

Reflections

Covid-19 and doctoral research in Brazil and Portugal: who pays the bill for confinement and remote work in research?

ROSELI BREGANTIN BARBOSA



Barbosa, R. B. (2020) Covid-19 and doctoral research in Brazil and Portugal: who pays the bill for confinement and remote work in research? *Fennia* 198(1–2) 239–242. <https://doi.org/10.11143/fennia.99208>

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought about several changes to doctoral programs due to the prohibition of face-to-face activities. This situation has generated many difficulties but has also facilitated research activities in Sociology in Brazil and Portugal. This essay discusses the changes introduced in sociological research and the main strategy found to overcome the difficulties – remote work – with the aim of raising questions for a research agenda on the subject. The notes and analyses presented here are produced from participant observation and full participation as an academic linked to three universities, where I had access to remote work data and operational notes issued by these universities during the pandemic. In these observations, I have identified that the professors, technicians and researchers pay the bill for remote work in the doctorate programs, and that the pandemic affects researchers unequally, depending on their gender, the stage of the course they are in, whether the academic relationship is national or foreign, whether they receive a scholarship or not, and whether they are at home or on student mobility.

Keywords: changes, Covid-19, doctoral research, remote work

Roseli Bregantin Barbosa (<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8573-8869>), Federal University of Paraná-UFPR/CAPES, Rua General Carneiro, 460, 9o andar, Centro, Curitiba/PR, Brazil. E-mail: roseli.bregantin@hotmail.com

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic caused the suspension of classroom (face-to-face) activities at universities, including doctoral courses. Within the scope of student mobility, the pandemic has seriously affected international students due to the closure of borders, travel restrictions and suspension of scholarships to support international research. Activities were resumed remotely through conference calls and messaging applications. These remote work tools that were already being used in teaching and research activities became the main source of communication in projects and research that had already been started in early 2020. However, the pandemic did not uniformly impact all researchers and academics in doctoral courses. Some encountered many difficulties, while others found it easier.

I speak in this essay as a student, because I am doing a doctorate at a Brazilian university and a doctoral internship (and also a master's degree) in Portugal – I am one of the few Brazilian researchers

who has managed to do a PhD internship in Portugal and maintain a research scholarship during the pandemic. These countries were selected according to the location of the educational institutions to which I am linked and because they focus on the field of my doctoral research. I did not experience any loss in the doctoral research routine. This is because my research already involved distance work, with field research carried out in 2018. In addition, I arrived in Portugal before the beginning of the first confirmations of Covid-19 in Brazil and Portugal. I did not encounter any major losses especially because my doctoral research was approaching the final stage. For the Master's in Law at the University of Porto, I did not suffer losses because legal work can be carried out remotely.

The implementation of remote work in the universities to which I am linked – Federal University of Paraná, Brazil (PhD in Sociology), Institute of Social Sciences/ULisboa, Portugal (PhD Internship) and Faculty of Law, University of Porto, Portugal (Master in Law) – facilitated the progress of the research. Short trips and live activities in Portugal were canceled, without compromising the investigation. The support of the CAPES scholarship was relevant to continuing the investigation and to remain on Portuguese soil. However, my personal experience should not be confused with the reality of most researchers. The Covid-19 pandemic introduced many complications to the research, especially for female researchers.

Difficulties imposed by the pandemic on research

The primary challenges faced by researchers in Brazil involved cuts to resources and scholarships in research applied by the Brazilian government (Soares 2020). The sectors that managed to continue their projects with the scarce resources available had to adapt, both as a result of the lack of resources and because of the constraints that had arisen since March 2020 as a result of the Coronavirus pandemic in the country. The shift in research, teaching and learning activities took place unexpectedly and lacked financial support from the Government to introduce remote work that started to be carried out at the researcher's home (Bridi *et al.* 2020).

The research trips that would have taken place in April were suspended, as well as the respective doctoral internship grants allocated for this purpose. Only researchers who were already located outside of Brazil on March 26, 2020, when the outbreak began in the country, continued their pending international research through remote work. However, the melding of the academic and domestic space raised several issues, especially for female researchers who took over domestic duties during this period and lost support in the form of cleaning services and fast-food delivery (Bridi *et al.* 2020). The researchers, in addition to bearing the cost, also faced problems adapting to this methodology. Some academics are facing difficulties in doing research without the physical structure of the University, this mainly affecting international students and female researchers.

The pandemic particularly affected the production of scientific research by female researchers in Brazil (Candido & Campos 2020). An internal survey, by DADOS magazine, reveals a drop in the submission of scientific articles by women (from 38% to 13%) in the second quarter of 2020 (Fig. 1). However, co-authorship emerged as a strategy for women to circumvent the effects of the pandemic, which had prevented them from continuing to produce articles alone (Candido & Campos 2020). I emphasize that the methodology of gender identification in this research consists of classifying the authors by names common to men and women and assumes a margin of error of 4%. However, gender diversity is not included in this methodology. I also emphasize that the difference in scientific production based on gender was not created by the pandemic but aggravated by it.

In Portugal, researchers also had to bear the costs of transitioning from the university's face-to-face activities to the remote method. However, perhaps the most significant obstacle has occurred in the area of student mobility, with the closure of borders and the suspension of activities at universities. International students have experienced more difficulties because they depend on the support of the physical structure of the Universities and have subsequently had to deal with restrictions and uncertainties regarding the alternative of returning to their countries of origin (Reis 2020). Remaining is difficult but returning also entails costs that not all researchers are able to afford. Until August 2020, they had no idea how long classroom activities would be suspended – in August, the resumption of school activities was scheduled for September.

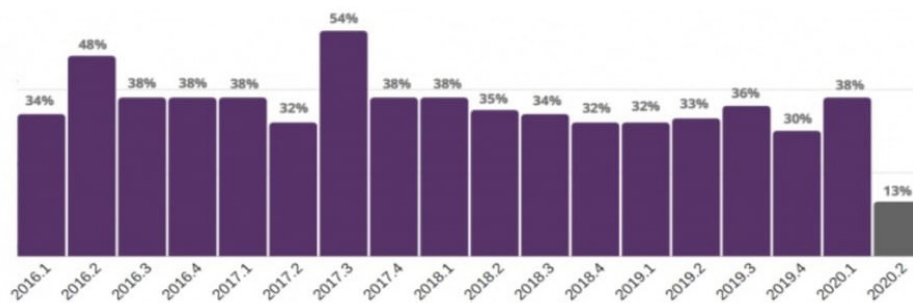


Fig. 1. Relative number of female first authors who signed manuscripts submitted to DADOS magazine per quarter (2016–2020) (Candido & Campos 2020).

Being a native of the country where they were doing their doctorate was not exactly easy for researchers during the quarantine in Portugal. There were difficulties faced by Portuguese researchers, but they had slightly more stability due to the assertive way in which Portugal instituted measures to control the pandemic. In Brazil, the Federal Government created more problems than it managed, the divergent approaches that each state government took to control the health generated much anxiety among researchers.

Facilities introduced by the pandemic in doctoral research activities

The most significant advantage that doctoral research obtained with the confinement of a large part of the population based in Brazil and Portugal was the increased availability of people to answer questionnaires and grant interviews online. Research conducted in Brazil on remote work reveals that social distancing has triggered the need in people to share their experiences and feelings, which is quite conducive to the approach taken by researchers, especially in Sociology (Bridi *et al.* 2020).

Some researchers report that due to the greater number of live events, they were able to participate in conferences, meetings of research groups and seminars from the educational institution itself, and even with others abroad. They state that they would not have been able to attend these events if they were presented in the traditional way. Not having to face traffic and long and tiring journeys to make presentations and debates on scientific work was (and still is) an advantage, saving time and money. This is a facility that especially benefits female researchers with children or those responsible for home care, who may have difficulty in leaving the home.

Likewise, the extension of deadlines for completing research in some Universities can be regarded as a benefit introduced by the pandemic. Social distancing and quarantine were not entirely bad either. They allowed some doctoral students to enjoy a period of seclusion, essential to immersing themselves in reading and writing, and encouraging the production of texts and theses, one of the main objectives of doctorates in Sociology.

Conclusion

I observed changes in sociological research in Brazil and Portugal during the Covid-19 pandemic period, because these are the research spaces that I have access to, where I do my doctoral research, and because I believe it is important to monitor these changes. From these observations, I note that the pandemic created more challenges than advantages for research. However, further studies on the topic are needed for more solid conclusions. Such depth of investigation will be possible when the crisis has been overcome and all the relevant data is mature. So far, I have identified some relevant points: both the obstacles and the facilities linked to the pandemic that existed before the health crisis, were exacerbated by the conditions it imposed (cf. the editorial of this issue); remote work was the main strategy used to overcome the difficulties imposed on research by the pandemic, and researchers, professors and students paid the price for its implementation in doctoral research;

women were the most affected, because in this model of work they are expected to perform domestic chores, in addition to doctoral research; co-authorship, an already commonly used method for the scientific inclusion of women, served as a tool to continue the production of articles during this period in which there was a sharp drop in female scientific productivity; the challenges and advantages created by the pandemic have unevenly affected male and female researchers, national and foreign, scholarship and non-scholarship holders, Brazilians and Portuguese, and PhD students in the initial research stage and in the advanced phase of their thesis, at home and in international mobility.

Analyzing an ongoing phenomenon is always precarious, but the surveys carried out based on this monitoring are essential for research purposes. These changes are still happening and will remain in effect until mass immunizations against Covid-19 become a reality. However, some guidelines for a research agenda are already pronounced: such as the need for public education policies to face health crises in educational institutions; gender inequalities in the models adopted to solve the crisis; and the vulnerability of the international student in the health crisis context.

References

- Bridi, M. A., Bohler, F. R. & Zanoni, A. P. (2020) *Relatório Técnico da Pesquisa: o trabalho remoto/home-office no contexto da pandemia COVID-19. Part I. Curitiba*. Universidade Federal do Paraná, Curitiba. <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.14052.19842>
- Candido, M. R. & Campos, L. A. (2020) Pandemia reduz submissões de artigos acadêmicos assinados por mulheres. Blog DADOS 14.5.2020 <<http://dados.iesp.uerj.br/pandemia-reduz-submissoes-de-mulheres>>. 1.10.2020.
- Reis, C. (2020) Retidos em Portugal ou com aulas de madrugada, alunos estrangeiros pedem suspensão das propinas. Diário de Notícias 22.4.2020 <www.dn.pt/vida-e-futuro/retidos-em-portugal-ou-com-aulas-de-madrugada-alunos-estrangeiros-pedem-suspensao-das-propinas-12101629.html>. 1.10.2020.
- Soares, J. (2020) Cortes na ciência comprometem resposta à COVID-19 no Brasil. Tilt 7.4.2020 <www.uol.com.br/tilt/noticias/redacao/2020/04/07/cortes-ciencia-coronavirus-brasil.htm>. 1.10.2020.