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Collaboration in Times of a Pandemic

Reflections on a Student Exchange between the University of Namibia and the University of Bayreuth

Introduction

At the University of Bayreuth (UBT), all MA students in anthropology and African Studies have a unique opportunity to do fieldwork abroad, preferably in a country in Africa. This way, they are encouraged to practically engage with specific problems, to improve their research skills and to develop close collaborations with their partners on the ground. On the other hand, the University of Namibia (UNAM) as part of their internationalization efforts aims at promoting diversity and intercultural interaction through exchange programs and collaborations such as these. Therefore, UNAM students, particularly postgraduate students are encouraged to participate in collaborations and networks that provide opportunities that will help improve not only their research skills but also enrich their academic journey. Clearly, students on both sides benefit in multiple ways: personally, academically and in terms of possible career opportunities after their studies. But one question remains pertinent and needs to be considered in the design of such programs, namely, how to make sure that this opportunity for practical research would also sensitize students about the various power hierarchies entailed in fieldwork without giving up on the very idea of research per se (see the early critical intervention of Linda Tuhiwai Smith 1999)?

These debates, which are linked to discussions around decolonizing research and epistemologies, demand close attention to *ethics* and fieldwork relations. Such attention starts from the conceptualization of the "field" – which is never "out there" but is always established in relations (Gupta & Ferguson 1997), runs across different scales (Fortun 2009) and is often patchy, uneven and challenging (Jobson 2020). It is also conceptualized quite differently in disparate disciplinary settings. In any case,

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research ethics need to be reflected in the choice and layout of a topic – opening up questions about the relevance of a particular research topic and the forms of knowledge production implied. Last but not least, research ethics cannot simply be solved by ticking off a box on a form but needs to be constantly negotiated in the process of fieldwork, writing and engagement. A further dimension concerns the very practice of organized student research – in this case between the University of Bayreuth and the University of Namibia. How could institutional and personal collaboration in these different academic settings look like? What forms of exchange between colleagues and students would be possible?

When we began to discuss a guided research program in Namibia, our ambitions were high. In conversations between Katharina (as the professor responsible for the research cohort from the Bayreuth side) and Ndeshi, lecturer in the Department of Sociology at the University of Namibia (UNAM), it soon became clear that Master's students on both sides were facing similar challenges: be it the many difficulties and uncertainties involved in designing and conducting one's own research project or the critical reflections about the possible impact of social science research on the people being studied. But of course, there were also differences: in terms of researchers' mobility as well as academic and financial resources. Moreover, the call for decolonizing the university (including practices of research and knowledge production) as it was articulated so forcefully by the South African #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall (cf. Booysen 2016) as well as global student movements (cf. Bhambra, Gebrial and Nişancıoğlu 2017; Levin and Greenwood 2017), resonated widely among the students and consequently shaped our conversations as well. So, we planned to bring our students together through a number of workshops and exchanges. We hoped for two summer schools (one in Windhoek, one in Bayreuth) where we wanted to discuss research methodologies and modes of academic writing. We also thought that students could learn from one another through peer exchange about their individual projects. And we discussed the possibility of (joint) publications.

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Then COVID-19 came and thwarted these plans. Travel for the UBT students became impossible. Partial lockdowns in Namibia also made it difficult for the UNAM students to pursue their research projects. Digital forms of research and exchange brought their own challenges. Yet we managed to organize a digital workshop that became the starting point for thinking together about collaboration in times of a pandemic. This blog entry is the first result of this exchange from the perspective of the students.

Collaboration in Times of the Pandemic: Going Digital

When the first wave of the pandemic hit, the UBT-students were in the middle of preparing for fieldwork. Initially, we thought that we could postpone the travel to Namibia from August to October. When travel in October became unlikely, we still had some hope that we might travel in February. But soon these plans had to be shelved as well and it became clear that we would not be able to travel at all. Of course, we were all very disappointed about this. Travelling to Namibia as a German student and travelling to Germany as a Namibian student would have been a great opportunity for all of us, both as an experience of going abroad, for making contacts and for broadening our own horizons. We had to find a new way to push our collaboration forward despite all the difficulties.

Because of the pandemic, we already had to get used to using VoIP technologies such as Zoom or Skype in our everyday university life, as both UNAM and UBT had fully shifted to online teaching. These technologies were ideal for conducting workshops and collaborations while we were 8,000 km away from our respective peers. But the technologies also brought some difficulties. Our two groups found a way to communicate via video conferences and we set up a joint document so that we could discuss and exchange ideas with each other verbally as well as in writing. So, there were video calls, shared documents and projects in the cloud. Besides the

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productivity aspect, we have found that online collaboration can also reduce the feeling of being alone. Be it through video calls or group communication via messenger services, in private life as well as in field research, it feels better when there is contact with other people who are struggling with the same or similar issues. Although conditioned by distance and isolation, digital communication also helps to break this distance down and thus creates a sense of being together, despite living in different time zones and continents. At the same time, we found that such digital collaboration can only work if one has the necessary resources (such as an internet-capable terminal device, microphone and functioning camera) and skills at one's disposal. However, learning these skills was part of the process and appreciated by all of us.

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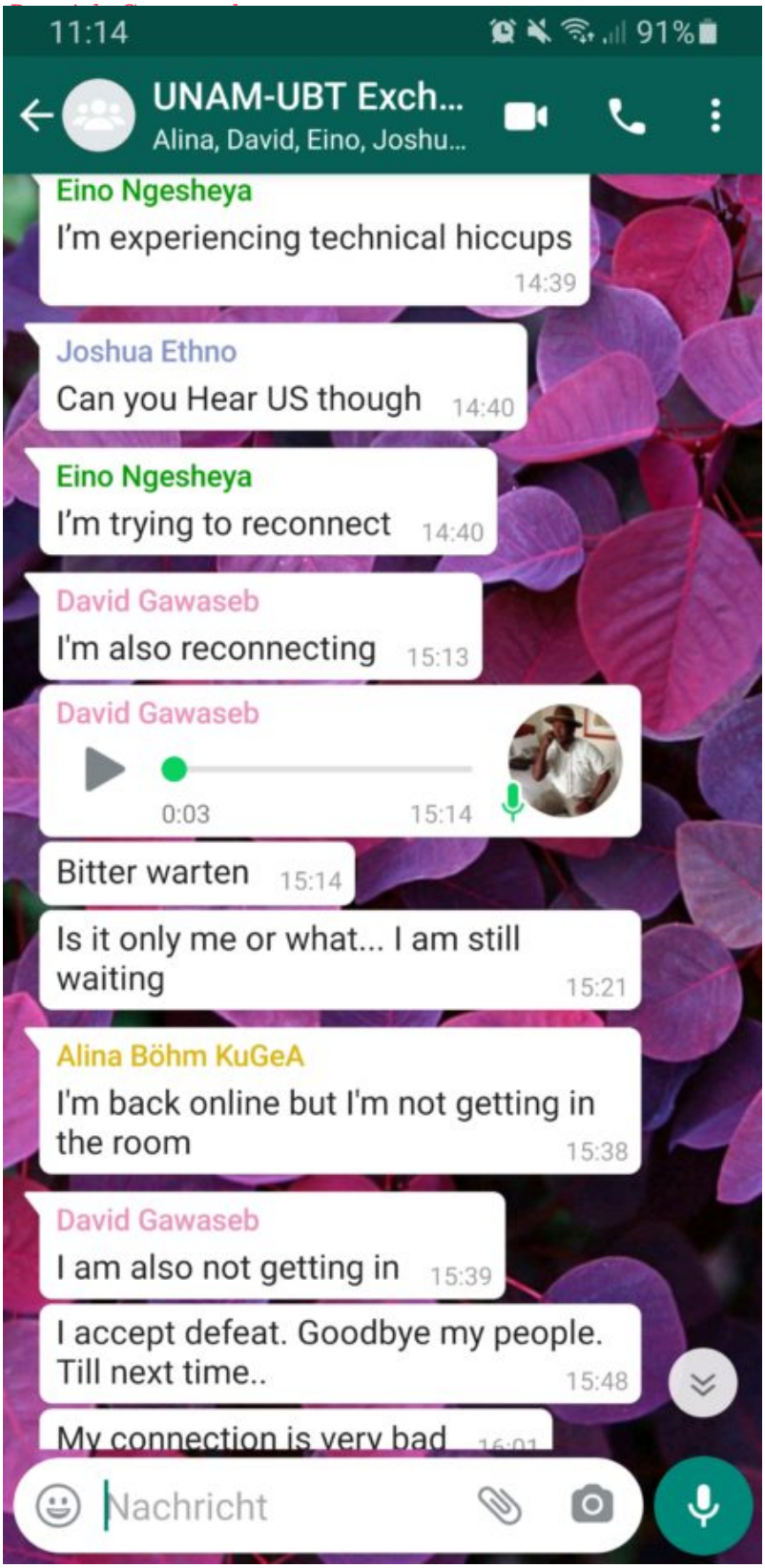

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Internet connectivity was often a challenge, screenshot of messenger communication.

But even if these prerequisites were met, collaboration was subject to external arbitrariness. For example, one of our fellow students in Namibia lost her internet connection during one of our virtual meetings because of rain. In other cases, the use of a conference tool at "rush hour" ensured that the servers of the University of Bayreuth were overloaded and a trouble-free process with the technology was not possible. Living in a multi-family house with everyone switching between "home office" and "homeschooling" doesn't make the connection any better – be it in Germany or Namibia. Additionally, when discussing online, it often happened that we interrupted each other because answers were delayed slightly – either due to a slow internet connection or because we simply could not detect whether the other person was taking a breath to say something else or whether he or she had finished talking. Slow internet also presented a challenge when it came to the process of co-editing this blog article.

But it's not all bad: the platforms we used made it possible to work in smaller "breakout rooms" and to present results to the collective afterwards. In some sessions we were paired with one of our respective peers from the other institution to discuss our research in more detail and share our experiences. The response we received from our peers during this close exchange enabled us not only to delve deeper into our research topics but also to deal better with the challenges posed by Covid-19. We found that it was easier to discuss and reflect our topics when there were only two or three of us than with the whole group. After the collective exchange via the existing platforms, we continued the discussions in individual exchanges via mail or social media.

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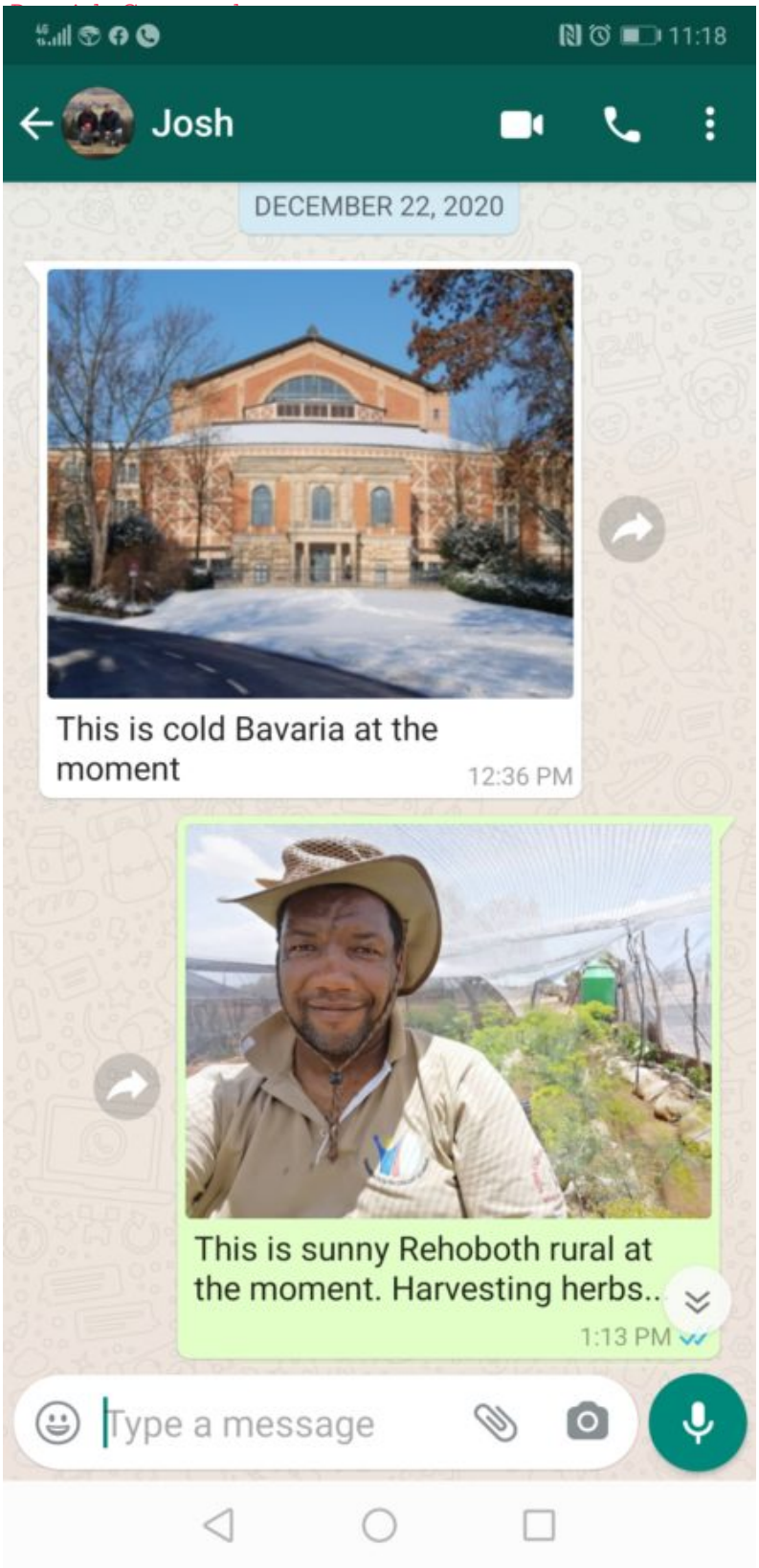

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Dawid and Joshua had regular chats, screenshot of messenger communication.

For Dawid (UNAM) and Joshua (UBT), these conversations were mainly about how they could support each other as collaborators. Via chat they discussed and suggested literature to each other, talked about the sharing-back of their research results and making contacts in the field as well as exchanging scientific literature. They also considered how the Namibian peers could benefit from the research funds of the students at the University of Bayreuth as Dawid was planning a photo display in Windhoek to exhibit his research results. For another example, Mao (UBT) and Tjova (UNAM) had the idea of a closer exchange during our first workshop. They decided that Tjova would first read Mao's exposé to learn more about the research. Then they thought of proper research questions together so that Tjova could travel to Chinatown in Windhoek to find informants, while Mao would talk to her on the phone at the same time, so that Mao would be able to also talk to the informants in real time.

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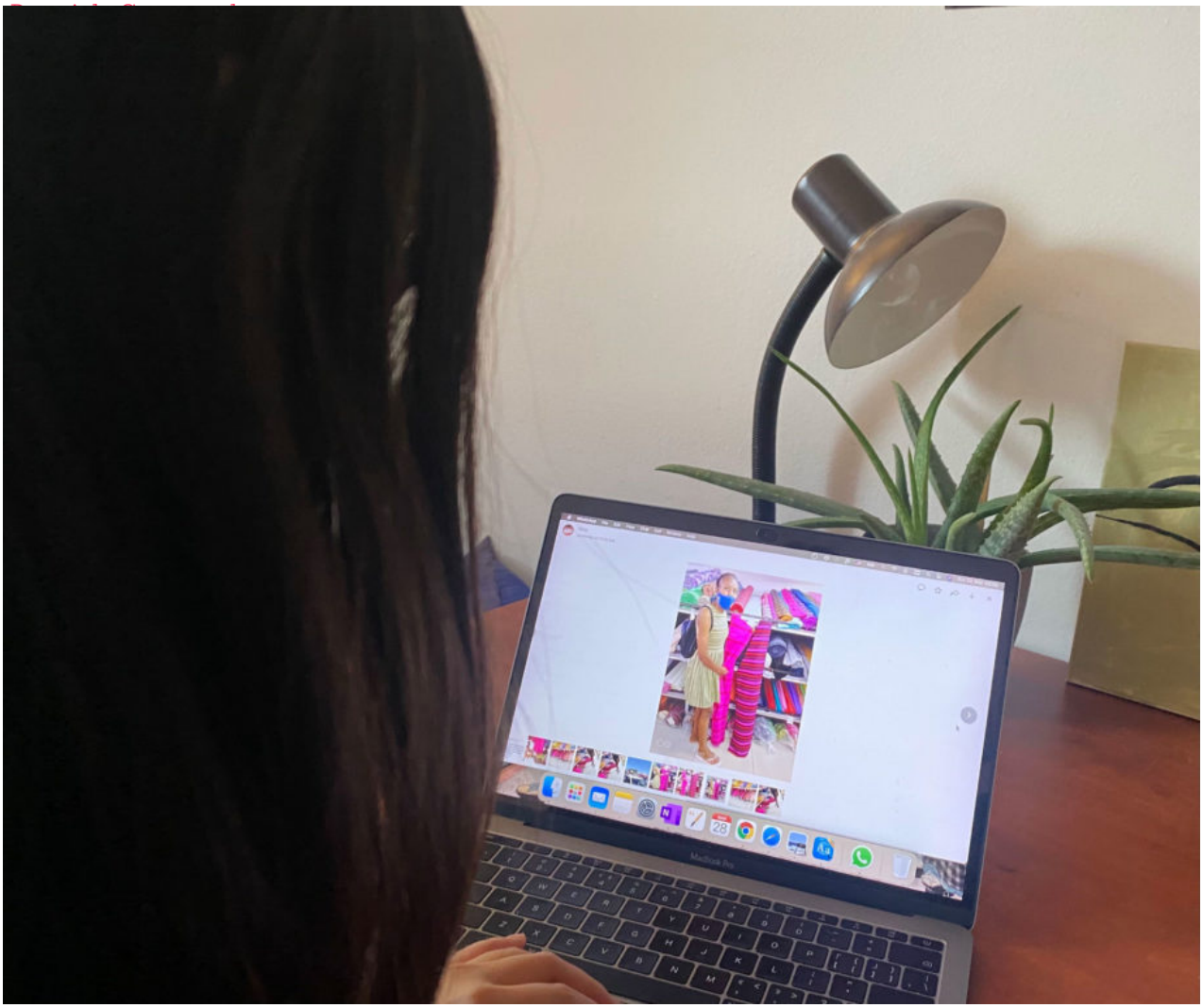

While Mao was at home, real-time online with Tjova, they discussed what was going on in the field and the next steps of their joint action, Photograph by Mao Zhiying.

In addition to the aspect of communication highlighted earlier, we have been able to address the sharing of information resources. Accessing literature is more challenging for those of us in Namibia – especially in times of Covid-19. The university's suspension of in-person services and/or limited opening hours and subsequent loss of access to physical collections at the libraries left us feeling displaced. We have to rely on resources on the internet, which has become a new

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norm for students around the globe. However, some resources are not available on open access, but have to be purchased online. Unlike UBT, UNAM has only limited licenses and agreements to access scientific sources on the internet. Through collaboration, this "*bottleneck*" to important resources cannot be completely eliminated, but it can be eased.

Fieldwork in a Pandemic: New Problems, Different Approaches

In addition to the difficulties and opportunities of digital collaboration, COVID-19 isolation measures have impacted on our concrete research in various ways. These measures mean that social researchers everywhere, who usually conduct face-to face field work (interviews, focus group discussions, participant observation, ethnographies etc.) are now faced with the challenge of either delaying or re-inventing their methods so they can do research at all (Lupton 2020). But how could we as MA-students find new approaches to conduct our research?

Obviously, we had to make changes in our research design. Nicola (UBT), for example, had to adapt her research to the new situation. She initially wanted to focus on national parks in Namibia and the related impact of German development cooperation. But since this was not possible from a distance, she changed her research question and is now analyzing evaluations in development cooperation, focusing on the internal processes and forms of documentation.

Other changes in the design might seem like minor ones only – for example switching from in person interviews to online or phone interviews. But these seemingly minor changes have a major impact on the kind of data we could gather as well as the way in which we would have to approach possible interview-partners. Eino (UNAM), whose study looks into the involvement of young people in electoral politics in Windhoek, had to shift to remote interviews. Since his research

participants were drawn from different sectors of the society such as civil society groups, youth movements and several political parties, he no longer had to travel to various places to get hold of them. This cut down the cost of research considerably. In a situation where Namibian students often struggle with the high cost of tuition fees and living expenses, this was a significant point and a positive aspect of not being able to travel. For the students from UBT however, whose research would have been sponsored by the university, the cut on traveling costs did not appear in a similarly positive light, which shows just how different the experiences of digital research might be between the students at UNAM and those of UBT.

But all of us agreed that being a student, a scholar and a social researcher during such a daunting time where homes, communities and the general society is being forced to adapt to new ways of life, is challenging. These new ways of life have altered peoples' socioeconomic conditions, especially those of the already impoverished, unemployed and underserved communities which are at the center of, for example, Dawid's research. He focuses on car guards and their living and working conditions, issues of social security as well as food security. During the pandemic, his interlocutors' priorities would surely primarily be on their personal health and safety, while engaging a scholar is likely to take a backstage. For example, the car guards in Dawid's research may not have enough cars to guard as drivers work from home which may lead to job losses and consequent loss of income. Therefore, they may face profound and threatening changes in their already precarious living conditions. The insecurities and distress they experience obviously influences how they respond to Dawid as a researcher.

Besides such concrete impact of the pandemic on our research topics and ensuing interactions, there are also other, perhaps more mundane effects. While ethnographic field work usually relies on being around the participants, as well as establishing a bond through interacting with them, it is very difficult for us to come close enough to each other to have this kind of interaction while also keeping the

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necessary distance of 1,5m. The parties involved also both have to wear facemasks to comply with the COVID-19 rules and regulations. You cannot see the facial expression of your interlocutors, which also means that you cannot interact with them in the same way as you would under normal circumstances. In addition, the anxiety emanating from the health risks because of the COVID-19 pandemic may have a negative impact on the outcome of the face-to-face interviews, as it might restrict the interaction between researchers and the participants of the study.

An alternative for researchers who aimed to use "face-to-face interaction to collect data during the pandemic is to pause and or go online which are actions that may need change in the methodology" (Clay 2020). This pausing might also be something that some of us will be faced with should there be another lockdown in Namibia. Unfortunately, pausing the study will also have serious financial implications and further exacerbate the already high academic cost for mainly the self-funding scholars. If the researcher goes online, such amendments may require the researcher to approach his/her institutional review committee for alteration, approval and consent thereon under which may delay the research process.

On the other hand, those of us who already had to give up on traveling and switched to do the research online, face different challenges, one of which has to do with getting access to the field. Personal interaction, which is usually very important in establishing a certain level of trust, does not take place. Our absence makes it more difficult for us researchers to build rapport and to "win someone over" to engage with you and become part of your research. For most of the people you are trying to contact, you are literally a *complete* stranger, just a name on the screen. In this context it is even more important than usual to get the support of "gate keepers" or other intermediaries to moderate your status as a stranger.

But online interactions not only make it more difficult for researchers to gain people's trust and find participants to engage with. The online interviews themselves are also difficult compared to face-to-face interviews, as you might lose a person's

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body language as well as contextual information such as the details of the environment in which the interview takes place. Moreover, switching to online interviews might lead to lower response rates, lack of control on the time and the availability of respondents.

Another challenge of going online has to do with the financial aspects of it. In general, we – especially as researchers from the Global North – cannot assume that access to the internet is given. In Namibia for example the cost of data bundles is important to factor in when setting up the research, as these might be relatively high for the participants and might deter them from participating in the research. But there are other costs of online research that we had not considered beforehand. Alina (UBT) for example was faced with the challenge of having to make international phone calls – on a real landline telephone, not via a messenger service – that can quickly become very expensive. However, these days there are many possible ways to make cheap international calls, so that a minute on the phone will only cost you a few cents and not a few Euros.

Conclusion

Despite the pandemic, we need to complete our studies during a given time and accept the stress levels and experiences that come with it. However, with the prolonged insistence of the pandemic, this can only mean that we have to continue changing with the times and adopt as we go along. Clearly it is not business as usual and/or as the mainstream research principles and underlying theories spell it out to be. We are thus forced to come up with alternatives to the norm. The question is, however, whether these alternatives are acceptable and ensure credibility in terms of the conventional guidelines of social sciences and whether everything will go back to “normal” afterwards. For our own collaboration, however, we think that it is important to see this not as a once-off event but as an ongoing process, through

which we can establish a network between us students where we can share our experiences as well as our knowledge. Moreover, institutional cooperation should continue between our universities and perhaps lead to a truly joint research project and/or an academic exchange program in the future.

With regard to the positive effects of our digital exchanges, we can say that we would like to continue to rely more on online solutions or hybrid formats when it comes to collaboration, as it is sustainable and reduces CO2 emissions. As online collaboration cannot (yet) replace face-to-face encounters it surely can break the barrier of distance and through the different ideas, possibilities and perspectives, a productive exchange is promoted.

A major challenge for some of us had to do with motivation and the different setbacks we experienced in adapting our research and academic life to the new circumstances caused by the pandemic. As we have seen above, there are many different and creative ways in which one can adapt to new circumstances and we also emphasized the importance of being flexible when it comes to doing research and embracing student life. However, it is also important to acknowledge that at some point you have simply reached the end of your flexibility, some ideas just turn out to be a dead end. When one is in this kind of situation it is difficult to keep up the motivation to go ahead with the research, nonetheless. But to then talk to others who are in a similar situation is a great help and an important aspect of our collaboration in times of a pandemic.

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