Pandemic fragility and/as ethnography

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Doing ethnography often evokes complexity, ambiguity and chaos in thinking and practicalities. All this is part of ethnographic work. Yet, the Covid-19 pandemic brought additional challenges in our ethnographic research, and these affected each of us differently. Below we present our reflections on how the Covid-19 pandemic has affected our research, both practically and emotionally. We wish to reclaim our situatedness and fragility as a genuine ethnographic experience, valuing vulnerability as a feminist ethnographic methodology (Page 2017). Please note that we wrote this text in October 2020.

Italy: strict lockdown, immobility and privilege

In mid-January 2020, I (Ali Venir) moved to my field site in Bologna, north Italy, for my research on homonationalism and the dynamics of solidarity between queer and migrant movements and subjectivities. I tried to acclimate, questioning the urge to dive immediately, wholeheartedly, and eagerly into the field; an unspoken demand that makes so many of us, shy anthropologists, feel like impostors. Then, however, by the beginning of March, it became clear that the activists' meetings, the protests, and the gatherings which I was just getting used to attending became a thing of the past. The lockdown in Bologna felt strict, scary, authoritarian, immobile. The now deserted city was being patrolled by police, and I started losing focus and energy after the alarming reports on the pandemic, the ever-changing governmental decrees, the worrying phone calls with local relatives I could not visit, and the mundane tensions brought by forced cohabitation. Being subjected to a strict lockdown was an experience I connect with confusion, intellectual stagnation, and lack of motivation.

I want to reflect on three dilemmas. The first one has to do with the unrealistic expectations of being productive and work "as usual" during such uncertain and unsettling times. Fragility, both mental and bodily, is not often taken into account in academia where mental health is already considered in ordinary times a risk factor and swept under the rug (see Levecque et al. 2017; Chhabra 2018). The contrast between my everyday routine of tiredness, lack of activities, anxious kitchen talks with flatmates, and the clean, professional and cheerful digital world of PhD-meetings felt uncanny, to say the least.

The second dilemma refers to how the lockdown made me question the relevance of my research topic. In the face of the emerging urgent issues, I started questioning whether my research project was becoming inappropriate, unimportant. And yet, I also questioned whether my lack of motivation or the urge to refocus my gaze was just a by-product of a rushed and unwise drive to be hyper-reactive to the pandemic instead of accepting that I could not yet have a lucid perspective on the phenomenon.

The privilege factor was my third dilemma. Yes, I felt demotivated, anxious and tired, also because of the implicit professional demand to be intellectually lucid and productive during the pandemic. Yet, the job that contributed to the feelings described above also allowed me to be safer and less affected than other people. I did not have to worry about losing income or housing. How could I then complain about the difficulties that the pandemic brought to my work? Was I reflexive about my privilege only to articulate a strategic self-absolution and get me a free pass to denounce my research fragility to the Covid-19 pandemic?

The Netherlands: business-as-usual

My (Sofie Smeets) research on diversity in higher education is located in the Netherlands. The Dutch so-called 'intelligent lockdown' was relatively free. In the Netherlands, we had to refrain from meeting family and friends of other households but could continue doing groceries as before. However, we had to start working from home to diminish travel movements and physical contacts with colleagues as much as possible.

Doing my research among teachers in higher education while being also a teacher and colleague myself, the lockdown implied that from March 2020 on I had to teach from home. Surely, education had to continue. Encouraged by instructive emails, newly developed workshops and toolboxes, my teaching colleagues – "do-ers" by nature – and I were very eager to get things done. In the first weeks, there was a hectic, energetic atmosphere where we all, teachers and students, were in it together.

The exceptional circumstances created a particular bond with my students. For teachers, the professional is personal, but this was exceptional. In the small-group online meetings, I saw my students in their own environments: at the kitchen table, the football field, or even straight out of bed in morning meetings. I, too, was in my own space, a surrounding that made me feel at ease. Taking time to exchange worries also created a novel sense of togetherness and connectedness, and a more equal way of relating, different from what I had experienced before in class.

However, facing higher education as business-as-usual put us both students and staff under pressure (Schinkel et al. 2020). Since exams could not be dropped, this led to endless efforts of redesigning them into trustworthy, reliable, online exams. It resulted in a week's delay, which was communicated very last-minute to the students. This heightened stress among students, for whom education was not a priority at that moment. Many students faced challenges by losing income from side-jobs or by taking care of their families or loved ones.

I worried about my students. The idea of high education as *business* frustrated me already before the lockdown, and it got only amplified with the extreme circumstances in pandemic times.

Frustration grew as the connection with colleagues faded over time. In offline times already, teaching can be solitary, as there is often just one teacher in a class. I felt lonely and insecure about myself, struggling with engaging and connecting with students in larger classes while being annoyed by a lack of *netiquette*. To me, in times of stress, exchanges on purpose are vital, but the habitual emphasis on the *here-and-now* of teaching continued to foreground practicalities. Being by myself behind a computer, every time I closed my laptop's front, it was a disappointing confirmation of the solitary side of teaching.

Bosnia and Herzegovina: new opportunities in the field

I (Ivana Ljuština) was eagerly waiting for the beginning of April 2020 when I would depart for my field research on mobility and borders in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Then, at the end of March, I received an email from the airline company informing me that my flight was cancelled due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The next three months, I was anxiously busy figuring out how to get to Bosnia. Planning my departure was hard because of the insecurity and the limited transportation options. I kept thinking about strategies to obtain a Bosnian residency permit. I kept bothering a nice guy in a Bosnian embassy with my frequent calls and pondering how to smuggle myself into Bosnia. I considered contacting truck drivers to help me to get to my fieldwork site. And yet, at the same time, I was also wondering: isn't it selfish to ignore the pandemic and only thinking about how to get my job done?

Eventually, when the border crossing became calmer, and I could decide when to depart, I wondered whether it was wise to go at all. My research there would include close contact with people. Would it be safe for them and for me to conduct fieldwork? Early July, I entered

Bosnia by car. As a Croatian citizen, I could enter the country freely and without Covid-19 control. Meanwhile, Bosnians were facing restrictions to enter Croatia and the EU. I had lost three months of fieldwork. I felt tired, but I was there.

In Bosnia, it seemed that the virus, as if by magic, "disappeared". What awaited me there were full streets, busy shops and cafes. There were kisses, hugs, handshakes, cups-sharing, and we all eating from the same plate just as in the past. On the one hand, it felt that the Covid-19 pandemic never happened in Bosnia, and that made me also lower down the precaution measures. On the other hand, the pandemic was present in people's anecdotes and critiques about the state-imposed lockdown from April to June and in their frustrations about the inability to go to the Croatian seaside. The face masks were hanging from people's hands more often than on their faces. But the pandemic did bring a change in everyday life. Routines had changed, plans were cancelled, and eventually, many people lost their jobs. Many things changed, but people's behaviour did not. One of my informants, who was hosting and helping a significant number of migrants stuck on Bosnian-EU border even during the pandemic time, said: "If this thing (Covid-19) existed, I would be first to have it." She was not the only one to say this.[1]

I was not present during the state-imposed lockdown in Bosnia, and I did not experience the police control and the isolation Bosnian people did. I was far away and concerned about how the pandemic would influence my research. On site, the opposite happened. My fieldwork possibilities remained mostly unchanged, and it felt like the pandemic only brought about another layer of opportunity to study (im)mobility instead of preventing me from researching at all.

Conclusion

Even though our reflections arise from different experiences, locations, topics and stages in our fieldwork, we see how the Covid-19 pandemic affected us all. With our different-yet-similar accounts, we want to reclaim the situatedness of our experiences and the importance of fragility and vulnerability as valid ethnographic experiences. One red line in doing fieldwork in pandemic times seems to be fragility, and the ways demands of productivity in the face of such challenging situations affect our mind and body. The pretention that we are unaffected professionals whose gaze is constantly directed outwards echoes patriarchal and colonial understanding of anthropology. Instead, we argue that doubt, anxiety, and isolation are parts of our research experience. We insist on reclaiming such moments of crisis and confusion as ethnographic experiences.

Although fragility exists in all ethnographic fieldwork, we feel that the Covid-19 lockdown amplified existing uncertainties and disrupted our sense of predictability and linearity. Admitting one's vulnerability is the first and most accessible territory where to direct the gaze. We refuse to call it navel-gazing or narcissism; instead, we insist on calling it honest and, foremost, feminist.

Notes

[1] Bosnia is not the only place where people "criticize" corona measures and doubt the existence of the virus, despite the growing numbers of infected.

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