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Ambivalent Lines: **Ethnographic Observation Of A Household Survey In Hamra, Beirut**

By **Soheila Shourbaji**

With guest introduction and conclusion by
Mayssa Jallad and Nikolay Mintchev

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Introduction: What Can We Learn From an Ethnography of a Household Survey?

Mayssa Jallad and Nikolay Mintchev

What happens when researchers carrying tablets knock on people's doors and ask to conduct a survey about wellbeing? How are they received and greeted? What are the dynamics of interaction between the researchers and their interlocutors? Since our researchers are citizen scientists who "know" the neighbourhood well, what do they end up learning from fieldwork? What are the relationships between different researchers on the same team? Analyses and considerations of survey data tend to forget and disregard the fact that the data collection process involves human interactions in which all participants express attitudes, emotions, and ideas that are not captured in the answers to the survey questions. Yet, despite being treated as irrelevant contingencies that take place on the side, such interactions can be rich in insights about the very themes that the survey is designed to understand.

This paper presents five ethnographic observations from the RELIEF Centre's 2019 household survey on prosperity in the Hamra neighbourhood of Beirut. The ethnographer – Soheila Shourbaji – worked closely with the team of citizen social scientists who went from door to door and from building to building to carry out the survey. She actively observed the different elements that make up an interview, including the actions and reactions of the interviewers, respondents, and herself as a participant in the process.

The wealth of material presented in the five case studies is a cogent reminder of two important points. The first is that people's responses to survey questions are far broader and richer in meaning than the answers that are recorded and presented as survey findings. These broader responses, of course, cannot be quantified and measured, but they can be described in order to convey something of the cultural texture in which the numbers are situated. The second point is that these broader responses to the interview and its questions vary enormously among participants. While the quantitative data can offer precise indication of the differences and inequalities between Hamra's

residents, Shourbaji's ethnographies show how these are tied to emotional states, ways of life and modes of interaction that differ fundamentally from person to person.

Shourbaji's ethnographies serve to document the way in which people describe their lives to researchers. When one reads the report with the quantitative findings of these surveys (see RELIEF Centre and UN Habitat 2020), one realizes that a lot gets lost in the formatting and formalization of surveys into percentages, bar charts, graphs and maps. This paper recalls the language of house encounters with the community, which comprises linguistic expressions of frustration, traumas and anxieties arising from talking about one's wellbeing, racist attitudes, nuances on neighbourhood belonging and perceptions of class. Most strikingly, survey findings alone do not capture the blaring contradictions within the same individual, and the complexity of Identity as people attempt to express themselves. Studies like the present one bring these contradictions to the surface and challenge us to question all forms of "representation" including stereotypes and tropes.

The Hamra neighbourhood of Beirut is a diverse place in every sense of the word. In fact, it is a "super-diverse" place, where differences in both sectarian and national backgrounds intersect with another layer of differences in class and occupation, legal/migration status, and a range of other factors that cut across sectarian and national identities (see Vertovec 2007, Seidman 2012, Harb et al. 2018). In many ways this is a positive thing. In fact, as we know from our interview data about quality of life in Hamra, many residents take both pride and comfort in the neighbourhood's diversity; they see Hamra's diversity as an exemplar of conviviality that others can learn from, as well as a source of safety with respect to their own difference from others. Difference and disagreement, we were often told, are tolerated in Hamra because the neighbourhood's diversity makes it difficult for anyone to impose their views on others.

On the other hand, however, as Shourbaji's ethnographies show, inequalities and power differentials play out in a number of different ways, including in verbal attacks and vicious stereotyping that she herself experienced as a Syrian in the field. Economic and social inequalities in Hamra, together with symbolic inequalities in how different groups are represented create complex assemblages of emotional states, feelings of entitlement, and rules and regulations of social conduct. We emphasize the notion of complexity here, because as Shourbaji's case studies show, ambivalence and ambiguity are common features in people's discourses, signalling ongoing internal negotiations – and even internal struggles – in establishing one's relations to oneself, others, and the context as a whole.

The household survey interviews that Shourbaji observed and studied are part of the RELIEF Centre's work on prosperity in Hamra. The aim of this work is to understand what prosperity means for Hamra residents, to develop a Prosperity Index with co-designed measures of quality of life based on local experiences, and to develop pathways to positive change that address the challenges identified by the data (for a review of some of the survey's findings see RELIEF Centre and UN Habitat 2020).

However, while most research projects that run household surveys hire external researchers for the sole purpose of data-collection, RELIEF takes a different approach based on citizen social science (Jallad and Mintchev 2019). The RELIEF prosperity team includes a group of citizen scientists – local residents who are fundamentally committed to making a positive change to their community through research-led initiatives. Citizen scientists are recruited, trained in research methods and ethics, and closely supported by more senior team members in their work. They play a key role in steering the project's activities, making important contributions to research design, data collection, data analysis, design of interventions for addressing local challenges, presentation of findings to external stakeholders, and writing and publication of outputs.

RELIEF's citizen scientists come from a diverse range of national, religious and social backgrounds, much like the population of Hamra. And just like the experience of life in Hamra, the experience of

working as a diverse team has presented opportunities, as well as challenges that the team has had to work together to address. One of the valuable insights of Shourbaji's ethnographies is that in addition to telling a story about the human side of the respondents, they also remind us that there is a human side to the research process from the perspective of the people who carry out the surveys. This last point is well-known in anthropology, where the ethnographer's positionality and its embeddedness in the field is routinely acknowledged as an important factor in the knowledge production process, but it is less frequently discussed in other academic fields that produce different kinds of data.

Shourbaji's descriptions of the citizen scientists meeting, discussing interviews with one another, and at times coming into tension with one another are all part of a broader picture of social research that often gets forgotten or disregarded. In this way, the case studies that follow are at once a portrait of Hamra's residents who convey their stories through the interviews, and a snapshot of what citizen social science looks like throughout the long and laborious process of carrying out research on the ground.

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Ambivalent Lines: Five Fieldnotes on a Household Survey

Soheila Shourbaji

Citizen social science opens up an ethnographically intriguing space. In 2019, I worked with RELIEF's citizen science team in Hamra while they carried out a household survey about prosperity and its different dimensions. My aim was to get a glimpse of what the surveying process looked like, and to understand the social interactions and emotions that are involved in data collection – experiences that ultimately get lost in the quantitative body of data that comes out on the other end of the process. RELIEF's work on prosperity is grounded in citizen social science in order to produce community-based research findings that are owned by, and intended for the use of, local residents and organizations.

Soon after my first household interview with the RELIEF team, I proposed to write an ethnographic account of the dynamics of the interview. I imagined gleaning such qualitative data would help contextualize the project's output with anecdotes of self-narrated life in Hamra. And it did. In an earlier essay (Shourbaji 2019), I described some of my work on this project specifically with regard to the themes of mapping, anxieties and reconceptions that emerged during the ethnographic fieldwork. In this paper, I follow up and build on my earlier writing by presenting five ethnographic accounts of my experiences in the field with RELIEF's Hamra citizen science team.

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Fieldnote 1

17/7/2019

One July afternoon, Kareem, a citizen scientist, and I interviewed Mona, a middle-aged Beirut woman. We entered a relatively new residential building. After a few failed attempts at door knocking (with some people declining to be interviewed and others not being home), we were welcomed into Mona's apartment. She was very quick to let us in and express an interest in our research. She later said that she trusted us because of our name tags.

As soon as we sat down, Mona offered us coffee. Since it is a habit to ask whether guests prefer sugar in their coffee, she jokingly added a twist saying "no sugar? No coffee beans? // بلا سكر؟ بلا بن؟" Later, she offered us cigarettes while she lit one for herself. The AC was off, but the fan cooled down the room. We sat on old but well-kept couches that carried the aesthetics of the early 2000s.

When Kareem started asking the survey questions formally, Mona said, "my husband is bald. Write that down." The atmosphere was generally light and funny. Mona's responses during the survey highlighted the ways in which different survey questions require different types of thinking, recollection and emotional work on behalf of the respondent. For example, when Kareem asked about the number of household members, Mona counted the people that live in the house on her fingers recalling their names, ages and random things about them. At the same time, some questions had a striking emotive potential. While the weight of these emotionally charged questions changes from one household to another, they seemed to follow a trend related to the income level of the household. Respondents who were better off answered questions about quality of life with a greater sense of lightness. In Mona's house, the atmosphere took a heavier turn after questions about access to healthcare, employment and medical insurance. When Mona's husband lost his job, he also lost his medical insurance. Access to healthcare has been a struggle for them ever since.

At the end of the interview, Kareem asked Mona how we can get in touch with another woman in the building who served as the head of tenants. It turned out that she and Mona were related. Mona said: "my husband's cousin does not open the door." Mona's statement reminded me of a remark she had made earlier in response to a survey question, where she used a door metaphor – "all doors are closed // كل الأبواب مسكرة" – to signal that people in the neighborhood are unhelpful to one another. However, she also said at a later point that "paradise without people is not worth living in // الجنة بلا ناس ما بتنداس" to indicate the importance she attributed to community life. She saw that community is crucial for a collective prosperous life, but she also implied that prosperity is strongly contingent on interpersonal relationships that are harder to make and maintain under hard socioeconomic conditions. Prosperity was a door that remained half-closed and half-open.

Mona expressed this ambivalence and complexity of ideas in some other intermittent comments she made about life in Hamra. One comment was "life is horrible. Hamra or not // المعيشة زفت. حمرا وغير // حمرا." Another remark was that "we are only going backwards// كل مالنا عم نرجع لورا." Eventually, Mona settled on "life is beautiful, but it's expensive // الحياة حلوة بس كلها غلا."

Even though such remarks might seem like "noise" in the data, my view is that they are exactly the opposite. They are evidence of the difficulty people experience in the psychological navigation of challenging economic situations in addition to a range of other issues. They are expressions of an effort to maintain a positive attitude towards the world, even at a time when doing so is itself a challenge. Prosperity is about the affirmation, hope and commitment to building a better future for ourselves and our communities.

Fieldnote 2

18/7/2019

On this particular day, May and I had arranged to meet directly at the interviewee's apartment, rather than to walk over to it together. When I got to the floor where the apartment was located, I texted May and she asked the interviewee, Asmaa, to open the door. We shook hands, and she welcomed me in. Asmaa's son and his children were in the room as well. The children, all below 5 years of age, peeked adorably at my notebook and then carried on playing and running around. One child got himself a glass from the make-shift kitchen and filled it from the jug of water the family offered us. Asmaa was our main interlocutor, but her son answered some of the questions as well.

When we introduced the project, Asmaa directly questioned the utility of social science research and its relationship to social and non-governmental work. She bluntly asked, "is this only ink on paper? // هل هو بس حكي عالورق؟" At a later point, she said "we welcomed and respected you although we are scared. We are scared even as we are speaking to you; we are thinking about the risks of telling you all of this. You know we are Syrians, and our situation is critical." Asmaa and her family rightfully expected a service or an intervention back. She questioned why we would conduct this kind of research if not to provide or enhance services. Throughout the interview, I was thinking that it is a very intense one. But what other than intense would it be? What would it mean for this research to not be heavy and intense?

At some point in the interview, we heard an ambulance passing by, which prompted Asmaa to talk about how her son died because of a medical mistake. The atmosphere of the interview became emotionally charged as Asmaa talked about her grief and suffering. Questions about people's quality of life often put them in the same emotional space that they see their lives through. In this household (and in other vulnerable households like it), questions about freedom and confidence in institutions seemed to be especially triggering, reminding people of the kinds of tension that they live with on a daily basis. Distrust in institutions, whether medical or political, comes with intense anxiety that seems to hinder their mobility in the city and access to services. The distrust stems from concern about their legal status as refugees in Lebanon. They live in constant calculation of how safe each step they take outside the house is.

When we asked Asmaa how anxious she felt the day before, she didn't understand what we meant by "anxiety // قلق" at first. We tried to explain the term as fear and psychic pain, but it appeared that our conception of anxiety did not encompass the grief and worry she lives with. Eventually, she confirmed that she felt a great deal of the anxiety we described which does not come as a surprise because anxiety is as socioeconomic as it is psychological or biomedical. Anxiety, in a wider, more totalizing sense, was at the very centre of her life – the anxiety of being insecure, of neither having legal documents nor a stable work contract, and of navigating the city under those conditions.

We later asked Asmaa about her relationship with her neighbors in a series of survey questions designed to understand people's sense of belonging in the neighbourhood. It turned out that her other son lived in the same building with his family. Because she told us that she does not normally leave the house, our conversation about the relationships in question was limited to her extended family. However, she did not say to what extent proximity to family offers the needed support to bear the vulnerability and isolation. Zooming out, there is an interesting parallel between vulnerable and well-to-do buildings here because we came across several households who had relatives who lived in the same building.

Last but not least, when we asked Asmaa about her religion, she paused for a second before specifying her sectarian affiliation. She explained that they never spoke of sect or even religion back

in Syria before the war and that they became more aware of sectarian division when they came to Lebanon. However, I would be careful around such a generalization because there are many political, historical and economic variants involved in sectarianism both in Syria and Lebanon.

Labor and anxiety are inseparable cracks that run through life for Asmaa. Vulnerable households like hers don't have access to decent services and have to spend a lot more time and energy to obtain them, which creates a cycle of poverty and entrenches the problem of vulnerability. They have to go to Damascus for medical care, and they have to carry drinking water to the building and up the staircase for several floors, meaning that the materiality of their life requires a lot of manual labor. Furthermore, their building is in a dire condition and gets very cold in the winter, and they also experience frequent cuts of water supply. Paradoxically, this same building is surrounded by shops for middle class consumers.

The way Asmaa and her family were trying to make ends meet could be contextualized in their experience of moving from a rural area to an urban one when they took refuge from Syria to Lebanon. Asmaa told us about the different social order of Bedouin they had in Deir el Zor. With this different social order come different livelihoods, different housing and different networks. While they used to live in an independent house near their farm and poultry, they now lived in a small, ancient apartment in an uninhabitable building. Their double refuge in Hamra was a deeply painful experience full of hardship and traumas.

Fieldnote 3

6/8/2019

The survey in this case study was led by Leen, a young, and mostly reserved and straightforward woman. Leen and I met in Starbucks and headed together to a household that she had previously arranged an appointment with. The building was under renovation on the inside and outside except for the apartment we were going to. We went a few floors up the stairs. The door was open. We knocked and waited for an answer. "Welcome. Welcome. Come in." We sat on the balcony under the awning. The household consisted of a grandmother, a mother and a granddaughter. The family invited us to join their informal lunchtime, but we declined. The balcony was turned into a lounge. There were couches, a coffee table and even a TV. The grandmother was our main interlocutor. She was in her 60s, while the mother was in her late 30s or 40s and the granddaughter in her early 20s.

When Leen began asking the survey questions, the grandmother answered in a way that was intimidatingly and rudely sarcastic. She mocked several questions, especially the ones about life satisfaction and economic conditions – questions which were cynically deemed to have obvious answers. In the meantime, the granddaughter was continuously either apologizing for her grandma's response or rephrasing questions to her. When asked about her overall satisfaction with life conditions, the grandmother answered in material terms. She talked about the noise of the generators, the suffocating heat and the uncontrolled mosquitoes, as well as the conflicts with the landlord and municipality. Setting up a makeshift living room on their balcony and heating water every day to bathe were some of the strategies that the household used to navigate the harsh climatic conditions and unsuitable infrastructure. Materiality came up again with the question on old buildings. The grandmother said that "a good building is one that is saturated with concrete. You can't hammer a nail into the wall. // جربي دقي مسمار بالحيط." That is part of why she would not leave

the house she got married in despite constant threats of eviction.

It was interesting to me how the granddaughter talked about marginalization when she described their living conditions. To her, their experience of injustice was based mostly on their poverty. The grandmother considered the middle class to which they previously belonged to have disappeared after the war. The factors that changed and put them out of the middle class, as the grandmother explained, were her loss of employment and a stable income in addition to the rise in living expenses. The family was, however, able to stay in the same house on an old rent contract.

The questions about security and safety were an important turning point in the interview. When first asked about them in the survey, the grandmother said that Hamra was a safe area and that it would still be if not for the "outsiders // أغراب" as opposed to the "locals // أهلية محلية." She did not explain who she meant by each term. Later, the granddaughter's friend came over. Once Leen wrapped up the interview and put the tablet with the survey away, the grandmother, the granddaughter and her friend asked more about the purpose and beneficiaries of the research. The friend started talking about how she has been unemployed for four years. The "outsiders," as discussed in this conversation, started to be specified as Syrian refugees. The friend and the grandmother even began to use derogatory terms to describe the Syrian woman that replaced the former at her work, claiming that she was "honorless" and "unworthy of a shoe." Another thing she said to illustrate this was, "Sorry, but Hamra has become Souq al-Hammedyie," which is a popular market in Damascus. The discourse of "they took our jobs" became connected to cultural, societal and consumptive markers through comments on those outsiders' clothing, taste, living conditions and morals.

At that point in the interview, I started asking myself where the line between acceptable and unacceptable Syrian presence is drawn. This is because these insults and negative stereotypes led to a sense of discomfort, and perhaps even guilt and shame, which in turn prompted apologies and justifications. The friend kept apologizing to me and saying that I'm not like the Syrians they had in mind in their remarks, and that I'm a university student. She also said that her mother is Syrian. When we left, the granddaughter showed us out and apologized to me again about what happened saying that her father is Syrian which makes her Syrian too. Syrians were not seen as a homogenous group even though the generalizations that were made seemed all-encompassing. I started wondering about political and personal emotions and the conditions under which one can separate them. The separation is an ambivalent line, not unlike the categories I was seen through.

Upon subsequent reflection, however, I realized that this encounter made it particularly hard for me to say something conclusive about my positionality as a Syrian in this interview. It was uncomfortable and threatening, but the people in that house were also singling me out of the Syrians they were talking about. I was torn between responding, taking notes and just nodding so they would not get angrier. This was mostly driven by my shock; I was aware that such attitudes could surface in interviews just as they do on taxi rides, in shops and during many interactions I have had in Lebanon, but I was still speechless. I think it was clear to them from the start that I was Syrian given my accent, and they treated me the same way as Leen. It is also hard to say whether the atmosphere significantly shifted from welcoming to hostile, because they did not perceive me or their Syrian relatives as "taking a job" or "ruining Hamra's culture." What took me more by surprise after we left was that Leen more or less agreed with what they said about Syrians in Hamra.

Fieldnote 4

11/08/2019

I met with Dana, a warm person and a motivated researcher, on an intersection a block down from Hamra main street. We first surveyed the map and discussed where to start our interviews. The building we went to first was new and tucked in a dead-end alleyway. We approached a man who was watering the plants in the entrance of the building. He turned out to be the concierge or natour. His name was Husam. During my work with the survey team I had come to realize that the presence of a natour is often telling of a building's condition because residents and owners with higher incomes usually opt to hire a natour and have them restrict access to the building. Husam told us that many of the apartments are still under construction and that only one is occupied. He, his wife and their children lived in a room on the ground level of the building. His wife, Samar, greeted us. She was very friendly, funny and open.

Husam talked about how the owner of the building was good to him without elaborating on the conditions of employment or the nature of their relationship. Natours in Hamra are often Syrian, and their work conditions, physical mobility and social relations provide important insight into the experiences of Syrian workers in Lebanon. The nationality of Husam and his family came up as we talked about belonging in the neighborhood, trust in institutions and access to healthcare. For example, when asked about trust in institutions such as political parties and the police, they immediately replied that they have nothing to do with any political party and that the police were "on the top of our heads; nobody can say anything to them" (an expression of ultimate respect and compliance). Such answers were in my view expressions of Husam and his family's nationality and position in Lebanese society. They indicated some of the ways in which their responses were shaped by the larger context of their experiences as Syrian migrants, even though they said that their overall experiences were not shaped by their nationality or work conditions. This became evident to me, when I interviewed another Syrian family where the household head worked as a natour. The man I interviewed on that occasion declined to answer most of the questions, saying that his position in Lebanon is very delicate. He also told me that I cannot interview anyone else in the building because the owner of the building, his employer, forbids it. At one point in that interview (as well as a couple of others), I realized that he thought that I was Lebanese and that I wouldn't understand the delicacy of the situation. This made me think that there were different factors, other than my accent, that play into whether I am perceived as Syrian or Lebanese. I was introducing myself as a student at the American University of Beirut. My style of speech was shaped by the data collection interaction. I presented myself with ambiguity, and I was not sharing anything about my life in the way the respondents were. How I perceived my identity was not necessarily how they perceived me.

Husam and Samar offered to do the interview with us outside. Only two chairs were available and they wanted us to take them. There was also a small chair where their toddler sat. They had another baby sleeping inside. I felt that the interview would have to be rushed because they were still standing up and because we cut Husam off from work, but contrary to my expectation, Husam and Samar were elaborate in their responses, and they answered all of our survey questions. Dana also found the appropriate pace for the interview to go smoothly.

Throughout the survey it was Samar who answered on behalf of the household. She talked about how they lived in uncertainty and instability even if they didn't expect to leave the house and neighborhood for the time being. Her replies further revealed some of the vulnerabilities that she and her family lived with. For example, she told us that the apartment where they lived was only 30 square meters in size. She also shared a story about being denied entry to a hospital when she was just about to give birth to her first child – an experience that led her to give birth with a midwife the second time.

When the survey turned to questions about community and belonging, Samar and Husam told us that they feel like they belong to Hamra. This, they explained, was because they were familiar with the neighborhood and had friendships with the neighbors, even though they didn't necessarily trust them because "you can't trust anyone during these times." They also told us that they appreciate the diversity in Hamra, and affirmed that Hamra was a secure neighborhood referring to how they could sit outside – in the same spot where we were conducting the interview – until one or two o'clock in the morning without anyone bothering them. However, when we asked them about freedoms, they laughed and said that only their baby has the freedom to say whatever he wanted. While this is true for many of us, it speaks to the kind of 'delicate situation' that Syrian natours and workers live under in Lebanon. It is not only about material and economic vulnerability, but also about navigating what one is and isn't entitled to say when it comes to having a political voice.

Fieldnote 5

25/08/2019

I went into the field with Anna and Maya to a part of Hamra close to the American University of Beirut. They were both enthusiastic, convincing and efficient researchers, who seemed to have gained extensive experience in working as citizen scientists. The neighborhood where we conducted the surveys on that day was on the high end of the income bracket of Hamra with secured residential buildings, business offices and cafes.

We entered a huge building that consisted of a commercial and a residential block. The entrance was elaborately decorated. It seemed a little too much for Hamra. The receptionist pointed us to the building manager to seek permission after we explained the research project. We met with the manager, Samer, a large and cautious man, in his office. He introduced himself as a retired man who managed the building's affairs to fill his time. We told him that we needed to meet with people who resided there. He then replied that he lived in one of the apartments and suggested we interview him in his office. He also pointed out that the same data he gave us would be true for three or four more apartments in the building as these belonged to his cousins. Later he told us that he also owned stakes in the building, not just an apartment.

Samer was browsing his phone for a considerable part of the interview. The office had a low ceiling and multiple CCTV screens which he kept surveying with his eyes as we talked. Samer said that they have a camera on every entrance and in the garage area because Hamra has become scary with all the pickpockets, "especially Syrians and Palestinians who enter the building and plot to steal from the residents." Interestingly, Samer also claimed that diversity is good because it makes Hamra "more high-class and less prone to conflicts." For me, this raised a question about the kind of diversity he was talking about. Whatever it was, it was a classist and nationalistic notion of narrow and regulated diversity.

Samer referred to Hamra as "centerville," which meant to him that it had everything. After the interview, Anna and Maya were talking about how the use of this term was really a way for Hamra's "indigenes" (as they call themselves) to claim a right to the region and alienate locals whom they do not see as belonging. The "centerville" quality of Hamra was not just about the neighbourhood's shops, restaurants and services. It was also about the idea that living in Hamra and having access to those services is a marker of Beiruti middle class identity. Anna and Maya's point was that the way Samer claimed this Hamra identity justified, in his view, his exclusionary opinions and practices.

Within our household survey, there was a short section on perceived status and privilege in relation to gender, nationality, and class. The survey asked respondents about the extent to which they agree/disagree with the following statements: “being male/female grants me privileges in society at large” and “my nationality grants me privileges in society at large.” The survey also asked respondents “how far do you feel from the middle class?” and presented a 10-point scale, where 5 is “middle class” and 1 and 10 are “lower” and “upper” respectively. Samer claimed that neither his gender nor his nationality granted him privileges, and he also said that he considered himself to be middle class, even though he insisted on counting his economic assets like cars and apartments, and proudly told us where his children live. Yet, at the same time, despite being quite well-off, Samer also said that “every day, every hour, every minute, I think about immigrating // كل يوم، كل ساعة، كل دقيقة بفكر هاجر” as he complained about things like noise coming from motorcycles and ambulances. In terms of civic engagement, he said that he trusted the mufti but not the media outlets, NGOs, police or the municipality. He said that since Hariri was killed, he only watches foreign movies on MBC2.

Anna and Maya were intrigued by the interview and continued to discuss Samer’s responses after we left the building. They compared how he boasted about his economic status, while simultaneously saying that he had nothing left from his salary by the end of the month. They also characterized Samer as one of the Beirutis “who claim their ‘indigeneity’ too far,” referring to the fashion in which he directly specified his sectarian identity when asked about religious affiliation. While it was common for Lebanese people to specify their religious affiliation when asked about it in the survey, Samer did this by emphasizing his family name alongside his sectarian identification in order to establish his nativeness to Hamra.

The dynamics of this interview and the subsequent conversation with the citizen scientists exemplified the complexities and ambiguities in the narratives that people often put forth to describe themselves and their lives. Respondents could say conflicting things in the same interview, which could only be made sense of by looking at the deeper cultural and historical meanings that informed their responses to the questions of the survey.



Conclusion

Is last year's research still relevant today?

The ethnographic observations in this paper were undertaken in the summer of 2019, just over one year ago. Since then, a lot has changed in Lebanon. Political uprising, economic downturn and inflation, Covid-19 lockdown, and a devastating explosion at the centre of Beirut have transformed life for people across the country. What does this mean for the way in which we read Shourbaji's case studies? Have they become outdated and no longer relevant? Or do they tell us something valuable about the present moment? What might such encounters and conversations look like if they were carried out today? The disasters of 2020 have completely changed people's lived experience worldwide, and particularly in Lebanon. Vulnerabilities around livelihoods, housing, and public services have worsened, and many people's daily struggles have intensified. The relationships between Lebanese and Syrians, the way in which Syrians see their position in Lebanon, and the significance of status and possession of assets for people who have them have perhaps become more glaring. These important factors determine what recovery already looks like, and will look like on the long run, and what kind of a society will emerge in the years to come. The ethnographic vignettes in this paper address these themes alongside the multiple vulnerabilities that many Hamra residents have experienced for years. And while the case studies could not foresee what would happen in the year that followed, they present a picture of some long-standing challenges that are shaping the present and will likely continue to shape the future that lies ahead.

CONTACT

www.relief-centre.org/

 relief_admin@ucl.ac.uk

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