SPECIAL SECTION

AREA | Royal Geographical Society with IBG | WILEY

Interrupted interviews: Learning from young people's lived environments in Lebanon

Hannah Sender 🟢

Development Planning Unit, University College London, London, UK

Correspondence
Hannah Sender, Development Planning Unit, University College London, London, UK.
Email: hannah.sender@ucl.ac.uk

Abstract
In this paper I explore the possibility that interruptions in in situ interviews can support understandings of power and social relations in research. I base my discussion on an extract from a study of young people's experiences of rapid urbanisation in Central Beqaa, Lebanon. The extract is from an interview with a young man who was continually interrupted by his mother. I problematise a tendency to silence these interruptions in the research process by considering how interruptions can reveal the social architecture in which young people are embedded.

KEYWORDS
interruptions, Lebanon, sound, urbanisation, young people

1 | THE EXCERPT

Omar: [Speaking about his French classes] I know how to construct sentences or start a topic, things like that.

Sammy: Oh, wow, from your first year? [*Loudspeaker playing a recorded lesson from the Quran starts*].

Omar: No, it's my second year [*loudspeaker stops*]. I did not take the basics at first, then I took them, then [*loudspeaker restarts*] I started writing the words and memorising them [*loudspeaker stops*] so I can …

Omar's mother: [Holding out her phone] Look at his brother [*loudspeaker restarts and continues throughout*], he's the Imam, he's younger than him, there was a period of six weeks in Ersaal when there were no Imams for the Friday prayers, so he went and took that role …

Sammy: And how old was he?

Omar's mother: Twelve years old.

Sammy: Wow.

Omar's mother: And we came here, first of all, they underestimated him, but he has the Quran memorised, Omar as well, they memorised it with their grandfather.

Sammy: Wow, wow.

Omar's mother: Thank God. We thank God and we ask him to give us the will to survive with what we are dealing with.

Sammy: Of course … [Speaking to Hannah] Omar's brother, he's a very young guy. But there was no person to do the Friday prayers, so he walked in and did the prayer the first time.

Hannah: Oh, really … How old was his brother?

Sammy: [Speaking to Omar's mother] How old was he?

Omar's mother: He was 12, and now he's 14.

Sammy: [Speaking to Hannah] He was 12 and now he's 14.

Hannah: That's beautiful.

Omar's mother: We experienced a lot of bombings and shelling and Omar lost his eye. We suffered a lot, we read a lot of Quran and thank God, we memorised it, and the Hadith, so he could do the Imam.

2 | THE PROJECT

This excerpt is taken from a conversation with a young man called Omar,[1] a Syrian refugee living in Central Beqaa, Lebanon who was 17 at the time of our meeting. The conversation was one of 17 interviews, organised as part of my PhD fieldwork in 2020, with young Lebanese and Syrian residents living in Central Beqaa. Since the Syrian Civil War broke out in 2011, Central Beqaa has become home to tens of thousands of forced migrants, contributing to a massive population increase in and around the small towns of the Beqaa Valley (UNHCR, 2021). Because of the Government of Lebanon's ban on refugee camps, forced migrants have had to find homes in rented apartments, repurposed buildings, and informal camps pitched on empty plots and farmland. This ad hoc self-settlement has led to urbanisation in and around the small towns in Central Beqaa (Dabaj et al., 2021). The towns themselves have become more built up, and their built-up areas have expanded into agricultural land on the towns' peripheries (Dabaj et al., 2021).

I wanted to find out how young Lebanese and Syrian residents describe the rapid urbanisation of their environments since 2011, and how they say they are affected by rapid urbanisation. I was interested in understanding urban changes through young residents' everyday experiences of housing, public spaces, and infrastructures such as medical centres and schools. I wanted to invite young residents to describe the rhythms that organise their daily life in Central Beqaa and the personal events that have rearranged and disrupted it.

To learn about young people's understandings of rapid urbanisation and its impacts on their everyday environments, I needed to establish a research setting in which young people felt comfortable talking about their experiences moving to, and living in, Central Beqaa. Given my limited Arabic and my obvious status as a foreigner, I employed two young researchers to conduct semi-structured interviews with young residents. Sammy, a young Syrian man, was one of the young researchers. He works in the humanitarian sector and lives in Beirut.

Taking advantage of the flexibility offered by the interview method, we organised interviews in young people's everyday environments (Hitchings & Latham, 2020a). My reasons for doing this were threefold. First, I wanted the young residents to choose a place where they felt comfortable having a casual conversation about their experiences of living in Central Beqaa. I considered that inviting young people to an 'off-location' sit-down interview might cause discomfort. Young residents of Central Beqaa are unlikely to be able to afford travel, and many do not attend school or extra-curricular activity spaces where we could meet. I weighed this up against the consideration that young residents might be observed by family members in their everyday environments, and might therefore hide information or be spoken over in the interview (Valentine, 1999).

Second, I believed that by conducting interviews in young people's everyday environments I would gain unique access to young people's personal lives. I wanted to make visible the links between young people's life histories and their lived environments. By having the interview in their natural settings we could ask young people to refer to the people and places they included in their biography, encouraging them to reflect on 'the transcendent aspects of environmental experience which easily escape [researcher] observations and off-location interviews' (Kusenbach, 2003, p. 474).

Third, by having interviews in young residents' natural settings, we were able to observe young people within their social realms. Margarethe Kusenbach argues that in situ go-along interviews 'visualise social networks in real space and time', allowing the ethnographer to 'piece together a mosaic of the invisible social architecture of their setting' (2003, p. 474). Whereas her go-alongs examined the 'parochial realms' of neighbourhood interactions (2003, p. 478), these interviews explored strong social ties within the intimate, personal, private realm of the home. Young residents often chose their families' homes as the location for our interviews, where parents, aunts, and uncles – and in the case of young women their husbands – circulated, and where children would play. In this sense, we 'went along' with young residents to a place of their choosing and were able to observe the 'social architecture' of their places of comfort.

Kusenbach shares that she experimented with different ways of recording her in situ interviews, including taking notes, using an audio-recorder, and taking photographs. I rejected the idea of using a camera to record young people's intimate environments, which I felt was too intrusive. Following Susan Smith's suggestion, I observed young people's environments by 'listening in context', attending to sounds during the conversation and noting their origin in hand-written notes (Smith, 1994). During transcription, I kept a note of the sounds – others' voices, ambient sounds from inside and outside of the room – I could hear in the recordings. In this reflective essay, I offer an extract from an interview that I find particularly revealing in terms of gleaning meaning from sound to develop an understanding of everyday environments. I do so in the hope that it forces reflection on how we typically treat interruptions to interviewees' narratives and how we might reconsider their value in research.

3 | INTERRUPTIONS

The excerpt above is taken from a conversation with Omar, who I had met a year earlier on a different research project. In 2020, Sammy and I met Omar in his home. Omar lives in one of two semi-formal refugee camps in Lebanon, which was set up and is managed by an international NGO. He had greeted us at the gate, which was manned by an armed security guard, and walked with us to his family's tent. His mother enthusiastically greeted us with snacks and coffee. Women did not normally sit in the room when I was working with Sammy, but Omar's mother remained with us almost the entire way through the interview.

The interruptions began about 5 min into our interview with Omar. When the recorded prayer first started playing, it took Sammy and me aback. The volume was turned up to loud and the walls of the tent were thin. Omar and his mother, who was sitting with us, were unmoved by the prayer booming through their home. Sammy and I worried over the recorder, and shuffled it closer to Omar in the hope that we would be able to pick up Omar's quiet voice. Once the loudspeaker had disturbed us (the researchers), Omar's mother swept in, derailing the conversation to show Sammy a video of Omar's younger brother and changing the topic. She is easier to hear in the recording. Since then, she regularly interrupted Omar with her own stories or reflections.

Sammy informed me that no one in his network of transcribers wanted to deal with the recording, because it was difficult to hear Omar over his mother, who continually changed the topic and spoke too quickly for the transcribers to keep up. When I received the transcription, I tried to transcribe the sounds I could hear in the recording alongside the written transcriptions of Omar's and his mother's words. In other interviews, sounds that emanated from the place we were sitting suggested a low-lying hum of activity that made no demands on my attention and did not disrupt the flow of young people's words. In this interview, it was almost impossible to disentangle the sounds from one another.

During the conversation with Omar, in the process of transcription, and in the analysis, sounds from Omar's environment were disruptive. They interrupted Omar as he was speaking and silenced him for several minutes at a time. They also leaked across the times and spaces of research, moving from the tent, into the recording. Sounds disturbed the transcribers' and my efforts to attend to Omar's words from which we derived meaning and therefore our value as transcribers and as researchers.

It is tempting to treat sound that (mis)behaves like this as 'noise'. Anything superfluous, even harmful, to meaning can be pushed to the peripheries of research ephemera. In the social sciences, this tends to mean any sound that is not the voice of the person whose ideas or experiences we are interested in. Once identified, noise can be kept in the raw

data files in password-protected folders. It might be captured in a brief ellipsis on the transcript, and then forgotten. In a vast majority of human geography papers, this process of transforming and silencing is also reduced to 'the background hum' of reported research methodologies (Hitchings & Latham, 2020a). Because Omar's mother's regular interruptions made the interview with Omar difficult to transcribe, the interview might have been considered a 'bad' interview, ruined by noise. I might have decided not to transcribe it and might have reduced the entire interview to the 'background hum' of my research.

However, by pursuing my methodology of in situ interviews, I had intentionally invited these sounds in, and had planned to attend to them as data that would provide insight into young people's intimate social realms. Although I envisaged conversations between family members, friends, and other intimates as a chorus of voices, rather than a cacophony of disrupted narrative threads and obscured meanings, I challenged myself to incorporate these sounds. Here, I reconsider the value of Omar's mother's interruptions to my understanding of Omar's everyday life in Central Beqaa.

4 | ATTENDING TO INTERRUPTIONS AS DATA

Following the disturbance of the loudspeaker, Omar's mother's voice swept up the conversation about her son's everyday life in Central Beqaa, redirecting it towards his brother and to what they are dealing with as a family. Throughout the conversation, Omar's mother would refer to their experiences of war in Syria, of arriving in Lebanon, and of their enduring faith. Omar's mother imposed her own narrative on the research, making sure that we attended not only to Omar's present, but also to his past. She made us aware of how Omar's experiences of civil war in Syria continued to inform the way he conducted himself in the present, and how being in Central Beqaa had emerged as the result of a sometimes traumatic, and sometimes hopeful, life trajectory. By attending to Omar's mother's narrative, we learn how Omar's everyday life is intimately connected to global events and family histories, as well as present-day activities like learning French. Her interruptions reveal the social architecture in which Omar is embedded, which includes familial and political relations. In particular, we learn about the shared experiences and narratives that circulate in his household, and how Omar relates to them.

5 | INTERRUPTIONS AS A PRODUCT OF RESEARCH

Omar sometimes picked up his mother's narrative threads, but sometimes resisted them and reclaimed the conversation to discuss the things that matter to him. However, Omar's mother continued to redirect the conversation to address what to her mind was most important, rather than the reality of everyday life we had been aiming to reveal. I built my argument for the efficacy of the in situ interview as a means of accessing 'the real' everyday lives of young residents. The interruptions in this excerpt demonstrate that the in situ interview can inadvertently produce sounds that can obstruct access to the intended subject of the research. The in situ interview provided a catalyst for Omar's mother to speak over her son, and provided a means for her to share her narratives. She seized the interview as an occasion to inform us of her world-view, which dominated the interview and obscured Omar's own lived experiences.

In his essay on the tape recorder, Les Back (2012) suggests that research produces the social encounter in such a way that it is close to, but not identical to, 'the real'. In his words, the interview and its recorded sounds enable 'an encounter with "the real" without a naive realism slipping in through the back door' (2012, p. 254). Back suggests that we think of the recording as producing 'a realist imaginative object' rather than something that 'captures' reality, and that doing so 'may provide a different kind of possibility for social understanding or revelation' (2012, p. 254). Following from Back, I do not think of Omar's mother's interruptions as obscuring 'the real' experiences or thoughts of her son that would have been captured had she not interrupted him. Her interruptions produced an 'imaginative object': a social encounter in which mother, son, and researchers contributed their own way of framing life in Central Beqaa. By recognising interruptions as generating a meaningful imaginative object, it is possible to question commonly held ideals about interviews, including the status of the researcher as the person who creates the conditions for the interview, the preference for quiet and private locations that reduce possibilities for interruption, and for clear recordings that appear to offer unimpeded flows of thought. Here, interruptions can be seen to support understandings about social relations that are produced by the sometimes noisy and messy research encounter.

6 | CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

I have presented a brief section of a conversation animated by interruptions. Attending to this excerpt has forced me to reflect on the potential contribution of interruptions to our understandings of people's everyday lives, even if they get in

the way of our interviewees' voices. It has encouraged me to rethink common practices around recording, transcription, and analysis, which have typically silenced interruptions. I propose that instead of thinking of recordings as records of a single human voice, which reveals the 'truth' of personal experience, it might be productive to think of recordings as soundscapes: 'imaginative objects' that include multiple human and non-human voices that co-exist in a research environment. This complicates efforts to discern interviews from other qualitative methods employed in studies of place, such as observations (Hitchings & Latham, 2020b). For me, this complication has been productive of a different way of thinking about young people's everyday lives in Central Beqaa.

Attending to interruptions can support our understandings of interviewees' social architecture as both a condition of everyday life and a product of the research process. In this excerpt, interruptions reveal how young residents are embedded in different social realms simultaneously. Omar's and his mother's narratives have prompted me to reflect on the interstices between people's personal, intimate, and public lives. Omar's mother insisted on the connections between Omar's personal life in Central Beqaa and his personal experience of a global event: the Syrian Civil War and mass forced migration to Lebanon. She associated Omar's personal life with that of his brother, embedding his narrative within a family history. By attending to multiple narrative threads at once, we are pushed to think across social realms while staying with the individual's lived experience.

Reflecting on interruptions also indicates how people make claims on our geographical research through in situ interviews. Interviewees' and their intimates' narratives can work with, alongside, and against one another within the unusual encounter created by the in situ interview. Attending to interruptions and thereby working with, rather than against, the interviewee's intimate social space has generated opportunities to practise an embedded and embodied methodology across the research process. This has entailed going along with interviewees to their home environments, being open to the everyday comings and goings of intimate relations, allowing others to seize opportunities to share their perspectives, and transcribing interruptions and analysing them as part of a dynamic research encounter involving multiple people bringing diverse agendas to the research. Through these practices, we stand to learn about social relations in which people, including ourselves as researchers, are embedded.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Due to the nature of this research, participants of this study did not agree for their data to be shared publicly, so supporting data are not available.

ORCID

Hannah Sender https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9730-338X

ENDNOTE

[1] Not his real name.

REFERENCES

Dabaj, J., Boano, C. & Al-Harithy, H. (2021) Learning to be a city: Emerging practices for housing the displaced in Bar Elias (Lebanon). In: *Urban recovery: Intersecting displacement with post-war reconstruction*. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 167–187.

Back, L. (2012) Tape recorder. In: Lury, C. & Wakeford, N. (Eds.) *Inventive Methods: The happening of the social*. London: Routledge, pp. 245–260.

Hitchings, R. & Latham, A. (2020a) Qualitative methods I: On current conventions in interview research. *Progress in Human Geography*, 44(2), 389–398. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132519856412

Hitchings, R. & Latham, A. (2020b) Qualitative methods II: On the presentation of 'geographical ethnography'. *Progress in Human Geography*, 44(5), 972–980. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132519879986

Kusenbach, M. (2003) Street phenomenology. *Ethnography*, 4(3), 455–485. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1177/146613810343007

Smith, S.J. (1994) Soundscape. *Area*, 26(3), 232–240.

UNHCR. (2021) *Syria refugee response: Lebanon, Bekaa & Baalbek El-Hermel Governorate. Distribution of the registered Syrian refugees at the cadastral level*. Operational Data Portal. Available from: https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/87183

Valentine, G. (1999) Being seen and heard? The ethical complexities of working with children and young people at home and at school. *Ethics, Place and Environment*, 2(2), 141–155. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1080/1366879x.1999.11644243