Patchwork Life

Balancing Migration, Family, Fieldwork, and an Academic Career during a Global Pandemic

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Abstract This article is based upon field notes I wrote during the so called first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, whilst I was a postdoctoral mobility fellow at the University of Amsterdam. First, I elaborate on the challenges of moving with one's family to a new place and conducting anthropological fieldwork in a novel site during a global pandemic. I also shed light on the differences between how I had initially planned data collection and how it actually turned out in practice. Second, I reflect on how Covid-19 increased existing inequalities on a local and global level. Third, I disclose how moments of uncertainty, disorientation, and vulnerability were integral parts of our lives as home schooling and working from home made my private and professional lives coincide and blur. Finally, I argue that our lives during this global pandemic were patchworked, through a continuous bricolage of trying and retrying.

Keywords Covid-19 pandemic – academic mobility – anthropological fieldwork – care obligations – home office

Introduction

> We live in extraordinary times. Last Thursday, the Dutch government closed the universities, museums, and theatres. Yesterday, the government further decided to close all restaurants, sports locations, and schools. The biggest consequence for us has obviously been the closure of the schools. That is tough. At the beginning of last week, I thought that we were slowly starting to settle in: the children liked to go to school (the acclimatization period for Alma had ended), their Dutch language skills improved, and they had started to make friends. Now, all of a sudden, their 'integration process' comes to a halt. We will be left just with the four of us. I feel so incredibly sad and sorry for Alma and Mali. (Monday, 16.03.2020)

In January 2020, my family and I moved from Bern, Switzerland, to Amsterdam, the Netherlands, for my two-year postdoctoral mobility fellowship. My partner, whom I call Simon for the purpose of this article, had quit his job. In early March, we had a long discussion evaluating our first two months in Amsterdam. We both agreed that we had been doing well so far. The majority of the administrative issues were settled, we could orientate ourselves in our neighbourhood and were discovering the city, and our two daughters, here called Alma (4.5 years old) and Mali (6.5 years old), both attended a local Dutch school. Feeling a little settled, we had decided that Simon would start looking for a job. I had already begun my new research project entitled "Doing Fatherhood in the 21st Century: Connecting the Global North and the Global South". In this project, my aim was to find out how fatherhood is understood, negotiated, and enacted in everyday life by researching two urban settings, namely Amsterdam in the Netherlands and Kankan in Guinea.

After nine weeks of learning a new language, trying to integrate into a new class at school, and making some first contacts with colleagues from the *Department of Anthropology at the University of Amsterdam*, the schools and universities closed. In the following weeks and months, we were pretty much on our own and we all dearly missed social contact. What was supposed to be our tiny guest room became my home office. The children, still in kindergarten, received some input from school

for home learning, but did not have to follow a regular timetable nor online lessons.

> Last night, I dreamt that I was dancing at a party (wow, what a dream!). During the dream, I became aware that the people did not follow the distance rule of 1.5 meters… Covid-19 is already hunting me into my dreams! Isn't that crazy? I am not only dreaming of the pandemic, but even adopting the prevailing measures to fight against the virus. (Tuesday, 04.05.2020)

This article is based on field notes, always written in italics, that I took during the so-called first wave of Covid-19, followed by a contextualisation of, and reflections on, those notes (the complete diary has been published on *boasblogs.org*, see Ammann 2021). As is usually the case with field notes, they do not follow a strict path, as thoughts jump from one topic to the next. Thus, they touch upon different issues that are loosely connected. Overall, in this article I aim to provide an insight into the "stor[y] behind the findings", as Susan Thomson, An Ansoms, and Jude Murison (2013) put it – stories that all too often remain hidden, as we usually do not learn much about the story behind the research in anthropological articles that are not specifically about methods, ethics, or the researchers' positionalities.

First, I elaborate on the challenges of beginning a new research project in a novel site during a global pandemic. I also shed light on the differences between how I had initially planned data collection and how it actually turned out in practice. Second, I reflect on how Covid-19 increased existing inequalities on a local and global level. I do this by drawing on exchanges with my former research collaborators in Guinea and by thinking about poverty in Switzerland and the Netherlands. Third, I disclose how moments of uncertainty, disorientation, and vulnerability were integral parts of our lives, as home schooling and working from home made my private and professional lives coincide and blur. Finally, I argue that our lives during this global pandemic were patchworked, through a continuous bricolage of trying and retrying.

Beginning a new research project in times of a pandemic

> This feels like a big joke: As junior scholars, we are supposed to be mobile. Once abroad, we are to connect and network with colleagues, get new ideas and inputs to do 'excellent' research, and advance our academic career. Nothing of all that is possible now. I sit alone in a small, dark, and cold room somewhere in Amsterdam. How can I get to know people and possible research participants in times of what is called 'social distancing'? I don't like addressing people out of the blue, for example at playgrounds. My anthropological self is highly annoyed with that, wondering whether I have chosen the wrong 'profession'. (Monday, 16.03.2020)

Anthropologists have written much about the challenges of entering and becoming familiar with a new field site (e. g. Pollard 2009). I was aware that I could not use the same methodological approach in a European metropole as I did when conducting fieldwork in Guinea – hanging out would definitively not be as successful in the Netherlands as it was in Guinea. In Guinea, as a white person, I enjoyed the privilege (and had to deal with the challenges) of attracting attention. People – especially men (Ammann 2018) – took an interest in me and often started a conversation. In the Netherlands, I did not stand out and people generally did not address me out of the blue. It was nevertheless frustrating to recognise how challenging it was to conduct fieldwork in the Netherlands compared to Guinea. Colleagues assured me that I was not the only one struggling with 'getting access to the Dutch field'. However, the Covid-19 pandemic definitely added an extra challenge on the top of it.

One of my plans was to recruit research participants through institutions such as schools, sports clubs, and governmental institutions; however, they all closed in March 2020. Luckily, I had already applied a further strategy to come into contact with possible research participants: I hung up bilingual flyers in Dutch and English ('*vaders gezocht*/fathers wanted') in parks, playgrounds, school yards, and at crossroads in different neighbourhoods. Furthermore, I posted the flyer in certain online fora, mostly Facebook groups. This method showed some success: in mid-March, I had already conducted a first interview and had

scheduled four for the following days. Unfortunately, I had to cancel three of them due to the Covid-19 restrictions.

> Today, I conducted my second interview. Instead of sitting in a coffee bar, we walked around the neighbourhood (more or less at a distance). That was very pleasant. I always thought running helps me thinking and walking facilitates talking. The thoughts simply flow better while walking. For interviews, those walking talks are perfect: I do not have my usual difficulties with sitting quietly and not knowing where to put my hands. Furthermore, we do not have to look at each other all the time. I think that this is especially helpful for the research participants when talking about personal issues. (Tuesday, 17.03.2020)

After what was locally referred to as an 'intelligent' lockdown had begun, I let the research participants choose whether they wanted to meet in person for a walking interview or whether they preferred to talk online. Personally, I preferred face-to-face meetings. First, because I could go outside and move my body. One of the pandemic's negative effects was that I – like so many others – stared into screens for even longer hours. Second, meeting a research participant personally provided me with a better sense of the person. It was easier to communicate non-verbally and to read the other's reactions and emotions. Overall, the first impression was much more comprehensive when it involved all senses. So far, a minority of the research participants invited me to conduct the interview at their homes. This provided me with important insights into how they lived. Third, the physical interviews lasted longer than did those online. The geographers James Evans and Phil Jones (2011: 856), who compared walking and sedentary interviews, came to a similar conclusion. I assume it is easier for the research participants to provide long and detailed answers when seeing each other in person, and especially when walking, compared to talking to a screen. Fourth, I found it much more challenging to conduct interviews in a foreign language – in English, but especially in Dutch – when talking online. Fifth, I was afraid that I would not be able to remember and keep the different research participants apart. When I read the interview transcripts and fieldnotes from my fieldwork in Guinea, I immediately had a sensory memory of how and where the interaction had taken place and what we had talked about. Now, I feared that the online interviews would blur into one big fuzziness. What I enjoyed most about fieldwork, namely being present and interacting with all my senses, was drastically reduced when solely conducting online interviews.

Walking has always been fundamental to anthropological fieldwork (Lee & Ingold 2006, Ingold & Vergunst 2008). When walking, we experience multi-sensory stimulation and can comment on things we see. Not unsurprisingly, walking methods – given different names, such as 'go-along' (Kusenbach 2003), 'walk-along' (Carpiano 2009), 'walking interview' (Evans & Jones 2011) or 'narrative walk-in-real-time approach' (Miaux *et al*. 2010) – are typically used for researching spatial aspects (see *e.g.* the edited volume by Bates & Rhys-Taylor 2017).

The research participants who chose a walking interview highly appreciated them. On the one hand, in times of social isolation, meeting someone was simply nice. Walking together (at a distance) was one of the few things we were still allowed to do in the Netherlands in the spring of 2020. On the other hand, walking allowed for "thinking time" (Lee & Ingold 2006: 71). Furthermore, walking side by side helped to reflect upon and talk about personal, and at times difficult, issues that my research on doing fatherhood entailed. Or as Anna Christen (2020: 144) put it, "walking together allows to hide the talk behind the walk". Recent neuroscientific research confirms that walking is good for the soul and the brain (O'Mara 2019).

Considering walking as an ideal way of conducting biographical research, Maggie O'Neill & Brian Roberts (2019) have developed the Walking Interviews as a Biographical Method (WIBM). They argue that WIBM "is a powerful means for understanding the lives and experiences of others" (O'Neill & Roberts 2019: 4).

> This year, I will probably not be able to conduct fieldwork in Guinea. Luckily, I have two field sites, otherwise I would now be busy completely rethinking and modifying my project. But what remains of my attempt to have a global perspective, to connect two case studies, one in the 'Global North' and one in the 'Global South'?

> I never wanted to just do interviews. My aim was to observe, and whenever possible, also participate. But I do not have a choice now. For sure, this will have a huge influence on my project. Not only am I not able to go to Guinea and conduct research there, I will probably also have a huge bias in terms of research participants here in the Netherlands. I am convinced that most of the fathers who will respond to my flyers will be heterosexual, highly educated, middle class, and read as 'white'. (Tuesday, 24.03.2020)

Indeed, in the first phase of fieldwork between March and June 2020, the fathers I talked to mostly belonged to the above-mentioned categories. However, they differed in terms of their age, their children's age, their family situation, and partly also their national origin. In the second phase of fieldwork, I included fathers with more diverse backgrounds, by mainly focussing on queer fathers, fathers with a migration history, and fathers of colour. Overall, I struggled with a general feeling that the gathered interview data was superficial, lacking the necessary depth. Intellectually, I knew I would never again have the possibility to conduct long-term ethnographic fieldwork during which I would be able to participate as densely, in the sense of Gert Spittler (2001, 2014), as I had done for my Ph.D. thesis in Guinea. As more advanced scholars, we typically have to juggle multiple balls – even more so when having care obligations. Despite this knowledge, I still have different expectations towards my academic self, and thus struggle with what I perceive as partial, fragmented, and superficial data.

The manifesto for patchwork ethnography by Gökçe Günel, Saiba Varma, and Chika Watanabe has helped me to reflect on these various expectations. The authors understand patchwork ethnography "as ethnographic processes and protocols designed around short-term field visits, using fragmentary yet rigorous data, and other innovations that resist the fixity, holism, and certainty demanded in the publication process. […] The methodological innovation of patchwork ethnography reconceptualizes research as working with rather than against the gaps, constraints, partial knowledge, and diverse commitments that characterize all knowledge production" (Günel, Varma & Watanabe 2020). In the end, all ethnographies are a patchwork, highly impacted by the researchers' positionalities and factors beyond the researchers' sphere of influence.

> Will I gain different insights into fatherhood due to the Covid-19 pandemic? I am sure that some of the fathers will spend more time with their children than ever before: They are working from home (or no longer working) and their children are home-schooled. In which ways does this transform the father-child/children-relationship and the relationship between partners? (Friday, 27.03.2020)

> It would be perfect if fathers would write a corona-diary for me. But I can hardly ask that from research participants after a first interview. I feel that it would need a much longer relationship and a higher level of trust to reveal even more intimate things regarding parenthood in a diary. (Wednesday, 08.04.2020)

> Last week, Mali came with me to meet a research participant and his daughter. Tomorrow, both children will come along when I have an interview with a participant on a park's playground. The interviewee asked me to meet there so that he can take his sons with him. I am very curious how this will work. Will we be able to talk, or will we have to run after our children all the time? What kind of different insights will this provide me with? (Monday, 20.04.2020)

Both of the above-mentioned research situations proved to be insightful. In the first situation, the encounter with and between our daughters definitely increased the mutual level of trust. Afterwards, the two of us regularly met for lunch in a nearby park, during which the research participant told me about his struggles with his daughter's mother from whom he has divorced. The meeting at the playground with all our children was interesting insofar as I could observe how the father talked to his children – an issue that came up during the interview. However, when I asked for a follow-up meeting, the research participant did not respond.

From the very start, it was my idea to somehow integrate Mali and Alma into my research on fatherhood. I imagined talking informally and repeatedly to their friends' fathers while the children were playing. I hoped that spending much time together and showing myself as a mother

would increase the mutual level of trust. I also hoped that such situations would provide me the possibility to observe interactions between the fathers and their children. I wanted to use specific situations as a basis to inquire issues about parenting further.

Beforehand, I had many concrete ideas on how to go about this in practice. For example, I had thought about setting up a 'fathers' lunch'. My idea was to cook lunch for a couple of fathers and their children. This way, the fathers would also get something out of their participation in my research. During and after the meals, we would have group discussions around the topic of fatherhood or other issues that turned out to be of interest. I also considered soccer clubs to be a perfect space to observe and interact with fathers from various backgrounds. In the Netherlands, field hockey is one of the most popular sports among middle-class and upper-class children. Soccer is also very popular among children from working-class backgrounds and families with a migration history (Elling, De Knop & Knoppers 2001, Elling & Claringbould 2005). Unfortunately, I could not turn any of those plans into practice. The sport schools had to close, and we were not allowed to gather with more than three adults at a time. Obviously, I did not want to take any risk of infecting research participants with Covid-19. Thus, getting access to possible research participants remained challenging and I had to rely solely on interviews.

> Is everyone now writing a Covid-19 blog? When was the last time that hundreds of social scientists (and among them many anthropologists) could document a global event in real time? On the one hand, I see wonderful interdisciplinary initiatives emerging from all over the world. And I am obviously happy that social scientists (and especially anthropologists) speak up so early, making important contributions e.g. about the long-term consequences of this pandemic, especially for people who were already struggling before the outbreak of Covid-19. On the other hand, I can't help but think that this has an opportunistic side: Which researcher is not trying to profit from Covid-19 in one way or the other? For whom is the pandemic a career opportunity? After merely two weeks, I am already fed up with having just ONE theme to talk about – and this will probably continue for months. It feels like everyone has something to say, like everyone has somehow turned into an expert. (Thursday, 25.03.2020)

I always feel uncomfortable when social scientists (and especially anthropologists) research extraordinary, spectacular, and current events, or large-scale, short-term transformations. What about the seemingly boring repetitions of everyday life, I thought. The unspectacular, the vague, the triviality, the ordinary, the diffuse, and the unfocussed are much harder to grasp and to 'sell' to journals and funding agencies. When it comes to Covid-19, I fully see the importance for anthropologists "to describe the pandemic from within" (Martínez, Berglund & Estalella 2020: 42). However, I fear that, in the following years, too much will be published about online methods and research in times of crisis. And am I not doing exactly the same by first, making my fieldnotes from spring 2020 publicly available (Ammann 2021) and second, by turning parts of them into this article? Who in academia is profiting from this pandemic and who faces major disadvantages due to it?

The pandemic does not only have severe consequences for academics who started a new research project or wanted to conduct fieldwork. Different voices have already pointed at the gendered and aged impact Covid-19 has on academic careers. The pandemic unfortunately exacerbated already existing inequalities in the neoliberal academic landscape with particularly negative impacts for junior, non-tenured researchers and female academics (Kim & Patterson 2020, Wichmann & Camenisch 2021).

Lived privileges during a pandemic

> Today, I received the message that one of the sisters of my Guinean research collaborator had died. I do not know why she died, but I know what will happen now: all the family members, friends, colleagues, and neighbours will pass by to condole. They will hug each other and cry together. [...] Unfortunately, this pandemic will widen the gap between the rich and the poor. [...] The long-term (indirect) deaths of this pandemic can hardly be estimated; their number is probably much higher than the one of the direct victims. (Tuesday 14.03.2020)

> I am completely aware that my complaints are complaints from a very privileged position. I try not to think about what is about to happen in Guinea and similar countries. There, physical distancing is hardly possible, and the large majority of people do not have access to (governmental) safety nets; they try to make ends meet on a daily basis. And contrary to Ebola, Covid-19 gets transmitted through the air and people thus get infected much easier. At least, Covid-19 is a less deadly disease, especially considering the country's young population (Tuesday 17.03.2020)

> Two days ago, I could finally talk to my other research collaborator in Guinea. He had started to work as a motorbike taxi driver. With that generated income he can sustain his family, for which I am very happy. At the same time, I think: NOOOOOOO! By working as a motorbike taxi driver he is in close contact with so many clients and I fear that he will get infected with Covid-19. But who am I to say something? I sit in a European city, complaining about working from home and social isolation. Physical distancing is such a privilege! (Tuesday 31.03.2020)

At the beginning of the pandemic, the thought of my Guinean friends troubled me very much. It took some time until I realised that in Guinea, Covid-19 was just one crisis among many; precarity had been normalised (Schwaller 2019). While my research collaborators reported that Covid-19 was the number one issue people talked about at the beginning of the pandemic, other topics such as the continuous political crisis, or the rise in food prices (caused by the pandemic), impacted their everyday at least as much as the governmental restrictions due to Covid-19. The long-term consequences will probably be felt much more as less remittances flow into the country and promised investments will fail to materialise.

In Guinea, people had demonstrated since October 2019 against the implementation of a new constitution, that would reset President Alpha Condé's term counter to zero, thus allowing him to run for a third mandate. Regardless of the pandemic, the constitutional referendum together with legislative elections took place in late March 2020. Those elections and the presidential elections in October 2020 had been marked by heavy pre- and post-election violence. Overall, the Guinean government used the pandemic as an excuse to silence protests, arrest journalists and opposition leaders, and to obfuscate political violence, making "authoritarianism […] Guinea's first Coronavirus survivor" (ACLED 05.05.2020).

> Every time I listen to or watch the Swiss or Dutch news, I am wondering about this pandemic's long-term consequences. They are not easy to calculate, and politicians tend to forget them when taking decisions on how best to fight against the virus. We must not go as far as Lagos or Delhi to see how many families are suffering from hunger. In Swiss and Dutch cities, the queues in front of locations where free food is distributed are getting longer and longer. This pandemic has negative consequences for everyone, but they are much less severe for the privileged than for the huge majority of less privileged. And who made the measures to fight against the pandemic? Mostly 'white', elderly, privileged politicians. (Monday, 06.04.2020)

In spring 2020, everyone was talking about solidarity; solidarity between different age groups, solidarity between classes, solidarity between countries. This "'equal opportunity' virus" (Faria 2020: 417) does not make a distinction of whether the person it attacks is rich or poor, so the argument. The longer the pandemic lasted, the clearer it became that solidarity and equality were – once again – an illusion. To take the vaccine as an example, in the US, a rich, 'white' person was much more likely to be vaccinated than a poor person of colour. And every country was first and foremost looking out for itself, making nationalism the imperative of the day. This pandemic, yet again, brought the gendered, sexed, classed, racialised, aged, and (dis)abled powers in our societies to the fore (Faria 2020).

In the news, plenty of contributions discussed the negative consequences of Covid-19, especially for vulnerable children and youth. For many children, school is their safe haven, even in 'normal' times. How can they cope without having their safe haven for months? How do parents deal with financial insecurities and fears for the future, while at the same time struggling with home schooling and being trapped with too many people in too little square meters? As a result, violence within families and partnerships, as well as severe mental health problems, were increasing. The Swiss Corona Stress Study (2020) showed

that mental stress has been on the rise, especially during the so-called second wave. The study also confirmed that young people were the principal victims of depression.

> What will the governments in Switzerland and the Netherlands learn from this pandemic? Will it have at least some positive impacts for sectors such as care, sales, or logistics, which are now considered as systemically relevant, but whose workers get very badly paid? And these are mostly professions where many women work. Will we, as a society, do more than clapping on our balconies? Suddenly, even the Swiss right-wing party is happy that the nurses living across the border in Germany, Italy, or France, enter the country every day to work in Swiss hospitals and nursing facilities. Without the nurses and physicians trained abroad the Swiss health care system would not survive. (Tuesday, 18.03.2020)

Emotional rollercoaster

> I feel a double isolation here because, on the one hand, we barely know people whom we could meet physically at a distance, and on the other hand, we are also not part of local online groups in which news would circulate and through which we could care for each other. (Wednesday 18.03.2020)

> Today, I went jogging and Mali came along on her bike. That was good. I could talk to her about loneliness. On Saturday evening, after a video call with one of her friends in Switzerland, she had cried for a long time. Mali blamed Alma for her own sadness, but it was clear to me that she was missing her friends and children to play with more generally. I told her how much I understood her feelings (and that I was feeling the same). And I also tried to explain to her that the situation would not be that different if we were at home in Switzerland. She would not be able to meet her grandparents and she would not be able to play with her friends. (I admit that I did not tell her the whole truth. Many of our friends put themselves together with another family to create a 'safe bubble', so that the children have at least some contact with other children.) I think that helped and Mali understood what I wanted to say. I feel so terribly sorry for our daughters. And I also feel guilty, somehow. In the end, they are here because of my research, because of 'my academic career'. (Monday, 23.03.2020)

When we discussed possible places for my postdoctoral mobility fellowship, Simon and I agreed that we wanted to stay in Europe. It was important for us that our families and possibly our friends could come and visit us without taking the plane. Amsterdam is an attractive destination for a long weekend, we thought. In March and April, our family and friends had to cancel their visits. Luckily, Simon's parents, my parents, and my sister had separately been with us for a couple of days in the first two months of 2020. I am happy that they now had an idea of how we lived. They saw our apartment, followed Mali and Alma on their way to school, and became familiar with the children's favourite playgrounds. From mid-March onwards, we – especially Mali and I – often felt lonely and isolated. We were not used to spending so much time together with just the four of us and we desperately longed for some social exchanges.

> Yesterday, the government announced the new Covid-19-measures. Afterwards, I felt very down. How are we to survive two further months of home-schooling, two further months of having almost no contact with other children. We can't stand this; we have to go home! But: Our apartment is rented out; we can't just go home. And staying with my parents or in-laws is not an option. I try to take day by day and to not forget that unfortunately, the pandemic has much more severe consequences for all too many people. I am so incredibly privileged – once again. (Tuesday, 24.03.2020)

On a daily basis, we tried to do the best with the situation. Simon was fantastic with home schooling, trying to provide a structure where necessary and leaving the children much space to play and follow their own interests. However, our daughters dearly missed other children. We also worried about their Dutch language skills. We had downgraded Mali one year with the idea that she should first concentrate on learning the basis of Dutch between January and July 2020, before she would begin to learn reading and writing from August onwards. It was a huge challenge to teach them a language we barely knew ourselves. During the

months of home schooling, I worked much less than usual and spent more time with Mali and Alma, thus also providing Simon some space to breath and relax. For example, I organised a treasure hunt every week. This became a fixed point and a highlight during days that seemed to blur into each other, making it difficult to orientate in time.

As long as I could conduct online and walking interviews, I felt like having a reason to be in the Netherlands. That definitively helped in dealing with the fragility of my mental being. Luckily, the sun shone almost every day and the trees in the nearby park turned green. Spring was on its way, lifting up our moods. We lived in a new temporal home, trying very hard to make it feel like home. Echoing the words of Francisco Martínez, Eeva Berglund & Adolfo Estalella (2020: 40), "The trope of home [...] might refer to a feeling or condition of safety, familiarity and comfort, 'being at home'." Our home making in Amsterdam – under very special circumstances – became "a gesture of putting the world in order (even if temporarily or illusorily)".

> The fact that I am working at home is especially difficult for Alma. She regularly comes into my room crying. How often have I already carried her down the stairs? That is becoming my daily sport. (Thursday, 19.03.2020)

> Every morning when I want to start working Alma and Mali are crying. Come on, I am JUST GOING UPSTAIRS! I am convinced that it is not good for our children to be with us all the time. This might be fun for one or two weeks during holidays, but not here, not now, not for such a long time. Today, it was really bad. Mali and Alma both cried when I went upstairs. A little bit later, I heard that they had a quarrel with Simon and both started crying again. (The walls are so thin here, I can hear every single word of what they say downstairs. How should I be able to concentrate on my work like this...?!?) Mali came to my room and I tried to comfort her. We went to the terrace to see the beautiful morning atmosphere. I then brushed her teeth and combed her hair. When Mali felt better, I brought her downstairs. Home school was about to start. Five minutes later, Mali stood next to me again, crying. (Wednesday, 25.03.2020)

> When the children are screaming and crying downstairs, I find it hardly bearable to work from home. (Isn't it incredible how many crises getting dressed, brushing teeth, and washing hands can provoke! And currently, the children must wash their hands all the time...) Unfortunately, my abilities to dissociate myself are very low; I quickly become nervous or annoyed myself, even if I am upstairs and not directly involved in the situation. (Thursday, 16.04.2020)

Spring 2020 felt like an emotional rollercoaster. On certain days, I had the feeling that I was exploding. I was getting angry all too easily, also about things that are normal when being together with children – many children are loud, sensitive, and at times stubborn. My reactions annoyed me very much: I told myself that I was not allowed to get agitated so easily just because children are children. It was a vicious cycle.

The situation was also challenging in terms of my academic being. Elsewhere, a colleague and I argued that the pandemic acted as a catalyst for junior (mobile) academics whose situation is generally marked by precarity (Ammann & Richter 16.03.2021). In theory, the aim of my postdoctoral mobility fellowship was to advance my academic career. However, professionally I was in a vulnerable position (Loher & Strasser 2019). On the one hand, I felt under much pressure to successfully collect data in Guinea and the Netherlands and to present new findings soon. On the other hand, I was convinced that good scholarship is slow scholarship because it "requires time to think, write, read, research, analyze, [and] edit" (Mountz *et al.* 2015: 2). Against all reasons, I hoped that a "caregiving academic [will one day become] the new norm" (Schurr, Mayer & Winiger 2020).

Being in a new country and living through a pandemic made it impossible to put the same amount of concentration and efforts into my academic work as before. The well-being of my children, my partner, and myself, was my first priority, not what would perhaps (but most probably not) turn out to be 'my academic career'. The four of us all had to demonstrate a high degree of flexibility by adapting to a new place and simultaneously, dealing with the impacts of Covid-19.

For academics, like so many other people, juggling work and private life has been a huge challenge during this pandemic. I found the pieces of

two authors highly helpful in this regard: On the one hand, and just a few weeks into the pandemic, Aisha S. Ahmad (2020) stressed beautifully that we should make room "to feel bad and lost" and focus "intensely on [our] physical and psychological security", not on academic productivity. On the other hand, Caroline Faria (2020) wrote a wonderfully funny and at the same time sad paper about academic work and care in times of a pandemic, bringing the toxicities of the neoliberal university to the foreground.

> I am always happy when I can discover new things. A new neighbourhood, a new canal, a new playground, a new green space. (Honestly, I would also love to discover a new museum, a new theatre, a new restaurant, a new bar). There is something satisfying about it. I definitely missed that back home. (Friday, 27.03.2020)

> The children profit incredibly from being here. Out of necessity, they became very open towards other people. When we arrive at a playground, Mali immediately searches for a child she would like to play with. She walks up to this child and asks whether they can do something together. What a pleasure being able to observe that! (Monday, 06.04.2020)

> Yes, it is often exhausting being in a new place and even more so because of this pandemic. But I am convinced that we will have unique memories of our stay in Amsterdam. We can spend more time with our children, watching them, jointly discovering new things, and being outside all the time. (Wednesday, 22.04.2020)

On other days, I appreciated the beauty of being able to spend so much time with my family and to discover new places. At the end of April 2020, we were slightly optimistic. The Dutch government had just announced that the schools would reopen after the May holidays. From May 11 onwards, Mali would go to school on Mondays and Tuesdays and Alma on Thursdays and Fridays. The atmosphere in our house immediately improved. This meant that I could concentrate much better on my work as both children were only at home together for one day, and thus the quarrelling, shouting, and crying reduced massively. Four weeks later, they were allowed to go back to school on five days a week.

At that time, we did not yet know that a second lockdown would include further weeks of home schooling – this time during short, grey, and cold winter days. Unfortunately, I had not taken Ahmad's (2020) words seriously enough. She had warned us already in March 2020 that this crisis would last for much longer than we all hoped for, making it a necessity to prepare for a marathon, not for a sprint. And indeed, our entire stay in Amsterdam was heavily marked by the pandemic, not only the first few months.

Conclusion

> Isn't it fascinating how quickly our behavioural patterns change? For example, when it comes to keeping physical distance and getting out of each other's way. Recently, we watched a documentary that was produced prior to the pandemic. In one scene, a lot of people were standing close together and my first, intuitive reaction was: No, they are not allowed to do that! Within a very short time, this new behaviour has been embodied…! And I hear from others that they react exactly in the same way. (Wednesday, 07.04.2020)

I found it very challenging to cope with the Covid-19 restrictions in the Netherlands – not least, because I always had the direct comparison with Switzerland, where, since autumn 2020, much more was allowed than in the Netherlands. Considering that I had initially intended to go to Bordeaux, France, with my first application for a postdoctoral mobility fellowship, in retrospect, I am very happy that the application was not successful. In France, we would have been obliged to stay inside for months – or to buy a dog. Like in other European countries, in France, you were only allowed to go for a walk with a dog, as if children do not need to go outside at least once a day. I will put this failed application in bold in my personal 'CV of failures' (Stefan 2010, Haushofer 2016) and draw some shining stars and happy smiley faces around it.

In 2020, we have been told again and again that we should consider this crisis also to be an opportunity and that we should creatively adapt to the current circumstances. While I do not deny that Covid-19 might have some positive impacts, I prefer not to see it as an opportunity, but as an in-

tegral part of my experiences. The pandemic has shown, once again, what feminist researchers have demonstrated long ago: we are not objective academics. Conducting research is highly influenced by our different and shifting positionalities and the circumstances in which we are conducting research.

In spring 2020, my professional and personal life coincided and intermingled heavily. Overall, Covid-19 has significantly shaped my "patchwork ethnography" (Günel, Varma & Watanabe 2020) on fatherhood. However, I argue that this not only holds true for my research; my whole stay in Amsterdam has been a patchwork due to the pandemic. What seemed to be working in one moment was falling apart in the next instant. In this patchwork life, the private and the public blurred as I tried to balance migration, family, fieldwork, and an academic career. It was a time of continuous bricolage and I was forced to constantly tinker, putty, glue, and improvise.

> The situation we are currently going through will have immense consequences; consequences we can't imagine yet. This virus is bringing so many living, working, and researching plans upside down. (Tuesday, 24.03.2020)

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