

Reflections

And now what? Changing fields and methodologies during the Covid-19 pandemic: from international mobilities to education

ANTONIO PEDRO DE BARROS, ANA DANIELA GUERREIRO, MAFALDA F. MASCARENHAS & RITA REIS



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The Covid-19 pandemic and the worldwide lockdown have brought about profound changes to the way in which fieldwork is done. During a time particularly marked by social distancing, how do social scientists cope with the need to alter their methodologies with fields in transition? This essay reflects upon the changes caused by the pandemic, both in the field and in the methodologies adopted by the authors – all in different phases of their PhD research. Drawing from their research areas, it focuses on two main thematic axes, both deeply affected by the current situation: international mobilities (of commodities and people) and education (in Portugal and abroad).

Keywords: education, commodities, international mobilities, research methodologies, Covid-19

Antonio Pedro de Barros (<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5091-4589>), Ana Daniela Guerreiro (<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1241-4764>), Mafalda F. Mascarenhas (<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0716-3748>) & Rita Reis (<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4109-7569>) Instituto de Ciências Sociais, Universidade de Lisboa, Av. Prof. Aníbal Bettencourt 9, 1600-189 Lisboa, Portugal. E-mail: antoniopbarros@gmail.com, danieela.guerreiro@gmail.com, mafalda.mascarenhas@ics.ulisboa.pt, ritamreis@edu.ulisboa.pt

Introduction

Dealing with a changing field and overcoming difficulties of many sorts is something social scientists are used to in their long-term research, based on the fluidity of interpersonal relationships and dynamic social contexts. However, the Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in an unknown situation for researchers – and human beings in general.

By now, it is well known that this pandemic brought about an unprecedented world-scale scenario that has *frozen* basic daily routines over recent months, and for the foreseeable future. Sudden changes in methodologies in social sciences are common for many reasons including political instability and violence (Bourgeois 1990; Kovats Bernat 2002), and gender-based issues (Golde 1986; Isidoros 2015). But researchers must cope with a new set of problems, such as confinement, inability to move and, above all, social distancing. This reframing is valid for both researchers and their interlocutors who, in one way or another, were affected by the situation.

This essay reflects upon the changes brought on by the pandemic, both in the field and the methodologies adopted by us – all in different phases of PhD research. Reis felt Covid-19's impact during the final weeks of her two-year research with Sahrawi students in Spain and Algeria although these impacts were not significant. Instead, the pandemic became an opportunity for her to observe important social dynamics that were being affected and changed by the situation. Meanwhile, Barros, Guerreiro, and Mascarenhas were confronted with abrupt changes when their research activities were about to begin. A different kind of methodological consideration was to be made then, mostly regarding the conditions of executing the research plan in relation to expected changes in their prospective research sites.

Despite these differences, we have all shared the need to deal with sudden modifications in our fieldwork without having – at least so far – to radically change the direction of our intended research. Our experiences are presented through two main thematic axes that seem deeply affected by the situation: international mobilities and education. Concluding remarks are then presented.

Staring at border control: the international mobilities of commodities, people, and money during the Covid-19 pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic came along with the re-strengthening of the role of polities in general, and the nation-state in particular. The closing of national borders and the imposition of confinement measures restricted to national territories emerged as an almost natural response to the rapid spread of the virus and escalation of its disease-inflicted deaths (European Commission 2020; Fernandes & Salvador 2020). These measures ended up causing serious constraints in the mobilities of people and commodities.

Thus, we reflect on how the pandemic affects the international mobilities of commodities, people, and the fields of research that depend on it, illustrating it through Guerreiro's research focused on the discourses and practices of Portuguese ethical fashion brands, and Barros's study seeking to understand the relation between collective academic migration of Brazilian PhD students to Portugal.

Regarding commodities, the European Commission has presented measures to ensure the continuity of cargo transport services by air, sea and land, aiming for the maintenance of the normal functioning of the European internal market (European Commission 2020; Rangel Logistics Solutions 2020) and trying to minimize economic losses. However, according to Portuguese ethical fashion brand representatives, although it was possible to transport goods between most European countries, some borders were strongly conditioning circulation of materials needed for the manufacture of their garments. These constraints, as Guerreiro was told, not only ended up delaying the production process, but also the product delivery, as online sales increased exponentially. This exponential increase in demand, both in international and national stores, paired with an inability to supply the demand, translated into serious economic losses.

On the one hand, through social media and direct contacts with ethical fashion brand representatives, Guerreiro observed how these brands reacted to the pandemic, especially regarding changes in production, selling and consumers. On the other hand, she rescheduled the participation in Neonyt,¹ which is central to her research.

While Guerreiro's research interests required a focus on how the circulation of commodities is happening, Barros' theme paid special attention to the mobility of people. Over the last few years, the presence of Brazilian students and researchers in Portugal has increased exponentially (Amato 2018). Even though it is too soon to gather data from universities' new admissions, there is already a recent report stating that the number of visa applications by Brazilian students in Portuguese consulates has increased 18% in comparison to the academic year of 2019/2020 (Amato 2020). So, the pandemic may not be having a significant impact on the upward trend in Brazilian academic mobility to Portugal. Nonetheless, other dimensions of these mobilities have been affected and should be taken into account.

One of the changes identified by Barros was the fact that many academic programs are proposing mixed in-person/virtual participation in academic activities. This situation deeply affects his research. Having classes and meetings online is a way of participating in the academic environment of a different country, without the experience of international displacement. In this case, not only the

different modalities of PhD attendance need to be considered, but also the fact that research must also privilege other ethnographic methodologies without relying exclusively on university campuses.

Another aspect that affects the international circulation from Brazil to Europe is the fall in the value of the Brazilian Real, accompanied by the strengthening of the Euro (Elias 2020). Considering that access to Portuguese scholarships is especially difficult for Brazilian students, they depend on Brazilian money to finance their studies and lives in Portugal. Bearing this in mind, it is possible that the experience of these newly arrived students/researchers will be marked by economic deprivation and its yet uncertain consequences, something less common among highly skilled migrants than in those with a lower socioeconomic status (Russi & Karam Brum 2019; Togni 2019).

Given this uncertain scenario, we decided to begin by carrying out the tasks related to research and data collection on digital social networks and only later will we move to physical and social field study. In summary, it is perceptible that for those who are at an early stage of their research, Covid-19 ends up being a challenge regarding the re-adjusting and re-scheduling of activities and, most importantly, reconnecting to people.

Schooling upside down: education paths during a pandemic

Within the scenario of the pandemic restrictions, education was deeply affected. From kindergartens to universities, the school year ended the same way: home-schooling, online classes, and severe mobility restrictions.

Several researchers worldwide follow the changes, improvements, and problems in educational access, especially regarding the most vulnerable groups such as migrants, students in rural areas or those from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds. We reflect on the consequences of the restrictions through two case studies: international students (Sahrawis in Spain) and national students (in Portugal).

Like Barros, but at the final stage of her research, Reis has closely observed the consequences of pandemic restrictions among Sahrawi youth and students in Extremadura (Spain). Within the scope of mobilities among refugees, she analyses student migration among Sahrawi youth. From a "consolidated" ² exile context, thousands of youngsters leave the refugee camps, under official programs to study in Algeria, Spain or Cuba.

From an educational perspective, like other international students, her interlocutors were prevented from returning to the refugee camps. For those who had already secured work, Covid-19 brought about both unemployment and new job opportunities. Additionally, it was with concern that her interlocutors saw the closure of camp borders since it left their families without access to humanitarian aid. Yet, in view of the debates around humanitarianism and development (Harrell-Bond 2002; Mosse 2005), it was very interesting to observe a reversal in the support chain: in March 2020 it was the Sahrawis – from the camps – who sent videos and messages to support the Spanish in their fight against Covid-19. This exemplifies how the pandemic affected her fieldwork and the people she researches, changing dynamics that were thought unalterable.

Methodologically, and without doing an online ethnography, several online platforms and social media remained fundamental during confinement. It was through *WhatsApp* that Reis was able to be present at the Eid meeting, which her interlocutors prepared at the end of Ramadan. Regarding the humanitarian domain, online meetings/events were focused on the combat of the serious impact of closing the refugee camps. Even though online tools were very important during confinement, they were already present in Reis' relationships with her interlocutors. Despite not having widespread effects on her research, it did affect her fieldwork and interlocutors.

At a national level, Mascarenhas aims to analyze discrimination in the Portuguese educational context, focusing on discipline and the expectations and recommendations that teachers have about students' future school paths. Even before the pandemic, the Portuguese educational system has frequently suffered alteration, constantly changing Mascarenhas' research field³.

Portuguese schools and teachers had to rapidly adapt to a system without on-site classes. Attending online classes requires resources that are not always available: not only due to the quality of internet connection and hardware availability (i.e., computers, tablets, or smartphones), but also because of

the characteristics of the domestic environment (how many people live in the household and how many work/study remotely), students' age, autonomy and skills available to study remotely, parents' availability and their ability to support the children, among several other factors. As expected, some students did not have quality internet access, or the necessary hardware for home-schooling. As usual, these problems do not affect all students in the same way (EEF 2018; Roldão 2015).

Mascarenhas was at the beginning of her PhD when the state of emergency was declared. At that point she was doing the curricular part of her program which moved to online platforms and she had already planned some initial studies, such as a focus group with teachers, which had to be postponed. The focus group will now be conducted online, which has some advantages, such as having teachers from different parts of the country. An upside of the pandemic was that Mascarenhas was able to start attending the lab meetings of her international co-supervisor, allowing for his feedback at an earlier stage of her PhD than expected. Mascarenhas' fieldwork will all be done in a during/after-Covid school environment and her findings will have to take that into consideration.

Despite sharing similar empirical contexts, the pandemic caught Reis and Mascarenhas at different stages of their research. Reis was ending her fieldwork, Mascarenhas had just begun, and experienced big transformations to her program and the field. Alternatively, we relied on communication technologies and social media to further develop our research, for keeping in touch with people and for being involved in international host institutions' activities. Furthermore, we had a unique opportunity to observe the changes happening *in loco*, researching while these changes happened and in the immediate aftermath.

Conclusion

Covid-19 has changed the way social scientists organize, conduct their research and experience fieldwork (Davies & Spencer 2010; Martins & Mendes 2016). Most importantly, it has changed their empirical fields and their interlocutors' lives, revealing unexplored dimensions. Throughout this essay, we reflected on how the pandemic modified both research fields and methodological strategies to collect data.

For Reis – at the final stage of her fieldwork – the pandemic did not bring about significant constraints, instead it provided an opportunity to better understand her field and interlocutors, through the emergence of new dynamics, especially in the humanitarian and education contexts. Conversely, for Barros, Guerreiro and Mascarenhas, all at an early stage of research, Covid-19 has raised concerns regarding the beginning of the fieldwork and how it might be carried out in such an unknown situation. Thus, as our reflections illustrate, we have ended up in similar situations as our interlocutors, favouring digital social networks to carry out research.

But this is only the beginning of a health and social crisis that is far from being over. With such uncertainty surrounding research, and without the ability to predict the future, planning for the coming months will be a complex task. This period of uncertainty is not over and more adjustments will need to be made in the near future. That leads all of us to the question: and now what?

Notes

¹ An international market that takes place annually in Copenhagen and Berlin and brings together ethical fashion brands.

² Spanish colony between 1884 and 1976, Western Sahara is the last colony in Africa. The Mauritanian-Moroccan invasion in 1975 triggered the flight of about half of the population (San Martín 2010). In the process of decolonization and waiting for a self-determination referendum, thousands of Sahrawis live in exile. The refugee camps (Tindouf, Algeria) became the headquarters of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), since its proclamation in 1976, through the implementation of the embryonic structure of the future independent state.

³ One example was the change in criteria to university access through professional education (Reis 2019). This change was particularly relevant to Mascarenhas. Initially, her focus was to understand the socio-psychological factors behind the discrepancies in the relative presence of black and white students in professional education (hindering access to university) by studying the recommendations

that teachers make at ninth-grade. She will now focus on the role of indiscipline on a more general variable measuring teachers' expectations and recommendations about students' future school paths.

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