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Subcontracting Academia: Alienation, Exploitation and Disillusionment in the UK Overseas Syrian Refugee Research Industry

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Abstract

As the political economy of social science research has shifted, subcontracted research assistants have taken over an ever growing part of the research process. In this article, we report on a case study of the experiences of local research assistants employed on UK directed research projects on Syrian refugees in Lebanon. While refugee research is framed in the UK as a noble project of helping the world's most vulnerable, these assistants speak critically of their sense of alienation, exploitation and disillusionment with the research they work on. Such problems arise, we argue, not just from subcontracted labor relations in the workplace itself, but also the broader political economy of how overseas social science research is currently produced. Addressing these problems requires giving better recognition to the work, interests and concerns of research assistants, but also rethinking and restructuring the global production of social science research more generally.

Keywords

alienation, exploitation, grant culture, refugee research, research assistants, subcontracted research

A scandal has been brewing in UK universities recently over allegations of international students paying commercial ghostwriters to produce academic coursework for them. Reports in the media claim that international students are four times as likely to cheat as home students; and a boom in the UK for-profit essay writing industry is being driven by a rise in international student numbers (Dean 2016; Mostrous and Kenber 2016). Explanations for why international students choose to pay others to do their university work for them focus on claims of their low level of academic and English language ability, problems of 'endemic corruption' in their home countries, differences in national academic cultures, and prevalence of a consumerist, careerist and credentialist attitude toward university studies (eg, Denisova-Schmidt 2016; Kaktins 2018). In 2017, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in the UK issued guidance for dealing with the problem of 'contract cheating,' where 'a third party completes work for a student who then submits it to an education provider as their own,' warning of the 'threat' that such practices pose to academic standards of 'honesty, integrity and professionalism' (QAA 2017: 1, 6).

Yet, at the same time, there is a parallel phenomenon that has received less notice, that sometimes occurs when university researchers from the UK go overseas to conduct grant funded research. Celebrated in UK universities for their success in grant income capture, publication outputs and contribution to global knowledge, some of the work these researchers sign off on is actually ghost produced by foreign research assistants. Ironically, more than a few of these assistants were previously international students, sometimes at UK universities. Both former international students and local university graduates have come to constitute an indigenous, proletarianized overseas research workforce, subcontracted to perform research that UK academics direct from afar, separated as they often are by a gulf of language, culture, geography, and the basic political economy of research production in the twenty first century marketized university sector.

The issue of subcontracted ghost production of overseas academic research has not been given the attention it deserves. In this article, we report on a case study of the views and experiences of a group of Lebanese and Syrian research assistants, who worked on UK directed academic research projects on Syrian refugees in Lebanon between 2012 and 2018. Overseas Syrian refugee research is framed in the UK as a noble and enlightened aid based project of ‘helping the world’s most vulnerable’ (BIS 2016); and engagement of local staff to work on this project is promoted as a beneficent act of ‘global partnership’ and ‘capacity building’ for lower income countries such as Lebanon (BEIS 2017). But the perspectives of the local assistants who conduct much of this research is often quite different: many speak of their experience of alienation from research projects, sense of exploitation during the research process, and disillusionment with the UK university research sector. The argument we make in presenting these perspectives is not just for the need to give better recognition to the work, concerns and interests of research assistants; but also the importance of understanding how the political economy of university research shapes research processes, products and impacts that academic research can have on the broader global, social environment. These impacts may be far less positive than those now regularly promised in research grant applications. While our analysis focuses on the particular case of UK overseas refugee research in Lebanon, we believe that the concerns raised by this case have relevance more generally for research conducted elsewhere in the global South by scholars from countries across the global North.

In the following pages, we provide overviews of the critical literature on fieldwork research assistants, the political economy of social science research, and the rise of the UK overseas Syrian refugee research industry. We then discuss the experiences of alienation, exploitation and disillusionment of fieldwork assistants employed in this research industry. Our analysis is based on a set of Arabic language interviews conducted in person in Lebanon in the summer of 2017, and by Skype from London in the winter of 2018, with 32 research assistants, who were recruited through a snowball sample based on personal relationships. The interviews have been transcribed and translated into English. Our analysis also draws on desk based research of government, university and funding agency documents in the UK on research funding policies and project awards related to Syrian refugees since the outbreak of the Syrian revolution in 2011.

‘Hidden Colonialism’ and the Global Fieldwork Research Assistant

A small but growing body of literature has drawn attention to the common obscuring of work done by research assistants in anthropological field research in the global South. This literature shows a long history of using field assistants in anthropological research, and an equally long history of failure to give full public credit for the work these assistants perform. As Sanjek (1993: 13) writes, in an early critique of ‘anthropology’s hidden colonialism’:

For more than a hundred years, members of the communities and cultures studied by anthropologists have been major providers of information, translation, fieldnotes, and fieldwork. While professional ethnographers – usually white, mostly male – have normally assumed full authorship for their ethnographic products, the remarkable contribution of these assistants – mainly persons of colour – is not widely enough appreciated or understood.

Fieldwork assistants, Turner (2010: 206, 207) argues, are ‘ghost-workers’ who are often ‘rendered invisible and effectively silenced’ in research publications (see also Jenkins 2018; Molony and Hammett 2007). This lack of visibility raises ethical questions about the working

relationships of anthropologists, often from the global North, with the assistants from the global South who work for them; and political and epistemological concerns about the nature of ‘authorship and authority’ in fieldwork research and how anthropological research agendas and knowledge are produced through the obscured and commodified interactions between anthropologists and their fieldwork assistants (Deane and Stevano 2016; Gupta 2014; Middleton and Cons 2014).

While this long history is important to acknowledge, there have also been key shifts in the use of assistants in overseas fieldwork. As higher education has internationalized, it is not only anthropologists who conduct fieldwork overseas, but researchers from other disciplines as well: sociology, geography, public health, psychology, area and development studies, political science, urban planning, the arts and humanities and so on. Much of the critical literature on the hidden work of assistants in anthropological research assumes the continuing existence of a traditional model of an anthropologist going into the field overseas for a prolonged period of time and working closely, *in situ*, with one or more local assistants: the work done by these assistants is thus often assumed to be circumscribed, limited primarily to facilitating the collection of fieldwork data (eg, Gupta 2014). But this traditional model of fieldwork is no longer the dominant reality. Instead, many principal investigators spend limited amounts of time in the field, are physically absent and outside the country for much or most of the fieldwork period, and conduct little or no direct research in ‘their’ fieldsite(s). In this new model, ever greater proportions of the fieldwork process are subcontracted to local research assistants – from the planning of research and production of background literature reviews, through to the transcription, translation, coding, analysis and writing up of fieldwork data. ‘Assistants’ can end up conducting much or all of their fieldwork operating essentially as lone researchers in the field. The focus of our study is on overseas fieldwork conducted for qualitative research investigations: but this subcontracted model of a principal investigator-research assistant division of labour is commonly found in survey research done in quantitative research investigations as well.

The subcontracted model of overseas fieldwork is shaped by several factors. Partly, researchers in other disciplines may not be as committed to the tradition of extended and immersed ethnographic participant observation that is sometimes seen as the defining feature of anthropological research practice (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). But there have also been changes in the political economy of academic research production that have transformed how fieldwork is done across all disciplines, including anthropology. First, there has been a shift in national research funding regimes in the UK and other countries, as governments seek to assert tighter control over research, amplify the impacts of research outputs, and achieve economies of scale. This has led to a move away from funding small, individual researcher driven projects and toward large grants supporting collectives of researchers and research centers to work on research priorities that are centrally determined by state funding agencies (Bloch and Sorenson 2015; Smyth 2017; Sorlin 2007). Mauthner and Doucet (2008: 972) note the ‘growing trend and increasing pressure towards undertaking ever-larger research projects, which are inter- or multi-disciplinary, multi-institution, multi-site and international.’ One consequence is that principal investigators on funded research projects often need to employ research assistants (Thornton 2008). Another is that principal investigators are also likely to be in a *de facto* subcontracted relationship themselves: a cascading set of instrumentalised, contractual agreements is thus constructed, in which lead investigators are subcontracted by funding agencies to work on agency research priorities; funded research projects are then partly managed and controlled by university administrative teams, who mediate the relationship between funder and principal investigator; and a range of research

support staff are subcontracted by principal investigators, working through university human resource departments, to carry out discrete sets of tasks on their funded projects (Demeritt 2000; Polster 2007).

Second, the rise of research entrepreneurialism and a grant culture in higher education has transformed the career structures and work roles of lead academic researchers (Baez and Boyles 2009; Lilienfeld 2017; Thornton 2008). Academic hiring and promotion is often tied to external grant funding success, and total research grant income is viewed by many administrators as a direct indicator of academic merit: so that big grants are unquestionably preferable to small grants, and multiple grants better than one (or no) grant (Morley 2016). As Lilienfeld (2017: 663) writes, ‘along with the grant culture comes mounting pressure to apply for funding at each entry point in the grant cycle.’ In these conditions, not only do principal investigators have less time to work directly on their funded projects, but their role shifts from being hands on researchers to becoming managers who seek grants and oversee projects – or, as the President of Imperial College London puts it, ‘small business owners’ (Smyth 2017: 160; Mauthner and Doucet 2008; Ylijoki 2003). Indeed, Klein’s (2000) argument that many high profile corporations no longer directly make the products they sell, but instead focus on creating the brands through which these products are marketed, may now apply in some cases to academic research as well. Polster (2007: 613), for example, notes the growing practice of academics ‘lending and/or borrowing ‘research names’ not to work on research projects, but only to enhance the likely success of grant applications.’

Third, there is an ever expanding contract researcher workforce available worldwide to recruit from, due to a combination of an expanding population of university graduates and declining proportion of permanent, full-time academic jobs. The bifurcation of the academic workforce into a small, relatively secure core and growing periphery of casualised contract researchers (and teachers) has long been noted in the UK and other wealthy countries. Almost two decades ago now, Harvie (2000: 103) wrote of the emergence of ‘two new classes’ in academia: a ‘research proletariat’ that is forced to sell ‘their ability to carry out research’ on projects owned and run by ‘research capitalists.’ Similarly, Reay (2000: 15) compares contract research work, done mostly by female academics, to ‘women’s invisible domestic labour’ that enables the privileges and successes of principal investigators; and argues that ‘the appropriation of the contract researcher’s intellectual labour is normative, routine practice within the academy’ (Reay 2004: 32). This phenomenon has also been spreading to the global South (Gupta et al 2016; Teeuwen and Hantke 2007). High participation systems of higher education are now worldwide, even as the global proportion of jobs requiring university degrees remains limited (Marginson 2016). In the Middle East and other regions of the global South, there are growing concerns about unemployment among university graduates (Jeffrey 2009). Large numbers of highly educated individuals in these regions are unable to secure stable jobs – and are thus available to work on short term contracts on research projects led by academics from the global North. Kazemi and Dehnavi (2017), for example, write of the growth of a university educated ‘research proletariat’ in Iran, who, unable to get regular university jobs, find employment in an ‘academic black market,’ where they ghostwrite books, articles and essays for Iranian university students and professors.

The UK Overseas Syrian Refugee Research Industry

From 2014 to 2018, at least 33 research grants for projects focusing wholly or partly on Syrian refugees in Lebanon totalling more than £28.2 million were awarded to UK

academics, from the UK Research Councils, European Research Council, British Academy, UK Department for International Development (DfID), and foundations such as Leverhulme and Wellcome. Just under half of these grants (fifteen) were worth £100 thousand or more; the largest ran into the millions of pounds. The total amount of funding on the topic is higher, as internal and foundation award figures are not always listed publicly. Further grants were awarded during this period to UK academics studying Syrian refugees in Turkey, Jordan and other countries outside the UK.

The overseas Syrian refugee research industry has become a significant business operation for many UK universities and academics: it is not just regional experts who are applying for research funding, but others with no previous experience of Syria or Lebanon, and little to no ability to speak, understand or read Arabic. As with other hot topics, universities deploy a network of services and events to encourage and support academics in applying for external research funding on overseas Syrian refugees (Lucas 2006). Winning UK research grants on overseas Syrian refugees has also become a social and political event. The launch of UCL's £4.1 million RELIEF (Refugees, Education, Learning, Information Technology, and Entrepreneurship for the Future) Centre in Lebanon in October 2017, for example, was hosted by the Lebanese Prime Minister at his Grand Serail headquarters; while its London launch in April 2018 was attended by the presidents of the American University of Beirut, Lebanese American University and UCL, CEO of the Economic and Social Research Council, and Lebanese Ambassador to the United Kingdom. It was also adorned with poetry readings, musical performances and catered lunch (UCL 2017, 2018).

One question that needs asking is why there is such an influx of money, much of which originates with the UK state, for research on this topic, particularly in a context of austerity politics and constraint on state research spending. The 2011 outbreak of the Syrian revolution and ensuing civil war led to the largest population displacement since World War Two: by 2018, 6.1 million Syrians were displaced internally and another 6.4 million externally, with over 80% in the neighboring countries of Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt (Connor 2018). As increasing numbers of Syrian refugees travelled to Europe from 2015 on to apply for asylum, the Syrian crisis was reframed by political leaders and media commentators in Europe as a 'European refugee crisis'; many fanned anti-immigrant sentiments and sought to re-assert tight control of national borders across the continent (Buonanno 2017). In the UK, government policy toward the Syrian refugee crisis has consistently been to strictly limit the inflow of refugees into the UK itself, and focus relief efforts on keeping Syrian refugees in the Levant or first countries of arrival in Europe (McGuinness 2017). In a speech condemned by human rights groups as 'divisive' and 'disastrous,' Prime Minister Theresa May argued at the United Nations in September 2016 for 'the right of all countries to control their borders' in order to tackle the global threat of 'uncontrolled mass migration,' a limited definition of who counts as a 'refugee,' and a requirement 'that refugees claim asylum in the first safe country they reach' (Frelick 2016; OneWorld 2016; Prime Minister's Office 2016). By December 2017, the UK had accepted about 19,500 Syrian refugees, which constitutes one of the lowest overall and proportional (relative to national population) numbers of Syrian refugees admitted by any large European country (Eurostat 2018; Home Office 2018). The UK has rejected calls by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees 'to develop more safe and legal routes' for Syrian refugees to come to the UK to claim asylum (McGuinness 2017); since the crisis broke out, the UK has made it more difficult for Syrians to get visas to come to the UK legally, precisely out of fears they may claim asylum once here (Wright and Merrill 2015).

The rise of the UK overseas Syrian refugee research industry is firmly tied to this UK foreign policy agenda. In 2015, the government created a new five year, £1.5 billion Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) to procure research that will ‘contribute to realising the UK aid strategy:’ this is to be done through forming ‘high-quality,’ ‘equitable’ partnerships with academic staff in the global South to create a ‘global community of researchers,’ who together can tackle global development challenges (BEIS 2017: 3, 6, 7). The GCRF is itself aid funding, diverted from the UK Department for International Development, and is legally required to support the government’s aid agenda. Also in 2015, this aid agenda was redefined by the government so that all foreign aid must directly serve UK ‘national security and foreign policy’ interests: controlling migration flows triggered by the Syrian conflict was explicitly highlighted as a priority concern for these interests (HM Treasury 2015: 3). The GCRF is the largest source of funding for overseas Syrian refugee research, providing 70% of total funding on the topic for UK academics since 2015. What is vital to recognise is that UK research spending on Syrian refugees in Lebanon (and elsewhere in the Levant) dwarfs the country’s research spending on Syrian refugees either in or seeking to come to the UK. Since 2014, there have been about seven grants awarded to UK academics to study Syrian refugees in the UK, over half (four) of which are PhD studentships, while three other grants amount to a spend of £809 thousand. The government has effectively been able to steer research attention to areas where it has identified policy priorities (refugee relief efforts in the Levant) and away from areas it doesn’t want addressed (e.g., extending resettlement programs in the UK): for, while technically, GCRF funds could be spent on research within the UK, in practice, GCRF advice directs academics to develop overseas research projects with international partners in lower income countries to maximise chances of funding success (Barnett 2016; Fielding 2016; Noxolo 2017).

Most of these UK funded research projects on Syrian refugees in Lebanon (as in other countries) rely heavily on the employment and labor of overseas research assistants. Most of these assistants are Lebanese, with some Syrians employed to facilitate access to refugee communities. Lebanese research assistants tend to be middle class, female, young (in their 20s), bilingual (Arabic and English) and highly educated (most have an MA degree, from Lebanon or the UK), and are recruited independently via social networks or through local universities in Lebanon. Independent (freelance) assistants are usually paid a daily or hourly rate that varies for the kind of work performed (e.g., \$100/day for fieldwork, \$50/hour for translation and transcription, \$20/hour for literature reviews); while university recruited assistants are given a salary (e.g., \$1500/month) covering all research tasks. Many of these assistants jump from one research project to the next, as this is short term contract work that lasts a few months to a couple of years; some have worked on multiple UK funded projects on Syrian refugees in Lebanon. When hired, research assistants sign ‘Terms of Reference’ contracts that detail their work responsibilities: these include choosing and negotiating access to fieldsites; developing fieldwork and interview schedules; collecting fieldwork data; transcribing, translating and analysing fieldwork data; researching and writing background papers and literature reviews; and sometimes drafting research articles. UK based principal investigators generally spend limited time in Lebanon and do little to no direct research themselves (though there are exceptions): most have limited or no Arabic language ability; and some never set foot in their project fieldsites. Lebanese research assistants constitute the waged labor force of the UK overseas Syrian refugee research industry in Lebanon, carrying out the bulk of the industry’s production. It is to their views and experiences that we now turn, for a workers’ perspective on how this industry effectively operates.

Alienation in the Refugee Research Industry

‘I was sitting in the audience while [the principal investigator] was presenting our research,’ one Lebanese research assistant (RA) recalls: ‘She presented as if it was her work, quoting Syrian refugees as if she had done the interviews herself, and we (myself and the other RA who did all the research) were just part of the audience, we did not exist.’ ‘At one point,’ the assistant says, ‘she was reading from the paper that I had written and said that ‘one of the refugees told *me*’ as if she was the one doing the interviews.’ ‘I was trying to swallow my anger and disgust,’ the assistant continues: ‘The meeting ended, everyone celebrated and clapped for the great doctor on her great work, and I clapped along.’ ‘It wasn’t the fact that I was angry at being plagiarised,’ the assistant reflects, ‘I was angry because I was being ignored, even in my presence.’ This experience of personal erasure from work they themselves have done is a common story among research assistants in the UK Syrian refugee research industry in Lebanon. It is also a classic example of worker alienation, as the assistant finds herself to be quite literally ‘a stranger in the world that [she herself] has made’ (MacIntyre 1953, quoted in Jaeggi 2014: 3). Another assistant tells the story of being asked by her principal investigator to write a presentation for him to deliver at a conference. ‘A few months later, while working on another project, I stumbled across the paper [I had written],’ the assistant recalls: it had been published without the assistant’s knowledge and without her name on it. ‘I was so pissed off,’ says the assistant, ‘I felt stolen.’

Research assistant alienation derives from the fact that assistants are subcontracted wage laborers, ‘working on someone else’s project’ they neither direct nor fully control (Harvie 2001: 115). As such, they often experience a sense of ‘powerlessness and loss of dignity, which is prone to provoke resentment, anger and frustration’ (Harvey 2018: 427). But the concept of alienation, as Harvey (2014: 267) notes, has a ‘diversity of meanings,’ and does not come solely from wage labor relations in the workplace, but from the broader political economy of the UK overseas Syrian refugee research industry as well. For research assistants in this industry, it is not just the lack of control over projects on which they are employed that creates a situation and experience of alienation, but also the sense that the aim and focus of these projects is often alien to (or estranged from) the immediate concerns of Syrian refugees and other local communities in Lebanon. As one assistant complains:

I think some of the [UK] researchers have no clue about the Syrian conditions.... They get some ideas from research on refugees elsewhere and they come to apply them to Lebanon. Like most of the [refugee] research will be on identity and home and belonging. But it is different: the Palestinian literature on home and identity came after two generations [of living as refugees]. The Syrian situation is different, it’s a war, they still can’t go back.... They are not thinking of the idea of home now. It is luxurious to think about these topics. They [Syrian refugees] have urgent needs, and yet the researchers ... come with their topics, they leave us to deal with it and beg the Syrians to say something about them, and we have to suffer the consequences.

Research topics in the UK Syrian refugee research industry are generated and controlled neither by Lebanese research assistants nor Syrian refugee communities in Lebanon. ‘We don’t have local funding [for refugee research], all the funds are from outside [Lebanon],’ says a research assistant, ‘and because the funds are foreign, the research proposals are written up abroad.’

Topics are not always fully controlled by UK principal investigators either, who may experience their own alienation from projects they officially lead. Two research assistants, who were working on the same project, recount their experience of asking their principal

investigator (PI) to change their project's topic, once they realized it was seen as irrelevant by Syrian refugees in Lebanon. 'I have no power to change the topic,' their PI told them, as the 'funding comes from a targeted call to do research on [this topic].' 'I feel very weird being here,' another PI told his research assistant in Beirut, 'I never worked on refugees or the Middle East before, I just was trying to tick boxes for the university ... I saw the call for funds, I applied and was honestly surprised to get [the grant].' Steering control over research funded by the GCRF is ultimately set by UK government aid policy, which (as noted earlier) is tied to UK national security and foreign policy agendas. Many Lebanese research assistants are not fully aware of the funding sources for the projects they work on, but for those who become aware, linking of research with UK aid policy provides yet another source of alienation:

How can they not say it? This is a breach of confidentiality. No transparency. What the fuck, I would not have worked [on the research project] if I knew it was aid money, and wow, national interest of the UK. I am so angry, I was working for the national interest of the UK without me knowing.... This is unethical and deceitful.

Lebanese research assistants further articulate a strong sense of alienation from the research process itself, and through this, what Marx (1844/1988: 75) describes as 'self-estrangement', as each worker relates 'to his [*sic*] own activity as an alien activity not belonging to him; it is activity as suffering ... begetting as emasculating.' 'After each day, I come home so angry, I hate myself for imposing myself on the Syrians,' says one assistant, 'they want to talk about their daily struggles, and what the hell, I need to shift the conversation and ask them about some topics decided elsewhere.' 'I feel so bad imposing myself on them [Syrian refugees] when I know their situation, why do we need to do more papers on this or that?,' complains another assistant: 'Why do we need to study to reinvent the wheel? I feel bad because I can't do anything for them, I am just using them.' Some assistants argue something fundamental is lost to principal investigators in the political economy of subcontracted research, as what is subcontracted out is not just abstract cognitive work, but emotional labor and human relationships:

The new arrangement of how research is done helps the researchers not only outsource the research collection and analysis on others, but also the pain of having to deal with the subjects, the pain of dealing with stories you hear everyday and you feel you are unable to do anything about it, the pain of connecting with people and feeling shitty about even being in this world, feeling shitty of going on with your own life. The researchers get the clean stuff at the end, without the tears, the anger, the frustration, the feeling of hating yourself, of being helpless and hopeless.

In other words, through subcontracting research, it is not just assistants who are put into a situation and experience of alienation, but at times, principal investigators as well. For many of these researchers no longer encounter their research subjects as flesh and blood individual human beings, but as textual products – transcripts, field notes, manuscript drafts – that can be transformed into other kinds of textual products to satisfy grant funding requirements and academic career demands (Newman 2016). 'Can you get me a draft of the research paper by January?,' a research assistant recalls her principal investigator insisting: 'I need it for my promotion file, I'm under so much pressure.' 'Knowledge once divided can be hard to put back together again,' write Mauthner and Doucet (2008: 971), in a critical review of work done by social science contract research teams: as subcontracting fieldwork research tends to 'decontextualize knowledge,' by separating 'textual knowledge' from the 'located, embodied

and specific subjectivities, contexts and relations' through which such knowledge is produced (973, 976).

Exploitation in the Refugee Research Industry

'They steal our labour, they steal our future, they steal our self worth' – this is how one Lebanese assistant sums up her experience of working in the UK Syrian refugee research industry. Feelings of exploitation are widespread among research assistants in this industry, and centre on three core issues: unjust wage and hour labor conditions, false (or misleading) promises by principal investigators, and in some instances, exclusion from academic authorship. Articulations of a sense of exploitation emphasize structural rather than transactional (or individual) aspects of the concept, or what McKeown (2016: 174) defines as 'the forced transfer of productive powers from groups positioned as socially inferior [in the economic system] to the advantage of groups positioned as socially superior.' Research assistants feel compelled to take jobs and accept employment conditions on offer in the UK Syrian refugee research industry due to a lack of alternative options. As one assistant points out:

There is no real structure to protect our rights, and the funders and PIs can take advantage of the lack of jobs [in Lebanon] and vulnerabilities [of postgraduates], and of course, the huge numbers of MA holders looking for jobs. They can keep using us, one after the other. They will never be short of new MAs, being naïve, looking for experience, and of course, searching for jobs.

Lebanon has one of the highest rates of higher education enrolment in the Arab region, along with high numbers of university students seeking degrees overseas: but it also has high levels of graduate unemployment, that have long been seen as constituting a 'crisis' for the young; and one of the highest rates of high skilled emigration in the world (El-Ghali and McClure 2010; Kawar and Tzannatos 2013; Loo and Magaziner 2017). Research assistants generally recognise that principal investigators are caught in the same system of unfree labor, even if they occupy more privileged positions and benefit from the exploitation of their assistants. 'Sometimes I felt sad for the PIs, like they have deadlines to submit what I was told are called 'products' for the funders,' one assistant reflects: 'I was told it gets easier when you are a professor, but it is not the case, it seems.'

While some research assistants are relatively well paid, wage labor concerns for many assistants focus on the long, frequently uncompensated hours of work endemic in academic employment, and the pay inequalities that exist between different categories of assistants. Salaried assistants employed through local universities on UK research projects speak of being pressured to work far more than their official hours:

We get a fixed salary per month regardless of how much work we do.... The amount of work I am doing per month is worth so much more than my salary. I am using my car, sometimes the car breaks down [and I have to pay to fix it]. I am running between Tripoli and Bekaa and Beirut. I am writing extensive fieldnotes at night because the PI would like to 'feel she is here with me.' ... I work sometimes at nights, sometimes Saturdays and Sundays.... It is exploitative.

Freelance, hourly paid research assistants are usually paid for all of the hours of work they do, but unlike salaried assistants, they lack a guaranteed monthly income and access to health insurance. Other wage concerns focus on the inequalities between the pay that Lebanese research assistants are given, and that offered to the Syrian assistants in refugee communities

who facilitate research meetings and interviews with local residents. ‘It’s so unfair, they pay the Syrians ten dollars per day of work, while we get paid much more,’ says one Lebanese research assistant: ‘They do all the work, without them, we have access to nothing.’ ‘I complain about not being well paid,’ says another assistant, ‘but I am still treated better than the Syrian gatekeepers, who lead us to the families and spend time with us.’ Such concerns are echoed by Syrian assistants themselves. As one Syrian gatekeeper reflects:

For me, it is good to get ten dollars a day, just accompanying researchers and giving them all the info they need, as I do not have a job. But am I well paid? Of course not. I used to teach in Syria and I know a lot. I end up sometimes reformulating the [researchers’] questions, which are totally ridiculous and come from people who know nothing about the history, society, culture of Syria. All of that [work] is not counted. But what can you do when you are vulnerable? You get what you get, and you’re grateful.

Both Lebanese research assistants and Syrian community gatekeepers complain, too, of false or misleading promises that are made by some researchers, to entice them into working on their projects. Syrian gatekeepers speak of how researchers promise them (or encourage them to believe) that participation in their research will help their situation by making their voices heard internationally (see Sukarieh and Tannock 2013):

We get all sorts of promises [from the researchers] – help in getting our voice heard, help in trying to get a visa for our young people who want to leave to Europe, help in getting access to aid. At first, of course, one believes. Researchers were not that many in Syria, and for some, it is our first exposure to being researched.... The visa issue is the biggest dream. And since we have no idea how it works, we thought that if we talk to someone [from the UK] they can help us immigrate [there].... It is all new to us, and when things are new, exploitation is at its best.

For Lebanese research assistants, there is the eternal hope that accepting a temporary research assistant contract will lead to a more secure and rewarding academic job later on – what Berlant (2011) refers to as the phenomenon of ‘cruel optimism.’ But more directly, assistants are explicitly promised by some principal investigators that working on their projects will help them advance their academic careers – promises that later ‘vanish into thin air.’ ‘In our first [job] interview, the PI said I would be helped to get into a PhD program at her prominent university,’ says one research assistant: ‘I was so excited about it.’ ‘‘We will publish together and it will be good on your CV,’ my PI told me when I first started the work,’ says another assistant: ‘It will help you to get into PhD programs if you are published.’

Perhaps nothing arouses the sense of exploitation (and alienation) more among Lebanese research assistants than the exclusion of some assistants from academic authorship, particularly after many principal investigators promise assistants a share in final authorship at the beginning of their work together. Some assistants not only collect, transcribe, translate and analyse the fieldwork data, and produce background literature reviews, they also write full drafts of research articles based on this data and analysis. As one assistant argues:

I was paid to be a researcher, but not paid to write a paper to be published not in my name, while it is 90% written by me. What is the PI being paid for? To oversee the research and plagiarize? ... If we live in a world where there is no intellectual property, then fine, he can take it. But this is a double standard, students are accused of plagiarism if they cut and paste a few sentences. Here you get research assistants doing all the work for the PI, who just puts their name on it.

‘I was so angry, I felt betrayed, I felt stupid because I believed the PI,’ says another assistant: ‘I never thought that promises to co-publish or get a PhD scholarship were a way to get me to

do the work well.’ A couple of research assistants attempted to insist their names be included as authors on research articles they had written for the projects they were employed on, and in both cases, the response was the same. ‘I got an email from the HR [human relations] department of [the UK] university where the PI is based, telling me that the research is owned by the university itself and that I was paid to do the job,’ says one assistant. ‘My PI sent me an email saying that all data and intellectual property on the project belong to the PI and his university,’ say the other assistant: ‘He told me this was a ‘professional matter’ and shouldn’t affect our working relationship on the project.’ Such structural exploitation, as McKeown (2016: 174, 176) argues, is seen as unjust because it represents the ‘forced transfer of productive powers’ from research assistants to principal investigators, and ‘it asserts the *power* of advantaged social groups over disadvantaged social groups, ... [and] increases the benefits of advantaged social groups, thus reinforcing class, ‘race,’ ... gender [and nation state] *hierarchies*’ (italics in original).

Conclusion: Disillusionment with UK Higher Education Overseas

One of the aims of the UK government’s new Global Challenges Research Fund, that sponsors much of the overseas Syrian refugee research industry, is to showcase ‘international best practice,’ by fostering ‘new research communities and learning alliances’ and ‘forging strong and enduring partnerships between academic communities in the UK and the Global South’ (BEIS 2017: 6, 9). In the case of local research assistants working in this industry in Lebanon, at least, the experience of alienation and exploitation leads in quite a different direction, toward growing disillusionment with academia, and UK higher education, in particular. Research assistant disillusionment centers, in part, on the collapse of previously held ideals of expert knowledge: assistants are often stunned to realize the limited abilities of (some) principal investigators, including a lack of Arabic language skills, lack of in depth understanding of Syria or Lebanon, and reliance on assistants to take over responsibility for an ever expanding proportion of the research process. Disillusionment also centers on the broader social value of academic research, as assistants witness the entrepreneurial and sometimes seemingly self interested nature of the refugee research industry, that works to extract information from refugee communities in Lebanon (and elsewhere) for the purpose of constructing academic products and satisfying grant funder requirements. While some assistants respond to their disillusionment by adopting cynical understandings of academic work, or aspire to find ways to become a ‘different’ kind of academic, others are pushed to quit academic research altogether. ‘It is the idea of researching and just leaving, listening to people’s stories and pain, and using them as material for writing papers, and then forgetting about them,’ says one assistant: ‘I’m not sure I can take it, I’m not cut out for this, it does not feel right to me.’

Previous critical literature on overseas fieldwork research assistants, as noted earlier, has argued for greater openness and critical reflexivity in academic writing about the role of assistants in the field – issuing a call for ‘writing research assistants back in to our collective considerations’ (Middleton and Cons 2014: 279). This literature insists on the need to look carefully at the economic, political and ethical dimensions of working relationships between principal investigators and research assistants; and in particular, at questions of authorship, intellectual property rights, wages and overall working conditions. We fully agree with such arguments. However, if we are to accurately understand the problems that are emerging in the experience of research assistants working in the overseas Syrian refugee (and other) research industries, we need to cast our perspective wider. The phenomenon of alienation, exploitation

and disillusionment among overseas assistants working on UK directed research projects is shaped not just by workplace labor relations, but the broader political economy of how overseas academic research is produced in the contemporary period. By this, we refer specifically to: shifts in the relationship between academic research and the state, and the increased interest of the UK government in steering research agendas and erasing boundaries between research, aid, foreign policy and national security interests; the rise of research entrepreneurialism and grant culture in UK universities, and concurrent changes in the work roles and career paths of lead academic researchers; the bifurcation of the global academic workforce, and continuing expansion of a precarious periphery of graduates who can access only temporary, insecure contract employment; the continuing inequalities of power, wealth and knowledge between academics in the UK and rest of the global North, as compared with the communities with whom these academics engage in Lebanon and elsewhere in the global South; and the spread of a fully subcontracted model of academia, in which little if anything is left that cannot be separated off and farmed out for others to be paid to do on a temporary and delegated basis.

We suggest that the experiences reported here from Lebanon be seen as a miner's canary, warning of problems and inequities in the industrial organization of academic research production today – problems and inequities that are found not just in UK refugee research in Lebanon, but more broadly, in research on other topics led by investigators from other countries in the global North in other regions throughout the global South (and indeed, in some domestic research as well, particularly where lines of race, nationality, class and gender are being crossed). Addressing these problems would mean calling for fair wages, secure contracts, shared authorship and intellectual property rights for research assistants worldwide. But more than this, it would demand a fundamental rethinking and restructuring of the global production of academic research, in terms of relationships between university research and the state, academic researchers and the research process, researcher training and researcher employment, and last but not least, the distribution of wealth, power and control of research agendas and practices among academic researchers with different race, class and gender identities, and who are based in the different regions of the global North and South.

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