

Introduction

by **Carolina Borda-Niño** | Chief of Research, WWB Colombia Foundation (Women's World Banking Network)
carolinaborda@gmail.com

The conditions of structural inequality accentuated by the COVID-19 pandemic have generated new forms of vulnerability, while those already in place have worsened (see the article by Richards and Hanson in this dossier). These new circumstances pose unavoidable challenges. Research ethics is one of the areas in which new questions are added to the already incomplete task of thinking about the epistemological and methodological challenges of our research. This dossier of *LASA Forum* presents the work of authors whose approaches are particular and novel in their reflections on the practice of research, and who collaborated for this edition with articles that address this pressing theme within the framework of Latin American studies.

Several authors in this dossier reflect on the new challenges faced by indigenous peoples amid the already serious and devastating process of exploitation of natural resources within their territories, promoted or allowed by different governments. The modes of resistance used to face these predicaments resemble those already developed and perfected over decades. María Eugenia Ulfe, Roxana Vergara, and Vanessa Romo show how traditional medicine practices, radio networks, and indigenous organizations' coordination of actions have played a key part in providing protection and survival resources for the Kukama Kukamiria people in response to the Peruvian governments' lack of appropriate response. The means, however, have reflected new possibilities to connect and communicate. Podcasts, for example, provide an interesting way of conveying reflections and calls to action across the Amazon; they also have become more visible as ethnographic objects.

These times have also prompted us to reflect on the transformations of our understanding of "fieldwork," beyond the pandemic. Liliana Rivera and Olga Odgers bring to this dossier a very interesting exploration of already transforming research practices in the context of new forms of perceived risk in different regions of Mexico. Before the pandemic, anthropological fieldwork could not always be taught to university students or practiced by researchers in several regions of the country. Dynamics of illegal economies alongside the armed conflict and increased levels of reported social and political violence had already brought universities to ban in situ research in specific territories. With the advent of the pandemic, such restrictions expanded to the whole country. How to enter the worlds of meaning of our interests through, for example, participant observation, during state-sanctioned social isolation periods?

Against the replacement of "traditional" for "new" methods in social research, the authors suggest considering the pitfalls and new horizons made possible by a dialogue between virtual and face-to-face fieldwork. Interestingly, the availability of research participants to take part in research activities such as interviews grew in some instances. However, such access became sometimes possible through peoples' lack of access to work and welfare opportunities, which left them experiencing higher degrees of vulnerability and isolation. Fieldwork became, for some research participants, a window through which to communicate their experiences and engage with others while experiencing precarious living conditions. At this point, we can do no less than ask ourselves about the ethical dilemmas we have faced as researchers during the pandemic. Do the already questioned ethical frameworks stand as legitimate under the new

contexts? Are there other ethical questions we could not or would not have asked before, but which are now pressing for an open discussion?

Carlos Vladimir Zambrano offers a very timely reflection on the morality of research. He suggests considering the ethical aspects of knowledge production not only in relation to data-gathering techniques or methodological designs but also in accord with the very purpose of conducting a piece of research and generating knowledge in a particular field. According to Zambrano, the pandemic worked as a catalyst rather than a transformative force, both in relation to social relations and research. Digital-based everyday interactions, and study of them, were already in place, but were working at a pace not compatible with the pandemic, understood not as a virus but as a “Sociocultural Emergent Phenomena.” Under these circumstances, Zambrano brings forward the need to reflect on what he calls “the morality of ethnography,” defined as a system of shared values and attitudes toward knowledge development in research, which functions as a common ground for researchers. The role of participants in current research (or, in the digital world, “data producers”) begets the need to consider the expectations and possibilities of the agreement on shared values and attitudes toward our place as subjects in the production of knowledge and the means available to this enterprise in the coming years.

This question demands a more urgent but also difficult discussion in relation to human suffering. In this vein, and among other very important and suggestive invitations, Mónica Maher asks the reader to consider the deeper ethical implications of the researcher/subject relationship in terms of the direct responsibility of the researcher toward the one suffering. As we know, Maher reminds us, we experience multiple pandemics that have become more acute because of the COVID-19 virus. Hunger and domestic violence, among others, account for a wide experience of suffering that goes along with the militarization of society and the widespread violation of human rights. Maher suggests an avenue of thought whereby witnessing suffering and living it might create a shared experience, which is problematic but could also

give rise to new ways of understanding the effects and responsibilities attached to studying human suffering and acting upon it.

Maher’s invitation to look at the relationships produced within the research endeavor and their consequences takes a more self-exploratory nuance thanks to Patricia Richards and Rebecca Hanson. It is a timely invitation that the authors have been working on for several years. Many conversations held in academic settings on the effects of the pandemic on social research have focused on what is being lost because of our inability to conduct face-to-face fieldwork. Could this be an opportunity, Hanson and Richards ask, to reflect on what could be gone for good? Should the conditions allow face-to-face fieldwork to resume, would we go back to ignoring the researcher’s body and the intersectional character of its vulnerability? What are the effects of power relations on the gendered, racialized, and classed, idealized researcher’s persona and the relationships researchers immerse themselves in when in the field and after returning to their academic communities?

We are scarcely tempted through our pedagogical and academic practices to embark upon a self-critical reflection on intimacy, power, gender, and class within academia and what of that luggage we take with us into the field permeating the knowledge we produce and the subjects we become within and outside it. Certainly, many of us don’t wish for a return to our academic common sense before the pandemic, but rather for a reevaluation of what constitutes that idealized researcher that many have been more or less encouraged to embody, with all the costs it has entailed in terms of our experiences of vulnerability, suffering, and violence, as well as for the knowledge we create and legitimate. Younger generations of researchers have an opportunity to create new paths of becoming while those with years of experience have the responsibility of leaving the doors open, through their teaching and research practices, for a much needed reflection on what constitutes the locus and the subjects of the whole research enterprise.

The following pages are the first part of a multifaceted reflection on some of the methodological/ethical questions and dilemmas those involved in research on Latin America, and beyond, are facing right now. Given its complexity, we have decided to dedicate the Spring issue to this same theme with the hope and awareness of covering—always partially—the pressing issues we are facing with new variants each day. May this be an opportunity to invite the reader to participate in one of the presidential workshops to be held at LASA's next conference, where we will bring together junior and senior researchers to discuss real-case scenarios and develop a toolbox that might be useful in the time ahead. There is much work to be done and knowledge, care, and change to emerge within and outside academia out of this trying period. //