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The Spirit of Fieldwork? Navigating Alcohol Consumption, Abstinence and Religious Positionalities in Social Sciences Research

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Abstract: In recent years, debates on researcher positionality have increasingly gained traction in academic circles. However, despite this increased focus on questions evolving around the impact of the researcher's presence on the research process and outcome, there are still issues that scholars have tended to avoid, such as the effect of alcohol on the research process. While existing publications contain some discussion of various aspects related to researchers navigating alcohol consumption during fieldwork, they do not touch on the role of religion—a striking absence considering the prevalence of religious reasons for abstinence. In this article, we therefore build on existing literature by discussing two case studies focused on the experiences of religious researchers with alcohol that help complicate our understanding of the role of alcohol consumption and abstinence during fieldwork. Using a collaborative autoethnographic approach and drawing on our fieldwork experiences as a Muslim woman in Lebanon and a Christian man in Vietnam, we discuss how religion affects rapport and insider/outsider dynamics during fieldwork. We conclude with recommendations on how academic institutions can better support students and staff members (regardless of religious identity or lack thereof) when it comes to navigating alcohol consumption during fieldwork and beyond.

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1. Introduction

Alcohol and religion are two of the oldest universal phenomena of human society, often sharing ambivalent relationships. In this article we address the relative lack of scholarship on how social researchers may become entangled in such relationships, primarily during fieldwork but also more broadly in academic institutions. This contributes to the growing body of literature concerning researcher positionalities and reflexivity (DALY, 2022; HADZIOMEROVIC, 2023), while scholars have only recently been paying more attention to religious positionalities (RUMSBY & EGGERT, 2023). Such a "religious turn" is helpful for challenging the Western domination of knowledge production, concentrated mostly in largely secularised universities in Europe and, to some extent, North America (YORGASON & DELLA DORA, 2009), while many researchers in Africa, Asia and Latin America are based in more overtly religious societies and are more likely to be religious practitioners themselves[1] (PEW RESEARCH CENTER, 2018). [1]

Meanwhile, conversations about the ambivalent role of alcohol in academia have been few and far between, in spite of the age-old trope of the wine-drinking philosopher inherited from Greco-Roman antiquity, and indeed similar references from Muslim history. Here we address the elephant in the room through two comparative case studies of "participant intoxication" (FISKESJÖ, 2010) and abstinence during research in "an attempt to explicitly demystify fieldwork or participant-observation by showing how the technique is practiced in the field" (VAN MAANEN, 1988, p.73). By reflecting on the contrasting experiences of each author, we hope to open up a critical conversation about the variegated effects of alcohol consumption in conducting research—from securing access to negotiating positionality—as well as fostering a more inclusive research environment. [2]

In Section 2, we review the state of the literature concerning the role of alcohol in academic research. We identify two main themes within the relatively small body of literature: first, alcohol consumption with research participants as an instrumental means of gaining access and building rapport, sometimes dubbed "participant intoxication". A second theme to emerge is about keeping safe within drinking spaces, but reflections on how engagement with drinking research participants affects the research process are rare. [3]

We utilise collaborative autoethnography to focus on how each author took different approaches to navigating the opportunities and challenges of alcohol consumption during fieldwork (Sections 4-5). As authors, we share much in common: being white Europeans affiliated with global North universities, focusing on research on politics and religion, and being religious practitioners. On the other hand, Jennifer is a visibly Muslim woman who conducted interviews in

1 This is, of course, not to deny the existence of secular approaches in African, Asian and Latin American societies, which are often deeply rooted in their respective contexts, nor the fact that many institutions in Europe and North America that view themselves as secular have religious origins and/or do not always essentially differ from faith-based organisations, as pointed out by postsecular theorists and scholars of the history of religion.

Lebanon and does not drink alcohol, while Seb is a Christian man who conducted participant observation in Vietnam and does drink alcohol. These similarities and differences yield productive comparisons and alternative perspectives through which to understand the surprising, unintended and sometimes comical outcomes of religious positionality during fieldwork. [4]

In the subsequent analysis section (Section 6), we emphasize our primary contribution of adding religion to discussions on researcher positionality and alcohol consumption. In doing so, we challenge and complicate assumptions about the role of alcohol consumption and insider/outsider dynamics during fieldwork by presenting a case for embracing the "strangeness" of an external researcher's outsider status. Finally, we shift from "the field" to briefly consider how academic spaces more generally are immersed in alcohol consumption, before offering some critical recommendations for relevant methodological training and fostering a more inclusive research environment. [5]

2. Literature Review

2.1 A neglected aspect of researcher reflexivity, positionality and research ethics

In recent years, debates on researcher reflexivity and positionality, research ethics, and safety in "the field"[2] have increasingly gained traction in academic circles. While sociologists, anthropologists, geographers and feminist researchers have a comparatively longer tradition of critically reflecting on how their presence affects the research process, in other social sciences subjects such as political science or humanitarian studies, these debates are still relatively new (LOKOT, 2022). Despite differences between various disciplines, overall, there is an increasing number of publications on researcher reflexivity and positionality, as well as research ethics. [6]

In spite of this increased focus on questions evolving around the impact of the researcher's presence on the research process and outcome, there are still issues that social sciences and humanities scholars rarely touch upon. The core aspects contributing to a researcher's positionality are usually considered to be gender, race, nationality, class and sexuality while (non)religious positionalities are often ignored or neglected as "soft" lifestyle characteristics, despite their salience in many people's lives (RUMSBY & EGGERT, 2023). This academic "blind spot" intersects with other social phenomena to produce further areas of reflexive neglect within the research process and academic environment; we argue alcohol consumption is an instructive example of this. [7]

Literature searches online and in leading research methods and methodology journals in the social sciences reveal only a handful of publications whose authors

2 While we do not have enough space here to discuss it in detail, we acknowledge the problematic origin and uses of the term "field" in academia and its entanglement with colonial imaginaries and practice (GUASCO, 2022). We use the term in a relational (rather than geographical) sense and encourage others to critically engage with the concept.

consider alcohol from a methodological point of view, rather than as the thematic focus of a study.[3] This omission is particularly striking considering how ubiquitous alcohol is in many parts of the world and that even when it is not (visibly) present for cultural, religious or health reasons, there are often strongly held views around alcohol consumption or abstinence. Alcohol tends to evoke strong feelings, positive or negative. It is revered or loathed, considered to be a highlight of or unthinkable in social gatherings. It leaves few people indifferent. [8]

Academia is often presented as an ivory tower-like space that is intellectual, progressive, and somehow disconnected from the "lower levels" of majority society, but in reality, it is as much affected by various social phenomena (such as, for example sexism or racism) as any part of society. Indeed, when it comes to alcohol consumption, many campuses are places where "everything is telling you to drink" (HILL, FOXCROFT & PILLING, 2018). What do we know about alcohol and academia? There is an abundant number of studies on alcohol consumption of students (CONROY & DE VISSER, 2014; HERMAN-KINNEY & KINNEY, 2013; HURLBUT & SHER, 1992; KARAM, KYPRI & SALAMOUN, 2007; MYRTVEIT et al., 2016; PERKINS & BERKOWITZ, 1986; RIORDAN, SCARF & CONNER, 2015, RIORDAN, CONNER, FLETT & SCARF, 2015; ROBERTSON & TUSTIN, 2018; ROMO, 2012; TAYLOR, JOHNSON, VOAS & TURRISI, 2006). In fact, some of the earliest publications go back to the early 20th century (MENDENHALL, 1940).[4] While academics seemed eager to address the alcohol consumption of university students, there is much less evidence of a grappling with their own relationship with alcohol. Indeed, publications on how alcohol affects researchers are rarer compared with reflections on other aspects of researcher positionality (existing articles include BASHIR, 2018; BHARDWA, 2013; BURNS, 2021; FIJESKÖ, 2010; GILLEN, 2016; HOLLAND, WILLIAMS & FORRESTER, 2014; PALMER & THOMPSON, 2010; SIN & YANG, 2020; THORESON, 1984). Some have only briefly treated the subject as one amongst other methodological issues (BASHIR, 2018; BHARDWA, 2013), and very few have openly written about alcohol abuse of researchers (BURNS, 2021; THORESON, 1984).[5] This is perhaps not surprising considering the potential reputational damage, given that the main audience for these articles are other researchers and therefore (potential) colleagues and employers. After all, while alcohol is ubiquitous in most Western societies and academic circles, alcoholism usually remains a taboo with significant stigma attached. [9]

Much of the existing literature on alcohol in academia is published in specialist alcohol and substance abuse journals, therefore reaching only a limited audience. More studies have been published in health-focused journals or by geography

3 Those who research alcohol as the object of their study usually give these questions of reflexivity more consideration, and the "Sage Handbook of Drug and Alcohol Studies" (KOLIND, THOM & HUNT, 2016) gives a comprehensive overview of such studies. However, in this article we move beyond this approach by highlighting the presence of alcohol in most fieldwork settings, including research where alcohol is not the primary focus.

4 We stopped looking once we reached the 1940s. There may be more in previous decades.

5 There is also some literature on other forms of substance abuse of researchers, including THORNTON (1995) and TUNNELL (1998) who have written about their consumption of illegal drugs during the research process.

and ethnography journals, but in practice discussions about the methodological implications of alcohol on the research process have not yet reached broader social sciences audiences. [10]

2.2 Themes in existing literature

Overall, two main themes in existing literature can be found: researchers reflecting on 1. how drinking with research participants allowed them to gain access and build rapport through participant intoxication, and 2. discussions on how to keep safe in environments where alcohol is consumed. A third theme that is much less discussed is how participant intoxication may offer new insights into the topics studied by the researcher. [11]

Most researchers who have written about their drinking with research participants have stated that it helped them gain access and build rapport with research participants (BHARDWA, 2013; FISKESJÖ, 2010; GILLEN, 2016; PALMER & THOMPSON, 2010; SIN & YANG, 2020). BHARDWA described how she drank "to blend in" (2013, p.51). PALMER and THOMPSON (2010, pp.428-429) explained PALMER's drinking during fieldwork as a form of "image management":

> "My visible alcohol consumption was a deliberate research strategy to facilitate my fieldwork. It offset the perception that I was taking the moral high ground and it provided direct and intimate access to the very attitudes, behaviours and practices I had been commissioned to document and detail. In this respect, it would have been less appropriate to abstain than to indulge." [12]

FISKESJÖ (2010), who coined the term "participant intoxication" for the practice of alcohol consumption with research participants, argued that drinking during fieldwork helps build rapport but also defines those as outsiders who are not willing to participate. BURNS (2021) shared that disclosing her past as an alcoholic helped build rapport but added that it can also highlight differences. [13]

Overall, intersectional aspects of participant intoxication are rarely discussed, except for gender in the publications of female researchers discussing how to keep safe (which we examine below in the discussion of the second key theme in existing literature). Other intersectional factors barely feature. Exceptions include GILLEN (2016) who discussed the role of whiteness and masculinity, SIN and YANG who briefly touched on gender and ethnicity (2020), and GOODWIN (n.d.) who pointed to the entanglements of colonialism, and early anthropologists' accounts of drinking practices of non-white indigenous populations which were used as justification for colonial domination. SIN and YANG (2020, p.1033) also stressed the relevance of cultural differences in how gaining access is balanced with research ethics:

> "In addition [in China], our experience is that it is common to wait until potential informants have had a fair amount of alcohol, before it is considered appropriate to ask for favors such as participation in research projects. Drinking, although seemingly

> outside of formal research practices as stipulated by IRB, therefore offers a way for participants to negotiate consent." [14]

A second key theme in existing literature is keeping safe. PALMER and THOMPSON (2010) situated their work on fieldwork in alcohol-based sporting subcultures within wider debates on fieldwork in risky situations. They, as well as BHARDWA (2013), discussed how they managed their alcohol intake during fieldwork so as not to compromise their safety, and BASHIR (2018) shared how she stayed safe when faced with a drunk interviewee and his aggressive dog (see also HOLLAND et al., 2014). PALMER and THOMPSON (2010) also discussed how to keep within their drinking limits in order to avoid being too inebriated to conduct research. Overall, gender seems to play a key role in this context as the literature on keeping safe when drinking or engaging with drinkers during fieldwork is clearly dominated by women. BHARDWA (2013) explained how being a woman helped with rapport but also put her at risk of sexual harassment. While much of the focus of keeping safe when faced with alcohol during fieldwork is on the researcher, keeping drunk research participants safe is much less in focus (see, for example PALMER & THOMPSON, 2010), which is curious, as in broader discussions about safety during fieldwork, it is usually the opposite (LEE-TREWEK & LINKOGLE, 2000, p.1). [15]

While in most academic discussions of engaging with drinking research participants, scholars focus on the practicalities of doing fieldwork, such as gaining access, building rapport and keeping safe, the question of how drinking may offer new insights into the research topic is much less often treated. One exception is GILLEN's (2016) discussion of how drinking with research participants in Vietnam helped him understand how whiteness and masculinity are produced in ways that differed with his expectations. [16]

In summary, while a handful of articles on the topic has been published since the early 2010s, overall, the question of how engagement with drinking research participants affects the research process remains largely neglected in social sciences discussions. In the limited available literature on the topic, scholars largely focus on the practicalities of navigating alcohol during fieldwork, including how to gain access, establish rapport, and keep safe. We know much less about the ways in which drinking with research participants can help researchers gain new insights into their research topic, and there is also very little evidence concerning what happens when researchers do not engage in participant drinking. Moreover, the existing body of knowledge on alcohol consumption during fieldwork could benefit from including more intersectional perspectives that include gender, race, class, nationality and other factors. Considering how prevalent religious reasons for abstinence are, there is a striking absence of academic reflection on the topic. In this article, we aim to help address these questions by discussing two case studies that help to complicate our understanding of the role of alcohol consumption and abstinence during fieldwork. [17]

3. Methodology

This paper is based on a collaborative autoethnographic discussion of our experiences. Collaborative autoethnography is a form of autoethnography, which in turn is a type of ethnography that has become increasingly popular in recent years. Drawing on autobiography, but different from it in the sense that it allows the author not just to narrate but also to analyse, autoethnography foregrounds personal narratives with a view to dissect broader socio-cultural and political phenomena (DOUGLAS & CARLESS, 2013; ELLIS, ADAMS & BOCHNER, 2011). Rather than trying to minimize subjectivity in research, authors of autoethnographic approaches embrace it, looking for socio-cultural and political meaning in individual experiences (ELLIS et al., 2011). In a nutshell, through autoethnography, the author

- "Uses a researcher's personal experience to describe and critique cultural beliefs, practices, and experiences.
- Acknowledges and values a researcher's relationships with others.
- Uses deep and careful self-reflection—typically referred to as 'reflexivity'—to name and interrogate the intersections between self and society, the particular and the general, the personal and the political.
- Shows people in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live, and the meaning of their struggles.
- Balances intellectual and methodological rigor, emotion, and creativity.
- Strives for social justice and to make life better" (ADAMS, JONES & ELLIS, 2015, pp.1-2). [18]

Collaborative autoethnography, which we used for this article, is a form of autoethnography that involves two or more researchers/authors, allowing them to compare and contrast their experiences (ABERASTURI-APRAIZ, CORREA GOROSPE & MARTÍNEZ-ARBELAIZ, 2020; CHANG, NGUNJIRI & HERNANDEZ, 2016). While autoethnography has been criticised as being a "self-centred" approach, with some questioning whether it was "even research" (GUYOTTE & SOCHACKA, 2016), collaborative autoethnography can help avoid some of the challenges of its sister method "by lending itself to greater rigor than autoethnography, by eliciting multidimensional perspectives on the research and by balancing the individual narrative with the greater collective experience" (YORKE, KIM, HAGOS HAILU & EJIGU BERHIE, 2023, p.604; see also LAPADAT, 2017). Our writing in this article is part of the analytical tradition which aims to combine autoethnographic work with modern scientific standards by going beyond mere descriptions of subjective experiences, therefore trying to overcome some of the limitations of more evocative autoethnographic approaches (ANDERSON, 2006). [19]

The work for this article consisted of an iterative process of intertwined individual and collaborative autoethnographic reflection, based on verbal discussion and reflective writing. This took place over telephone and in-person conversations,

focusing initially on the broad themes in existing literature on alcohol consumption during fieldwork and in academic institutions, and how our experiences compared to them, followed by the compilation of the literature review. The literature review then helped guide the individual writing up of our autoethnographic reflections, as it provided us with a reference frame that we could compare and contrast our experiences against. [20]

Once our respective autoethnographies were written, we engaged in a collaborative, thematic analysis of them (BRAUN & CLARKE, 2006). We read and commented on each other's reflections, identifying in the process themes that cut across our individual autoethnographies and linked them with the literature review. This intersubjective exchange helped refine our analysis and writing, and it reduced bias (YORKE et al., 2023). Previous research has shown that collaborative autoethnography works particularly well in trusted teams (LAPADAT, 2017), which our experience supports. We have known each other and worked together for several years, and this article is our second co-written piece. This facilitated the process in terms of trust but also familiarity with elements of the other's fieldwork experiences. [21]

4. Fieldwork Case Study 1 (Seb): Intoxicant Participation Gone Awry

4.1 Researching religious transformation in upland Vietnam

Between 2016-2017, I spent three months conducting fieldwork in Vietnam's northern highlands to investigate the everyday politics of mass Protestant conversion, state-led development and market expansion among the Hmong, a marginalised ethnic minority group (RUMSBY, 2023). I took a multi-method approach—combining in-depth interviews, focus groups and participant observation—across three remote Hmong villages in order to triangulate and corroborate data generated from different methods (BREWER & HUNTER, 2006). In addition, I also took fieldnotes every day for three months which proved invaluable for my autoethnographic reflections (WILLIS, 2000). With the guidance of a local research assistant, I aimed to engage with a representative sample of people from different ages, gender, religious affiliation and socio-economic class. Inevitably my "strange" positionality as a tall, white foreigner (I was the first Westerner many research participants had ever spoken to) made my presence something of a novelty at first, although this gradually wore off over the course of the fieldwork. [22]

Similar to wider Vietnamese society, drinking alcohol together has traditionally been an obligatory form of (male) boding in Hmong society. As GILLEN pointed out, "drinking spaces and practices are both expressive and ethically challenging (for reasons like health, productivity, and relationship building) to many in Vietnam" (2016, p.590). Many Vietnamese Protestants have altogether abandoned these ethical dilemmas and contested spaces by abstaining from alcohol consumption. This is taken very seriously by Protestant converts and has ramifications for rural livelihoods; for example, one of my case study sites used to be famed for the quality of its homemade rice wine, but alcohol production had

virtually disappeared since three quarters of the village converted to Protestantism. [23]

Protestant conversion has also caused conflict and tensions within the Hmong community, as converts demonize and deride many traditional customs as "backwards" while non-Protestant Hmong (many of whom follow traditional animist practices) accuse converts of abandoning their roots (NGÔ, 2015). Non-Protestant research participants quoted a proverb to me that "drinking makes us brothers", which means converts who abstain from alcohol are seen to be breaking established kinship ties. In turn, Protestants contest this accusation by asserting that brotherhood ought to be about helping each other, not intoxication. But in practice, Protestant conversion has clearly driven a wedge through Hmong society, with reduced interaction and empathy between either side of the religious divide. [24]

4.2 "If you want to understand Hmong culture, then you have to get drunk with them!"

These tensions must also be understood within the context of ethnic inequalities and discrimination between the (predominantly non-Protestant) ethnic majority, Kinh, and minority groups like the Hmong. During my stay in the villages, I met an ethnic Kinh school teacher who could not speak Hmong but, with an air of authority, insisted that "If you want to understand Hmong culture, then you have to get drunk with them!" As I was to find out, this statement contains an element of truth but is also entwined in Kinh prejudices about the Hmong as rebellious, lazy and "wild" (O'BRIAIN, 2018). More problematic was the positionality of the declarant: an ethnic Kinh teacher who had not learned much about Hmong culture or language, but whose job was to teach Hmong children to learn the national Vietnamese language and a Kinh-centric curriculum as part of an ongoing national project to assimilate ethnic minorities (McELWEE, 2004). Tellingly, this teacher did not live in the village or integrate with the local community, but commuted from the nearest town. [25]

As another outsider to the village, I certainly did not want to repeat this mistake (although I have, since, inevitably become an unelected "advocate" of Hmong culture and society to academic and policymaker audiences). I stayed in my Hmong hosts' houses during fieldwork and adopted an ethnographic approach, attempting to immerse myself in everyday life as far as possible. Within non-Protestant circles, this entailed alcohol consumption to an extent and frequency well beyond my personal comfort zone—especially over the Lunar New Year holidays. A few excerpts from my fieldnotes are illustrative:

> "When I told *Xa*[6] I'd have one more drink and then stop, he replied: 'Three more; it's our custom'. How can you argue against that!?

6 All research participant names in fieldwork Case Study 1 are pseudonyms.

> Then we went to *Co*'s house, where everyone proceeded to get drunk and I had to eventually refuse their pressure to keep me drinking, on the pretext of having work to do. To be honest, this battle to avoid drinking is quite exhausting ...
>
> After getting up early [to meet my research assistant], he didn't turn up on time. After more than 30 mins wait, [the assistant's] nephew turned up to pick me up—drunk ... By 9am he has already been drinking for hours with guests ...
>
> In the afternoon we continued our search for [female] interviewees, with the men absent at a drinking location to which I no longer wanted to attend.
>
> *Cho* invited me to his house tomorrow, but I don't think I can stomach it. In fact, that evening I got food/alcohol poisoning which kept me up most of the night ...
>
> [Local official] *Pao* was drunk asleep but [my research assistant] woke him up and *Pao* was very much 'with it'; we had an excellent discussion which could have gone on for longer ... After the interview, *Pao* excused himself and proceeded to throw up outside!" [26]

4.3 When participant intoxication backfires

Within the context of government suspicions about external religious activity, I also had a rather instrumental goal for drinking alcohol with non-Protestants: I wanted to avoid the label of being a possible "undercover missionary" and allow for more confident drinkers to share negative opinions about Protestantism without fear of offending me. This was successful to a certain extent, although I was also regularly disappointing my hosts and creating awkward situations by turning down the next drink. PETIT and TURNER noted how "men who drink reluctantly are said to feel superior; conversely, to become intoxicated together is to show esteem, trust, and equality with one's table companions" (2013, p.156). Upon reflection, I probably did not achieve much of the desired esteem, trust and equality within non-Protestant drinking spaces—although the very discomfort and awkwardness were nevertheless enlightening for me to understand the dynamics of religious hostility and tensions within Hmong society. [27]

However, as I have elaborated upon elsewhere (RUMSBY & EGGERT, 2023), this participant intoxication strategy backfired somewhat when I moved across to the Protestant side of the religious divide. As a Christian myself, I assumed building rapport with Hmong Protestants would be more straightforward, and so it seemed to be initially. Naturally, I did not drink alcohol around Protestants since no-one else was, although I did explain to those who were interested that where I was from, Christians were allowed to drink (unlike in Vietnam, where all major denominations take a hard line on abstention from alcohol). Nevertheless, my simultaneous forays into non-Protestant drinking spaces did not go unnoticed and raised concerns among some Protestant research participants. [28]

This was particularly problematic when my (non-Protestant) research assistant accompanied me into Protestant spaces, such as the wedding of two Hmong converts. None of the Protestants were drinking but non-Protestant guests certainly were, and my research assistant (who knew I was not abstinent) invited me to join them. This put me in a difficult situation: on the one hand it would have

been rude to refuse, on the other hand I did not intend to drink in front of Protestant research participants. In the end, rather than being suspected of having ulterior evangelistic motives, I was instead suspected of not being a "real" Christian at all—or perhaps even worse, being dishonest about my religious identity in order to gain the trust of the Protestant community. As a result, I had to rebuild trust and rapport to a certain extent, explaining to relevant participants that in the UK it is perfectly normal for Christians to drink alcohol (in moderation). This opened up an unexpected space for mutual learning and understanding, but I was consequently treated with more caution by the church leaders and missionaries. [29]

5. Fieldwork Case Study 2 (Jennifer): When Abstinence Builds Rapport

5.1 Researching civil war in Lebanon

My fieldwork in Lebanon in 2015 was part of a research project on gender and political violence (EGGERT, 2023a). Civil war had devastated the country in intermittent rounds of fighting from 1975 to 1990, broken up by periods of quieter, almost peaceful times (TRABOULSI, 2007). Thousands of fighters had joined the many militias involved in the fighting, thousands of men—and women. Lebanon was, and is, a relatively gender conservative country. What made the participation of so many women as fighters possible? Why did the women want to join the fight, what made the organisations they demanded to join allow them in, and how was this perceived by society? Drawing on theories on involvement in political violence and organisational decision-making (EGGERT, 2021), and building on existing literature on female fighters worldwide (HENSHAW, 2016) and in Lebanon (KARAMÉ, 1995; SHEHADEH, 1999), I set out to help shed light on these questions. Based in the UK, I undertook four trips to Lebanon and, during a total of four months, interviewed almost 70 former fighters and militants from most of the militias involved in the war and civil society (EGGERT, 2023b). I later analysed this research by taking a thematic analysis approach (FIFE, 2005; HOLLIDAY, 2007). Interviews were my method of choice because most archives from the war that could have revealed information about the inner dynamics of the militias at the time were destroyed (EGGERT, 2021)—and official accounts were unlikely to include detailed accounts of the former fighters' and militants' personal experiences. Owing to the sensitivity of the research topic, I reached out to interviewees via a mix of purposive and snowballing sampling (KENNEY, 2013). Most of the interviews took place in public or semi-public spaces, like a café or a shared office. Cafés were particularly popular with interviewees and me, probably because they represented somewhat "neutral" territory, felt safe, and left both interviewer and interviewee with the choice to leave at any time. And of course, there were plenty of cafés in Beirut! [30]

5.2 Interfaith acts of solidarity

During my second fieldwork trip in December 2015, I had already established strong links with *Fighters for Peace*, a Lebanese NGO founded by a group of former fighters who were now working for peace (SAAB, FOERCH & MOFFETT, 2022). I had interviewed several of the former fighters and befriended Christina, the wife of one of the fighters who had co-founded the NGO and whose daughter was approximately the same age as my daughter. When they heard I was in Beirut again, Christina, Ziad and Assaad (the president and vice-president of *Fighters for Peace*) invited me to the opening of an exhibition on the former fighters and their post-war experiences. I expected the exhibition to be of relevance for my research and Christina promised to introduce me to more former fighters on the day. The exhibition took place in a trendy restaurant on Hamra Street in the centre of Beirut. I was in Beirut with my daughter, who was of primary school age at the time. When she saw Christina and her daughter, she joined them excitedly and the girls ended up drawing together at one of the tables. I had time to take a closer look at the exhibition, mingle with the other visitors, and catch up with the former fighters I had interviewed during my previous trip to Beirut. [31]

As a practising Muslim, I do not drink alcohol and in line with Islamic scriptures and mainstream scholarly opinions, whenever possible, avoid venues where alcohol is drunk (DAR-AL-IFTAA, 2015). However, living in a multicultural, multifaith society and coming from an interfaith family, I also know that sometimes it is difficult to completely avoid such places. I did not know it beforehand, but soon discovered that alcohol was served at the exhibition. I would have preferred to view the exhibition and meet the former fighters in an alcohol-free place, but I decided to stay. When I was offered a glass of vodka and orange, which was served at the exhibition, I declined. I asked if there were non-alcoholic drinks and got a grumpy response from the barkeeper and owner of the restaurant: "*No, there is only vodka and orange*!" None of us said any more, but when someone later told me that the owner was a professed communist, I wondered if maybe there was an element of Islamophobia, or general antireligious sentiment. It would not have been the first time that I experienced Islamophobia in Lebanon (which is discussed, for example, by KASSEM, 2023). Was the owner annoyed by the presence of a visibly Muslim woman in his space? A bit later, Assaad from the *Fighters for Peace* saw me without a drink and asked if I was not having anything to drink. I briefly mentioned the encounter with the owner, which I had not actually minded that much because I was here to do my research, not to drink. But Assaad, a practising Christian himself who, like many of the others, was drinking vodka and orange tonight, was annoyed. He started ranting: "Only vodka and orange!? There should not be only vodka and orange! If you don't drink, he should just get you an orange juice. If he can make vodka and orange, he can make orange juice! What's the problem!?" I tried to placate him, but he was not happy until he had made the owner bring me a freshly squeezed orange juice. While as a guest (both at the event and in the country) and a member of a racialised religious group (KASSEM, 2022), I would have been hesitant to be more demanding, Assaad used his relative privilege (as one of the

hosts, as a Lebanese, and as a Christian) to speak up for me, in an act of interfaith solidarity (HOUSTON, 2023). This act of solidarity was particularly powerful in a context where societal conflict was often read along sectarian lines (RUMSBY & EGGERT, 2023). [32]

5.3 Drinking vodka and orange with a Muslim woman

The *Fighters for Peace* kept their word and introduced me to several former fighters who I interviewed at the exhibition. The spacious layout of the restaurant provided a convenient location for the interviews, as I could sit at a separate table with individual interviewees. This setup provided us with privacy to talk about their experiences during and after the war, while still being within sight of the others. I had just finished an interview with a former fighter, and we were still sitting at the table. There was a moment of silence between us. The friends and colleagues of the former fighter I had just interviewed were all sitting around a table not far from us. I thought he might be hesitant to join them because he did not want to be rude towards me by leaving me at my own at the table, so I pointed towards the group and said to him that we were done with the interview, that I was grateful to him for taking the time to answer my questions, but that he could feel free to join his friends now if he wanted to. He looked at me, the glass of vodka and orange in front of him, then back at me and laughed: "I'm sitting here, drinking vodka and orange with a Muslim woman in hijab—I'm not going anywhere!" We were both aware how (relatively) unusual the situation was. He could have been hostile towards my non-drinking, or even just my presence in a space where many would not usually expect a Muslim woman wearing hijab (MIR, 2009). Judging by the conclusions of authors of existing literature on alcohol during fieldwork (see, for example, FISKESJÖ, 2010), my refusal to drink would have been expected to negatively impact trust and rapport with research participants. Instead, the unusual nature of the situation sparked interest, and amusement, in the interviewee. [33]

6. Discussion and Conclusion

Similar to the broader literature on researcher positionalities (RUMSBY & EGGERT, 2023), most academic publications on alcohol and fieldwork do not contain discussions concerning the role of religion. While this is somewhat surprising due to the clear stance that many religions have on the consumption of alcohol, it is likely a reflection of two phenomena. On the one hand, alcohol consumption of researchers remains an uncomfortable topic, due to it touching on questions of social norms and expectations (and, often, the breaking and bending of these), as well as ethics and consent; on the other hand, it can be explained by the relatively small number of religious researchers amongst academics in the West who continue to dominate academic knowledge production. [34]

Despite this reluctance in the existing literature, the case studies in this article provide clear examples of how religion, alcohol and fieldwork are often entangled. Although we are of different religious backgrounds and conducted our fieldwork in

two different parts of the world, our religious identity and affiliation played important roles in how we experienced, navigated and practised alcohol consumption and abstinence during fieldwork. Moreover, our positionalities with regards to alcohol provided important insights into dynamics around conflict and religion in "the field" as well as our role as researchers who were external to (but temporarily part of) the communities we researched. We will discuss this in more detail below. [35]

6.1 Complicating assumptions about the role of alcohol consumption and insider/outsider dynamics during fieldwork

In the case of Seb's fieldwork, alcohol played an important role in the communities he immersed himself in. It affected relations between members of the local community but also his relationship with them. Seb tried to be "all things to all men" by attempting to conform with both research participants who drank and those who did not. His religious identity and affiliation allowed him to approach alcohol consumption with some flexibility, but his strategy only worked to some extent. On the one hand, his attempt to gain insider status through participant intoxication built a degree of rapport but often went far beyond his physical and ethical comfort zones. On the other hand, his practice of "selective abstinence" with Christian research participants strengthened access initially, but backfired later on when the inconsistencies of his strategy emerged within the local community. [36]

On reflection, Seb's strategy of selective participant intoxication *and* abstinence was over-ambitious and perhaps naïve about the limits of fieldwork within the context of religious polarisation. The "all things to all men" approach unintentionally led to awkward and challenging social situations, even exposing him to questions about his integrity. In spite (or perhaps because of) this, his strategy of navigating alcohol consumption in the field provided unique insights by revealing attitudes and relationships between research participants belonging to different religious groups (RUMSBY & EGGERT, 2023). Overall, his experience therefore challenges and complicates portrayals of participant intoxication as a general unifier between researcher and research participants as claimed in existing literature. [37]

For Jennifer, on the other hand, participant intoxication was not an option for religious reasons. As a practising Muslim, she did not try to fit in and gain "insider status" with regards to the consumption of alcohol (as propagated by the method of participant intoxication). She did not drink and avoided places where alcohol was consumed. She unexpectedly found herself in a context where alcohol was drunk and decided to stay (but not drink), therefore breaking expected conventions twice (by being in that place in the first place, but also by not drinking), and thus she stuck out unmistakably as an outsider. According to the wisdom of participant intoxication, this would have been expected to hinder rapport with research participants as she would come across as "judgemental" or "superior". [38]

In fact, the reality was more complicated, partly since the research participants she engaged with were not practising Muslims or abstinent themselves. At first, the bar owner's hostile reaction to Jennifer's abstinence seemed to consign her to a marginal position in the field. However, this hostility in turn led to an act of solidarity by the Christian *Fighters for Peace* leader who, despite not being abstinent himself, could apparently empathise with her religious motive and used it as an opportunity to practice interfaith solidarity and include Jennifer in the group of valued colleagues, friends and visitors of the group. Finally, the former fighter's reaction to Jennifer's unusual presence in a drinking space was one of curiosity and openness. [39]

Despite our different positionalities and approaches towards alcohol during fieldwork, the outcome was the same in the sense that we both gained access and the trust of our research participants, albeit through a different mechanism: while Seb's participation in alcohol consumption was based on the mechanism of finding common ground, Jennifer's abstention showed that embracing "strangeness" does not have to be a disadvantage. Her abstinence in the field opened up new opportunities for rapport, in the form of solidarity or interest and amusement, as outlined in her case study. Similar to Seb, then, Jennifer's experience also challenges existing assumptions in existing literature about the role of participant intoxication in creating rapport with research participants during fieldwork, by showing that abstinence can have a similar effect. Our experiences provide evidence for the fact that both drinking and abstinence during fieldwork can build rapport and trust with research participants, albeit in different ways. [40]

Beyond discussions of the "effectiveness" of participant intoxication, the experiences of Jennifer and Seb speak more broadly to the insider/outsider dynamics of researchers amongst their research participants. Attempts to gain insider status (such as learning relevant languages and participating in everyday life) are usually laudable and considered beneficial in much of the social sciences literature, especially anthropology. Nevertheless, the attempt of an external researcher from a different (and usually privileged) social class, educational background and/or nationality to gain an "authentic" insider status has always been an "ideal type" at best, or an illusion at worst. Honest ethnographers have acknowledged that they will always be outsiders (unless they are from the researched community in the first place) and adjusted their claims to "expertise" accordingly (HARRELL & XINGXING, 2013), but in general there remains an aspiration to get as close to insider status as possible, within the confines of positionality. [41]

We do not critique this aspiration in general, but our experience questions some particulars of this attempt to reach insider status in certain situations. Instead, we point to the counterexample of the researchers who, instead of denying the obvious, humbly acknowledge and embrace their "strangeness" and outsider status (for example by not drinking in places where drinking is the norm). Our case studies show that this may generate some friction but will also be respected and even considered intriguing to others, thus generating opportunities for further conversation. Restrictions that religious researchers place upon themselves due

to their beliefs are often considered as limiting; however, our experiences show that rather than being limitations only, embracing one's convictions—even if it stresses one's status as an outsider—can also open up new possibilities for engagement, mutual exchange and research insights. [42]

Nevertheless, it is important to note in this context how the fact that we were both outsiders, and only temporarily present in the communities where our research took place furthered our ability to navigate, and break, expected conventions. While "image management" is often part of fieldwork (PALMER & THOMPSON, 2010), the degree to which this is necessary, and the cost related to things going wrong varies considerably depending on researchers' positionality. While breaking norms during our fieldwork still carried some risks for us, as outsiders we had comparatively higher levels of freedom to navigate the grey areas of what was considered acceptable in the local community. We were less reliant on the approval of the communities that we were temporarily part of, and any reputational damage due to us breaking with expectations placed on Muslim women or practising Christians was less likely to harm us to the same degree that it may have someone who relied on local communities more than we did. Discussions about the insider/outsider status of researchers (religious or not) would not be complete without considering this considerable privilege of the outsider researcher. [43]

6.2 Recommendations for academic institutions

The neglect of certain aspects of researcher positionalities such as religiosity and lifestyle choices has broad ramifications, but here we focus on the implications for alcohol consumption. Alcohol plays a central role in many fieldwork settings, but researchers are largely left to their own devices when it comes to navigating this issue. We call on academic institutions to change this situation. Concretely and as a first step, we recommend that the topic be included in fieldwork preparation training (see also GILLEN, 2016, p.599). The "Sage Handbook of Drug and Alcohol Studies" (KOLIND et al., 2016) is a solid starting point, especially PAGE and SINGER's (2016) principles of participant observation in "drug ethnography". Existing discussions about keeping safe in the field (for both researchers and research participants) can be built upon with a focus on the gendered, racialised and religious elements of alcohol consumption, informed consent and inclusivity. In particular, more attention should be paid to the ways in which navigating alcohol consumption and abstinence can provide insights into broader dynamics between researchers and research participants as well as amongst and between research participants and the wider community. [44]

Alcohol is not only omnipresent in many fieldwork settings but also in broader academic spaces such as conferences and universities. Looking back at our journeys through Western academia, alcohol was everywhere and often deeply ingrained in academic institutions and practices. Excessive drinking during freshers week, university colloquia entitled "think and drink", seminar series and conference presentations that end in the pub, department socials and receptions where alcohol is served as a matter of course, jokes that romanticise alcohol

consumption—the list is long. The omnipresence of alcohol is one of Western academia's unspoken truths: everyone knows about it, but it is rarely acknowledged and even less critically reflected on. While academic alcohol consumption and alcoholism have a long history, it is not unlikely that to some extent, the current state of affairs is also linked to the conditions of the neoliberal academy. Burned out and exhausted, many academics need the incentive of a glass of beer or wine after work to help them make it through their day. [45]

While we focused on the experiences of a Muslim and a Christian researcher in this article, these experiences are not limited to Muslims and Christians or even religious academics. There is a growing number of people in the academy who would like to fully participate in academic spaces without having to navigate alcohol consumption: People who do not drink for health reasons, people who are recovering from an alcohol addiction, people who have been sexually harassed or experienced other forms of violence following alcohol consumption, people who simply prefer not to be in the company of intoxicated colleagues. We therefore call on academics, universities and academic associations to critically reflect on the place alcohol has in their institutions, how this affects staff members and students from a range of different backgrounds, and what alternative arrangements can be made. [46]

In our experience, attempts at challenging the omnipresence of alcohol in shared academic spaces are often met with responses ranging from a lack of understanding to dismissal and outright hostility—responses not unlike those experienced by the authors during fieldwork, as Jennifer's case shows (see also MIR, 2009). Raising reservations about alcohol consumption at work can be particularly risky for researchers who are minoritised based on their religion, such as Muslims in Europe who are at risk that their rejection of alcohol will be read as an expression of "extremism". With current counterextremism legislation and practice in mind, accusations of extremism pose significant risks to researchers who may be at risk of detention and deportation as was the case for Rizwaan SABIR and Hicham YEZZA in the UK in 2008 (SABIR, 2022). Accusations of extremism also make it easier for critics to dismiss calls for a critical consideration of the role of alcohol in academic spaces as a "Muslim issue", when it really affects a wide range of different members of the academic community. We therefore recommend building broad alliances that highlight the benefits of alcohol-free spaces at universities and conferences for students, staff members and visitors from various backgrounds and who collaboratively develop strategies of working towards creating these in ways that are attuned to the specific context. [47]

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