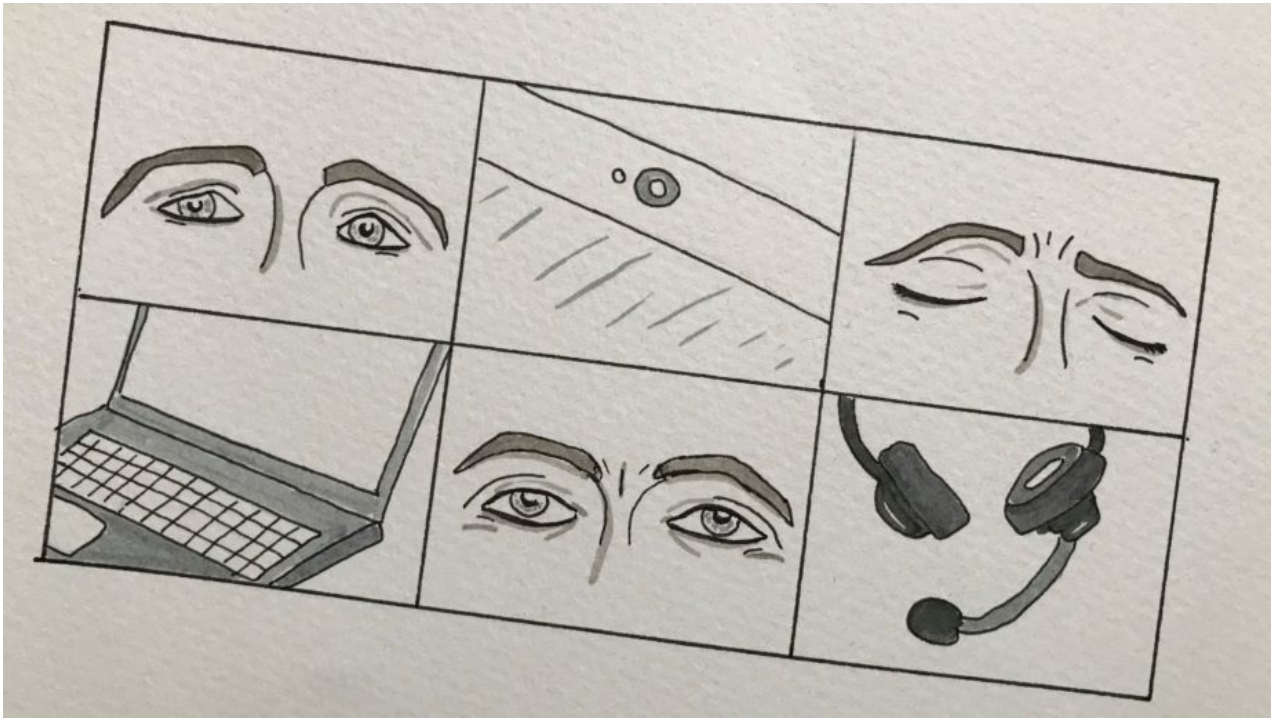
Laura Thurmann

From Anxiety to Method in a Global Pandemic

Emotional and ethical challenges in researching sexualized violence during times of crisis

I began writing this piece several times, trying to find an interesting vignette to catch the readers' attention. The truth is, I don't have one. I spent the last six months of my academic life sitting at my desk, changing my research project, writing and editing papers, attending online conferences and zoom meetings whilst getting increasingly frustrated by the mere thought of having to conduct online research. I could write a vignette about amazing video-call-conversations or about the inspiring researchers I met online; opportunities for which I am truly grateful. However, while some of these online events were indeed inspiring, others left me with a great deal of frustration, anger, and feelings of isolation. They also left me with a considerable amount of concerns about doing research on emotionally challenging and sensitive topics during a pandemic. In this blog post I am reflecting upon challenges and questions that came up for me while preparing for my PhD research on women's security practices and gendered violence in fieldwork.



How can we deal with emotional challenges if face-to-face conversations are no longer possible? (Image: Laura Thurmann)

1. The researchers' emotions: mental health level

Research is barely possible without emotional involvement, and anthropology would be a sad discipline if compassion, empathy and shared feelings of joy, trust and anger were not at the very heart of our methodology. Agreeing with the findings of the Berlin School of Affective Scholarship, I strongly believe that even strong emotions, if carefully analyzed, can be seen as a contribution to our data rather than a disruption of the research process (Stodulka 2014; Lubrich & Stodulka 2019; Thajib, Dinkelaker & Stodulka 2019: 8). On the other hand, as someone who is researching violence, I am quite aware that the productivity of emotions has its limits. In some cases, as Markowitz (2019) experienced during her research in El Salvador, the constant confrontation with violence, even if not experienced ourselves, can have a serious

impact on our mental health.

During previous research on sexualized violence, I established some measures to keep track of my psychological wellbeing and cope with the stories I heard, some of which left me angry, sad and sometimes shocked. In the last few months, however, I began to wonder how much more difficult this process will inevitably be if some things that usually contribute to my wellbeing, such as going to a concert, engaging in martial arts or watching a movie at the cinema, are either not possible anymore or provoke further feelings of uneasiness rather than distraction. How much more difficult is it to deal with emotions if instead of taking a long walk home from a challenging interview, you just switch off your computer to find yourself sitting on your desk, surrounded by silence and feelings of isolation? How can we cope with additional, research related distress while we simultaneously worry about sick family members, are concerned about the future or struggle with anxiety, increased stress or a general feeling of being overwhelmed by the current situation?

2. The participants' emotions: ethical level

Of course, the emotional challenges of dealing with violence in times of heightened stress and worry do not only affect us as researchers but also have an impact on our participants. Talking about one's own experiences of violence can feel empowering but it can also feel incredibly wrong. It can be infuriating, distressing and triggering. It can be challenging even under what we call "normal" circumstances and, for some, it might be considerably more challenging during the crisis. This has to be taken into account when conducting interviews and focus groups with participants, in my case anthropologists, who are affected by violence either themselves or through the experiences of peers or students they supervised.

However, there can be a thin line between conducting compassionate and trauma-

informed research and paternalizing the participants by assuming their ability to talk about violent experiences. When I started reading into my research topic, I came across a quote by Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois who claimed that "rape survivors [...] often become living dead people, refusing to speak of the unspeakable" (2005: 1). I remember getting quite angry at this quote. One reason was that, having experienced sexual assault during fieldwork myself, I felt slightly offended by implicitly being called a zombie. Another reason for my anger was that the quote implied that not talking about a violent experience was some sort of refusal rather than being an active choice or a decision resulting from silencing and a lack of spaces which enable conversations about rape.

One thing I learned during my previous research is that the reasons why someone does or does not want to speak about an experience of sexualized violence are incredibly complex and diverse. Taking into account that most people are to some extent challenged by the current state of the world and that sexualized violence is a topic that can provoke strong emotions, it is crucial to be aware of how to deal with possible distress and trauma. This also means to acknowledge the participants decisions about what to disclose as individual and active choices, instead of seeing their chosen silence as refusal.

3. Emotions in the research process: methodological level

One of my main reasons for pursuing a PhD, after three years working outside of academia, was that I realized how much I missed doing ethnographic fieldwork. While I am still passionate about my topic, I haven't fully come to terms with the idea that most of my PhD fieldwork will now take place at home, in front of my computer, probably not feeling like a "proper" anthropologist. Regardless of this inner fight with (problematic) tropes of what it means to be a 'real' anthropologist, doing research online does come with a few methodological issues that I have yet to find

solutions for.

As Beek and Göpfert (2011) describe, relating to police institutions in West Africa, fieldwork access is often dependent on a balance of 'ground work' and 'paper work'. On the 'paper work' level, getting permissions to conduct research is probably as nightmarish as it always has been. The 'ground work' level, however, is getting increasingly tricky. While under "normal" circumstances, I could have attended some conferences to talk to other researchers about my topic, the ground work I am doing now mainly consists of waiting for emails. In previous research projects, which also partly occurred under less than ideal circumstances, I found some solace in Lentz' (1989) notion that anthropologists could always gain knowledge from failure if the process of failure is observed and analyzed thoroughly. But failure in the case of online interviews might, in the worst case, result in my only data being my emotion diary (Lubrich & Stodulka 2019) full of descriptions of frustration and tales of waiting for Godot (and emails). While the reality will probably (or hopefully) look less grim, I am still wondering how all the things on the 'ground work' level that usually just "happen" at some point in the explorative stage of fieldwork, can be done online. How can we establish trust without spending a long time "hanging out" with our participants? How can we establish meaningful relationships without being able to meet face to face? How can we convince people we've never met before that we are able to treat their stories with care and abide to what we wrote in our informed consent forms?

There has been a great deal of optimistic ideas about turning the crisis into a chance to advance our methodology and expand the limits of our discipline. However, for many of us who just started their academic careers, the crisis has mainly produced a multitude of new emotional, ethical and methodological challenges. We are confronted with the pressure to produce an amount of data that is sufficient and profound enough to write a PhD thesis while human interaction has changed significantly. Some of us are trying to conduct research with methods we have little

experience with while simultaneously being confronted with an amount of uncertainty that goes far beyond the usual infeasibilities of anthropological fieldwork. Some, like myself, had to change their fields and/or research topics and almost had to start their PhDs from scratch whilst not knowing if their programs or funding would be extended.

I think that in order to make fieldwork feasible during the pandemic, we do not only need new methods in terms of netnography or zoom interviews, we also need to look at the emotional challenges that arise for all parties involved and how these are interlinked with our methodology. We need to stop questioning the usefulness of emotion-based research diaries and affective scholarship. We need open conversations and spaces to discuss these issues. We might also need some acceptance for failure and frustration. Dominant "feeling rules" (Hochschild 1979) in our discipline tend to pressure researchers into being excited and passionate about their projects. I am still majorly passionate about my research topic and more than committed to start fieldwork at the end of this year. At the same time, I am experiencing pressure in my academic environment to perform this enthusiasm for my research at any time, even when frustration and worry are the more dominant emotions. With this in mind, I should maybe acknowledge, that preparing for fieldwork on sexualized violence during a global pandemic, is not necessarily a situation in which one can find an inspiring vignette to start a blog post.

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Laura Thurmann is a PhD researcher at the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of Manchester. Her PhD project examines women's security practices and gendered violence in fieldwork. Her Master's thesis was based on a mixed-methods study on experiences of sexualized violence in the field among German anthropologists. Previously, she conducted fieldwork on police and security in the

DR Congo and Niger. Contact: laura.thurmann[at]postgrad.manchster.ac.uk

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