

## Reflections

# The challenges of anthropological research among sex workers and victims of domestic violence in times of the Covid-19 pandemic

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This essay reflects our doctoral research experiences at the Institute of Social Sciences, University of Lisbon. It aims to understand the new challenges and measures adopted in relation to fieldwork with sex workers and victims of domestic violence in Covid-19 times. Our work includes ethnography and participant observation in prostitution houses, LGBTQI+ institutions and spaces of support for the victims of domestic violence. We seek to reflect on the possibilities and limitations of conducting anthropological research during the pandemic.

Keywords: Covid-19, trans women, impacts, support measures, methods

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## Introduction

In the time of the Covid-19 pandemic, many anthropologists have faced the challenge of how to proceed with their ethnographies. The dilemma lies in how to undertake participant observation without putting the research participants and the researcher at risk of contagion. In the classic models of anthropology, contact with the 'other' and being witness to their experiences is considered central to the development of research (Evans-Pritchard 2013 [1940]). Yet it has been known for some time that we do not always have simple access to fieldwork sites. A historical example of this is *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (Benedict 2007 [1946]), a study of Japanese society and culture during World War II published in 1946, which could be considered a classic example of 'distance anthropology'.

Anthropologist Ruth Benedict (1887-1948) was among the top cultural anthropologists recruited by the U.S. government to investigate war reports and provide advice after the U.S. entered World War II. Barred from carrying out fieldwork in Nazi Germany or Japan, Benedict used other ways that could guarantee access to the research field. Researching culture through its literature, newspaper clippings, films, archives, and interviews with immigrants, was fundamental to understanding the cultural patterns that guided World War II. Benedict's work is not only considered a classic in the discipline influencing research methods in anthropology but reiterates the possibility of performing ethnographies at times when access to the field is limited. It is possible to conduct an ethnography as

original, meaningful and insightful as any that has been known (Miller 2020). Making changes and finding ways around a problem is a part of scientific and artistic endeavour. Finding a way to become useful to the investigated group and realizing how our participants also circumvent the limitations imposed by Covid-19 can be understood as a first entry into the field.

The possibilities and limitations reflected in this essay are based on our challenges as researchers to carry out fieldwork with transvestites and transsexual women in Portugal and Brazil. The initial research proposals we produced focused on living for a year in houses of prostitution and accompanying victims of domestic and gender violence (Scott 1991 [1990]) in Portugal and Brazil, yet this has become unviable in times of social distancing. The way in which we will overcome this issue is central to our ongoing research. The points that follow describe how our research participants are facing the pandemic and whether domestic violence has been accentuated or not due to social isolation. It is hoped that this initial exploration will make it possible to rebuild our research design, so that is more effective in responding to or rejecting the research hypotheses.

### **Who can protect themselves? Sex work and dual violence (domestic and gender)**

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the guidance suggested by the World Health Organization and followed by most governments was the proposal of social isolation as the main way of reducing the possibility of contagion and of flattening the curve. Yet social isolation has revealed social inequalities experienced by different groups in society. These groups include transvestites, women, and transsexuals, and especially those that are involved in sex work, which our PhD research is based upon. To address different experiences of social isolation due to Covid-19, two interviews were conducted with Brazilian transvestites, one who has been a sex worker in Lisbon, Portugal for 18 years, and one who has worked for more than 20 years as a social activist in Salvador, Bahia, Brazil. At the present time, we argue here that the ways in which sex workers and their clients are dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic needs to be investigated with a new urgency.

Through an interview we conducted with a sex worker who lives in Lisbon, it is possible to perceive complex challenges involving the clinical stigmas of a migrant who works as a prostitute (Sarró 2007). Being undocumented further limits social care available (Aboim *et al.* 2018). While in an interview we conducted with a Brazilian transvestite, Bianca Graça<sup>1</sup>, 42 years old and 25 years of work as a social activist in the city of Salvador, Bahia, Brazil, she reported that:

Many transvestites who work as prostitutes had to choose: they either went hungry or were at risk of being contaminated by Covid-19. In some cases, it was possible to observe that some of them had to return to the relatives' home, a place from which many were expelled when they assumed their gender identity as a transsexual woman.

If social isolation was perceived as a new experience for a large part of society, for transvestites and transsexuals isolation has always existed. For the Brazilian transvestite Samanta Brasil<sup>2</sup>, 40 years old, who has been working as a prostitute in Lisbon, Portugal for 18 years: "Many transsexual people were already away from social media. Throughout their life trajectories, they have been removed from school, the labor market and even from their families."

For this reason, the challenge of isolation, imposed on all social groups, was not necessarily considered to be the worst experience of the Covid-19 pandemic for transvestites and transsexuals who were active in the sex market (Piscitelli 2005).

Yet it is important to remember that Covid-19 and social isolation are having an impact on the lives of the most marginalized sex workers (including transvestites and transsexuals) and this has led to the accentuation of a double violence (of gender and domestic) in Brazil and Portugal. The United Nations and the World Health Organization (WHO) foresee an increase in aggression and domestic violence, as well as a greater exclusion of these victims from society, during social isolation. This is an unseen human rights issue in the context of Covid-19 and social isolation, due to its legal, health and social dimensions.

When we talk about domestic violence and gender violence in different contexts, transvestites and transsexuals can often reveal limitations regarding their recognition, pathways and suffering by

authorities. In Brazil, a country that records the highest number of assaults and murders of LGBTQI+ people (according to the organization Transgender Europe), violence was accentuated in the period of social isolation with the impact of unemployment and social coexistence, and there were cases where victims were forced to live with the aggressor. Portugal, on the other hand, which is considered a reference for innovative projects in the fight against violence of this kind noted a decrease in the country compared to 2019, according to a report in the newspaper *Público* on April 29, 2020. During the pandemic, the Portuguese government created a distance service user plan with support structures and a short messaging service reinforced by a telephone line, and created shelters with a total of 100 spaces each.

### **Limitations of researchers and new methodologies**

To conceptualize a researcher's limitations is to seek to understand the challenges, problems, concerns and feelings that mark ethnographic production and the positions that researchers and research participants occupy in the field. This is the case whether research is in-person or virtual, and in relation to online and offline relationships in the current context of the Covid-19 pandemic (Miller 2020). The empirical field influences data collection, how we reflect upon data gathered, understand problems and interact with participants which is not entirely possible when conducting research online. Yet fieldwork can be gathered and analysed through novel approaches (theoretical, practical and methodological) that permeate the notions of 'the field' and indeed the bonds between the researcher and the research participant in the current locked down landscape (Nader 2011). Perhaps especially in face of national lockdowns, and in face of the pandemic, novel approaches need to be considered in order to retain contact with vulnerable research participants.

The ethnographic process is a relationship of mutuality, communication and interaction, and here we consider our status *vis-à-vis* our interlocutors thus engaging with positionality (Viegas & Mapril 2012). Conducting fieldwork during the pandemic reframes our work and we need to think carefully about how we interact with our interlocutors, seeking to understand their experiences and how they face the current situation that we are also experiencing. One of the main points for the researcher to consider is to have increased sensitivity towards the varied effects of the situation in different communities (Miller 2020). Our engagement and interactions with the people we are researching through virtual communities, digital platforms, and webcam interviews are essential when these resources are available and accessible to our interlocutors.

In addition to ethnographic research, voluntary work with victims is essential during the Covid-19 pandemic. We use digital platforms and disseminate physical and virtual campaigns on social networks such as Facebook and Instagram, and through WhatsApp groups. We seek legal, health, social and psychological support from institutions to create a network of contacts, and as such participate directly or indirectly in the lives of our research participants at a difficult time. The researcher's position can no longer be one that distantly analyses the reality of our research participants, rather we now strive to understand the point of view of our research participants, to empathize and to understand what they are experiencing on a daily basis during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Viegas and Mapril (2012) address 'the field' as shaping gender relations, power dynamics, and the experiences of communities. Researchers must look for alternative means to connect with research participants, given the limitations that have been experienced as established paths have closed as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

### **Conclusion**

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on sex workers, as they have been forced to alter their usual routines. In addition, researchers have been unable to conduct field research with direct in-person access and participant observation, informal conversations, and face to face interviews, making it difficult to accompany our interlocutors and to understand their new reality during a global pandemic.

In the case of the women interviewed in this Reflection, they are oppressed by their social practices within a historical-cultural system in which there is failure to implement policies for inclusion. They

face difficulties in gaining access to justice, and experience a situation of risk and vulnerability in terms of reduced access to health care, technical and legal support and emergency alert systems due to the Covid-19 outbreak.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Fictitious name. Interviewed by the zoom platform on 08/09/2020 as part of the PhD project in Anthropology by the University of Lisbon.

<sup>2</sup> Fictitious name. Interviewed by the zoom platform on 02/04/2020 as part of the PhD project in Anthropology by the University of Lisbon.

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