KULTURELLA PERSPEKTIV

Research article

"A modest hijab"

A humanitarian encounter in Brazil through the lens of a single-story

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The encounter perspective highlights frustration, moral commitment, power asymmetry, inequalities, and experiences. This article contributes to the ethnographies of encounters, articulating an encounter perspective with literature on gender and Middle Eastern studies. Through a single-story, I critique the culturalization of humanitarianism. This article shows the reflective discourse of the Syrian-Palestine woman refugee in Brazil who rebuilt her life and engaged in her religious self in its disciplinary practices. Samia's narrative shows that her modesty was part of a larger personal project of being a pious woman. I argue that centring on the body of a woman and her "culture" deflects attention away from Brazilian precarious humanitarian aid, inequalities and the force of religious will. The methodology was ethnography based on fieldwork conducted between 2015 and 2018 in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

Keywords: humanitarian encounter; Syrian conflict; refugee; Brazil

Encounter-perspektivet belyser frustration, moraliskt engagemang, maktasymmetrier, ojämlikheter och erfarenheter. Den här artikeln bidrar till etnografiska studier av möten (*encounters*) genom att artikulera *encounter*-perspektivet med litteratur från genus- och mellanösternstudier. Genom en enskild berättelse (*single-story*) kritiserar jag den kulturalisering som ofta sker inom humanitärt arbete. Artikeln diskuterar en syrisk-palestinsk kvinnas reflexiva berättelse om hur hon efter att ha flytt återuppbyggde sitt liv och engagerade sig i sitt religiösa jag genom disciplinära praktiker. Samias narrativ visar att hennes modesthet var en del av ett större personligt projekt som from kvinna. Texten diskuterar hur hjälparbetare i en brasiliansk flyktingorganisation genom att fokusera på en kvinnas kropp och "kultur" flyttar fokus från frågor som rör det brasilianska biståndets prekaritet, liksom från ojämlikheter och religiös agens. Artikeln är baserad på etnografiskt fältarbete som genomfördes mellan 2015 och 2018 i São Paulo och Rio de Janeiro, Brasilien.

Nyckelord: humanitärt möte; syrisk konflikt; flykting; Brasilien

The Brazilian response to the Syrian conflict can be described differently from that of most countries in the world, which closed their borders or defined extremely challenging requirements for the entry of Syrians and people of other nationalities affected by the conflict.[1] During 2011 and 2012, at the onset of the conflict in Syria, the Syrian communities in Brazil[2] tried to reunite with their relatives to flee violence and persecution. Faced with the challenges of migratory procedures, such as requiring a visa to enter Brazil, representatives of these communities demanded action from the Brazilian government to facilitate the displacement.

The Brazilian government adopted a flexible policy, with borders being open to refugees from Syria who could obtain tourist visas with only a few requirements for humanitarian reasons.[3]

[1] The Brazilian modality of entry offers a legal, safe and non-selective route for refugees from Syria, making Brazil an exception concerning the mechanisms intended for Syrians elsewhere in the world (Baeza 2018).

[2] The first records of Arab immigration to Brazil occurred in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Mainly coming from what is called Syria and Lebanon today, 140,464 immigrants from the Middle East landed in Brazil from 1880 to 1969. In the following decade, records indicated about 500 immigrants arriving in Brazil annually (Karam 2009).

[3] Fassin defines "humanitarian reason" as the "principle under which moral sentiments enter the political sphere. It underlies what may be called a humanitarian government, that is, a way of governing on this principle" (2012: 37). This concept is used in the normative documents issued by the Brazilian Ministry of Justice. It is worth mentioning that

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Since 2013, the demography of refugees from Syria[4] has changed: most Syrians living in Brazil had no previous connections with pre-existing Syrian networks and their bonds with Arabic-speaking communities established in Brazil were weak. The majority of people from Syria to Brazil at this time were predominantly Muslim and male; of military age they were required to fight in the Syria war. Between 2011 and 2021, 4,992 Syrian citizens sought refuge in Brazil, of which the Brazilian Ministry of Justice recognised 3,682 as refugees. Seventy percent of recognised refugees were men, 30% were women. In 2015, Syrians stood out as the largest refugee group in the country, according to official data from the Brazilian state (CONARE 2022).

Brazil is the 7th largest economy in the world, corresponding to more than 40% of Latin America's economy. At the same time, 33 million people face hunger and there exists high unemployment. In 2015, 15,905 people were homeless in the wealthiest city in the country, São Paulo (FIPE 2015). In 2019, this number had increased to 24,344.[5] Considering this context of enormous inequality, it is significant that the Brazilian government created no specific program or any public policies to welcome people from Syria. Souza and Manfrinato (2019), Meihy (2019), and Baeza (2018) have shown that refugees from Syria in Brazil were left to their own devices. In general, while Syrian nationals and other people affected by the conflict could find a safe route to Brazil, they had little else than access to essential documentation for living in the country. As scholars have shown (Hamid 2012, 2019; Perin 2014; Facundo Navia 2019), humanitarian aid and Brazilian administrative practices for managing refugees and migrants are uncertain and precarious.

Aim and research questions

Against this background, this article aims to describe, contextualise, and investigate a specific humanitarian encounter, in which a woman's attire plays a central role in how she is interpreted and responded to by humanitarian aid workers. Through this in-depth reading of an encounter, as narrated by a refugee woman I call Samia, and a humanitarian aid worker I call Joana,[6] I investigate how preconceived ideas of "culture" and "cultural differences" come to serve as explanations for certain choices Samia made – explanations which neither matched Samia's own understanding of her situation nor took into account more structural obstacles that refugees in Brazil face when seeking to make a life in their country of destination.

To be clear, while it may not come as a surprise for researchers who conduct fieldwork in the humanitarian field that aid workers may have a prejudice against a woman dressed in distinctly Muslim attire, I believe that by paying particular attention to details can contribute to shifting the focus to the precarious and unequal situation in which Brazilian humanitarian aid takes place, and show how it plays out in the life of a single individual. In doing so, I attend to a set of more overarching research questions: How do the cultural discourses of those receiving humanitarian aid deflect attention from the social and political forces that have a decisive impact on people's lives? How is the humanitarian encounter affected by representations of unfreedom that blame the chains of culture? By responding to these questions, this article seeks to contribute to ethnographies of the encounter, articulating the perspective of an humanitarian encounter (Grayman 2012; Fountain 2016) with literature on gender and Middle Eastern studies.

Theoretical approach: Humanitarianism and the encounter perspective

Understood as a gesture of compassion, fraternity, and charity, humanitarianism is regarded as an altruistic act of helping others (Fassin 2012, 2011). Fassin articulates different conceptions and actions of helping others based on the concept of "humanitarian reason", which he defined as the "principle under which moral sentiments enter the political sphere. It underlies what may be called a humanitarian government, that is, a way of governing on this principle" (Fassin 2012: 37). In this sense, the "humanitarian government" can be described as a whole set of procedures and actions that aim to manage and regulate the existence of human beings (precarious and vulnerable) and this includes but is not limited to interventions by the nation-state.

Fassin (2011) considers that the presentation of a critical point of view concerning humanitarian practices is relevant, since "the world of humanitarianism tends to elude critical analysis". Critical views have much to contribute not only to anthropology of forced migration and humanitarianism but also to humanitarian work itself. A challenge, however, is to build an autonomous and solidaristic mode of critique that can be heard by those towards whom it is directed. As Fassin argues it is essential to produce a discourse that is neither an admired endorsement nor a virulent denunciation (Fassin 2011: 37).

Based on their works on disaster relief in Indonesia, Grayman (2012) and Fountain (2016) argue that by involving dynamic cultural meetings across differences, the ethnography of humanitarianism is necessarily

Brun argues that humanitarian reason has become part of our way of making politics, nationally and internationally (2016: 396).

[4] Instead of Syrian refugees, the term refugees from Syria is being used, since not only refugees of Syrian origin, but other groups including Palestinians and other stateless persons are fleeing war and seeking protection in Brazil. I also use refugees for people displaced by the Syrian conflict who are asylum seekers or have another migratory status, such as immigrants or tourists.

[5] Secretaria Especial de Educação 2020.

[6] The names used in the text are pseudonyms, and I will maintain their personal integrity throughout my descriptions of their lives. Samia, who no longer lives in Brazil, allowed me to provide more specific details based on her biography.

the study of encounters. Analysing encounters helps researchers look at the complexities of culture and the dynamics of power and inequality that arise from encounters between people. The encounter perspective shows how people from diverse backgrounds negotiate and make sense of their interactions and how these encounters are comprised of moral commitment, power asymmetry, inequalities, and experiences of frustration. The analysis developed in this article is supported by authors with ethnographies of encounters in humanitarian contexts.

In his ethnographic study of humanitarian workers, Grayman develops the concept of the “humanitarian encounter”. While the concept is not elaborated in theoretical terms, it operates nonetheless as a frame for his descriptions. Grayman highlights frustrations, moral commitments, power asymmetries as well as experiences, all of which are ethnographically rich (Grayman 2012: 51). This is where the “encounter” comes in as a key concept that refers to the interactions between actors, accounting for both inequalities and cultural differences.

There is a vast amount of critical work on different types of encounters (Asad 1990; van der Veer 2001; Keane 2007; Bauer-Amin 2018).[7] In this article, I will thus also draw on Faier and Rofel’s (2014) and Schiocchet’s (2017) approaches because they are “more suitable as an academic tool to investigate how different world views influence each other upon contact. In turn, it does not assume the normative imperative of fitting one to the other standards” (Schiocchet 2017: 10). Ethnographies of encounters explore how culture-making occurs through unequal relationships involving two or more groups of people and things that appear to exist in culturally distinct worlds (Faier & Rofel 2014; Schioccet 2017). The encounter perspective seeks to create a broad understanding of representations, social interactions, social organisations and social practices, as opposed to preconceived notions that generate blind spots about the larger structure of the encounter (Schiocchet 2017: 81).

Method and material: Fieldwork and humanitarian encounters

The small material featured here comes out of a broader project conducted from 2015 to 2018. The research consisted of interviews and observatory participation during everyday activity with 15 refugees from Syria and 12 humanitarian workers. My goal was to register the narratives of refugees from Syria regarding humanitarian aid. I was also interested in the relations of refugee from Syria with humanitarian organisations involved in their bureaucratic process of refuge and migration.

As soon as I started to conduct my fieldwork, I had an opportunity to interview several humanitarian workers. As a postdoctoral fellow at the Research Centre on Immigration and Refugee Policies (CEDPIR/FCRB), nationally known in Brazil with a solid institutional network of humanitarian organisations, both local and abroad, I had access to professionals with consolidated careers who occupied relevant positions as well as university students in training who also worked as volunteers. I interviewed 12 humanitarian workers, several of whom were colleagues at the Research Center (CEDPIR/FCRB), where there was also a Legal Clinic for migrants and refugees (Cepremi). Through FCRB, I talked to a sort of professionals such as lawyers, social workers, psychologists, sociologists, economists, and public defenders, as well as researchers and managers who worked at the Ministry of Justice, Conare, and major organisations, such as Cáritas, UNHCR, and IOM. In addition to the interviews, I attended many events organised by the Research Centre, such as the summer courses in 2016, 2017, and 2018. The course consisted of 40 hours of training and, in one week, brought together so-called practitioners, scholars, students, and other professionals related to the humanitarian field.

My fieldwork was not about humanitarian workers but refugees from Syria.[8] I aimed to record their narratives of displacement by considering their relationship with the humanitarian government. I interviewed people displaced by the Syrian conflict. They were Syrian citizens and other nationals such as Palestinians and Lebanese. These refugees lived in urban areas of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo and presented great socioeconomic diversity. They were between 18 and 65 years old and mainly from Damascus and Aleppo, but also from Deir ez-Zor, Daraa, Raqqah, and Homs in Syria. I attended regular meetings with five refugees (and, on many occasions, I talked to their families as well) for more than 12 months. I came to know most of them through the services they provided as Arabic language teachers and as traders selling Syrian food, which they themselves had made.

For my analysis here, I have selected a single-story from the extensive material based on fieldwork conducted from September 2015 to October 2018 in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. It was selected because, from it, I can present a relevant critique of the culturalization of humanitarianism. Dawn Chatty argues that anthropology’s unique contributions to the field of refugee and

[7] There is wide variety of heterogeneous and critical research on encounters in the field of forced migration and humanitarianism. I must also mention the perspective of “conviviality” in migrant contexts such as Gilroy (2004) and Wise & Noble (2016). As argued by Wise and Noble, Gilroy extended the idea of conviviality. It is more than a context of “living together in real time”. It is also a culturally complex, mobile global world: “With Gilroy, cultural differences arising from the long-term consequences of post-colonialism, mass migration, multicultural policies and transnationalism are foregrounded” (2016: 424).

[8] For an ethnography focused on dialogue with humanitarian workers, see Grayman (2012).

forced migration studies include carefully documenting what happens to people, their culture and society when they are forcibly displaced and pulled away from their territorial moorings, or, indeed, when they are dispossessed through processes of forced sedentarisation and involuntary immobility (Chatty 2014: 80). I chose to document what happens to people displaced by the Syrian conflict from an encounter that cannot be isolated from its historical context, and social and political forces.

Meeting Samia and Joana

Samia was a regular interlocutor. She has been my Arabic teacher for a year. While being my teacher, we had the opportunity to meet weekly for long conversations over coffee,[9] talking about her life as a newcomer in Brazil. The notion of reciprocity, of "giving something back" (Liamputtong 2007: 60), has here guided my research, so fieldwork included assisting my informants with opening a bank account, helping them access public health and education services, and assistance to humanitarian organisations. Thus, the relationship between refugees and humanitarian workers did not escape my observations or scrutiny. I have followed these encounters for almost three years.

In the 2016 iteration of the summer course (at FCRB), I met Joana, who formally worked at an international humanitarian organisation based in São Paulo. She held a leadership position and had extensive international experience in the humanitarian field, a college degree, and a postgraduate degree. During the week of the summer course, I interviewed Joana. We had lunch together, talked about our careers, and shared my impressions of the roundtables and debates we attended and participated in. A year later, I met her again in the city of São Paulo at an event for refugees promoted by several humanitarian organisations in partnership with public agencies, the private sector, and religious institutions. The event was held in a large public space, and provided information on refugee and human rights themes. The event included volunteers and humanitarian workers from UNHCR, São Paulo Caritas, NGOs, such as I Know My Rights (IKMR) and the Refugee Reintegration Institute (Instituto de Reintegração de Refugiados ADUS).

Humanitarian workers, placed in several tents distributed throughout the event's space, provided information about refugees, women, and children's rights. The organisation's volunteers distributed pamphlets and other informative materials. In one of these tents, I could talk to Joana, accompanied by her staff of volunteers who were attending the last period of their undergraduate courses and who had already previous experience volunteering with other organisations. The volunteers had time available for humanitarian work, and, as Joana, they all spoke English as a second language, had a Christian background, and lived in middle and upper-middle-class neighbourhoods in the city of São Paulo.

Joana started the conversation by explaining her work and her organisation's role in the event. She then decided to talk about "Syrian women" more precisely. Joana was aware of my focus on the Syrian conflict and she was determined to help me, providing consistent information and comments on her work with Syrian refugee women. Joana was very open to informing me about how her day-to-day work created new programs and the challenges in implementing these, though she was notably busy at the event.

My meeting with Joana was accidental. I went to the event to meet Samia. When Samia left my side and conversed with others and visited another tent, I spoke at length with Joana and volunteers from her organisation. To my surprise, Joana and one of the volunteers had already met Samia at another event their organisations had held, specifically for refugee women and children. Moreover, Samia sought aid from Joana's organisation.

Joana commented on Samia describing her as a "traditional" woman. Joana stated that her "traditional culture" was a "problem" for her "integration" into Brazilian society. She repeated this several times while the volunteers nodded with approval. The fact that "culture" was a term mobilised so regularly by humanitarian workers as a problem and, consequently, understood as a key reason for an immigrant's alleged inability to integrate in Brazil prompted me to adopt the perspective of the encounter. Samia's story was not unique or unusual in my fieldwork. Instead, discourses in which culture was blamed for unsuccessful integration were observed throughout my fieldwork, not just in the context of the interviews. In events open to the public, as in the edition of the summer course (CEDPIR/FCRB), I observed humanitarian workers blaming the culture of refugees when confronted with research data that indicated a series of problems in resettlement programs and the refugee policies of their own organisations and the Brazilian government. In an ethnographic study of the "integration" program for resettled Palestinian refugees in the city of Mogi das Cruzes, in São Paulo, Hamid (2012; 2019) argues that the use of the category of "culture", often mobilised by those working in program management, was treated in a totalizing way to explain assisted subjects' behaviour.

Despite the diversity of practices and behaviours among Palestinian refugees, Hamid described humanitarian workers mobilising a predefined concept of culture, ignoring cases that defied their predetermined vision and seeing those cases as exceptions. The criticism of culturalist explanations that isolate the historical context and social and political forces has also been explored in prior studies by Lokot (2018) and Hamid

[9] I clarified to Samia that the class, coffee, and my availability were part of my fieldwork, so she was aware of their participation in academic research.

(2019). Both criticise an emphasis on "tradition" and "culture" as categories triggered by humanitarian workers that do not describe or explain the meaning of "culture" or "tradition".

When asked the question, "What does 'traditional' mean?", Joana replied: "Samia looks like she is from my grandmother's time […]. She is very traditional" (Interview in June 2017). Volunteers stressed that Samia was even more "conservative" and "religious" than other Muslim women attending the event, since these women wore skinny jeans and colourful hijabs. Joana and the volunteers repeatedly said they did not want to be seen as judgmental. They argued that they were not prejudiced against Islam, particularly the hijab. According to them, Samia's hijab and clothing style were expressions of a traditional form of Islam, and was definitely seen as a problem.

Pointing to other Muslim women wearing hijabs at the event, Joana and the volunteers emphasised the contrast between them and Samia. In a group of four women, all wore hijabs. One of them wore a brightly coloured animal print hijab. Another woman wore jeans and a T-shirt, so her arms were not covered below the elbow. Her hijab had a white and yellow floral print. Another woman wore a scarf but did not cover her neck. This was a pink Pashmina model. Unlike the colourful veils I saw at the event, Samia wore a black hijab with a cap underneath. She covered her ears, neck, forehead, and hairlines. She also wore a long, loose skirt, long-sleeved turtleneck shirt, long waistcoat, cap, and hijab in a monochromatic combination of shades of black and grey. According to Joana and the volunteers, there was a manifest difference between Samia's Islam and the other women present at the event.

Joana went on to explain that "the Muslim culture" and "the Arab culture" would not allow women "to have freedom" (Interview in June 2017). She assumed that Samia's husband was the reason why Samia was clothed in the way she was and why moreover she was not interested in the job opportunity that had been offered to her. When they first met, Joana offered to help Samia find a job in a refugee employment programme. Joana worked hard to develop this programme, in which companies register to hire refugee and migrant workers. Joana and Samia chatted in person and exchanged messages through WhatsApp. Joana argued that, at first, Samia was interested in the job offer; she had even sent her resume. A few days later, however, Samia still needed to respond to the messages sent by one of the organisation's volunteers. Finally, she replied that she was no longer interested. For Joana and the volunteer, Samia's husband led her to abandon the search for a job. This assumption was based on the idea that Samia's family was "very traditional".

Always with the gestural agreement of the volunteers, Joana continued to speak, reaffirming the "traditional culture" of Samia and "Muslim women" who "wore the veil and stayed at home". Joana seemed very annoyed by the fact that Samia missed the opportunity. Joana was disappointed with Samia's decision. The disappointment of Joana showed how good intentions gave way to irritation and hostility when humanitarian workers experienced discomfort, failure, and betrayal by people they thought were grateful (see also Harrell-Bond 2002).

I argue that cultural differences are not predetermined but are shaped by preconceived notions, social interactions, frustrations and power asymmetries. During the encounter described, it is possible to see that cultural differences are not pre-given facts. Difference is questioned and reformulated from the encounter itself. Following the perspective of encounter (Grayman 2012; Fountain 2016; Schiocchet 2017), the single-story presented here showed that humanitarian encounters are spaces of creativity and cultural innovation in which notions about the other are re-elaborated. Significantly, no humanitarian aid worker enters the field as a tabula rasa. Embodied practices, traditional theologies, and schooled preconceptions of self and other remain determinant (Fountain 2016: 164-165).

Samia's decision

After listening to Joana and the volunteers, I decided to hear Samia's point of view about the job proposal and so on. Samia had lived in Brazil for almost two years at the time of the abovementioned event. She came from Syria with her husband Khaled, and a three-year-old son. The couple, born in Syria in the 1980s, received training in administration and engineering.

I asked Samia about Joana's job proposals. I wanted to understand the reason for her decision in her own words. I felt I could not accept the volunteers' explanation, which was centred on Samia's body and their prejudice toward Islam. I consider that the expectations herein and the entanglement with cultural conceptions or perceptions of traditional and unfreedom reverberate in humanitarian aid. The encounter perspective (Schiocchet 2017; Faier & Rofel 2014) led me to face how refugees must muddle through various images and ideology-laden representations when seeking to make a new life in a new country.

Contrary to the essentialist explanations given by the volunteers, Samia told me that the job as an administrative assistant involved 44 work hours per week and paid the minimum salary for the professional category. Before even being considered for the position, she would have had to undergo a selection process involving a curriculum vitae analysis and one interview. Samia justified her disinterest in the position and choice not to participate in the application procedure with various arguments, the most significant being her child's well-being. Accepting the position, she explained, would mean that she would be absent from home for almost in total 13 hours per day, including nine hours of work and 2.5 hours of commuting time. Another argument she mentioned was that the salary would not allow her to pay a monthly preschool

fee, given the constraints of her family budget. Samia knew already that she could not obtain a place in public kindergarten, which was free of charge. She was informed of this as soon as she arrived in São Paulo.

Samia contacted Joana's organisation because she wanted help finding a school for her son. No one in this organisation could offer an accurate answer to her question: How can one find full-time school for a child? There was no formal procedure for helping refugees at this organisation regarding essential information and public educational services. Samia showed me the exchange of messages with one of the organisation's volunteers and expressed her dissatisfaction with not getting an objective answer to her question. After insisting, Samia received a message in which someone from the organisation said she could not be helped because the organisation needed more staff and resources to fulfil Samia's request.

Blaming "Islam" for women not entering the labour market, as was the case with the volunteers, ignored the fact that many of the obstacles she and female migrant workers like her experienced are commonly shared all over the world. I consider that the role of culture should not be taboo, silencing gender-based violence.[10] However, attention is needed before focusing on "culture". What does a woman's hijab say about the shortage of kindergarten places? The story of Samia showed that it is inaccurate to attribute Samia's failure to enter São Paulo's labour market to cultural or religious difference.

In this specific case the focus on Samia's "culture" obscured some significant weaknesses of humanitarian aid in Brazil, where there are no programs or structured public policies to welcome refugees and provide them with essential knowledge about welfare provisions (such as publicly funded childcare). In practice, this means that the Brazilian government does not have obligations towards refugees and that once they arrive, they are alone – no one is accountable for their situation. It is generally up to organisations to carry out humanitarian work, conceived as a gesture of compassion and charity rather than as a guaranteed human right.

Joana and the volunteers' emphasis on Samia's body and her "culture" also led me into some long conversations with Samia, who not only confronted the stereotypical view of humanitarian workers but also offered me a reflection on her changes in the context of forced migration.

A "modest hijab" and the force of religious will

In our conversations, Samia told me that she was born in Damascus in the 1980s in an unofficial Palestinian refugee camp. Her grandparents left Palestine in 1948 and became refugees in Golan, Syria. With the Israeli occupation of the territory in 1982, they went to Homs and then to Damascus. Samia grew up in the suburbs and studied at the University of Damascus, where she met her husband, Khaled. They were Sunni Muslims who grew up in Damascus but in different neighbourhoods. Khaled was from an upper-middle-class family, and Samia's family was from the working class. After a few years of marriage, Samia left Syria with Khaled and the couple's minor son. The decision to leave was motivated by the Syrian conflict.

They arrived in Brazil in 2015 after living in Jordan and having their visa applications denied by several Western countries. Samia learned that members of her family and friends who were in Lebanon had obtained visas for Brazil. She called a cousin who lived in São Paulo. He informed her about the refugee application process, local Arab-speaking communities, mosques and job opportunities offered by the city, the country's financial centre.

I met Samia and her family in 2016 in Rio de Janeiro, and in 2017, we met again in São Paulo. Samia suggested that we participate in the event for refugees, which has already been described above. Samia attended the event in response to an invitation from friends who worked as volunteers in an Islamic association in Pari Mosque, São Paulo. She could not decline the invitation. Samia became very close to Muslim communities in her exile. Samia's narrative showed her connection to Islam in Amman, where an inner change began.

In Jordan, when Samia needed to purchase her first *hijab* outside Syria, she decided to buy a "modest *hijab*". This decision for a "modest *hijab*" appeared when she changed her inner life and connected with *Allah*. Samia's exile started with a personal challenge: to become modest. Modesty was expressed in choosing a "modest *hijab*", usually black, in combination with monochromatic clothes. She said neutral colours like black, white and grey were the best options.

For Samia, clothing was cultivated to reach *al-haya* – a feeling described as modesty and shyness among female Muslims that became very important and virtuous for her. In Samia's view, *al-haya*, like prayers (*salat*) was a practice that began to be part of her daily life when she left Syria. Taken together, these practices were part of her personal project to be a pious woman. From this perspective, Samia's black *hijab* and neutral-toned clothes could not be interpreted as a "problem". The highly reflective narrative of Samia defied Joana's and the volunteers' comments about her modesty.

Samia said she had been wearing a *hijab* since her teenage years, even though she used to wear whichever model and did not seriously consider modesty. In exile, she started to think about how to cultivate a practice of modesty and shyness. The decision for more modest clothing was therefore made on an everyday basis. Samia told me how challenging it was for her not to wear colourful clothes and tight jeans and how she

[10] For a critical discussion on the role of culture and its relation to gender-based violence, see Al-Ali 2019.

needed to discipline herself and control her impulse and natural preference to wear "less modest" attire, especially patterned clothes. Since Aman, Samia has developed the practice of buying the most modest clothes she could find. Shopping in Aman, Rio de Janeiro, and São Paulo was changing Samia's wardrobe. Every purchase in exile must suit the colour palette of modesty. Following Mahmood (2005: 159), I understand Samia's practices of *al-haya* as an embodied practice in making herself closer to *Allah.* Samia's daily practice to become a modest woman showed her moral commitment and the strength of her religious will.

In this sense, Samia's use of the veil cannot be understood as an expression of her husband's will or impositions made by her family. This view of Muslim and Arab women as passive and submissive, attached to male authority structures, has already been widely questioned (Said 1978; Abu-Lughod 1996, 2013; Mahmood 2005; Hamid 2012, 2019; Lokot 2018). Mahmood (2005) values the point of view of her interlocutors, for whom the use of the veil (as for Samia) is an exercise in modesty and shyness, one of the religious virtues for devout Muslims in general and for women in particular. Mahmood conceives the veil as a disciplinary practice that constitutes devout subjectivities and recognises women's agency whose action aims to build a virtuous habitus.[11]

By articulating the perspective of the encounter with gender and Middle Eastern studies, I have intended to contribute to more nuanced analyses in the humanitarian field. The single-story presented here has shown that researchers and humanitarian workers could recognise the agency of the pious women in exile, considering the moral commitment and the strength of religion.

Concluding remarks

The encounter perspective, which has been adopted in my article, encourages an analysis that seeks to address situations that cannot be divorced from the political and economic structures and inequalities in which they are embedded, since it does not tend to locate the problem in individual morality and/or traditional cultures (Faier & Rofel 2014; Schiocchet 2017). Samia's disinterest in a low-paying job, which would potentially impact the well-being of her child negatively cannot be appropriately understood by simply referring to her Muslim faith or assuming that a patriarchal husband or family imposes her decision. Indeed, although Samia's hijab and her relationship with religion had acquired a prominent place in her life, Islam was not mobilised in her narrative to answer why she did not accept the application of the proposed job. Joana assumed that the "culture" of Samia – her modesty expressed through her clothing and style – constituted a significant obstacle to her integration. However, by listening instead to Samia's own narrative, I see that her modest hijab and clothes were part of a larger personal project of being a pious woman. The expectations herein and the entanglement with cultural conceptions or perceptions of traditional and unfreedom reverberate in the humanitarian encounter.[12]

Mahmood (2005) is an important author that supports the analysis of the humanitarian encounter described in this article. The Mahmood concept of modesty agency is built on women who do not conform to liberal and secular projects and who reflect highly on their religious experiences. Mahmood shows that the choice to wear Muslim attire is an expression of agency. The virtue of *al-haya* cannot be understood as another example of the subjection of women's bodies to masculinist or patriarchal valuations, images, and symbolic logic (Mahmood 2005: 158). Pious Women put effort into cultivating *al-haya*, which cannot be ignored. *Al-haya* tends to be a deep, everyday and meaningful commitment in their lives. This was the case with Samia.

This article contributes to ethnographies of the encounter, bringing an articulation between the perspective of humanitarian encounter (Grayman 2012; Fountain 2016) and literature on gender and Middle Eastern studies. Abu-Lughod (1996, 2013), Hamid (2012, 2019), and Lokot (2018) support the arguments presented here on how the representations of the unfreedom of others that blame the chains of culture "deflect attention from the social and political forces that are responsible for the ways people live" (Abu-Lughod 2013: 20). As Abu-Lughod argues, representations of "Muslim women" incite rescue missions by outsiders and mask the histories of internal debate and institutional struggles over justice that have occurred in every nation (2013: 20). From within the Brazilian context, this article offers insights to scholars interested in documenting what happens to people who experience forced displacement. Documenting what is happening is one of the most relevant anthropological contributions to the field of forced migration (Chatty 2014). In this sense, I have shown that in a context in which refugees were left to their own devices (although Brazil was an open-door destination for refugees from Syria) and were living under inequalities and precarious humanitarian aid, Samia rebuilt her life, focusing on her son's well-being and engaging in her personal project of being a pious woman.

[11] Considering the influence of the Aristotelian conception of habitus in Islamic thought by Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1058-1111) and Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406), Mahmood describes how habitus refers to a conscious effort to reorient one's will through an agreement between internal motivations, external actions and emotional states, obtained through repeated practice of virtuous acts

[12] The image of Samia as an oppressed woman by her "traditional culture" corresponds to a stereotype that, as this text shows, was reproduced by the humanitarian worker occupying a senior position in her organisation' bureaucratic structure. As Michael Herzfeld argues, "stereotypes are produced at the top" (1992: 71). Although the use and diffusion of stereotypes are often attributed to popular discourse, Herzfeld (1992) shows how they are mobilised by states and bureaucratic actors.

Through the humanitarian encounter described, my aim has been to criticise reductionist concepts of culture, and place precarious Brazilian humanitarian aid at the centre of ethnography. My analysis showed how focusing on power relations, social inequalities, and the force of religious will is crucial. The article further suggests that within an humanitarian encounter, power exists through which people interact not only with each other but also with their frustrations, moral commitments, inequalities, and past experiences.

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