PEOPLE AND PLACES

Adapting to Crisis

Migration Research During the COVID-19 Pandemic

*Aydan Greatrick, Jumana Al-Waeli, Hannah Sender,
Susanna Corona Maioli, Jin L. Li, and Ellen Goodwin*

■ **ABSTRACT:** This article draws on our experiences of carrying out PhD research on migration during the COVID-19 pandemic. We are all involved with the University College London Migration Research Unit (MRU), and our PhD research explores the lived experiences of migrants and people affected by migration. This is the first of two articles in this issue of *Migration and Society* addressing the implications of COVID-19 on migration research from the perspective of postgraduate researchers. In this article, we firstly reflect on how "crises," including the COVID-19 pandemic, inevitably shape contexts of migration research. We then share how COVID-19 has shaped our relationship to "the field" and our formal research institutions. Finally, we share how we have adapted our methodologies in response to COVID-19 and, considering the complex ethical and practical challenges posed by this context, reflect on what it means to make methodological "adaptations" in times of overlapping crises.

■ **KEYWORDS:** COVID-19, crisis, doctoral research, ethics, fieldwork, migration research

PhD students' research projects and personal lives have been affected by COVID-19, as have other researchers' (Corbera et al. 2020). COVID-19 restrictions have also created new dynamics between PhD researchers and potential participants. Whereas we had previously imagined having to deal with uncertainty and change in our fieldwork, we had not imagined becoming mutually—though differently—affected by the same global pandemic. This article focuses on the specific, but not unique, experiences of PhD researchers studying migration as they plan, replan, and conduct fieldwork. We draw on our own experiences of dealing with the uncertainty that arose because of the pandemic, but that intersected with other political and social conditions that shape the lives of our research participants, and our lives too. Drawing on methodological literature on migration, and its emphasis on dealing with uncertainty, we consider how an intensified uncertainty has impacted our research as UK-based PhD candidates. We reflect on how we have navigated fieldwork in times of social distancing and lockdowns, the methodological adaptations we have made, and the ethical, social, and political dilemmas that we considered through our encounters with participants and institutions.

In March 2020, following in the footsteps of other countries around the world, the UK government announced a national lockdown in response to the outbreak of COVID-19. PhD students in the middle of fieldwork, or preparing to start fieldwork, were told by their universities not to travel and that fieldwork ought to be suspended. PhD students from the UCL Migration Research Unit came together to support one another in this context, leading some of us to develop the two articles presented in this issue. This is the first article, which focuses on the methodological considerations and adaptations that were made by those of us carrying out fieldwork during the pandemic. The second article complements this by reflecting on the ethical dilemmas of (dis)engaging from the field during times of crisis, especially for those who had finished fieldwork and were writing up (Manoussaki-Adamopoulou *et al.*, 2022). Both articles draw on the authors' personal reflections and collective conversations from across the Migration Research Unit. In this article, we raise ethical issues and pose further critical questions about our position as researchers at a university in the Global North, and how we can respond to multiple and intersecting "crises" in future research.

Methods for Migration Research in Times of "Crisis"?

Perceptions of migration as both a cause and symptom of "crisis" are instrumental to the wider politicization of migration, including in response to the climate crisis (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2019: S47; Kothari 2014) and the so-called European "refugee crisis" (Castelli and Zamponi 2020; Voltolini et al. 2020). With the arrival of the COVID-19 crisis, measures to prevent the spread of the virus inevitably became entangled with efforts to limit human mobility, including the closing of borders and national-level lockdowns. These responses coincided with existing social and political crises that trap, marginalize, and demonize migrants, refugees, and asylum claimants, compounding the challenges faced by our research participants. For example, political backlash against refugees and migrants as perceived vectors of disease in Greece and Lebanon contributed to an increasingly xenophobic environment, leading to abuse and hostility. In Germany, LGBTQI+ asylum claimants found themselves increasingly stuck in accommodation where they had to hide their sexuality for fear of being harassed. In the UK, the challenges faced by Syrian refugee families of accessing schooling while stuck at home were compounded by language barriers and the (un)availability of appropriate technical equipment. Finally, COVID-19-related border enforcements in the US dramatically altered the context of reception for those traveling from Central America, generating new forms of precariousness for those living in shelters in Mexico.

In each of the different contexts covered by our individual PhD research, it became essential to recognize how the effects of COVID-19 intersected with other supposedly exceptional "crises." Scholarship that addresses migration and "crisis" frequently notes how narratives of "crisis" overlap with structural forces that push, pull, trap, and release the movement of people in complex and acute ways (Garelli and Tazzioli 2021). A general discourse of migration "crisis" or "panic" pervades the politics of migration, underpinning policy decisions geared toward deterring or excluding migrants from arriving in transit and host countries (Missbach and Phillips 2020). In response to narratives of "crisis," we also see the emergence of competing solidarities in contexts of migration that resist processes of deportation, prevention, criminalization, and securitization (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Berg 2018). Given this, it becomes helpful for migration scholars to develop an analysis of and a methodological approach to researching migration that attends to these multiple, overlapping, and intersecting processes and the ways that they differently shape experiences of and responses to human mobility.

Prior to the arrival of COVID-19, we had been thinking about how we could account for and respond to these multiple "crises" in our own research, drawing on existing migration scholarship that encouraged us to anticipate the unpredictable situations that emerge in field settings shaped by precarity, inequality, and securitization. We were also mindful of how our own work could and should address perceptions of "crisis" in contexts of migration, encouraging us to adopt reflexive and adaptive methods. This training meant that we were well equipped to respond to potential "crises" in our own research, including the unexpected arrival of the global COVID-19 pandemic, by drawing on existing methods focused on adaptability and flux.

Some of these methods include patchwork ethnography (Günel et al. 2020), designed around multiple, short-term field visits that enable researchers to capture changing dynamics and conduct research in a way that responds to the barriers many face in carrying out more traditional "long-term" ethnography. When studying contexts of migration, this can be helpful in addressing the difficulty of accessing certain sites, including when mobility may be restricted or where multiple visits help to make sense of changes over time. Likewise, rapid ethnography enables researchers to collect rigorous data in situations where a more long-term commitment to physical fieldwork is not possible (Vindrola-Padros and Johnson 2020). Place-based research, which focuses on a specific town, city, or region, rather than cohort-based research, which focuses on a specific group of participants, can also be helpful in researching contexts of flux and rupture. These methods allow researchers to flexibly respond to changing dynamics and insights in real time and in specific and clearly defined geographic contexts (Charmaz 2006). Moving data collection online has also been important during COVID-19, encouraging many of us to engage with methods of online ethnography. These have broad applications to the study of migration, especially considering the role that the internet and social media are seen to play in shaping migrant networks, decisions, and mobilities (Leurs and Smets 2018). In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, such methods became invaluable given the frequent impossibility of in-person research. They also highlight the limitations of more traditional methods that take for granted the physical mobility of the researcher and of the research process.

To an extent, such adaptations are a core part of social research. Ethnographers must frequently respond to contingencies and adapt methods in the field (Spindler 2012). In our own experience of modifying fieldwork plans during the COVID-19 crisis, such considerations inevitably intersected with the very real overlapping consequences of multiple "crises" and the ways in which they were affecting our potential research participants. Susanna, even before the pandemic, had been required to make changes to her research plan as people's movement from Central America to the US changed due to newly applied border enforcements in southern Mexico. Enforcement meant that there would be potentially fewer migrants visiting the shelter where she had intended to conduct her research. Because of this, Susanna extended her fieldwork site to three different shelters, recognizing that one site would no longer be enough to account for the specific migratory processes under investigation (following Marcus 1999). Susanna's experience echoes many of the adaptations and changes that we all had to make when planning our field research, even prior to COVID-19. It has been helpful for us to consider our own adaptations to "crisis" not as something exceptional, but as part of the course of responding to and accounting for the multiple, overlapping "crises" that shape contemporary contexts of migration.

(Dis)Connected from the Field

Despite this, the introduction of COVID-19 restrictions created a new dynamic between us as PhD researchers and our potential and actual research participants. The pandemic worsened

many migrants' pre-pandemic situations and weakened potential connections between PhD researchers and participants, undermining our ability to build trust, for example, because of social (and physical) distancing in and from different field sites. The pandemic also forced us to ask whether we could or should remain "researchers" in light of the additional challenges now facing our participants. These moral and ethical considerations were also weighed against a sense of urgency around the need to finish fieldwork, adapt to the circumstances, and complete a thesis. Our experiences speak to the ways in which the doing of research actively cuts across multiple practical, ethical, and professional considerations, which cannot be easily separated.

For Susanna, COVID-19 restrictions meant that she had to delay her fieldwork in three different migrant shelters in Mexico. However, by first acting as a volunteer in these shelters, Susanna was able to justify spending time building trusting relationships with migrant children and support staff before approaching them as potential participants. This emphasizes the importance of prior familiarity with the field site, even if it means first accessing the field without active research intentions. Likewise, Ioanna Manoussaki-Adamopoulou's research in Greece became increasingly concerned with the continuous struggle for basic necessities and rights that displaced people are faced with. COVID-19 intersected with already precarious systems of support. Island refugee camps became closed facilities in the name of public health "protections," in turn curbing movement, undermining livelihoods and survival strategies, and thus generating further crises of hunger, destitution, and sanitation. Such acute crises raise questions about how research can best respond, in this case leading Ioanna to increasingly dedicate her time to solidarity actions, activism, and frontline assistance over and above observational research. This experience of adapting to crises meant that Ioanna became differently and uncertainly positioned in relation to research subjects and the field more broadly, reflecting extensive scholarship on researcher positionality and the uncertainty of researcher performances (Rose 1997; Wagner 2018).

Acknowledging and prioritizing caring relationships as part of research has been further prompted by the pandemic. The complex melding of roles between researcher and care provider, friend and activist shows how crises can change both research and researcher alike, prompting affective consequences that challenge methods of "objectivity" and distance. While these reflections are not new, health-related restrictions specific to the pandemic inhibited in-person encounters more broadly. This raised important questions about whether it is possible to develop caring relationships without being physically present, and how to make sure that research works for participants when researchers are at a distance. Making these judgments, often from situations of lockdown, meant being simultaneously connected with and disconnected from participants and research sites.

These considerations were also shaped by our own individual circumstances, as well as the policies and priorities of various funders, university departments, and ethics committees. Each of us brings different experiences and forms of knowledge, based, inter alia, on language, race, religion, gender, and sexuality. As PhD students, we experience different forms of precariousness that affect our capacity and ability to "adapt" to change. One key issue addressed by groups like Pandemic PGRs,[1] and reflected in our own experiences, relates to the heightened insecurity that some of us faced because of an inability to secure funding extensions (if we were funded), or due to not receiving any formal support to deal with suspended research if self-funded. Initial interactions with the UCL Research Ethics Committee and funders also meant negotiating with the demands of neoliberal institutions that encouraged us to "adapt" our research so that we might be able to complete our theses within existing time frames and funding restrictions. This focus on adaptation as a "skill" leads to a form of comparison with other PhD students that will inevitably disadvantage those who face certain challenges, such as having to work on their

PhDs from the same space in which they are homeschooling children. This focus on "adaption" also has the effect of relegating important questions about how we can practically and ethically engage with the field and our research participants in light of COVID-19. This highlights the relative precarity of research as a process, where "getting the thesis done," including within set (funded) time frames, is seen to take priority over other considerations.

Adaptations to Methods

Given this context, it has been invaluable for us to consider what it means to methodologically "adapt" to emerging crises, and the associated challenges and opportunities that arise. For example, moving to online methods allowed many of us to overcome the challenges of carrying out social research in times of physical distancing. However, these methods also revealed barriers to internet access among participants, as well as several ethical issues relating to privacy and safety online. These reflections on the limits of online methods are not new (for example, see Fielding et al. 2016). However, by reflecting on our use of these and other methods as a means of adapting to the COVID-19 crisis, we aim to reflect on what it means to methodologically "adapt," and how this can be done in a way that does not require ethical and methodological shortcuts. By reflecting on our various methodological adaptations, we aim to consider how such adaptations might address rather than further reinforce intersecting health, climate, social, political, and economic crises.

For example, Aydan's research with LGBTQI+ asylum seekers and refugees required him to grapple with a number of ethical and methodological issues when considering a move to online research. This included navigating questions of safety for LGBTQI+ refugees whose ability to disclose information about their sexuality and gender identity during online interviews was affected by the spaces in which they found themselves immobilized due to COVID-19, such as refugee accommodation centers in Germany or family homes in the UK. Here, discretion may form an important part of a refugee's survival strategy. As such, finding ways of safely engaging different participants becomes ethically challenging, confounded by existing structures of containment, accommodation, and detention that have regulated the lives of displaced peoples before and during the pandemic. Such considerations prompted Aydan to suspend formal research with LGBTQI+ refugees, focusing instead on engaging with different support groups as they work to offer solidarity and care despite the suspension of in-person activities.

However, as time went on, and the likelihood of conducting in-person interviews with refugees and asylum seekers in secure and safe settings appeared less likely, Aydan had to go back to his ethics application to secure permission to carry out interviews in parks and public spaces as and when restrictions allowed. Paradoxically, the need to conduct in-person interviews in outside spaces led to key research findings about what does and does not constitute a "safe space" for LGBTQI+ asylum seekers. Both Aydan and the UCL Research Ethics Committee initially anticipated that this would be in a secure, organizational space, with opportunities for referral should the participant become distressed. In contrast, because of COVID-19, participants were encouraged to say where they felt comfortable to be interviewed, with some choosing public parks, open spaces, coffee shops, and town squares. Reflecting on this, Aydan now notes how the research may have indirectly assumed participant vulnerability, in turn vulnerabilizing them through an insistence that interviews only take place in "secure" spaces. As a result, the research has been able to address how LGBTQI+ asylum seekers manage and negotiate public spaces, safety, and visibility on their own terms, and in a way that challenges prevailing assumptions within research ethics that such decisions are often made *for* rather than by participants.

With Jumana's research, which uses the lens of social justice to examine how a sense of belonging may shape the learning of Syrian refugee students in England, gaining access to research participants had already constituted a dilemma prior to COVID-19, as the London school in which they were based tried to impose time and space restrictions that could have jeopardized the anonymity and confidentiality of the research process. Unfortunately, shortly after full access was gained to the research participants, COVID-19 lockdown measures in the UK forced a further halt in research. Moving the research process online meant that more limits were imposed by the school on how, when, and where interviews were to be conducted with the young Syrian students, raising issues of child safeguarding, online security, and confidentiality. Furthermore, the change highlighted important aspects of the participants' lives, as some of them have expressed the lack of an adequate and safe personal space at home in which they could feel comfortable and confident to share their stories. It also raised other issues (shared by nonmigrant students from low-income backgrounds) of whether those children could have access to the internet or devices outside school premises, a concern that raised questions about how a lack of access to such equipment may have also impacted their learning during periods of lockdown or self-isolation.

These obstacles meant that the research with the school was postponed until children could regain physical access to the premises. However, this did not prevent Jumana from developing other methods through which to engage with the everyday lives of some of her participants. For example, she used visual autoethnography (Scarles 2010), encouraging participants to record self-reflections, draw images, take photographs, and create video extracts that they would like to share with the researcher. This offered valuable insights into several participants' experiences, and particularly their perceptions of the exacerbation of social injustices during the time of COVID-19. Nevertheless, this example highlights the limits of adaptation in response to the very specific circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic, leading Jumana to recognize that a wider set of ethical challenges, including the inability to build some form of trust with the participants, would prevent her from doing research via the school (her key research site) until COVID-19 restrictions had eased.

This echoes Jin's experience of trying to make methodological adaptations in her research with transmigrant parents in China. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Jin designed an online research method that would allow her to observe the everyday lives and parenting practices of transmigrant families in China. However, debates about the reliability of online communication technologies and data protection in China caused problems from an ethics perspective: WeChat and Zoom, the most popular platforms in China, are considered unsuitable and unsecure by institutional ethics committees in the UK. However, asking potential participants to download new software and sign up for new accounts threatened to discourage them from taking part. There was no "best" way to resolve this debate, leading Jin to develop a "compromised but practical" solution: online ethnography was replaced with in-person observation only once COVID-19 restrictions were lifted; because of the data and security challenges posed, most interviews had to be done offline. Those who chose to speak to Jin online were recommended the most "secure" software, and it was noted that they could also choose the software that they were most comfortable with. This process of adaptation highlighted how institutional definitions of security, safety, and data protection can often come into conflict with the preferences and expectations of participants, potentially alienating them from the researcher, something Jin aimed to avoid through her "compromised but practical" solution.

The authors have all been required to adapt their research in such ways, developing plans and strategies that commit to ethical standards while responding to the different expectations

and needs of potential participants affected by these overlapping crises. For Hannah, adopting a new approach to her ethnographic research was motivated by a desire to *not* use new digital methodologies. Having attempted a simple autoethnographic exchange between herself and young people in her research site, Hannah found that her participants simply did not engage with the process and preferred chatting online until she returned. Concluding that further attempts might weaken rather than strengthen her relationship with her participants, she adopted "patchwork ethnography" (Günel et al. 2020). In the "patchwork" framework, distinct periods of literature review, fieldwork, analysis, and write-up are broken down and made to inform one another iteratively. Using this methodology, Hannah revisited earlier fieldwork in light of her PhD research questions and themes, engaged with local researchers in a midway analysis phase, and co-created future phases of face-to-face engagements with local researchers. The patchwork framework liberated her from a more linear approach to research, allowing her to shift plans according to changing contexts. This also meant that Hannah was able to respond to the changing needs of her participants and colleagues and systematically embed her learnings into subsequent phases of fieldwork.

For others, the scale of the COVID-19 crisis inspired a different approach to research subjects. Ellen, whose research in collaboration with International Faith-Inspired Organizations (IFIOs) was completely suspended because of travel bans, found that her inability to access a local site presented new avenues for more multiscalar research. Given the restrictions imposed on her research, Ellen adapted it so that it directly responded to COVID-19. In contrast to a preference for in-depth and situated research within development studies and anthropology, Ellen has been able to develop online methods to conduct research on events in real time, in multiple contexts, for a more global perspective on what is a worldwide pandemic, including through multilevel online interviews, systematic data collection, and responsive data collection.

Concluding Thoughts

The brief reflections covered by this article demonstrate how PhD students working on diverse migration-related topics have sought to learn about migrants' lived experiences during a time of intense uncertainty. During this time, we have experienced encounters with our institutions and with migrants that have challenged our plans and our positionality in relation to our research. To cope with uncertainty, we have adapted our methods, but we have also spent time reflecting on ethical challenges around doing research with migrants that, though always there, have been exacerbated by COVID-19. We have offered our experiences as PhD researchers in order to ask how we can and should respond to intersecting crises, what "adapting" to such crises might mean ethically, practically, and methodologically, and how our institutions might better support us too.

While this article is not intended to present definitive conclusions, we hope that our shared reflections will be of value to those navigating the practical, ethical, and methodological challenges of researching migration in contexts of personal, social, and political crises. One specific recommendation that we would like to make concerns ethics procedures: we need to close the gap between formal ethics procedures and ethical practice. Within our networks, we have been able to support one another to improve our ethics in practice: to reflect on and respond to our rapidly changing personal and professional circumstances. We believe that there is a need for PhD researchers to be better equipped with tools that allow regular reflection, and that emphasize care for self and others, informed empathy, and openness to change. This might entail a change in formal ethics procedures and governance, as well as training for PhD researchers.

AYDAN GREATRICK is a PhD Candidate at the Centre for Multidisciplinary and Intercultural Inquiry (CMII), University College London.

JUMANA AL-WAELI is a PhD Candidate at the Institute of Education (IoE), University College London.

HANNAH SENDER is a PhD Candidate at the Bartlett Development and Planning Unit, University College London.

SUSANNA CORONA MAIOLI is a PhD Candidate at the Institute for Global Health, University College London.

JIN L. LI is a PhD Candidate at the Department of Geography, University College London.

ELLEN GOODWIN is a PhD Candidate at SOAS, University of London.

NOTES

1. "Pandemic PGRs" is a Twitter account that was created for postgraduate researchers to share their experiences, thoughts, and news relating to or beyond the pandemic.

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