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The pragmatics of alienation: revisiting humanitarianism in Lebanon

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I draw on my 15-year-long ethnographic research across Lebanon on the lifestyle, practices and ethos of humanitarian professionals. I show how their experience and discourse (the everyday pragmatics of humanitarian work) point to a process of alienation. Approaching alienation as semantically polyhedral and multifaceted and as a key factor determining the interplay between collective and individual identity, I discuss its historical-material dimension, implying both the disconnection of the humanitarian workers from the failures and discontents of humanitarian action, and what I term "organizational amnesia." Later, I examine alienation as a form of psychological resilience to survive and thrive in the humanitarian sector, where recruitment politics tend to value the accumulation of technical know-how across multiple geographies, and securitized forms of temporary life do not allow for learning local languages and cultures. Finally, I show how not only internationals develop alienation in the contexts in which they operate (as generally seeing crises from a cosmopolitan distance), but so do locals, who often need to abide by foreign agendas while being alienated from their everyday work. Showing how alienation becomes organizational and not merely individual, my analysis ultimately suggests their increasing alienation not only from their own local cultural, linguistic, and epistemic capital, but also from their professional environment.

Introduction

By examining experiences and discourses in the humanitarian world, in this article I explore alienation in the Lebanese context. The exploration of alienation is an epistemic opportunity to open the Pandora's box of the implications and taboos of the humanitarian system in areas where practitioners intervene to assist displaced people and provide relief in a so-called time of crisis. To formulate such reflections, I draw on the fifteen-year-long ethnographic work I have conducted on the lifestyle, practices, and ethos of foreign and local humanitarian professionals. By doing so, my intention is to foreground neither a novel nor a monolithic concept of alienation—a concept that, per se, beyond the peculiarities of Marxist theory, lacks an exclusive authoritative narrative (Ludz 1976). Instead, I will employ alienation as a heuristic tool, able to guide me through the organizational as well as relational economy of humanitarianism in Lebanon.

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Why make the effort to think about the humanitarian experience through alienation? To begin with, it is an epistemic opportunity to employ a powerful diagnostic tool (see Jaeggi 2014), to open up the Pandora's box of "exigho-phobias" (Hage 2003)—that is, the fear of explanations—to think through the unequal and unjust relational economy of humanitarianism. Therefore, I map the processes through which humanitarian practitioners develop their understanding of the "crisis-affected worlds" as alienation allows us to acknowledge and interrogate the moral work that humanitarianism does at the level of collective and individual identity. This pushes my effort beyond the act of merely describing humanitarianism through the recurrent dynamics inherent to over-work and precarity, such as "burnout" and staff turnover. Such discussions have often become a tokenistic standard to tick the box of, rather than a stimulus for transformation (Agaba 2018), revealing the lack of regenerative memory of past decisional processes and practices.

My interest in navigating alienation in humanitarianism can be traced back to the late 2000s, when I relocated to Cairo to start working for a UN agency focusing on small and medium enterprises in Egypt. During that experience (see Carpi 2023), I developed a sense of not knowing enough about what I was doing and not knowing what exactly I was expected to do in relation to that political and cultural context. I had not been trained sufficiently to develop a full grasp of the project I was working on, of the local feedback on the project (if ever searched for), and of other political and institutional expectations. Yet, submission deadlines for mid-term and final reports were chasing us. My lack of an understanding of what timeframe was expected for that project, combined with institutional expectations couched in terms of "success," led me to feel alienated from the workplace and the empirical context. Importantly, during the project, I was never expected to set foot in the area I was focusing on. It was only when I decided to become a researcher that I made that step independently. While I now believe I felt alienated from the circumstances I was working and living in at that time, during that very professional journey, I never thought of this spatial, temporal and epistemic dissociation in terms of alienation.

In this article, I approach alienation in humanitarianism as semantically polyhedral and multifaceted rather than based on a bi-dimensional structure, as widely conceived of in international scholarship. Moreover, I will examine how this multifaceted factor significantly determines the interplay between collective and individual identity. First, I will refer to the historical-material dimension of alienation, shedding light on the organizational amnesia that characterizes the humanitarian sector. This organizational amnesia of one's actions and policies is produced by the lack of an archive able to provide a temporal perspective to an organization's presence in different geographies. Continuous staff turnover within NGOs and UN agencies is another determining factor, caused by the politics of recruitment, which values the accumulation of technical experiences and knowhow in different parts of the world instead of in-depth vernacular knowledge (Carpi 2023).

Second, I will shed light on the existential, intimate and individual dimension of alienation, which, in the common discourse, is spoken about in the international humanitarian sector in terms of "burnout" and "(lack of) empathy." I approach the latter as tacit synonyms of individual alienation. In this framework, I will examine the positionality of local humanitarian staff, which is historically determined by unequal labor economies and relationships vis-à-vis their foreign counterparts. Hence, I will finally show how alienation can also be the result of the provincialization of ways of knowing and working.

More specifically, with an autoethnographic intent, my analysis will build on a theoretical revisit of different studies I carried out over the past years in Lebanon: my investigation of the moral economy of humanitarianism in Beirut's southern suburbs and the Akkar governorate in northern Lebanon (Carpi 2022; 2023); my past research on the urban-humanitarian encounter in Halba (Akkar) during

2016 and 2017 (Carpi 2024); and a study (Carpi and Diana 2020) of foreign-funded but locally-led sport and play programs for vulnerable youth and children in Tripoli (northern Lebanon).

While I do not intend here to expand the terminological boundaries of "alienation," I am interested in how its effects can be generative, enlarging our understanding of the semantics and the pragmatics of alienation: notably, the multiple (un)negotiated meanings of alienation as well as its impact on those who make the humanitarian experience in Lebanon.

In this bid, I use alienation as conceptual onset and orientation, as well as a heuristic tool. I do not claim any exclusive significance of the term, but I instead share the ethnographic snapshots which, to me, when framed as the *pragmatics* of alienation, can provide heuristic benefits to: (a) further expand the theories underlying the concept, and (b) reflect in greater depth on the emotional as well as historical-material dimensionality of what humanitarian actors experience in everyday life.

In this context, alienation is not a Durkheimian social fact, since it can only emerge out of a space of negotiation and encounter. With this purpose, instead of alienation being a self-evident ontology, I argue that the pragmatics of alienation can shed light on the spaces where humanitarian professionals think, negotiate their place in the areas of intervention, and operate. A focus on pragmatics enables us to learn from the social interactions and the context that make the meaning of alienation.

Exploring alienation in humanitarian lifeworlds and practices

With a focus on the humanitarian world, in this section I focus on building multifaceted understandings of and approaches to alienation developed in the Social and Psychological Sciences. Alienation typically refers to the process by which individuals become disconnected from their social worlds. While hegemonic forms of humanitarian work, as practiced in Western societies, has been critically viewed as having a "civilizing" mission and constituting a politico-existential search for a meaningful life among middle and upper classes (e.g. Fassin 2007; Pandolfi and Fassin 2010; Redfield 2012), I will show how the experiences and the discourse of humanitarian professionals point to an individual and collective process of alienation which can be described as twofold. Therefore, I will try to fuse intimate—and, as such, existential and psychologized—levels of analysis with the historical-material, which combined give rise to alienation as semantically polyhedral. In doing so, it becomes evident how some processes of alienation support and preserve the current order of things, while others challenge it. More specifically, I am interested in investigating how these intimate and historical-material dimensions do not emerge antithetically, but rather conflate and interrelate, impacting both the existential subjectivity of humanitarian professionals and the economic order of humanitarianism: namely, a conceptual common ground which existentialism and Marxism paved together, as Schacht previously put it (1970, xvi). In a nutshell, this is an attempt to go beyond alienation as mere separation (Geyer 1994), externalization (Hegel in Rae 2012), or as an exclusively individual state that indicates an "experience" or an "attitude" (Fromm in Schacht 1970).

The philosophical underpinning of humanitarian work is normally rooted in the opposite side of alienation, such as acts of transnational morality and governance (Barnett 2011; Fassin 2007; Redfield 2012), civic engagement and solidarity (Rozakou 2012; Wagner 2018), or empathy and moral proximity (Ferris 2011; Malkki 2015). In this context, critical scholars have often understood humanitarian agencies as opportunists that make a career and a mobile life out of injustice, impoverishment, and corruption (Anderson 1999; Belloni 2005; Fassin 2007; Polman 2010; Redfield 2012); and as vectors of "white saviourism," mostly reproducing colonial legacies and the spirit

of a civilizational mission (Watenpaugh 2015). Against this backdrop, my observations over fifteen years suggest an increasing alienation of humanitarian professionals, first, from the contextual specificities of the crisis addressed. Humanitarians tend to disentangle themselves from the consequences of aid work in settings where the latter has an impact on the way forced migration and chronic vulnerabilities are managed and understood. It is indeed this historical-material distance from the context of intervention that posits humanitarianism as a desirable career. This includes what have I called "epistemic failure"—the lack of linguistic, historical and cultural knowledge about the areas of intervention—and the moral acceptance of "material discrimination" (Carpi 2023) across foreign and local humanitarian staff, with locals being exposed to greater risk in the field (e.g. Duffield 2014; Smirl 2015) and accessing lower pay-scales than internationals (Mercer and Green 2013). Historical-material alienation also implies a subsequent dissociation from their professional career derived from "excess of work": a tendency which is often simplistically classified as "burnout," which I will take into particular analysis.

When I refer to humanitarian alienation as existential, I not only approach it as a psychological form of separation and isolation from one's professional career and its practical consequences. I also consider it positively, as a form of psychological resilience to survive and thrive in the humanitarian sector, where recruitment politics value the accumulation of technical knowhow in different geographic areas and where securitized forms of temporary assistance to the needy do not allow for linguistic, historical and cultural knowledge. Thereby, the predominant understanding of career and professional authority among alienated aid workers ends up consolidating and sanctifying "compounded" forms of humanitarian action (Smirl 2015), as well as moral and epistemic distance from the people they aim to assist. International contracts only include relatively short timeframes (UN agencies normally give a time-out of four or five years). These dynamics create a gap between desk-based work, the frustrating lack of impact on the people they assist, and, quite likely, the sociophysical distance from the area of operations. In this regard, "objectivism" in the approaches to humanitarian settings and subjects can explain the presumption according to which external actors, such as international humanitarian professionals, are better placed than locals for fair, rational approaches to relationally complex settings like conflicts and disasters. Indeed, the false promise of objectivity still dominates the humanitarian sector nowadays.

I begin with an analysis of the historical-material dimension of alienation: first, the dissociation of humanitarian professionals from their context, their career, and the empirical consequence of their work on the local society. Second, I examine organizational amnesia in the humanitarian sector and its key underlying factors. I then focus on the concepts and discussions around "burnout" and "empathy" in the sector, which I approach as tacit synonyms for "alienation." However, I contend that this latter has been rendered a taboo in humanitarian debates. Finally, I show how not only internationals are likely to develop alienation in the context where they operate (as generally seeing crises from a cosmopolitan distance), but also locals, who often need to abide by foreign agendas to remain in place as accountable humanitarian professionals while becoming alienated from the principles, modalities, and consequences of their everyday work. This also speaks to my above-mentioned experience in Egypt.

Alienation as dissociation from context and career

In historical-material terms, alienation stems from everyday dissociation from context and career. The context is characterized by a politics of recruitment that values the accumulation of technical know-how across geographic heterogeneity. It also discriminates against vernacular forms of

humanitarianism (e.g. Ferris 2011; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Daley 2019). In turn, this cemented inferiorization and provincialization of local humanitarianism, which I have previously called "Southism" (Carpi 2023), allows for the creation of a moral alibi for foreign humanitarians to disconnect from the empirical failures and discontents of humanitarian action in the "Global South," merely conceived as the area of intervention, and to uphold an enduring "culture of self-justification" around the consequences of humanitarian action (Terry 2002). These contexts also tend to be securitized and/or gentrified to different extents—or "bunkerized" (Duffield 2014) and made of short-term forms of aid provision—for example, gated communities or class-marked residential areas (e.g. in the case of Lebanon, the district of el-Mina in Lebanon's Tripoli, or Beirut's Sioufi neighborhood). The process of bunkerizing the life of humanitarians does not facilitate linguistic, historical and cultural knowledge among foreign staff. Furthermore, dissociation from context becomes a *sine qua non* condition to develop "professional authority" in a professional environment in which acting as a neutral and impartial *super partes* is seen as necessary (Carpi 2023). In other words, principles like impartiality and neutrality—the pillars of Western humanitarian action since the foundation of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)—also presume humanitarians are compliant and, as a consequence, aware of the moral duty to keep themselves distant from local intricacies and circumstances (Redfield 2012). In this expected compliance with neutrality and impartiality, the predominant epistemological principle is objectivism (Clifford and Marcus 1984), whereby the dichotomy between subject/object and observer/observed subsists and undercuts human interactions and intersubjectivity as epistemological principles. An intersubjective and interactions-based approach is instead able to undermine the enduring interpretation of ethical relationships in humanitarianism as focused on distance and objective disengagement from the context of intervention.

Alienation not only happens through dissociation from the immediate context of living but also from the humanitarian career per se, which is certainly embedded in that same historical and cultural context. In most Western humanitarian organizations and institutions, corporative identity—which social psychologists usually discuss as a sub-category of "group identity"—is promoted as neutral and, as such, tends to neutralize and absorb individual specificities. These include the ways corporative identity is paraded as independent from the political challenges and specificities that humanitarian staff are faced with daily. This predominant group identity (Hammack 2008), which deliberately places individual identities in the peripheries, prevents professionals from seeing themselves as directly related to the macropolitical processes in which they intervene.

A past anecdote was decisive in encouraging me to navigate individual and collective identity theories to identify the significance of the thoughts I had had, following a professional experience. I recall the way in which a local practitioner in Akkar trained me on Lebanon's "historical basics" in 2016, when we were both working with Save the Children, a major assistance provider to refugees from Syria. The practitioner used the script given, which emphasized the number and the innate diversity of the different confessional groups (or "sects," *tawa'ef*). He argued that, in fact, the confessional factor did not particularly play a role in his personal life or personal identity but, professionally, confessional demography needed to be his guiding knowledge. However, while performing the given script, he explicitly stated he could not remember why confessional knowledge was relevant to what we were doing in Akkar. This demonstrated a process of self-marginalization of individual identities and subsequent bewilderment vis-à-vis the corporative request of embracing a group identity built on the use of prefixed scripts to train new collaborators.

In this vein, corporative group identity is often vested with moral elitism, inducing its own identity entrepreneurs (Moss 2017) to believe that only those in the sector can understand one another

as well as the salvific dimension of their continuous effort to "do good" by prioritizing the corporative over the individual. This salvific dimension is strictly correlated with a collective form of alienation. This so-called group identity also induces staff to dissociate themselves from the empirical consequences of their work, engendering a form of anti-consequentialist humanitarianism (Duffield 2007), whereby professionals dissociate themselves from the broader consequences of their work. Therefore, I will now turn to discussing the specific dynamics that underlie anti-consequentialist humanitarianism.

Disengagement from empirical consequences

In the humanitarian sector, I have identified as a reiterated pattern the likely attitude of humanitarians to disengage from the empirical consequences of their programs: the first is what I previously called the "politics of blaming" local authorities and the negative fetishization of local politics overall (Carpi 2023). Frustration was often voiced by the professionals I interviewed when dealing with the change of municipal or national authorities, as well as policy shifts in domestic politics. Working with local authorities in politically volatile contexts, such as Lebanon, particularly induces humanitarians to dissociate themselves from the empirical consequences of their programs and their physical presence on the ground. Against this backdrop, I realized that the continuous act of blaming the locals was a coping strategy for humanitarian practitioners to manage frustration and perpetuate self-justification.

The change of municipal authorities in northern Lebanon was one blatant example, which led a large number of local professionals I met at that time to vent their anxiety over the ineffective use of funding. Another telling example comes from the construction of a short-lived local market in a relatively isolated area of the Akkar region (Carpi 2024). The market, funded by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and UK-AID, was shut down after four days in December 2016. Set in 6,000m^2 of public space, it would have had the capacity to accommodate nearly 390 traders. The UNDP professionals described the negotiations with local authorities and the broader involvement with local political actors as a "burden." While humanitarians entirely attributed the failure of the project to local politics, the market had been built in an isolated site in Akkar, where means of transport and general infrastructure are historically under-resourced, and the private ownership of vehicles is not common across low-income families (Carpi 2023, 138). The newly elected mayor decided to shut down the market, considering the project ineffective. After the closure, in the interviews I conducted, the humanitarians only placed the blame of the market's short life on local authorities, their inefficiency and their corruption, never mentioning the due considerations of the infrastructural environment where the market was built (Carpi 2024).

Alienation as a result of organizational amnesia

Organizational amnesia commonly refers to the phenomenon where an organization loses or fails to retain critical knowledge, skills, and epistemic processes broadly meant. It applies in the humanitarian sector and beyond, and is often due to high-frequency staff turnover, lack of a knowledge-sharing system, or endemic organizational changes. The loss of key institutional knowledge, often causing inefficiency or inadequacy to crisis response, is inherently correlated to the politics of temporality when deploying professionals in areas of intervention for short timeframes, and a knowledge exchange structure which is poorly grounded in the endemic history of organizational politics and practices. Thereby, organizational amnesia not only relates to the historical-material

dimension of alienation in the humanitarian lifeworld, but it also entails the intimate and the existential; indeed, the process of alienation does not exclude group identity, as cultural psychologists would posit it (e.g. Hammack 2008), because cultural history goes along with the existential unfolding of alienation.

While I will not examine the layered relationships between collective narratives and individual life stories, in the humanitarian context, group identity (as an NGO, as a UN agency, etc.)—that traditionally tends to be emphasized over and even imposed on individual identities —is promoted as something that needs to function independently from political challenges and specificities. Therefore, group identity here becomes an ideal that needs to prevent professionals from seeing themselves as related to—or even embedded in—macropolitical challenges (Moss 2017). As explained, while individuals are expected to contribute in meaningful ways to the formation, maintenance, and nurturing of group identities, the institutional unfolding of the latter is aimed at encouraging individuals to dissociate themselves from the empirical consequences of their work. As I will explain later, this dissociation takes to the development of a discourse which has been named "burnout," which is likely to be the result of the high turnover of staff, as well as the emotional absence and/or the physical isolation of professionals during work missions. In this historical-material framework, organizational amnesia is a key factor in generating alienation among humanitarian staff while acting as a key component of the abovementioned group identity.

In practice, organizational amnesia causes humanitarian organizations that do not own long-term archives of their past programs to be unable to learn the limitations and strengths of previous ways of working. Likewise, the resulting contextual learning tends to get lost within the same organization. For instance, I noticed there was no continual knowledge within the same NGOs when I interviewed them about their aid programs during the Israel-Lebanon July 2006 war in Beirut's southern suburbs and, years later, about their aid provisions during the arrival of refugees from Syria. Most of the time, the staff interviewed were different over the years, and, with the people, organizational knowledge was lost as a consequence of a scarce focus on internal contextual learning (e.g. the history of the organization's programs and principles, and the political, economic and cultural history of the context of intervention).

In my longitudinal study of humanitarianism in Lebanon, I observed how organizational and, more broadly, historical amnesia was triggered by more than one factor. First, high staff turnover, when team members would often move to an entirely new region in order to pursue different job positions or missions. This led to an accumulation of geographic experiences which, at a later stage, resulted in being rewarding for professionals who had acquired a growing professional and epistemic authority in such ways (Carpi 2022). In this regard, the attitude of developing moral—and at times even physical—distance from beneficiaries and local inhabitants is institutionally established through the mainstream politics of recruitment in the humanitarian industry, which rewards geographic mobility and discourages and undercuts vernacular knowledge about the areas of operations (Carpi 2023). As a result, to pursue a humanitarian career, professionals are encouraged to move frequently. Sometimes, their official mandate in a particular country is temporally limited (especially when working for UN agencies) to prevent, at least on paper, personal relationships and connections in a given place in light of the enduring importance of impartiality and neutrality principles, which is therefore seen as a measure aimed at preserving humanitarian distance.

Here, the role of time becomes relevant in understanding the pragmatics of alienation. The permanence of international humanitarian actors after crisis in Lebanon speaks to a wider and increasing tendency in Western humanitarianism to ensure organizational continuity in the areas of intervention, where continual political connections are needed. Scholars identified this tendency

as emerging along with the professionalization of aid right after the 1967–1970 Biafran humanitarian crisis (Omaka 2016). Such permanence is in apparent contradiction with the continuous motion of the humanitarian system, generating a hybrid world of policies and practices that rest on what I termed "complex temporal circularities" (Carpi 2023, 9), where individual humanitarians, especially when carrying a foreign passport, tend to move while the agencies and organizations they work for tend to remain.

Second, the cyclic implementation of humanitarian projects rarely shows engagement with previous programming and contextual learning within the same organization. Despite a growing number of calls to embrace localization of aid after the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, most projects are brought into local peculiarities in the form of standardized packages, at least in the initial stages (which often reflect how funding is decided). For example, Elizabeth Dunn (2012, 13) offers the example of humanitarians bringing potable water and breastfeeding support to displaced people in post-Soviet Georgia in 2019, while these services were all available and well-functioning at a local level. Likewise, through the World Food Program's introduction of ATM cards, Syrian refugees in Lebanon and Jordan became able to withdraw cash to make their purchases with full autonomy. These so-called e-food ration cards replaced in-kind assistance (e.g. water, food kits) only three years after the beginning of the war in Syria. While cash programs have been extensively implemented worldwide over the last two decades, I noticed that they came with large delays in the aid delivery to refugees from Syria. This shows how organizational amnesia appears as systematic in neglecting past learnings in the broader humanitarian sector.

A further example is provided by the over-registration of Syrian nationals at the beginning of the humanitarian crisis following governmental repression in Syria in the Spring of 2011. As the crisis progressed, many humanitarian agencies started struggling with resources. To deal with budget shortfalls, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) de-registered several aid beneficiaries in Lebanon, causing what Ilana Feldman (2012) calls the "trauma of category change" for Palestinian refugees in Jordan (397). These examples evidence how humanitarian programming is characterized by organizational as well as historical amnesia. The latter triggers not only intimate, individual experiences of alienation, notably dissociation from the empirical context, but also what Fiona Terry incisively names the "culture of self-justification" (2002), which posits group identity as self-indulging and solipsistic (Carpi 2023, 142), and which implies the indulgence over organizational miscalculations and the discontent of beneficiaries, while justifying humanitarian malfunctionings through a systematic politics of blaming local capital holders and infrastructures (Carpi 2022). In fact, when I was raising questions on the previous organizational decisions and programs during past crises in Lebanon, practitioners tended to motivate the lack of history-informed knowledge with the country "being unstable" and "lacking archives," rather than acknowledging the need to build solid organizational archives themselves and to train their staff accordingly.

The "burnout" discourse: the semantics of alienation

"Burnout" is often mentioned and increasingly discussed in the humanitarian sector as a result of the lack of mental health care, the exposure to long working hours when deployed in the field, and the lack of contact with the surrounding context and with the local residents when working from a securitized compound. However, thanks to the growing importance of the institutionalization of safeguarding policies and practices that aim to protect and/or establish ethical relationships between aid recipients and providers, as well as among providers, the structural issues underlying burnout are left underexplored. Likewise, the way people talk about alienation mostly remains

"vague and imprecise," undermining the "heuristic potential" (Choquet 2021, 106) of this concept to interrogate the *de facto* reproduction of a system where burnouts are more the rule than the exception. Professionals continue complying with major structural inequality and epistemic failure, while the humanitarian order is kept in place. In this regard, experts have warned about a "mental health crisis" in the humanitarian sector, with studies indicating that 70% to 89% of aid workers have experienced mental health issues related to their job (Sutton and Paddon Rhoads 2022).

While trauma exposure is an established predictor of poor mental health among humanitarian aid workers, less is known about the role of psychosocial work-related factors (Foo, Tay, and Yang 2023), namely, how so-called "burnout" is understood and addressed by workers themselves and employers in the humanitarian world. Such burnouts have been explored as a result of unhealthy and abusive organizational cultures (Houldey 2021), where self and collective care can become efficacious tools to counter burnouts.

How "burnout" is defined from the perspective of a humanitarian worker is summarized in the words of a UNHCR advisor, Josep Zapater (2023, np):

> Workload and pressure pile up. Security is, at best, spotty. Families may be far away, and meaningful social life can be poor or non-existent. Staff witness or listen to countless horrors. They can also be victims themselves, in particular national staff. Front-line staff have to take responsibility, in front of affected populations, for poor decisions or simply the difficulty of having any meaningful impact.

As will be evident when discussing intended alienation among local humanitarians, Zapater's account confirms that local staff are the ones who are primarily held accountable for technical successes or failures, and for the cultural appropriateness of foreign-funded projects. Against this backdrop, I see "burnout" and discussions around "empathy" and "lack of empathy" (Sutton and Paddon Rhoads 2022) as tacit synonyms for "alienation," which, instead, never explicitly comes up in the everyday humanitarian jargon. That being said, I do not intend to presume the extent to which humanitarian staff are or are not enmeshed in the historical present where they are expected to intervene without remaining personally involved, as argued. Indeed, while some humanitarians do engage with the context, they still need to do this *through* the international humanitarian system and way of life, which tend to be based on acontextual and standardized programming and operationality, and actively promote moral and physical distance and gated lifestyles (see Smirl 2015).

Similarly, I do not intend to "measure" humanitarians' alienation vis-à-vis their actual amount of work, which would not even be verifiable, let alone in my position of temporary observer. In this sense, alienation may be both the result of working too much and of a strategy meant to generate self-care and self-protection from the immediate present. Either way, more importantly, it builds upon a historically unequal set-up between local and international staff. A similar consideration can be advanced on empathy: the way we can discuss empathy also cannot be disentangled from its role in setting up unequal lifeworlds, even when burnout is not necessarily a product of disengagement. However, while the role of political geography in generating empathic humanitarianism has gone unheeded, there have been scholarly discussions about the role of empathy in humanitarian effectiveness, that is, the extent to which it helps to make aid provision and humanitarian negotiations more or less effective. In this context, Breithaupt (2015) argues for non-empathic humanitarianism, because empathy ends up centering the very act of assisting and caring exclusively on the empathy of the empathizing practitioner:

> a modest plea for the removal of empathy from the aid and intervention equation. Empathy is something felt by the empathizer; it is often focused on the self rather than the other; and it frequently ends up creating narratives about the empathizer rather than about the empathizee. Empathy is the big "I" that feels your pain. (Breithaupt 2015, 14)

This speaks to Hannah Arendt's *On Revolution* (1963), rejecting compassion in politics as hypocritical and ephemeral (Unrau 2015, 22). By contrast, Adloff (2015) contends that when empathy is manifested through compassion and sympathy, it can instead trigger motivated and effective action, which benefits humanitarianism. This debate around empathy and reciprocity informs, in turn, the under-explored interplay between empathy and alienation—tabooed in humanitarian discussions—which rarely focuses on the endemic relational economy of humanitarianism. In the humanitarian sector, on the one hand, processes such as "self-loss" (Unrau 2015) are viewed as empathy, that is, identifying with the other's feelings and forgetting we are other to that Self, as humanitarian "maximalism" or "solidarism" wants to suggest (Weiss 1998). But "self-loss" can also imply empathy's opposite: alienation, where cognitive empathy is suspended due to a process of dissociation and estrangement.

In this context, the interpretation of various forms of alienation through the mere lens of "professional burnout" (Pines 1993) or the empathy debate contrasts with the existential quest for meaning in the humanitarian sector: meaninglessness is indeed an important trigger of alienation (Seeman 1959, 786). In my attempt to revisit humanitarianism in Lebanon through the idea of alienation, meaninglessness is key to intended dissociation. By experiencing it, aid workers tend to develop low expectations, if any, about what can be improved or transformed in the context of their operations. This shows a fundamental link between, on the one side, the individual, intimate, existential sense of being meaningless and dissociated from the context in which one works and from one's own professional career; and, on the other side, the collective, historical-material dimension of alienation, whereby I have examined the problematic approach of viewing humanitarianism as an aprioristically good act happening in an empirical vacuum, in which its agents should not be burdened with consequential responsibilities.

Having worked primarily with development and humanitarian professionals addressing long-term forced migration and chronic forms of local poverty in Lebanon, I observed how the way of intervening is seldom that of "actors delivering life-saving services in situations shaped by violence and conflict, often in direct contact or proximity to those who are suffering" (Sutton and Paddon Rhoads 2022). The aid workers that I met over the years who were providing both short and long-term assistance to refugees from Syria and, earlier, from Iraq and Sudan, were often under pressure, having to meet strict deadlines, work overtime, or cope with politically stressful situations.

Although empathy with crisis or disaster victims is mostly talked about as being rare in the contemporary humanitarian world (Smirl 2015), burnout and alienation can be frequently identified among foreign and local humanitarian staff. As discussed in Zapater (2023), the discomfort of humanitarians is increasingly spoken of and framed as alienation. This points to forms of alienation being tangible even when professionals do not engage in empathy-driven action and when the material circumstances in which they work do not facilitate empathic ways of working, for instance as I illustrated, by setting up residential compounds for humanitarians, securitizing their offices to impede direct access from the outside, or making their mandates short-term in the areas of intervention to encourage emotional distance.

Local humanitarians: alienation through provincialization

Not only are internationals likely to develop a sense of alienation in the contexts where they operate (as generally seeing crises from a cosmopolitan distance). Locals can also experience alienation, especially where they often need to abide by foreign agendas to survive in their position and are held accountable as humanitarian professionals, while at times becoming alienated from the

principles, modalities, and consequences of their everyday work. To examine the pragmatics and semantics of alienation among local professionals, it is necessary to navigate the meanings of alienation across languages: English, the language in which I write and think, and Levantine Arabic, the language of my ethnographic experience in Lebanon. By this token, I do not intend to "retrieve" signs of alienation at any cost in these past ethnographic snapshots; by contrast, I aim to map the process of how I have come to conceptualize alienation and the importance of employing it in the humanitarian lifeworld.

To illustrate how alienation plays out at a vernacular level, I will build on my previous work in the neighborhood of al-Qobbe, in northern Lebanon's Tripoli (Carpi and Diana 2020). My past research in al-Qobbe examined how foreign and local ways of undertaking play and sports activities for Palestinian, Lebanese, and Syrian youth can be complementary, oppositional or overlapping in the aid workers' sociological imagination as well as in program design and implementation. Using this framework, it is clear that local staff need to comply with external agendas and program design, while they remain accountable for externally designed programs in the areas of intervention. In most cases, local aid workers are the ones asked to locally represent programs that are designed overseas, and to become the point of call regarding such programs for local residents, official authorities, and informal power holders (in the Lebanese social fabric, family or community leaders— zuʻamaʼ—can become very influential in local politics). Indeed, while "localization of aid" has become of increasing importance in the UN Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDG), established during the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, local-international NGO partnerships are the rule rather than the exception nowadays. Notwithstanding, such partnerships tend to remain structurally unequal, with foreign NGOs and UN agencies withholding and managing resources for their local partners and relying on local staff to avoid the direct exposure to safety risks (Duffield 2014), direct involvement with local politics (Carpi 2024), and to develop quicker and easier access to the targeted population (Mercer and Green 2013). In this policy context, the local and international humanitarian agencies that have addressed war-caused displacement from Syria in Lebanon predominantly rely on different strategies: in this specific study (Carpi and Diana 2020), I focused on psychosocial support for war-affected children and youth and play and sports activities for different refugee groups based in al-Qobbe. Echoing recent theories on universal models and particularisms and how local understandings of childhood do not necessarily destabilize the "hegemony of a modern Western childhood" (Balagopalan 2019, 25), I examined how, to a certain extent, the particular is incorporated into the universal in a way that it does not challenge the "fixity of the universal itself" (Balagopalan 2019, 26). However, identifying local understandings and strategies of child protection does not emerge as an easy search in the official context of international-local humanitarian cooperation, especially in contexts characterized by postcolonial influences and/or the large cultural impact of foreign agendas, such as in Lebanon. Yet universalized and normative types of childhood are the only ones to be globally known in institutionalized settings (Carpi and Diana 2020).

In the interviews with local NGO professionals during 2016, I observed how, on the one hand, local staff are increasingly invited to share vernacular knowledge on how to manage a refugee response and promote, in this case, social harmony and cohesion across locally based youth in response to the UNSDGs. On the other hand, they deal with paradoxical strategies deployed by international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) to keep such knowledge marginal and uninfluential. In this contradictory process of parading the local as morally valuable (as mentioned, especially after the establishment of the SDG) while keeping it operationally redundant, the two NGOs World Child Holland and Canadian Right to Play, which I observed in Tripoli

(Carpi and Diana 2020), proposed play and sports activities as a way to "heal" and prevent the radicalization of youth in al-Qobbe, with local staff voicing their total ineffectiveness on the ground.

Local staff were the only ones deployed in the field and considered accountable for such foreign-funded and designed programs. In other words, hegemonic concepts of childhood and youth, as well as foreign approaches to play and sport, were still coming as pre-packaged, universal standards, while vernacular knowledge about strategies towards deradicalization and about the key factors that underlie deprivation and poverty were provincialized (Carpi and Diana 2020). Moreover, the recruitment of local staff, who would be able to roll out such programs, was obviously ephemeral because it was highly dependent on international humanitarian funding (which is temporary by definition). People's employment, indeed, could only last until the departure of these INGOs from northern Lebanon, following the Syrian crisis becoming out of fashion in the eyes of foreign donors.

Among the utterances utilized to point to individual feelings of alienation, local staff would often refer to *bo'd*, that is, the emotional and operational "distance" from the practices funded and promoted by foreign donors and agencies. Local aid workers, so to speak, affirmed they would have designed such programs in a way that would have been more appealing to local residents, and which would therefore be more effective. For instance, football matches were already played in streets and public spaces with all refugee groups involved, with no need to create registration lists that may end up excluding some community members and generating potential friction among locally based families. In this sense, new programs could simply have worked as catalyzers, capitalizing on the existing capacities for co-existence, stability and peace.

Local aid workers also highlighted how the ways they were able to implement such programs was often distant from the ways implementation had been decided at the helm of the organization, as a consequence of beneficiaries advancing requests that demanded high flexibility and contextualization. For example, while these activities were designed for an expectedly larger participation of Syrian and Lebanese children, Palestinians who aspired to join were large in number, although they were supposed to access programs run by organizations specifically working with Palestinians. In other words, eligibility criteria based on nationality were making the program less effective, with the result of local staff deciding to bypass the criteria to make the program socially inclusive and responsive to contextual peculiarities, while avoiding a negative impact on local society. However, when they tried to explicitly discuss the policy change with the organization, they were discouraged by the heavy bureaucracy they would have gone through to advance the amendment to the INGO leaders, who would have considered the proposal too late, after the end of the program. This pointed to the lack of consultation with local communities before designing programs.

Among the signifiers of alienation, which were never named explicitly (e.g. *taba'ud*, *ihsas bil'azle* namely, "estrangement" and "feeling of being marginalized"), local professionals also referred to *fajwa beyn al-wada' 'ala al-ard w masalih al-mujtama' al-duwali* ("the gap between the situation on the ground and the interests of the international community") to voice their discomfort in having been disenfranchised to effectively question hegemonic standards and standardized ways of working. This pointed to their forced disengagement from the way foreign funding works and programs are designed, resulting in a sense of alienation from what they are expected to do in the workplace. In this vein, alienation emerges as a deliberate project to keep the local marginal and uninfluential, while parading the valorization of the local as a needed decolonial asset in international agendas and debates.

Conclusion

Adopting alienation as a heuristic tool, I have endeavored to show how such historical-material and intimate-existential processes are identifiable in the pragmatics of alienation that define the humanitarian experience: namely, the multiple meanings of alienation in light of its practical role in engaging with forms of humanitarian action in Lebanon. Rather than looking at alienation as a self-evident concept or as an ontological unraveling of crystallized dynamics that need to be "evidenced," I have illustrated how the multi-fold pragmatics of alienation can dig into the relational economy of humanitarianism, meant both as practical operations and as subjectivities involved to different extents in their immediate present, by instead identifying the contextual meanings of alienation. Importantly, I have configured alienation not as a deterministic "outcome" of the processes taken into analysis but, rather, as a heuristic tool able to unravel the empirical dynamics that allow for the sector to be sustained as it is, with its unequal power relations, heavily critiqued outcomes, and negative personal impacts on its workforce. As such, alienation can work as a powerful heuristic tool in finally acknowledging and interrogating the moral and psychological work that humanitarianism does at the level of collective and individual identity; a discussion which is a hard-to-die taboo within the humanitarian sector (see Sharma 2017 and Agaba 2018). This paper argues for more critical research on the individual and collective levels of alienation, which remains an under-explored terrain where the entangled psychological, moral and physical dimensions continuously define humanitarian presence and absence. With the intent to examine how the effects of alienation can be generative rather than expanding its terminological boundaries, I have focused on documenting the multiple (un)negotiated meanings of alienation as well as its impact on those who make the humanitarian experience in Lebanon. With this purpose, instead of casting alienation as a self-evident ontology, I have argued that the pragmatics of alienation can shed light on the spaces where humanitarian professionals think, negotiate their place in the areas of intervention, and operate.

In this framework, the historical-material and the psychological intimate processes I have described do not emerge antithetically, but rather conflate and interrelate, generating a semantically polyhedral construct. With alienation being semantically embedded in the making of existential subjectivities and organizational functioning, humanitarian professionals end up developing, preserving, or resisting dissociation, (lack of) empathy, burnouts, and, importantly, the unequal relational order through which humanitarianism is still heralded nowadays.

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Notes on contributor

Estella Carpi is an associate professor in Humanitarian Studies at University College London. As a social anthropologist in multidisciplinary environments, her work mostly revolved around the identity politics of aid and the moral economy of humanitarianism and forced migration in Lebanon and Türkiye. She is the author of *The Politics of Crisis-Making. Forced Displacement and Cultures of Assistance in Lebanon* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press). In the past, she worked as a researcher and a lecturer in several academic and research institutions in Lebanon, Türkiye, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Australia, Italy, and the United Kingdom. Her research has been published in international peer-reviewed journals such as the *Journal of Refugee Studies, Middle East Critique*, and *Third World Quarterly*. She regularly provides consultancies on safeguarding to NGOs in Arabic and Brazilian Portuguese.

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