

Micro-disruptions and struggles for success in Beirut

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Abstract

Middle-Eastern contexts where war, corruption, and oppressive regimes compromise and undermine wellbeing, security and basic freedoms, do not give much hope or outlook for improvement. Even against massive and protracted protests, illegitimate power endures. Some local initiatives “disrupt” these hostile and dehumanizing environments by fostering communities of refuge, care, hope and empowerment.

In my Beirut-based research I employ a micro-interactional and emotion-focused sociology to dissect the innerworkings of such communities. Research settings include NGO programs, schools, martial arts gyms, basketball courts, and street corners. They contain interaction rituals, each with their own rhythms, focus, shared mood, and physical deployment. These dynamics chart young people’s disparate paths of development.

In different constructive interaction rituals, young people experience three components of success: temporary *boosts* of positivity, a more durable *elevation* over difficult circumstances, and *grounding* in encouraging networks and stabilizing emotional states. These components in varying constellations have important restorative effects for young people suffering from debilitating and discouraging interactions. Concretely, these experiences empower young people’s efforts in education, labor and personal development. I pay substantial attention to youth workers and other adults’ contributions to young people’s struggles for success.

Local initiatives can become networked “pockets of resistance, creating multiple sites of micro disruption” as sociologist Erika Summers-Effler puts it. Without outright challenging prevailing macro-structures and regimes, these initiatives provide positive counterweights for overwhelming hardship. The “horizontal” (local, peer-based) multiplication can become a grassroots change, potentially influencing “vertical” power structures. This research is an ongoing exploration of hope in contexts of despair.