

## Reflections

# PhD research in social sciences amid a pandemic: introduction to a situated and reflexive perspective

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This short essay introduces a forum made up of six Reflection pieces on what it means to carry on a PhD research in the social sciences amid a pandemic. Sparked by discussions held during the 2020 edition of the "Open Day" of the Institute of Social Sciences of the University of Lisbon, this forum collects solo-authored and collective texts that focus on a number of dimensions along two main threads: the problems, uncertainties and potentialities of researching in these times; and similar reflections with specific focus on gendered dimensions. Together, though situated (all these researchers work in or about Portugal and Brazil), we hope these experiences will speak to peers around the world that are dealing with the pains and challenges of these times.

Keywords: social research, Covid-19, Coronavirus, academic reflexivity, Portugal, Brazil

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## A situated perspective

Maybe the greatest difficulty, and at the same time advantage, of working in a multi-disciplinary center like the Institute of Social Sciences of the University of Lisbon (Instituto de Ciências Sociais da Universidade de Lisboa; ICS-ULisboa) is that of being perennially exposed to epistemological and methodological approaches that differ from your own, and this is particularly true while one is carrying out their PhD research. This is one of the reasons why, during the last few years, ICS-ULisboa has been organizing a yearly "Open Day", where the PhD candidates from its ten doctoral courses<sup>1</sup> can discuss their projects in a beautiful "organized chaos" of conceptual and research perspectives. The 2020 edition, that took place on June 17, had to deal – much like all researchers around the world – with yet another dimension of organized chaos, the direct and indirect consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic. Focusing on the impact that the pandemic and the measures put in place in response to it had on PhD research seemed natural to the organizers – after all, the meeting itself had to be organized completely online.

This reflection section collects six essays that stem from that day of discussion and deal with many facets of what it means to carry on a PhD in social sciences during a pandemic. With the goal of providing as many perspectives as possible and, at the same time, of creating a collaborative learning environment, in most cases we challenged the authors to write collective texts, dialoguing on common threads of their presentations. The 6 essays we present here were authored by 15 PhD candidates, enrolled in 4 different courses: Anthropology (9), Sociology (4), Social Psychology (1) and Comparative Politics (1). Though most of the authors are based at ICS-ULisboa, some of them were or are currently visiting from Brazilian institutions. This collection therefore offers a broad set of perspectives, which is however situated in and around a specific research institution and geographic space: most of the authors do fieldwork either in Portugal or Brazil. Indeed, this situatedness plays a role in the collection of reflections: some essays engage comparatively with two contexts where the responses and impacts of the pandemic have been very different; others reflect on the experience of travelling students and researchers. In this sense, we also hope that this section will contribute to enriching the reflection on social research amid the pandemic through the experiences of places that are not so often at the core of mainstream social and geographic theorization.<sup>2</sup>

### **The essays and their main threads**

Let us move to summarizing the main themes and ideas emerging from the seven essays. The first four engage head on with the problems, uncertainties and potentialities of researching in these times. Kátia Favilla and Tatiana Pita deal with the impact of the pandemic in two PhD research projects in their start up stage, particularly focusing on the question of whether to wait for the field to “open up” again or rather transform the field itself through digital instruments. Antonio de Barros, Ana Guerreiro, Mafalda Mascarenhas and Rita Reis focus on the changes in the field due to the pandemic, in the arena of mobilities and in that of education. Next, Roseli Barbosa takes advantage of her multiple affiliations in Brazil and Portugal to reflect on how the impacts of the pandemic are differentiated among geographies, gender and individual conditions – mobile or not-mobile researchers, PhD candidates with or without funding. Andreia Nascimento and Hugo Lopes reflect on the positive ways the pandemic situation has affected their own research experience: how the lockdown has helped them to focus better on their research and how digital tools made available by academic institutions made life easier for PhD candidates who do not reside in the city of their host institutions.

The following two essays, while still engaging with the same general issues, provide focused insights on gendered dimensions therein – a topic that appears, if in passing, in other essays. Catarina Barata, Luísa Coutinho, Federica Manfredi and Madelon Schamarella reflect on care, which they frame as an object of research and, together, a crucial dimension of their own life/research, dissecting how the pandemic has both deepened pre-existing inequalities and opened up to a shared understanding of the importance of care – also reflecting on the possibilities for “caring masculinities”. In the following and final essay, Marcos Silva and Raphaella Câmara build on their research on topics – sex work and domestic violence – where gendered inequalities and violence, and also mutual care among their participants, are central issues. This allows them to reflect on how the pandemic has heightened the importance for researchers to develop sensitivity towards their participants; but at the same time the importance of researching together with these individuals and groups.

### **Concluding remarks**

This collection of essays gives us a wide set of perspectives on how the Covid-19 pandemic has affected social sciences and PhD research in particular. Though situated, these experiences speak, we believe, to many people around the world, dealing with the pains and challenges of these times. In a way, the seven essays give us more evidence of something we already suspected: much like any major disruptive event amid global capitalism, the pandemic and the responses to it have basically deepened pre-existing problems and inequalities (see also the editorial of this issue). And yet, claiming “nothing new under the sun” would be a mistake, for two reasons: first, because the peculiar scale and speed of this disruptive event has brought about impacts – including those in terms of individual and

collective suffering – that are somehow quantitatively unprecedented, and whose scars will last for some time to come; second, because these same scale and speed have also forced humankind to stare in the face of what may well be a future that is just about to come as the temperatures rise and environments start to collapse, as Barata, Coutinho, Manfredi and Schamarella remind us.

This has quite concrete implications for our research work. Focusing on the positive aspects, as Nascimento and Lopes suggest, is important, but with a caveat. Many of the issues that the pandemic context has helped to address were not “natural” problems (e.g. logistical problems for non-resident PhD candidates), but those of undertaking research in contexts where research is underfunded – like in Portugal, Brazil and, increasingly so, the world around us. This is to say, if science – *and social sciences* – are crucial pieces to charting a path into the future to come, we are at the same time responsible for fighting for better conditions for researchers and PhD candidates, wherever they are.

In this sense, we believe social researchers have the responsibility to become activists against the deep injustices that this pandemic has made visible. And we believe that this collection of essays points toward dimensions of hope, be it in the opening toward politics of care or in the possibility of reframing digital technology toward a more inclusive space. In the words of indigenous leader, environmental activist and intellectual Ailton Krenak, these may be “ideas that help postponing the end of the world”<sup>3</sup>: they point toward the possibility of building up an “us” – a caring humankind – that is always aware of the deep social fractures that exist and are to be relentlessly mended.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See [www.ics.ulisboa.pt/en/post-graduation/phd/opening](http://www.ics.ulisboa.pt/en/post-graduation/phd/opening).

<sup>2</sup> Some words on how we managed the process. Simone was firstly invited by *Fennia's* editors – who had heard of the Open Day on a geography forum – to produce this section. He made the first steps of taking notes during the Open Day and proposing the writing collaborations. Since we did not want an assistant research professor to manage alone a collection of texts produced by PhD candidates, the participants to the Open Day were encouraged to volunteer as co-editors: this is how Kátia joined in. Since then, we managed the process together of reviewing the texts, giving feedbacks to the authors (except, of course, in the case of the text co-authored by Kátia), collecting the final versions, dealing with proof-reading (done by Katy Pugh) and writing this introduction. Finally, the editorial team of *Fennia* provided a final review and copyedit.

<sup>3</sup> “Ideias para adiar o fim do mundo”, as in the title of his 2019 book (*São Paulo: Companhias de Letras*).

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