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Towards a praxis of care in post-pandemic fieldwork: Comparing ethnographic encounters during Covid-19

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ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of ensuring the wellbeing of both researchers and participants throughout the research process. In this paper, we argue that in order to produce caring research, the wellbeing of researchers must not be neglected. Using our experiences as three doctoral researchers undertaking ethnographic fieldwork during the pandemic, we consider what it means to do research which has a 'praxis of care' at its core. By consciously embedding care into the research process, we argue that we can work towards research that prioritises multiple modes of care and compassion. To demonstrate this, we present and reflect on our three related, but individual experiences as ongoing case studies. Grounding our own research encounters within broader literature focused on self-care in early career research alongside feminist perspectives, we ask the following questions: In the pursuit of knowledge, what does taking a step back to care for ourselves look like? How can we plan fieldwork which operates without harm for both researcher and participant? Finally, we contemplate what fieldwork with an epistemological commitment to 'care' for both researchers and participants could look like and propose some practical recommendations for incorporating a praxis of care throughout the research process.

Ana-Maria, Fieldnotes, 4th January 2021

After dinner, Boris Johnson announces a new national lockdown, schools will shut and the government instructs people to 'stay at home'. The earliest date for vulnerable groups to be vaccinated, which may put an end to the lockdown, is mid-February. Given the government's track record, I cannot imagine when the restrictions will actually be lifted. I avoid thinking what a month and a half indoors with my participants will mean for my mental health.

Lucy, Fieldnotes, 26th February 2021

I'm writing these notes on the 2nd march so details might be a little hazy. I was absolutely dead after doing 4 hours of Zoom fieldwork in a row on Friday - I actually got a really terrible migraine and ended up taking yesterday off. I think it's important to talk to supervisors about how I do my fieldwork without destroying my health.

1. Introduction

In this paper, we ask a deceptively simple question: what could qualitative research which holds care at its very core look like? Defined by the World Health Organisation (WHO) as 'a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity', we consider how 'health' (in its multiple registers) can be used in the development of qualitative research *that cares*. In this, we are clear on our position: without all aspects of researcher wellbeing being treated as paramount, participant wellbeing is neglected and thus any research which is carried out is lacking due ethical diligence.

The Covid-19 pandemic has had far-reaching consequences for the way qualitative research is carried out more broadly, explored by a growing academic literature that focuses specifically on health-based research (Rahman et al., 2021; Rahman, Tuckerman, Vorley, & Gherhes, 2021; Teti, Schatz, & Liebenberg, 2020; Tremblay et al., 2021; Vindrola-Padros et al., 2020; Watson, Lupton, Michael, & Watson, 2019). From methods to epistemic positions, the Covid-19 pandemic has required researchers to reconsider how and what they research. Within anthropology, these reflections both before and during the pandemic have led to a rejection of what Günel, Varma, and Watanabe label 'fieldwork truisms' (2020: no pg) whereby the researcher must set off to a faraway land and easily relinquish her own life and responsibilities

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(see also Chua & Mathur, 2018; Faubion, 2009; Tsing, 2005). We follow Günel, Varma, and Watanabe's (2020; see also Günel & Watanabe, 2023) footsteps to ask that changes to fieldwork models are made not only to accommodate the researcher's competing commitments, but also their health and wellbeing. In this paper, we write from our training in anthropology, but we acknowledge that these models are also productively critiqued in other cognate disciplines that use ethnography and qualitative methods (Katz, 1994; Sundberg, 2003; Thornton, 2022; Watts, 2008).

In what follows, we present our experiences since beginning our doctorates in 2019 as three related, yet individual case studies.[1] We base our diverse experiences on previous research arguing for self-care for early career researchers (ECRs), alongside feminist perspectives and Black Feminist Thought on self-care more broadly. We structure our reflections under three normative phases of doing ethnographic research, although we acknowledge that they are often overlapping and blurred (Günel, Varma, & Watanabe, 2020): 'Starting the PhD', 'Going to the Field and Doing Fieldwork' and 'Returning Home and Writing Up'. Our aim throughout this paper is to showcase the different aspects of fieldwork which may be detrimental to the wellbeing of researchers and participants alike. We illustrate the places where our fieldwork practices fell outside of 'traditional' models in order to cultivate caring research practices, both for ourselves and our participants. Finally, we envisage what forms of ethnographic research that have a praxis of care at their centre could look like, and present practical solutions for embedding care throughout the research process.

Writing this paper was, for us, a form of catharsis. We want to embrace the messiness and logical inconsistencies that come with doing qualitative research, especially ethnography. We are also wary of the over-romanticisation of this messiness, which places serendipity, chance and responsiveness above the wellbeing of all those involved in the research process. After three years of pandemic anxiety, we came together to write this article as co-authors, but more importantly as friends (see also Oliver & Morris, 2022). It is in the writing that we began to consider this praxis of care and how we might use our experiences to articulate practical changes for the future. We hope what follows will contribute to a broader conversation about researcher and participant wellbeing, and allow our readers to consider their own practices of self-care during the research process.

1.1. Theorising care

When writing this paper, we came up against the same theoretical hurdle again and again: what do we mean when talking about care? There has been a recent move in feminist social science to emphasise self-care (Nicol & Yee, 2017; Rosenbaum & Talmor, 2022), but this emphasis has yet to be embedded into institutional training and the practicalities of the research methodologies that shape our work. How then, do we articulate what we experienced when doing research during the Covid-19 pandemic as constituting caring acts?

To help in our analysis, we borrow Akemi Nishida's definition of care as 'a way to orient ourselves and direct our energy towards something or someone' (Nishida (2022):9). To supplement this, we turn (as we do often throughout this paper) to the work of Sara Ahmed (2017). Drawing heavily from Audre Lorde[2], Ahmed argues that in order to care for those around us, we need to prioritise self-care in order to produce just one of the many 'ordinary ways we look out for each other' (Ahmed, 2017:240). In an interview after the publication of *Living a Feminist Life*, Ahmed articulates this point with further clarity, stating that 'caring for oneself is also about caring for others' (Fitzgerald, 2017). Here, our position becomes clear: by consciously embedding a praxis of care throughout the research process, we can work towards research that prioritises and emphasises reciprocal modes of care and compassion.

1.2. Theoretical orientation

Before discussing our own praxis of care, we first outline the key theoretical positions which informed our thinking. We do not want to claim originality in our analysis; we are not the first people to explore these concepts, nor will we be the last. Instead, we draw three strands of literature together, in order to radically affirm the importance of caring for oneself when researching challenging topics or at difficult times.

1.2.1. Early career researcher (ECR)[3] calls for self-care in research

This paper feeds into a small, yet promising, niche of interventions from ECRs that centre care for the researcher within their methodologies. Our critique of the expectations of fieldwork placed on ECRs, especially on women, people of colour, or disabled researchers, is far from novel. Critiques of these expectations by doctoral researchers have increased across the social sciences, many of which echo the dilemmas we unpack in our reflections below. In comparing their fieldwork experiences, Billo and Hiemstra (2013) acknowledge how researchers' personal lives intersect with the realities of fieldwork. They explain how they failed to consider 'the flesh and blood, everyday needs and realities of our own bodies in the field' (2013: 321), from deciding where to live to the emotional impact of research on difficult topics. The emotional toll of fieldwork arises in many of these interventions, with ECRs writing against the 'culture of silence' (Caretta & Jokinen, 2016) that undermines the experiences of researchers battling trauma and depression (Johnson, 2016; Lewis, 2019) or post-traumatic stress disorder (Taylor, 2019) during and after fieldwork. Building community and making space for oneself to slow down emerge as key solutions, from adequate supervision and training (Caretta & Jokinen, 2016) to writing groups (Van Dyk, Evans, Romero, Friend, & Lefkowitz, 2021) and academic

[1] When discussing our positionalities, we decided to present our narratives as three distinct, yet related voices in order to avoid reproducing an image of a heterogenous 'PhD student' as a young, white, middle-class, non-disabled student. We instead take space within the paper to describe our specific fieldwork experiences before unpacking their commonalities and differences in shared reflections.

[2] Audre Lorde (1934–1992) was an African American feminist, writer and civil rights activist. Lorde emphasised self-care as a form of resistance and a means to nurture oneself amidst oppression and marginalisation. She famously stated 'Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation.' Lorde advocated for a form of self-care that leads to collective healing from which we draw inspiration.

[3] Mainly used in UK academia, early career researcher (ECR) encompasses a range of researchers at the start of their career, from newly-minted doctoral candidates to those with a few years of post-doctoral experience under their belt. UK Research and Innovation, one of the main funding bodies in the UK, defined ECRs as those within eight years of their PhD award or within six years of their first academic appointment (UKRI, 2023). Although our paper mainly speaks to our experience of doctoral study, we use the term ECR to highlight how our reflections may apply not only to those studying for their doctorates, but also to the wider, neoliberal academic environment that routinely undervalues the work, voices and experiences of ECRs (Burton & Bowman, 2022; Ivancheva, 2015; Rao, Hosein, & Raaper, 2021). Even when deciding authorship for this paper, we have decided to use an arbitrary measure (alphabetical order) rather than assigning specific value to our different roles in writing, and by extension implementing a hierarchy of value. The aim of this was to push against the ever-present ECR requirement to be 'first author' and to be in constant competition for jobs, recognition and prestige against one's colleagues and friends.

friendships (Oliver & Morris, 2022). A growing minority even investigated how Covid-19 magnified these issues when ECRs were expected to 'adapt and adjust' (Johnson, 2022) and seamlessly shift methodologies without adequate support (Fratini, Hemer, & Chur-Hansen, 2022; Rutter, Hasan, Pilson, & Yeo, 2021; Saxena, 2023), a challenge we further explore in our reflections on fieldwork during the Covid-19 pandemic.

However, care for the researcher was absent from fieldwork models long before Covid-19. In a paper over a decade old entitled *Field of Screams,* Pollard (2009) investigated the experiences of sixteen anthropology doctoral students across the UK. Participants in Pollard's study reflected on the ideal of fieldwork as a solo pursuit requiring hardship as a 'rite of passage', rather than being grounded in self-care to facilitate reflection and ethical conduct. These undue expectations intersected with challenges that often shape fieldwork - bereavement, poor mental health, so-called 'tropical' illnesses such as dengue, sexual harassment, and insecure accommodation - to constitute experiences which 'eroded, reshaped or transformed their sense of self' (Pollard, 2009:5). Pollard's paper received various responses from anthropologists at the time (Barry, 2009; Mills, 2009; Okely, 2009), with some accusing participants of simply failing to be socialised as fully-fledged ethnographers where 'the survival of the misery and bafflement of fieldwork is the best way to see who is, and is not fit to join the culture' (Delamont, 2009:1). It is these idealised norms of fieldwork that we are writing against, turning instead to the work of feminist scholars and Black radical thinkers focused on self-care within academia.

1.2.2. *Feminist housework and feminist complaint*

To develop our own praxis of care, we align our thinking with Sara Ahmed's work on 'feminist housework' and 'complaint' within the academy (Ahmed, 2017, 2021). We draw from long and important histories within feminist anthropology, explicitly framing our work as not simply being focused on the lives of women, but focused on the question of justice for all (Mahmud, 2021; Visweswaran, 2003). Mahmud (2021) defined 2020 as a moment of what Ahmed would call 'feminist snap'. Years of discontent within the discipline of anthropology became compounded by the pressures of the pandemic, and from this came a renewed drive to reclaim feminist anthropologies for the future. While doing our doctorates, we found ourselves working at the apex of this 'feminist snap'.

This paper contributes to this critique, embodying what Ahmed (2017) terms 'feminist housework'. In her words, but again drawing from Lorde (1984), 'feminist housework does not simply clean and maintain a house. Feminist housework aims to transform the house, to rebuild the master's residence' (Ahmed, 2017:7). By thinking through, and reflecting on, our experiences, we do this housework. In this paper, we have slowly tidied up the loose ends that have caused us discomfort over past years, pondered about how to do meaningful self-care, how to navigate the complex demands of fieldwork, and how to manage the constant (re)negotiation of boundaries central to ethnographic research. By taking the time to do this 'slow scholarship' (Mountz et al., 2015), our intention is to transform this housework into something practical and meaningful for ourselves, our research communities, and our participants. We hope that this analysis contributes to the creation of a more nurturing praxis of care within post-pandemic qualitative research.

Furthermore, we think with Ahmed's (2021) *'Complaint!'* to examine institutional systems of power and how they are replicated. Here, the concept of the 'feminist ear' first introduced in *'Living a Feminist Life'* (Ahmed, 2017) becomes central. This 'feminist ear' becomes an institutional tactic that can help us to 'dismantle institutional barriers to hear complaints' (Ahmed, 2021:6). By lending our feminist ears to each others' worries about what we were most 'ashamed' of during our fieldwork, we have *begun* to dismantle some of the barriers which led to our feelings of isolation and caused us to worry for our health, and that of our participants, in the first place. This is only a starting point. In the future, we need to think about how the feminist ear can become incorporated into the institutional structures that shape research processes, and make careful listening a central tenet of qualitative research from beginning to end. We hope that this paper can serve as a collective feminist ear for those interested in doing this work.

1.2.3. *Black Feminist Thought and approaches to self-care*

We explore the application of Black Feminist Theory in comprehending and addressing the varied racial and gendered dynamics within knowledge production, particularly regarding (an absence of) self-care in qualitative research. Black feminist praxis as a social and political framework imagines and affirms the freedom of Black communities across the world. Specific acts of resistance through the body and wellness (hooks, 1993; Lorde, 1997), the centering of Black women's voices through intentional citational practices (Williams, 2022), slowing down (Banda, 2022) and the deployment of creative methodologies such as critical fabulation (Campt, 2017; Cox, 2015; Hartman, 2008) all highlight the ambitions and possibilities of work centred on Black womanhood and radical self-care. While this section cannot fully delve into the topic, it aims to highlight how principles from Black Feminist Theory informed our understanding of self-care and our coming together to start a conversation about prioritising researcher health and wellbeing.[4]

Within anthropology, to confront hostile and racist establishments, Black feminist anthropologists have questioned cis, heteronormative, white, male research practices and have highlighted the absence of Black women's perspectives and their contributions within the discipline's history (Bazen, 2018; Harrison, 2010; Williams, 2022). Scholars such as Zora Neale Hurston (1986), Alexus Bazen (2018) and Nolwazi Mkhwanazi (2023) have offered critical and inspirational reflections on their experiences as Black women studying anthropology, spanning the discipline's history and offer lessons about the work that needs to be done to address the exclusion of Black women in anthropology. To navigate Black precarity in hostile academic spaces steeped in white supremacy and misogynoir,[5] Black feminist scholars have created vibrant and radical outlets for self-care. Through publications and social gatherings, Black Feminist Theory has generated a space for healing and communal wellbeing through theorising Blackness and advocating practices of radical refusal (Bailey, 2021; Bazen, 2018; Leath et al., 2023). For example, in 2022 the *'Loophole of Retreat'*, a symposium centred on Black women's intellectual and creative labour linked to Simone Leigh's Venice Biennale exhibition, fostered a collective sense of preservation and pause (Leigh, 2022).

Another expression of self-care within Black feminist thought is letting out and speaking against systems of oppression, especially through anger. In the article 'I AM an Angry Black Woman: Black Feminist Autoethnography, Voice, and Resistance', Rachel Alicia Griffin's (2012) mode of resistance to the dispossession and negation of the intellectual offerings of Black women is driven by anger. Griffin (2012) beautifully captures the generative potential of emotions such as anger to address and highlight the struggles Black women face and how to respond to setbacks, rejections and systemic injustice. Black feminist autoethnographic approaches serve as a form of resistance and provide a crucial narrative to amplify the experiences of Black women in academia. Drawing inspiration from these practices, we organised intentional gatherings where we learned and shared from each other.

[4] We acknowledge that a large number of scholars cited in this section are African American or are affiliated with US based institutions. This fact reflects the state of British higher education where there is a notable low representation of Black professors across all disciplines. The Twitter account @PaperWhispers highlights this underrepresentation, pointing out that 1% of professors in the UK are Black. As of July 2023, there are a 61 Black women professors out of a total of 23,000 professors in the UK.

[5] A term coined by Moya Bailey (2021), a queer Black feminist scholar, to describe the specific intersection of misogyny and anti-black racism that Black women face.

The community the three authors have built in learning and writing their PhDs together has invited the freedom to express anger, anxieties, hopes, vulnerabilities and to articulate what a praxis of care could entail.

2. Starting the PhD (October 2019–August 2020)

2.1. Ana-Maria

My fieldwork plans started a year and a half before the Covid-19 pandemic when I first met participants for my Master's research about Romanians working in so-called 'unskilled' jobs in London and kept in touch with those who agreed to be contacted again for my doctoral fieldwork. At first unable to return to London due to Covid-19, I prepared endless contingency plans overnight. I compiled lists of Facebook groups where Romanians searched for housing or jobs, joined Romanian volunteers' WhatsApp chats and Zoom meetings, and immersed myself in the literature on online ethnography. During the first lockdown, I applied for ethical clearance to conduct my research in person, including my many contingency plans. Promising to follow the UK government's Covid-19 restrictions, I outlined that I would move to London that summer since social distancing restrictions would soon be relaxed. Should the situation change, I expected to fall back onto the online research plan I produced days after the start of the pandemic. My research was seamlessly approved at the start of summer of 2020, despite the number of cases in London reaching staggering numbers and the infection rate slowly growing each day.

2.2. Lucy

Originally, my fieldwork plans were oriented around obtaining NHS Ethics clearance and doing my research out of a GP practice in North East England, with the aim to 'follow the molecules' which constituted different opioid painkillers around local communities (Ecks & Harper, 2013). In February 2020, I began to apply for this NHS ethics clearance, but soon realised this was pointless. During the first UK lockdown, I applied for university ethics clearance in anticipation of beginning research 'in line with UK Covid-19 governance' as soon as possible. This clearance was granted at the end of April 2020.

In reality, I had no idea what the research I had clearance for would actually look like, and felt worried that proposing online research while doing research into health inequalities was inherently contradictory, and had the potential to magnify the very inequalities I endeavoured to highlight. During this time, feelings of dull disappointment permeated the overwhelming stress that shaped living through the unknowns that characterised the first wave of the pandemic. I had spent years thinking about doing this research, and accepting that it was not going to happen left me feeling unmoored, lacking neither direction nor drive.

During my progression viva, I presented three different research plans as options:

Plan A: if everything went back to 'normal' by the end of summer and research could carry on as planned.

Plan B: if a return to normality occurred before the end of 2020.

Plan C: if research had to be carried out entirely online.

After the viva, I spent the summer considering which research plan would be the most likely one to materialise, and attempting to plan accordingly. By this time, I had already spent months communicating with colleagues, friends and family mainly through my laptop and phone. I felt my world shrink around me as I pushed to try and expand it into something resembling 'proper' fieldwork.

2.3. Chimwemwe

I encountered many challenges whilst preparing for fieldwork including navigating university protocols and uncertainties regarding international travel. My planned work to conduct a visual repatriation targeted at artists, archivists, and medical specialists was approved after two tries, on the basis that I postpone any research involving human interaction and only conduct archival research. Global travel restrictions and the closure of the Malawi border made the waiting process more difficult and increased uncertainty about being able to carry out fieldwork. Malawi's borders had closed in March 2020 and did not reopen until September 2020. Additionally, having not seen my family in close to two years and being several months behind my fieldwork schedule added to the pressure. My first application for travel clearance to my field site was denied because of the risks posed by the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic and according to government advice my intended fieldwork was categorised as not essential. At the time of this application my field site had not enforced a lockdown and comparatively the cases rates of Covid-19 in Malawi were much lower than in the UK. I was able to use this difference in Covid-19 cases to successfully appeal the decision. The University's concerns about safety did not take into account the ways my field site had managed to keep Covid-19 infection rates low.

2.4. Joint reflection

How were we meant to do this? This question stayed with us as we navigated the uncertainty of the pandemic whilst trying to adjust our research proposals. Forced to 'adapt and adjust' (Johnson, 2022) seemingly overnight, we struggled to define risk and safety, as the guidelines set by the University varied and revealed inconsistencies in what fieldwork was considered safe. Ethical approval frameworks established a hierarchy of safety, where fieldwork in the UK was subject to less scrutiny than fieldwork in Malawi, despite the fact that the UK had much higher infection rates. For Lucy, the possibility of a hospital-based ethnography and face-to-face fieldwork was ruled out. She prepared for online research and devised creative means to recruit participants. Ana-Maria built on her previous networks and considered a range of safety concerns for herself and her research participants as she prepared for a potential period of research that could take place both online and in person. Chimwemwe put a fundamental component of her research on hold due to travel and pandemic restrictions. The ethical checks required by universities revealed themselves to be insufficient for our wellbeing in the field, as new waves of the pandemic, different management strategies like vaccinations, and later the removal of restrictions showed that our general wellbeing, mental health and safety were ongoing concerns, and not just a one-time clearance. We realised we had to confront assumptions and expectations of fieldwork on our own terms, as the following reflections will explore in more detail.

3. Going to the 'field' and doing fieldwork (August 2020–December 2021)

3.1. Ana-Maria

My fieldwork started serendipitously, a notion often celebrated by qualitative researchers. In my case, serendipity came with anxiety about what seemed like a fantastic 'research opportunity'. Once Covid-19 restrictions relaxed in the summer of 2020, I asked my previous participants about available rooms in a shared house, the only affordable accommodation in London on a PhD stipend. Camelia,[6] one of my previous participants, quickly suggested the spare room in her house. While this offer seemed ideal, I felt uneasy about it. Mother to two young children, Camelia had just had another baby. I knew that her three-bedroom house had previously housed as many as ten people. I debated the move with more experienced researchers who saw it as a fantastic opportunity, laughing off my questions about a lack of privacy. My health or that of my participants did not come up in conversation, despite the rising Covid-19 infection numbers in London at the time. The norms of vulnerability set out by institutional frameworks seemed

[6] This is a pseudonym used in order to protect my participants' anonymity.

murkier than ever. Since my plans to move to London had been approved, why not take up what everyone around me saw as a great research opportunity?

A fortnight later, I arrived at what would be my home for the next year. Camelia and her family became my closest participants and allowed me to observe their family life for my thesis, a conversation we often revisited as our lives became more intertwined. We celebrated birthdays together, prepared food for religious holidays, and shared the drudgery of everyday chores. This process of 'deep' immersion was however far from frictionless, with Covid-19 magnifying the toll of immersion characteristic of ethnographic fieldwork. Doing research during two national lockdowns meant I was permanently inside my 'fieldsite' with little opportunity to take breaks. I felt constantly tugged along by the life events of my host family and needed to be 'switched on' for research at all times, which took its toll on my mental health. Despite being surrounded by other Romanians, I grew increasingly lonely and anxious.

It soon became clear that my host family was not concerned about Covid-19 and crafted ways to evade restrictions. When I spoke about these at conferences, other researchers relished the ethnographic insight that many scholars lacked at the time. Yet, what was analytically interesting placed my health in danger every day. The closest I came to moving out occurred when my hosts agreed to take in two men who had recently arrived from Romania despite my insistence that this would be unsafe during a national lockdown. While the two men left after a couple of nights, I continued to worry about my and my participants' health, especially since Camelia and her husband had significant health problems. Despite getting the Covid-19 vaccine early, I worried about meeting more participants when restrictions eased and bringing the virus home. Concerns about protecting my participants' health crystallised when the entire household caught Covid-19 in the summer of 2021, which we thankfully all survived. I spent my days with deep body aches helping look after the children who ran fevers, trying to be both a friend and a researcher at a time of crisis. Watching one of our housemates be wheeled off to hospital where he would later be intubated made me wonder what I would do if that were Camelia, one of her family members, or myself. Surely this was not the 'risk-free' fieldwork that the university had approved?

3.2. Lucy

For me, 'doing fieldwork' was 'doing fieldwork at home'. I had never intended to move away to do research, and was instead working in the area I had already called home on-and-off for several years. The first year of my allocated fieldwork time was characterised by the navigation of the ever-changing local and national Covid-19 restrictions in the UK. During this time, I continued to work at home, feeling increasingly isolated from my department and PhD cohort, and feeling the pressure to gather data to avoid wasting my precious PhD funding.

During the third national lockdown (January to March 2021) I sourced participants via locally-based Facebook groups. I began talking to consenting participants via video calls from my laptop, sitting in the same physical space each time. After each call, I worried about how the participant was feeling on the other side. Despite my concerted efforts, I had none of the normal measures of connectedness one would have in a face-to-face encounter, and often felt worried that I had left participants alone and upset after each call. Similarly, I felt it hard to switch off myself after I had finished the call. There was no distance, and no escape.

During spring and summer 2021, the restrictions which had kept me chained to my laptop began to lift. I began meeting participants face to face, and attending support group meetings when they recommenced. As per my ethics application, I followed UK Covid-19 guidance at all times, first only meeting people outside, and then visiting people at home when it was deemed 'safe'. Soon, ethical questions about my conduct not covered by my university ethics clearance became important. It is well documented that Covid-19 mortality correlates strongly with, amongst other factors, index of deprivation and pre-existing comorbidities (Bambra, Riordan, Ford, & Matthews, 2020). As I was working with people living in deprived areas who had pre-existing health conditions, I had to be aware of this, even if the participants I was working with were not themselves concerned about infection with the virus. As such, questions of when to test myself for Covid-19, and how to avoid potential transmission of the virus, began to dictate how I carried out fieldwork.

Although I had frequent, and very supportive, supervision throughout my time 'doing fieldwork', the above questions still dominated my decision making processes, causing me to worry about the implications of my actions and compounding my feelings of being unable to switch off. I had previously assumed these feelings were somehow aligned with lockdown and the physical proximity I had with my laptop, but soon realised this was not the case.

Throughout my time 'doing fieldwork' I felt a constant push-pull battle away from doing online fieldwork to doing 'real' in-person fieldwork, and back again. Even after restrictions had lifted, I had difficult decisions about whether or not to do research in person. Much of my mental energy was spent trying to make these extra-ethical decisions, and worrying about the consequences of making the incorrect choice. All the while, my institutional ethical clearance was no help.

3.3. Chimwemwe

As an anthropologist studying my 'home', my personal experiences and fieldwork could not be separated. I sought to study and write about how I co-produced research with participants. To conduct my research that examines a range of ethical dimensions regarding black health and the difficult histories of medicine in the twentieth century, it was important that I locate myself within the research and move out of the normative structures of doing anthropological research. Instead of the detached researcher, I acknowledged different emotions regarding anti-blackness in colonial archives and the labour of articulating this violence to different participants required an approach grounded in an ethics of care.

The core of my research entailed incorporating visual methodologies into qualitative research, specifically photo-elicitation techniques. I approached the qualitative component of my work as collaborative and intended to co-theorise with my participants. My project aimed to connect a collection of medical photographs taken by a former British colonial officer (c. 1906) with present-day communities. In preparing for interviews, I was careful about how I introduced my project and the content of the material (which included graphic depictions of diseases and images taken without consent). What would a praxis of care look like when dealing with material that I found emotionally wounding? I placed myself at the centre of this project not only as a qualitative researcher but also as someone who identifies with my research on a personal level tied to my national identity and the possibility that these could be archival images of my ancestors. To conduct interviews, I followed Covid-19 regulations and met with participants in outdoor spaces such as cafes and only had one interview in my interviewee's work office. I was interested in talking to specialists and health professionals with expert knowledge and I navigated access through an acquaintance (a doctor) who recommended key people for me to invite to participate in my research and my networks at a prominent medical research institution. Conducting interviews with participants who are experts in their field is challenging as they are difficult to access, owing to busy schedules and problems gaining trust.

3.4. Joint reflection

For all of us, doing fieldwork during the pandemic raised significant questions about the toll of ethnographic research, and the practical decisions required to care for participants and for oneself. We all felt

eager to begin our fieldwork due to the changing pandemic regulations and the constraints of three-year PhD funding. The pandemic however irrevocably changed our projects. For Chimwemwe, it meant a delayed start focused on archival work and a rushed fieldwork due to ethical approval delays. Lucy and Ana-Maria combined online and in-person research, which came with isolation, anxiety, constant immersion and overwhelm.

We all navigated the porous boundaries between personal and research experiences characteristic of ethnographic fieldwork, which were further blurred by the pandemic. Chimwemwe sought co-production with her participants and allowed her own emotions to guide her research at a time of crisis. Ana-Maria and Lucy became immersed in 'fieldsites' inside their homes, merging research, analysis, and life in the same space. Expectations of non-stop immersion soon took their toll, as recognised by many papers written by doctoral students cited at the beginning of this paper (Billo & Hiemstra, 2013; Carietta and Jokinen, 2016; Pollard, 2009). While she initially felt the impact of doing research online due to Covid-19 restrictions, Lucy discovered that in-person fieldwork came with the same pressure of constant engagement. For Ana-Maria, living with participants during consecutive lockdowns came with an inability to take breaks and reflective distance from her research. Feelings of isolation abounded for us all, with practical solutions such as reconnecting with family or friends lessening their impact.

Our fieldwork experiences also pushed us to question how safety and vulnerability were set out in institutional frameworks, such as ethics applications, at a time when social interaction risked contagion and illness for both researcher and participant. During the pandemic, the dichotomy between ethics processed by institutional frameworks and those 'in the field' (Sleeboom-Faulkner, Simpson, Burgos-Martinez, & McMurray, 2017) stood even clearer. Beyond the superficial decisions about the safety of her home country as a whole, the institutional ethics framework provided little guidance for Chimwemwe who needed to find ways to conduct her research with care for herself and her participants. Although ethics frameworks deemed the research conducted by Ana-Maria and Lucy safe, the ethical decisions encountered on the ground refuted this perceived safety. While Ana-Maria worried about the impact of her research on her host family's health and her own health, Lucy anxiously needed to decide if and how to meet immuno-compromised participants. By placing the onus for such decisions on the researcher, institutional frameworks fell short of protecting both researcher and participant, instead causing significant concern and anxiety for the (novice) researcher. To borrow Sarah Ahmed's cautionary warning in *Complaint!*, the 'institution becomes what you come up against' (2021:7), trying to instead negotiate the practical and caring alternatives for rigid institutional guidelines. These negotiations continued after the 'end' of our fieldwork, as our final set of reflections explores below.

4. Returning 'home' and writing up (from 2022 onwards)

4.1. Ana-Maria

The end of my fieldwork was marked by haste, guilt, and uncertainty. As Covid-19 restrictions slowly disappeared, stopping research when the 'ideal' of fieldwork was finally within reach felt counter-intuitive. Funding constraints however meant that every week spent in the field cut into the limited year of writing I had left. Alongside these practical concerns, the intimate relationships I created left me feeling guilty about leaving London. To address these feelings, I met close participants to bid them goodbye and show my gratitude. As to Camelia and her family, I took the children for a day out, bought gifts, and cooked one last meal together. Far from straightforward, these activities happened in haste and parallel to my struggle to find a place to live, pack all my belongings, and organise travel during petrol shortages.

Upon my return to university, I found no time to rest and slow down. I was expected to arrive ready to deliver the writing up of my thesis, so I duly sketched out a plan marked with timelines and clear objectives. The process of writing fell short of this plan. Writing instead came with reliving difficult experiences from my fieldwork, like the image of our sick housemate being crammed into an ambulance. The loneliness and anxiety of fieldwork continued to loom large, and it took deliberate and caring friendships to navigate this, including the friendships behind this paper. Shared reflections over coffee about the realities of fieldwork and holding ourselves accountable to slowing down became crucial.

It was then that care for participants resurfaced once more, as I decided against writing about certain events for fear of reproducing tropes about 'Eastern European migrants'. I also used my 'writing up' time to sustain the close relationships I forged during my research. This meant setting aside time to visit my participants, especially my host family, whenever I travelled to London. It also meant many phone calls, messages, and hours spent trying to help participants with online bureaucratic tasks, from passport appointments to translating short texts. The webs of reciprocity I weaved needed sustaining, and this often came with contradictory feelings around blurred boundaries, which shaped my fieldwork from the very start.

4.2. Lucy

For me, there was no return from the field. This was magnified due to the impact of Covid-19; the time I had spent doing fieldwork had been full of false starts, abrupt stops, and changed plans. At the end of 2021, I began to wind down my research. I felt I hadn't managed to do enough work with people face to face, but was cognisant of my own needs to rest, slow down and consider what to do with the many painful stories that had been told to me. At the same time I planned to 'end' my fieldwork, Covid-19 case rates in the UK once again began to climb rapidly despite high vaccination uptake, reaching case numbers far higher than in the majority of previous waves. All of these confounding and confusing factors meant the 'end' of my fieldwork could be more aptly described as a tapering off and a slowing down. I began to visit the support groups I had been interacting with less frequently, especially when local case numbers were high and multiple people around me were falling ill with Covid-19.

I began to think about transitioning into writing. At this time, I was still in regular contact with many of the women who had participated in my research. As I write this, over a year after 'finishing' fieldwork and well into the drafting of my thesis, I am still in touch with participants who wanted to maintain contact. We talk over text or email, and sometimes meet up for coffee if we both have the time. I ask them questions about what I am writing to check the accuracy of my interpretations, and have even sent excerpts of my ethnography-in-progress across to those who are interested. I am also still in touch with the support groups I attended (mostly via Facebook), and try to attend the groups when I can, and when our notoriously unreliable local buses allow. As I write, it has become clear to me that the relationships and friendships I made during my time 'in the field' will extend beyond the research period, and hopefully even beyond the bounds of the PhD.

For me, leaving the field was not an abrupt and final transition. This was a good thing. Keeping and carefully tending to some of the relationships that I forged has meant that I have been able to create social links not restricted to the arbitrary limits of an imagined field site. By doing so, I have been able to show those who participated in my research care and respect, and that they are valued beyond the data they produced for me. This perhaps would not have materialised, nor been maintained, had I stuck to more traditional models of field practice.

4.2.1. Chimwemwe

Throughout my PhD, like many researchers, I was encouraged to engage in slow writing that will eventually build up. After my final interview in January 2022, I began to reflect on my experience and conduct preliminary analysis and follow ups. I also had informal

conversations with some of my participants, which gave me an opportunity to continue discussions around my research but these often steered to other engaging discussions, from brainstorming ideas about art exhibitions and music videos. I made sure to remain available to my participants, months and weeks after I met with them. This helped me to manage some of the emotional aspects that researchers often experience such as guilt after leaving the place and people they had grown attached to.

A severe storm hit Malawi at the end of January 2022 causing damage to the hydropower plant, and resulting in a series of planned power outages of up to 8 h. The power outages affected the progress of my writing and the planning of my daily activities. To make matters worse, my laptop crashed and I was away from University, with no access to a backup device. After getting my laptop repaired and all data restored, it became clear that it was time to return to the UK. I returned to the UK 18 months after I left for fieldwork. Immersing myself in my data, the weight of the difficult nature of my topic and how to make sense of it took its toll. How do I write about the afterlives of colonialism and the subjectivities of people who have been silenced in the archive? In transforming historical and ethnographic data, I needed to write in regard for myself and for others, specifically for my interviewees who shaped this work and spoke for the voices who historically had not been heard. To write with and from a place of care, the connections and friendships that form this paper created solidarity. Writing in a shared space, having an avenue to exchange removed the isolation that is often experienced during the thesis writing stage.

4.3. Joint reflection

The reflections above paint a fractured image of 'return' from the field. Instead of simply bidding our participants well and saying goodbye, we all made attempts to maintain and nurture some of the relationships we had forged during our fieldwork. Through this, it is clear that caring fieldwork never *really* stops. Instead, centring care is testament to maintaining the relationships, language skills, and slow thinking required of ethnographic fieldwork (Günel et al., 2020).

For us all, the process of 'returning' was emotionally troubling, leaving us with feelings of guilt and anxiety. We managed this in different ways; Ana-Maria and Lucy through maintaining physical and text-based contact with our participants when we could, and Chimwemwe through the careful follow up of interviews and research encounters before returning to the UK. Here, we argue that these small and thoughtful acts of connection can serve to provide a model of what care looks like for both researchers and participants. However, these modes of care should not be over-romanticised; they took deliberate work and time and should be considered in tandem with the pressures of analysis and writing.

Our reasons for 'returning' were also very different. Lucy and Chimwemwe had started writing while they were doing fieldwork, whereas Ana-Maria returned with thesis writing very much in front of her. Chimwemwe returned to the UK through necessity, in order to access the requisite IT equipment to be able to physically continue writing. Ana-Maria returned due to funding pressures and the need to present a workable completion timeline to satisfy institutional expectations. Lucy had never left the North East, so had no real concept of 'return' to begin with. However, we collectively experienced feelings of being unsure of how to transition across into the 'writing' phase, a common yet significant experience for doctoral students doing qualitative research (Humphrey & Simpson, 2013).

Furthermore, all three of our accounts express a visceral need for rest and recuperation after what had been an extremely stressful few years. This follows much of the literature which documents the pressures of trying to think deeply and carefully whilst being entangled within neoliberal academia (Mountz et al., 2015). As Sarah Ahmed explains in an entry on the *feministkilljoys* blog inspired by Lorde (Ahmed, 2014), self-care is not self-indulgent, but it becomes an act of warfare against the neoliberal academy. Prior to returning to the UK, Chimwemwe's laptop crashed and she was forced to take time off and reflect on the anxiety she had felt around access to her data, in order to maintain her wellbeing. Lucy and Ana-Maria both felt unable to rest after 'finishing' their fieldwork; we both felt unable to take proper time off to slow down, despite being acutely aware of our need to do so. Building caring friendships helped us centre self-care as a key practice during our writing, lending a 'feminist ear' (Ahmed, 2021) to each other, comparing how fieldwork had left us exhausted and emotionally spent, and feeling reassured that we were not alone in our feelings. On reflection, we all agreed that an institutional impetus to build periods of rest into research plans *as standard* would perhaps allow for the intensity of feelings and emotions from 'the field' to be processed in a healthy way, which promotes researcher wellbeing as a priority.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, we used our experiences of doing ethnographic research during Covid-19 to interrogate how we can build post-pandemic research methods with care at their centre. Rather than seeing Covid-19 only as a limitation for research, we paid attention to the 'inverted commas' of fieldwork (Eggeling, 2022) and investigated how our experiences during Covid-19 can show us the beginning of a praxis of care in ethnographic research and in qualitative research more broadly. In short, this practice of care prioritises the wellbeing of researchers, it ensures responsibility and care for participants, and forges trusting relationships resulting in the ethical representation of their experiences. By seeing care as a 'way to orient ourselves and direct our energy' (Nishida, 2022:9), we reflected on the different ways in which we used this energy to care for ourselves, for our participants, and for each other. We end the paper by providing general recommendations for promoting researcher wellbeing and self-care in existing methodologies and institutional frameworks, including those specific to doctoral researchers.

5.1. Recommendations

5.1.1. Ethical approval frameworks should include a commitment to researcher wellbeing, with institutional training, resources and services available to support it

Our experiences of ethical approval during Covid-19 showcased a vacuum of support for researcher wellbeing. We suggest that ethical frameworks include a commitment to researcher wellbeing, shifting from a risk-averse perspective to one dedicated to meaningful self-care. As Ahmed explains in her '*Killjoy survival kit*' (Ahmed, 2017), self-care can often be dismissed as a neoliberal tool to further productivity and remove the accountability of institutions (see also Günel et al., 2020). With this in mind, our recommendation serves as a reminder that universities and research institutions must remain accountable for researcher wellbeing. This involves creating relevant structures to support researcher wellbeing, such as institutional training, dedicated resources, and well-funded support services. A good example comes from the University of Oxford's Vicarious (Secondary) Trauma workshop which aims to support researchers embarking on potentially challenging projects. Such training courses and the mental health professional staff required are the bare necessities for any institutional framework that prioritises researcher wellbeing. By building this commitment for care into institutional frameworks, the emotional and physical wellbeing of researchers could become part of the ethical approval process itself, rather than being superfluous to it.

5.1.2. Build boundaries and rest into fieldwork plans

Our fieldwork experiences would have benefited from setting boundaries in the face of constant immersion, embracing our conflicting emotions and slowing down. We therefore suggest that setting boundaries and slowing down becomes a regular item on research checklists,

building a practice of 'slow scholarship' (Mountz et al., 2015). But rather than putting the onus on individuals, setting boundaries should become part of ongoing conversations with experienced mentors and supervisors. To do so, methods training courses and supervisor training alike require a step away from the idealised norms of fieldwork to instead acknowledge that slowing down, taking breaks, or having conflicting emotions about research are valid parts of one's methodological toolkit. Attention must be paid however to how one can navigate the emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) of these conversations, as women (and particularly women of colour) often carry the emotional toll of setting boundaries and fighting against normative (research) models in academia (Ahmed, 2012; June, 2015; Leath et al., 2023).

5.1.3. Start a fieldwork mentorship scheme focused on pastoral care over academic progress

To support a commitment to researcher wellbeing, institutions can establish mentorship schemes that put wellbeing above academic productivity, starting with doctoral researchers. A key example would be a mentorship programme matching a permanent staff member outside of supervisory teams with doctoral researchers. Rather than a supervisory role, this mentorship scheme could provide a pastoral dimension that often misses from supervisory relationships due to the competing demands on academics' time. Once again, however, the question remains on whom institutions choose to lay this burden of care, as women, people of colour, and those in precarious roles often disproportionately shoulder the burden of carework under the guise of 'being included' (Ahmed, 2012).

5.1.4. Create peer support groups for PhD students and nurture academic friendships

One vital source of support we used to reflect on fieldwork during Covid-19 and to grow our praxis of care was one another. Peer support groups for students conducting fieldwork can help provide yet another level of community to be able to slow down, step back, and act from a place of care, rather than pressure to finalise research. Allocating resources to such groups, including physical and online infrastructure, facilitators, and funding could help ensure that peer support is finally recognised as a key component of doctoral training for qualitative researchers. Beyond organised structures, 'academic friendship' can provide a welcomed space for caring practices where ECRs can act as co-authors and write about their experiences, as we have throughout this paper (also see Oliver & Morris, 2022).

5.1.5. Use remote working technologies to keep in contact with researchers 'in the field'

Finally, we propose that researchers across all stages of their career, whether early-career or not, take the aspects of working during the Covid-19 pandemic that went well, such as using technologies to make adjustments for researchers far away or with disabilities. The possibility to receive support from afar is invaluable to both novice and more seasoned researchers seeking self-care during research. In a world where digital technologies are increasingly used to facilitate vast webs of global communication (Hine, 2015; Jordan, 2009), the idea that fieldwork must be a bounded experience which can just 'end' is being challenged (Eggeling, 2022). More flexible perspectives need to be written into the institutional frameworks that guide research practice.

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