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EDITORIAL

Decolonising Methods, Online Methods, and Creative Practices in Migration Research
Irene Gutiérrez & Chrysi Kyratsou

From Greek *methodos*, "scientific inquiry, method of inquiry, investigation", methods depend on ends and goals. But research methods are not linear, static and neutral tools. In an era in which migration is the rule and not the exception, migration studies' methodological paradigms differ and are complementary when combining their potentials and limitations. Moreover, the growing dilemmas in researching migrant populations unveil power structures that expose and sustain their often-precarious situation, bringing up different methodological difficulties researchers must cope with.

Acknowledging that ethical and methodical issues are closely intertwined, this special issue has been conceived as a shared thought to do better migration research without harming and, above all, in a more collaborative, sustainable, or even activist way. We aim for a non-extractive migration scholarship where the communities we work with can be co-researchers and even co-designers of the methods employed as they are knowledge holders. In doing so, we formulate questions on how to practice a more engaged migration scholarship by emphasising the perspective of researching *with* more than *on*. Furthermore, we consider that communities and migrants in vulnerable situations should be provided with tools of knowledge and methods that can improve their situation during and after the fieldwork. We believe in this as restitution if we contemplate that Western academia and universities have been actively or passively part of coloniality.

The special issue is devoted to questions on decolonising methods, using online methods, or employing creative practices in migration research. The entries come from PhD candidates who had to deal with these issues, sometimes for the first time, in the field of migration. Each entry provides the readers with ethical and methodological reflections of specific case studies that we hope to inspire other peers in such endeavours. While covering one or more of the three modalities, the authors explore when, how and why they could enrich their research by reflecting on the logic of their methodological design as a crucial element for addressing ethical, theoretical and epistemological challenges. The sections are in dialogue because we aim to provide a dynamic, multidisciplinary, and multimodal overview of the link between methods and migration and how it reveals discussions on questions of power, mobility, access, mediation and participation.

For instance, Berfin Nur Osso, political cartoonist and Doctoral candidate at the Faculty of Law of the University of Helsinki, and Rica Agnes Castaneda, PhD student in Policy Studies at the Toronto Metropolitan University, reflect on how the colonial legacy of ethnography as a discipline can be still visible in the hierarchies between researcher and 'subjects' of research. While Berfin focuses on the potential of visual arts to unveil refugees' narratives of agency, Rica assumes a reflexive 'bottom-up' perspective aimed at including multiple voices by collaborating with communities but also considering her own positionality as a student from the Global South affiliated with a university in the Global North undertaking research into migrations, mobilities and transnationalism. Migrant perspective and the 'epic' meaning is a central issue in Katherine Lao's entry, a MA in Sociology at the University of the Philippines Diliman working in capacity development, research, and development cooperation on migration. Lao draws on her current project, for which she is developing a serious interactive game to help bring players to 'roleplay' into the migrant narratives themselves, embodying their experiences to understand where they are coming from, why they migrate and what their needs are.

Another critique of the way of carrying out ethnographical fieldwork in distant countries is discussed by Maia C Brons, a PhD student at the University of Brighton (UK) affiliated with the university's Centre for Spatial, Environmental and Cultural Politics. Maia examines some configurations of coloniality embedded within the researcher's mobility, such as the initial need to fly more than 30,000 kilometres to study the climate-related vulnerabilities of Bangladeshi communities, which would contribute to climate change. Acknowledging that the mobility of migration researchers is intrinsically linked to the conduct of their research, she addresses the question of how the discipline can achieve a fundamental decolonial reform within its research methods while avoiding extractive and environmentally destructive research. For instance, Maia opted to read already-existing literature on her topic to perform a considerably more environment-friendly method. Likewise, Franca, Rosario, Talitha Dubow, and Eleni Diker adopted this and other alternative methods when shifting their research from offline to online during the pandemic. Finally, the authors unpack some of the pitfalls and advantages they found while using online methods to conduct their studies. Some of the traps are:

1. the difficulties confronted in managing the division between personal and private life when researching on social media platforms like Facebook;
2. the limitations of transferring or substituting the richness of face-to-face encounters;
3. the risks of insecurity for both the researcher and the participants in terms of personal data management and the lack of control over the quality in the process of data collection;
4. and other implications for research ethics –such as an increasing tendency to use online data collection methods to reduce costs.

Among the advantages they underline are the flexibility to arrange and reschedule interviews, the similar approach between participants and researcher by using technology as another everyday activity, the possibility of recruiting participants and local experts throughout different countries or regions, and the development of alternative forms of research collaboration and dissemination.

Building on these fruitful debates, we, migration scholars, must realise that, in today's world, being alive depends to a large extent on the possibility of mobility (Mbembe, 2016) and thus have the right to escape (Mezzadra, 2004). Therefore, we must question our privileged mobility, access and sometimes funds we have at our disposal to carry out our research. In this sense, we assert that the need for epistemic disobedience must precede any methodology and question the very notion of method: "Do what you need to do, not what the discipline tells you to do" (Mignolo, 2021). This debate also reflects the challenging encounters we face as editors, which merit further analysis after the completion of this issue.

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Migration, Law, and the Visual: Unveiling Narratives of Agency in Refugees' Paintings

Berfin Nur Osso

Berfin Nur Osso _is a doctoral candidate at the University of Helsinki, Faculty of Law, and a Project Researcher in Academy of Finland–funded projects at the University of Eastern Finland Law School. Osso's doctoral research project investigates the interplay between the externalization of migration management and the political agency of refugees with theoretical and empirical inquiries in the Greek–Turkish context._

In this contribution, I reflect on a socio-legal project at the design stage that explores how refugees' paintings reveal their agency and struggles for rights claims vis-à-vis borders. This project draws upon a project that I had undertaken in 2016 as an undergraduate law student, that involved illustrating a story book for Syrian refugee children to investigate the uses of art for overcoming communication and language barriers. This time, I focus on interpreting refugees' artworks. To that end, I utilize a theoretical framework that combines the concepts of "Autonomy of Migration (AoM)" (De Genova, 2017) and political agency (Arendt, 1998; Huysmans et al., 2006). AoM proposes a lens that considers refugees as autonomous individuals who can react through their agency vis-à-vis borders aimed at managing their mobility. Drawing on this framework, I interpret refugees' paintings as reflecting their struggles to subvert borders in finding a place where they can enjoy their human rights.

Much scholarly work in social sciences and humanities has favored visual arts as research focus or as research method (Mulcahy, 2017). The latter, for instance "visual ethnography", recognizes the revelatory potential of art in scholarly research and uses visual artworks as a source of data. Particularly, visual anthropology and visual sociology utilize art for documenting certain societal phenomena. Nonetheless, the use of visual ethnography as a method in legal, particularly socio-legal, research continues to be underdeveloped (Mulcahy, 2017).

As a political cartoonist and researcher, I have got first-hand insights into the relation between art, migration, and law. More specifically, in 2016 I illustrated a story book, _The Journey of Nasim_, for the needs of an art therapy project for Syrian refugee children, co-designed with two friends and organized with NGOs in Istanbul, Turkey. The book narrates the story of loss of home and finding a new one through an interplanetary journey. We understood this as reminiscent of refugees' stories, having been displaced from their home countries and trying to integrate into their host societies. Art therapy was a vital participatory method we used in order to overcome any communication hardships stemming from the anxieties that children develop due to civil war and displacement (see Ugurlu et al., 2016). We were concerned about the ethical underpinnings of our project, and more specifically about avoiding potential harm when engaging with children and respecting their vulnerability (Pauwels, 2015). To navigate the ethical challenges, we collaborated with an art therapist experienced in working with children who suffer from mental health challenges, such as PTSD. Using our illustrated book, the therapist enabled the refugee children to uncover their anxieties. The outcome of the sessions revealed that art can indeed enable interaction between research subjects when there are language and communication barriers.

Few years after _The Journey of Nasim_, I am designing an empirical study at the intersections of law, migration, and art. I aim to investigate refugees' agency and claims-making as depicted in the non-verbal artifacts they create. Within this study, I reflect on the paintings of a group of refugee artists hosted by the NGO _The Hope Project Greece_, operating in the Greek island of Lesvos. I employ visual ethnography because it offers valuable insights for unfolding refugees' lived experiences. The artworks narrate refugees' experiences of displacement and confrontation with borders. Some of the artworks are available online.

However, using them as data in scientific research involves several ethical implications, such as receiving the artists' consent and ensuring anonymity. To address these challenges, I conducted a semi-structured interview with the NGO representatives for an action plan. We discussed about the modes to address the ethical implications and agreed that I contact the NGO after selecting the artworks to obtain the artists' consent.

Using visual artworks as a source of data, my role as a visual ethnographer is two-fold (Pink, 2013), and comprises data collection and qualitative analysis. First, I curate the artworks, namely choose them based on their relevancy with my study, so as to understand the visual practices and images that reflect refugees' worlds. I select the artworks based on certain patterns for analysis for this study (van den Scott, 2018). These patterns include "border", "border crossing", "encampment", and "emancipation", as found in refugees' paintings.

An illustration from The Journey of Nasim. The text (in Turkish) from left to right reads as: "This is so much fun!", "Hello!" © Berfin Nur Osso

Later, I translate these patterns into codes, namely the units of my data analysis and interpretation. I reflexively interpret these artifacts with a focus on the associated modes of knowing them (Pink, 2013). I attend to my notes from the interview I conducted with The Hope Project regarding the context within which the paintings were created. Some of these artworks reveal refugees' journeys towards Lesvos, their struggles of border crossing, or their lives constrained in Moria. As I interpret, these experiences exhibit refugees' reactions to various forms of borders that Greece and the EU utilize to manage or restrain their movement, hence, the autonomy of migration. Refugees as autonomous individuals subvert these borders through their agency to claim and enjoy their rights.

By unveiling narratives of agency in refugees' paintings, this study proposes broader understanding at the intersections of migration, law, and the visual. My earlier experiences indicate that visual methods propose sufficient ground for merging empirical and theoretical analyses for making sense of refugees' lived experiences. This helps to "rehumanize" migrants (Martiniello, 2022). It also enables shifting our focus on their practices as unique individuals, rather than perceiving them as statistical populations deprived of their human rights and managed by borders.

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Ethnography and the Decentering of the Knowledge Agenda

Rica Agnes Castaneda

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One day in Methodology class I delivered a presentation on 'Observing Participants in their Context', widely known as Ethnography. Like any well-meaning presenter/peddler of ideas, that wish their audience to engage with the topic of their presentation, I asked my audience whether they would consider using ethnography as a methodological tool in their study. This led to a lively open discussion. Some participants saw the act of observation as a practical skillset in conducting research, labelling it as common sense. Others viewed it as strategic tool, in learning about specific contexts, and uncovering motivation as 'people don't do as they say' (Charmaz and Mitchell 2001). However, one rejected the option, on the grounds that Ethnography is plagued by the coloniser's gaze, as for instance, early anthropology is. This is shown through the antiquated ethnographic accounts of systemic record keeping, so these 'new' lands and people become subjects (Pachirat 2017) to the pursuit of knowledge, and power. Empires accomplished their goals because apart from colonising places and bodies to extend their influence, it was colonising the subjects' mind that provided a lasting outcome.

After all, knowledge production has usually aligned with the norms established by a hegemony of disciplines and institutions. We are now at a juncture where dominant worldviews are no longer the only worldviews, although like any expression of the status quo they are constructed in a way that they are harder to resist (Strega 2005). The term 'decenter' is an actionable concept, a transitive verb. I prefer using the term in my projects because it enables questioning and offers a non-dominant/ mainstream/ westernised/ 'Global North' perspective. It is a way of undoing, of 'writing back' (Burney 2012). But while it is a reaction to the normative coloniser, I   think that the process of decentering as the best way to move forward without assuming that power is balanced in the peripheries, or subscribing to the 'us vs them' divide commonly used by demagogues to fashion political legitimacy. This is not always the case, as demonstrated by a resurging penchant for populist movements in both the developed and developing world (Forsdick et al. 2020; Moosavi 2020) and the rise of a post truth regime (Waisbord 2018). On the contrary, sometimes it is the practices themselves, the scholarship tradition that needs to be decolonised.

How could we decolonise ethnography, and turn it into a tool towards decentering knowledge? One way is to seek perspectives alternative to the conventional knowledge sources. By considering local scholarship and engaging with our participants as partners we open our study to nuances and localised knowledge (Takayama et al 2016; Thomas 2018). However, this is harder to practise than it reads. I have spoken with researchers in my university and beyond who work on projects that commit to the decolonisation of knowledge as part of their primary research agenda. Some recalled how tough it was to access substantial literature written by non-western, local scholars, even in their mother tongue. Another way is to engage with stakeholders in the research process through Participant Action Research (PAR). Some of us may have come across research projects that engage with non-academic collaborators: community leaders, migrant individuals, migrant groups and so on (Spitzer 2022; Tungohan et al 2015; Spitzer and Piper 2014). Encouraging our research participants' 'voice' is a way to enhance their engagement with the process and can be vital in a researcher's 'truth claims' (Checkland and Holwell 1998). Finally, another way can be a change in the research-focus, for instance study 'power centres', instead of those they affect, or what ethnographers call 'study up' rather than 'study down' (Nader 1972).

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How could a student from a developing country and former colony, who studies migrations, mobilities, and trans-nationalism, reconcile with this methodology?

I am still in my journey towards extending decolonisation through practice, in how I think, and how I write. I envision this process as a meaningful synthesis wherein one can transform knowledge production, through consciousness and tenacity to promote change.

In addressing the need for including more voices, more work needs to be done. One way is through one's engagement with local scholarship and communities, although slow and incremental. Another way is committing to engage with communities, along with their local knowledge producers in establishing a sustainable relationship with sites and partners in the research process. We can contribute to enhancing both capability and confidence building in communities by using our positionalities as academics and allies of the community. We can advocate for better, diversified tools in learning about, and producing knowledge. This ambitious task can become feasible subject to the aforementioned tenacity and creativity. If that happens, knowledge can become dispersed, localised, nuanced, and richer; decentered, pluralised, and flourishing.

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Why Should I Play a Game About Migrants?
Design and Potential of Serious Games on Migration
Katherine Lao

Katherine Lao _works in capacity development, research, and development cooperation on migration and sustainable development since 2019. A Filipino migrant born and raised in Bahrain, she 'returned' to the Philippines in 2015 to pursue her MA in Sociology at the University of the Philippines Diliman, focusing on sociology of migration. She aims to widen her knowledge and experience in migration and eventually, discover the running thread between her experience as a migrant, budding sociologist, and aspiring development practitioner in migration and development. Reach her at m.katherinelao@gmail.com._

I am currently developing an interactive game where you play a migrant. Based on the choices you make, you learn about the complexity of a migrant's experience along with related migration facts throughout your journey.

When I presented the idea to my former colleagues, they argued, "How is this a game? Where are the trophies, the points, the multiplayers?" I was frustrated. The goal here was not to make an entertaining game per se, but a game that makes learning about migration issues fun. But I could not define what and why I wanted to do this.

It was only in my current work, I learned about serious games and gamification. A serious game is a game with a higher purpose beyond entertainment, a non-entertaining purpose (serious) achieved through a game structure (game) (IGI Global, n.d.).

I thought about how we tell stories about migrants. We do not lack research and narratives of migrants and their depiction from the academe to the media. What I believe deserves attention is developing more serious games on migration (see Gabriel, 2021).

I will briefly review two serious games on migration to demonstrate their potential in enabling a better understanding of migrant experiences. I will then highlight how I will take into account design, impact, and purpose when I develop an interactive game on migration.

This will shed light on how the creative practice of developing serious games can help bring in players to 'roleplay' into the migrant narratives themselves, replicating what it is to live like a migrant and learn what we know about migration so far.

Bury Me, My Love (The Pixel Hunt, 2017) is a text messaging adventure video game of deciding a Syrian migrant's journey to Europe. It takes you to a messaging application where you converse with Nour in her decisions such as advising her on legal documentation and responding to her sweet and sarcastic musings. She updates you hours to days later of her progress like a loved one left behind waiting to hear news about their migrant partners. There are nineteen different endings. However, for each time you reach an ending, you are taken back to the start of your first conversation with Nour. While the developers explain that they wish to replicate the hopelessness of refugees' journeys, save points for users to explore other pathways could have helped them learn more about migration.
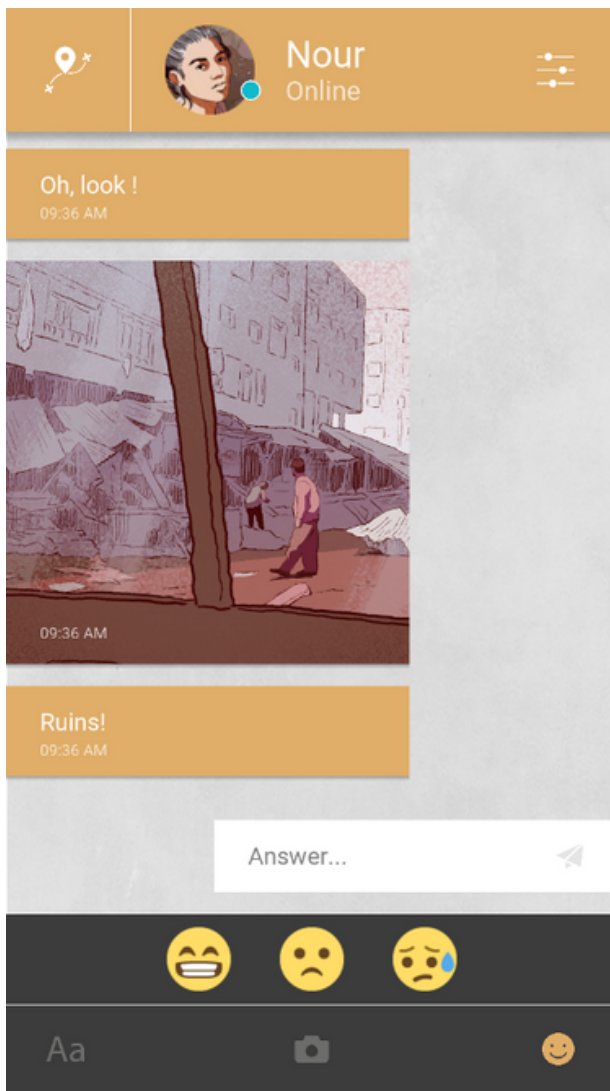
Screenshot of playing Bury Me, My Love
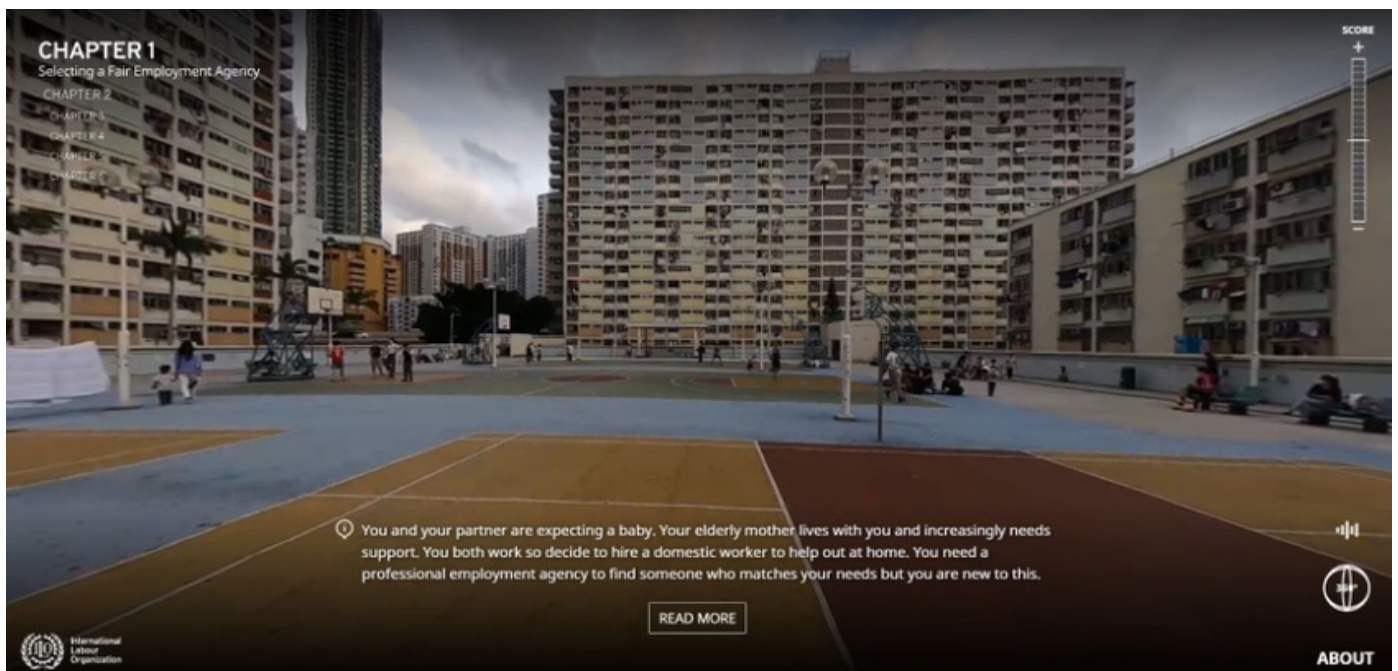*© Katherine Lao*

The Hiring Challenge (International Labour Organization, 2021), is a web-based interactive game of how to fairly hire a migrant domestic worker in Hong Kong. It brings you to an immersive 360-degree panorama of sites in Hong Kong as you seek to hire a migrant domestic worker in your household. For each choice you make, a short educational video on the related stage of the recruitment process plays before you proceed to the next step. You earn points depending on how fair you are in your recruitment decisions. But the game loop of selecting a choice, watching, or skipping, a video clip, and then moving on to the next step, leads to a predictable navigation of the story. Choices that take you to different sequences may have aided in a more interactive gameplay.

Both games are presented beautifully in different ways of immersion. They place the player in the first-person viewpoint to make choices in migration as a loved one or an employer. The games are based on real stories of refugees and actual recruitment policies and practices. The messages behind these games are the legal and cultural barriers migrants contend with in their journey and awareness on fair recruitment of migrant domestic workers.

Why Should We Develop Serious Games?
Inspired by these games, I will develop mine that takes into account serious game design, purpose, and impact. In terms of design, I will refer to the Octalysis Framework (see Chou, 2021). It presents gameplay elements corresponding to eight core drives that motivate players to engage in gaming.

Gameplay aligned to key motivations and engagement are important in game design to successfully engage players to the game. Doing so, the rich educational content will be meaningfully used in the game. Through this game, I aim to contribute to serious games and gamification in the process of instilling change in societies.This role of serious games and gamification has proven to encourage peace discussions and inclusive workplaces, bridge understanding across generations and cultures, simulate scenarios to help understand and develop policies, among others (Spanellis and Harviainen, 2021).

Screenshot of starting the game, The Hiring Challenge © Katherine Lao

Finally, I hope the games impact will address "epic meaning" to the players. McGonigal (TED Talks, 2010) shares that gamers are in search of "epic meaning" which motivates them to solve challenges in the virtual world. She then postulates how do we make use of that potential in solving real life challenges? The interactive game I will develop seeks to answer this question. It will bring players to put them in the shoes of a migrant, navigating their personal perspectives, migrant choices, barriers, and successes, in their journey. By learning and living through the multi-faceted experiences of migrants through a game, I hope it will help them in their outreach to migrants, understanding where they are coming from and sustainably addressing their unique needs.

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The Paradox of Taking a Flight to Study Climate-Induced Flight: Reflecting on Coloniality in Researcher's Mobility

Maia C. Brons

Maia C. Brons *is a PhD student at the University of Brighton (UK), and is affiliated with the university's Centre for Spatial, Environmental and Cultural Politics. Her project explores the link between climate–related water insecurities (including floods, extreme weather and contamination) and forced im/mobility as experienced by marginalised communities in Newham, London. Maia's research interests include: climate change, im/mobility, political ecology, cities, justice and (de)colonialism.*

The task of decolonising migration research and methods has gained notable momentum recently, especially as climate change-related inequalities have thrown the enduring disconnection between migration and colonialism studies into sharp relief (Whyte, Talley & Gibson, 2019). Since starting my PhD, I too have sought to broaden my awareness of how mainstream migration research methods may be complicit in colonialities past and present. For context, for a long time I envisioned my PhD to explore the relation between climate-related water insecurities and forced (im)mobility amongst marginalised communities in Dhaka (Bangladesh) and London (UK): shedding light on linked climate justice and mobility justice issues whilst provoking dogmatic "North-South" divides.

But last month, whilst preparing for conducting fieldwork in Dhaka, reflections on my positionality as a ("Western") researcher in (decolonising) migration methods overturned what seemed like a perfect plan with strong decolonial ambitions. I realised that, whilst e.g. knowledge production and fieldwork ethics are thoroughly subjected to coloniality-concerned criticism today, researcher's mobility itself is rarely challenged in how it can advance reparations for – or reproduce – colonial legacies.

In this blog post, I reflect on some configurations of coloniality embedded within researcher's mobility. These contemplations influenced, alongside other salient considerations including ethical issues and limited resources, my recent decision against conducting fieldwork in Bangladesh – a decision which I am still coming to terms with.

Hermann Traub © Pixabay

Empirical migration research methods often inherently rely on the ability of researchers to move to faraway fieldsites, alternated by periods of secure sedentariness to write about their findings. Scrutinising our (that is: researchers') unparalleled privileges in a time of mounting mobility inequality and precarity should, I argue, be a non-negligible component of critical (decolonial) methodological reflection in migration studies.

First, the act of flying overseas to study community-level (im)mobility issues is often inherently extractive and/or destructive, both socially and environmentally. I was advised to do a "scoping trip" before collecting data in Dhaka. Despite this being seemingly commonplace in migration studies, I wondered how I could justify flying four times (more than 30,000 kilometres) to explore the climate-related vulnerabilities of Bangladeshi communities. In doing so, I would be directly contributing to the climatic emergency underlying their unevenly inflicted (im)mobility issues – sometimes coined "the ultimate injustice" of our time (Ionesco, Mokhnacheva & Gemenne, 2017, p. viii). My ambitions to inform just and sustainable mobility policies with my research seemed to contrast innately with the unsustainable mobility I would enact to achieve these goals. This shows how qualitative migration research methods (taking a flight to study climate-induced flight) are complicit in the slow violence of climate change, and build on colonial and neoliberal environmental powers (Sheller, 2018).

Second, in scrutinising mobility inequality and precarity issues amongst marginalised groups, migration researchers often mask or dismiss their own privilege within global (colonial) mobility regimes. Researchers from "developed" countries (including myself) often embody and enjoy an exceptional hyper-mobility allowing them to relocate or remain rooted as necessary. I felt pre-emptively conflicted imagining how I, an EU citizen living in the UK, would travel to Bangladesh to document the climate-mobility conundrums of people who may never experience this kind of unfettered mobility.

My methods, in other words, relied on me accepting and appropriating a mobile elitism allowing me to move freely to "climate vulnerable" places (enough to grasp the lived realities), whilst safeguarding my own mobility and security. This unparalleled privilege stems from imperial lines and logics and, if left unquestioned, tolerates the colonial legacies that both displace and immobilise already-disadvantaged people around the world today. Why are these colonialities embedded within researcher's mobility not discussed more? In her book Mobility Justice, Sheller (2018, p. 141) encourages readers "to acknowledge [their] role in the splintered provision of unequal mobilities [and] the exposure of the mobility poor to greater climate risk and vulnerability."

But what remains underemphasised, is the explicit relationality and responsibility that researchers themselves carry as they move and moor to study these unequal mobilities and vulnerabilities, and the conspicuous coloniality that sometimes underpins these performances. Possibly, the novelty of cross-pollinating migration and colonialism studies (as stated in a previous IMISCOE PhD blog: Tuley, 2020) means that fundamental decolonial reform within migration research methods is an oversoon objective.

I conclude with two questions for the reader to contemplate. Perhaps most importantly: what are the solutions? I chose to ration my own mobility and instead build on excellent already-existing works on water insecurity and im/mobility in Bangladesh (e.g. Sultana, 2020) – a sedentary and considerably more environment-friendly method. But this option is not for everyone, and I cannot imagine migration methods becoming steadily more sedentary for environmental reasons, even within the context of acute climatic emergency. Indeed, movement is a strong, symbolic and splendid part of conducting migration research. However, is it compatible with the urgent task of decolonising methods, that is, counteracting extractive and environmentally destructive research?

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'Can you hear me now?'
Ethical Benefits of Online Ethnography

Franka Zlatic

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My PhD project was originally designed as ethnographic research with interviews and meetings taking place in a public space, or preferably, in participants' homes. As ethnography often requires 'going native', I wanted to meet participants where they feel most comfortable, presumably in their home (Burgess, 1984, p. 59). Such a setting would also give me a chance to establish a rapport and to collect the non-verbal side of data. However, I did not have the chance to prepare everything for that scenario, nor did I have the time to step into contact with my participants and ask for entering their homes before the pandemic struck the world, and consequently the way we do social science research. At the very start of my PhD, not only had I relocated back to Croatia, but had to redesign the initially planned in-person data collection.

The silver lining here was the fact I did not have to adapt in the middle of the fieldwork but could plan the methods online from the very start. This was the first time in social science research that data collection was taking place online not for the usual and known reasons such as "time and financial constraints, geographical dispersion, and physical mobility boundaries, which have adversely affected onsite interviews" (Janghorban et al., 2014, p. 1), but for the sake of everyone's health and wellbeing. Instead of meeting with the participants in person, the interviews were held online together with participant observation, photo-elicitation method and the counter-mapping prompt. Instead of taking this design change as a disadvantage, I decided to turn to different aspects of online interviews in order to make the most out of it.

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Firstly, it was easier to arrange the interviews logistically speaking, but also to reschedule them if needed as there was no inconvenience caused by travel plans or time lost. Secondly, as Salmons (2016, p. 62) noticed, by being in their home environments, relaxed, at their computers, "participants may be more willing to discuss sensitive or personal matters, […] that are hard to reveal in person" which is of extreme importance in migration-related research.

In that sense, while there was an obvious limitation in terms of lacking the usually traditional ethnographic 'thick' data (Geertz, 1973), absence of physical 'meet & greet' and observation of both surroundings and behaviour, there was a good side to it. Meeting participants online meant fewer ethical challenges as I did not enter into anyone's privacy physically, as face-to-face interviews can be indeed sometimes perceived as intrusive and reactive (Russell Bernard, 2006, p. 257). I did not make anyone leave the comfort of their home and there was no awkwardness that comes with the concept of hosting such as offerings and gifting.

For example, one of the interviewees would have given me a present had the interview taken place in person, as they were showing it to me during our video call. It was common for them to bring small key chains from their home country and they explicitly said I would have gotten one, however, due to physical distance and the pandemic-imposed guidelines, that was not possible. Had such a thing happened, I would have felt even more indebted towards the participant and probably tried to return the favour. As using technology has now become part of everyday lives and as I was at home too, the approach neutralised the potential power imbalance and emphasised "important 'approachability cues' that signal to others that 'you can approach me'" (Salmons, 2015, p. 208).

In none of the other in-person options would that be a possibility as this way they had insight into my home as much as I had into theirs. In addition, the fact that participants were at home, they were able to reach and show memorabilia mentioned in the interview that reflected their migratory experience which would not be possible if we were to meet in a public space and that contributed to gaining a wholesome and richer overview of participants' stories.

Finally, I also found these extenuating circumstances to be an opportunity to expand my recruitment of participants throughout the UK. Taking into account that "the everyday lives of many individuals more often than not transcend the geographical locations in which classical fieldwork [takes] place" (Boccagni and Schrooten, 2018, p. 210, that created a good rationale and a solid theoretical background for me to take part and observe such an activity through the same medium. Doing fieldwork online then, acts as "challenging ethnographers to include these social spaces in the demarcation of their fieldwork sites" (Boccagni and Schrooten, 2018, p. 210).

As more social and personal as well as professional communications now occur online (Salmons, 2015, p. 62), I found it very easy to conduct my fieldwork online too. Participants truly were "more relaxed because they [were] communicating with the researcher in the comfort of a familiar online setting" (Salmons, 2015, p. 62). Doing empirical social science research online has proven to be very viable and ethnographers "do this by immersing [their] embodied selves within the cultures of interest, even when that embodiment is in the form of an avatar" (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 1).

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Doing Online Fieldwork on Social Media Platforms: The Blurred Lines Between Personal and Professional Life

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This blog post deals with the blurred lines between personal and professional life when conducting online research. At the beginning of my Ph.D., I planned to do fieldwork in Mexico and Guatemala as I focused on the migrant caravan that left Honduras for the US in October 2018. I was interested in understanding people's involvement and participation in the movement. However, with the Covid-19 outbreak and without certainty of when I would be able to carry out fieldwork, I refined my research question to focus on caravan mobilization via social media.

First, I needed to decide what platform I was going to use. I had read that many of the people that participated in the caravan had heard or found out about the movement through social media, particularly Facebook. Some of them were part of the groups created to organize the caravans. Thus, I decided to recruit participants through that social media platform.

Then, I had to decide on the account I would use to approach participants. I debated between creating an account that would be used exclusively to carry out "fieldwork" or using my account and profile. I approached other colleagues and senior professors who had done research through social media, and some advised me to use my personal account to do semi-structured interviews. By doing so, my colleagues argued, I would be able to create a rapport with participants. The premise was that I would ask for information about their experience, and participants deserved to know part of my personal life. This thought led me to reflect on how much personal information researchers should share with participants.

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Third, I decided to create a flyer to recruit participants. So, the next question was what information I should put on the flyer. Should I add my phone number? Should I add my email? After reflecting on the pros and cons with colleagues, I added my personal Facebook account to the flyer and my professional email so that people interested could reach out to me. However, I decided to keep my WhatsApp number private. Before posting the flyer, I changed the privacy of some of my posts and photos from "public" to "friends" to keep my personal life separated.

Because the Facebook groups where I was posting had more than 5,000 members, and the people I contacted were undocumented migrants, many feared that I might be a migration officer, a police officer, or a scammer. Leaving some photos public was my way of dealing with some of these fears, as participants then had a chance to see a glimpse of my life.

Once I posted the flyer, people commented on my post and sent me direct messages on Messenger. Because of the time difference (7-8 hrs.), I would receive them in the middle of the night. People would also message me on the weekends. I remember waking up to at least a dozen messages on the post and a few conversations on Messenger. I saw myself replying during the week, on weekends, throughout the day and night, when shopping or eating, in public transport and the office, and conducting interviews on Sundays at 8 pm. I always had my cellphone with me, and I would try to answer as fast as possible to the messages to get the number of participants I needed. I felt compelled to reply to every message on Messenger, regardless of the time, since participants could think that I was rude if I was online and not responding. At that point, I realized that my personal and professional life had blended, and the line that separated them was blurred.

When scheduling the interviews, some participants asked for my WhatsApp number. However, I asked people to reach me on Messenger and offered them to call on Skype, if needed, to keep my privacy and only use my WhatsApp for personal matters. Others asked me to add them as friends on Facebook, but I respectfully declined. Also, I received at least a couple of inappropriate romantic or sexual messages from male participants on Messenger that had nothing to do with the research. For security reasons, too, I decided not to add my phone number on the flyer or the Facebook post, as one of the Facebook groups had more than 5,000 participants.

So, if you plan to do online fieldwork on social media platforms, here are some tips. First, I suggest creating an account exclusively for fieldwork. Second, establish a timeframe where you respond to messages and the like, and politely communicate it to your respondents. Third, do not provide personal information, such as your phone number, especially if the information is shared in a public group. Finally, respect the timeframes you set and your own space; your professional and personal life are equally significant. Strive for balance!

Present Yet Distant: Opportunities and Pitfalls of Online Fieldwork

Veronica Øverlid

Veronica Øverlid _is a PhD Candidate in the Department of Law and Legal Studies at Carleton University in Canada. Prior to the PhD, she worked with civil society organizations related to human rights and youth in several countries and has written several non-academic articles about human rights activism in Latin America. She has taught at high school level and has furthermore worked at the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) in Egypt, with a focus on gender-based violence. Her doctoral project examines the 'migrant caravans' from Central America as a protest movement, considering their implications for international refugee law. She is funded by the Pierre Elliot Trudeau Foundation._

As the Covid-19 pandemic hit, I had just started drafting my PhD proposal about Central American migrants in Mexico. Since the pandemic was assumed to be a swift affair, I didn't even contemplate the potential barriers the virus would pose to my plans to spend time in Mexico and immersing myself in the region of study. As I was writing this post in the spring of 2022, the idea of making travel plans for more than a few weeks ahead – let alone months – was still distant as the possibility for new and unknown Covid variants lingered. Travelling in a pandemic can also be a <u>burden to others</u>, especially in the context of unequal vaccine supplies.

Even though my methodology is mostly based on textual analysis, inability to travel to the region in the early stages of the research has still presented conceptual and ethical challenges. When examining how the global and regional 'politics' of law operate, how do, for example, funding challenges, the immense (legal) bureaucracy, and every-day local politics play into these larger structures? Having insider knowledge on some of the tiny pieces that are needed in the larger puzzle makes quite a difference when delving into the research material. In this post, I aim to share some of the strategies I have used in my attempt to locate alternative and creative ways of gaining a better understanding of the region and field of study. While the strategies were prompted by the inability to travel, they might also serve as an opportunity to reconsider how we conduct fieldwork in general.

It would be naïve to assume that one can become an expert on a region by 'parachuting' into the field. Yet, being physically present allows for spontaneous conversations and networks to form, as well as input from less tangible (but in no way less important) sensorial experiences related to the research environment, which the online format is simply unable to replace. Confronted with this dilemma, and having already started tapping into my academic and professional network in the preparation of my doctoral proposal, I continued connecting with activists, practitioners and scholars through email and Zoom to gain a better understanding of regional perspectives.

A scholarship furthermore allowed me to hire a research assistant in Mexico, who has provided invaluable support and insights. These engagements opens a whole new area of ethical concerns, however, such as 'research extractivism', where researchers (even if unintentionally) take advantage of the unequal power relations between them and the people they interact with for the purpose of research or career advancement. The time and effort that my online contacts generously afforded me should therefore not be taken for granted.

Another strategy was virtually volunteering with an organization that provides legal and humanitarian support to migrants in Mexico and the United States, which I stumbled upon in one of my many virtual conversations.

Initially hoping to spend at least part of the internship in person, but finding new obstacles related to pending immigration procedures in Canada where I'm located, the opportunity to take part through an online format has still been incredibly enriching, both on a personal and academic level. Many of the barriers of online engagement are still present: I can't participate in hallway-chats in the office, have a drink with colleagues after work, or spontaneously get introduced to others working in the same field and city, which are important arenas where networking and learning takes place. Yet, volunteering has allowed for a better understanding of what is happening behind the scenes in the day-to-day operations of my research context.

Being present in the field, even if virtually, not only allows for a better understanding of the field, but provides a closer connection to people's lived experiences. Academia is isolating enough already, and sitting in front of my computer in Ottawa theorizing about issues that are lived by people on an every-day basis in a different geographic location feels absurd. Thus, doing trainings to learn about the work of the organization and participating in weekly debriefs provides important insights into how things look like from the perspective of those working on the ground. It furthermore creates a possibility to discuss and ask questions that might randomly pop up. Hearing about challenges the other colleagues encounter, such as the disappointments from having to turn away clients due to lack of capacity, but also sharing the joy of success achieved after months of persistent advocacy has served an additional purpose: It has reminded me of why I even embarked on this doctoral project which, to be frank, most days feels like a chaotic process with no end in sight.

As a result of the volunteer work with the organization in Mexico, I was able to get in touch with and virtually collaborate with an artist based in Tijuana. While the collaboration is still under development, I have added one of his artworks as an illustration.

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As I attempt to balance the acts of locating information originating from actors on the ground, listening to scholars in the region, while also producing new knowledge, all while online, I continue to reflect upon the possible benefits and harms my actions may have on those I engage with, as explained above. Albeit largely insufficient and itself a sign of privilege, participating in online volunteering and other types of collaboration not only serves as a modest way to contribute to the community, but also helps to reassess the ways in which we conduct research and fieldwork, with its motives, beneficiaries, and effects on the communities we work with. I am still learning and have surely not figured everything out. I hope, however, that reflections around strategies that were initially developed to overcome travel barriers can offer new ideas for collaboration and co-creation of research across borders, even when the pandemic has (hopefully) retreated.

Two Years Into the Pandemic:
What has the Migration Community Learned About Working Online Throughout the Research Cycle?
Talitha Dubow & Eleni Diker

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At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, researchers had to find solutions to conduct research in the midst of travel restrictions and social distancing, and the associated practical, ethical and emotional challenges. In a spirit of optimism and solidarity, the broader social science research community shared a wealth of creative ideas and advice for adapting fieldwork approaches, in particular. Constraints on conventional data collection practices have posed the most obvious difficulties, but the entire research cycle has been affected by the pandemic. Two years on, we are interested to take stock of how migration researchers have responded to these challenges, and to reflect on key learnings to be taken forward into post-pandemic ways of working.
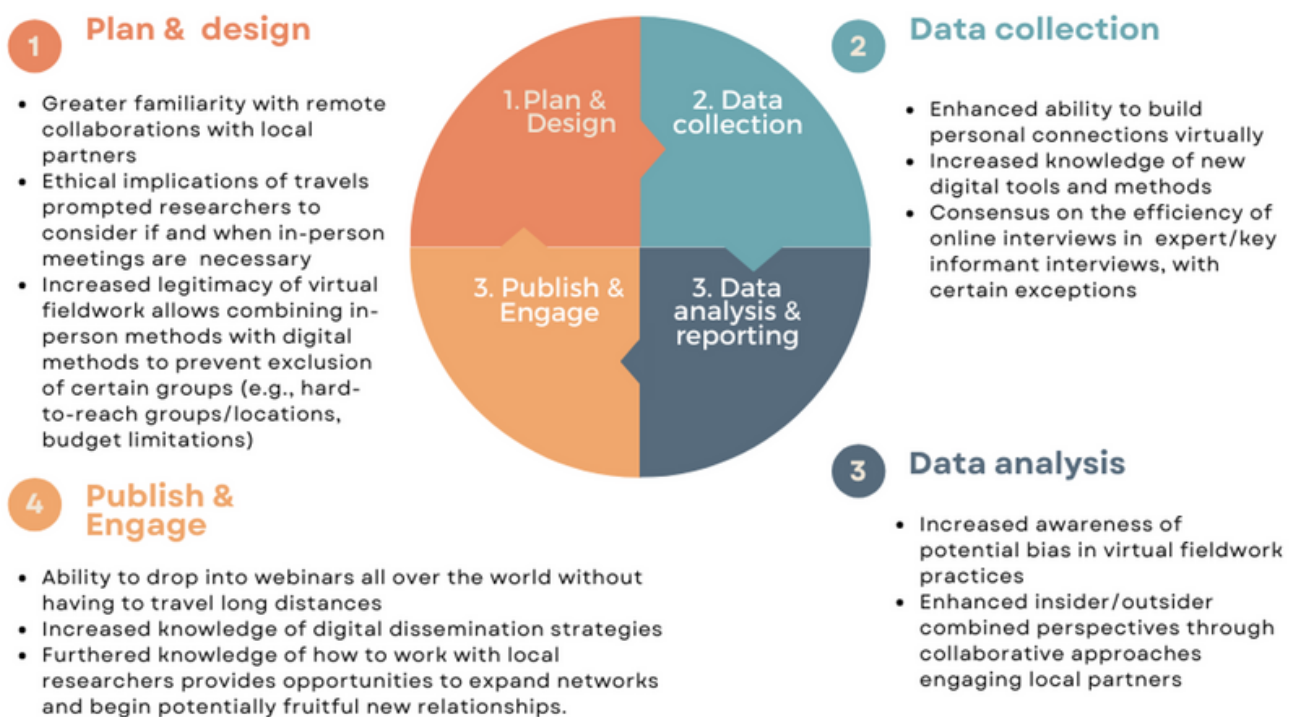
In this blog we summarise some reflections based on our conversations with researchers within our own institute (UNU-MERIT and Maastricht University), at collaborating institutes[1], at the MACIMIDE/DAMR annual conference 2021, as well as based on our own day-to-day observations. In figure 1, we provide an overview of specific lessons and opportunities as these relate to the different stages of the research cycle, and in the following sections we discuss three broader conclusions.

A first observation is that – at least within our own networks – the main trend has been to take conventional semi-structured interviews (or focus groups) "online" (i.e., either via telephone or videoconferencing), or to collaborate with local researchers who are better able to conduct these interviews (either in person or also online). We have not seen much evidence of experimentation with the kinds of more innovative, creative or participatory methods promoted as alternative methodologies towards the beginning of the pandemic. This seems to follow the pre-pandemic trend: Mata-Codesal et al. (2020) have observed that the field of migration studies has been slow to adopt more creative and participatory methods.

Second, we – the migration research community – have got much better at taking our research online. We exchange research findings and hold meetings online with fewer and fewer awkward screen-sharing and audio mishaps. We are able to build meaningful collaborative relationships entirely via email and videoconferencing. We understand better when and how online data collection methods such as telephone or videoconferencing interviews can be done well. We are more aware of the importance of "recorder-off" moments, which takes place naturally in real-life settings (unlike in online settings) when there is a more of an etiquette of saying goodbye, paying a bill or leaving a space together. We make extra effort to create these buffer moments online by, for example, taking some time for a more casual chat pre- and post-interview to transcend the "extractive" researcher-data subject relationship. When the content of research required a more human connection, some have discovered the advantages to having their cat appear in the background (or the foreground) of the video.

Third, we have become more sensitive to the feasibility, advantages and disadvantages of online practices, including not only data collection, but also for research collaboration and dissemination. For example, we hope that online and hybrid seminars and conferences will continue – allowing us to share knowledge with colleagues around the world, without the time, financial and environmental costs of travelling in person. Of course, in-person participation will remain hugely valuable in some cases, but we look forward to this being a choice, rather than a limitation. Regarding data collection, we seem to have reached a consensus that interviews with what are typically referred to as "experts" or "key informants" (i.e., people sharing their views and experiences in a professional capacity) can generally be conducted online without significant loss in terms of data quality, and with substantial gains in efficiency. The greater familiarity with – and legitimacy of – using online methods for data collection should also allow us to plan for the flexible use of such methods as we consider necessary or beneficial (e.g., to reach groups who might otherwise be unable or unwilling to participate in person, or who may prefer to speak more anonymously).

1 Plan & design
- Greater familiarity with remote collaborations with local partners
- Ethical implications of travels prompted researchers to consider if and when in-person meetings are necessary
- Increased legitimacy of virtual fieldwork allows combining in-person methods with digital methods to prevent exclusion of certain groups (e.g., hard-to-reach groups/locations, budget limitations)

2 Data collection
- Enhanced ability to build personal connections virtually
- Increased knowledge of new digital tools and methods
- Consensus on the efficiency of online interviews in expert/key informant interviews, with certain exceptions

4 Publish & Engage
- Ability to drop into webinars all over the world without having to travel long distances
- Increased knowledge of digital dissemination strategies
- Furthered knowledge of how to work with local researchers provides opportunities to expand networks and begin potentially fruitful new relationships.

3 Data analysis
- Increased awareness of potential bias in virtual fieldwork practices
- Enhanced insider/outsider combined perspectives through collaborative approaches engaging local partners

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On the other hand, there's a risk that research funders may push for the use of online data collection methods in order to reduce costs – but with potentially negative implications for data quality and research ethics, in some cases. As we (hopefully) leave pandemic-related restrictions behind, further work and discussion will therefore be needed to build consensus regarding when online research practices are significantly better or necessary, and when they are not (or indeed pose risks), in order to guide shared conversations with collaborators and funders in the planning of new projects.

Despite the challenges, we have demonstrated great capacity for change and adaptation to new circumstances as migration researchers. We have developed alternative forms of collaboration and extended our reach beyond our usual circles, thanks to the digital space. We are more aware of the benefits and trade-offs of an in-person or online approach to research, which can hopefully help us to make better decisions when considering our options. The breadth of these learnings – with relevance across the research cycle – are summarised in Figure 1. As we move forward into post-pandemic times, these learnings will likely change the way we approach migration research.

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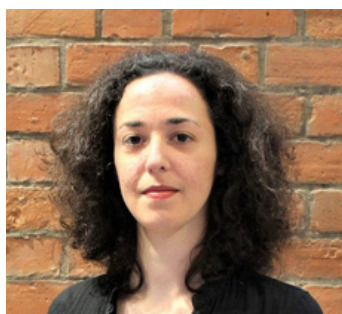
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