Reflecting on Crisis

Ethics of Dis/Engagement in Migration Research

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■ **ABSTRACT:** This article offers a collective "gaze from within" the process of migration research, on the effects the pandemic has had on our interlocutors, our research fields, and our positionalities as researchers. Drawing from our experiences of researching a field in increasing crisis, and following the methodological reflections of the article written by our colleagues in this issue, we discuss a number of dilemmas and repositionings stemming from—and extending beyond—the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Focusing on issues of positionality, ethics of (dis)engaging from the research field, and the underlying extractivist nature of Global North academia, we propose our own vision of more egalitarian and engaged research ethics and qualitative methodologies in the post-pandemic world.

■ **KEYWORDS:** crisis, COVID-19, doctoral training, ethics, ethnography, methodology, migration

Continuing the conversation from Greatrick et al. (this issue), this cowritten piece comprises collective reflections on the effects of the current pandemic on our field sites and participants, and on ourselves as early career researchers. It draws on our individual research experiences, from a series of different disciplines applying ethnographic and qualitative methodologies. From this "in-betweenness" of overlapping positionalities and levels of engagement in the field of migration, we discuss how we, as academics based in the Global North, engage with a dynamic phenomenon continuously punctuated by crisis.

Finding ourselves in close proximity to situations of crisis and increasing systemic violence has posed a number of ethical and affective dilemmas for our roles and responsibilities as academics, as well as citizens and members of the communities with which we conduct research. Following the proposal of Günel et al. (2020) in the "Manifesto for Patchwork Ethnography," rather than focusing solely on the needs of research participants, we decided to look at how ethnographic practices are shaped by the researchers' own lives and ethical commitments in order to reflect on wider methodological repositionings. We proceed by discussing individual research experiences in the form of field diary vignettes, using our own observations as primary material for analysis and methodological reflexivity. Centering around issues of relationality, extractivism, care, and agency, we engage in ongoing conversations on essential academic transformations.

"Positioning" Ourselves

Conducting our doctoral research in the field of migration, we have witnessed closely how the present health crisis has exacerbated this already complex field. As researchers, some of whom also identify as migrants, we recognize that we are among the more privileged of the world's displacement-affected communities (Zaman 2018). We are part of the Migration Research Unit PhD Network at University College London, an elite UK academic institution, based in different disciplines and departments, including anthropology, development studies, education, law, and sociology. We are also engaged in activism, advocacy, aid work, solidarity, and teaching, alongside our filial, parental, and other social roles. COVID-19 travel restrictions have made all of us feel to some degree "positioned" (Latour 2020), by calling into question our habitual relationship with space and mobility. This shared experience is mitigated by the relative strength of our passports, which allow us to cross borders more freely than most of those with whom we research and many of our scholarly peers around the world. We are also in the latter stages of our PhD journeys, having completed the bulk of our fieldwork before the first lockdown of 2020. Yet we consequently found ourselves being "submitted to the virus" (ibid.) in both our homes and research fields, since connections to the field often preexist and continue well beyond the designated fieldwork period.

At the onset of the pandemic, international NGOs initiated a discussion on how social inequality shapes global responses to crises, looking for ways to decolonize humanitarian action (Médecins Sans Frontières et al. 2020). Likewise, art practitioners have been reflecting on how art institutions can actively practice a politics of care, using research-generated knowledge to transform institutions into caring environments by focusing on feminist, queer, and Black critical knowledge (State of Concept 2020). We also saw this as a fertile moment to examine the relational dynamics of ethnographic fieldwork, our agency as academics, and the often extractivist nature of research. Drawing from our own experiences of crisis in the field, we hope that our reflexive trajectories are useful to other researchers navigating similar situations, as we open up discussion on how to consciously position ourselves inside and outside of the field, in what we term "ethics of dis/engagement."

A/Effects of COVID: Observations from the Field

Among the many effects of COVID-19, the inability to physically engage with our research sites and participants has been significant. As our colleagues address in this issue, health crises and containment measures often overlap with preexisting crises, be they social, political, legal, or economic. Alongside Brexit restrictions and growing anti-migrant sentiment within the ranks of policy-making bodies across our field sites, a preexisting hostile climate has been fueled further by media portrayals of refugees as a major COVID-19 threat. In practical terms, the lockdown and subsequent economic slowdown have had a number of detrimental effects on migrants, including a disproportionate loss of often unregulated employment, the intensification of restrictive visa regimes and subsequent difficulties in adjusting to these, further limiting access to basic healthcare and first reception support, and in some cases eradicating controlled freedom of movement altogether.

Ioanna Manoussaki-Adamopoulou, a social anthropologist researching formal and informal networks of care provision for people seeking asylum in Greece, reflected on the ripple effects of the strict antivirus measures on migrants' rights, namely the closing of borders and imposition of a countrywide lockdown. She observed how "this 'state of exception' came at a

social cost, affecting disproportionately those already most vulnerabilized." Under the pretext of "protecting the social body," the Greek government turned island refugee camps into closed facilities, trapping everyone inside in overcrowded, squalid conditions. To minimize incentives for movement further, asylum seekers' monthly stipends that were withdrawn from cashpoints located outside the camps, were temporarily halted, affecting their ability to buy soap, masks, and other basic hygienic necessities to protect themselves against the virus. People reaching the islands at this time were asked to "self-isolate" at the points of arrival, and were left to sleep on the beach under the pouring rain for days. The same "necropolitical" policy (Mbembé and Meintjes 2003) was applied to mainland camps with confirmed COVID-19 cases. Instead of increasing tests and isolating positive individuals, when initial testing exposed more than a few dozen carrying the virus, entire camps like Malakassa and Ritsona in mainland Greece were put into quarantine. Many recognized refugees who are no longer supported by the humanitarian system and rely heavily on unregulated manual labor went hungry, and so did a lot of those that remain undocumented or whose documents had expired.

In addition to this intensification of crisis in living conditions, the pandemic has had a parallel negative impact on the support systems offered to migrants. Aydan Greatrick, navigating safety issues for LGBTQ+ refugees, described how COVID-19 has forced support groups to move their work online, triage casework, and navigate unequal access to the internet, especially for those living in detention or migrant centers. Finding secure housing and maintaining social networks that rely on face-to-face interaction, particularly significant for queer refugees who disproportionately lack privacy and security at home, has become increasingly difficult. Access to decent healthcare provision for those with precarious legal statuses has also been adversely affected.

Continuing the theme of the pandemic's impact on the groups we research, Natalie Sedacca, a lawyer researching domestic workers in Chile and the UK, recognized that challenges faced by domestic workers in the context of COVID-19 and subsequent lockdowns have included large increases in workload, health threats through exposure to the virus, and loss of jobs and income. This is a particularly serious problem since these workers often fall outside provisions for income replacement, and in the UK, those on visas cannot claim state benefits because of the "No Recourse to Public Funds" (NRPF) condition. Live-in domestic workers face an additional danger if they are laid off, as this will also lead to the loss of their accommodation. The way that visa regimes are structured means that losing a job can also affect immigration status, potentially leading to a worker becoming undocumented.

In some cases, crisis stems from other political events, such as the explosion in the port of Beirut. Hannah Sender, researching adolescence, displacement, and urban change at UCL's Development Planning Unit, observed that the homes and neighborhoods of her colleagues based in Beirut were directly affected. Her participants, however, were affected indirectly by worsening economic collapse connected to the destruction of grain stores and increased problems with fuel imports. These experiences demonstrate the multitude of intersecting impacts of the pandemic on the people we conduct research with, subsequently affecting ourselves and our research relations.

Researcher–Participant Relationality

During data collection, we develop interpersonal relationships with migrant research participants that can be long-standing. The researcher–participant relationship is often infused with a mutual ethic of care (Tronto 1998), forcing us to reflect on whether it is possible or even desir-

able to be "neutral" as an ethnographer, while calling into question the role of ethnographer as witness (Marcus 2005).

As Rachel Benchekroun, a sociologist working with mothers with insecure immigration status and NRPF, discussed, building trust and negotiating the relationship between researcher and participant requires careful consideration. As an ethnographer researching how the UK's hostile environment policy shapes the processual nature of social networks for mothers with insecure immigration status living in London, she spent many months "hanging out" in their homes and "walking with" them wherever they went. She gradually became part of the individuals' support networks, by helping out with childcare, accompanying them to appointments, sourcing second-hand clothes, talking politics, or providing emotional support. At times, she questioned the compatibility of her relational practices with her role as researcher, and wondered whether they would problematize stepping back from the field later on. Yet on balance, these small acts of care were important in and of themselves.

While she was clear about the conclusion of fieldwork, ceasing communication with these mothers felt inappropriate, outlining the power imbalances embedded in research relationships that highlighted a tension between instrumentality and care. Through multiple, in-depth, open-ended conversations, we familiarize ourselves as researchers with migrant experiences of being excluded from "the system," witnessing how precarious legal statuses and restricted access to welfare support and public services affect individual and relational well-being. Strict lockdown measures created new pressures, connected to the temporary closure of many support organizations on which a lot of our participants relied on for their survival, leaving many of them in cramped living spaces, cut off from other face-to-face interactions.

While social distancing prevented Rachel from meeting up with her participants to reflect together on data analysis and experiences of the research process, she remained in regular contact, checking on their well-being and signposting possible sources of practical support to them. However, she experienced engaging and supporting "at a distance" to be insufficient, and the lack of face-to-face interactions felt uncaring on her part; it also felt like an abrupt end to, or fizzling out of, the research relationship.

Ioanna, finding herself locked down in her field site, which is also her "home" country, ended up connecting a number of migrants who reached out to her for help with newly emerged COVID-support food networks. She supplied former participants with food provisions directly and helped coordinate a bottom-up hygiene support initiative spanning across Athens and island and mainland camps, mobilizing the contacts she had acquired during her fieldwork to gain access to people living in government-controlled spaces.

Witnessing an already dire situation worsening, Natalie noted how the pandemic reinforced the importance of continued dialogue with participant groups, whether by direct contact or via campaigning and awareness-raising. Her observation resonated across the authors, identifying a heightened sense of responsibility toward interlocutors during this increasingly violent period.

When he returned to the field in the summer of 2020 on a non-research-related trip, Andrew Knight's overlapping positionalities in Greece raised some familiar questions: "How does one identify the 'line' between friend and research participant? How does this apply in the context of pre-PhD relationships? Where are the boundaries of fieldwork itself? How to separate data collection from simply chatting with friends, family, and others?" COVID-19 had inhibited his willingness and ability to continue gathering data on the island. Nonetheless, this trip enhanced his understanding of the field, context, and environment, blurring fixed lines between research and social engagement.

Andrea Cortés Saavedra, a Chilean researcher who experienced the social uprising for justice and equity during her fieldwork with migrant schoolchildren in the north of the country,

equally believes that the social and political dimension of research "must materialize in a commitment beyond the time considered for fieldwork or the boundaries of the research site." She stressed the necessity to promote ongoing communication channels with the participants of our research, to maintain contact after the formal conclusion of fieldwork, and to find ways to contribute to their daily lives. In a fieldnote she observed that "If research participants allowed us to enter their contexts, get to know them and trust us, not cutting the relationship abruptly and offering them our expertise becomes part of our moral obligation."

As we emerge from and reenter periods of local and national lockdowns, the intersection of structural and everyday forms of oppression related to immigration status with the effects of COVID-19 must be understood and responded to. Aligning with Duclos and Criado's (2019) proposal for medical anthropology "to not simply seek to represent or bear witness to these practices but to reinvigorate them in relation to care," we believe that academic research can also be enriched by embracing modes of inquiry and intervention in states of crisis that can open up new relational and methodological possibilities.

Our perspective aligns with Scheper-Hughes's (1995: 410), arguing against the role of the researcher as a "neutral . . . objective observer of the human condition" in favor of a more "politically committed and morally engaged" approach. As Clifford (1984) has posited, ethnography is inherently partial. We experientially contest Hammersley's (2006) suggestion that ethnographers should not seek to further the interests of marginalized groups. Rather, we maintain that we have a moral responsibility to participate in political struggles through our research, remaking ethnographic methods to incorporate social activism (Hale 2006) by asking "how we might contribute to making the world a more just place" (Abu-Lughod 2002:789). As ethnographers, we can be "agents of change" alongside the people with whom we do research (Gomberg-Muñoz 2016; Mohanty 1984). This engaged approach to research can diversify knowledge production, by unsettling fixed representations of participant "others."

Unpacking Academic Extractivism

Besides a moral responsibility toward those with whom we conduct research, there are also those whom we conduct research alongside to consider in the new and challenging methodologies emerging in the COVID-19 era. During our reflections, we questioned the appropriateness of researchers from the Global North flying to the Global South when, in the context of climate emergency, research could be undertaken by in-country social scientists. While these are important questions, Sukarieh and Tannock's (2019) findings from Lebanon warn us of some of the pre-2020 extractivist trends to which further reliance on local researchers could contribute. Often responsible for planning research, producing background literature reviews, transcription, translation, coding analysis, and writing up fieldwork data, "assistants" can end up conducting much of the fieldwork itself, without the appropriate recognition or reward (cf. Aymar et al. 2020). Local research assistants spoke of their sense of alienation from the projects they work on, exploitation during the research process, and disillusionment with the research sector generally. Fair wages, secure contracts, shared authorship, and intellectual property rights could address some of the issues arising from subcontracted labor relations, but the need for a broader conversation remains.

Any discussion of continued or increased reliance on local researchers in emerging post-COVID methodologies should consider the direct consequences for their lives and careers, and for the broader political economy of overseas academic research. The ethical implications of subcontracted research point to a more mindful approach toward these collaborations, includ-

ing provision of specialized training and support that acknowledges the emotional burden of often being exposed to traumatic contexts. Given ongoing processes of neoliberalization, the metrics-driven approach, the contested nature of the "Global South" (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2020: 8), and increasing precaritization among young academics (Fotta et al. 2020), Sukarieh and Tannock's findings are relevant to global academia and call for wider reevaluations of the ethical dimensions of conducting research.

On Voice and Agency

Beyond the impact on those we research with and alongside, the pandemic has given us all a sense of what it means to be "in crisis." Being "positioned" and simultaneously "dislocated" (Latour 2020) from the familiar has exacerbated feelings of "being alone, ashamed, bereaved, betrayed, depressed, desperate, disappointed, disturbed, embarrassed, fearful, frustrated, guilty, harassed, homeless, paranoid, regretful, silenced, stressed, trapped, uncomfortable, unprepared, unsupported, and unwell" in all of us. These emotional states are frequently experienced by PhD researchers conducting ethnographic fieldwork (Pollard 2009: 1). We also regularly identify them in our research participants, albeit often in a more pronounced form. Commonalities in emotional responses to situations of prolonged stress challenge fixed predispositions of the "suffering subject" (Robbins 2013), opening more interconnected ways to approach experiences of dispossession.

As we "got together" in virtual mode in early August 2020 to talk about the impact of COVID-19 on our research, we found ourselves discussing previous protracted or short-term moments of crisis that we had experienced in the field. Reflecting on how the current health crisis has intersected with preexisting, long-standing political crises, we soon moved to our own ethical and political positionalities as academic researchers and relational, politicized subjectivities immersed in multiple "ecologies of support" (Duclos and Criado 2019). These reflections raised further questions on how we want to continue investigating the social world, on how we connect ourselves through qualitative research with people and their lives, and on possible repositionings in relation to extractivist trends within academia.

With reference to fieldwork in Lebanon, Aydan expressed feeling "less interested in engaging [with research participants] as a researcher . . . and more in solidarity." As a result of the exodus of several of his friends since the "revolution" in October, the declining resources of hard-pressed organizations, and his own positionality as a white British researcher from a Global North university entering into an increasingly compromised space, he felt a more urgent need to address the politics of hostility through acts of support and care in a context that he was able to speak to and advocate for. Similarly, for Andrea, the daily experience that she lived at the school, the bonds of trust that were created with children and teachers, and the political commitment to migrant children made her question the need for formal closure of a social investigation.

These observations show researchers interrogating the appropriateness of sudden disengagement following completion of research, particularly in light of COVID-19 and other ongoing crises. The multiple constraints and simultaneous "slowness" imposed by the pandemic, together with human rights movements rising again in this period, such as Black Lives Matter, direct us toward finding new ways of doing ethnography (Günel et al. 2020) and toward the pressing need to decolonize Western academia (Delisle 2019). Echoing what Bruno Latour (2020) recently called "a tragic good luck" in relation to how the pandemic has highlighted important social issues that until now often remained sidelined, we wanted to expand on these by centering the ethical responsibility of conducting qualitative research in migration settings.

In his keynote speech at the 2020 RAI conference, "Anthropology and Geography: Dialogues Past, Present and Future," Latour underlined the present importance of the anthropologist's role to give agency to the voices of the people they study. Without intending to overstate the researcher's role in this process, it is essential to acknowledge the power imbalances at the root of these relationships and the benefit that we, as researchers, can derive from them. We therefore need to question the researcher's own agency: how we engage in different socialities and solidarities, performing our political commitment to migrants without reproducing the same instrumental relations on which we tend to critically reflect as academics. It is important to place balanced emphasis on "giving voice" or agency to research participants; people *are* de facto agentive—they *have* voice. More pertinent is the researcher's role in silencing, consciously or unconsciously, those with whom we study and failing to recognize that we are as much a part of their projects as they are of ours (Spivak 1988; Kobayashi 1994). Practicing "embroider[ing] the voice with its own needle" (Qasmiyeh 2020), accepting voices as preowned, and dialectically interacting with the researcher's own imagination in the intimate and fragmentary process of knowledge production can redress some of the pitfalls of misrepresentation that stem from unequal dynamics.

Engaging in continuous reflexivity on our positionality and on how, in the process of familiarizing ourselves with the stories of participants, we may be "othering" them (Espinoza 2020) enables us to renegotiate the terms of these daily relationships together, building an ethical practice that strengthens mutual rapport. This, in turn, allows us to recognize the multiple, nuanced ways that voice and agency are exercised beyond the confines of "visibility" (Haile 2020). We must keep evaluating engagement processes and expectations throughout the research process, making explicit that academia is but one way to make marginalized groups' struggles known. Far from being mere sources of "data," the voices of marginalized persons, including those we research with, should also be recognized as providing analysis and producing knowledge that is significant in its own right (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2020: 12–13). Finally, we have to consider how to ethically disengage from the field and the research–participant relationships that have been produced there, being part and parcel of fieldwork's *longue durée*, without further enhancing patterns of dependency and structural inequality.

As Hammersley and Atkinson (2007: x) point out, the potential for qualitative research to give voice to the systemically marginalized is understood as an "intrinsic political and ethical value." Following this, it is urgent to rethink concrete forms of agency production beyond the mere knowledge production interests of academia. In other words, we do not only propose that those who are traditionally "othered"—including our research participants—are a main source of our studies and publications. We do not only strive for the voices that are contstantly silenced to become protagonists and tell their own stories in the pages of our writings. We expect that the relationships we generate with participants, and the co-construction of knowledge that arises, allow us to collaborate even minimally in the daily lives of those who agreed to participate in our qualitative enquiries. Furthermore, we firmly support that our role as researchers in contexts of migration must be politically committed to our participants and the spaces in which they are involved.

Reflecting on our efforts so far to make this kind of difference, we have collectively identified some positive examples. Ioanna recalled how her own position as participant-observant-witness gradually shifted to that of cultural and linguistic mediator, assisting refugees in their interactions with state institutions, NGOs, IOs, and self-organized projects, further using her citizen privilege to facilitate access to services and rights. This allowed her to observe closely the parallel system of living in the city as a person no longer on the move, and to map out the multiple actors that interact in a refugee's life. Her positionality as an anthropologist, involved in all these different fields simultaneously, enabled her to assist refugees by connecting them with

relevant nongovernmental services and actors. Permitting herself to also be politically active helped her to gradually overcome her researcher "imposter syndrome" by taking part in migrant struggles and advocating for rights as an engaged response to the injustice she observed.

For Natalie, the part of her research conducted in the UK was a collaboration with a migrant domestic worker NGO, and therefore formed the basis for further policy work in support of specific changes to the visa and other rights of domestic workers. During the course of the lockdown she became a trustee for the NGO, allowing her to find a formal way to continue this work, and making her acutely aware of how the pandemic heightened an already very challenging situation for these workers.

We remain conscious that there may be limitations on the extent of active ongoing involvement for researchers conducting fieldwork in a country where they are not citizens, and that degrees of engagement may also be circumscribed by the nature of a discipline. We also recognize that it is important not to overpromise to research participants or offer support that is beyond our skills or expertise, all the while allowing ourselves to use the knowledge we gather in the field, be it legal, linguistic, cultural, or positional, to assist them in their everyday struggles.

This interweaving of reflexive observations offers a collective "gaze from within" the research process of migration, on the effects that the pandemic has had on our interlocutors, our research fields, our positionalities as researchers, and possibly on academia as whole. Our experience of researching a field in constant and increasing crisis ultimately highlights the need to acknowledge our own vulnerabilities and agency within the boundaries of our ethical commitments, which offer a protective framework in this messy process, allowing for more in-depth, engaged research and more insight into our participants' own dilemmas and agentive strategies.

Conclusion: Toward an Ethics of Dis/Engagement

While most contemporary voices in academia point toward less exceptionalist, more egalitarian and engaged approaches to conducting research, some have recently blamed "indigenist, racialist, and 'decolonial ideologies'" for acts of extreme violence, alluding toward a return to academic authoritarianism (Lentin et al. 2020). This is why we consider the patchwork ethnography approach referenced above to be of value. While the importance of theorizing that takes place in the domestic space is often erased (Ahmed 2006), it was precisely this academic labor done "at home" during the pandemic that allowed for these conversations to take place. Patchwork ethnography stresses the importance of recombining "home" and "field" under the pandemic; we argue for a further necessary recombination of the field as a space of study and of social engagement. It also encourages ethnographic processes designed around methods that resist fixity, holism, and certainty. Our experience in the field of migration has showed us that even prior to COVID-19, contemporary social reality was rarely fixed, "whole," and certain due to the social context itself being fluid and fragmentary, meaning that research can be "fragmented" even when we are present in the field for long periods of time, demanding flexible and adaptable methodologies.

In this piece, we have considered the ethical dimensions underpinning engaging and disengaging from the field, especially when research is heavily reliant on human interactions. We placed reflexive emphasis on "how" and "when" we engage but also disengage from fieldwork, being mindful of the relations that have been created there. Methodological innovations, some of which are discussed by our colleagues in this issue, attempt to conceptualize research as working with rather than against the gaps and constraints that characterize knowledge production. We advocate for working with rather than against the social connections, ethical and

political dimensions, and crises, health or otherwise, that affect our participants and ourselves in multiple ways. For some, an ethnographer's primary goal is to "go out to confront the radically unknown" and render it understandable (Howell 2017: 18). We see this process as being intimately connected to unpacking what remains opaque in our own academic contexts, the place "we go out from"—making it transparent enough that we can transform it. As researchers, we are not mere "translators" of otherness. We are entangled in social and historical processes that shape our fields, which we simultaneously define through our presence. The kind of world we imagine after the pandemic, academic or other, is ultimately tied up with continuing the reflections and repositionings that materialized during it, often drawing us back to how we experience and envision the ethics of our research dis/engagement.

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