

Adaptable But Not Replaceable: Migration Studies Fieldwork in the Time of COVID-19

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Introduction

Well over a year into a global pandemic, it is clear that the ways we approach and conduct research have changed. The flexibility and creativity of researchers has been put to the test. Greatly aided by the hard work and innovations of colleagues in the library and information sciences and IT services, we have unprecedented access to digital research collections and tools, and have learned to remotely connect and collaborate more effectively. These adaptations have provided some normalcy among upheaval and will certainly stay with us as we continue our shift to greener and more equitable research practices, post-pandemic. The strides in digital sources and tools, however, have not adequately addressed the significant impact of COVID-19 restrictions on fieldwork-based migration research.

For qualitative researchers who engage in participatory, arts-based, immersive, intimate, and/or unfolding modes of fieldwork, such as life story interviewing, ethnography, and workshoping, COVID-19 has induced feelings of restlessness, uncertainty, and — particularly when faced with ticking project timelines — worry. Speaking informally with colleagues, we recognized that we were all reassessing, rescheduling, and redesigning our fieldwork plans, but often found ourselves weighing these decisions on our own.

In response, the Migration Institute of Finland hosted an open online research sem-

inar on March 9, 2021, that delved into how researchers have adapted their fieldwork and participatory practices in the face of pandemic restrictions. The seminar featured presentations by Marja Tiilikainen and Mervi Kaukko (“Relational Wellbeing in the Lives of Young Refugees” project), Outi Kähäri and Kristel Edelman (“Postmemories of Ingrian Pasts” project), Tiina-Riitta Lappi (“Displacement, Placemaking and Wellbeing in the City” project), and Samira Saramo (“Deep Mapping the ‘Uncharted Territories’ of Finnish Migrant History” project).

Based on the timely and important seminar discussion, we thought it would be useful to continue the conversation here, through three short essays. First, Marja Tiilikainen, Mervi Kaukko, and Fath E Mubeen reflect on “Researching Relational Wellbeing of Refugee Youth during COVID-19.” Next, Samira Saramo shares experiences from “Connecting Place and Finnishness in Ontario through Online Writing Workshops.” Finally, Tiina-Riitta Lappi offers important considerations on what happens to ethnographic research when the field is out of reach in “Doing Ethnography from a Distance?” Together, the essays offer examples of flexibility and adaptability in action, while showing the limits of methodological substitution and the ultimate irreplaceability of fieldwork.

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Researching Relational Wellbeing of Refugee Youth during COVID-19

In the beginning of 2020 — before we understood the seriousness of the pandemic — we started off with a new research project titled as “Relational Wellbeing in the Lives of Young Refugees” and funded by NordForsk (<https://www.drawingtogetherproject.org/>). The project focuses on how young refugees create wellbeing through social relationships in their new societies in Finland, Norway and Scotland. Our participants have migrated as unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors, but are now adults and have received permission to stay in their countries of settlement. These young people are now building lives in their new home countries. Whilst creating new lives, they maintain those existing relationships that are important for them and develop new ones. We will accompany these young adults for a period of three years in Finland, Norway and Scotland. We will meet them on a regular basis to map how their relational wellbeing evolves over time. The research project is conducted in collaboration with the Migration Institute of Finland and Tampere University in Finland, NORCE in Norway, and University of Bedfordshire in the UK.

We are employing arts-based and more “traditional” qualitative research methods to understand how relational wellbeing comes to be, is sustained and transforms. Together with the young participants and local artists, we use art to communicate relational wellbeing as young people experience and express it. In art workshops, we encourage our young participants to create visual pieces of art about their relational wellbeing. These artworks will depict three points in the young people’s lives: the present as they experience it, the future as they imagine it, and the past as they remember it. The images will then be used as a basis for interviews. At the end of the project, we will put their stories, images

and objects together to see how the past, present and future connect, and how these young refugees develop sustaining relationships with other people and add to the life of their new countries.

In Finland, we work with 17 young participants, who are between 18 and 30 years of age. Their background countries include Somalia, Congo, Afghanistan and Iran, and currently they live in Tampere, Turku, Oulu and Helsinki region.

Meeting with Participants during a Pandemic

In Finland and Norway, where the pandemic situation at the time was better compared to the UK, we were successful in organising the first art workshop and the first round of individual interviews face-to-face. However, continuously intensifying pandemic meant that we had to plan everything in uncertainty. We had to make significant changes to the research design at short notice. For example, Finnish and Norwegian welcome events were originally planned for the whole group of young participants. Those were changed into small group gatherings or even individual meetings. Another obstacle was the lack of available venues. Due to COVID-19 many university premises and other public spaces were closed. When we managed to get together, we reminded the participants not to attend if they had even mild symptoms. We maintained distance, reminded the youth about the use of masks, and provided hand sanitisers in all our meetings. However, many seemed to forget the safety measures during the long and intensive workshops.

In Scotland, where the pandemic and related restrictions were more severe, the first workshop and interviews had to be conduct-

ed online. This had an impact on the study design and in particular, on the relationships that formed among the youth and between the participants and the researchers.

The Impact of COVID-19 on the Wellbeing of Young Refugees

Young people participating in this study experienced pandemic-linked isolation and immobility differently. Some of them noted that their social network had shrunk, as they were not able to socialise with as many people as before. Contact was kept with particular and close friends only. Some struggled with studying remotely and not having access to ordinary support services and study-related peers. Some, in particular those whose family members lived far from them, were able to maintain their existing relationships online like before.

Some participants asserted serious concerns because of the COVID-19 related restrictions. Separation from loved ones, confinement, loss of usual routine, limited social and physical contact and the loss of freedom caused frustration, boredom and a sense of isolation. This was distressing for all and had dramatic effects on the wellbeing of some participants. Some young participants continued working in the health care sector, and had to work longer hours than usual, due to colleagues' sick leaves and quarantines.

However, our Finnish participants were pleased to participate in the art workshop. This is understandable as the workshop of-

fered a short break from the prolonged cycle of isolation. The opportunity to engage both socially and physically enabled participants to provide an in-depth response when inquired about their relational wellbeing.

What Have We Learned?

The COVID-19 situation and related social restrictions have been stressful for many, but they have also provided opportunities to deepen and expand our understanding on how to adapt to new ways of doing fieldwork and data collection. Some tasks and appointments may be effectively conducted in virtual space even in the future once the pandemic is over. However, we have seen that face-to-face meetings cannot be fully replaced by online tools. Physical, social and visual interaction in the same space provides us with detailed and deeper data unachievable with online tools. Participants of our study valued the sense of community. They described the art workshop as a chance to be with others, have open communication and get their needs fulfilled. Many also reported shared emotional connections.

A project with relational wellbeing in its core cannot solely rely on digital means. Building a trusting relationship with a new person is hard in all situations, but it is particularly hard without face-to-face meetings and time spent together. It is possible, however, to maintain a relationship online once the relationship exists already.

Samira Saramo

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Connecting Place and Finnishness in Ontario through Online Writing Workshops

Living with a global pandemic, we have all found ourselves remaking plans and re-envisioning the possible. Such negotiations have significantly impacted our personal lives, as well as our research. COVID-19 has closed many physical and metaphorical doors and the disruption, frustration, and uncertainty require time to work through. For researchers engaged in site-based, participatory, and/or ethnographic fieldwork, the pandemic has demanded patience, flexibility, and imagination. Though some research doors remain firmly closed — not easily or sufficiently

substituted through remote means — other doors have opened. Here, I offer reflections on recent adjustments to my research practice, highlighting (to me) new approaches for community engagement, source collection, and knowledge production.

In September 2020, I began work on a new four-year research project, "Deep Mapping the 'Uncharted Territories' of Finnish Migrant History," funded by the Kone Foundation. Through the project, I am situating Finnish migrant narratives on place and belonging in the overlapping contexts of settler colo-

nial structures, the environment, and changing demographics over time in the Canadian province of Ontario. To promote engagement and dialogue, the project will result in an openly accessible multi-sensory digital map through which people can explore these intersections and fluidities. In addition to archival research at several repositories, a critical component of this project is immersive fieldwork. In order to create the multi-sensory layers of the map, I will spend time getting the feel for places central to Finnish migrant histories and stories, interviewing people, photographing places, recording soundscapes, and creating intimate maps of Finnish place and belonging. Ongoing COVID-19 restrictions, however, have forced me to put off this fieldwork indefinitely and has made planning very difficult.

My project's multifaceted source base fortunately means that even with fieldwork on pause, I can continue to work through, for example, digital archival collections. Yet, as a researcher who thrives on community engagement and making connections, the distance from the "field" has felt disheartening. But, just when it felt this door had (temporarily) closed, an opportunity arose at the Migration Institute of Finland to collaborate with writer, journalist, and facilitator Leena-Kaisa Laakso. Laakso's work also explores people's connections to places, including old wooden houses and, more recently, forests, and she has extensive experience in leading writing workshops, including with Finnish migrants. Drawing on Laakso's proven repertoire of exercises that inspire writing and group cohesion and my scholarly background in Finnish migration, Canadian history, and life writing studies, in late 2020, we organized an online writing workshop for people with Finnish backgrounds and connections to Ontario.

The Workshop

The aim of the workshop, as stated in its announcement, was to "develop writing that reflects on participants' connections (or disconnections) to places in Ontario and how these places may relate to their personal understandings of Finnishness and Finnish history in Ontario." I shared the workshop information on Finnish Canadian Facebook groups and emailed the announcement to several Finnish cultural and religious organizations, with the request that they forward it to their members. It was also featured in the Finnish Canadian newspaper *Kanadan Sanomat*.

Enrollment in the free workshop did not require any writing experience, but participants did need basic internet and techno-

logical access and literacy. To make participation as accessible as possible, we arranged two forms of the workshop. The first was a more intensive and participatory group that included three scheduled Zoom group workshops (over three consecutive weekends, each session lasting 2.5–3 hours), weekly homework assignments, and personalized written feedback from Leena-Kaisa Laakso and me. For those who could not commit to the three meeting dates, did not have adequate access to the internet or needed tools, or who simply preferred to participate more independently, we arranged an "Email Group." This group received a weekly package of writing exercises over three consecutive weeks. The completed exercises were then emailed back to us, and Laakso and I sent personalized feedback in return. The workshop ran from late-November to mid-December 2020, and nine participants completed the "Zoom Group" and three participants completed the "Email Group."

Over the course of the workshop, participants had an opportunity to engage in a range of activities, including writing creative short stories, poetry, and different types of autobiographical texts. Participants also drew pictures, used photography, and incorporated material objects from their lives into their writing practices. Participants worked through exercises such as "Finnishness in my everyday life in Ontario," "Encounters," "Smells," and a culminating piece on the theme "When Canadian Me Meets Finnish Me." All of the workshop activities were aimed at addressing "being in place," identity, and belonging from perspectives of the sensory, the material, the emotional, the everyday, and the temporal. Leena-Kaisa Laakso guided participants through the practicalities of the writing exercises and gave feedback to help shape their personal craft of writing. My role, in both written feedback and during the Zoom meetings, was to help historically contextualize the themes and experiences being explored through writing, to ask questions and facilitate discussion, and to encourage participants to dig more deeply into their explorations of Finnishness and belonging.

The "Zoom Group" read, shared, and extensively discussed their writing and images with each other, and the peer-support proved invaluable enriching. Despite coming from rather different backgrounds, generations, and writing experience, the "Zoom Group" very quickly developed a warm, open, and constructive rapport. This group has continued to stay in contact through email, occasionally sharing writing, ideas, and opportunities. The "Email Group" workshop also worked successfully, though naturally with quite different

dynamics and less exchange. From feedback, it seems participants in both groups felt the workshop helped their development as writers and to think about their Finnish heritage in new ways.

What We Gain and What We May Lose

The workshop fostered the emergence of a new community of Finnish migrant writers that geographically spans far beyond what my original fieldwork plan could achieve. While my immersive fieldwork will - out of practical necessity - primarily center on areas surrounding Thunder Bay and Toronto, the workshop brought together participants located there and elsewhere in Ontario, but also as far away as Prince Edward Island, Alberta, Manitoba, and Louisiana. Likewise they brought different connections to Ontario, allowing me to learn about places and histories far from the reaches of Finnish enclaves in Thunder Bay and Toronto.

Over the course of the workshop weeks, the significance of the Finnish language and related feelings of dis/connection emerged as an important theme, shaping the ways we discussed and wrote about Finnishness and place. Workshop activities could be completed in either English or Finnish. Participants had differing levels of fluency in Finnish and, in the end, one participant did all of their writing in Finnish, some chose to do a mix, but most wrote in English. While most discussion was in English, the Zoom meetings developed a unique bilingual flow, where Finnish and Canadian Finnglish words peppered reflections on complex feelings surrounding loss of language, family genealogies, and the meanings of being Finnish without the language.

Together, the participants brought out important new voices and perspectives on Finnish migrant history, culture, and identity. Their workshop writing and discussion made connections across places and times, highlighting fascinating overlaps in participants' relationships with particular foods and objects, and their feelings about generations and community change over time. I learned a lot from the participants, and their writing

and shared experiences have made an important contribution to my understanding of Finnish migrant history.

The workshop has resulted in new original source material. After reviewing the potential research uses, all of the participants gave their informed consent, allowing their writing exercises and other workshop materials to be used in my research project (some openly named, others anonymously). Their writing will be featured on the project map, providing personal narrations about the specific places and events they tell of. Additionally, participants have given permission to donate their writing from the workshop to the Migration Institute Archives after the conclusion of the research project in 2024, which can benefit future research.

The writing workshop successfully brought people together to think through Finnish Canadian identities and histories — both personal and collective — and offered a welcome and creative reprieve from pandemic routine. It offered some of what I love about the field, but it must be acknowledged that, nonetheless, many elements of immersive fieldwork have no substitute. You can't feel the ups and downs of the terrain or experience new smells, sights, and nuanced sounds through a laptop screen. Likewise, you can't photograph or record the field from afar. There is much we miss in the subtleties of human interaction from a distance. Immersive fieldwork results in knowledges of people, places, and the research process that cannot be replicated through other means. I eagerly await the opportunity to get back out to feel all the things that come from being in place. Spontaneity and adjustment are vital parts of being in the field, but have also proven to play a key role in research in the age of pandemic. The pandemic put my fieldwork plans on hold, but through it I found my way to the creation of the "Place and Finnishness in Ontario" writing workshop and the connections it came to offer. The resulting new collaborations, methods, and engagement in creative processes have enriched my research in unexpected ways and will continue to inform it far beyond these days of COVID-19.

Doing Ethnography from a Distance?

In February 2019 I started my ethnographic fieldwork in Vantaa as a part of the research project “Displacement, Placemaking and Well-being in the City” with the aim of studying migrants’ uses of urban spaces, placemaking practices and space-related experiences. During that first month I had visited research sites and spent time getting to know people as well as formal, informal and voluntary agents and activities organized by and for migrants in the locations chosen for the study. My initial plan was to stay longer periods in Vantaa starting from the beginning of March but that plan was never realized as the whole country went into a lockdown due to the COVID-19 around that time. This also meant that I could not continue my ethnographic work as I had planned.

Ethnography in general is an art of studying people in their naturally occurring settings or “fields”, as they are usually called. Ethnographically oriented researchers apply methods which capture people’s ordinary activities and social meanings so that the researcher participates directly in the setting in order to collect data in a systematic manner but without meaning being imposed on them externally. Data collection in ethnographic processes is flexible and often quite un-structured (beforehand) to avoid pre-fixed arrangements and categorizations. It is the interaction with people and their surroundings, social as well as material, which is at the core of doing ethnographic research and requires researcher’s presence in shared spaces with the people she or he studies. So it is quite obvious that having to keep distance and working mainly from home for over a year now due to the COVID-19 has greatly affected my research plans as well as the whole international and transdisciplinary project which was largely based on cooperative activities and data collection in diverse urban locations in the UK, Finland, Norway and India.

When people’s lives are ethnographically studied in everyday contexts, it is the contextuality and situatedness of behaviours and meanings attached to them that is of essence. What do we do when this is not an option? Are there alternative ways of doing ethnographic research? What exactly is it that gets lost when physical proximity with people and sites is

not possible? I have had a lot of time to reflect on these questions during the past year but haven’t found any all-embracing answers or solutions. Instead, I will share some thoughts based on my own experiences.

From Shared Spaces to Online Discussions

When the lockdown began, I had just barely started my fieldwork period which meant that I had not made that many connections with people so far, especially migrants. Meeting people and getting to know them personally would have been very important for building trust and allowing the people I hoped to become more involved in the study to gain a clear picture of the aim of the project and how it was being done. Without those connections it proved quite hard to get in touch with people later on since it became clear that the COVID-19 situation would restrict research activities for quite a long time and alternative methods for gathering data were needed. So it became obvious that the possibility of doing or continuing previously started ethnographic research from a distance would depend on the phase of the study and the type of the community or even the topic that is studied. Even if I had been able to travel to Vantaa for my research, the circumstances at the sites where I had planned to do my study had changed, since people were urged not to gather in public spaces or in the facilities normally used for a variety of social activities and for meeting other people. It is also important to keep in mind that the COVID-19 has affected the daily lives of so many people as their daily routines have changed and they may have experienced economic uncertainty, fear, anxiety and loneliness, among other things.

In my case, clearly the only available alternative, as the period of remote working prolonged, turned out to be online interviews. Working and gathering data in the field focuses usually on a variety of relations, whether between individuals, between people and their environments, organized as collective practices or situatedness of activities in the larger community. Much of this is lost if an online interview is organized with only one person at a time, even if such discussions are

otherwise very valuable as a source of information. Interviews related to fieldwork experiences and observations are made in normal situations as well, but not as isolated from what is happening in the field as was the case in this project due to the pandemic situation. Luckily, I have been able to reach some people for interviews or, rather, what I would describe as research discussions. Since my study has focused on mundane daily practices and ordinary urban spaces, it has turned out to be quite challenging to lead discussions into such topics without being able to relate or contextualize them in particular places. For example, there may be practices, activities, spatial uses, social gatherings etc. which are of great interest to a researcher but do not come up in the interviews as they would if recognized and discussed at the site. There is also a lot of non-verbal information that can be reached by observation and sensitive examination of the surroundings and social activities but are challenging to capture from a distance.

Lessons for the Future

Maybe in the future it could be useful to make (or even sketch) some kind of an alternative plan for situations or circumstances where ethnographic research as intended is not doable or is disturbed somehow along the research process. Even if it was not a necessity as it has been due to the COVID-19, it might be fruitful to consider online discussions as

one part of at least some ethnographic studies. Especially at a stage where actual fieldwork has been done already or is well on the way, online discussions over particular topics or sites, perhaps with some additional material, such as photos, maps etc. could bring forth depth or new aspects on data gathered or produced in the field. This would require careful planning already at the beginning of the project along with other activities.

It is not possible to turn ethnographic research design into a study based on interviews without revising the research design as well. As I had earlier interviewed some stakeholders working with migrants in Vantaa, I continued to do that online, which meant that this part of the study received more attention than was originally planned. However, it could not cover for what was lost otherwise. Knowledge production through an ethnographic process follows a different logic than some other research methods and that is why changing one into another without rethinking the aim of the study may be realized, but not scientifically justified.

Doing ethnography may have proven to be quite challenging during the past year, but at the same time, I have realized probably more than ever before that it provides a means to obtain knowledge and understanding which cannot be achieved in any other way. Ethnography is in many ways quite a sensible research application, which probably should be better recognized and considered when research projects are being planned.