the discussion proceeded smoothly. In all the sessions, I have to play the role of mediator, sometimes directing the dialogue, sometimes asking some questions about some of the topics that were addressed by the interlocutors in an attempt to organize the conversation.

These are the most important methods that were used to collect data from the fieldwork.

1.3 Data Analysis

This section of the chapter explores the way in which data collected from the field were handled, in particular regarding the methods used to help analyze this data or utilize them for the purpose of this research.

Initially, the data were divided according to the three methods that were used to collect them: participatory observation, interviews, and focus group. All audio recordings were transcribed into files that were numbered in order by date of interviews and labeled with the names of the interviewees. Later, all these real names in the search were changed to pseudonyms to preserve the privacy of the interlocutors. This process of unpacking data consumed a lot of effort and time, but it turned out to have a positive

impact on treating biographic interviews, especially regarding the two following opportunities it allowed for:

- Looking at the data again and thus consolidating it in the researcher's mind more.
- Preparing these narratives for analysis so that each story could be viewed as an integrated whole.

All of this data was entered into MAXQDA software, which was used to assist in classifying, coding, and analyzing this data.

Bernard defines analysis as "the search for patterns in the data, for ideas that help explain why these patterns exist in the first place."[114] Bob and Ross defined it as "[a]n approach that works with data for describing, discussing, interpreting, evaluating, and explaining in terms of research questions or the hypothesis of the research project."[115] However, the process of analysis is not limited to searching for and interpreting patterns, nor is it limited to describing, discussing, etc.; rather it requires both processes together.

My analytical process begins as soon as I conceived of the project's idea and its question, and it continues with me throughout the research. As I mentioned above, the four dimensions - social, educational, economic, and legal - on which the guide and the axes of the interview questions were built were based on my preliminary observations through relationships developed with the communities where the research was conducted and through some of the interviews that took place at the beginning of the research project idea. What happened in the following stages of the research, especially during and after data collection, is that the analysis process became at the same time more expansive (due to the amount of collected data) and more focused and nuanced (due to the increasing insights into the complexities and variations of family life).

The transcriptions of the audio recordings during the fieldwork took place immediately after the interviews. However, this was not done all the time, as some days were crowded with interviews, and as a result transcribing took place days or weeks later. After conducting more than ten interviews and taking notes through participant observation, I withdrew from the field and suspended the interviews for some days to finish the unloading process and to start the initial analysis process. When the

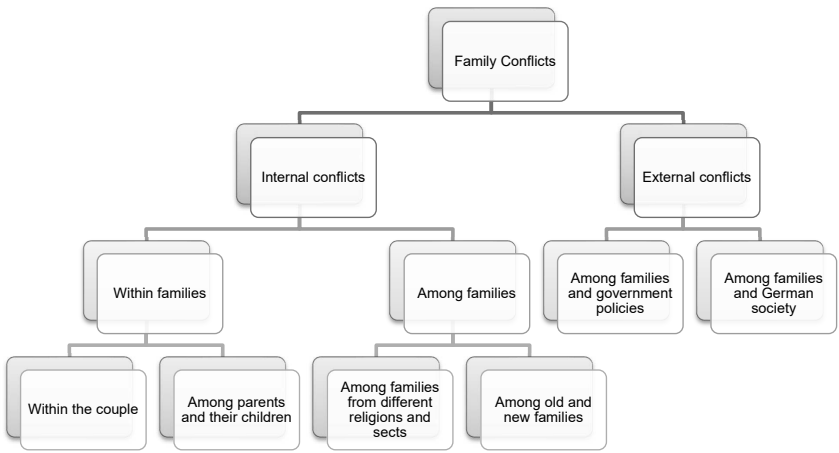
114 H. Russell Bernard, *Research Methods in Anthropology. Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011), p. 338.
115 Bob and Ross, p. 317.

process of transcribing was completed, classification of the data into its various topics began in conjunction with the initial coding process using MAXQDA program.

The primary data were divided into multiple topics, which were classified as follows:

1. The reasons for the displacement of Syrians and their asylum in Germany. Within this issue, several codes emerged including insecurity: such as threats to life, kidnapping, withdrawal for compulsory recruitment or fear of being arrested. In addition, this classification included ensuring a better life for the kids as well as the economic factor and the search for a better future.
2. The changes that occurred to Syrian families and the challenges they faced when they arrived in Germany were monitored. Codes were also created for this topic revolving around: language, finding work, fear for children from the new environment, social alienation, racism, religious and cultural challenges, feeling anxiety, instability, and the lack of adequate housing.
3. In this section, the focus laid on the factors of family disputes. In the first stage of data collection, a blueprint for the types of conflicts within the Syrian communities in Germany was built upon primary data. Among the different types of conflicts, the focus has been on conflicts within the family (between spouses), as they are form the focus of my research. Other conflicts were only considered in the context in which they affected the conflict within the family. Some of the factors related to conflicts are linked in one way or the other. Figure 2 shows the types of conflicts that take place within the Syrian communities in Germany.

Figure 2. Types of conflicts within the Syrian communities in Germany



Through the preliminary analysis of the data, more than 20 codes related to family conflicts were extracted and classified into several subjects (factors), some of which were related to the initial evidence for interview questions, while others were not included in it and thus were revealed by the data collected from the field.

In later stages of the interviews, codes were discussed with the interlocutors to find out their opinions and perspectives, which helps deepen the idea around it. Later on, some codes were excluded and new codes were added; accordingly, they were classified into five basic topics:

- Factors related to the effects of war and migration.
- Factors related to the status of women and men in the Syrian society.
- Economic factors.
- Legal factors.
- Factors related to the effects of the new environment on the family.

These factors then formed the backbone for structuring my thesis and presenting my findings.

4. By means of the data, the mechanisms for resolving disputes and their challenges between spouses were also monitored.

These were the most important topics that have been coded and analyzed based on data gathered from the field.

1.4 Limitations

The data collection process did not go very smoothly, and things did not always go in line with my expectations and perceptions. These "unexpected" challenges included positive and negative aspects. This section of the chapter reviews the constraints that I faced during the data collection process, and it also shows some unexpected issues that I faced on the personal and research levels.

1.4.1 Access to women (as a target group)

Before the fieldwork started, my biggest concern was reaching out to women. Syrian communities are generally patriarchal and conservative, even though this characteristic varies from region to region and from one family to another.[116] Thus, I expected that my male gender would be an obstacle to my access to the sample of women from families. But the fact that the families now resided in the German context, as well as the changes in the personality of women, helped a lot in overcoming this problem. For example, two twenty-year-old girls were interviewed without their father knowing, and they mentioned that their fathers did not understand how two girls could be sitting with a young man in the café or any other place for an interview. One of the wives was also interviewed without her husband knowing it in order for problems not to rise up between her and her husband if he knew or for suspicions not to rise up by the fact we were breaking some social norms related to mixing between the sexes in her family. The first time she brought her friend with her, and the second time she brought her sister to sit with us during the interview. It must be said that I only became aware that they did not have the permission of the father or husband during the interview and that the likelihood of the interviewees experiencing problems as a result of this is small but possible. Hence, the ethics of scientific research dictates that the researcher does not expose the interlocutors to any danger, even if it is small. Had I known of this matter beforehand, I would have thought carefully before conducting interviews with them. My research does not deal with open-minded families which have no problem with such matters. Rather, I am talking about families that

116 Anas Weppi, 'Syrian Women and Society', in *Syria and Its People. A Series of Research Papers about Life in Syria Prior to 2011 (Arabic Version)* (Sharq organisation, 2019), p. 253, 263.

are somewhat conservative. There was a risk that interviews would never have taken place with members of this type of family. Therefore, I always took care in my interviews with women not to specify where our meeting would be or who would attend or not attend this meeting, and I left it to them to decide as I realized that the standards of freedom granted to them within their families differed greatly from one family to another.

What was surprising to me was that the data collected from husbands and wives – in addition to their sons or daughters at times – showed that women in general were more candid and profound in the narration of their stories and experiences outside and inside the family than men, especially when the interview took place alone with the wife. This argument is constructed by comparing private interviews with a husband and wife and their son or daughter. Some wives often delved into the details of their lives and family problems within their family without embarrassment or fear. On the other hand, some men were discrete and careful not to show the negative side, both in their personal experience or in their family relations, although they sometimes knew that I - as a "researcher and friend" - was aware of the details related to them and their family. So their narration or answers to some of the questions during the interview were not explicit and detailed, especially with regard to data that might reveal a negative side related to the way they treat their family. In my opinion this is due to the fact that such frankness or certain details may put the interviewees - especially if they have a good friendship with the researcher - in a difficult situation by revealing their bad history; thus, they omitted part of their experience or summarized other aspects or limited their narration to the positive side. "The participant may therefore avoid answering the question or respond in a manner that distorts reality in an effort to protect his or her self-esteem"[117], according to Madison. This matter is considered one of the criticisms leveled at ethnographic studies. Nonetheless, it is to unveil these aspects that are hidden or distorted by the interviewees that I made use of comparisons with other family members or of close relationships with the interlocutors to know better what was really at stake.

117 D. Soyini Madison, *Critical Ethnography. Method, Ethics, and Performance*, E-Book (Sage publications, 2020) <https://www.amazon.de/dp/B07NKKSCZH/ref=dp-kindle-redirect?_encoding=UTF8&btkr=1>, p. 121.

1.4.2 Language

The "Syrian colloquial Arabic" was the language of communication with all interlocutors. I did not use standard Arabic with interlocutors, because it sometimes confused them as they had to search for vocabulary to express themselves clearly. Many of the interlocutors did not speak standard Arabic properly. Therefore, in order for the interlocutors not to be distracted by the search for these vocabularies, I preferred to use their local colloquial accent. Despite the fact that the dialects of the interlocutors differed somewhat, this was not an obstacle for me to understand it. I spent a long time in three different Syrian governorates (Idlib, Latakia, and Damascus) during or before university studies, which was a chance to interact with individuals from different segments of the Syrian society and to therefore understand different dialects and vocabulary.

Nevertheless, I did not refrain from asking the interlocutors about what they meant by a certain term if I did not understand it. On the other hand, the process of making it easier for the interlocutors to use their local dialects created a kind of difficulty for when I had to translate the interviews from one language to another. Conveying the meaning from the spoken colloquial dialect to another language is not easy. The local colloquial speech may lose after translation the impact of words, their echo, and the emotions they may bear, as these may be expressed by simple words or letters that are difficult to transfer from one language to another. It can also be noted that during the exchange of conversations with the interlocutors – whether formally or informally – there was some use of few German words. Some interlocutors used German concepts to express things they wanted to say when they could not find an equivalent in Arabic. In these instances, this vocabulary was often explained by the interlocutor him/herself to clarify what he/she meant.

1.4.3 Differences, not conflicts

The previous reference at the beginning of this chapter to the strict norms governing Syrian communities led me to beware from the outset of using the term "family conflicts" when dealing with the interlocutors, because the idea of conflict directed the research to a specific preconceived idea of this term confined to conflicts between spouses that end with divorce or separa-

tion. This is why I was often asked in research groups whether the research was directed only to families where the spouses had separated or divorce occurred. In fact, the research was directed at all families because the phenomenon of family conflicts cannot be understood without understanding the nature of the family, its structures, and its functions within the context of indigenous and new communities. Since there were many stressors that had an impact in one way or another to family relations before, during, and after asylum, it was better to move away from using the concept of "conflicts"[118] with the interlocutors and to use words that were less severe, namely, "difficulties" or "challenges". If I found myself obliged to draw the interlocutor's attention to the phenomenon of conflicts, it was better to use the concept of "family differences", as the impact of the word "خلافات ḫilāfāt" is less severe for the interlocutors than the word "conflicts", "نزاعات nisā'āt". Linguistically indeed, "conflict" might imply animosity, while "differences" might carry both meanings: amicability and animosity.[119]

1.4.4 Asking the sensitive questions

According to the interview guide, the researcher requests the interviewee to introduce him-/herself in order to get a general idea of the person he is meeting with – name, age, place of work, place of residence, marital status, number of children, and so on.[120] At the beginning of the fieldwork, when interviewing a person I asked him/her to introduce him/herself before the interview as per the protocol. In one example, an interviewee responded: "I feel that I am in the investigation branch," and he smiled. I requested him to move beyond this question and start talking about what he wanted to tell me. Since then, I no longer use this technique with interlocutors, that is, asking them to introduce themselves before an interview. Syrians are fully aware of the dominance of the oppressive, totalitarian regime and its institutions that were terrorizing people in Syria. Therefore, any direct personal questions that may raise suspicion or, let us say, bring back the painful memory represented by its relations with the intelligence services

118 This concept was used at the beginning of the project in order for the interlocutors to understand the subject of the research and to focus on it.

119 Muḥammad Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān Al-ʿarab* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1994); خلف، نزع.

120 Bob and Ross, pp. 227–28.

and the police were avoided.[121] The mere activation of these feelings may be a negative start in the relationship between the researcher and the interlocutor on the one hand and could affect the narration of the interlocutor on the other hand.

To elaborate further on this fear aspect, some other people interviewed later stated explicitly that they never liked seeing the police on the streets and that they had a kind of phobia when they saw police officers in their uniforms. Since I am fully aware of the kingdom of fear that the Syrian regime has built in the hearts of Syrians, it was necessary to move away from direct personal questions that may provoke these memories and even to be careful in the way the questions were posed. As a result, I have resorted to obtaining personal information in an indirect way most of the time. For example, to avoid asking a person about his age directly, I asked him/her about his/her age at the time of the occurrence of an event he referred to, and at the same time I asked in which year this event occurred, so I could deduce his/her current estimated age.[122] I also tried, as much as possible, to stay away from questions related to his/her political positions, leaving room for the interviewee himself to express them if he/she wanted to do, so that no kind of anxiety, suspicion, and caution would arise during the interview. Because of this state of suspicion or caution, I was keen to assert to all interlocutors that I work as an academic researcher and that the data collected was meant for research purposes only and would not be shared with or seen by any other party. I also referred to the data protection law in Europe,[123] which prevents me from giving this data to other parties or using it for purposes other than scientific research. I also informed them that their real names would not be used in the research. All of this aspired to give some reassurance to those who were reluctant to accept communication with the researcher or to give sensitive and highly specific data related to their political positions or their family privacy.

121 For more details on this topic, see Borneman, 'Fieldwork Experience, Collaboration, and Interlocution', pp. 242–46.

122 Age was important to the research for data analysis and to understand the changes pertaining to the family from all age groups whether old or young.

123 See Council of the EU, 'The General Data Protection Regulation – Consilium' <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/data-protection/data-protection-regulation/> [accessed 5 April 2023].

1.4.5 Pressures related to compassion

I mentioned earlier that the study group is constituted of Syrian refugee families coming from a war-torn country. Consequently, many of these families have gone through painful experiences and stories, which still live in their memories and have their effects in one way or another on the course of their new lives. During the fieldwork, it appeared that there was a need for the interlocutors to get these stories out of their chests so that they could be finally heard. It had both a positive and a negative side. Positive, as the researcher could sense the truthfulness of their speech and reach the hidden things that happened within the family or understand this person deeply by knowing what he/she went through on all psychological, social, and economic levels, etc. This then helped to understand the impact of these factors and their interaction with each other. The negative side is reflected in the sometimes apparent lack of focus on the topic of research, in addition to hearing some painful incidents. This subjected me to the burden of so-called "compassion stress" or "the danger of being emotionally drained."[124] Seeing the interviewees who were subjected to psychological trauma crying and hearing the stories of those who were subjected to torture or who saw the body parts and bodies of those killed in the war, all of this required me to share their emotional distress and show respect not only to gain the trust of the interlocutors but also because that is a moral obligation in the first place.

An issue of concern to me was related to how the researcher should deal with those who were traumatized or affected by the war and were not aware of this. This task requires a psychologist, not a researcher who only explores their stories and narratives. In this context, the researcher has to create a sort of balance and distance between his position as a researcher and the position of the interlocutors. The perception of a complete estrangement in the relationship between the researcher and the interlocutors, or the alienation in dealing with them, or the perception of excluding his emotions or putting them aside in research may be an idealistic position or more of a utopia. Madison noted that, "[a]lthough degree of trauma cannot always be avoided, it is less difficult for both conversational partners to deal with trauma if the researcher is sensitive to and aware of the difficulties. This is

124 Målfrid Råheim et al., 'Researcher-Researched Relationship in Qualitative Research: Shifts in Positions and Researcher Vulnerability', *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-Being*, 11.1 (2016), 30996.

an area that requires rapport; that is, dealing with trauma requires listening with sympathy, following the narrator's pace, demonstrating appreciation through eye contact and gestures of concern, explaining the reason for your question, and, if necessary, guiding the responses with gentle empathy."[125] On the other hand these emotions constitute a qualitative added value to the research, as through them I sometimes discovered their impact in the adoption of certain behaviors or tendencies, thus showing - as Holland notes - "how important acknowledgement of and reflection on these emotional dynamics can be for the production of knowledge."[126]

Conclusion

This chapter was dedicated to elaborating on the methodology and research methods that I used to answer the research question and its problem. It demonstrated the utilization of the qualitative field ethnographic approach to collect the data necessary for the research. This approach was adopted for many reasons. It can be summarized as follows:

- Collecting credible data from families who are controlled by many norms, which made them somewhat closed and made access to their private circles difficult without building close relationships with them.
- The research topic "family conflicts" is considered one of the topics that affect these families directly and personally, and therefore it is difficult to approach them without building real ties with them. Only the ethnographic approach based on the fieldwork allows such access.
- The research group "Syrian refugee families" is linked to painful and complex experiences. These experiences, with their human complexities, are difficult to quantify or to be expressed in theoretical or generalized terms. Only the field inhabited by these families is the method necessary to disentangle these complexities and to study their effect on the stability or the disintegration of the family.

In this section of the chapter, a quick overview of the study group is given, including their numbers, ages, ethnicities, religions, and sects. The analysis of where fieldwork was conducted, the concept of field in anthropology, and the obstacles that arise when defining its concept within a specific

125 Madison, p. 121.
126 Edwards and Holland, p. 85.

framework are discussed in this chapter. Thus, I presented the flexibility that the field as a concept allows by uncovering the challenge of studying refugees in host countries. This took form in a three-way relationship between the researcher, the study group, and the place. From this standpoint, it was necessary to emphasize the need to understand the research group "there" and to understand its presence "here", as families cannot be cut off from their political, economic, social, psychological, religious, or cultural contexts. Consequently, we have relied on three main sources to understand these contexts:

- Relying on the study group itself by reconfiguring these situations through narrative biographical interviews.
- Seeking help from an external source through interviews conducted outside Syria with Syrians for the project of "Syria and its People".
- Reliance on the researcher's background as a Syrian who is a member of these families.

In the second section of the chapter, the research methods that were used to collect the data are presented. These methods include:

- Participatory observation, which is the primary data collection tool in anthropology.
- Qualitative interviews that included in-depth biographical interviews and semi-structured in-depth interviews. Within the second type of "semi-structured" interviews, a guide to interview questions was presented that was used with the interviewees to clarify the progress of the research in collecting these data.
- The focus group, which was used on a small scale.

In the third section of this chapter, the process of dealing with data and of coding and classifying it into topics that formed the structure of this research was reviewed. The use of MAXQDA program, which facilitated the procedures and steps for dealing with these data, was mentioned.

At the end of the chapter, the means that were used to overcome the obstacles imposed by the fieldwork were discussed. Examples of such obstacles are: reaching women, language, using appropriate terminology with the study group, taking into account the sensitivities, cautions, suspicion, or fear in relations with the segments of Syrian societies in addition to the pressure of empathy associated with studying refugee families coming from a war zone.