DOCTORAL JOURNEY DURING COVID-19: REFLECTIONS FROM A COLLABORATIVE AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

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ABSTRACT

Aim/Purpose	This paper identifies and examines cross-cutting experiences from the perspective of two doctoral students, whose research was affected by the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19).
Background	The COVID-19 pandemic continues to be challenging for higher education scholars in terms of proceeding with their research and how the pandemic sets the scene for changes in higher education's future. Due to increased anxiety levels because of uncertainties, the paper provides a reflection of doctoral experiences from two students – one in Russia at the data collection stage, and one in China (enrolled in New Zealand) at the proposal stage.
Methodology	Through collaborative autoethnography and joint-reflection, we analyze our experiences as doctoral students focusing on methodological adjustments, ethical dilemmas, adaptation strategies and supervisor-supervisee relationships. Conducting a collaborative autoethnography provides a richer analysis of the interplay between perspectives, compared to a traditional autoethnography. Collaborative autoethnography also provides conditions for a collective exploration of subjectivities of doctoral students through an iterative process. After providing separate individual accounts, we discussed our experiences, analyzed them, and engaged in a joint-reflection from our consensual interpretations.
Contribution	Our work aims to contribute to existing discussions on how COVID-19 impacted on doctoral students' coping strategies during the pandemic. The paper

	encourages doctoral students to further discuss how they navigate their doctoral experiences through autoethnography and joint-reflections.
Findings	Three main themes transpired in our analysis. First, we encountered roadblocks such as interruptions, frustrations and resistance to adapt our doctoral studies in the pandemic context, which align with the recent literature regarding education during the coronavirus pandemic. Second, we faced a diversity of burdens and privileges in the pandemic, which provided us with both pleasant (opportunity to create change) and unpleasant (unknown threats) situations, thereby enabling us to construct and reconstruct our stories through reflection. Third, we experienced a shared unfamiliarity of doing doctoral studies during the pandemic, to which the role of the academic community including our supervisors and doctoral colleagues contributed to how we managed our circumstances.
Recommendations for Practitioners	We speak to our fellow doctoral students to dare navigate their doctoral experiences through collaborative reflections. In practice, by reflecting on our experience, we recommend that new doctoral students remain flexible and mindful of their doctoral journeys and recognize their agency to deal with the unexpected. We thus encourage the view of doctoral studies as a process rather than outcome-oriented, as we gain experience from processes.
Recommendations for Researchers	We recommend using both collaborative autoethnography and joint-reflection as an instructive tool for qualitative research. Such engagements offer important discussions towards further communications and exchange of ideas among doctoral students from various backgrounds.
Impact on Society	More broadly, this work is an invitation to reflect and provoke further thoughts to articulate reflections on the impact and various ways of thinking that the pandemic might bring to the fore.
Future Research	Doctoral students are welcome to contribute to a collectivity of narratives that thicken the data and analyses of their pandemic experiences in higher education to reinforce the role of doctoral researchers as agents of history in the trying times of a pandemic.
Keywords	doctoral studies, higher education, COVID-19, collaborative autoethnography, reflection

INTRODUCTION

The unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic has posed multiple challenges to higher education (Aristovnik et al., 2020; Dyson, 2020). Due to the impositions of strict health and safety measures, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have implemented restrictions and sanctions to mitigate the spread of the infection and other detrimental effects of this pandemic (International Association of Universities, 2020). Whilst not all fields have entirely suspended face-to-face activities – such as nursing programs and those that require laboratory experiments – the majority of academic institutions generally had to follow lockdowns rules. Of particular interest are doctoral students whose research works are affected by the pandemic in Russia and China because of the high cases in such countries at the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic. Consequently, HEIs in Russia and China have taken necessary steps to ensure a guided adjustment and flexible research modalities such as allowing students to arrange online dissertation defense (Kondratyuk et al., 2021; State Council Information Office, 2020).

In Russia, distance learning has been welcome by most students and faculty, including higher education scholars (Olentsova, 2020). Likewise, in China, students and faculty find online learning reasonable and useful (He & Wei, 2021). However, questions remain concerning the implications of the pandemic for doctoral students' research and whether such context sets the scene for any change and consideration in how doctoral students thrive in the academe.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Empirical studies have pointed out the vulnerabilities doctoral students face, such as mental health struggles, maladaptive stress, suicidal attempts, and physical health problems in their respective doctoral program (Barry et al., 2018; Garcia-Williams et al., 2014; Gill & Donaghue, 2015; Guthrie et al., 2017; Juniper et al., 2012; Kernan et al., 2011; Levecque et al., 2017; Wyatt & Oswalt, 2013). In the literature, there have already been long-standing issues concerning the well-being and vulnerabilities of doctoral students raised in the last 20 years. For instance, Govender and Dhunpath (2011) reported that doctoral studies foster a sense of isolation and pressure on students to meet academic requirements and other expectations. This resonates with Boud and Lee's (2009) emphasis on the need to address the feeling of alienation of doctoral students. Golde (2005) also explains that this is especially difficult when the academic culture is unresponsive to their needs and expectations. Likewise, doctoral students also experience lack of motivation and insecurities about their technical skills and potential for academic development (Leijen et al., 2015; Walker et al., 2008), as well as difficulty in having a harmonious relationship with their supervisors (O'Meara et al., 2013). Meanwhile, other doctoral students struggle to balance their academic and social responsibilities (Ots et al., 2012). As such, Maki and Borkowski (2006) have pointed out the need to review doctoral studies in view of students' perspectives including "their knowledge, abilities, habits of mind, ways of knowing, ways of problem solving, and dispositions" (p. 4). Likewise, Golde and Walker (2009) have also suggested the need for a targeted approach to doctoral studies that take into consideration their holistic lives. Yet, the pandemic has even exacerbated the long-standing issues of doctoral students' vulnerabilities raised by previous studies in the past two decades.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION OF THE AUTHORS' COLLABORATION

This article engages in a collaborative discussion in which the two authors serve as an audience for each other concerning our doctoral experiences during the pandemic. The first author (she/her) is a Filipino doctoral student undergoing a joint-PhD program between Russian and Australian universities, with the guidance of two supervisors. The second author (she/her) is a Chinese doctoral student taking her doctoral degree in social work in New Zealand. Also, in the succeeding sections, we refer to the COVID-19 pandemic whenever the term 'pandemic' appears in the text. We met in a virtual seminar on childhood studies in late 2020. Being active in the webinar's chat, we ended up exchanging contact details for further academic partnership, thereby diverging from the primary purpose of the webinar. We then contacted each other and found common research interests and experiences during the pandemic through conversations with each other on a Zoom call. As we came together with our thoughts, we refined our ideas and planned out this collaborative work. Our collective thoughts led to drafts and further virtual meetings and ensuing dialogues that prompted us to revisit our experiences as doctoral students upon the advent of pandemic. This situation has brought us together not only for academic peer support but also for gaining perspective on scholarly issues that we have never thought of before, including ethical and methodological aspects of our research. Finally, at the time of writing this manuscript, we are at different stages of our research. The first author has already conducted her remote fieldwork in the Philippines while living in Russia, and the second author was at the research proposal stage while residing in China. Although we are at different stages of our research, our iterative exchanges in this collaborative autoethnographic reflection provided us with a common ground as we ventured to make sense of both our experiences (Ellis et al., 2010).

Guided by the notion of 'PhD as a journey' (Miller & Brimicombe, 2010) in which we experience "both the passage of time and changes of phase in our being as we age, learn and develop" (p. 409), we take our own experiences as a case for examination. We adopt this framework as a lens in understanding doctoral studies as "a road to be travelled marked by checkpoints, landmarks, and fuel stops" (Macaulay & Davies, 2019, p. 174). In view of our doctoral life as a journey, we recognize that knowledge is constructed and reconstructed through experience as we undergo an "identity metamorphosis" (Stanley, 2015, p. 114). In the previous works, this approach has been used by doctoral students themselves to examine different parts of their doctoral studies, such as peer learning (Shacham & Od-Cohen, 2009), finding voice (Nicholson-Goodman, 2012), and personal development (Stubba et al., 2012), among others. In this paper, however, the focus is on how two doctoral students experienced changes in their doctoral studies at the advent of the pandemic in 2020. As we are at the "initial stage towards the making of a scholar" (Amran & Ibrahim, 2012, p. 530), we hope to open up a space to articulate value systems for doctoral students and new ways of thinking that the coronavirus pandemic might bring to fore. While we acknowledge that doctoral studies experiences are different, we take the framework of being doctoral students as a journey to provide some decent conceptual comparability to be useful for other doctoral studies.

OBJECTIVES

This article seeks to offer a glimpse of two doctoral students' lives in view of the challenging period they experienced from their pre-pandemic lives until the first wave of lockdowns in Russia and China.

We identify several notable reflections by focusing on our personal experiences as doctoral students in the social sciences whose research needs human contact at the core of our methodologies. We offer three-fold explorations. First, we explore how our lived experiences and identities are entangled with our academic identities at the time of a global health crisis. Second, we show how we are specifically positioned and embedded to take up both the challenges and opportunities in the academic setting. Third, we provide experience-based reflections that may give our fellow doctoral students insights in contextualizing their doctoral studies during the pandemic. Our work aims to contribute to the existing discussions regarding the emerging issues in doctorate studies during the coronavirus pandemic and its implications in the post-lockdown context.

METHODOLOGY

This work adopts two different yet complementary approaches to analyze our doctoral experiences: collaborative autoethnography, and joint-reflection.

COLLABORATIVE AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

Autoethnography has gained traction in recent years as it enables researchers to generate insights about a phenomenon by drawing from their situated experiences (Ellis et al., 2010; Holman Jones et al., 2013). This work, however, departs from traditional autoethnography by adopting a collaborative approach to autoethnography (CAE) (Cohen et al., 2009; Jonsen et al., 2013; Kempster & Stewart, 2010). Whereas traditional autoethnography takes on a 'solo performance' from a single researcher's experience, collaborative autoethnography is written from the perspective of two or more researchers to create an 'ensemble' of interweaving narratives (Chang et al., 2012, p. 24). The decision to embark on collaborative autoethnography is due to the richer analysis of an interplay between different perspectives, thereby unfolding how stories and narratives are interlinked. The justification in engaging in a collaborative autoethnography roots from the methodological standpoint that knowledge generation is not restricted to a single paradigm (Sparkes, 2002). In view of the critiques of solo autoethnography noting that "memory is flawed, experience is subjective, texts are constructed, and narratives are performances of our chosen versions of ourselves" (Stanley, 2015, pp. 148-149), we argue

that our research is best carried out through incorporating the perspectives of the key research participants – two doctoral students in this study's case. Compared to the 'self-indulgent' nature of auto-ethnography (Delamont, 2009; Sparkes, 2002), a collaborative autoethnography provides greater experiential and textual juxtaposition by providing "a scholarly space to hold up mirrors to each other in communal self-interrogation" (Chang et al., 2012, p. 26). Through a multiplicity of narratives, the knowledge generated in a collaborative autoethnography even more vibrantly emphasizes points of commonality and difference as it would in a solo autoethnography.

As pointed out by Wolfe et al. (2018), participant-researchers in a collaborative autoethnography are able to "bring their narratives together" (p. 297) beyond individual-level. A collaborative autoethnography thus allows for an exploration of our subjectivities as doctoral scholars collectively by having an iterative process. Note that this collaborative approach has been challenging at times. Aside from the different time zones between the two of us (GMT +5 in Russia and GMT +8 in China), we had some challenges in arranging schedules due to our individual academic timetables, personal schedules, and institutional commitments. Such issues have taken us longer to produce this work than if we would have in individual work. However, this partnership has also enabled us to have a more substantial and nuanced work than what each of us would have produced in a solo autoethnography.

JOINT-REFLECTION

To further enhance our analysis of collaborative autoethnography, we employ a joint-reflection approach. Human agency roots from the capacity to reflect as it is "a process of reviewing an experience of practice to describe, analyze, evaluate and so inform learning about practice" (Reid, 1993, p. 305). In trying times, such as a pandemic, reflection is instructive to the learning and research experience (Dewey, 1933; Scambary, 2016). Similar to the reason we pointed out about a collaborative approach, we embarked on a joint-reflection to further engage and juxtapose our experiences in the pandemic scenario. This resonates with previous scholars who argue that research needs to explore the transformation of experience into knowledge by the researchers themselves (Habermas, 1987; Jarvis, 1987; Merriam, 2001). Doctoral students themselves are an important source of insights because "there is no method or technique of doing research other than through the medium of the researcher" (Stanley & Wise, 1993, p. 157). In view of taking doctoral studies, we regard this reflection as an activity of introspection and internalization of personal experiences, which eventually underscores alternative perspectives to evaluate higher education (Amran & Ibrahim, 2012; Pretorius & Ford (2016). These experiences take a wide range of events from finding a supervisor, dissertation writing, candidature, publishing, and examinations, among others. The conscious effort to have a reflective examination of doctoral experiences during a pandemic is insightful because reflection is not only about positive experiences (Bolton, 2014; Marrington & March, 2019). Our joint-reflection reveals self-narratives and meanings, and shapes and guides alternative ways towards the (re)imagination of higher education with new perspectives from such experiences (Goldberg, 2010).

The personal experiences were written individually; thereafter, we discussed these individual accounts, analyzed them, and jointly wrote the text. Note that the second author used sketches to describe her experiences, which was considered in our joint-reflection. In this joint-reflection, we provide our consensual interpretations, although they can be read in many ways. In reflecting and retelling our experiences in collaborative writing together with our dialogues, we inevitably have overlapping experiences with other doctoral students, both domestic and international. However, we do not seek to produce generalizable insights to either group, as all international doctoral students have different positionalities, leading them to experience a doctoral life in unique ways. Our intention in this collaborative autoethnography is to contribute to the literature of pandemic-related issues in the academe by offering an immersive understanding of our lived experiences from our situated vantage points as international doctoral students whose research were affected by the pandemic (Ellis et al., 2010).

FINDINGS

FIRST AUTHOR'S NARRATIVE

Methodological concerns

I am a doctoral student under a double-PhD track in philosophy (ethics) and geography. The initial design of my research was to examine children's play spaces in poor urban neighborhoods in the Philippines through face-to-face interviews and participant observation. However, the pandemic coincided with my data collection because I was stuck in Russia due to travel restrictions. My doctoral dissertation was also on hold concerning the decisions and actions I needed in order to pursue my research. I had several options, such as waiting for the lockdown to ease out, changing my research questions, or modifying my methodology to fit the current situation. I ended up adjusting my methodology into a remote interview with children to maintain my research momentum. I needed to embrace the logic of digital communication in gathering and ordering my data. To contextualize the extent of this issue, undertaking remote fieldwork raises unique risks as a qualitative research method. First, it is difficult to navigate this emerging method because there is still no solid consensus on the standards of implementing an empirical study in a digital platform (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Hesse-Biber & Griffin, 2013). Second, the paradigmatic scope of this field is still in its infancy stage, which leads to uncertainties about the proper conduct of research on online communication with respondents (James & Busher, 2006). Finally, my research targets marginalized respondents who have access needs to technology (McInroy, 2016).

Ethical aspects

Before the research itself, I conducted a remote ocular visit to my research venue to test whether my plan would work and if there would be any ethical dilemma ahead. A faith-based group helped me reach out to the children in the poor urban community I wish to interview. The purpose of this visit is to test the possibility of remote or virtual participatory research with children. Using the volunteers' devices, I conducted a remote unstructured interview (Engler et al., 2016) with 9–12-year-old Filipino children. One community volunteer took the role of a proxy researcher, who became my virtual assistant in the entire process as children are already comfortable with him. The volunteer went to the houses of my target participants and discussed with them and their parents my research and their possible participation. Then, I was introduced to the children through Zoom, and we had informal chats. The result of the remote visit was positive. Both the children agreed to participate in my research, and their parents gave their consent.

At the start of the actual field visit, my proxy researcher went to an old open-space basketball court near the children's neighborhood where children usually play. The venue was spacious enough to practice distancing protocols. Using the equipment of the proxy researcher and resources from the volunteers such as paper, crayons, and art materials, the children illustrated their play lives and spaces during the lockdown while I was observing and talking to them virtually. The children's names were archived but not written in the official results to protect their anonymity. The participants were interviewed in groups of three or four peers (7 triads and 1 quartet) to keep a comfortable ambiance. The children were also aware that participation was optional, and they could opt out at any time. After the drawing activity, we had a show-and-tell and discussion about their works. The children also brought my proxy researcher to their homes to explain in detail their play spaces at home. The turnout of the ocular visit and method testing has been inspiring and eye-opening.

Emotions involved

Before implementing my remote ocular visit, I was filled with insecurities about adopting traditional social research methods to online interactions. Switching from a face-to-face interview to an online one was a major challenge in my work, making me question my scholarly abilities to conduct a

method I have never done before. I had many questions: where will this research ambition lead me? how much am I aware of this fast change in my methods? and how much does all this become truly appropriate in my study? For the first few weeks of changing my research methods, I was constantly disquieted about how a remote interview method could affect my dissertation's quality, its contribution to the broader discipline, and my standing as an academic. This situation also fostered the fear of not building rapport with my respondents. The challenge was paralyzing in anticipating and managing research issues, especially that children do not see my research the same way I do. Despite my research training and experience, I was not prepared to address the adjustment of ethical quandaries in ways attentive to the protection of children. The literature concerning researchers working remotely with children does not provide sufficient guidance on managing the complexities inherent in this remote fieldwork. I also initially found this method less thrilling than I thought. It was filled with uncertainties compared to the initial proposal I had crafted and devoted my effort to. Instead of feeling driven, I was reluctant and unconfident. As a result, I spent extra hours studying this new method to compensate for my unfamiliarity with this new research terrain. Through familiarizing myself with this new method, I have witnessed the promise of web-based methods and virtual/digital methods.

Adaptation

A few notable insights are instructive. First, recruitment of participants through third-party channels was crucial. I got a better grasp of what kind of assistance I need for my research, and I learned to trust a third party or the proxy researcher in the process. It was certainly challenging to immerse myself remotely in the research field since physical presence provides more interpersonal connection between the researcher and respondents. While I am a Filipino and fluent in the local language of my respondents, I worried that the children might not see me as an 'insider' because I am on screen. However, the proxy researcher assured me that everything is going to be well. I realized that groups that work on behalf of marginalized communities invariably play a role not only in accessing potential respondents for research but also acting as external experts in the field who guide researchers. Aside from facilitating access to my target respondents, the volunteers exceeded my expectations by assisting me throughout the process and extended help beyond my requests.

Second, willingness to be disappointed is insightful. Indeed, problems unfolded as I was conducting my remote research. The internet connection crashed; some of my respondents initially did not follow my instructions; I was interrupted by calls; my laptop hung halfway through the session. Moreover, our 3-hour time zone difference meant that I was conducting research on a dark winter morning in Russia while warm and sunny in the Philippines. This added to the dissonance I felt during research as we did not share the same sensescapes and environment. However, what helped me was constant communication of what was happening on each side. This also helped build personal connections because we have shared struggles.

Finally, being open to children's questions helped break barriers between my participants and me. The children were inquisitive about my research because it is their first time participating in research, let alone a remote one. The children asked me to show my room and tell them about Russia to make them feel 'fair' because I asked about their play spaces. Moreover, the children were expressive that they 'liked' the drawing experience reflected in spontaneous laughter while drawing. The simultaneous drawing and open discussion became very engaging as the children mentioned that they were more comfortable talking while drawing.

Supervisor and academic community

In my desire to learn more about coping with this situation, I found myself seeking out advice from my academic community of doctoral students about how they went about the changes in their research. Discussions with my academic colleagues were instructive to how I proceeded with my dissertation. Having frequent conversations with my two supervisors, who are my 'academic mothers', has

kept me on track. As a scholar in my early 30s who usually works independently, I contact my supervisors only when I need them to check my drafts. However, the pandemic made me contact my academic mothers to ask for advice and have more regular conversations, ranging from my dissertation to staying mentally strong during the pandemic. I have compassionate supervisors who never pressure me to do work when I am not in my best capacity to do so. Having seasoned and well-trained supervisors is important for me to get the support I need, especially at more challenging times and unprecedented life circumstances.

Final take

Overall, presenting such findings hopes to provide useful insight to other doctoral students who can resonate with the challenges of collecting data during the pandemic. In contrast to my expectations, the change in my methodology did not jeopardize my research and reputation as a researcher. Rather, this experience has confirmed a long-standing wisdom – that a doctoral dissertation does not need to be what was initially planned, and all I have to do at this point is to find a way to get to the end of this journey as best as I could. This unprecedented change in my research has led me to take a step back and reconsider my doctoral degree within the grand scheme of things. What this pandemic implies for my doctoral journey is that the notion of a 'successful' academic needs rethinking away from the conventional meritocratic narrative of being an independent and productive scholar. Considering my conversations with my respondents, my proxy researcher and colleagues in academia, doctoral students are not independent from the rest of society and have their fair share of 'I-don't-know's'. Admittedly, we build our entire careers on these 'I-don't-know's'. As Polish poet Wisława Szymborska (1996) puts it, "Whatever inspiration is, [it is] born from a continuous I do not know". This also meant that I had to change the vision I had for my doctoral dissertation, and accept that I only have to produce work decent enough to earn a doctoral degree. This may not be the doctoral journey I used to imagine for myself, but I have come to terms that I do not control all aspects of my research and I have to work with the affordances my circumstances give me at present. This reflection is not an attempt to spin an unpleasant phenomenon into a superficially positive narrative but rather to bring to the surface emerging doctoral issues often only relegated informally within small doctoral cliques, informal email exchanges, or social media posts. Attentive to how personal experiences resonate with my fellow doctoral students, these concerns are raised in an effort to consider what insights can be gained from doctoral experiences during the pandemic.

SECOND AUTHOR'S NARRATIVE: DAISY

Methodological concerns

I started my doctoral journey in 2019 as a student of social work. My research is about left-behind children's living experiences in a rural town in southwest China. Drawing on a child rights framework and children's agency perspective, I intend to add to knowledge on left-behind children by eliciting their perspectives on their experiences. I also intend to reflect on the ethical implications of conducting child participatory research in rural China and about the possible contributions of this research to the new sociology of childhood.

My research was in the research planning stage, so I had not started data collection. The pandemic paused research using in-person methods instantaneously. In order to protect participants from the risk, researchers take actions immediately. I have already prepared an in-person version research proposal, so moving my research online brings great challenges.

The following image (Figure 1) shows the whole process of revising my research plan. You can see I am a girl sitting by the sea. I need to capture a lot of fish (evidence) to support every change I make in my research proposal. However, things are never as easy as they seem. I sit by the sea from sunrise to sunset, but I only catch four fish. I did catch a lot of other things, such as crabs, shrimp, conch and octopus. Every time I picked them up, I was disappointed, not because of their problems, but

because I did not need them at the moment. I wasted a lot of energy to capture them, and I was exhausted. At the same time, I began to wonder if there were enough fish in the sea because I had fished for so long after all, and I forgot to tell that the fish I catch could be a new variety (virtual participatory research). I do not have enough time either, because my mom (supervisor) has asked me to come home for dinner.

I took my four fish home that day, but of course I will come back again the next day because I still need more fish. That was by no means the end of the day's story because I need to cook them. I ask myself: What is the best way to cook the fish to keep it delicious (How can I use this evidence to best justify my change) – fried, boiled or stir-fried? What kind of flavor would my diners (supervisors and members of the committee) prefer – more salt, a little bit sour, or tastes very peppery? What vegetables should I add to soften the taste of this fish (How can I make each part seem logical and cohesive) – onions, tomatoes or peppers?

Figure 1. A fishing analogy showing the process of changing my research plan
(Image Source: Chen, 2020)

Turning to the real world, I have to admit that at the beginning I indulged in spending a lot of time to shut myself up in a room making a cart. After having gained nothing, I went through a period of despair. However, my professional experience allowed me to quickly grasp the agency. In order to find enough evidence for applying participatory research methods to an online setting, I reminded myself that I had to remain open. I attended a series of webinars on child research and themes, and it was at one of the webinars that the first author and I met.

At the same time, I contacted some professional scholars in child field by email and asked some 'stupid but emergent' questions. Fortunately, most of the academics replied to me, though there is a real disparity in our academic standing. Some of them provided me with their team's research notes, while others shared with me the webinars they hosted or their websites. Reassuringly, the 'fish' in the bucket gradually grows, from 'theoretical underpinnings of online participatory research', 'methodological modifications of online participatory research' to 'ethical considerations of online participatory research'. Without stopping to reflect, I realized the crucial role that flexibility and agency play in moments of instability, and the action I took as a result was: going global.

Ethical aspects

As a novice researcher, I know there is 'ethics in practice' beyond the 'procedural ethics' (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004, pp. 269-273). I know there is a real limit to how much help the 'procedural ethical guidelines' can provide. The ethics booklet depicts an unfamiliar valley with a path that winds its way forward. At the side of the road, there is a signpost that says 'GO AHEAD'. If you follow the sign,

you can reach your destination by following the path. There is the same valley, the same road sign, but countless paths that seem to wind their way forward in the actual situation (Figure 2).
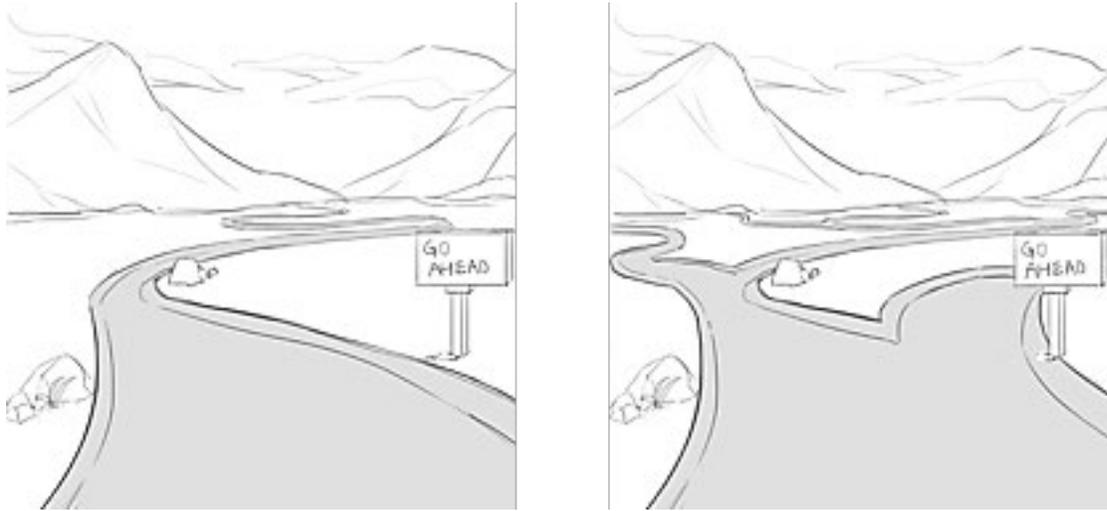
Figure 2. 'Go ahead': ethic guidelines vs. ethical practice
(Source: Chen, 2020)

I am not stressing that ethical guidelines are of little help for ethical issues encountered in real research settings, but there is always a gap between ethical theory and practice. Conducting research during a pandemic may pose a greater challenge to previous ethical frameworks and make us think about whether the current ethical system is already adequate to deal with the new tension that the pandemic brings. Specifically, although I have not formally entered the data collection stage, I think that my research practice and that of the first author and that of other colleagues conducting human-related research during the pandemic, could fill some of the gaps in the current ethical framework. Although the pandemic has brought many surprises to my research, it provides a lot of new insight, such as the ethical issues of conducting virtual participation research with children.

Emotions involved

Academic researchers are required to manage their feelings, specific 'emotional mechanisms' and undertake emotional work during their research (Bondi, 2005). Many scholars have shared their own emotional experiences during their research (Bondi, 2005; Davies, 2012; Willis, 2012). The pandemic involved academic researchers in a new emotional experience.

What I felt most during the pandemic was a sense of loneliness and helplessness. Choosing to come back means reunions with my family, but such a long reunion caused me uneasiness. Who am I? Sometimes I had to face the contradiction from various selves (Reinharz, 1997), especially when some unfamiliar acquaintances quipped with 'you come home again?' or ' when you can return to school?'.

A student staying at home can be ashamed. 'Does not go to school' is always related to 'play hooky' and 'floppiness'. Though doctoral students are regarded as academic staff in my faculty, for other people in my community in China, a doctoral student is still a student, and it is weird to see a student stay at home all day.

It is also shameful for a woman in her late twenties to stay at home for such a long time. I do not have formal employment, and typing all day cannot bring me any tangible return. Sometimes I just doubted what I was doing. I often asked myself: oh, why … why … I know you think you work hard, right? … but why did the delay happen? … No matter what kind of role I play, I am an anomaly in the eyes of those around me (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Drawing showing a doctoral student's reality of working at home vs. what others think is like working at home during a doctoral program, modifying from CohenMiller (2014)
(Source: Chen, 2020)

The first author mainly elaborated on a series of emotional reactions she experienced after knowing that she could not conduct the research in person. For me, the loss of my academic environment on campus left me with a series of emotional struggles. As I mentioned in the methodology section, I took a series of steps to help me re-establish the academic environment. In addition to joining some webinar sessions, e-visiting scholars engaged in child engagement research around the world and making academic partners, I also took two qualitative research courses and communicated regularly with colleagues and my supervisors. This positive 'self-help' mode helped me successfully establish an academic environment at home. I was most fortunate to meet the first author in such a tense and uncertain situation, and it was through my initiative, I gained the friendship and then wrote this article.

Adaptation

The development of technology enables me to study at home, but it is also technology that brings me trouble. Internet development helps students learn online through Zoom meetings and be able to access online resources. Technology helps me work at home, and I enjoyed it in the first few days. During normal days, I had to get up at least an hour earlier to freshen up. Then I need to take a bus for half an hour to get to campus, which does not include the time waiting for the bus. Sometimes if I have courses all day, I may not be able to eat at noon. Working at home solves almost all the problems. I do not need makeup, and I do not have to spend time commuting. My mom usually prepares the food for the family, so there is no need to worry about eating. In the middle of the lockdown, I began to feel depressed and unstable. I feel cabin fever and feel very depressed. I could not go to the gym during my isolation, and I gained weight, making me more down. There is a window in front of my desk. When I am tired of studying, I can see the scenery outside. It is a great relief. However, the window to the outside world was no longer my salvation. This window allows me to see the outside world, but also isolates me from the outside. The lack of a real social environment makes me irritable. The people on the computer screen, including my supervisors, colleagues, and classmates are always two-dimensional. Then the window kept reminding me that I was in a cage, and looking out of the window has become a burden to me now.

Later, in the university's language development course for newly enrolled doctoral students, I met many colleagues in the same situation. Although we came from different faculties, we were stranded in our home countries because of the closed border. We set up our after-school discussion group to

communicate and share, which brought me out of the enclosed space. Sharing my life with them, listening to them share their lives, made me feel like I was not alone, and I gradually forgot the anxious days before. I have never given up on practicing my agency and connecting with the outside world (Figure 3).
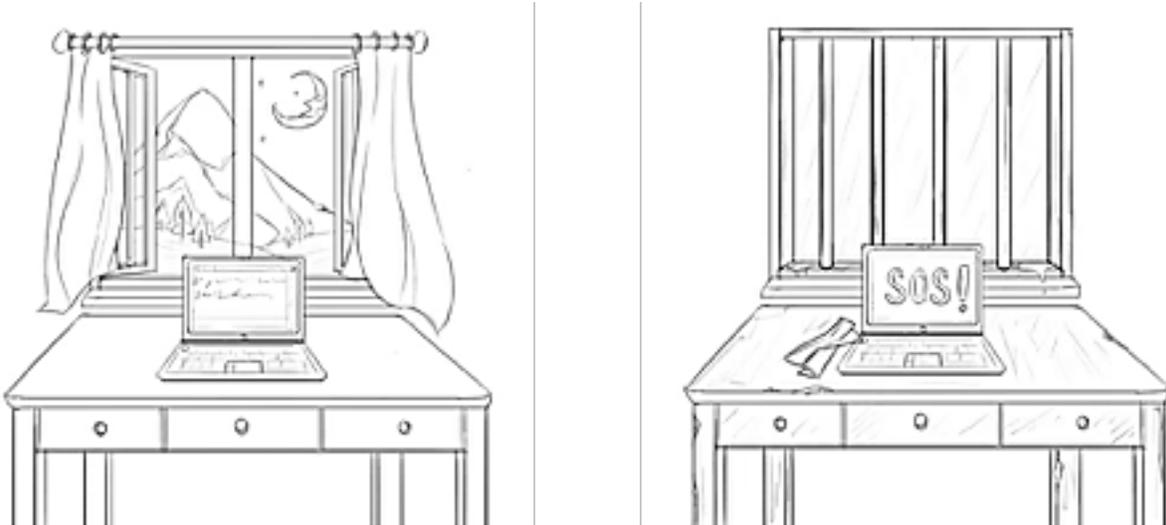

Figure 4. The world outside and me
(Source: Chen, 2020)

Supervisor and academic communities

I do not know how other students see the student-supervisor relationship. Before I started, I always regarded a doctoral journey sailing on an endless ocean until I found my island. From the start, I was the sailor and my supervisor was the captain. My boat was loaded with all kinds of food and tools to help me reach my destination. My captain will control the whole direction. She will tell me: 'so now we are now at 52 degrees north by east … I think you need to speed up or we may not get to the third canyon before dark as planned …' or ' oh … no, no, no … I do not think your paddle is correct … you should have a look at page XX of the training book'.

And she will also tell me: 'oh, you should feel hungry now … please take a piece of mousse … oh, hold on … a cup of latte will make you more energetic'.

When my supervisor asked me: 'how do you think?' or say: 'please do not mind to add your own ideas' … I gradually realized that it is my journey, and the image of sailing in my mind changed. I now drop out the role of the captain on my boat. At the same time, it reminds me of what my co-supervisor said to me at our first supervising meeting: 'it is your journey, not ours'.

Along with the Covid-19 storm, it was bound to be an extraordinary voyage. You never know what will happen tomorrow. Nowadays I think of a supervisor as a doll with a map of the world. She is always here for me when I am lonely. The doll's map of the world keeps me from getting lost in the sea, but only if I need to act independently.

I am increasingly sure that I am playing the role of 'captain of the ship'. In recent supervising meetings, I have become more proactive in sharing my new research ideas with them and expressing my thoughts on the progress of my research. I am trying to become a leader in my research and I think my supervisors have the same idea of developing me into a truly independent researcher (Figure 5).
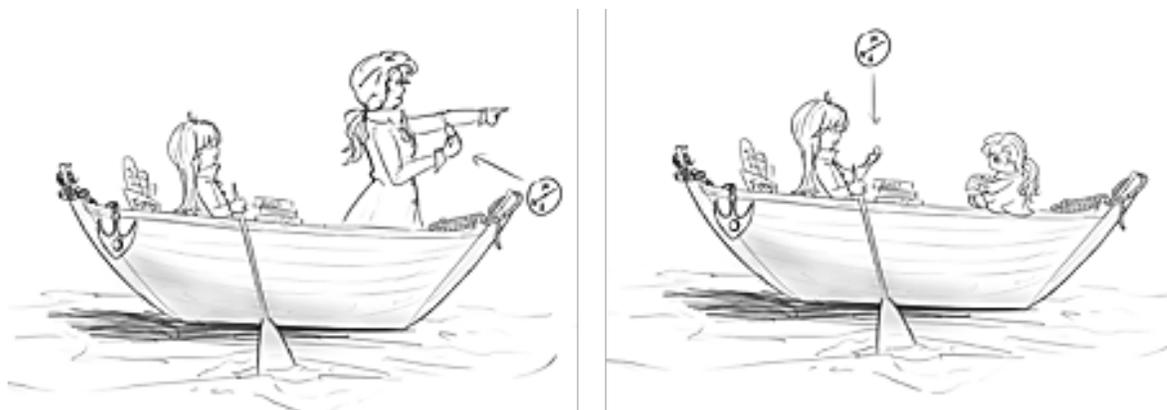
Figure 5. My supervisor: a leader or a companion?
(Source: Chen, 2020)

Final take

The pandemic has sent me into despair and collapse on many occasions. Both academically and in personal life, I have been in a constant state of accepting challenges, adapting to them, continuing to accept them, and continuing to adapt to them. Looking back, I seem to have a better understanding of why people coincidentally see doctoral studies as a 'journey'. I agree with the first author that the true nature of doctoral study is not about getting there quickly (the utilitarian, ambitious pursuit of a degree).

This reminds me of a popular advertising slogan from over a decade ago in China: 'Life is like a journey, in which the final destination is not important while the scenery along the road and the mood of enjoying the scenery are of true value.' For me, the same goes for doctoral studies. Doctoral studies are more like a personal discipline, and the people and events we experience on the way to the end help us understand ourselves and the world better. In doctoral studies, we are trained in our thinking, our aptitudes. This pandemic has challenged me like never before, but it has also given me hope. As the first author mentions, I am acutely aware of the importance of remaining flexible. I have come to understand that doctoral study is not a step-by-step process, but requires the ability to adapt to any unknown or uncertainty. Although the process was painful and exhausting, the pandemic did provide me with an opportunity to exercise my flexibility.

DISCUSSION

In the discussion that follows, we present our reflections of our doctoral experiences. Although our experiences vary due to our different personal, social and academic backgrounds, we share challenges pertaining to being doctoral students during the pandemic, shaping and counter-shaping our personal and academic lives. While a global health crisis is a collective experience, we also recognize the uniqueness of our positionalities as international doctoral students. The modest aim of this reflection is thus not to generate totalizing insights but instead to be agents of history contributing to the existing narratives in higher education especially during a global health crisis. We aim to demonstrate that our lived experiences from our situated vantage points as doctoral students are more than time capsules of pandemic events but rather a way to walk through the inner workings of a collaborative endeavor. Three main themes transpired in our discussions of each other's narratives, all of which are intertwined with how we negotiate with the changes in our research agenda.

THE ROADBLOCK: INTERRUPTIONS, FRUSTRATIONS AND RESISTANCE

We both framed the pandemic as an interruption of our plans. We used the rhetoric of 'coinciding' and 'paralyzing' (first author) to imply a struggle or a battle against the pandemic and 'pause' and 'real

limit' (second author) to express how the pandemic obstructed our research endeavors. These disruptions also evoked memories of feeling trapped with a sense of 'loneliness and helplessness' (second author). Indeed, the pandemic has given us hurdles in our research strategies and left us with many questions without much certainty about the timeline of our doctoral research. While it is not surprising to assume that doctoral students might have been prepared for the lockdown because they frequently engage in long hours of solitary work (Jaschik, 2015; Walker, 2015), the pandemic's impact cannot be underestimated. Just because we have not quit our doctoral studies does not mean we are moving forward because most of these extra tasks are related to adjusting our research towards a more viable approach. This lockdown has surfaced that hard work does not necessarily equate to research rigor and progress. This means we had to step back, reconsider and replan, as we learn new approaches to qualitative research even though it implies dropping initial respondents from the study, contacting new respondents, rewriting letters of consent, and overhauling sections of chapters we have already written. While it is not entirely new to be a remote doctoral student (Paliktzoglou & Suhonen, 2011), one of the most obvious technical adjustments has been embracing technology in ways that we might not have realized to do, and do so rapidly. We have switched very quickly to distance instruction, and working from home or dormitory has rendered a huge challenge in terms of the absence of all the usual resources such as a work environment in the university. Moreover, given the uncertainty attached to this pandemic, long term planning started to look different from how we have imagined it to be. We cannot simply set schedules, meetings or university visits weeks beforehand. Indeed, finding sources of resilience that work for both our personal and academic needs has not been easy.

The narrative of interruption we shared is entangled with narratives of frustrations on proceeding with the rest of our research. Part of this frustration was questioning ourselves and our research capacity. Both of us were anxious about our performance as researchers. As the second author mentions, being a 'novice researcher', there are many research practices in grey areas, making us cautious about the possible ethical dilemma ahead. Even if we sought a diversity of perspectives to guide us toward new ways of doing doctoral studies in a pandemic, there was only a limited set of instructive materials to help us adjust our doctoral lives during a pandemic. Moreover, worrying about our image as a scholar was a vibrant emotion we shared. This resulted in lurking into self-judgment for what is outside of our control. We looked at our circumstances, such as not being prepared for the pandemic changes or not being employed as shortcomings. Lastly, the way we initially reacted to the pandemic was that of resistance. We both resisted changing our research plans due to the 'wasted energy' (second author) from investing our time in our pre-pandemic plans. Such resistance comes from the awareness of letting go of control and being comfortable with uncertainty. Even though we know that we need to re-plan our research, it was difficult for us to accept it because it is 'difficult to navigate [an] emerging method' (first author). It was then challenging to reclaim our agency as researchers because of such constraints in our environment, which hindered us from taking "a certain action or even urge [us] to do something" (Withagen et al., 2012, p. 253).

THE CROSSROADS: BURDENS AND PRIVILEGES

Burdens of technology and spatial limitations

While technology has been a source of convenience, the narrative that dominated our experiences is that of distress and nuisance, laying bare our personal dynamics with the digital platform. The first author emphasized the slight difficulty in communicating with her respondents, in which the gift of technology is futile without the appropriate assistance of third-party channels. Being online also has inherent impersonal aspects built on it, which has placed initial barriers between the author and her participants. Meanwhile, the second author centered on the personal impact of immersing in the digital world for an extended period of time. What she thought to be a sensible set up such as the time-saving facet of work-from-home, turned out to be restrictive and drowning. The feeling of being 'de-

pressed and unstable' speaks about technology's tendency to imprison human will. The same technology that helped us optimize our actions and transcend physical constraints is the same technology that reduced humans into mere 'users' of digital devices, expected to be productive. Interestingly, our experiences also resonate with research indicating that women are more affected by technology-related stress (Andersen et al., 2020; Fauville et al., 2021; Viglione, 2020). For instance, the second author mentioned being especially conscious about her physical appearance, which is related to what previous studies call 'self-focused attention' (Gonzales & Hancock, 2011) from self-viewing in an 'all day mirror' (Bailenson, 2021) in video conferencing. What transpires is that the technology can have a double burden of being both insufficient and cause of burnout. Such experiences are, of course, not isolated from the rest of the world, which places the authors' experiences to the broader issue of technology's limited capacities for interaction and the fatigue it brings to people. An online environment, with all its benefits, cannot replace the rapport built through face-to-face interaction because humans utilize senses to communicate. Moreover, nonverbal overload in online settings potentially fatigues those exposed to technology regularly (Bailenson, 2021).

Our experiences also raise potential and varied interpretations of how we relate to space and what we tell ourselves about it. Both of us experienced the ease and restrictions of spatiality in our personal and research life. We acknowledge the possibility of pursuing remote fieldwork through technology. This situation has allowed us to transcend physical spaces and continue our research work via digital means. However, at the same time, the sensory intangibility of our academic spaces and being away from our colleagues and research participants required us to pause and re-negotiate with ourselves the meaning of virtual spaces as our 'new normal' research spaces. The first author used the 'barrier' rhetoric to indicate the geographical divide between her and the participants. Meanwhile, the 'cage' metaphor used by the second author indicates the restricted spatiality of her physical and digital realms. In such conditions, our bodily mobilities were the means by which we comprehend the burdens of the pandemic. The lack of movements in a restricted space is at the center of our narratives, albeit in different ways – limited movements in remote fieldwork (first author) and limited exercise/gym activity (second author). In both cases, our relationship with our moving bodies has become the core medium through which we felt the impact brought by the pandemic.

Hidden privileges

Having mentioned our burdens, we also acknowledge the need to be self-critical of our privileged positions as doctoral students. In our reflection, the burdens we faced also reflect the privileges we enjoy. Doctoral education occupies a liminal space between a privileged group outside the academe and a struggling group inside the academe. On the one hand, doctoral students are considered experts because they comprise a small percentage in society (Walker et al., 2008). On the other hand, being a doctoral student also means having one of the least stable positions in the academic world (Linková, 2014). Along with these identities are other multiple identities that cut across personal and professional structures, which are ultimately embedded in the constellations of identities in our lives. Thus, being a doctoral student is a complex oscillation of tribulations and entitlements on a case-to-case basis and calls for further documentation, analysis and reflection in respective fields, universities, and countries.

Having the means and headspace to reflect on our experiences is a privilege that not everyone can enjoy. This recognition of our technological privilege provides perspective in how doctorate studies can be imbued with irony. For instance, while we told ourselves narratives of technology's burdens, the irony is that we would have not even met had we not been on the same digital platform that exhausted us. This also reveals our complex relationship with technology – whereas we have digital burnout, we also use technology in sharing experiences with a fellow doctoral candidate. While technology can bring exhaustion to doctoral students, this tool also serves as an opportunity to build a supportive environment with our academic partners. Moreover, being women scholars, we are aware of our situation of not being mothers with child-care responsibilities (Minello, 2020). We both have a child-free space, do not need to think about child care and are free from the mental fatigue of taking

care of a family. We have time to communicate with each other, sit and write a 'side hustle paper' outside our individual dissertations and jobs. The fact that we are able to reflect and write about our circumstances means that we have digital time affordances, which would usually go to attending to the needs of others or doing household tasks for many women in the academic experience.

Overall, the interdisciplinary nature of our dialogues has been fruitful and helpful on how we can respond with high levels of uncertainty, which is in line with previous studies on social support among doctoral scholars (Aitchison & Guerin, 2014; Cahusac de Caux et al., 2017; Lam et al., 2019). However, this reflection serves as a reminder that the distresses we experienced from the pandemic still come at a privileged disposition. All these conditions led to the reflection of our privilege of being in academia as an elite institution. We began a writing collaboration without reflecting on the manner we have hidden and unchecked privileges until we come to the reflection part. Indeed, having a doctoral position afforded by academia is a double-edged sword, making us simultaneously burdened and privileged, both visible and invisible.

NAVIGATION GUIDE: SUPERVISION AND RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Even before we begin our reflections, it has been established in the literature that supervisors are central to obtaining a doctoral degree. In our individual accounts, we used certain terms such as 'academic mothers' (first author) and metaphors 'a doll with a map of the world' (second author) to describe the importance of our supervisors. As seasoned scholars, supervisors can provide valuable insights regarding the pandemic-induced rapid shifts in doctoral practices. However, in acknowledging both the challenges of the pandemic to both doctoral students and supervisors, our experiences gave the word 'direction' a different meaning beyond merely giving advice thesis-wise. We recognize the insurmountable responsibility they carry during the pandemic as it is a heavy burden to give directions and even micro-manage multiple students in times of uncertainty (Dollinger, 2019). To be clear, we have different relationship dynamics with our respective supervisors – the first author sees her supervisors as her motherly confidants while the second author regards her supervisor as a doll with a world map. However, we find similarities in terms of our dependence with our supervisors, in which we have also seen more of their humanity unfold. In the pandemic context, being validated by supervisors became all the more important for our academic esteem. The characters of our supervisors have been fleshed out as more than academic partners who are intellectually grounded. At the same time, the narratives of relationships we used – maternal relationship and accompanying relationship – demonstrate our sense of teamwork with our supervisors. This shows our acknowledgment that we also need to carry our own weight as doctoral scholars since supervisors are also finite academics who have suffered from the pandemic. In view of our collaborative autoethnography, the narrative we tell ourselves about our supervisors took a leap beyond a collegial relationship. This leads to the reflection of our relationship with our supervisors as rather a multi-layered patchwork and as part of what Minge (2013, p. 429) calls a "messy, complex, and multiple realities and knowledge" unfolding before us throughout our interactions during the pandemic.

A WAY FORWARD

This collaborative reflection involved constant dialogue and writing over six months using various digital platforms. Constant dialogues, both verbal and written, have been the building blocks in our construction of research questions, objectives and methods. Such dialogues are professional and our way to self-understanding, each acting as a 'foil' to the other. Our discussions revolved around the themes emerging from the literature in various fields such as doctoral education, research with children and recent pandemic-related studies. It has not been easy for both of us to distinguish our reflections as collaborative and/or individual in doing such reflections. Indeed, how we form reflexive critical knowledge about our doctoral journey, personal lives and the pandemic condition is filled with complexities. The learnings involved in our experiences are insurmountable but few things are worth mentioning, which may resonate with a wider audience. Being an 'interdisciplinary team'

(Chang, 2013), our reflections involved exploration of subjectivities that transcends from self to other and individual to society in four ways:

1. The journey

Part of the lessons learned in this doctoral journey is the confirmation that journeys are transformative, shaping our academic identities and perpetually transforming across our lived experiences, values and cultural practices, and ways of being. However, this journey follows an entangled rather than a straight path. As Gunter (2010, p. 81) notes in describing a doctoral journey, "what looks to be linear, neat and tidy, was messy, crazy and wonderfully exciting". Indeed, our journeys stretch out and curl around us, with tunnels and loops – from the university to home and back, writing and revising again, tweaking research questions and re-reading objectives. While many Higher Education Institutions are actively upscaling and boosting their existing doctoral programs, the coronavirus pandemic has proven that there is still a lot more uncharted terrain to discover; a lot more to learn, relearn and unlearn. Our lived experiences as doctoral students belong to the complexity of intersections among academics, institutions and a global health crisis. As such, while we are still in the middle of our doctoral journeys, we share this reflection to contribute to the growing collection of insights from doctoral students ourselves.

2. Turning points and milestones

We have witnessed many turning points throughout our doctoral journeys during the pandemic, which we cannot fully grasp all at once. The shifts in research directions, methodological approaches, and university rules and regulations were only among the crucial changes that determined our next actions as doctoral students. The turning points we decided to take in this doctoral journey, such as epistemic and methodological risks, are affordances we had as doctoral students in a protected learning space to mature, grow and even make mistakes in the university. In our learnings, reconsidering turning points and alternatives is also worthwhile as it has trained our decision-making skills and lent resilience to our biographic and academic tracks. On a more trivial level, our doctoral journey also involved small turning points, such as finding and reading additional literature, revising a paragraph, even the day-to-day activities of cooking, going to the grocery, cleaning, and general self-care.

It has also been challenging to the ego to hear about the milestones that other doctoral students have made during the pandemic while we cannot even start our data gathering. Imposter syndrome can easily lurk in when our thoughts are left unguarded (Litalien & Guay, 2015). Indeed, it is easy to doubt our worth and competence in our academic roles when we witness others coping better than us. However, this reflection has made clear that one's progress is different from another, and so are our turning points and milestones. We have our own timing, research issues and coping approaches. Besides, the encounters along our doctoral journeys can be sources of learning in terms of "reflection, pushing boundaries, surmounting challenges, and appreciating encounters rather than not comparison" (Nguyen, 2019, p. 161). As such, it is futile to compare ourselves to other doctorate candidates. Instead, thinking that a doctoral degree is a shared space has allowed us to fruitfully engage in collaborative research works (Russell, 2017). Through our discussions and research brainstorming, we resisted the temptation to complain, blame anyone or resort to divisive actions.

3. A shared experience

Given that doctoral students still occupy a place of privilege in our society (Walker et al., 2008), it is to the academic world's credit that we are reminded of our shared responsibility of taking a doctorate degree: to contribute to knowledge through the quality of our scholarship. Our doctoral journey in the coronavirus pandemic has also taught the valuable lesson of the potential of our common humanity to arrive at a diverse yet united approach in doctoral education. The takeaway is that our task as scholars is to collectively move humanity forward by producing new knowledge, new paradigms and even new questions. In being doctoral students, we also get the privileged comfort of knowing

that researchers are doing something in response to this pandemic. While many might be worrying as they wait for vaccines, doctoral students are busy expediting the process of arriving at desired results, assessing the impact of the pandemic, preparing for post-pandemic contexts, among others. We keep ourselves on our toes about the latest progress, so we keep our eyes forward because we know that we will soon recuperate. Indeed, our doctoral candidature during the coronavirus pandemic has allowed us to see the relationships of "multiple actors and practices that constitute a knowledge community" (Halse & Bansel, 2012, p. 388).

4. Contribution to research

Reflecting on our pandemic experience has allowed us to reconsider various paradigms about what it means to contribute to research. During this pandemic, journals have prioritized and expedited publishing research related to. There were also back-to-back webinars and online forums organized to propel research dissemination, even of minor findings. As such, this pandemic has proven that contribution to knowledge does not always necessarily have to undergo quantitative metrics to prove quality and novelty. This pandemic has shown that contribution to knowledge does not have to be flawless research. On the contrary, as already mentioned in previous studies, failed or uncertain results are stand-alone contributions (see Fanelli, 2012). For instance, taking epistemic or methodological risks that did fail to deliver expected results does not mean career suicide. Rather, it shows an attempt to venture into new things to expand knowledge. Uncertain results are still useful in terms of reconsidering other methods for the same research problem. Suboptimal research outputs might spark insights and research gaps.

CONCLUSION

In our joint-reflection in this collaborative autoethnography, we have shown that while academic identities are reinforced by the system of academic institutions, these identities are nonetheless constructed through the trivialities and everyday constellations of academic life. The contribution of our work is three-fold.

First, the coronavirus pandemic has revealed the unspoken tensions and roadblocks of doctoral studies. Discussions on experiences of conducting doctoral research during a crisis is thus necessary to generate a collection of guidelines to better prepare researchers for crisis management in the future. As such, this work is an invitation to doctoral students to also reflect and provoke further thoughts to articulate reflections on the impact and various ways of thinking that the coronavirus pandemic might bring to the fore. Doctoral scholars are welcome to contribute to a collectivity of narratives that thicken the data and analyses of their pandemic experiences in higher education to reinforce the role of doctoral researchers as agents of history in the trying times of a pandemic.

Second, our experiences in our doctoral studies during the lockdown enabled us to reflect further on both the similarities and differences doctoral students face. Whereas doctoral studies can be solitary, there is still a shared experience – burdens and privileges – that can draw them together. Thus, we speak to our fellow doctoral students to navigate their doctoral experiences through collaborative reflections. Such engagements offer important discussions and sharing of ideas on practical solutions among the common challenges faced by doctoral students.

Finally, forward-looking, we expect that reflections on research during the pandemic will flood the literature not only in qualitative methods but across various methodological approaches. Thus, we recommend using both collaborative autoethnography and joint-reflection as an instructive tool for qualitative research.

There is little doubt that this global health crisis will change how doctoral students will conduct future research, and many future dissertations can look very different from the present. We are left with the task of "not let this crisis go to waste" (Zattler, 2020, p. 4). This joint-reflection will be valuable

to future researchers in providing further insights regarding the unprecedented restrictions on conducting some types of qualitative research. We encourage qualitative researchers to consider reflection as an instructive tool for academic collaboration. In doing so, there will be larger participation in reinforcing the role of doctoral researchers as agents of history in the trying times of a pandemic by reflecting in their own work the complex matrices and mechanisms of a doctoral journey. The uncertainty inherent in the pandemic is in many ways we find the fundamental value of reflecting about our doctoral journey. This reflection also serves as a reminder of the relationship between the academe and the society more broadly, in which doctoral students are part of our shared humanity. Therefore, we pass on the task to doctoral scholars to thicken the data and analyses in collaborative reflections in higher education through more sustained engagements with the imbrication of the unseen aspects of doctoral studies in writing. We are still taking steps towards the final stage of our doctoral journeys, and we still face lots of uncertainties. However, we are certain of one thing, that this journey has been already a life-defining experience thus far. With these considerations, this work is an invitation to those doctoral researchers to reflect and provoke further thoughts beyond the content of this paper.

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