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Reflections on ethics, care and online data collection during the pandemic: Researching the impacts of COVID-19 on migrants in Latin America

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Abstract

While most borders in Latin America were closed during the COVID-19 pandemic, the dynamics of mobility and immobility in the region did not stop. In this extreme context, there was a growing need to understand how the pandemic impacted migrant and refugee populations, as well as the long-lasting effects of measures implemented to mitigate its effects. With many migrants facing exacerbated conditions of vulnerability and with new working modalities affecting all members of society, especially those who were key respondents to protect migrants in the first year of the pandemic, key ethical questions emerged about how, when and where, should research be conducted. This paper reflects on the ethical challenges we faced – such as interviewees' research fatigue, negotiation of access, researcher's positionality and the strategies to create rapport – and the methodological decisions we made in the context of a regional project (CAMINAR) that conducted online interviews with governmental and non-governmental actors working with migrants between June and August 2020.

Keywords: *Research ethics; online interviews; COVID-19; migration; Latin America*

Introduction

There is a before and after the pandemic for almost everything, including qualitative research. In April 2020, a group of researchers on migration in Latin America met online to try to make sense of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as to discuss the early impacts it was having on migrant and refugee populations across the region. Besides knowing each other through previous research projects and networks, we shared an interest to further understand how the health, economic and social crisis prompted by COVID-19 were not only exacerbating pre-existent structural vulnerabilities in Latin America, but it was also creating new ones. From that dialogue, the research group Comparative Analysis on Migration and Mobility in the Americas (CAMINAR) was born⁵ (see Vera Espinoza et al., 2021; Zapata et al., 2022).

We are a group of female researchers who come from different countries, most of us (nine out of the twelve current researchers) are from Latin America, and, at the time of the data collection, ten of us were living in the region, while two were living in European countries.

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⁵ CAMINAR is a multidisciplinary research group formed in March 2020 in response to concerns about the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on mobile populations in the Americas. See www.caminaramericas.org

We are researchers at different career stages, including early and mid-career scholars, as well as colleagues well consolidated in the field⁶.

We immediately started to discuss key questions we wanted to explore and the comparative methodologies we were going to use (see Zapata, Vera Espinoza and Gandini, 2022). Our research aim was to analyse how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted mobility dynamics in Latin America and the experiences and wellbeing of migrant, refugee and displaced population, as well as the extent to which this population was included (or not) in the institutional and political measures adopted by states and non-state actors to face the consequences of the health crisis. Our objective was to conduct this analysis through an interdisciplinary and comparative approach that included seven countries in the region: Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, Peru and Uruguay. The selection reflected the countries where we were either based or we had expertise on. At the same time, these countries shared some commonalities such as structural inequalities; recent transformations in their migration dynamics, and undergoing changes in their migration legal framework (see Vera Espinoza et al., 2021; Zapata, Vera Espinoza and Gandini, 2022). During our discussion about the adoption of online research methods and the definition of our study population, we were constantly reflecting on research ethics in a hyper-complex situation (Wa-Mbaleka and Costa, 2020), marked by lockdown measures and imposed closed borders, international and internal ones.

Across the world, researchers found online methodologies as one of the ways to conduct data collection when it was not possible to be physically on the field (Lupton, 2020). The specific circumstances during the pandemic, have also turned out to be an opportunity to reassess the “exclusionary mechanisms and power differentials that sustain” fieldwork-based research (Rudling, 2021). These exclusionary mechanisms and power differentials, as we show in this article, did not limit to the places where research was conducted, but also to who was able to participate in the study, and who was excluded, as access to the research was limited to those with the digital means to take part of the process, either as researchers or as informants.

Online methodologies are not new, but their use has been intensified in the context of the pandemic (Nind, Coverdale, and Meckin, 2021). While in this paper we only briefly discuss online interviews, there is a wide range of online methods to consider, from the already well-established online surveys, to increasing online ethnographies and social media research (Gutiérrez, 2022; Nind et al., 2021). As the use of these methods grows, the discussion of the related ethical challenges has also increased (Eynon & Schroeder, 2017; Sugiura, Wiles & Pope, 2017).

While embracing online methodologies, we also reflected on the specific ethical challenges that emerged in relation to remote data collection during the pandemic, particularly in the field of migration studies. Who did we contact and how did we conduct interviews? What voices were excluded? What are the ethics of conducting research on migration when migrants’ exclusionary experiences have been exacerbated due to the pandemic? Some of

⁶ We experienced different levels of job (in)security, some of us enjoying permanent positions, while others were (and are) unemployed or in short term precarious contracts. Despite our differences, we did not establish a hierarchical structure. The group does not have a ‘team leader’, we started working without funding, and all the decisions have been taken by consensus through conversations held through lengthy Zoom meetings. We divided tasks through specific subgroups, depending on each person availability at specific times (e.g. one group prepared the initial draft of the instrument of data collection, while the other group started to work on ethics applications). We all participated in the research design, data collection and analysis, and we wrote collectively, with multiple hands knitting a single manuscript.



these questions emerged early on as we applied for ethical approval in two of the institutions where some colleagues are based⁷; other questions took further relevance once the data collection started.

Through this reflection, the paper argues that the extreme context of the pandemic reinforced some ethical challenges while also generating new opportunities of data collection, some of which contributed to develop an ethics of care with ourselves and our participants (Ahmed, 2014; Reich, 2021). We develop this argument by going through some of the key ethical questions we faced and the decisions we made during the research process, from who could be interviewed, when and in which ways, to then discuss shifting positionalities in the context of COVID-19.

Ethical decisions: including (and excluding) voices in online research

Our first ethical concern raised questions around who would take part in the study and how to access and recruit participants. In April 2020, we had already reported increasing gaps between host societies and migrant populations in the seven countries included in the study (Bengochea et al., 2022; Zapata and Prieto, 2020), through an initial assessment of secondary data, which included decrees and institutional measures enacted by states to respond to the effects of the pandemic, as well as the rapid scope of both academic and grey literature.

Some migrants and refugees were experiencing exacerbated socio-economic vulnerabilities, job losses, precarious living conditions and, in some cases, forced immobility, while others were trying to return to their countries of origin or move somewhere else and were trapped on different sides of the border (Vera Espinoza, Zapata and Gandini, 2020; Zamora, Palla and Blouin, 2022). Although including the voices of migrants about their own experiences during the pandemic was relevant to understanding the impacts of COVID-19, as a team, we decided that in the first months of the pandemic, interviewing migrant and refugee populations may have imposed another pressure on their already precarious situation. However, this decision carried the risk of leaving out migrant and refugee voices. We attempted to mitigate this risk by including migrant-led organisations in the sample of interviewees, as they are key actors in assistance provision and advocacy on migration. However, we have also reflected on how migrants are partially represented by these organisations and that not all migrant-groups were included. As migrants themselves, these groups are also diverse, with different political inclinations, with diverse interests and distinctive strategies. We strived to include a range of groups, within the limitations of our small purposive sample, which allowed us to appreciate some of these differences.

Based on these reflections, we decided to address our research questions by conducting online interviews (James and Busher, 2016), primarily with three distinct groups of key informants that directly or indirectly assist migrant and refugee populations in each country, working in a capital city or in one or more border cities: i. representatives of national and local governments, ii. International Organisations (IOs), such as OIM and UNHCR iii. Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), including local, national and international CSOs, both faith and no-faith base groups, as well as migrant-led organisations. In total, we conducted more than seventy interviews across the seven countries, between June and August 2020.

⁷ The research received approval by the Ethics Committees of Queen Mary University of London (QMERC2020/27) and the Federal University of Minas Gerais (CAAE: 34657020.1.0000.5149).

Access to participants and recruitment of interviewees was facilitated by the well-established networks that the research team had previously developed through extensive fieldwork across the region, as all team members have consolidated experience on interdisciplinary research around the political, social and economic dimensions of migration and displacement in Latin America (see for instance Fernández de la Reguera, 2022; Gandini et al., 2019; Vera Espinoza, 2018). The knowledge of the field and the range of contacts and expertise held within the research group guaranteed the success of the participants' recruitment for the online interviews. However, the recruitment was not free of challenges and ethical concerns, as we explore below.

We were cognisant that limiting our research to a selective group of informants, many of them not migrants themselves, such as those in IOs and CSOs, would have an impact on the study. On the one hand, key informants' perspectives are marked by their own institutional agenda. On the other, while most of the participants work closely with the migrant population, there are limits to what extent we can understand migrants' experiences and needs without their own voices. We were also unable to compare the narratives of our informants with our in-situ participant observation. There are also power differentials between our interviewees. While some of them had home offices (equipment and internet access) quickly set up or facilitated by their institution, other participants had no internet connectivity guaranteed, and they had to assume the cost of digital access.

Despite these limitations, the sample of participants, that purposively selected those actors working directly with migrant population, allowed us to reach other key actors within migration processes, providing insights both into the changing assemblage of actors and the complexity in the provision of services and assistance to migrant populations in the region (Vera Espinoza et al., 2021; Zapata et al., 2022). For example, in the case of Mexico, we were also able to interview an activist who does not necessarily belong to any organisation and who spontaneously began to seek and deliver supplies for migrants in her neighbourhood and eventually became a key player at the local level, especially at the peak of the pandemic. We were also able to interview the same organisations working in all seven countries, mainly IOs, which also contributed to the comparative analysis that guided the study. Indeed, much of the richness of the research is its comparative nature, since we applied the same instrument of data collection and analysis matrix across the seven countries included in the study.

Research environment: temporality, flexibility and care in the virtual space

A second concern was that while many of these participants responded to our interview requests as part of their institutional positions, they personally were also experiencing the impacts of the pandemic. Most of the people we interviewed were working from home juggling their jobs, care responsibilities, health concerns, and other pressures while they also negotiated privacy, internet, technological tools and space with other family members or other kin relationships (see Nair et al., 2021). In this context, the concerns were not only related to the change from offline to online data collection, but instead, we were interviewing people in a context of constant changes and accumulated stress due to breaking down the barriers between work, family and care, both for ourselves and our informants.

The temporality of the study, conducted during the first six months of the pandemic, facilitated a different relationship with informants, embedded in notions of care that accounted for this online mode of data collection. On the one hand, our research was



reflective of the inherent power imbalances between researcher and participants (Anumol, 2021), and how these hierarchies of power could be amplified in the context of the health crisis. On the other hand, but also inter-related, the research was taking place in a context where care practices at home rendered visible and impacted on labour activities and family dynamics. Our participants were experiencing - in different ways - the impacts of the health crisis. As a representative of an IO in Chile told us: “the crisis has tested our lives and we are still learning. We are all so tired, putting different aspects of our lives to the limit. Mine, yours, the staff that works with me, the entire world, particularly migrants and refugees”.

Therefore, online interviews during the pandemic context implied new ethical questions. For example, was it possible to schedule an interview during non-working hours? or how can privacy be ensured in the context of online interviews and lockdown? Due to the difficulty of reconciling work and private life in the middle of the pandemic, where our homes were our offices, all the questions above represented challenges that required a specific response.

As a research team, we adopted a ‘flexible approach’: a format of organising and conducting interviews that was accommodating to participants’ circumstances and needs, particularly in relation to the time of the interviews, the platform to be used and understanding of the several requests to reschedule. We also increased the number of platforms used for the interviews, with Zoom, Teams, Skype and in a few cases Whatsapp, as the participants’ preferred platforms⁸. This flexibility was also needed to ensure privacy and confidentiality during the interview process. While we could not fully know if family members or other people were present in the interviewees’ environment, participants arranged interviews during times of the day that were most convenient for them: sometimes early morning or late afternoon, or any other times when they had lower caregiving and household responsibilities. When it was evident that children or other family members appeared and/or interrupted the interview, we would pause the interview until the participant let us know they were ready to engage again or reschedule if needed.

This flexible online strategy, also called “methodology of closeness” (Palla, 2021), has also been adopted and elaborated in other studies throughout the pandemic, and is characterised for its commitment to creating virtual dialogue spaces that are closer and more careful to the needs and circumstances of each of the people interviewed. The ‘closeness’ in our approach did not mean empty proximity. Instead, as Reich (2021: 578) has argued, it called for more self-reflection, resulting “in a methodological obligation to embrace an ethic of care”, aware of the harm research can cause on participants and researchers themselves. This flexible approach, rooted on notions of care, was relevant to deal with some of the personal pressures our participants were facing (Madziva and Chinouya, 2022), as well as our own, as we also experienced blurred work-family life, with the earlier confinement eroding reasonable work schedules and increasing mental health struggles (Wa-Mbaleka and Costa, 2020). Drawing on contributions from feminist methodologies (Fonow & Cook, 2005), this approach acknowledges how the personal experience of both the researcher and the interviewee are part of the investigative research process and should be understood from a critical perspective along the study.

⁸ Measures were taken to ensure password protected links to join the interviews. Interviews were audio recorded, after informed consent was obtained from the interviewee. The audio files were transcribed and anonymised, before the analysis was conducted through a common matrix.

‘Care’ in this context, is understood as a form of intimate connection expressed in daily gestures, strategies and practices that as Caduff (2019: 789) says “bring comfort into something that’s uncomfortable, to make bearable what’s unbearable”. This relational understanding of care also recognises that care is a complex practice, which includes multiple purposes, such as a functional role and an expression of solidarity. Our interview requests were functional as they were aimed for the purposes of completing a research project, and within that context we established practices of care through our flexible approach described above. But we also established online interviews as spaces of closeness marked by expressions of care and solidarity during and after the interview, as there was genuine concern about how the person on the other side of the screen was facing and coping with the pandemic.

We therefore emphasised the need to create *rapport* with the people interviewed, particularly when the interviewee and the researchers were living under similar restrictive COVID-19 measures (even if the pandemic affected people in different ways). This way of connecting with the participant almost automatically broke some tacit barriers between interviewee and interviewer, recognizing each other in a moment of extreme uncertainty.

This specific context facilitated each initial conversation, almost as an icebreaker, mutually checking how the other person was doing (and coping). We observed how initial conversations around some common experiences, such as care work or being far from our respective families, with greater or lesser economic possibility, allowed in some cases a greater rapport and emotional connection (Beneduce, 2010). This empathy required the interviewer an additional ability to manage their own emotional wellbeing at a time that did not allow either detachment from the field, or an in-depth discussion of the accumulated tensions created by the forced quarantine measures. These small moments of care displayed during and after the interview process became a strategy to “endure precarious worlds” (Hobart & Kneese, 2020: 2) as part of the relational exchange created through the interview.

To certain extent, both the virtual space and the shared conditions of pandemic restrictions allowed a space of more ‘horizontality’ that diluted certain power dynamics between the researcher and key informants. For instance, the absence of the geographical material space for interviews – not being seated in the same room, in an office space - also meant the absence of certain power dynamics related to the researcher’s outsider positionality when physically present in institutionalised settings.

Research during the pandemic: participant’s fatigue and wellbeing

Due to the emergency of the pandemic, many institutions and their personnel had to change their activities and plans entirely and quickly, from development support projects to humanitarian aid actions. This has demonstrated the high adaptability and commitment of the organisations and their staff (see Nair et al, 2021). Still, at the same time, doubts emerged regarding the vocation and professional experience they had and the fate of previous projects, which, although necessary, appeared of lesser relevance in the light of the COVID-19 and the associated emergency needs.

While we tend to assume that interviewing actors within these organisations (national and local government, IOs, and CSOs) is part of either the remit of their role or consistent with their advocacy mission, we have not yet explored in detail the impact of research fatigue that may emerge in relation to multiple interview requests or related to the power imbalances



within these actors. While some participants at the national government can more easily decide to accept or not an interview request, or to impose several gatekeepers to get to them, others in CSOs or migrant-led groups, were providing extra time that in some cases was not properly recognised or remunerated. For instance, some interviewees in Mexico and Chile told us that they had to set up an extra fixed time slot in their weekly calendar to give interviews (as IOs), which generated an unpaid overload.

Elsewhere, one of the authors has previously reflected on the research fatigue among Palestinian refugees interviewed in Chile and Brazil as part of a project on refugee resettlement (Vera Espinoza, 2020). In that case, some participants declined to participate in the study, as they claimed that the constant requests from academics and journalists translated in an extra pressure for them to retell their stories. At the same time, they did not perceive any benefit or return from the exposure of their intimate experiences of displacement. While these issues are increasingly reflected on by social scientists researching on migrants' and refugees' experiences (see Clark-Kazak, 2017; IASFM, 2018), it has been less explored in relation to those individuals working on the governance of migration or in assistance provision.

As part of this and other studies, in which we explored the role of Civil Society Organisations and other actors during the pandemic (see Nair et al., 2021; Prieto Rosas et al., 2021; Palla, Blouin and Zamora, 2022), it became clear that the many challenges and changes in service provision during COVID-19 has affected the mental health and wellbeing of staff and volunteers (Palla et al., 2021), as the increasing demands and lack of fixed working hours created a perception of "never-ending work" (Nair et al., 2021: 30). The request to participate in our research project may have added to those existing pressures. Only a few participants declined to take part in the study, some feeling overwhelmed by the increasing needs of the migrant and refugee population they work with.

On the other hand, the participants that decided to take part, appreciated the interview as a space of reflection at that particular time. During and after the interview, some participants welcomed the interview as a space to reflect and go through some of the institutional changes they were experiencing in their modes of working, their resources allocation, and the type of services they were providing. For example, the director of an NGO in Mexico told us: "I appreciate the opportunity to explain the different actions that we have carried out in the past weeks as an immediate response to provide support to migrants, because we have had to completely change our work strategy, and this exercise allows me to organise and explain what we have done".

Knowledge production during the pandemic

The use of online methodologies during the first months of the pandemic also raised wider questions about knowledge production in the field of migration. Two years after the study took place, we have identified the value of information provided at that specific moment and its lasting effects. From the beginning, there was a commitment to critically discuss and contrast the data, without forcing immediate conclusions. Data collected through the interviews was analysed in dialogue with data collected through other forms of secondary analysis for data methods, such as the analysis of changes in countries' legal instruments and

administrative acts⁹, monitoring of press releases, and observation in openly available social media channels¹⁰.

Another ethical concern was related to knowledge production. In a context of rapid changing scenarios, we were given off-the-record information or information that lacked support from other primary sources. Also, some of the actors interviewed were simultaneously generating their own data and improving their strategies to systematise it. For example, in Chile, Peru and Mexico some organisations were developing health protocols to provide care and assistance to the migrant population at the time of the interview. In some of these cases, we also became useful actors disseminating their information and protocols, as per request of our interviewees. To some extent, collaboration between academia and CSOs, among other interviewees, strengthened during this period since we shared information or organised webinars to jointly discuss findings.

In this context, the research found an advocacy and ‘militant’ connotation (Boni, Koenler, Rossi, 2020), which contributed to breaking the silence and isolation that we were all facing during the first months of quarantine. Our research shed light on concerning issues such as the challenges faced by migrants and refugees, as well as testimonies of human rights violations and information about the different forms of aid, both institutional ones and those from grassroots groups. Research findings were disseminated through working papers¹¹, published articles and also presented at cross-regional webinars and international conferences¹². In Peru, the data was also used for the elaboration of the Report on the impact of COVID-19 on the human rights of migrants issued by Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants¹³, and data collected across all seven countries was shared with different with different local and international organisations local and international organisations in the field of migration¹⁴.

Conclusion: ethical challenges and opportunities during pandemic times

It has been widely suggested that the COVID-19 pandemic has both exacerbated and made visible wider structural inequalities as well as the vulnerabilities of migrant and refugee populations. Through this reflection paper, we discuss what this context meant for the decisions we took through this study, both in relation to the use of online interviews and who was included and excluded from the interviews, why and with what consequences. We also reflected on how the pandemic has also affected our interviewees, both on their jobs and personally, and what provisions we took to make our approach flexible to participants’ needs, based on notions of care and closeness.

Embracing online methodologies has been key to understanding the effects of the pandemic on mobile people across Latin America. The extreme context of the public health crises

⁹ We reviewed over forty legal instruments that rule migration in the country-case studies including constitutions, laws, decrees, and administrative acts.

¹⁰ These included social media of the organisations and groups which representatives we interviewed and other sites of interest to migrants and refugee population.

¹¹ Working papers can be accessed here <https://en.caminaramericas.org/documentos>

¹² For example: LASA Conference 2021 and 2022 <https://sections.lasaweb.org/sections/international-migrations/?pg=5>

¹³ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/calls-for-input/report-impact-covid-19-human-rights-migrants>

¹⁴ CAMINAR researchers were invited to present evidence based on our research on the impacts of the pandemic on migrant and refugee population to the Committee on Migration Issues (CAM) of the Organization of American States (OAS), in July 2021.



imposed specific ethical challenges, while also creating opportunities within research design and processes of data collection. For instance, it allowed us to explore the role and perceptions of other important actors within migration management, such as state and non-state actors, CSOs, IOs and grassroots activists, including migrant-led organisations. While we recognise the limitations of including only few and limited number of migrant voices, we also sustain that the diversity of experiences gathered through the approach discussed here allowed the study to better understand the assemblage of migration actors responding to the emergency needs, and the changes to their plans, activities, and resource allocation in the context of the pandemic.

Our work encouraged a research environment based on practices of care with our informants and with ourselves, through a hyper-flexible approach, accommodating to participants' needs of time, availability, connectivity and personal life in time of confinement. At the same time, we discussed how the recognition of similarities, despite our differences and specific circumstances, in the context of the health crisis, allowed us to establish practices of care that put attention to power inequalities inherent both to the research process and to the pandemic. We engaged, then, in developing a 'methodology of closeness', as we learnt other ways of interviewing and generating rapport in contexts that particularly affected the wellbeing of both the interviewee and the interviewer.

The paper contributes then to reflect on the conditions and practices that emerge from the use of online interviews in a moment of global crisis, such as the pandemic, in which both researcher and interviewee were facing contexts of extreme uncertainty. While the virtual space brought specific challenges, such as limiting the interview to participants with digital access, it also showed the possibilities of the online space to generate rapport and care in such contexts of crisis. The context of the pandemic not only determined our decision of using online interviews, but also prompted other ethical questions that guided our decisions in the research and our approach to participants. While many of these reflections are already present in the considerations we all take as part of the institutional process of research ethics, they take new meaning in such extreme context, where the concerns go beyond no harm, to caring for the wellbeing and the situated experience of the human on the other side of the screen.

The study reviewed here also invites us to think about the afterlife of these online research processes. On the one hand, online methodologies may reinforce some power differentials. On the other hand, it may create some spaces of care and closeness. Online methodologies that were timidly implemented in social sciences and on migration research, have consolidated their use during the pandemic and they are here to stay. Some of the ethical challenges, as well as the opportunities that emerged in this context may also stay, even after the pandemic.

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