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ARTISTS, ACTIVISTS, AND THERAPISTS MAKING MEANING OF COLLECTIVE VIOLENCE IN LEBANON: A COMMUNITY-ENGAGED PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH STUDY

بحث مشترك لظاهرة العنف الجماعي في لبنان

by

NAWAL MURADWIJ

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Psychology in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,
The City University of New York

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APPROVAL

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by

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Psychology in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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ABSTRACT

Artists, Activists, And Therapists Making Meaning Of Collective Violence In Lebanon: A Community-Engaged Participatory Research Study

by

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This study collaborated with community-engaged artists, activists, and mental health workers living in Lebanon to explore the community narratives that exist around collective violence in Lebanon. With the support of a community advisory board, in-depth interviews, and focus groups were utilized to understand the associations that participants had with the construct of collective violence as it pertains to communities in Lebanon and their understanding of its impact on collective mental health. The sample of artists, activists, and mental health workers framed collective violence in Lebanon as intergenerational, perpetual, and institutionally and politically entrenched. Cultural concepts that described the impact of collective violence on collective mental health, such as the term *Ihbat* (Collective Dejectedness*),* were elucidated from the participant's narratives. Participants struggled to explore narratives of meaning making around perpetual violence, emphasizing instead a collective process of *al-ta'ayush ma' el 'onf*, or co-existence with violence, which emphasized survival over a search for meaning. Participants explored the role of artists, activists, and mental health workers in creating room for meaning making through creative, communal spaces while highlighting the structural and material barriers that impact the ability to maintain these spaces.

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CONTENTS

List of Tables……………………………………………………………………………..…vi
List of Figures……………………………………………………………………...…vii
List of Appendices…………………………………………………………………..……..viii
Chapter 1: Introduction ………………………....……………………………………………....1
Background……………………....…………………………………………….……….1
Existing Community-based Research in the Levant………………....……………………5
Arts-informed Research Approaches…………………………………………….……..7
Chapter 2: Method………………………....……………………………………….........10
Reflexivity……………....……………………………………….............................11
Pre-Data Collection: Creating a Community Advisory Board.…………………………14
Data Collection.…………....………………………………………........................15
Data Analysis…………....………………………………………...........................18
Chapter 3: Results ………………………....……………………………………….........20
Theme 1. Historical Markers and Features of Collective Violence…….…………….…20
Theme 2. Psychological Impact of Chronic Collective Violence…….…………………..25
Theme 3. "No Room for Meaning Making": When the Need to Survive Overshadows Meaning Making.…………………....…………………………………………….......37
Theme 4. Attempts at Meaning Making through Community Work….………….…..48
Other Terms and Idioms that Express Impact of Collective Violence..….………….…..63
Chapter 4: Discussion ………………………....…………………………………………...65
Chapter 5: Limitations and Future Directions ……………………………………………......72
Appendix. ………………………....……………………………………………….............83
References ………………………....…………………………………………….............89

TABLES

1 Participant Demographics…………………………...…………………………………………76
2 Glossary of Terms and Idioms About Collective Violence……………………………….....78

FIGURES

1 Visual Timeline of Participants Associations of Collective Violence in Lebanon..............80

APPENDICES

1 Select Reflexive Journal Entries……………………………...…………………………………..……88

to my grandfathers, who taught me that what has been broken can be rebuilt

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Experiences of collective violence have historically occurred within larger sociopolitical contexts marked by oppression of communities and rooted in legacies of colonization (Fanon, 2007). Clinical psychological research has traditionally attended to the impact of these experiences by examining their associations with individual markers of mental health, such as the incidence of psychological disorders (Betancaurt & Kan, 2008; Fazel et al., 2012; Ghumman et al., 2016; Johnson & Thompson, 2008). Although such findings can inform psychological intervention and support pathways to healing, they do not account for or assess narratives that surround experiences of collective violence (Ajdukovic, 2003). Narratives enable meaning making in the face of adversity and trauma, argued to be a primary driving force and essential for coping with suffering (Frankl, 1963; Park, 2013). Community narratives play an integral role in meaning making as they frame the psychosocial and political contexts within which events are experienced, serving as cultural schemas through which community members process, make sense of, and fit their individual narratives within the context they are living in (Young, 2004). With the aim of informing community interventions, this study seeks to better understand community narratives and conceptualizations of meaning making in the face of collective violence in Lebanon.

Background

Today, it seems impossible to engage in discourse around Lebanon without mention of its exposure to the realities of war, political violence, and displacement. Such experiences, virtually unavoidable for communities residing in Lebanon, are tied to a complex sociopolitical history rooted in sectarian divides and Civil War (1975-1990) (Fawaz & Khalaf, 2002; Traboulsi, 2015).

Following the civil war, which left in its wake around 150,000 casualties and 300,000 'disappeared' victims whose fate remains unknown, warring factions neither took responsibility nor created opportunities for reconciliation or healing, instead ushering in a post-war *Taif agreement* that officiated a sectarian system of 'power sharing' and a general amnesty law that absolved all ruling parties from accountability for mass atrocities and war crimes (Cammet, 2019; Hazin, 1991). Centralized sectarian power structures have since monopolized access to economic and social resources, culminating in Lebanon's recent economic collapse, which has deepened income inequality and skyrocketed rates of poverty and unemployment (Reuters, 2020). Due to regional conflicts in neighboring countries (i.e., the Israeli Apartheid of Palestine, the Syrian Civil War), Lebanon also hosts around 1.5 million Syrian and 300,000 Palestinian refugees, who face ongoing hostility and alienation from state resources (Cammett, 2019; UNHCR, 2019).

As a result of the ongoing sociopolitical landscape, communities in Lebanon continue to face chronic exposure to various forms of institutionalized and political collective violence, including bombings, targeted assassinations, ongoing armed conflict and war with Israel, and intergroup sectarian conflict (Fawaz & Khalaf, 2002). The Beirut port explosion on August 4th, 2020 of over 2700 tons of highly flammable ammonium nitrate that had been neglected by governing parties for around six years reflects the most recent iteration of this structural legacy of collective violence (Hubbard et al., 2020). Attempts to challenge the current regime, such as the 2019 Lebanese revolution, have been met with increasing state violence, including the systematic use of force by law enforcement (including against minors), mass or unjust arrests, and the use of violence and torture in interrogation and detention settings (Haidar, 2021; Human Rights Watch, 2020).

Exposure of communities in Lebanon to chronic collective violence and displacement, compounded by a lack of access to economic resources and healthcare, has dire impacts on mental health, increasing psychosocial stress, hopelessness, and disrupting the *will to exist, live, and survive* (Kira et al., 2020). The vast majority of existing clinical psychological research conducted in Lebanon has been etic in nature (Pike, 1967), employing an outsider standpoint with the goal of assessing and measuring the deleterious consequences of collective violence and displacement for individuals living in Lebanon. Such studies have found high rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety among Lebanese (Karam et al., 2008; Shaar, 2013; Tayara, 2014), Palestinian (Khamis, 2019; Kheirallah et al., 2020), and Syrian communities (Kazour et al., 2017; Khamis et al., 2019). The impact of collective violence and displacement on individual mental health symptoms has been found to be additive (Dubow et al., 2010), compounded by lack of access to economic resources (Fayyad et al., 2017; Khamis, 2016), and buffered by social and family support (Fayyad et al., 2017; Jawad et al., 2008).

Although etic research highlights the adverse impacts of collective violence and displacement on individuals, it remains limited by its focus on individual mental health symptoms grounded in Eurocentric frameworks and measures of mental health, which often do not encompass community constructs of well-being or distress (Hinton & Lewis-Fernández, 2010; Rasmussen et al., 2014). This approach to research often does not contextualize traumatic exposures within the sociopolitical landscape, and as such, may provide a snapshot of individual mental health or coping without necessarily addressing the impact of these realities on collective narratives (Bosqui, 2020). Existing community narratives about experiences of collective violence and displacement, such as narratives around the Civil War, have often been silenced, dismissed, or misrepresented by dominant political forces (Foucault, 2003; Masalha, 2012l;

Sayigh, 2013). A lack of coherent, meaningful community narratives following collective trauma can create a diminished sense of cultural continuity (i.e., the degree to which communities engage in behavior that is consistent with shared cultural narratives), which may then lead to limited collective action to preserve and advance their cultural legacy (Chandler & Lowland, 2009). The disconnection and dispossession of community narratives of historical trauma for communities in Lebanon, along with exposure to ongoing, chronic collective violence and displacement, becomes a mechanism through which psychological growth and collective mobility are inhibited (Mohatt et al., 2014).

Community narratives also enable individuals to make meaning of their experiences and develop psychological frameworks through which to process their suffering (Frankl, 1965). Frankl (1963), in his autobiographical account of his time in a Nazi concentration camp, observed that the primary driving force in life is "man's search for meaning." He argued that it is the *will to meaning,* or the ability to create value out of all experiences, that is essential to coping with trauma and suffering. The importance of meaning making as a process that can facilitate healing and recovery was further developed by Kegan (1980) and McAdams (1989), who highlighted the ways in which meaning making can allow individuals to account for the psychological impact of traumatic or painful experiences. For events experienced collectively, providing opportunities for the collective construction and expression of community narratives is an essential step toward addressing and responding to needs around mental health and psychological well-being in the face of ongoing adversity and exposure to trauma.

Contributions from liberation psychology, grounded in a 'decolonized' approach to the production of knowledge, aptly situate explorations of community narratives for communities living in Lebanon (Martín-Baró, 1994). Liberation psychology argues that the struggle for

liberation against an oppressor fundamentally shapes the psychological experience of individuals and communities (Fanon, 2007; Martin Baró, 1994). It emphasizes the importance of exploring the sociopolitical underpinnings of structural violence and recovering historical memories relevant to community narratives (Rivera, 2020). Liberation psychology lends itself to an epistemology grounded in the lived experiences of communities. Grounding research in lived experiences can aid the development of clinically relevant psychological conceptualizations through community participatory methods of research that center the ways in which communities have come to experience, interpret, and respond to their social realities (Milich & Moughnieh, 2018; Torre et al., 2012). Community-based participatory approaches to research can also provide an opportunity to recalibrate power and equity in contexts of crisis (Afifi et al. 2020; Fine et al., 2021).

Existing Community-based Research in the Levant

A few community-based participatory studies on trauma surrounding collective violence and displacement, grounded in a liberatory approach to psychological research, have been conducted in the Levant region, mostly in Palestine (Afana et al, 2010; Atallah, 2017; Barakat & Phillipot, 2018; Hajj, 2022; Veronese et al., 2019; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2006; Simaan, 2017). Community-based participatory studies conducted in Palestine, related to but not directly applicable to the context of Lebanon, can help to inform the impact of chronic trauma exposure on the psychological experiences of communities in the Levant and their processes of adaptation. One qualitative study with key informants (e.g., political and religious leaders) in the Gaza Strip found that the magnitude of physical, emotional, and existential threats that Palestinians face led to a perceived breakdown in the boundary between events that are considered 'stressful' and those that are interpreted as traumatic. The study found that the trauma-related concept of *Sadma*

(meaning ‘shock’, the closest literal translation for the English word trauma) was used broadly to describe the social reality of Gaza. Other concepts, such as *Faji’ah* (tragedy) and *Musiba* (calamity) were used to describe varying levels of threat, loss, and distress following a ‘calibration process’ (Afana et al., 2010).

In a recent phenomenological study by Hajj (2022), which focused on the psychological impact of the Beirut Blast on injured victims, participants named themes of emotional numbing and somatic detachment following the blast. Collective existential and spiritual feelings of loss in association with community trauma were also found in an interview study by Barber (2016) among Palestinians living in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip. Barber (2016) described the construct of ‘feeling broken/destroyed’, characterized by feeling perpetual psychological and physical exhaustion, and suffering damage to self, spiritual, moral, and hopes or ambitions for the future. Additionally, in an exploration of the relationship between body, memory, and past violence in the narratives of Palestinian diaspora, Blachnicka-Ciacek (2020) draws on theories of ‘body memory’ (Casey, 2000), which challenged separations of body and mind and emphasized the ways in which experiences can be re-lived and re-experienced through the body.

Other community-driven concepts emphasize the importance of asserting agency and making meaning through the development of community narratives (Atallah, 2017; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2006). For example, one study employing 30 group and individual interviews with Palestinian adults living in refugee camps in the West Bank identified the concept of *awda* عودة, or return (Atallah, 2017). This psychological concept relates to *Hakk El-Awda* حق العودة, or the right of return, an ongoing point of political discourse for Palestine referring to the right of exiled Palestinians to return to their homeland. In the study, *Awda* was understood less as a hope of

physically returning to original lands, but rather as maintaining the connection to homeland through the revival and reproduction of cultural narratives as a way of enduring and coping with the ongoing traumatic loss and dispossession that Palestinian communities face due to the Israeli occupation (Atallah, 2017).

Another theme that is highlighted extensively in existing community-based studies is the role of political resistance and collective action in buffering the psychological impacts of collective violence (Atallah, 2017; Barakat & Phillipot, 2018; Simaan, 2017). Concepts of 'mukawama' (مقاومة), or resistance, and *sumud* (صمود), or perseverance and steadfastness, were found in studies done with olive farming families working in Palestinian villages (Simaan, 2017), Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza (Atallah, 2017; Veronese et al., 2019), and Syrian women displaced in Lebanon (Barakat & Phillipot, 2018). *Mukawama* and *Sumud*, characterized by ongoing cultural resistance and collective action, were understood as mechanisms of agency in the face of continuous uncertainty, loss, and bereavement. In contrast, other studies have explored the material and emotional costs of resistance and activism. Wispelwey and Jamai (2020) write about the ephemeral nature of both material and emotional gains of the period of mass mobilization following Palestine's Great March of Return, reflecting on. Segal (2016) further provided one potential analysis of the complexity of the relationship between activism and mental health, arguing that political activism in the face of mass oppression becomes fused with the notion of the self, which following failed attempts of resistance, leads to feelings of indeterminate loss and ambivalent attachment towards activism.

Arts-informed Research Approaches

The psychological understanding of lived experiences of communities that have been historically marginalized and continuously oppressed can also be deepened and strengthened by

integrating community-based participatory research with arts-informed or arts-based social research (Foster, 2015; Knowles & Cole, 2008). Arts-informed, participatory studies can not only elucidate rich narratives and reveal cultural concepts that are relevant to communities but also generate *embodied knowledge* (Knowles & Cole, 2008). Traditionally unaccepted by positivist research as a valid form of knowledge, *embodied knowledge* is knowledge reflected in moments of meaning making that are created "in the imaginative spaces created between the lines of a good book or an encounter with an evocative photograph, in an embodied response to a musical composition or interpretive dance" (Knowles & Cole, 2008, p. 59). An illustrative example of this is Rohrbach's (2018) study, which elucidated narratives of community members using Playback Theatre, a form of improvised theater in which community members are invited to share personal stories that are directly transformed onto the stage by actors, in Jenin, Palestine's Freedom Theatre (Rorhbach, 2018). In this way, social inquiries, beyond eliciting rich, relevant data that can inform clinical practice, also become living transformations and representations of *sumud,* opportunities to engage in moments of collective critical consciousness, meaning making, and cultural resistance. Using arts-based approaches can also facilitate the dissemination of study findings back to community members. For example, Bosqui et al. (2020) conducted a qualitative grounded theory study with adolescents living in Lebanon examining the effectiveness and acceptability of *Sumoud*, a comic book developed about responding to adversity and coping based on a systematic review of reviews on mechanisms of change for mental health and psychosocial interventions for children and adolescents affected by war and armed conflict (Bosqui & Marshoud, 2018).

Building on burgeoning community-based research in the region, the proposed study responded to urgent mental health needs in Lebanon by utilizing an arts-informed, community-

engaged approach to generate community narratives around sociopolitical experiences of collective violence. **The purpose of the proposed study was to elicit community-driven narratives around the psychological impact of sociopolitical realities for communities living in Lebanon.** This study posed two preliminary research questions:

(1) *What are the associations that artists, activists, and mental health workers have with the construct of collective violence as it pertains to communities living in Lebanon?*

(2) *What are some cultural concepts that artists, activists, and mental health workers engaging with communities in Lebanon identify to characterize their experiences of chronic collective violence and to describe their psychological impact?*

(3) *What are narratives of meaning making around collective violence that artists, activists, and mental health workers have observed in their work with communities in Lebanon?*

CHAPTER 3

Method

This study utilized a Participatory Action Research (PAR) framework grounded in a qualitative, phenomenological approach to launch a collaborative inquiry into the lived experiences of collective violence in Lebanon, by initiating a process of reflection and action in collaboration with mental health workers, artists, and activists in Lebanon. PAR, a framework for approaching community research influenced by the work of Freire (1996) and principles of liberation psychology (Martín-Baró, 1998), prioritizes the participation of community members as co-investigators in the research at each level of the research process (i.e., the construction of research methods, research design, analysis, dissemination). It argues that research with communities can be a vehicle of transformation, and transformative justice, through engagement in collaborative inquiry (Rivera, 2020; Torre & Fine, 2012). It does by creating 'contact zones', or social spaces where differently situated people across varying relationships to power collaborate in service of a shared pursuit (Torre et al., 2008). Phenomenology is an approach to qualitative research which aims at understanding the "essence" of a certain phenomenon. It holds certain principles around the research process, including valuing an idiographic process that centers the subjectivities of its participants and holding the double heuristic, where the researcher is making meaning of the participant making meaning of a lived experience.

Approval was initially granted by the University Institutional Review Board contingent on receiving approval in Lebanon, the location of the study. Approval protocols in Lebanon necessitated a review by a local Institutional Review Board, which was granted by the American University of Beirut. Following this, the study was reviewed and approved by the National Mental Health Program of the Ministry of Public Health.

Reflexivity

Positionality is instrumental to all research, particularly research that seeks to 'democratize' access to and construction of data and knowledge. Herr and Anderson (2015) describe a 'continuum of positionality', highlighting ways in which a researcher can hold at once 'insider' and 'outsider' positions when conducting research with a group of people, emphasizing the dynamic nature of positionality. I, the researcher, am a doctoral student (she/her/hers) in Clinical Psychology who was raised in Lebanon. I was born in Jordan, holding a Jordanian passport, and my grandparents, having originally immigrated from Bosnia to Palestine, were displaced from Palestine into Jordan. My positionality in the research is also inherently personal, in that I have had direct exposure to collective violence in Lebanon. In this way, I hold an insider identity in the study. For the purposes of this study, I partnered with community organizations to which I was an outsider. Having lived in New York for the past nine years, I also hold a geographical outsider positionality and enter the research from the position of a student within a Western graduate institution. The research team also included four psychology students who volunteered as research assistants and participated in data transcription and analysis. All research assistants were Arabic speaking, three were Lebanese and one was Egyptian/Syrian. Two of the research assistants were undergraduate students located in Lebanon, one was an Arab-American graduate student who was raised and located in New Jersey, and one was a Lebanese graduate student currently located in Washington DC.

To ground and guide me through the inevitable tensions that this brings, I engaged in a process of reflexivity, the process of articulating and acknowledging the perspectives, values, and biases that permeate the research process (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). This entailed keeping a reflexivity journal where I used a "brain dumping" technique, sharing free-flowing thoughts

and reflections on the research process intermittently before, during, and after data collection and analysis. There was a total of twenty reflexive entries between July 14th, 2021, and February 19th, 2023. My hope was to document consistently, following each interview, focus group, or analysis session. This hope did not come to fruition, perhaps partly due to one of the main themes that arose from the reflexivity, of traumatic avoidance, which will be discussed below. A subset of the reflexive journal entries can be found in the Appendix. In reviewing the entries, several themes felt significant to me and to the identities I held throughout this process.

The first theme was a consistent fear of failure, of getting it 'wrong', that plagued me throughout the research process, at times paralyzing my forward movement. I journaled about an 'imposter syndrome', a fear that I, despite my best efforts, had no idea what my community was experiencing or what they needed, and that I was simply faking my way through the process. Some of these fears came from the tension I held between the process of inquiry that has been ingrained in me in Western hegemonic knowledge, one that glorifies and idolizes quantitative methods and a priori hypotheses while questioning the validity of more idiographic, qualitative methods.

An exacerbating factor to these feelings of doubt was the physical distance from Lebanon that I had throughout most of the research process. My reflexive entries made it apparent that I was most engaged, inspired, and confident in the validity of my research when I was in the country or engaging directly with my research participants. In contrast, after returning to New York following my in-person data collection phase, I wrote about the absurd distinction between reality in New York City and Beirut, a reality I found difficult to overcome and surpass. When I returned to New York City, the traumatic re-experiencing was replaced with a traumatic avoidance, evidenced first and foremost by my lack of reflective journaling throughout most of

my time working on this study while in New York. During one particularly significant moment of reflection, following the analysis of an interview of a Syrian activist, I noticed myself, while in the process of analyzing the last fifteen minutes, dozing off, distracted. I half-heartedly attended to the content he was sharing – when asked if there was anything else he would like to add that I hadn't asked about, he continued to list off ways in which Syrians were subjected to collective violence in Lebanon. In these moments, I understood the true complexity of being an insider-outsider in this type of research – so much an insider that I was bogged down in my own traumatic impacts, so much an outsider to his Syrian experiences that my mind refused to hold and connect to the experiences of those more marginalized. It felt too heavy to hold, almost burdensome.

Yet, despite the heavy traumatic load, bureaucratic hurdles, and avoidance, the sense of meaning and purpose which drove this research study was found at the heart of its participatory design, in the connections made and the brilliant souls that it brought into my purview. The collaborations I sought to build forced me to confront the tensions that exist, between academic accomplishment and authentic community partnerships, between what can be considered data and what is considered action, movement, or change, and between systematic inquiry and readaptation. Every conversation I had forced me to reconsider and rework my frame. The design felt loose and everchanging up till the last minute (perhaps even until this very moment). In many ways, as one of my dissertation committee members aptly put it, that is the indicator of true participation. In making these connections, and opening my eyes, ears, and soul, to the decades of meaning making that activists, artists, and mental health workers whose feet have been planted firmly in the soil of our homeland have been doing, building space and community, this reflexivity process helped me recognize the true intention and purpose of this study and this

work, a realization I had made during the early phases of the project, aptly forget again and again and was reminded of to hold, document, and initiative a process of collective meaning making.

Pre-Data Collection: Creating a Community Advisory Board

Prior to the beginning of data collection, I conducted preliminary field networking to identify organizations of activists, community organizers, mental health workers, and artists located in Lebanon who have experience working with communities around the topic of collective violence, with a particular focus on those using arts-based approaches in Lebanon. Following this initial scoping phase, I created a community advisory board whose role was to assist in shaping the methodology, analysis, and dissemination of the study. The advisory board was made of four members: (1) an ethnographic researcher with a background in political science, development, and creative writing (2) a participatory action researcher with a background in applied theater who was undergoing a PAR study with domestic migrant workers in Lebanon, (3) the director of a project that generated narratives of Lebanese women with the Civil War utilizing participatory theater, and (4) the program director of an organization that matches skilled young adults with short-term job opportunities who had hired four facilitators to launch a photo-voice project[1]. I met with the community advisory board virtually over Zoom prior to data collection, introduced the role of the advisory board, provided an overview of the project and proposed methods, and received feedback on the methods. During this meeting, discussions around the scope of the study, representation of different demographic groups, and clarification around the research questions were had. During this pre-collection meeting, it was noted that the scope of the construct of collective violence (and at the time displacement was

[1] This photovoice project was done in collaboration with the principal investigator, who helped recruit and train the four facilitators, provided weekly consultation calls throughout the photovoice project, and assisted the facilitators and program in putting together the final photovoice exhibition.

included in the construct as part of the proposal plan) was quite broad, as it may relate to a myriad of different events which communities may have made sense of differently. I decided to narrow the construct simply to collective violence without including experiences of displacement. Another advisory board member was concerned with the representation of the multiplicity of marginalized identities in the study and suggested targeted sampling of different groups; this specific member was working on a PAR project with domestic migrant workers in Lebanon and was hoping that at least one focus group could include domestic migrant workers. I explained that due to the already limited sample size, the plan was to recruit a snowball sample based on identified collaborating organizations. The limitations of the sample and the voices not represented in this iteration of the study would be addressed in the write-up of the study. Additionally, during this advisory board, members began to identify research participants that would be a good fit to be interviewed for the study.

Data Collection

Following the initial advisory board meeting, I began the process of recruitment for data collection. Data collection consisted of ten individual in-depth interviews and four focus groups.

Individual In-depth Interviews

A total of ten in-depth individual interviews were conducted between January 2022 and May 2022. For those identified as potential key informants through advisory board members, advanced verbal consent was gathered from advisory board members for potential key informants to be contacted via email or telephone. Following this, potential research participants were contacted via email or telephone. Following the interviews, a snowball sampling approach was utilized by asking key informants to suggest potential research participants. I set up a time to

conduct the in-depth interview in a private space most convenient to the participant. The first three in-depth interviews were conducted in person in Lebanon in an enclosed, private office space. An additional seven in-depth interviews were conducted after I returned to New York City over Zoom, also while both I and the participant were in enclosed, private spaces. The interviews were conducted in a mix of Arabic and English. In six of the interviews, the participant's preferred language was Arabic, whereas, in four of them, the preferred language was English. The interview sample consisted of three activists, two therapists, two artists with a theater background, and three creative arts therapists. Eight of the interview participants were Lebanese citizens, one was a Lebanese-Armenian citizen, and one was a Syrian refugee. Interview participants were between 20 and 50 years old.

Focus Groups

Four focus groups were conducted between January 2022 and May 2022. Recruitment for focus groups occurred through collaboration with community organizations that utilized arts-based approaches to engage community members in discourse and meaning-making around collective violence in Lebanon. These were identified in the initial scoping phase and with the support of the advisory board and consisted of both professionals and community members. I contacted organization directors who then gathered advanced verbal consent prior to connecting me with the potential focus group participants to facilitate scheduling or in one case (Focus Group 3), scheduling the focus group themselves. Four focus groups were conducted, two in person and two virtually over Zoom.

> *Focus group 1* was conducted in Arabic over Zoom with four community members (all women) that had engaged in a participatory theater project focused on generating and documenting the narratives of Lebanese women around the Civil War.

Focus group 2 [2] was conducted in English person with two writers (one man and one woman) who had participated in a writing workshop focused on generating narratives around living with the realities of Lebanon in the years since COVID-19.

Focus group 3 was conducted in person in Arabic with twelve members (five women and seven men) of an improvisational theater troop that conducts playback theater sessions with communities around Lebanon.

Focus Group 4 was conducted in Arabic over Zoom with four facilitators (three women and one man) of the photo-voice project conducted with communities around Lebanon on the topic of collective violence.

Overall Sample

The overall sample consisted of 32 participants, predominantly Lebanese citizens, with 5 Syrian refugees/residents and one Lebanese-Armenian. All participants were over 18 years old. Income ranged widely among participants; with the lowest bracket being those who made no steady income and the highest bracket being around $3,000/month. Additional demographic breakdowns of the sample can be found in Table 1.

Informed consent and demographic questionnaires were gathered from all research participants. The interviews and focus groups both followed a semi-structured script which began with asking participants what their initial associations were with the construct of collective violence as it applies to communities in Lebanon. Following this prompts focused on eliciting participants' understandings of the psychological impact of collective violence, narratives they have witnessed existing within communities they have engaged with, and specific language they

[2] Whereas focus groups typically refer to groups of at least three people, Graham and Bryan (2020) note that two person focus groups tend to be more common in dissertation research.

have heard to describe the impact of collective violence on mental health. Interviews and focus groups were conducted in English or Arabic, based on preference. Interviews and focus groups were audio recorded using two mechanisms (e.g., an audio recorder and a phone recorder). Key informants and community circle participants were compensated USD 15 for their participation in the project. For data collected in person, funds were distributed directly by me following the interview or focus group. For data collected virtually, funds were distributed by me or a research assistant through Western Union.

Data Analysis

Interviews and focus groups were audio recorded, digitally stored, and password protected. Only the research assistants and I had access to the audio recordings. Audio recordings from the ten interviews and one of the focus groups were transcribed by research assistants and de-identified by the principal investigator. All research assistants completed the CITI Human Subjects Research and Responsible Conduct of Research training. Weekly meetings were held with research assistants that included training on research transcription and analysis. Three focus groups were transcribed by an AI digital software Sonix. Deedose (2023), version 9.0.83, a web application for managing, analyzing, and presenting qualitative and mixed-method research data was used to manage, store, and code data. Two of the research assistants who had assisted in transcribing the data also collaborated in data analysis. Four interviews were initially analyzed using the interpretative phenomenological analysis method outlined by Smith and Nizza (2022). Transcripts of interviews were reviewed, and I took exploratory notes which then were used to generate personal experiential statements describing the participant's experience of collective violence in Lebanon. These personal experiential statements were clustered and grouped under common group experiential themes. This process was done for three other interviews. Research

assistants received the transcripts and groups of experiential themes and coded the interviews as well. The researcher assistants and I met weekly for 16 weeks to discuss the analysis, generate other themes, and agree on existing themes. Following the phenomenological analysis of the first four interviews separately and generating four sets of grouped personal experiential themes, the themes were cross-analyzed and combined into an initial draft of a unified code book. The rest of the interviews and focus groups were then analyzed using the unified codebook, which was shaped and reorganized based on ongoing analysis. When all data had been analyzed and a codebook was synthesized, I met with the community advisory board and shared the preliminary findings. Advisory board members shared feedback on codes, highlighting specific relevant codes, asking for clarification around unclear codes, and making links and relationships between different codes in the data. These advisory board meetings were centered on the idea of praxis, a continuous cycle of reflection and action. As such, the advisory board members and I first reflected on the process of the study and provided feedback on the content of the data, then brainstormed ways to disseminate research findings more broadly to the public.

CHAPTER 4

Results

This community participatory study captured and documented the narratives of activists, artists, and mental health workers engaged in community work around collective violence in Lebanon. The qualitative data gathered through interviews and focus groups was analyzed using an interpretive, phenomenological approach, resulting in a unified qualitative codebook. Four main themes were elucidated from the data. The first theme summarized the historical and social markers of collective violence that participants brought forward and synthesized the main features of collective violence that were shared among these markers. The second theme identified participants' understandings of the psychological impact that collective violence has on communities in Lebanon, with particular attention given to culturally constructed concepts of distress and local idioms that describe this impact. The third theme explored the mechanisms of defense against meaning-making in the face of chronic and continued exposure to collective violence, explaining how participants, in their observations of the discourse of communities and in attempting to make sense of their own experiences, have come to conclude that there is no room or space for the process of meaning making. The final theme explores the ways in which community work that activists, artists, and mental health workers engage in with communities can make space for meaning making, consolidating the shared challenges and successes that participants across all three domains named, while also highlighting the unique avenues and narratives within activism, art, and mental health.

Theme 1. Historical Markers and Features of Collective Violence

To address the first research question, the first theme attempted to clarify the scope of the construct of collective violence in Lebanon. Participants were asked "Where does your mind

go?" when sharing their initial associations with the construct of collective violence based on their experiences and those of communities they have engaged with in Lebanon. *Figure 1* presents a visual timeline reflecting the markets that participants shared in this study. Most participants cited specific, historical markers of collective violence that have afflicted communities living in Lebanon. In particular, the three most present markers that were identified by most all participants were: the current, ongoing economic collapse (2019 – present day) (14/14 transcripts), the August 4th explosion (2020) (12/14 transcripts), and the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990) (12/14 transcripts). Other frequently identified markers included instances of oppression by both local and foreign military and non-military armed groups particularly in the face of mass resistance, such as those following the October 2019 revolution (5/14) or during the 2006 war with Israel (5/14). Less frequently mentioned but present were other specific historical markers of collective violence, including targeted assassinations of politicians (1/14), a siege of the city by the internal sectarian armed forces in 2007 (1/14), an infamous local neighborhood battles between opposing sectarian groups (4/14).

In addition to these specific historical markers, most participants also spoke about more embedded social and political factors that form the undercurrent of ongoing experiences of collective violence in Lebanon. Participants described the underlying sectarian system in Lebanon as a breeding ground for collective violence, one that only promoted the widespread availability of arms resulting in an all-too-common occurrence of armed violence (*Alsilah El-Motafallit*), but also perpetuated ineffective governance that bled into participant's experience of violence in daily life when, for example, attending public educational institutions, receiving support from the humanitarian non-profit governmental organizations (NGOs), or encountering the justice system. Another frequently cited social factor was the oppressive treatment and

discrimination against marginalized populations, such as refugee populations or queer communities. One statement, shared by one participant with a half-hearted humorous scoff halfway through one interview, concluded their explanation of the multitude of different ways in which collective violence is experienced in Lebanon:

> *"So, yeah… the collective violence is riding us, and it is at the heart of our current affliction."* - Individual Interview, Participant 4

The statement helps frame the synthesis of some of the main features of collective violence in Lebanon: that participants experienced collective violence in Lebanon as *intergenerational*, *institutionally and politically entrenched*, and *perpetual*. Additionally, participants emphasized that collective violence in Lebanon extends beyond physical or material forms of violence, experienced as a *psychological* form of violence.

Participants maintained that communities in Lebanon carry not only the current experiences of collective violence but also those of the generations that came before them to an inheritance of past experiences of collective violence, such as those experienced during the Civil War between 1975 – 1990. One participant stated:

> *No matter how many times we say, "We're done with this, leave us alone, we're a post-war generation," the fact that we never dealt with the civil war correctly, in the sense that we never had a proper reconciliation process… This stays with us. It stays with the people who lived it, and it stays with their children who haven't lived it, and their children's children who haven't lived it whether directly or indirectly… by directly I*

mean, I think the repercussions of the civil war are part of our daily politics that is affecting the people who haven't lived the civil war. And indirectly as in all the stress, generational trauma that is being transferred from one generation to another, from one group to another etcetera. - Individual Interview, Participant 1

The intergenerational transmission of experiences of collective violence highlighted how experiences of collective violence in Lebanon were directly tied to an entrenched political regime and institutionalized within governmental policies and legislative practices. During a focus group, a playback facilitator responded to the initial prompt:

I would say Lebanon, the country we live in is, in itself, a form of collective violence through the authority and government, something that is institutionalized in the governmental regime. – Focus Group 3 Participant

An interview participant similarly noted:

First thing, I mean, we can talk about these institutions, the apparatus of the government, the military institution. – Individual Interview, Participant 4

In eleven of the transcripts, participants discussed the direct and indirect intergenerational inheritance of the civil war, not only due to the state's failure to reconciliate or take accountability for the violence experienced during the civil war, leading to an inheritance of the psychological load of the violence experiences but also due its proactive maintenance of civil war institutions and structures. By failing to enact proper post-war reforms and move the country

towards progress and growth, the state has continued to enact daily experiences of collective violence, the perpetual effects of which participants expressed enduring constantly. For example, one participant framed the economic collapse and its repercussions as a form of ongoing psychological warfare, stating:

> *This war, for me, is a psychological war. Or we can say it's an economic war, or distinct wars, including a material war and two armies fighting. It's a war, we can barely endure it. It's much more severe than a material war. At least in a material war, well, you'd be psychologically relaxed, or at the very least, you adapt. You'd think, "If a bomb falls on me, I'm going to die." You don't die every day. Do you know what I mean? Every idea, every stressor, every moment, every year. The psychological war kills every second, every minute, in this world.* – Individual Interview, Participant 6

In summary, participants framed the construct of collective violence, for the purposes of this study, as extending beyond any singular event or set of events, instead describing a persistent and daunting reality of collective violence, which is rooted in the very infrastructure that makes up the political and institutional backbone of the country, and which bleeds into almost any daily mental, material, or social experience that a community member living in Lebanon might have. This framing then allowed participants to explore prompted questioning of the psychological impacts of this collectively violent reality on the communities they have engaged with in Lebanon, and inevitably, on themselves.

Theme 2. Psychological Impact of Chronic Collective Violence

To address the second research question, participants were prompted, following their response to the initial questions about where their mind goes when thinking of the construct of collective violence in Lebanon, to describe the ways in which they observed or experienced the individual and collective psychological impacts of collective violence on communities in Lebanon. Participants reflected on a multitude of different ways in which they have both observed and experienced the psychological repercussions of existing within this reality of collective violence. The interviews and focus groups were conducted in a mix of English and Arabic, and as such, some participants, especially those trained within Western educational systems, spoke about psychological mental health effects in English, using Western-generated psychological terms, such as anxiety, depression, and trauma. Others, particularly those who were embedded within Arabic-speaking educational institutions, offered up culturally specific constructs in Arabic. During the process of analysis, I initially coded these separately and then attempted to create relevant links and parallels between related English-driven and Arabic-driven constructs were applicable.

All participants emphasized that the current reality of collective violence in Lebanon has profound and unrelenting psychological impacts on both individual and collective mental health. Participants reflected on affective, intrapsychic, and relational difficulties in daily life.

The Affects of Perpetual Dehumanization: Kaher and Daght Nafsi

When discussing the realities of the economic collapse, including the challenges of jumping through daily hoops to secure basic needs, participants described a process of dehumanization that was humiliating to endure. One participant described:

There is a total disrespect to your existence as a human being by the system that you are living in and getting used to this disrespect is humiliating. Even if you are not aware of it, even if you don't care about it, in the back of your brain it is putting you down, it is making you think of yourself as a lesser person, a lesser human being and that is happening every day. – Individual Interview, Participant 1

Participants went into detail to explain the ways in which these constant daily pressures and dehumanizing experiences are present the minute they wake up and have to figure out if and how to secure electricity for their home, fuel for their cars, or their own money from their banks. This stress is reflected in stark negative affective shifts. In ten out of the fourteen transcripts, more than any other code under this theme, participants describe chronic feelings of irritability and anger. One participant described:

I am so angry. I'm so constantly irritable. My kids ask me, why are you so irritable? I mean you see it around, when you drive, when they talk, the impatience. And also - on the other side, you see this giving up, this passivity. This "okay this is how it is; we cannot do anything about it." Go to the supermarket, try to discuss prices, I can't do anything - this is how it is. – Individual Interview, Participant 2

A term that was commonly used to refer to the affective impact of a build-up of chronic stress and the daily pressure of realities of collective violence is *kaher*. Participants used the word *kaher* to reflect an increasing emotional reactivity to the loss of dignity and

dehumanization that is being experienced. For example, one participant described the reaction to the excessive use of force and tear gas against a small, unified group of organized protestors made up of the parents of the victims of the August 4th explosion, who often take to the streets to demand justice and accountability for the loss of their family members to the blast, stating:

> *You know the parents of the August 4th victims? Usually, when someone is the parent of a victim, this gives them some form of legitimacy, or respect, which allows their reactions to be valid socially because they are the parents of those who died, or the mother or father of a martyr or whatever… So when these people become the victims of state oppression or threats, and they are the victims… this really increases feelings of 'kaher'.*
> – Individual Interview, Participant 9

Participants also linked a build-up of *kaher* with an externalization of aggression, leading to increases in community and street violence. *Kaher* is an internal, affective shift that is felt collectively, but which also leads individuals to act impulsively and aggressively. One participant shared a recent event:

> *I don't know if you heard this but a few days ago there was a murder in a town in the south of Lebanon and people began shooting at one other and the person trying to mediate the conflict died (as usual). How did the conflict start? From a laundry line. Two women were fighting about one hanging her laundry and how it is dripping down on the other woman's balcony, and the men intervened, and that was that…* - Individual Interview, Participant 9

Another participant described her understanding of a process of projection of this experience of *kaher* on to the other, reflecting:

> *When you are being exposed to oppression and murder and threats and curses when you are already viewing yourself as the victim, this increases kaher. This is where collective violence becomes projected onto the rest of the community. The root of collective violence is from the system, but people begin to hate each other and violence transforms. It's the like person who is makhour (feeling 'kaher') and his circumstances improve a little bit, identifies in some way with this 'kaher', and turns against the person who is still makhour. He becomes an ally to the 'kaher'.* – Individual Interview, Participant 4

Notably, Syrian participants, in addition to the chronic collective stressors faced by all those living within the collapse in Lebanon, described facing an added burden due to the discrimination and oppression of refugees, and the disdain they experienced towards them by individuals and the system alike. Individually, this process of dehumanization experienced by all participants was maximized for those with this added marginalized national identity who are renegaded to second-hand citizen status. One Syrian activist described one instance, waiting in line to renew governmental papers on a rainy day, lines of people standing outside without being provided any shelter from the rain. Systematically, an activist highlighted, Syrians are persistently robbed of job opportunities that allow them to advance their economic standing, regardless of education and skill level, resulting in an inability to build the cornerstones of a livable reality. Another participant noted the impact of this dehumanization on community members' perception of their identity, and their connection to it, stating:

I’ve heard at least three people say the same sentence. One was a young Syrian artist, the Syrian workers we work with, and a girl in the Syrian camp. The three of them said the same thing. “I am tired of being Syrian, I want to take a break from being Syrian, I want a moment when I'm not Syrian.” To take from being Syrian means to take a break from eyes that constantly watching you. You need to take a break from being Syrian because this is part of my identity that cannot be separated from my daily life. – Individual Interview, Participant 3

A similar sense of erasure of identity and self was also evident in one Syrian participant’s narrative, who described feeling a lack of existence in the world, stating:

It’s this feeling that you are disconnected., you don’t exist in any place on earth, away from human rights, international human rights, and the global protocols that concern civil, political, economic, and social rights. – Individual Interview, Participant 6

One construct that was brought forward in four transcripts grouping the impact of this chronic daily living stress and persistent dehumanization is the Arabic term *Daght Nafsi*, a form of ‘psychological pressure.’ Feelings of chronic pressure to achieve basic daily needs leave community members feeling as though they are stuck living in a pressure cooker. One activist explained the use of the adjective *daght nafsi* to describe how a person remains *madghut*:

Madghut is a term describing a person who is burdened with significant problems and struggles to cope with them. They try to find solutions, but they are unable to stop and

> *think clearly. They are in need of making decisions but lack the ability to mentally process the options. They may use the excuse of external factors to justify their inaction. The issues they face accumulate, and solutions seem difficult or impossible to find. They do not trust that anyone can help them address these problems. Therefore, they must make many decisions, but they need to be prepared to make them without being able to fully understand the consequences. To express the severity of their situation, they may use exaggerated responses. This exaggerated reaction is as if something is being released, even if it is only temporarily, because they will still be trapped by their problems. For example, if we talk about a "balloon," their problems are like the air in the balloon, and even if they release some air, the problems still remain. But you are using exaggeration as a coping mechanism.* – Individual Interview, Participant 9

Individual Depression and Collective 'Ihbat'

Eight of the transcripts were coded for utilizing descriptions of textbook symptoms of individual depression to explain the impact of realities of chronic collective violence on individual mental health, naming the ways in which the increased psychological pressure has led to communities becoming more vocal in individual mental health difficulties and feelings of depression. One participant shared:

> *This is extremely tiring. People feel exhausted, people feel depressed, and they say it. Maybe they don't say I have a mental health issue, but they say I'm depressed, I'm exhausted, I'm tired, I'm drained.* – Participant 7, Activist

Another participant shared the impacts of one particularly jarring experience waiting for fuel, describing how she sat in a car for eight hours to fill her car up with gas, needing to pee badly. She named this incident as a precipitant for a stark episode of depression:

> *I mean, it breaks something in you, actually. It really does. It makes you like not to be cliche, but it makes you really not the same going through these things is because yeah, it did get worse since April. But we forget though. We forget that it was that bad, you know. But it actually was that bad. And that day I queued for 8 hours was, you know, after that I decided to go back to therapy because it was the first time where I found myself thinking, God, I wish I could, I would die. Not like [active] suicidal thoughts, but thinking, wow, I cannot actually deal with - like, it's easier if I'm not alive, not like wanting to kill myself. But for the first time ever in my life, I actually found myself praying, which was another thing. Like, suddenly I found God again.* – Focus Group 2 Participant

Extending beyond individual impacts, participants also reflected on the impact of this reality of collective violence on the collective experience and well-being of communities in Lebanon. In eight of the transcripts, the construct of *Ihbat* emerged. *Ihbat* reflected a collective experience of dejectedness and hopelessness that participants noticed happening at the societal level. One focus group participant explained:

> *Almost everyone experiences Ihbat, feeling defeated, with no ambition or drive, as if there is no vision for the future or any work or even a small glimmer of hope. Ihbat prevails, it is the most common response.* – Focus Group 4 Participant

Another focus group participant emphasized *Ihbat* as one of the main psychological impacts of collective violence, linking it to the intergenerational transmission of unprocessed violence, reflecting:

> *I feel that the first thing that collective violence causes is Ihbat. The collective violence is widespread and inherited, it goes back 1400 years. The first thing it does is create roots for ongoing violent behavior, so even in your upbringing, you are taught that it is inherited and that it begets violence. This is closely related to customs and traditions, even to the point that it is peer pressure from dead people. For me, this causes a great deal of Ihbat, because if something has been going on for 1400 years, it stays with you. This in itself has given rise to violence. It has affected and been passed down through generations, such that violence begets even more violence, rather than leading society or individuals to work on the issue in a way that starts with the last person in line. Therefore, there is a lot of Ihbat that leads to a sense of loss, because as an individual, I am always confused about my situation, my desires become non-existent. desires become non-existent, canceled out because your survival poses a greater danger, and you must take options that you do not want, but are forced to because the available options are not viable. I feel that Ihbat is a big word that encompasses other characteristics like sadness, grief, and despair.* – Focus Group 3 Participant

'Civil War Reactions': How the Body Kept the Score

While some participants were pulled to focus and reflect on the impacts of the economic collapse and the daily reality of embedded collective violence, others emphasized the impacts of specific events, such as the more recent August 4th explosion in 2020. One notable theme that

was present in ten of the transcripts was how people described an instinctive survival response to the explosion, which several participants linked to being rooted in the transmission of traumatic responses from the civil war. One participant stated:

> *The first reaction I saw in the streets here is maybe 5-10 minutes later when everyone knew it was an explosion in the port, almost everyone got their brooms and started sweeping the debris. And in my head, it is wow yeah, I mean if this is a reaction for something this big, it's definitely not…it doesn't come from the last 10 or 15 or 20 years, this is something that has been happening. These people have had to sweep the floor many times you know to get to where they are now and it's a second nature thing now. You know get the broom, sweep it, and let's continue. And this is exactly what was happening here***.** – Participant 1

Several participants named instinctive 'civil war' mechanisms which kicked in when faced with a new incident of collective violence. Two participants shared almost an identical anecdote, of how it had been ingrained in them to keep any glass windows partially opened at home, to protect the glass from shattering in case of an explosion. They both marveled at how these instinctive practices, transmitted to them from the civil war, partially protected them and their homes after the August 4th explosion.

Dissociation

Another theme that emerged in six transcripts was the different ways in which participants described, particularly in the recent period following the August 4th explosion and

collapse, patterns of dissociation and disconnection from the body. Reflecting on a series of over 200 playback theater performances that she had done with groups of people who were impacted by the August 4th explosion, one participant shared:

> *Many people say that 'we are not ourselves', especially those that experienced physical damage, they continue to talk about this dissociation from the body, and about themselves as though they are not themselves. There are a lot who said that at the end of the day, they try to visualize how they lived that day, try to imagine where their body was, they can't remember where their body is, what they are eating, if they're gaining or losing weight, what's changing in their body. They say 'I'm dead, and I've died many times since the explosion. I died, I am not here, this is not my life, it's a gift from God.' And even when they are praising this, calling it a blessing and being thankful, the subtext is 'this is being handed to me, this is not my real life'.* – Individual Interview, Participant 3

This was also evident in the interviews themselves when asking prompts about the impact of chronic collective violence on the body. One participant struggled to answer my prompt around this, stating:

> *I don't think I answered your question because I don't really know what happens in my body. I can know my thoughts, I can know my reactions, I can know my observations. But in my own body, I don't…But I think maybe our postures are affected, maybe the way we walk is affected, the way we run is affected.* – Individual Interview, Participant 1

Another participant shared a dissociative state they inhabited after they had to cue for eight hours to fill up their gas tank:

> *I definitely remember that after that for, like, a few days, actually. It was quite scary, I'll tell you that because I was. And again, it was the first time that ever happened to me. But I was and I'm realizing it's the first time I thought, like I've talked about it in therapy, of course, but not like the other people. But I was kind of in a catatonic state for a few days after that. Like really not talking, not eating, not actually. We spoke about that, too. I told you about that time. I waited 8 hours for gas. So I was it was a bit like I couldn't recognize, like, I'm not like this usually. I couldn't recognize myself. And now every time something happens, I go back into that state. So every time, like, for instance, renewing my passport was another like big moment where I kind of like, really regress basically back into the state of like, again, dissociative, I guess, but not like symptomatic in the way that like people hallucinate or whatever dissociative means clinically. But, but just in the state of like, like really not inhabiting your body anymore because there's nothing there, you know? So in that way. It just feels like. It's weird because there's such calmness too. So I was thinking because it's because I've had panic attacks and it's not that there's no palpitations, there is no if anything, it's like the opposite. Yeah. It's like an inhibited state of being*. – Focus Group 2 Participant

Ro'b: Living in Terror

In contrast to experiences of dissociation, participants also described increased fear, anxiety, and panic in response to periods of high exposure to collective violence, such as

following the August 4th explosion or during the period of mass resistance in October 2019 when the military was using excessive state force against protestors. One participant shared that terror was a commonly shared experience for adolescents during one playback theater performance, sharing:

> *In one playback session, in a school with children between the ages of 16 and 18, the whole session, all they talked about how much terror they feel everyday. The word "ro'b (terror)" is associated with moments of violence, where we become scared and run. Maybe 10 times the word "ro'b, ro'b, ro'b" came up - we are terrified, we sleep in our rooms and we are terrified, I changed the location of my bed because if I look out the window, I get terrified. The ro'b lives within their rooms, in their houses, in their beds*. – Individual Interview, Participant 3

Perpetual Uncertainty and Compulsive Behaviors

In eight of the transcripts, participants describe a complete loss of predictability or certainty due to the nature of reality and the persistent risk of being exposed to collective violence at any moment. One participant stated:

> *And for me is, I can't plan. Like if you tell me, can I see you in two days, I'm very scared to tell you yes. Which is like even if it's something I really like to do, I'm so scared. I have this anxiety of like I can't make plans; I don't know what's going to happen. I don't know what I'm going to wake up to today*. - Individual Interview, Participant 8

In six of the transcripts, participants also described patterns of compulsive ritualistic behaviors that people utilize to cope with the total loss of predictability and to gain a sense of order and control. One participant linked different forms of addiction and compulsive behaviors to the persistent reality of collective violence, reflecting:

> *Everyone has compulsive and repetitive behaviors and a need to escape. Their entire social lives revolve around food, smoking, marijuana, drugs, sports, or alcohol. It's one of those things, really. I can't think of anyone in my life who doesn't have one or two or three of these addictions, and that means a lot. Compulsive behaviors are very clear, and it's obvious when the addiction intensifies based on the current situation. Most people don't see what's happening, but when someone with a bit of expertise zooms out, they can clearly see that this is compulsive behavior. We are all in this vortex of compulsion. We are facing all types of violence that were mentioned earlier, which makes us feel like we need to escape. For example, all of our mothers have a compulsion to clean, seriously, that's how we are. But we also have different things, smoking, some drugs, video games.* - Focus Group 3 Participant

Theme 3. "No Room for Meaning Making": When the Need to Survive Overshadows Meaning Making

To address the second research question, participants were then asked how communities ascribe meaning to chronic collective violence and the relevant narratives they felt have emerged from communities they have engaged with around the construct of collective violence in

Lebanon. In eight of the transcripts, participants maintained that it is not possible to make meaning of the current experience and reality of collective violence in Lebanon, due to its ongoing nature and the need to survive. One participant shared:

> *I don't think people are making sense of it. It's just that they have no choice but to continue their life. So, it's not something that we're being able to cope with and to close the page and continue, but we have no other choice but to survive. By surviving means continue trying to bring some normality into a country where all kinds of normality don't exist.* – Individual Interview, Participant 7

Another participant noted how living in a constant state of emergency necessitates being in survival mode, not allowing for the more reflective process of meaning making:

> *I'm in it. I'm living it. So, yeah. I don't think anyone has a narrative that is reflective as we were talking about earlier, because now all the narratives are emergency response narratives. Since we're in the emergency, we are not in a reflective, in a reflection phase now.* – Individual Interview, Participant 1

Instead of processes of effective meaning making, most participants shared the ways in which there are factors, both at the level of the collective and the level of the state, that obstruct the ability to effectively engage in meaning making processes, including the state's failure to take accountability and facilitate meaning making for past collective violence experienced by

communities, *Al-Ta'ayush,* or the maladaptive adaptability to collective violence, and the mass exodus of a large portion of the population who are leaving the country.

State Lack of Accountability

In nine of the transcripts, participants linked the inability to make meaning to the state's refusal to take accountability for its role in perpetuating collective violence in communities. Specifically, participants shared ways in which this lack of accountability was intentional following the civil war, as a way of maintaining power and authority over communities. One participant, reflecting on whether communities have made meaning of the fifteen years of civil war, stated:

> *We haven't done that. I mean we haven't done that for many reasons. We haven't done that first because I think… wow… we haven't done that, the first reason why we haven't done that is because the people who are responsible for maintaining the system that is supposed to do that, do not want us to do that. It's not for their benefit for us to do that. Not because they are these big evil people, they are evil, but it's not that. There's a more practical reason for it which is a reconciliation process. A proper reconciliation process has many steps to go through and one of those steps which is very important is accountability and they don't want to be held accountable for what they did.* – Individual Interview, Participant 1

Another participant described how robbing communities of reconciliation processes leaves people unable to move on from the remnants of the civil war, and how the state has institutionalized this lack of accountability:

> *And, anyway, there was never a reconciliation process, how do they expect a chapter this violent [to be closed]. There are still people who are claimed missing; get up and announce them dead! Close this folder and allow us some sleep, it's enough. The government still has them claimed as 'missing' in official paperwork – this isn't normal. They expect people to move past the civil war? Impossible.* – Individual Interview, Participant 3

In the absence of meaning making around the Civil War, a theme that emerged in six of the transcripts was a community narrative that the war never ended, that communities are still living in a state of war despite not there being an official declaration of war. One member of a focus group of women who had undergone a participatory theater project aiming to document narratives of women during the civil war maintained:

> *Regarding the issue of the civil war … they want to say that we forgot about the war in Lebanon, but for me, the war didn't end, and it continues. The shape changes, the victims change, the players remain the same, and the victims increase. We are being brainwashed generation after generation. If they don't uproot the foundations, the regime, if they don't leave, we will never come out of the war. We will continue living in and through the war.* – Focus Group 1 Participant

Another woman in the same focus group agreed, adding that the present circumstances due to the economic collapse were more difficult than those she endured in the civil war, stating:

> *What I want to say is that we on the surface are no longer living in the war, I mean, technically you might look around and say 'there's no war' but unfortunately what has been ingrained in us makes clear that we are still in the war, and every day we are living in a worse situation than before, and the biggest evidence is that even in the days of the war, we weren't living in circumstances that were as bad as this.* - Focus Group 1 Participant

A less frequent narrative that emerged related to the idea that the deteriorating economic circumstances and living conditions have become unbearable, and how communities try to reckon with the reality of economic violence they are currently living, is the wish or fantasy of returning to the war, where at the very least, economic resources were more present. In one focus group, two writers had this exchange which reflects this narrative:

> *Speaker 1 (speaking about his stance during the beginning of the economic collapse): I told him like, you know, listen, if it's only going to be, you know, just economic collapse, I'll stay in the country. Like I don't give a shit. I can survive this. You know, it's just going to be economic collapse. Like not war or not anything else. Now, I would rather there is a war at this point.*

Speaker 2: I mean, yeah, at this point, because then you get to jump on a ship and escape, I don't know. – Focus Group 2 Participants

One participant explained the underlying message of this collective narrative which some hold, in an attempt to emphasize the severity of the current situation:

When people say "Take us back to the war"; it is meant to emphasize the amount of violence we are going through, which is more than the violence of the war. So, we wish to return to less, meaning we wish that the humiliation, shame, and violence we are experiencing now would be at the level of war, not at the level it is now. – Individual Interview, Participant 9

Al-Ta'ayush: Co-existing with Collective Violence

Instead of a process of meaning making, or forms of collective narrative or sense-making, participants' responses to prompts around the second research question clustered around a collective psychological process of adapting to, and co-existing with, the reality of collective violence. In opposition to a reflective meaning making process, *al-ta'ayush* is a collective, survival-driven response to a reality that all are afflicted by, and no one feels they have control over. When describing this collective state of mind, which is focused on surviving and accessing basic needs, participants described a state of denial of the severity and weight of the current reality. One participant explained:

> *So, the mind I think is completely in denial and again, busy with basic needs. I don't know how we are handling it. Are we handling it? Or are we just avoiding conflict and busy again with basic needs? I think that's what we are doing.* – Individual Interview, Participant 2

Another participant used an allegory to describe this process of adapting to continued forms of collective violence:

> *What's happening to us? I don't know, I feel like this warrants research because we have become so accustomed to this. So many people are accustomed to this violence and adapting to it despite everything that continues to happen. There's an allegory of a man who is told, "There's a thief in your neighborhood", and he responds, "Oh well, at least he's not in my building." They then tell him, "He's gotten into your building", and he says, "At least he's not in my apartment." They say, "He's in your apartment now" and he responds, "Well, at least he's not in my room." You see what I mean? Ultimately, he's going to get into your room and it's going to reach you, and this is one of the issues [of this adaptation]* - Individual Interview, Participant 6

Several participants similarly reflected on how this process of *ta'ayush*, while maintaining survival in the short-term, is maladaptive in the long term, as it fosters some sense of 'acceptance of the status quo', and continued adaptability to new forms of dehumanization and violence. One participant, relating *ta'ayush* to the notion of resilience, shared:

> *This adaptability, which some people call 'resilience', is simply new ways we invented to cope. When the power goes out, we install generators. When the phones lose service, we use Wi-Fi. At first, for a few months, we revolted against this, we said we could never accept this. But now, we've learned to create ways to live with the situation. However, the Lebanese people are suffering greatly. We were 'resilient' against the situation, we were adapting, creating ways to cope, and we were so 'resilient' that the regime now knows that. They are thinking that it doesn't matter if we don't have electricity or water, we've become accustomed to it, and we know what we're doing. We'll pay for fuel at the cost of the dollar, we'll pay for gasoline at the cost of a dollar. Everything is expensive, and we don't hold anyone accountable. So, this 'resilience' we've developed is harming us*. – Focus Group 4 Participant

Another participant argued how the community went down to the street after the August 4th explosion to sweep the streets, is in the same vein, a maladaptive form of adaptability, or *ta'ayush*, stating incredulously:

> *Ta'ayush looks like, we were still in shock, still out of sorts, and we went down to sweep… to clean up after the crimes of others.* – Individual Interview, Participant 9

Another participant shared the same sentiment, linking it as well to the state's lack of accountability which obstructs efforts to make sense of and recover from past and current realities of collective violence:

You're going to take a broomstick and clean the fucking streets? It shouldn't be our job. It shouldn't be, I swear. Me going down and cleaning the streets. It should be the responsibility and the conversation around the government and the collective needs of the people and how mental health should be the responsibility of the states and how unfortunately it's not. It takes away the importance and the attention and emphasis on structured violence and collective violence when that's the case. When we are so distracted by other things. And unfortunately, that dismisses our collective efforts and collective solidarity that arise from trying to fix the problem of the collective violence that shouldn't be the individuals to fix. I think that's the big cycle around this conversation and how do we solve that? – Individual Interview, Participant 8

The Ultimate Obstruction to Meaning Making: Exile

With several layers at the state and collective level obstructing communities from making meaning, another theme that emerged in eleven of the transcripts was the level at which people were leaving the country, in search of dignity and better living conditions. Several participants identified the decision to migrate abroad as a final attempt for people to escape the collective violence experienced in Lebanon, framing this process as 'fleeing' rather than an intentional decision to migrate, fueled by a complete loss of hope in the country and its potential to improve. One participant shared:

If you are to think of how we live and where we are - this is why you have 250,000 Lebanese who left in the last year, that's huge. Out of a population of 4 million? Massive. All educated. They are not refugees; they are not immigrants. They are exiled. It's very

different. This is the educated class who can get a job anywhere and they had to leave. We have friends, around 7 to 8 families left within a week of the Beirut blast. One week. Pack their life, their kids, and left mostly to the Gulf. Unbelievable. I'm like how do you pack yourself within a week and decide? Are they happy? Not really, I know they're not. That's the curse of being Lebanese. It's a love-hate relationship with the country. I used to say we loved Lebanon, but Lebanon didn't love us back. – Individual Interview, Participant 2

For another participant, the desire to leave was fueled by the conviction that physical distance would enable him to make meaning and become more effective at enacting some change:

I feel I can be more helpful to this, to the communities I work with here if I am not here. Where I can take space, distance to reflect when I'm not in emergency mode the whole time. I can contribute to this emergency much better if I'm not spending two hours in the morning trying to figure out how to take a shower. – Individual Interview, Participant 1

Some participants viewed the desire or attempt to leave the country as a readjustment of one's framework of meaning, where the only thing that allows someone to make sense of their current reality is to work on creating a different one somewhere else, while others viewed this as an attempt to disconnect from the current reality to avoid confronting the struggle and loss of meaning in the current reality. One participant, reflecting on those close to him, neighbors, who

were attempting to flee the country by boat and risk drowning in the sea (as several boats have), shared:

> *I mean, really, really, look at how far gone people are, that they have no issue – the same people who were willing to sacrifice their life to the revolution and the streets – are now willing to sacrifice in a very different way, just so they can flee from this difficult reality.* – Individual Interview, Participant 10

Participant reflections on displacement and migration also converged in their ability to hold the bittersweet nature of leaving the country, and how those who leave struggle to readjust and acclimate. They reflected on the ways in which this mass exodus of people re-enacts a collective form of violence on those who stay behind, who have to endure the loss of their loved ones, of professionals, or brilliant minds who had a different kind of vision for the country. One participant reflected on how this then created a double-edged sword of exile:

> *The idea of migration is a very big one because in every situation the idea of migration comes up. When people leave, they leave behind a big gap that needs to be dealt with by those who remain. So, our situation isn't really changing because some of us may still be here, but every person who leaves is leaving a gap behind, and who is dealing with it? So, we are trying to fill the void of what was once there. Okay, for sure those who are outside are also suffering, trying to balance their lives between here and there, but even the idea of leaving does not mean that those who remain will not live in exile. They are living in exile.* – Individual Interview, Participant 3

Theme 4. Attempts at Meaning Making Through Community Work

To address the second research question more specifically, participants were prompted to reflect on how their work, as activists, mental health workers, and artists, has facilitated attempts to make meaning of the current reality. Several of the themes were clustered together and overlapped between the different disciplines, whereas others were specific to the different fields.

Creating 'Holding Spaces' for Communal Narratives

Across all fourteen of the transcripts, one shared theme among artists, activists, and mental health workers was the importance of the role of community work in building safe communal spaces that can hold narratives of collective violence and allow people to tell their own stories and listen to those of others. This requires a deep level of trust to be established by community organizers and facilitators necessitating consistent and recurrent communal spaces. Participants who came from a participatory theater background reflected on the power of holding monthly open community playback theater sessions, where people come to tell the stories relevant to them that month and see them acted out by a group of trained improvisational actors. One participant shared the ways in which he found that this consistent holding space for people's narratives can help to pierce through the obstacles to meaning making mentioned above:

> *It also creates a sense of community because you want people, you want that witnessing of your story. You want people to hear you, but you also need to hear other people's perspective on the same events. You want to see so we were there together, how did you take it, what happened to you, and how does that feed into my narrative. And when you*

> *do it with a group, you are countering communal violence with communal narratives so to speak.* – Individual Interview, Participant 1

Another participant, speaking about the same monthly open playback session, described the ways in which it became a holding space during the October 2019 revolution, a refuge for people to process the cataclysmic collective energy. She reflected on how these moments, amidst mass mobilization and energetic movement, ended up being moments of meaning making for individuals, a window that allowed them to connect narratives of the past and the present. She shared:

> *There were a lot of people who spoke about the Civil War during the revolution. It was talked about more in playback sessions during the revolution than ever before. One woman from Zgharta told us one day that she was walking in Tripoli, and she had been afraid to come down to Tripoli*[1] *because, since the war, she had internalized the message that Tripoli was filled with terrorists and jihadists and extremists. She said to us, the civil war ended with the revolution when she finally was able to walk in the streets of Tripoli by herself again.* – Individual Interview, Participant 3

Meanwhile, activists, and other participants who reflected on their experience of activism, spoke both about the importance of the streets in mirroring and reflecting a collective narrative. One activist who was heavily involved in the revolution in Tripoli, thinking back about the energy of the revolution, stated:

I want to describe to you the situation because I was one of those people who was there every day, and one of the people who felt that this was our only chance to express our opinion, and to really get to a specific goal, and to have achieved a little bit for our town. The idea is that this square brought together all the ideas and all the people that were feeling the same pain. Without being called on, we all found ourselves in the same place, with different backgrounds and areas of expertise, each working, launching initiatives in the middle of the square. – Individual Interview, Participant 10

Activists similarly spoke about the importance of building spaces of refuge and safety for activists to retreat to, one that can provide them with space to reset, a space with power and electricity where they can recharge their literal and emotional batteries, connect to the wi-fi, and have some breathing room to respond to the ongoing demands on their plate. One participant described one such initiative which he was working on building for communities in Tripoli:

In truth, it's a necessity for shifting from violence to nonviolence, from silence to dialogue, from lack of peace to peace. When people would ask me about this initiative, I would say: do you see all these contradictions out there, the conflicts? This initiative is like, say you're in a war, you need safe spaces for civil servants, this initiative is to create this safe space, that has electricity, that has internet, that anyone, regardless of the background can come, get training, give a training, etc. It's about building a space, an environment, for people to come and express themselves. This expression itself is a breath of air. It's cathartic, when you let people talk, at least talk, and have people hear them and share in their worries and feel with each other and connect to each other's

> *pain. This really lightens people's load; it lightens it a lot. Whereas when you're existing in this world alone, you're going to lose your mind.* – Individual Interview, Participant 6

The Catch-22 of Lived Experience: Professional as Victim

Another common theme that was coded in ten of the transcripts was the challenge that is posed when therapists, activists, and artists, whose discipline depends on their capacity to process pain and suffering and facilitate others to do the same through their work, are themselves direct victims of ongoing collective violence. On one hand, participants maintained that being ingrained in the culture of Lebanon, and experiencing the collective violence firsthand adds a very rich layer of understanding and effectiveness to the work that they do. One therapist argued that to have cultural identification is integral for treating the complex nature of the mental health difficulties associated with experiences of collective violence in Lebanon:

> *But it's also very important to know the people and the culture and it's important to be from it. You can learn- you can learn about a culture, but you will never understand it.* – Individual Interview, Participant 2

Another participant shared that, while it may not always be necessary or possible to share certain experiences with the group you work with, in her experience, having suffered economic disadvantage and suffered the same collective violence as her clients, allowed her to have an experience-near perspective on the topic:

Now it's not necessary for everyone to be an activist, they can still be supportive even without being directly involved in everything that's happening, they can be advocates or take action. But I notice that most of the time, your history and lived experience and where you come from matters. – Individual Interview, Participant 4

Yet, in the same vein, participants remarked on the unique burden of holding both their own experiences of collective violence and those of the communities they engaged with. One participant even jokingly remarked during our interview that this study was going to cause me to have a mental breakdown. Another participant spoke about struggling to share her own experience of the explosion with her own therapist, knowing that her therapist themselves had experienced it at a closer range than she had. At the same time, she reflected on the playback sessions she had facilitated following the August 4th blast, describing the toll they had:

This story, of 6:04 PM, I must have heard over 100 times by 100 different people with varying perspectives. Sometimes, I can zoom out from above Beirut and create a map in my mind of all the people and what they were doing at that moment of the explosion. Like the girl I mentioned earlier, who ran from Zaytouna to reach Karantina, crossing the path of the young man in the photo who was going to his brothers' house, whom she didn't know, but I know that the two of them passed each other on the same road. I hold an entire community's suffering in my mind in one moment. As collective as it was, it was also personal. This is communal violence. Each person has their own experience, not just everyone as a whole. – Individual Interview, Participant 3

Looking Beyond Individual Solutions

Across nine transcripts, participants also emphasized the need for system-level change to occur before substantive improvement can be expected at the individual level. One participant stated:

> *Individual issues can no longer be treated in an individualistic way, by advising people to breathe and practice anger management, etc. Yes, that can be helpful, but if we focus on that, it is as if we are giving ourselves a pill or a breath so that we can tolerate what's going on, instead of thinking about how we can change our situation even if it's in a small way*. – Individual Interview, Participant 4

One psychologist similarly argued that dignity through the affordance of basic needs and rights is a precursor to thinking about well-being and mental health in a real way:

> *What makes somebody healthy mentally? The context they live in. The quality of life. Having dignity. That's the minimum.* – Individual Interview, Participant 2

Activism: A Temporary Breath from Perpetual Stuck-ness?

Activists provided varied responses around the role of activism in facilitating meaning making in the face of collective violence. Some viewed activism as a temporary release from feeling stuck in the current reality, a small opportunity to unite and connect with others to reject the normalcy of perpetual collective violence. One participant shared:

I felt like this was bringing, the only place where things made sense because everything else, I felt I was somehow faking life, while the only thing that really made sense is to scream on the street. And I was literally screaming. It's a place where people will not look at you like what's wrong with this girl screaming, because this is what we are meant to do, and it's chanting things that help me release a little bit of pressure. So, I think activism in this sense saved me. – Individual Interview, Participant 7

Another shared:

Let me tell you, it's like a sedative. Something that numbs you for a while. A small breath, a temporary breath before you return to the same problematic reality that you originally had. – Individual Interview, Participant 6

Participants who had participated in the mass protests that erupted in 2019 found themselves looking back at the energy of that moment of mass mobilization, recognizing the profound sense of hope and energy that it had brought up in them. One participant reflected on how the revolution became the meaning making he had been missing:

We, I mean I personally, believed in the revolution to the point that I have no problem losing my soul so that this country can progress. I'm really happy to be talking about this topic because the revolution really made room for this. I used to know people who would die for their sect, die for a principle, or a religion… but in the streets, there were people dying for the country. How beautiful is this concept? To build a nation. How meaningful

> *is that? We really love Lebanon to an unnatural degree.* – Individual Interview, Participant 10

Yet, in seven transcripts, a theme emerged that reflected a profound hopelessness in the capacity for mass movement in a positive direction for the country. Participants shared the massive losses of loved ones and of safety that were experienced during moments of mass movement and activism. Participants viewed the current regime as too deeply entrenched, feeling a sense of defeat against the existing political machine after the last wave of protests died down. One focus group participant stated:

> *I think that they succeeded. Like the system really succeeded in putting us back in our cages and re-instilling the insecurities and the fears that we inhabit. I think they really knew how to push our buttons, and honestly, violence has always been their game. So I felt like, you know, you cannot really [change things], the odds were stacked. The odds were stacked.* – Focus Group 2 Participant

Another reflected on how she observed a collective surrender following the revolution, instead seeing that moments of resistance can be found in actions happening on a smaller scale, whether on the municipal or organizational level, stating:

> *Right after the revolution, I saw people really destroyed, retreated, lost the desire to fight, and became numb, indifferent… The choice for us now is doing little actions of revolution, small things to impact our environment, whether it's a word or a small action*

when we reject something, or when we reply to an email from an NGO and don't know how they are talking to us or how they are looking at the work or the people. When I say to myself, "Okay, I don't want to respond," but I choose to respond and say my piece. – Individual Interview, Participant 4

The overwhelming sense that there is no room for true movement at this moment in time, coupled with participants' understanding that change is necessary to make conditions livable for people, fuels activists' hopelessness. One participant shared how he viewed three potential doors for activists who remain holding onto a sense of hope in the benefits of activism: the door of depression, the door of indifference, and the door of displacement:

For those who continue to have faith, I believe they will inevitably confront the reality that change will not happen. if it happens, it happens, great - if it doesn't, he will continue and eventually come to three doors: the door of depression, the door of indifference and meaninglessness, or the door of displacement, he'll get out of here. – Individual Interview, Participant 6

Therapy for Survival: Rejecting Resilience

Therapists spoke about how the increasing exposure to collective violence across the population has led to increased awareness and curiosity about mental health across communities. Participants were quick to reject notions of communities in Lebanon being labeled as resilient, calling for the fall of a common narrative that paints Lebanon as a phoenix rising from the ashes:

Nobody talk to me anymore about the phoenix rising from the ashes -no - there should be ashes to start with. The' resilience' - this isn't resilience. This is just putting our head in the sand or lack of confrontation of reality or just immaturity about, you know, a sense of community. It's all about "me". As long as my needs are met, I'm fine. No, it's not [fine]. It's also about the quality of life, It's also about wanting to live in a place that's safe with dignity – that's the minimum. – Individual Interview, Participant 2

Another participant also explained how labels of resilience put the onus on communities as victims to cope effectively with suffering, whereas people would gladly shed the burden of resilience if they were afforded a modicum of dignity and quality of life:

I'll tell you, for example, we've always been known as resilient people. But it needs to be understood that people don't like this word. Because they feel that to be resilient is contingent on suffering. How much do I need to continue to suffer to be a "resilient person"? – Individual Interview, Participant 5

Yet, participants found that people's willingness to engage in conversations around mental health overall was increasing. One participant shared how the revolution allowed mental health workers to create spaces of awareness and psychoeducation on a large scale, initiatives that were readily welcomed by many. Sharing an initiative wherein a psychological first aid tent was erected in the middle of the protestors' square, she stated:

It started as a medical tent and then we had our own tent. And people - psychologists in the community came and literally had a schedule and they signed up for our slots. It was amazing. It was a tent and a parking lot. No walls. There was a table and four chairs. The tent got destroyed 3 times. But we had a huge banner and people would come and take pictures and they were very curious. – Individual Interview, Participant 2

Participants who were not in the mental health also recognized the increased need and decreased stigma around mental health due to the severe toll that the reality of collective violence has taken on the mental health of the population, with participants in focus groups sharing their own experiences seeking mental health treatment, encouraging others to do the same, or talking about how so many people in their life were seeking out mental health treatment. Yet with the increasing load on the mental health sector, participants noted that the large wave of migration has dwindled the numbers of qualified and certified mental health professionals, adding a burden on those that exist. One participant dejectedly shared her most recent understanding of the number of losses:

In our department, we lost about 20 people between doctors, nurses, social workers, and staff. The whole country lost 1000 doctors and over a thousand nurses. It's unbelievable. And at least 200 psychologists from what I know. So how do you function? (laughs) So, it is gloom and doom. It's difficult to see a positive thing. – Individual Interview, Participant 2

Moreover, despite increasing curiosity, participants also reflected on the limited effectiveness of existing models of care to respond to the complex needs of communities in Lebanon. One psychologist shared that her current approach is one that tried to emphasize day-to-day survival, though even that sometimes did not feel possible:

> *Day to day, unfortunately. This is what I offer them and myself. One day at a time, this is it. One day at a time. Surviving, let's focus on now and today and well-being and this and that. We can't do more than that. What are you going to say to someone? Go to the gym and exercise? The cost of the gym is an arm and a leg. You know? And - the basic- do yoga. Open YouTube. Okay, the apps. But the apps cost money. There are no resources. –* Individual Interview, Participant 2

Another therapist, reflecting on what collective healing from the civil war mental health looks like, also named this accountability as a necessary component to meaning making, and consequently, healing:

> *Let me tell you another thing in relation to the civil war – from a mental health perspective, we understand that we're not going to be able to heal without this meaning making process and this discourse to be written about what really happened so that the people are held accountable and so that we can move on.* – Individual Interview, Participant 5

Furthermore, though therapeutic spaces are in high demand, collective therapeutic spaces are not as present. One participant shared:

> *More people are seeking mental health professionals, for sure. There's also a demand, which I don't see being met, for collective circles and groups. I've noticed several people inquiring about this, but it isn't as present.* – Individual Interview, Participant 9

One participant theorized that this may be a result of an existing mistrust within communities and fears around confidentiality and privacy:

> *Exactly and we don't trust each other, you know that. People are hypervigilant. But also, they risk that oh that guy in the group knows the cousin of my neighbor of the guy who knows my uncle who works in Dubai and his nephew… everyone's connected.* – Individual Interview, Participant 2

Participatory Theater and Art: The Power of Witnessed Storytelling

Participants who had engaged communities in collective processing through forms of art were most closely able to speak about the ways in which meaning making can be facilitated by allowing community members to share their stories and hear the stories of others through a safe and transformative medium. Qualitative data was gathered through focus groups from community members who had engaged in projects utilizing theater, writing, or photography and confronted topics relating to collective violence, including the Civil War, the August 4th explosion, and economic collapse. They reflected on the ways in which these spaces allowed

them to build narratives around events and realities that had been unfamiliar to them prior. Reflecting on a participatory theater project that focused on women's narratives around the civil war, one woman shared:

> *Honestly, in addition to the experiences that we heard from other women that clarified for me personally that even if my experience were different from neighborhood to neighborhood, there was a shared experience that was comparable. The narratives were repeating themselves in each neighborhood despite their being a large variety in terms of role and background. On either side, people were losing people. On either side, people were dying. On either side, there was fear. Women had responsibilities whether she was a mother or sister or had war responsibilities. This was something I came to terms with because of the different perspectives I heard. I was able to do more than just condemn the war – I was able to also make sense of the factors that lead women to participate in the war in the ways that they did.* - Focus Group 1 Participant

Participants shared the ways in which these spaces can also make room for people to mourn losses that had not yet been processed due to the perpetual nature of collective violence and the ways in which meaning making is obstructed. Reflecting on work she had done with Iraqi women resettled in Lebanon, one participant shared:

> *It allows them to mourn those they have lost that they weren't able to see and say goodbye to that died in the war. This is one of the hardest things.* – Individual Interview, Participant 4

Facilitators also highlighted the ways in which collective community work through art, and especially participatory theater, can encourage and foster the development of critical consciousness, enabling communities to draw links between their personal narrative and the collective narrative. It frames personal struggles within larger political and social contexts, allowing individuals to make sense of their experiences within a collective frame. One facilitator explained the rationale behind this:

> *If you do that, what happens? If you don't do that, what happens? The pedagogy of the oppressed is always at the forefront, it's the idea of moving toward critical and conscious thought. It's that we didn't assume that this form of theater does this or that, or this movement does this or that. Why? We always ask ourselves why. There is no ready answer, there is no catalog, there is no judge.* – Individual Interview, Participant 4

One of the focus groups was with facilitators who had been trained in photovoice and then facilitated photovoice circles with communities across Lebanon around the topic of collective violence. One facilitator described how she witnessed photovoice as a tool that built connections between people, increased awareness of multiple perspectives, and encouraged people’s agency:

> *People, when they expressed through a photo, each person had a perspective to share about it. But we noticed that, unconsciously, there was an awareness that was being built. People began to take from other’s experiences, from their ideas, their successes, and it encouraged them into movement. It created this connection between people to learn from*

each other, and built agency, a recognition that they had solutions they could work towards. – Focus Group 4 Participant

One focus group participant who had participated in the Civil War project shared the ways in which developing awareness allowed them to regain hope as a collective in the community's ability to progress:

When all of us are together in sessions like this, there is space to gain awareness. When several groups do this, and you hear other groups speaking with this level of awareness, you say "ok, there's hope." - Focus Group 1 Participant

Other Terms and Idioms that Express Impact of Collective Violence

In addition to the themes described above, participants were also asked directly to identify any terms or phrases in Arabic that they have observed being used by communities to express the significance and impact of the realities of collective violence being experienced. Table 2 lists the terms and phrases that were gathered in Arabic, with a Latin pronunciation along with a translation of the general meaning indicated by the term or phrase. These terms were grouped into three general categories: terms or adjectives describing affective states of distress, phrases used to describe the general state of things, and religious phrases that revert the situation back to God's will or mercy.

The first category contained the largest number of contributions and consisted of expressions of individual or collective distress. Some of these terms reflected the theme of desensitization or numbness described above (e.g., مبنجين *Mbanjeen*: to have been given anesthesia / to be numb; مخدرين *Mkhadareen*: drugged / numb; متمسحين Mtamsaheen: having

grown the skin of an alligator / to have lost the ability to be impacted by ongoing violence). Others captured the increases in reactivity, anxiety, and stress that were noted in the themes (مهسترين *Mhastreen*: from 'hysteria' / to have become hysterical; عمبنهار *'am binhar*: I'm collapsing/having a nervous breakdown). The second category was phrases that attempt to interpret or summarize the general state of things. Some phrases in this category attempted to unify the collective experience (e.g., كلنا بالهوى سوى Kilna *bil hawa sawa:* we are all in the same situation; متلنا متل كل الناس mitilna *mitl kil el neis*, we are like everyone else here). Additionally, some of these phrases reflected the hopelessness expressed in the themes above (الوضع تعتير *El Wadi' Te'*teer: the situation is filled with misfortune; اليوم أحسن من بكرا *El yom ahsan min bokra*; today is better than tomorrow). Finally, a few terms were religious and referred to deference to God (e.g., الله يعين *Allah y'een:* God help us; كيفك؟ من الله منيح *Kifac? Min Allah Mni7*; How are you? Good by the grace of god).

CHAPTER 5

Discussion

This study drew from the theoretical and practical contributions of liberation psychology (Martin-Baro, 1996; Rivera, 2020), holding in mind Fanon's (2004) insistence that the psychological *is* political and cannot be untangled from historical and sociopolitical contexts. Abi Ghannam, Perkins, and Fine (2023) highlight the invisibility of Fanon in social and political psychology, despite the acute relevance of his frame to psychological research. The same argument holds for clinical psychological research, which has long held a Western, Eurocentric gaze (Heinrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). To counter this gaze, I drew on methodological frameworks of Participatory Action Research (Herr & Anderson, 2020; Fine et al., 2021) and Community Based Participatory Research (Afifi et al., 2020) and engaged artists, activists, and mental health workers in Lebanon in a process of *acompañamiento*, of psychosocial accompaniment of collective experiences of struggle through co-being (Fernandez, 2020). In this way, this study transcended positivistic approaches to clinical psychological research and encouraged collective reflections and understandings of how legacies of collective violence have shaped and molded the collective psyche of communities living in Lebanon, and how their struggle for survival overshadows processes of meaning making.

Aligned with tenets of participatory research, this study challenged the hierarchical modalities of conventional research by recruiting and relying on the wisdom and collaboration of a community advisory board of four members currently living in and engaging with communities in Lebanon. This was the first point of co-construction, or *contact zone* (Torre et al., 2008). The perspective of the advisory board, who were physically and spiritually grounded to the reality in

Lebanon throughout the research process, was a unifying thread that ensured that this study remained rooted in the communities whose voices it intended to lift.

The participants in this study heeded a monumental task, offering up narratives that were both personal and communal, reflecting critically on their observations as community-engaged artists, activists, and mental health workers. Above and beyond the academic fruit of their narratives reflected in the results above, this study produced *testimonios,* the verbal journeys that reflect the cultural wisdom of those who are historically oppressed and perpetually marginalized (Cervantes, 2020). The benefit of these *testimonios* is inherent in their being spoken and documented in the clinical psychological literature, allowed to breathe where voices have often been silenced. In ancient Arab tradition, the *hakawati* referred to the collective storyteller who "represented the collective genius and fantasies of his people, and with his way with words, would spin yarns and breathe life into the heroes of history" (Chaudhary, 2014, p.1). Though missing elements of theatrical performance, these participants were, in their own right, *hakawatis* of the collective truths of their people.

The narratives elicited in this study emphasized the ways in which collective violence in Lebanon was an intergenerational reality, one that has been institutionally and politically entrenched and continues to be experienced with every breath. Participants offered a politicized, structural framework within which to understand collective violence, one that extends beyond discrete incidents and captures the ongoing nature of multiple forms of collective violence that are all at once material, economic, spiritual, and psychological. These narratives add to existing documentation of Arab scholars who have highlighted how collective violence is embedded within daily reality, and results in psychologically detrimental consequences (Afana, 2010; Hammad & Tribe 2020). Holding with them the soul wounds of generations past, the participants

in this study also emphasized the continued weight of the Lebanese civil war, which remains collectively unprocessed and institutionally silenced. They stand here with many other communities who still bear the collective consequences of historical violence, including Palestinians living in Occupied Palestine (Atallah, 2017), indigenous communities in the United States (Braveheart, 2000), survivors of the Armenian genocide (Mangassarrian, 2015), and survivors of the Cambodian Khmer Rouge regime (Chhim, 2012).

Soul Wounds of Perpetual Violence: *A Collective Lens*

The participants in this study brought to light the ways in which exposure to collective violence has wounded the collective psyche of communities living in Lebanon. *Ihbat,* a collective form of societal dejectedness and hopelessness, rose up as an idiom that emphasized the collective impact of generations of collective violence being perpetrated on communities. *Ihbat* was described as an existential form of collective suffering that was rooted in long-standing exposure to collective violence and manifested in a loss of ambition, hope, and vision for the future. *Ihbat* is an idiom of distress that centers on collective mental health, emphasizing how in the face of collective suffering, the mental health of the whole can be viewed as larger than the sum of their individual parts. Idioms like *Ihbat* challenge existing paradigms, highlighting a need already established for a paradigm shift that can better account for collective mental health and recovery for communities impacted by mass oppression and collective trauma (Bosqui, 2020; Giacaman, 2011). Beyond the psychological impact of collective dejectedness, participants also named somatic and spiritual impacts, highlighting feeling perpetually dissociated from their bodies and a sense of being ‘dead’, ‘no longer here’, or ‘only existing by the grace of god.’ These descriptions also mirror those in comparable psychological literature with Arab communities affected by chronic collective violence (Barber, 2016; Hajj, 2022).

In the participant’s stories, Fanon (2004) was alive, as participants reflected on the psychosomatic distress caused by experiences of dehumanization, humiliation, and oppression. Participants described how chronic experiences of dehumanization through daily acts of collective violence enacted by the political regime were directly linked to affective states of *kaher* and *daght nafsi*, which were characterized by a build-up of anger, irritability, and psychological pressure. These losses to dignity were externalized, manifesting in acts of aggression or exaggerated responses. Participants also emphasized the impact of unconscious intergenerational transmission of collective violence, describing instinctive ‘civil war reactions’, ways in which even bodies who had not directly experienced the war jumped instinctively into a war mentality following exposure to collective violence. ‘Civil war reactions’ served as somatic reminders of the collective loss and grief that remains unprocessed, marking the collective psyche of communities in Lebanon. Participants’ narratives highlighted the importance of attending to body memory (Casey, 2000) in our understanding of the complex connection between mind, spirit, and body in the face of trauma.

Survival over Meaning Making

Faced with intergenerational and ongoing, chronic forms of collective violence, the study’s storytellers struggled to reflect on the meaning or sense made amidst the reality, reflecting on the inability to make meaning due to the state’s refusal to take accountability for the collective violence it has perpetrated. The state’s lack of accountability is institutionally entrenched; Hodeib (2021) has pointed to how the Amnesty Law, put into effect in 1991, bolstered state narratives following the Civil War of ‘La ghalib, la maghlub’ (no victor, no vanquished). This institutionalized the immunity of those who committed war crimes, setting the

foundation for a state-enforced 'amnesia' that paved the way for an intergenerational silence around the massive collective violence experienced during the Civil War.

Therapists in this study rejected the dominant bio-medical, depoliticized model of mental health, which conceal the social and political meaning that communities attribute to their experiences of collective violence (Giacaman, 2020). Following the Beirut Blast, Kerbage and El-bejjani (2021) advocated for the need for mental health response to be grounded within sociopolitical and economic realities and acknowledge the necessity for justice to predicate healing. When individual frameworks for mental health are imposed as the singular way to understand and make sense of their suffering, communities are further distanced from their subjective perceptions and narratives around the collective violence they have endured, disabling them from truly making sense or meaning out of past and present experiences

In the absence of a state willing to make room for accountability and reconciliation, and a mental health system readily facilitating links between communities' economic and sociopolitical conditions, participants described a process of *al-ta'ayush ma' el 'onf,* or co-existence with violence, a survival mechanism characterized by a denial of the severity of the current reality and a maladaptive adaptability to the increasing daily life stressors of living in a reality of collective violence. *Al-ta'ayush* linguistically holds a distinct, positive connotation of different religions and cultures can co-exist in harmony under one rule (Abdullah & Fathil, 2021). This study reflected the way this construct takes on a different meaning when linked with collective violence, describing a collective psychological process that at once facilitates short-term survival in response to ongoing threats to security and safety while obstructing long-term recovery through meaning making and situating experiences of collective violence.

Creating Room for Meaning Making

The storytellers in this study were artists, healers, and activists. Their work was predicated on creating room for collective meaning making and processing. Participants from all three of these disciplines highlighted the ways in which creating communal ‘holding spaces’, physically safe and emotionally containing spaces where people can express their stories and connect with one another, was an essential component of facilitating collective meaning making. This finding reflected the tenants of liberation psychology which drove this study, emphasizing the ways in which healing must occur in community. Additionally, activists, artists, and mental health workers all emphasized the challenge of being themselves a victim of the same collective violence that they are expected to help others process. They also highlighted the limitations of community work to truly intervene on a collective level without mass changes to the system-level factors perpetuating collective violence.

Findings from artists and community members who engaged in arts-based community work around the ways in which different mediums of art, including participatory theater, writing, and photography can construct spaces for people to express their narratives and witness those of others add to a body of literature that has demonstrated the role of participatory forms of art in facilitating meaning making (Abdel Latif, 2021; Rohrbach, 2018). The study findings on participatory forms of art aligned with Freire’s (1996) mechanism of conscientização, or critical consciousness, bringing the individual experience into the collective, and linking community members' individual experiences with larger social and political factors.

Structural and Material Barriers to Meaning Making

Some activists continued to view forms of activism and protest as ‘temporary breaths’ from feeling stuck in their current reality. This has been alluded to in several past studies in the region, with activism being framed as a potential adaptive coping mechanism or protective factor

against adverse mental health outcomes (Atallah, 2017; Barakat & Phillipot, 2018; Simaan, 2017; Veronese et al., 2017). However, activists in this study also described deep hopelessness, particularly following the surge of hope and mobilization during the October 2019 revolution that did not lead to substantive change. Participants noted the other side of activism, how activism and mass movement are linked with material harm and losses to community members and loved ones that can further exacerbate psychological suffering. This darker consequence of activism in the context of perpetual, collective violence was noted in research in the region, particularly in Occupied Palestine (Segal, 2016; Wispelwey & Jamai, 2020).

Therapists, along with community participants, discussed ways in which they perceived an increasing curiosity and demand and decreased stigma around mental health services. Therapists also commented on the dwindling availability of therapists due to many leaving the country, a finding that has been documented in the recent literature (Shallal, 2021). Building on recent calls by Bosqui (2020), Moughnieh (2022), and Kerbage and El-Bejjani (2021), therapists reflected on the ineffectiveness of current models to respond to the complex needs and mental health outcomes related to collective violence exposure. Therapists working individually with community members in Lebanon would benefit from continuing to conceptualize and frame individual mental health outcomes within the larger sociopolitical conditions. For the more high-functioning patient, this may mean integrating a liberatory clinical framework into the clinical work that allows individuals to explore and integrate their own narratives of collective violence within the collective history. However, it is essential to keep in mind how the process of *ta'ayush* reflected in the study could be linked to layers of denial and traumatic avoidance which may not allow for such layers of conscious processing. Therapists, and healing professionals in general, would benefit from their own 'holding spaces' to process their experiences of and interactions

with collective violence. The existing mental health system in Lebanon is centered mostly on a privatized model which isolates mental health professionals and disavows them from the opportunity to process collectively alongside other professionals in order to bolster their ability to hold both themselves and the communities that rely on them. The creation of supportive holding spaces for therapists can also create openings for collective organizing that can begin to envision effective ways to challenge individual models of mental health and make room for a deeper understanding of and response to collective mental health outcomes.

CHAPTER 6

Limitations and Future Directions

This study had several limitations that can be addressed in future research. The sample was made up predominantly of Lebanese citizens, although it was exploring the experiences of multiple communities existing in Lebanon. With Lebanon hosting a large number of Syrian and Palestinian refugees, and the study having represented the voices of some Syrians, it was notable to me that Palestinian voices were missing. I had chosen to use a mixture of organizational collaborations and snowball sampling to recruit participants. The lack of Palestinian representation in the study is reflective of the invisibility and structural oppression that Palestinians in Lebanon have long been subjugated to, whereby most are limited to camps and are not integrated within Lebanese communities. Similarly, one participant in this study spoke about their work with Iraqi refugees, a subpopulation of refugees that has received little attention and whose voices were also not represented in this study. Liberatory participatory methodologies are focused on bringing to light the narratives of those most marginalized. Future studies can build on the collective reflections documented in this study and create contact zones that invite voices that weren't represented in this study, as the experiences of collective violence among these subcommunities living in Lebanon are interconnected.

My geographic positionality outside of Lebanon for the majority of the research process was also a limitation of the study. Although virtual options are now more readily available to collect qualitative interview data, difficulties with electricity and connectivity continue to pose challenges for engaging participants in a smooth and containing interview process. Additionally, the power of embodiment and the ability to take in participants' environments and non-verbal behaviors with in-person data collection is significant. Further, given the topic of this research

study was perpetual experiences of collective violence, and the nature of the collapse in Lebanon meant that communities were continuously subjected to this violence throughout collection and analysis, being positioned outside of Lebanon created distance that limited my access to auto-ethnographical data that may have changed the research process. As noted above, my engagement in reflexivity was inconsistent and increased dramatically when I was in Lebanon. In future studies, I would consider spending an extended period in Lebanon, and I would plan for a more structured process of reflexivity to mitigate the impacts of traumatic avoidance. It may also be helpful to incorporate into the methodology, along with auto-ethnographic reflexivity through reflexive journaling, and intermittent and consistent group reflexive processes with colleagues, advisory board members, and research collaborators.

There are ways in which this study could have increased the level of participation of research participants and community members in the research process that was limited by a combination of institutional guidelines and time limitations. For this study, an advisory board was put in place that provided input on research design before data collection and on coding following the analysis process. In future studies with more time permitting to gain more complex institutional approvals, research participants can be engaged as collaborators in research study questions, recruitment, and analysis. This can be done using a group/workshop format with a more homogenous sample within one organization of activists, artists, or mental health workers, for example. Additionally, there are several ways in which findings from this study can be disseminated in ways that are digestible and accessible to a larger audience. A list of terms that are used to speak about collective violence, found in Table 2, was gathered from the contributions of participants in this study. These can be turned into an illustrated glossary, zine, or collection of poetry, writing, and photography, in collaboration with artists that can be

disseminated to the public as part of a larger awareness campaign. Additionally, research findings can be utilized with future collaborations with artists (i.e., photographers, musicians, theater professionals, and writers) to re-imagine arts-based outputs for the study. The collective truths that were elicited from the storytellers in this study can be foundations for ongoing discourse and dialogue that facilitates ongoing collective meaning making. Mental health and psychosocial workers can benefit from utilizing the constructs and terms of this study to better understand the social-political underpinnings of their patient's suffering. Mental health organizations can build on the study by continuing to initiate *contact zones* that launch an exploration of the ways in which mental health systems and services can better account for collective mental health by creating therapeutic communal holding spaces. These contact zones could include integrated spaces between clinically trained therapists, psychosocial support workers, artists, and activists. Movement-based approaches, such as dance, can support and foster connection and connection to 'body memory' in order to access embodied forms of knowledge in tandem with discourse-based examinations on the topic.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Demographic	Count
Gender	
Male	14
Female	17
Nationality	
Lebanese	25
Syrian	5
Lebanese Armenian	1
Age	
18 - 25	7
25 - 65	24
Citizenship Status	
Citizen	26
Refugee	2
Resident	2
Other	1
Highest Education Received	
Middle School Diploma	1

Table 1 – continued

High School Diploma	3
Bachelors Degree	10
Masters Degree	13
Doctorate Degree	1
Income Range	0 - $3,000
Mean Monthly Income (US$)	$1,029

Table 2

Glossary of Terms and Idioms Used to Communicate About Collective Violence

Term / Idiom	Translation / Meaning
Affective States	
مضغوط Madghout	Pressured
مقهور Makhour	Oppressed
مخدرين Mkhadareen	Drugged / Numb
متمسحين Mtamsaheen	Having grown the skin of an alligator / to have lost the ability to be impacted by ongoing violence
مهسترين Mhastreen	Form 'hysteria' / to have become hysterical
مبنجين Mbanjeen	To have been given anesthesia / to be numb
تسطيل Tosteel	To appear 'knocked out' / used to refer to the impact of experiencing direct exposure to collective violence, meaning to lose awareness for a little while
شد عصب Shad Asab	To pull a nerve / used to characterize intense moments of reactivity/anger in response to ongoing daily stress and oppression
تنفيس Tinfees	Venting / Catharsis
تنجلطي Tonjolte	To have a stroke / To have a nervous breakdown
حاسس راسي حيبج hasis raseh ha ybij	I feel like my head is going to explode
مخنوق Makhnou'	State of being suffocated
مشحرة Mshahara	Charred

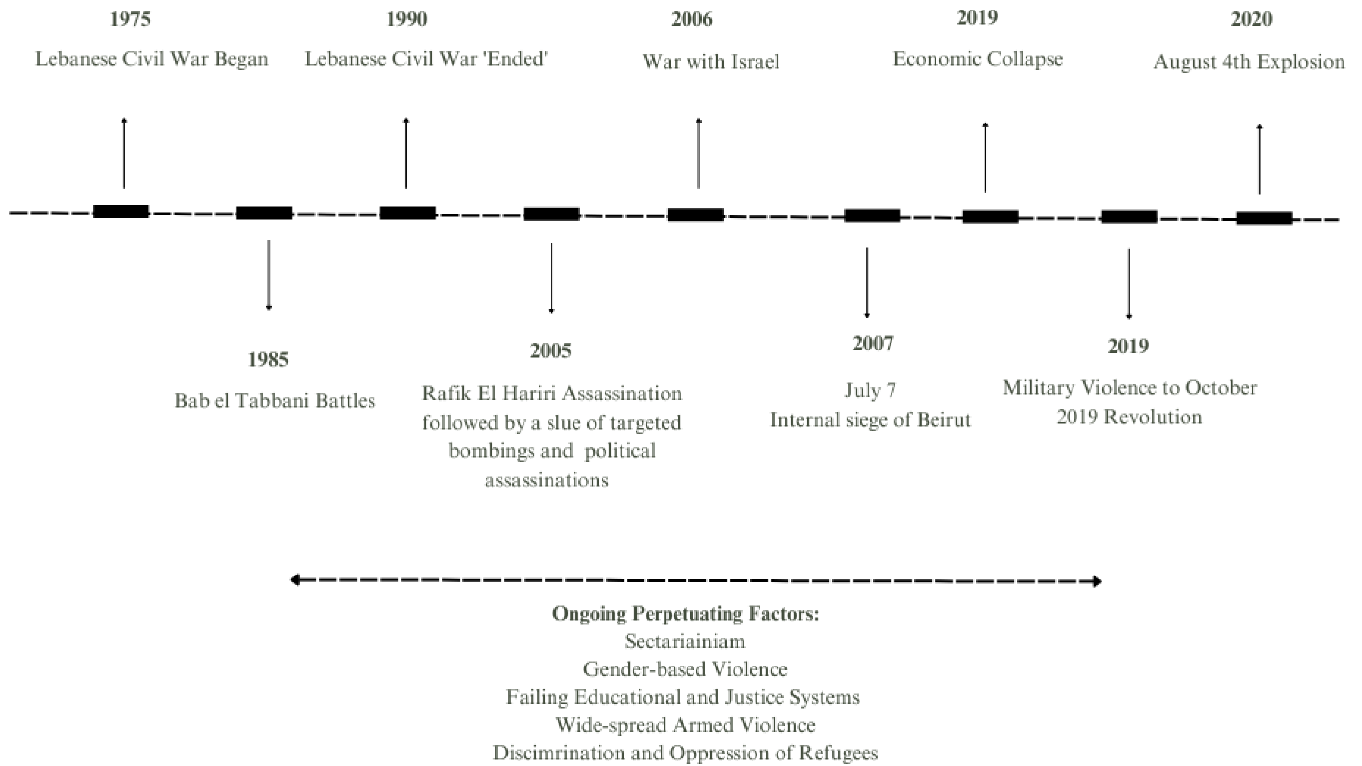
Table 2 – continued

عمبنهار ‘am binhar	I’m collapsing/having a nervous breakdown
مدبرسين Mdaperseen	Adjective used to describe being ‘depressed’
مني شايف ادامي Mani sheyef iddami	I can’t see in front of me
Reflections on Collective State	
شو حناعمل ماشي الحال Mashee El-Hal, shu ha na’mol?	It’s okay, what are we going to do?
الوضع تعتير El Wadi’ Te’teer	The situation is filled with misfortune / Things are bad as they can be and keep getting worse
ما النا غير بعض Ma ‘ilna gheir ba’d	We only have each other
جنون Jnoun	Direct translation: loss of mind; also used to refer to the ongoing state of chaos
عايشين بالصدفه ‘aysheen bil sodfeh	Living by coincidence / a sentiment used to describe the subjective experience of being alive and having survived years of exposure to collective violence
فشيء أكبر مني ومنك Fi shi akbar mineh w minak	There’s something bigger than you and me
كلنا بالهوى سوى Kilna bil hawa sawa	We are all in the same situation
اليوم أحسن من بكرا El yom ahsan min bokra	Today is better than tomorrow
إذا ما خربت ما بتعمر Iza ma khirbet ma bti’mar	If it doesn’t get ruined, it won’t get built
متلنا متل كل الناس mitilna mitl kil el neis	We are like everyone else here
Religious idioms	
الحمدلله Al-Hamdulilah	Praise God / What can we do but praise god?

Table 2 – continued

الله يعين Allah y'een	God help us
كيفك؟ من الله منيح Kifac? Min Allah Mni7	How are you? Good by the grace of god

Figure 1 *Visual Timeline of Participants' Associations of Collective Violence in Lebanon*



Appendix

Select Reflexive Journal Entries

I am currently in Lebanon, Beirut specifically, where I intend to collect my data, and feeling unsure/anxious about my ability to gain approvals in time to be able to collect while I am here in the summer. This is day by day seeming less likely, which elicits a personal feeling of having 'failed' or 'being behind'. This is a feeling that I carry with me through this entire process, I think particularly due to the fact that the project is so personal to me, but perhaps also the guilt that accompanies me for being abroad? I'm not quite sure. I must say I at times (and often) feel utterly incompetent to conduct this study. – July 14th, 2021, Beirut, Lebanon

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In qualitative research, there is even less of a filter between you and the data – you are in the data, and the data is in you. This becomes even more of a reality when you, as I am, are researching experiences that are your own lived experience. I find I am so worried to be 'messing' up – that my analysis will be somehow faulty and my results unsound… It takes so much mental effort just to get myself out of this headspace and back on the desk, with the data – and even when I am, my first feeling is that of intense overwhelm and shaking doubt. – January 22nd, 2023, New York, New York

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It surprises me, despite the feeling of dissociation or disconnection from Lebanon that often happens after I've been in New York for an extended period of time, how present, alive, and excited I still feel whenever I do engage in conversations with people about

this. I'm humbled by the natural process of 'emerging knowledge' that I am witnessing during these interviews and focus groups. Themes seem to rise to the surface by themselves, almost as though this dissertation is writing itself. - May 31st, 2022, New York, NY

The absurd distinction between reality here (NYC) and there (Beirut)…. Is something I find difficult to overcome and surpass. Makes it so difficult to find order in the madness, structure in the collapse. What is the point of this project even? I can no longer tell. How do you keep it going? How do you find the intersections and implement a protocol to tie them together? I tire of these questions. I don't know where to look… - September 6th, 2021, New York, New York

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In New York, yesterday, as the plane was taxiing to depart the JFK runway, I looked outside only to find that after days of frigid cold, snow had begun to fall. As the plane took off, I gazed at the lines of snow in the cement below me – splashes of white like paint splatters on the earth. I felt a sudden wave of sadness; I was missing the second snow in the city. Beirut felt far, confusing, and overwhelming. New York, in its quiet barren cold, felt safer. Yet, now, in the nauseatingly familiar transit through Paris, Beirut already feels closer, exciting again. Things already feel clearer in my mind, as I envision the next few weeks. This is the trick of distance, of physicality. Switching between the alternating realities of New York and Beirut does not come without a mental, emotional, and physical cost. So, the mind defends and blocks. – January 17th, 2022 Paris, France

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There is also a deeper tension

Of doing this work amid crisis

Of saying –

Let's process the past

When the present is only an iteration of that past

When the capacity to access basic resources is threatened on a daily basis,

When there is burn out and fear and hyperarousal.

A few days away from August 4th

And a consistent oscillation

Between defeat and a drive / a rage for change

Between a sense of mobility and feeling trapped and stuck in time

Between the re-experiencing and the processing of the past. – July, 29th, 2021, Beirut, Lebanon

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A general note on uncertainty and limbo. It's exhausting and consuming and terrifying. – Reflexive Journal Entry, August 13th, 2021

A note on research in collapse

The country, overnight, has entered a new era of collapse.

There is no fuel. Fuel explodes in Akkar. Shops have closed down.

There is a sense of guilty/worry/concern about asking people even to spend mobile data to get on zoom to collaborate or train.

To make it to a meeting.

Attempts to research come with a pre-emptive apology and a meaninglessness.

Why do we do this? What and who is it for?

Literally since two weeks ago the country feels more in danger

As I write a friend says "we might have a solution for the fuel shortage – for now" - Reflexive Journal Entry, *One company agreed to send enough fuel to keep the country going for another five to six days*

…

We laugh or cry, no one knows. المضحك المبكي [3] - August 17th, 2021

I am startled awake at 5am from a nightmare:

In it, I am in my family's house in Jieh; one that was destroyed in the war, rebuilt by my grandfather, and which today, my uncle is reviving by returning to the land. We are sitting and laughing and hear a growling, rumbling sound. I look outside to find that we are surrounded by a circus. I realize there is a show coming up and that the house across from us seems to be housing an elephant. I continue to stare at the elephant, who seems agitated, and realize, 'Shit – it's eating through the house!' Panicked, we all rush down the stairs – I jump down three flights of stairs, grabbing on the banister on my way down. We run out of the house, fleeing the building, only to realize the entire neighborhood has

[3] An adage in Arabic that loosely translates to: "that which brings me to tears, makes me laugh."

realized what is happening and is fleeing as well. I wake up, my heart beating, terrified.

- February 2nd, 2022, Beirut, Lebanon.

It has been months since I've been able to sit down and reflect on the process of data collection, despite having conducted several interview over zoom since returning from Beirut at the beginning of February. This is partly because the structure of Zoom interviews adds a level of distance/ disconnect from the process – I shut off the Zoom screen and jump off the chair on my desk and onto my bed, exhausted. I find ways to distract myself from fully processing the content of the interview/focus group, despite being present and even excited during the conversation itself. - May 31st, 2022, New York, NY

Couldn't even stay present

Completely disengaged

Noticed I was also disengaged in the interview itself

From the tone of my voice

Can't express much but need to return here

To notice

What I could not contain

In the moment and months later,

What I could not hold

(I feel I am failing this research) – December 3rd, 2022, New York, New York

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After having met with several people who have been doing p articipatory community engaged work, I find myself floored, humbled, and impressed with how much of these spaces, through narrative and art have been and continue to be created on the ground. – July 29th, 2021

I think this project can document. Hold. Initiate. It can bring unlikely combinations of meaning making together and create a narrative or thread between them. – July 29th, 2021, Beirut, Lebanon

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