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Chasing scorpions across North Africa: Ethical reflections on life story research with Sub-Saharan migrants

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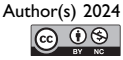

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Abstract
In this Research Note, two researchers present their reflections on the ethical challenges they encountered while collecting life stories of sub-Saharan migrants in Morocco and the Disputed Territory of Western Sahara. The reflections are based on field notes and excerpts from unedited transcripts of daily debriefing sessions that the researchers undertook together. The sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed into written notes. The materials reveal their thoughts and feelings as they grappled with the ethics of keeping their research participants ("Narrators") safe, working with community organizations on the ground, attempting to conduct interviews as humanely as possible, while also managing and concealing their own emotions.

Keywords
ethics, life stories, reflections, field notes, trauma, migration, Morocco and the Disputed Territory of Western Sahara

Introduction

In some parts of rural Morocco, when a child is stung by a scorpion, the cure involves two steps. First, a healing ceremony applies a remedy accompanied by sacred incantations. Once the patient is out of danger and the pain is managed, the parents instruct them to retrace their steps back to where the arachnid lives, search in crevices and under rocks, find and kill the insect, and bring the corpse home. This act may seem like vengeance, but it is the concluding stage of a cure that targets both body and mind. While herbs

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and incantations cure the body, soothe pain, and lead to rest, the soul, as the seat of dreams and memories, needs a cleansing process that involves the journey, the search, and the act of killing. By taking the scorpion's life, the traumatic experience is also killed. The child is no longer a crying victim stranded in the pain of the past, but rather the victorious hunter. In some respects, telling one's own story can be like killing that proverbial scorpion. The life story (*le récit de vie* [Bertaux, 1997], *relato de la vida* [Valasco Ortiz, 2004]) captures voices and emotions, sometimes providing a sense of hope, belonging, and meaning for people who have undergone traumatic experiences (Deutsch et al., 2014). Life stories transform and enrich the interviewer–interviewee relationship. Through this approach, the interviewees become narrators with stories to tell and views of their own—not simply respondents to researchers' questions (Chase, 2005). However, the process of searching for people willing to tell their life stories, meeting with them in a safe space, and documenting those stories with objectivity is not without challenges.

This ***Research Note*** reflects on the ethical dilemmas we encountered while conducting life story research with Sub-Saharan migrants in Morocco and the Disputed Territory of Western Sahara. Our research seeks to provide a window into the lives of men and women who became stranded *en* route through Morocco to Spain. While many need humanitarian protection they do not meet the 1951 Refugee Convention criteria, resulting in their precarious immigration status. We want to know how stranded migrants reformulate their dreams, revise their aspirations, and reinvent themselves in the shadows of Moroccan society where they are unable to access most social services and are rendered vulnerable to abuse by authorities and criminal groups. The idea to spend six weeks in North Africa documenting migrant stories emerged from conversations between two colleagues with different disciplinary training from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Canadian-born Stacey Wilson-Forsberg[1] is a social scientist and specialist in human rights. She conducts qualitative research with immigrants and refugees using scripted interviews with large numbers of research participants. Abderrahman (Abdou) Beggar is a Moroccan Canadian scholar with expertise in Francophone literature and media discourse. He uses informal discussions with people as a launching point for both his fiction and nonfiction writing. The authors' collaboration on this project reflects the inherently interdisciplinary and capacious nature of migration studies as a field. They share a conviction that conveying the complexity of Sub-Saharan migrants' lives in nuanced and textured ways requires the use of natural life stories.

The reflections presented in this ***Research Note*** are based on field notes and excerpts from unedited transcripts of daily debriefing sessions that the authors undertook together following each life story interview. Debriefing sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed into written notes. The materials reveal the authors' thoughts and feelings as they grappled with the ethics of keeping research participants ("Narrators") safe and attempting to conduct interviews as humanely as possible, while also managing and concealing their own emotions during the research experience. The tension between the intellectual preparation for field research and existential preparation for the research experience has been addressed by many researchers over the years (see for example Nordstrom and Robben's, 1995 edited volume *Fieldwork Under Fire*). The Research Note contributes to this body of work two researchers' careful reflections on the ethics of spending time with, observing, and telling the stories of vulnerable migrant populations in the field.

Morocco is geographically positioned as the gateway from Africa to Europe. Sub-Saharan Africans trek the Saharan Desert, eventually entering Northern Morocco through Algeria or Southern Morocco through Mauritania. From there they attempt to make it to Spain. Restrictive systems of externalized border management by Spain have caused the passage to become increasingly more perilous, effectively stranding people in Morocco (Wilson-Forsberg and Beggar, 2024). Migrants who have entered Morocco irregularly (i.e., they did not enter through an official port of entry and may not have passports) do not have permission to be in Moroccan territory and thus, face risks and vulnerabilities that are distinct from people with citizenship, including the possibility of detention and deportation (Bloemraad and Menjívar, 2021). During their six weeks of fieldwork in Morocco and the Disputed Territory of Western Sahara (in October 2021 and March 2022), the authors collected over 200 hours of recorded audio and 1000 pages of transcribed life stories from 36 men and women (28 men and 8 women ages 17–50 with the average age 29 years). They were assisted by community organizations that advocate for migrant rights and provide them with basic life necessities. In this field experience, the places the authors decided to focus on are all considered "gates," places of transit, charged with hope and dreams. As a gate, Oujda is a city that borders two countries: Algeria and Spain. They also chose Tangier for being the most northern part of Africa, just 14 km away from Spain, Lafnideq, adjacent to Ceuta, the other Spanish enclave, and Beni Ansar adjacent to Melilla. They then focused on the southern gates, the ones that lead to the Canary Islands: Laayoune and Dakhla.

This ***Research Note*** offers a selection of ethical dilemmas the authors experienced in the field. Everyone who participated in this project, including the coauthors, is like the child, chasing scorpions with hundreds of tails across North Africa. The insect we seek is the trauma and anguish described in migrants' stories. Inhabiting roads and shadows, with suspicious gazes, guilty encounters, and discrete smiles, the research seeks to displace that tragedy with hope. This was accomplished by asking individual migrants about who they were before they migrated, who they are now, and who they aspire to be in the future. The first reflection "Suspicious Gazes" presents the authors' realization that they may have inadvertently drawn police attention to a group of Sudanese men who were hiding in the streets of Oujda. The second "Guilty Encounters," reflects on the authors' feelings of losing control of the research at a community organization. The third "Discrete Smiles" describes how learning of the trauma experienced by one Cameroonian woman shattered the authors existentially. The final reflection offers the authors' thoughts about breaking the stance of neutrality regarding the phenomena they observed and experienced. Each section pivots from first- and third-person narrative and from present to past tense depending on which author wrote the original field notes and how stories were told.

Suspicious gazes

Our day begins with a chance encounter with two narrators in the Medina ("Old Town") of Oujda. Like all old urban centres in Morocco, Oujda has a Medina, a medieval town surrounded by a wall to protect it against raids and invasions, as well as its colonial quarters, vestiges of the French protectorate (1912–1956). The "Eastern Jewel" and "Capital of Arab culture" (a title earned in 2018) as its inhabitants proudly call it, has a memory as heavy as the history of the country. Oujda is strategically positioned as a historic transit

point for caravans and troops. As a frontier city, disputes between Morocco and Algeria are felt everywhere. At 16 km from the city centre, the main crossing point between the two countries has been closed since 1994. On both sides, the French left the baguette, the French language, Edith Piaf's music, and a border that feels like a curse to many, especially for the ones who have relatives beyond the heavily guarded separation line. Here, even after the War of Sands (1963), the massive expulsion of Moroccans from Algeria (1975), and the dozen violent incidents (the latest occurring in August when Algerian soldiers killed two Franco-Moroccan tourists for mistakenly crossing the sea border on their jet skis), a painful nostalgia determines the way stories about what lays beyond the border are told. Hotel and shop owners, cooks, and taxi drivers, all languish for the day when the human flow will come back. The only humans who dare come from the Algerian side are Sub-Saharan migrants attracted by the idea of crossing to Melilla, the Spanish enclave (115 km away).

We were walking along the narrow street of the Medina eating fresh figs and discussing events that occurred the day before. I (Stacey) was frustrated because I had been asked to leave the room when two Sudanese men were being interviewed. I lacked the language to lead the interviews and, as a woman my presence made the men uncomfortable. It is difficult to find oneself alienated from the capacity to communicate, a paralysis proper to the inability to fulfil the most basic desire when conducting life story research: sharing a common narrative space with the "other," the one that the storyteller is supposed to populate with personal stories, testimonies, anecdotes that serve the purpose of self-construction. We were walking along discussing these feelings, with fig juice running down our arms, from time-to-time glancing at the world around: a sparrow feeding on a dry piece of bread, two old women sitting on the step of an old home while a stray cat caresses their legs with its furry tail, a man pushing a cart loaded with onions, and a young man smoking in a corner, lost in his thoughts.

Here, we encountered the Sudanese Minister of Happiness and Ahmed. Why did he select that pseudonym? Was it humor? Was he mocking us or was he trying to tell us something else with that name? "Call me the Minister of Happiness." That was the way he introduced himself. His story is one of the most dramatic. He escaped his native Darfur two years ago before engaging in a perilous adventure through Libya, where he fell into the hands of militiamen who treated him as a slave. It was hard to follow him through the labyrinth of untold pain. His story was difficult to understand. His words were scarce, his sentences incomplete and interrupted with moans, sighs, sobs, and grunts before diving into total silence with the same frozen smile and watery eyes. Due to his condition, we had to interrupt the interview the day before.

There he was standing at the fountain greeting us with his big white smile. Perfect teeth. Perfect smile. But something was off about that smile. It didn't light up his face as it should have. The Minister of Happiness has the same empty gaze as the others. The smile is a beautiful mask, so innocent, so bright, but his eyes are dead. When did the light go off in those dark eyes? The Minister of Happiness pauses and looks at Ahmed, who carries himself as if he is the leader of the Sudanese group, which now ranged in the order of 500 migrants on the streets of Oujda. Ahmed nods at his friend, permitting the Minister of Happiness to speak. "We had a very rough night," he says. "The police raided us three times. We couldn't rest. They took our blankets away. They took the last of our cell phones and they ripped up the appointment cards that the

UNHCR gave us (as proof that they are seeking asylum under international law)." The young men are tired, cold, and hungry. Their fetid body odor indicates to us that they have not washed in a very long time. "What did we do to deserve this? We aren't causing any trouble. We were planning to hide in the woods at Nador and wait for another chance to enter Melilla, but we are so tired. Please just arrest us and send us home. I don't want to do this anymore."

These young men can't go forward to Europe, and they can't go backward in shame to their communities in Darfur. They are stuck. They are victims of the same syndrome from which many migrants suffer when the object of their quest is so close, just a few miles away, but cannot be reached. Nothing is worse than enduring a long and perilous journey and, once at the gates of the "promised land" (Melilla), the focus shifts from the original plan to a paralyzing feeling of despair, a pit of impossibilities where dreams vanish and despair flourishes. We ask them to come eat with us or to wait for us to deliver food to them. "No" says the Minister of Happiness. "The police are watching you. You are putting yourselves at risk by being seen with us. Please walk. When you see us sleeping in the street, keep walking. We don't want any more trouble."

Sure enough, we observe the same two gentlemen who had been in the hotel lobby watching us this morning. Plain-clothed police officers. The Moroccan authorities have been monitoring us throughout our stay in Oujda and the Western Sahara, which is likely due to the heightened tensions in these areas. During our stay, there were ongoing border conflicts involving Morocco, Spain, Algeria, and the Polisario Front. While in Dakhla, a major city near the Mauritanian border, our days were marked by the constant sound of jet fighters and movements of troops on alert. We were also wondering if the police were concerned about how their country (i.e., their treatment of migrants) will be portrayed in our future publications. We have unknowingly caused these undocumented Sudanese men unwanted attention. With a sick feeling in the pit of our stomachs, we leave them at the fountain and walk away fearful that we did not protect our research participants.

Guilty encounters

When we arrive at the offices of the community organization to our conduct interviews in Oujda, the presence of three Moroccan graduate students catches us off guard. They volunteer to assist migrants at the association with processing refugee claims and want to shadow us to learn how to collect qualitative data. The two young men are respectful and kind. The woman, however, is brazen and invasive. The day starts with a meeting to introduce everyone. Narrators William, Billy Amin, and Sharif are already there. The small room is hot and crowded. At the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, we should be wearing masks to cover our mouths and noses, but out of politeness we are not. Marlys, our fourth narrator, arrives late to the meeting and apologizes to the group for her tardiness. We are struck by her beauty. Her hair perfectly done in a highlighted puff of curls, her nails painted, and black eyeliner carefully outlining her golden eyes. She is smartly dressed in a pantsuit in shades of brown with cheetah print. She carries a large purse and holds herself with poise and confidence. But that gaze is the same as the others we had encountered. An empty gaze. This woman is in pain. Marlys has a dreadful story to tell, and we are mentally preparing ourselves to listen.

Marlys sits down next to the female graduate student Fatima[2], who immediately starts to pester her with intrusive and inappropriate questions. We offer to continue the meeting at a café. We meant that Billy Amin, William, Sharif, and Marlys could accompany us to a café so that we could gain their trust. Much to our surprise, everyone comes to the café, including the graduate students. This is one of those circumstances when a researcher's plans must adapt to the given situation and follow the host's social rules and obligations. We were not taken to a café to drink coffee; instead, we were taken to this place to be introduced to the community, even from a distance. Together with hammams (bathhouses), cafés are major gathering places where customers come to inquire about others, including the presence of foreigners. In this kind of situation, the guest's time is managed by the host, who defines priorities. This can create unforeseen delays and disappointments, especially when dealing with narrators like Marlys, who are suffering from deep trauma and are highly sensitive to any kind of indiscretion. The café is a dark poorly ventilated room on the second floor with ceilings so low we must bend down to walk to the table. It smells of stale tobacco. One poor waiter is attempting to serve all of us, running down the street to gather the pastries we ordered. I (Stacey) decide to sit next to Marlys to block her from the invasive Fatima. I say a few words in French and make do smiling and touching her gently on the shoulder. While gazing at each one of us, Marlys is busy designing some figures on the table with the tip of one finger. Interrupted, from time to time, she engages in a conversation or takes a sip from her café au lait.

After the café, the entire party of 11 continues to a nearby restaurant for dinner. Four hours have now past, and our life story interviews have become a social gathering. Fatima is really getting on my nerves at this point, asking me too many complicated questions in French as I attempt to eat. Eventually I put my spoon on the table and give up. Then she corners Marlys at the other end of the table and this time I can't protect her. I overhear Marlys talking about a Libyan prison and I am astonished that Fatima is asking her direct questions about her prison experience. Now, I am deeply upset that Marlys has become a spectacle, to be dragged around and put on display for an audience. I am also worried that, by the time we have the opportunity to speak with her in private, she will be too exhausted to participate in the research.

Dinner concludes and we leave, but not before quarreling with Fatima who insists on being included in our interview with Marlys. We explain that, for the sake of confidentiality there is no way we will let her stay in the room. At that point, she turns to the association directors who attempt to intervene on her behalf. Nevertheless, we are firm in our commitment to uphold the confidentiality of Marlys, and the interview proceeds without Fatima.

Discrete smiles

Marlys does not want us to change her name. Her name is all she has left. She wants people to remember her. Her story is by far the most disturbing account we have heard. While the community organizations advocate for and support migrants, most do not have trained social workers or psychologists to support people with complex trauma. We were not prepared for this interview. We had a feeling it would be bad, but it exceeds our worst expectations. Abdou interacts with warmth and kindness. When he notices Marlys becoming upset, he redirects the conversation and attempts to distract her with positive images, sights, and scents from her childhood: her favorite meal, the songs she sang with her sisters, the scent of flowers in the patio. With a sweet and trembling voice, Marlys revisits

the world left behind to bring back sounds, tastes, smells, and impressions. A nostalgic smile lights up her eyes from time to time, and she pauses, waiting for more details to arise from behind the curtain of silence and amnesia.

I (Abdou) try my best to allow Marlys to talk freely, asking follow-up questions only when clarification is needed. I don't at any point go outside the frame of her story. In a good life story, one is surprised by the character. Marlys gives us lots of surprises. She wants her story to be told and appears determined to tell it even though it clearly causes her tremendous grief. She behaves as if the story is burning her from the inside and needs to be released. So, she talks. Each sentence, each event and experience, is more heinous than the previous. As the hours crawl by, we worry that she will get too exhausted. She pauses every once and a while and puts her head down. Before we can say "enough" she lifts her head and keeps talking.

The first thing that catches our attention is her gaze. Those golden-brown eyes. The expression around her fixed gaze changes as she speaks. She smiles discretely when describing her childhood in rural Cameroon. There is not only a child-like sparkle in her eyes but also an empty sadness and shame. Her face gets red as she cries. She is so fragile. As she continues to tell her story, she projects a deep sadness throughout her entire body. The map in her mind and the map in her story don't match. She gives no geographical details beyond "in this place we ate this, or the desert felt hot on my feet." Places are shaped by experience, the march of time, the flow of events, and the traces they leave in one's psyche. Maps cannot replicate the unique way we imagine places. They are just indicators of a collective imagination, inhabited by a vision of space that differs from that of someone chasing a dream in a valley of nightmares. For Marlys, abuse was the price to pay for freedom of movement. She describes an entire system of modern-day slavery throughout North Africa and the Sahel. How the militia in Libya take prisoners to clandestine detention centres run by organized criminals and how bodies are rented, bought, and sold. One of three female siblings, she tells us the heartbreaking story of her sister. The sister was on the back of a motorcycle in Niger, and the police were chasing her. She fell off the motorcycle and broke her arm before she was returned to the detention centre in neighboring Libya with Marlys and the third sister. The women managed to escape from the detention centre and get to a boat departing for Europe. But the small boat was overcrowded and not seaworthy. While at sea, the boat began to sink. Marlys' sister did not have her life jacket on properly due to the pain caused by her broken arm, nor could she tread water. She drowned in the Mediterranean. Marlys could do nothing to save her. Marlys also describes drowning people panicking and grabbing her in the water trying to pull her down, but a loose strap on her own life jacket saved her. She survived. Her sister did not. And she survived only to be put right back in the Libyan detention centre. After 3 hours, Marlys' story abruptly ends. She puts her head down on the table and sobs. This time she doesn't recover. Her forehead stays resting on the table. So, I (Abdou) stop the interview. I feel terrible about her situation, but also grateful we were given the privilege of listening to her. She drowned in her own story. The only thing we could do for Marlys is distract her by taking her out for baklava. After that interview, I felt ashamed to be human. Marlys broke us. We broke her.

Marlys' story did not end in that little baklava shop. Over the next three months, we often talked about her, wondering about her fate. On our second trip to Oujda in March 2022, we looked for her. We asked at the various migration associations and at the church, we spoke with representatives of the Cameroonian community, but nobody knew where she was.

Hope

Zournazi (2002) wrote that "hope is the difference between probability and possibility. If we follow probability there is no hope, just a calculated anticipation authorised by the world as it is" (pg. 245). On our second trip to Morocco, we heard about settled communities of Senegalese and Ivoirians led by women in the Disputed Territory of Western Sahara. Having heard several horrific stories told by female migrants, we wanted to document a story of women in leadership roles. Beyond the discomfort of being shadowed and spooked by the police and gendarmes while in Laayoune and Dakhla, we came to Western Sahara during a time of high tensions over the Guerguerat, a crossing point with Mauritania, formerly under UN control. Known especially for its importance for trade between Morocco and West Africa, the Polisario Front decided to block the crossing point. In response, Morocco sent its army to the Guerguerat, which remains under its control until now.

I (Stacey) caught a cold and did not want to spread it to people, so I missed a couple of interviews. Abdou told me how disappointed people were to find him (a Moroccan national) when they arrived to be interviewed and not me. I soon figured out that many people wanted to speak with me because I could potentially be their ticket out of there. The few interviews I did undertake did not go well. I felt like the narrators were telling me what they thought I wanted to hear. I am white, privileged, and (they hoped) powerful enough to get them out of Africa and into Canada. Of course, I can't do that, which led to even more feelings of impotence.

We were now some 2000 km from Oujda in Laayoune. After an 8-hour bus ride from Tan Tan through the Sahara Desert, we were disappointed that our rooms were not ready at the hotel to take hot showers. At this point, we decided to leave our things at the hotel and find somewhere to eat dinner. As we walked down the street, we passed a woman sweeping the sidewalk in front of a small shop adjacent to the very out-of-place golden arches of a large, new McDonald's. I looked right at this woman, smiled, and kept walking. I was surprised when the woman started following us. We picked up our pace and so did she. We turned a corner, and so did she. She said "Madam, Madam!" Soon she was chasing us frantically screaming "Madam!".

Stacey: "Abdou that woman is chasing me."
Abdou: "She is begging for money. It is sad but we must keep walking."
"Madam, Madam, Stacey! C'est Marlys!"
Marlys?

I turned around and she embraced me. We both cried. It was Marlys. But not the beautiful Marlys we met in October. This woman wore long layers of clothing to protect her from the Sahara sun and a COVID-19 surgical mask. Her face was round and puffy. A hood covered her bald head, her tattered feet were barely protected by a pair of pink flip flops. She continued to hold her broom in her right hand "C'est Marlys." How could the woman we were eagerly looking for 2000 km away in Northern Morocco be sweeping the sidewalk precisely at that moment when we walked by? Had we taken a shower at the hotel as planned, our paths would not have crossed.

Marlys accompanied us to dinner. She did not offer many details of how she ended up in the Disputed Territory of Western Sahara but it was obvious that she was running,

scared, and desperate for money. We couldn't leave her in a baklava shop. Not this time. At that moment, our neutrality as researchers was cast aside. We have been working with Marlys ever since to apply for refugee status at the UNHCR in Rabat, using her documented life story as a testimony. We hope to eventually use the Private Sponsorship program to resettle Marlys and her remaining sister in Canada.

Conclusion

Our life story research has a clear commitment to rights, standards of conduct, and protocols codified by our university's Research Ethics Board, all of which are grounded in federal Canadian law. In each step of the procedure, these rules and protocols were adhered to and thoroughly explained to narrators prior to each interview. Nevertheless, like the sands of the Moroccan Sahara, the research terrain of collecting life stories of vulnerable populations in North Africa can rapidly shift, potentially increasing discomfort for all involved. The key challenges to ethical procedures were situational in nature, circumstances beyond our control. For instance, our community partners in Oujda were not required to adhere to the same code of ethics, appearing determined to demonstrate compassion by putting our research participants on display. We encountered ethical challenges in geopolitical factors especially when conducting research in the conflict zones of Disputed Western Sahara where authorities were not only suspicious of our intentions but also directed us to refer to the territory as "disputed." We have also not decided how to handle compromising, albeit anecdotal information about police misconduct toward migrants. At the same time, as researchers, we have had to come to terms with our own feelings and emotions during and after the life story interviews. Publishing the life stories will present further ethical difficulties, with the biggest challenge being how to get these stories back to their owners? Ultimately, understanding the unique experiences of Billy Amin, Shariff, Marlys, the Minister of Happiness, and countless others in North African spaces helps to uncover diversity behind overgeneralized notions of the migrant experience to establish a foundation for empathy and enhance public discourse around migration.

Notes

1. Authors names removed for peer review.
2. A pseudonym has been used to protect the student's identity. With the exception of "the Minister of Happiness," all narrators requested that we use their given names.

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