

Reflections

“When will fieldwork open up again?” Beginning a project in pandemic times

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The entire world population was taken by surprise by the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic has transformed our lives through its impact on health systems, the economy, on work and the way that we work, and has created feelings of uncertainty about the future. We intend to reflect on how the Covid-19 pandemic has transformed academic life in general, but primarily how it has affected our research projects, given the closure of the field of study and the isolation of interlocutors. We reflect on the adoption of digital methods to communicate with our interlocutors and interviewees and its implications and ask ourselves when fieldwork will open up once more.

Keywords: Covid-19, pandemic, digital methodologies, fieldwork, research, PhD

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Introduction

This reflection introduces a discussion about the field of research in Anthropology and Sociology in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. It examines how to carry out participant observation and in-depth interviews on social distancing and social confinement/isolation situations. Are digital methods a possibility for opening up the field or are these methodologies limited in some cases? Can the proximity and collaboration generated by dialogue and interpersonal interaction be maintained in virtual contexts? These are challenges to the construction of scientific knowledge and, in particular, to the production of our studies, carried out in different disciplinary contexts.

This reflection text presents questions from two doctoral students who are in the early stages of their research. In keeping with the entire world population, we were taken by surprise by the context of the pandemic, which also represented the postponement of fieldwork and the isolation of interlocutors. This situation has hindered the construction of our research projects and has forced us to redesign these projects in order to include objectives, methods and tools that will allow for the continuation of our investigations even with the imposed limitations that clearly distance us from our interlocutors.

We will carry out investigations in Portugal and one of us will also study local communities in Brazil, with research taking place in both urban and rural contexts. It is interesting how the questions that have arisen, despite our different fields and objects of research, are very similar. Therefore, we question the viability of carrying out the research in the current context.

The pandemic

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared the Sars-Cov-2 (Covid-19) a pandemic. In Portugal, the government enacted strict population confinement measures as of March 22. In Brazil, the federal government has yet to declare quarantine measures, which were instead carried out by local governments and in an uncoordinated way, generating different reactions from the population.

As of August 2020, the number of deaths caused by diseases associated with Covid-19 surpassed 700 thousand all over the world, and Brazil was then ranked as the second worst country in number of cases and deaths. In Portugal, numbers appeared to be more controlled, both in terms of cases and deaths. The two countries are now reopening their economies and borders for tourism. It remains to be assessed how this will be reflected in the development of the number of cases and of community or imported transmission. At an economic level, the world is still witnessing the impact and transformation in different sectors of activity, including academia and research.

The context of fieldwork

The methods we used for data collection are based on direct contact with interlocutors, despite the different approaches of our areas of study.

Kátia, for her PhD in Anthropology, will do fieldwork in two different contexts, seeking to address how reforestation processes and the restoration of landscapes impacted by eucalyptus monoculture are under construction. Part of the field work will take place with local communities (traditional in the nomenclature of Brazil) in the northern region of the State of Minas Gerais in Brazil and in an area in the center of Portugal with small rustic properties in the eucalyptus cultivation region. In both cases, access to the field to perform ethnographies has been postponed due to health security issues, both for communities and small rural owners and for the researcher (Nogueira 2017; Tsing 2019 [2016]).

Tatiana, enrolled in a PhD in Sociology, will seek to understand how gender (divide) undergoes construction in the ICT sector while taking into consideration both how this sector is expanding economically and already contains a significant gender bias. It will be carried out through the analysis of professional paths of men and women in technological areas, in Portugal. Doing face-to-face interviews with interlocutors is difficult, given the circumstances and the fact that many workers are working from home. Yet here are doubts about the adoption of digital methods, such as online interviews, to collect data in the best possible way with the least possible loss of quality of interaction between researcher and interlocutors.

In view of the pandemic scenario in Brazil, many traditional communities decided to close their territories, forbidding the entry of outsiders and encouraging the reduction of circulation of its members to urban centers and the minimization of contact with those outside the community. In Portugal the population was more protected, with more effective health measures, whether in urban or rural areas, but social distancing remains an active guideline to ensure a decrease in the number of active cases and deaths due to Covid-19.

The relationship between researchers and interlocutors has been deeply affected by the impossibility at present, of carrying out research with close physical contact. The choice for qualitative research methods, including ethnography and conducting interviews, delimits the field of investigation and, at this moment, restricts access to it, as 'the field' is not open for interpersonal interactions.

With the new increase in the number of cases in Portugal and a contagion curve that has not declined in Brazil as expected, we are now reprogramming the beginning of the field research, seeking to guarantee the integrity of our interlocutors.

The sociological research also presents important challenges, some imposed by new conditions and family reorganizations in a pandemic context. The question is now how to access men and

women who already had different professional paths and who now have new tasks within the panorama of the pandemic which could result in the interviewees having reduced availability for interviews. Tasks such as caring for children at home with virtual classes, teleworking, increased domestic activities and new family dynamics in a context of restricted life represent new challenges that need to be surmounted by the researcher.

The pandemic context presents challenges and demands adaption efforts in the development of the aforementioned research projects. Should a move be made towards digital investigation or should the opening of public places and the possibility of greater proximity and interaction with interlocutors be awaited for? This is one of the decisions that we are facing regarding the advancement of the investigation processes presented here.

Starting a research in a pandemic context - adjustments and new directions

When we enter the world of research, we learn about the importance of planning and, at the same time, the importance of flexibility. Nowadays, nothing challenges us more in terms of flexibility than the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Research around the world has suffered the impact of the pandemic. By looking at the Social Sciences field and at the researchers and doctoral students who are now starting their research, the impact is evident.

As doctoral students, at the beginning of our investigations, we have had to deal with the concern of designing and redesigning a research project and consider different research routes that could effectively fit and be developed and carried out in this context. We do not know when or if everything will return to what it was and whether research will be conducted again as before or be transformed. We faced the challenge of refining our research as our interlocutors had become less available and more difficult to access, given all the concern in times of pandemic. As we know, interviewing is one of the most widely used forms of data collection in qualitative research (Creswell 2007). Among others, we needed to adapt our research and think of other ways to reach our sample, through online resources. Skype and Zoom platforms, for instance, encourage interviewees who have place and time limitations for face-to-face interviews, precisely what has happened in this pandemic context, to participate in research in another way (Janghorban *et al.* 2014).

However, we cannot forget that the online alternative also has consequences and limitations, given the tendency for reduced willingness on the part of participants and the difficulty in creating a calm, silent and relaxed environment conducive to the development of a collaborative attitude and a relationship of trust between interviewer-interviewee, as well as the usual guarantees concerning anonymity. Some studies suggest that the relative lack of anonymity might increase a presentation of self and authenticity when compared to face-to-face interviews (Bargh *et al.* 2002; Ellison *et al.* 2006). Thus, we need to consider both the advantages and disadvantages before deciding to engage on online resources.

In the case of anthropological research, there is a growing field of Digital Anthropology (Horst & Miller 2012; Hine 2000), with the use of digital media as tools, methods and even as a field of study. However, when it comes to communities located in Brazil, internet access is still far from universal. Additionally, the type of research, focused on ruined landscapes (Tsing 2019 [2016]; Cardoso 2018) and reconstruction of other possible worlds (Krenak 2019; Kopenawa & Albert 2015) through reforestation, do not allow for the use of digital media as a method for data collection, notwithstanding its use as a tool (Miller 2020). In this specific case, Digital Anthropology will be used as a complementary tool, generating data for analysis of land use and coverage in the regions to be analyzed, as well as in the construction of a platform or application for mobility that allows the exchange of experiences between Brazil and Portugal in the field of reforestation.

The fieldwork to be carried out with communities in Brazil and owners in Portugal requires an important stage of participant observation *in locu*, with monitoring of reforestation activities and ways of conducting the recovery processes of degraded areas. Digital tools do not provide, as yet, an effective way of looking at and participating with the anthropologist in the field.

Katia's research, in the planning phase of the fieldwork, needed to be resized. A stage of documentary research, use of satellite images and prospecting for land use and coverage is being added to the work

plan with the aim of making entry into the field for a post-pandemic period. As a way of maintaining contact with communities and strengthening ties with organizations in Brazil, digital media, such as the above-mentioned platforms, have been used for meetings and planning of activities.

Final considerations

Although 'the field' is closed to conducting research that requires greater interpersonal contact, the activities of fieldwork cannot be interrupted, doctoral programs are seeking ways of adapting to the new realities of a pandemic world. Yet time for investigations has not been expanded, requiring the search for new tools, methods and resilience necessary to face momentary adversities.

The Covid-19 pandemic has hit us unexpectedly. It has changed our lives, health systems, economy, ways of working and interactions with people. PhD students and their research are a clear example of that. Waiting for fieldwork to once again be possible, accompanied by the high levels of uncertainty that surrounds us all, demand from us a greater flexibility and the ability to look for different alternatives in order to conclude our project.

There is no way of knowing when 'the field' will be opened again, therefore, it is up to doctoral students to open themselves to new technologies, new ways of conducting research in Social Sciences and search for readjustments in schedules and activities, seeking to adapt to new world realities and encouraging scientific research to follow as a priority in the search for solutions and cures for the world.

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