Between Disconnects and Flows: Reflections on Doing Fieldwork in Rural South Punjab during the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Introduction

As the Covid-19 pandemic continues to unfold, it would not be a hyperbole to state that we are experiencing history in the making. Barely any aspect of the human experience has remained untouched by the ongoing pandemic, least of all scientific endeavours. On the one hand, scientists are grappling to quantify and predict the outcomes of a global infectious disease. On the other hand, the very practice of science has in some ways been hindered or even brought to a standstill. Burgeoning literature on the effects of Covid-19 on scientific developments has already emerged to document the (on-going) impacts of lockdowns, home office, and travel bans on research and researchers. Early career researchers, for instance, are noted to be especially precarious due to an increased inability to collect data or engage in enriching face-to-face interactions with peers (Byrom 2020).

Women, especially mothers, are also a particularly vulnerable demographic of scientific researchers; using a preprint analysis, Giuliana Viglione (2020) demonstrates that already within a few months of the lockdown, a gendered disparity in publication submissions could be discerned. Disruptions in fieldwork and their effects on longitudinal studies have been documented. For instance, a case study on two family studies in Germany underlines the need for transparency in documenting

changes in methodologies (Gummer et al. 2020). In a time of rapidly changing scientific fields, some scholars raise the call for 'foster[ing] an ethics of care' in academia to tackle the 'inequities of confinement' of the pandemic (Corbera et al. 2020: 192).

However, all is not doom and gloom for research under the Covid-19 pandemic. Many have harnessed the impetus for innovations in methodologies. The impossibility of fieldwork in some cases has mobilised digital modes of *being in the field*. Digital ethnography, although in existence for over 25 years, has naturally now become the refuge for many researchers engaged in anthropological praxis (Góralska 2020). Particularly in the social sciences, with conventional research methods strongly identified by physically immersing in the field, many have turned to video-conferencing, phone calls, and online platforms in lieu of prohibited in-person interactions. Marnie Howlett (2021: 1) aptly terms this '[l]ooking at the "field" through a Zoom lens.' Resultantly, online research strategies have also benefited from the expansion of study sites as increasingly professional and private interactions enter the digital fold during the pandemic. But what becomes of qualitative research that cannot be taken to the digital sphere? As many of us proceed with taking our professional interactions online, there are those that remain excluded from the digital sphere. The 'digital divide' (Mubarak et al. 2020: 415) is deepening globally. Research going digital, and thereby limiting to digitally accessible stakeholders, risks deepening neglect of marginalised groups. This research note is a product of a qualitative inquiry that is considerably hindered by 'going digital' as it engages with demographics that are unlikely to be accessed online.

My doctoral research entitled "Agricultural Transformations and Sustainable Pathways in South Punjab, Pakistan" looks at the expansion of agrarian biotechnology in South Punjab, Pakistan, with special attention towards small scale farmers and the adaptation options available—or not available—to them. In Punjab, farm sizes are small; roughly 65 per cent of farms comprise of 5 acres or less (Government of Pakistan 2010). While in Pakistan Punjab is generally considered rich, the districts constituting its southern part rank as some of the most impoverished of the country. Roughly half of the households here are characterised as poor[1] (Government of the Punjab 2019). The majority of my data corpus comes from qualitative research in selected sites of four districts of South Punjab (see Figure 1) using interviews, focus group discussions, participatory observations, and transect walks as research tools.
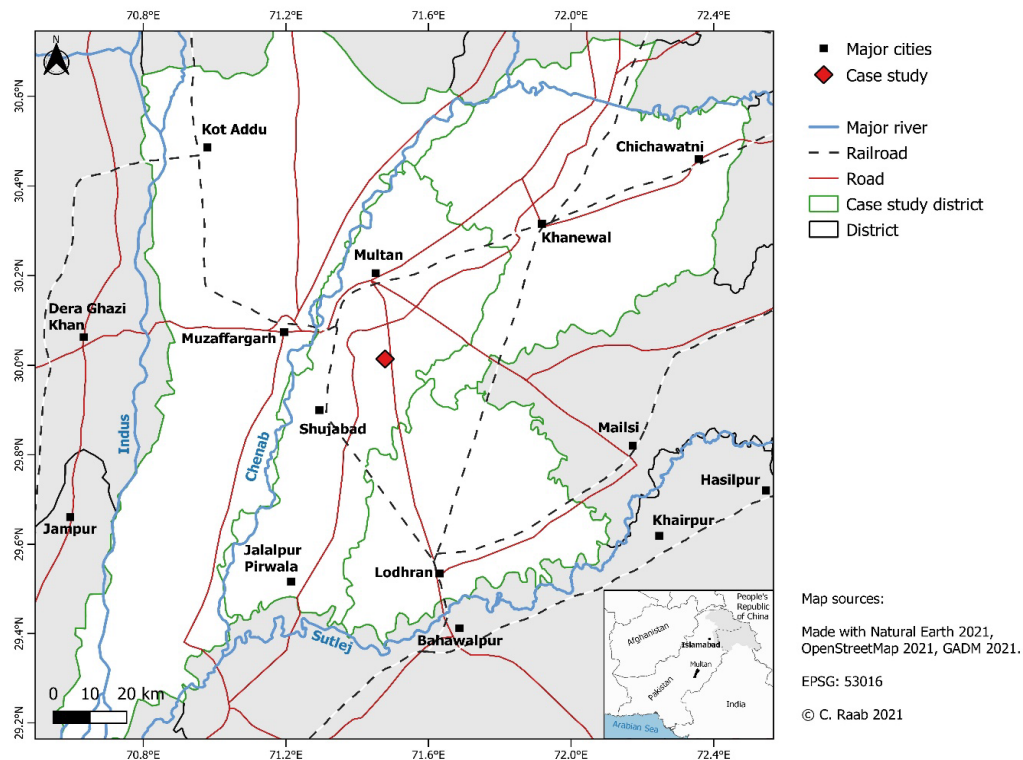
Map of study area with case study site

Figure 1, source: Raab 2021

I use a holistic approach for my research and rely on insights from a wide variety of stakeholders. Primarily, these are small farmers, men and women alike; women are typically found in the field picking cotton and weeding, or rearing livestock in and around the home. Other stakeholders include more resource rich farmers, agrarian extension officers, bureaucrats, cotton researchers, cotton breeders, cotton ginners, agribusinesses, pesticide sales officers, and NGOs operating in South Punjab. According to DataReportal, an online platform that compiles annual global digital statistics, a mere 27.5 per cent of Pakistan's over 223 million population is comprised of internet users.[2] Sadia Jamil (2020: 3), in a study on the widening digital divide in Pakistan, cites 'high cost of internet service, poor service accessibility and quality and socio-cultural constraints (i.e. low literacy rate, cultural restrictions and linguistic barrier)' as some barriers to internet access and usage.

On a disaggregated level, a rural-urban divide can be perceived in terms of information and communication technology (ICT) usage; while 19 per cent of households in urban areas have access to at least one digital device (such as computer or mobile), this number falls down to 7

per cent in rural areas.[3] Furthermore, among the digitally connected, a gender based digital divide also prevails. The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2021 (Carboni et al. 2021) reports that women in Pakistan are 43 per cent less likely to use mobile internet than men. Women's use of mobile and internet is also heavily limited and monitored by men in the family. Gendered disparities are further increased in rural areas where most women are unequipped and unskilled in internet usage (Jamil 2020).

It can be argued that with the exception of poor (especially women) farmers, many of my intended informants have access to the internet and therefore can be approached digitally. I find this to hold true only in principle. In practice, access to stakeholders is mediated by middle-persons who supply not only the contact but also serve as a validator for the researcher's inquiry. In my experience, the chain of contacts to a desired respondent can be several middle-persons long. Physical presence in the field is crucial to establish relevance and open doors to important stakeholders that would otherwise remain closed, even in the internet era. In the case of farmers, the digital divide takes even greater significance. Most of my rural respondents are not equipped with the means to digitally communicate, in terms of both tools and skills. Those farmers that are digitally equipped also remain largely inaccessible: For instance, in the early days of the pandemic, I was eager to receive updates from the field from my primary informant in Multan, a self-proclaimed progressive farmer. However, my several WhatsApp calls went unanswered and our chat remained one-sided—that is until my arrival in Multan later in the year. It is not difficult to imagine that farmers, in South Punjab and elsewhere, are preoccupied day and night with the countless concerns of raising crops and may not be available for the inquiries of a research (and researcher) deemed irrelevant or unurgent. As any monetary compensation or project implementation is not envisioned in the scope of my PhD, I am upfront with the stakeholders about the objectives and limitations of my study. This is also the reason it was pertinent to make the process of data acquisition as undemanding as possible for the research participants, primarily by me coming to them. Thus, in my experience, physical presence in the field is the primary means of gaining relevance as well as accessing stakeholders.

For my PhD in the discipline of Geography, approximately 12 months of research stays were initially planned. I conducted an exploratory field visit prior to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, in November and December 2019. This visit provided a macroscopic view of land use changes occurring in South Punjab. It also laid the ground for a research network in the field. A subsequent longer and more intensive research stay was planned starting from summer 2020. This stay was indefinitely

postponed amid the chaotic unfolding of the pandemic in the first half of 2020. In the fall 2020, a window of opportunity opened up for me to travel to Pakistan when the nationwide lockdown was lifted and provided a chance to step into the field. Consequently, between October and November 2020, I was able to go to Pakistan for a research stay. I owe this opportunity partly to my position as an insider-outsider researcher that allowed me to move internationally. I also credit this research stay to the disjointed geographies of the pandemic that allowed me move domestically within Pakistan. The notion of disjointed geographies of the pandemic refers to the diverse manifestations of the Covid-19 pandemic and the responses to the pandemic that (re)configured reality in an uneven and disparate manner, between and within countries. Rose-Redwood et al. (2020: 104) rightly concludes, 'the COVID-19 pandemic is thoroughly spatial in nature' and that each socio-spatial context has an own lived reality of the pandemic that needs to be documented in its specificity.

In this research note, I recount the complex interplay of factors that contributed to the continuities and discontinuities of my fieldwork in Pakistan during the pandemic and their implications about the disjointed geographies of the pandemic. This research note aims to reflect on the questions regarding the possibilities and challenges of conducting fieldwork in the era of travel restrictions and physical distancing: How has the pandemic (re)shaped the research landscape? Which spaces have been opened up and which have been closed off? For whom do these changes matter? Are these short-term configurations or will they last? This paper explores the answers to these questions with the following. Having introduced the problematic in the first chapter, the second deals with the considerations of "entering the field," particularly with respect to privileged access to certain space as an insider-outsider. The third chapter dives into the experience of "being in the field," particularly with respect to rationalising the continuities and flows, however disjointed, of life during the pandemic. The final chapter reflects on the process of "exiting the field" and re-accustoming to the world where the pandemic holds greater centrality. The paper concludes with some final thoughts on the implications of the pandemic social order for current and future of fieldwork in Pakistan as well as in other contexts.

Entering the field: Privileged access as an insider-outsider

I find myself juggling a wide array of identifiers on the spectrum of the insider-outsider as I traverse my way through fieldwork. In this chapter, I will discuss how not only these identifiers matter in the field but also on the path to the field.

Delving into qualitative research as a form of inquiry necessitates the examination of one's positionality in the field. This is a chance to introspect one's frame(s) of reference which shape observations and interpretations. More broadly, positionality also sets the stage for 'the intersubjective elements in the research encounter' (Adu-Ampong & Adams 2020: 583) that not only provides context but also shapes the outcomes of the inquiry. I draw on the notion of the insider-outsider, following Adu-Ampong and Adams (2020), describing native researchers conducting research at "home." Following this notion, the position of the researcher cannot easily be bifurcated into either insider/outsider position and rather is constantly (re)negotiated in each encounter. I am a Pakistani Urdu-speaking woman, who grew up in an urban context, who has called Germany her home for over five years now, who is employed by a German university, and who conducts research in an ethno-linguistically distinct part of her native country. I have found that outside the boundaries of my native country, my Pakistani identity—the cultural insider in me—appears to be emphasised. Within the country boundaries, the opposite holds true. In my study site in South Punjab, the question of *zaat* (caste) is often asked upon introduction as a way of mentally mapping a stranger. My lack of a caste identity often serves to operationalise the outsider elements of my identity, particularly with my rural respondents.

My doctoral research is situated in an international and interdisciplinary junior research group [4] at Eberswalde University for Sustainable Development. We work on the topic of agrarian transformations and future scenarios in irrigated croplands with multiple case studies from Central and South Asia. As the Covid-19 epidemic spread rapidly beyond the Wuhan epicentre and engulfed most of the world, including our study sites, early concerns of our existential insecurity extended to contemplating the impacts of the pandemic on our respective field research plans. As most of my team primarily engage with small scale farmers in Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, and Pakistan who are largely digitally inaccessible, relying on digital modes of ethnography was not considered as a possibility from the start. At this point, the value of my positionality as an insider-outsider became obvious.

My positionality differs from the rest of the team in that I am the only native researcher who researches on the country that is native to me. In the past, I had relished this position particularly because it was a chance to be close to "home"—physically, scientifically, and emotionally—while being away from it. Qualitative researchers are prone to blurred lines between the private and the professional. Such has been my case. Once the initial shock of the pandemic had passed and a strange new reality identified by masks, physical distancing, and

quarantines had set in, my position allowed me to consider travelling to my home country—and to my research site.

The impetus for the consideration to travel across the globe amid travel restrictions, threats of infection, and quarantine requirements was private as well as professional. In the first few months of the pandemic, I had surpassed several events of hardships and joy with my family in Pakistan. Each was harder than the one before to experience from a distance. The existential doom of the pandemic felt in isolation had made me wonder if I would ever be able to see loved ones from home. This pushed me to consider the risks of traveling as soon as a window opened. Practical considerations of progressing with my doctoral research also supplied courage. As an early-career researcher with very clearly defined deadlines to complete my PhD, gathering fieldwork data in the early years of my project was crucial. Finally, the content of my research also provided stimulus to go into the field as soon as possible. The agrarian landscape of Punjab is highly dynamic with stark seasonal political, economic, and ecological variations. Too long of a gap between research stays would seriously hinder any ability to grasp progressive changes. Furthermore, being native to the country where I conduct research, I had the added benefit of being familiar with the on-ground realities of the pandemic in Pakistan. I kept up with news from friends, family, and local informants who ensured the possibility of conducting fieldwork with reasonable safety once the first wave had passed and lockdowns had been lifted.

With these considerations in mind, I approached the university administration to explore the possibility of a two-month work travel at the end of 2020, which was received with hesitance. Travel for work had a blanket prohibition, however the university would consider my case due to the necessity of my travel to gather data and due to my position as a Pakistani national. The only chance of me to go to Pakistan with the intention of doing fieldwork at this time would entail declaring complete responsibility for my health and safety as well as of bearing any costs related to change in travel plans. Furthermore, I would be required to closely monitor the pandemic situation prior to and during the research stay, and be ready to suspend my research upon worsening of the local situation. I agreed to these conditions and started the bureaucratic procedures of applying for a work travel permit in the summer which was duly approved. On 3 October 2020, I travelled to Pakistan. The decision to travel presented a number of ethical challenges and practical considerations.

Upon arrival at Islamabad International Airport, double masked and exhausted from a long-haul flight, paranoia of contracting the virus had

very much taken a hold of me. The sight of closely huddled people at the immigration desk with futile masks hugging chins and necks made me wonder if I had made the right decision to travel to my homeland in the midst of a pandemic. I was jolted by an airport staff member who grabbed my trolley to assist me out of the airport and to earn a few bucks in the process. I loudly refused his assistance as I was not eager to have my belongings handled by another, owing to nearly seven months of touch-phobia conditioned under the lockdown. I was surprised, yet not at all surprised, to see that nothing had changed. If anything had changed, it was my relationship to the land I was born and raised in as I lugged not only my luggage but also my "Europeanised" sensibilities of pandemic-appropriate conduct—for better or for worse. Travel restrictions at the time permitted entrance in Pakistan with quarantine which could be lifted after a few days in the event of a negative Covid-19 test. However, as my family picked me up at the airport and we hugged, I feared that there would be a slim chance of isolating myself even from the elderly and sick in the family as the excitement of seeing one another was too overwhelming. Testing negative for Covid-19 on my fourth day in Pakistan was a welcome respite from the constant fear of having unknowingly transmitting a life-threatening virus to my elderly parents.

I spent the first few days in my familial home in Rawalpindi planning the next couple of months before travelling to Multan, the city which would be my home base for the next two months. As a first order of business, I got in touch with the local agrarian university in Multan to organise a date for signing a Memorandum of Cooperation between our respective institutes. Here, drawing attention to my position as an outsider becomes crucial in order to receive support at the field site from the local university partners who provide local contacts and logistical support. My identification as a researcher from Germany—albeit a Pakistani one—has served to open up channels that might not be easily available to local researchers. In my interactions with the university partners, my "foreignness" is highlighted from both sides. While I benefit from having privileged access to senior members of the university and their fruitful guidance for my project, the university benefits from highlighting their international collaborations. The latter was evident over multiple occasions. In particular, I recall an event where the German ambassador to Pakistan was invited by my partner university. The vice chancellor personally requested my presence at this event as a token of their Pakistani-German educational cooperation. My outward perception as "German," therefore, allowed for a mutually beneficial exchange to occur with the local partners, a privilege I was painfully aware of.

Gendered aspects also contribute to my positionality as an outsider. As a woman researcher, traversing the field of agriculture in South Punjab can make one feel somewhat of an alien being. In the many air-conditioned offices where corporations, research institutes, bureaucracies, and departments are housed, I am usually the only woman in sight, save for the occasional secretary or a student. In the rural fields, I am an anomaly due to my persistence to enter the male domain, the *dera* (a place of meeting and socialising in the village, normally reserved for men)*,* and the agricultural plots, to speak to farmers at their place of work and socialisation. Regardless of the differences between the urban and rural research participants, all interviews uniformly call for rigid policing of the appearance of my "self"*;* I try to achieve a delicate balance between casualness in conversation—to put the interviewees at ease—and reservation in conduct—for my questioning to be taken seriously. Persistence is key in such situations where the constant need to validate my inquiry is amplified by my womanness. At the start of my first farmer household interview in 2020, my primary informant in Multan, a man who is a gentle being and a supportive farmer, responded to me detailing my research plans by saying, '*Kaam bara mushkil hai aap ka. Bara aap ne challenge qabool kia hai*' (Your task is very difficult. You have accepted a great challenge.)

I undertook two strategies during my fieldwork in 2020 to tackle the hindrances that emerge(d) as a consequence of my position as a woman in the field, primarily based on lessons learned from my first research stay in 2019. Firstly, as far as the rural field site was concerned, I primarily conducted fieldwork in one location in the district of Multan (see Fig. 1). This not only enabled the building of mutual trust between me and local stakeholders, who became accustomed to seeing the site of me arriving in a hired Suzuki Cultus on several mornings, but also made me feel secure about being in the field. The second strategy was to have a male research assistant (RA) to accompany me for all interviews concerning male interviewees (see Fig. 2). The RA in question was remunerated through my junior research group and acquired from a pool of competent bachelor student from the entomology department of my local university partners. The presence of a man with an agricultural background who was native to South Punjab, in the research team put my male interviewees at ease as they preferred to engage with him, due to local conventions that govern mixing of genders in rural South Punjab. My RA was an important source of insights throughout the field work process; not only was he an able interpreter between Siraiki and Urdu, his judgement provided an important portal to acquiring and analysing information in context sensitive manner. Most likely, I would have adopted these strategies in the absence of pandemic conditions as well.

My research assistant in a field of maize crops in the study site in Multan district

Figure 2, source: Zuberi 2020.

At the start of the research stay, I was struck by what I would only in hindsight come to see as the disjointed geographies of the pandemic. The disease that had brought life to a standstill in the Global North was being brushed off as one of life's many daily nuisances in my native country. As a researcher positioned as an insider-outsider, not only did I have privileged access to my chosen field, I also bore the sensibilities of both aspects of my positionality throughout fieldwork. I further reflect on the role of the pandemic in changing (or not changing) my research strategies in the following chapter.

Being in the field: Rationalising continuities

From the onset of being in the field, one thing became glaringly clear: the pandemic held relatively low relevance in the daily life of the average Pakistani citizen. Low official numbers for Covid-19 cases and deaths tell a partial, and misleading, story of the pandemic in this country. These figures can be credited to several factors: insufficient testing capacities,

unreliable disease diagnosis, and the taboo surrounding Covid-19 that prevents people from seeking testing or ultimately admitting it as a cause of death[5]. For the purpose of my stay in Pakistan, I relied on another indicator of the pandemic pressure: critical care patients in hospitals. While official Covid-19 testing numbers can be unreliable and deaths from the pandemic misattributed, I believed that the number of critical care patients could not be concealed and would paint a more reliable picture of the pandemic in Multan and elsewhere in Pakistan, and would be a better determinant of my decision to continue or terminate my research. For most of the duration of my research stay, the numbers remained relatively stable with low cause for concern.

Despite that I was determined to conduct fieldwork responsibly and follow mainstream precautionary measures, such as masking, distancing, and ventilating. However, my journey from a vocal arbiter of Covid-19 appropriate protocol to silent complier with others' irreverence to precautionary measures was a short one. The first time I booked a Careem ride in Rawalpindi—a mobile phone app to book rides, being my main mode of transport in cities during my research stays—I insisted that the driver wears a mask. This was a request that the driver firmly ignored. My initial outrage would soon recede to complicity with violation of pandemic preventative measures as I became aware that I was a small minority of Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) followers. Over-time, I learned to accept this position by rationalising my personal mask-ing and ventilating efforts less as a precautionary measure and more as a civic duty. Time after time in public spaces and interactions, I was reminded of the stark reality of the pandemic in Pakistan: life goes on.

For most of the stakeholders in my research, farmers and officials alike, Covid-19 updates appeared to hold less relevance than other political, economic, or ecological developments. In October, farmers in Punjab had barely recovered from the devastation to crops caused by swarms of desert locusts, forcing the state to import wheat for the first time in almost a decade.[6] In November, news of cotton crop failure in the "cotton belt" of Punjab and Sindh were sounded due to untimely rains and uncontrolled pest outbreaks. These conditions led to a decline of 43 per cent cotton output as compared to the previous year (Hussain 2020). Also dominating the local airwaves was coverage of a massive sit-in protests by the political party Tehreek-i-Labaik Pakistan (TLP)[7]. Around the same time, an alliance of opposition parties called Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) mobilised country wide anti-government rallies between October and December 2020. Thus, in most cases, Covid-19 was fringe news and was often reported in relation to the implications of lockdowns rather than the outcome of the disease itself. For instance, one of the major outcomes of the lockdown was the

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temporary unavailability of transport within and between provinces, due to which agrarian output could not reach markets for certain periods (FAO 2020). Another was the loss of household incomes as wage labourers in cities were forced to return to their rural homes amid lockdowns (Yamano et al. 2020).

Unsurprisingly then, the pandemic remained mostly in the backdrop of daily life, limited in the social imagination to visible markers of Covid-19 precautionary measures in public buildings—such as surgical masks, hand washing stations, and security guards holding electronic temperature guns. I perceived the social distancing rules were often employed to further increase the inaccessibility—and accountability—of those higher on the social and political ladder. Complicated and non-linear chains of connections are typically expected in order to land a meeting with a desired interviewee in regular times, and this was amplified during Covid-19. My meetings at research institutes, agrarian departments, public offices, and agribusiness corporations—often held in unventilated air-conditioned offices spaces, owing to Multan's temperature highs in the range of 30 degrees in November—would hold some degree of a façade of SOPs at the start. However, as soon as the first cup of tea and biscuits would be served the façade would literally wear off, never to be seen again.

In the midst of interviewing, I regularly found myself doing mental ethical calculations: Should I continue the interview unmasked? Should I re-cover my face and risk emphasising my "outsiderness"? Should I disrupt the interview and flee from the premises? In hindsight, it is admittedly challenging to recount my mental rationalisations that led me to continue with such meetings in some cases. Firstly, most of the interviews with such circumstances had been critical for my research and difficult to schedule. It would likely be impossible to reschedule, at least given the limited research stay I had. Moreover, discontinuing an interview with an important stakeholder would risk affronting said person and hurt any chances of including their perspectives. Secondly, as a qualitative researcher who is attempting to absorb into her field site in order to grasp local vantage points, I would often find myself mirroring the vernacular and body language of my research participants. I would climb up or down to the level of comfort of the interviewee, not only in terms of Covid-19 precautionary measures but also in terms of general interaction. Finally, the role—and power—of context also needs to be emphasised here; sometimes it is far more taxing to maintain a fringe stance than succumbing to the norm, no matter how irrational or dangerous the norm may be. Often such decisions have to be made in split seconds by taking the complex interplay of an array of factors. These justifications may not be available to the same mind some time

down the line in a wholly different context.

The majority of my fieldwork was comprised of interviews with farming and non-farming rural households in one location in the district of Multan which was facilitated by a locally respected large farmer, that is, my main informant. He was someone I had met on my first research stay in 2019, before the pandemic became a part and parcel of our vernacular. During the first visit in 2019, I had been briefly accompanied in the field by my German supervisor. My to-be main informant had then ensured his complete support for my research in facilitating access to the local settlements for a deeper case study. It would be speculative to question to what degree my outsider position, emphasised by the accompaniment of my German doctoral supervisor, facilitated in establishing the importance of my research and earning the support of my main informant; however, it certainly played a role. Upon arrival in Multan for my second research stay, he facilitated access to local farmers of different social class and ethnic groups. The use of what appears to be an influential farmer to gain access to local stakeholders raised some ethical considerations for me at the start. However, upon closely witnessing the nature of exchange between my primary informant and other local persons, it became evident that despite a certain socio-economic disparity, there was no coercion at play and interviewees were free to decline his request. Most, however, would accept the call for interviews. His reputation was key in accessing farmers, who trusted his word enough to allow me and my research assistant to interview them. Each day, he would personally contact rural stakeholders to ask about their availability and brief me about the backgrounds of the particular interviewees. He would then accompany us to the interviewee's homes where he would introduce us, explain my research in his own words, and then leave.

I believe the process of accessing farmers remained unchanged in light of the pandemic conditions when compared to my first research stay conducted before the Covid-19 pandemic. The disparity of prevalence of the virus between rural and urban South Punjab was a major factor here. A district- and tehsil-wise (sub-district administrative level) mapping of Covid-19 cases in Punjab by Saeed et al. (2021) demonstrated that the prevalence of the virus between March and October 2020 was predominantly clustered in urban pockets. This was confirmed by my informants in the case study area who mostly dismissed the pandemic saying, 'ay siraf shehran da masla hai' (this [Covid] is only an issue for cities.) Another factor that relegated pandemic related concerns to the back of my mind was the opportunity to conduct fieldwork in open spaces. Interviews with male farmers were primarily conducted on *charpoys* (rural bedsteads) in verandas of homes or in

open fields. Social norms strictly governing mixing of genders meant that I would be seated far apart from my mostly men informants. This implied that distancing and ventilation was built into the interview setting naturally and no extra precautions had to be taken to make the conditions Covid-safe.

Interviews with women in rural settings, however, presented different ethical challenges. Meetings with women farmers, in particular, often took the shape of social visits rather than academic interviews. Following local protocol, customary hugging and shaking of hands is crucial to gain trust and familiarity with women informants. This particularly matters in cases where glaring social—regional, linguistic, and class—differences between interviewer and interviewee could easily prove cumbersome to the goal of enriching conversation that forms the basis of the qualitative inquiry. In my experience, these forms of physical contact are culturally important and serve as great unifiers. Therefore, in the moments when women offered a handshake or a hug as a greeting in their private domains, I accepted these. These meetings usually took place in inner courtyards of homes in open spaces, so I only experienced fleeting concerns related to the risk of virus transmission even while not wearing a mouth and nose covering. Again, it is hard to recount my mental justifications in these regards, but a few rationalisations come to mind.

In general, I regarded offending women and side-lining their perspectives from my study a more present risk than the threat of contracting or transmitting a disease that appeared to be absent from the context. As I was the one coming from an urban setting, I perceived my own risk of contracting the virus as far less than the risk of the women research participants contracting the disease from me. Therefore, I encouraged them to be the arbiter of risk level by discussing how they had experienced the pandemic or if it was a concern to them. The usual response from the women research participants was on a spectrum of two themes: Firstly, that the virus had never reached their village (that they knew of) and secondly—and most importantly to them—that health, life, and death is in Allah's hands, so why should one worry? The interviews with women were as much about me learning about their daily life and struggles as about them interrogating me about. Without an exception, each interview with women ended in them asking for promises of my visiting them again.

Time and time again, I was struck by the outcomes of disjointed geographies of the pandemic. In South Punjab, and arguably elsewhere in the country, the continuities and openness of research channels during the pandemic indicated a relentlessness to succumb to the restrictions of the pandemic, not only by the state but also by regular people in

private interactions. Within the local context, the pandemic served relevance only in so far that it fortified the status quo in interactions, might they be hierarchical or gendered.

Exiting the field: (re)accustoming to the disjointed geographies of the pandemic

By the end of November 2020, as my planned research stay was coming to an end, news of Covid-19 hotspots in Multan city and other major cities of the country were gaining frequency. My hired driver from the local partner university, who had become a sort of informant related to the inner working of the university, mentioned high level meetings between the city's universities' vice chancellors to discuss a university shut-down in light of an emerging second wave. My RA, being a student in Multan, was aware of the on-ground realities of the pandemic and we would frequently discuss the Covid situation in Multan. As the university was considering shutting down, he was keen to return to his familial home in the district of Muzaffargarh which he was planning to do so upon the completion of my research stay. Even though the indicator I had relied on—strain on intensive care units—remained fortunately noncritical in this period, the news of rising cases in several major cities of Pakistan, including Multan, led me to the conclusion that I should terminate my research in South Punjab.

In the last week of November, I returned to Rawalpindi to my familial home. Having my family some 500 kilometres away from my fieldwork site had always served to comfort me that in case of any unexpected obstacles to my work, I had a refuge to turn to. I had by then managed to do 55 interviews with roughly 80 respondents, majority of whom were small farmers and the rest were medium to large farmers, NGO, agri-business and state representatives, agricultural and off-farm labourers, ginning factory owners, and research institute representatives in the broader South Punjab region. Due to the breadth and depth of qualitative data I had managed to gather despite the looming spectre of the pandemic, I considered this research stay a success even as I cut it short by a week. As I spent my last days in Pakistan with my extended family, where (un)fortunately private boundaries are non-existent, I relished the constant companionship of some family member or the other, loud chatters, and the November sun.

Travelling back to Germany, amid flight cancellations and delays, I initiated the process of grasping the disjointed geographies of the pandemic. My first day back in Eberswalde was a sunny day in December 2020, however the warmth of this day was a false prophet of the cold and isolating winter that would come. A week after my arrival—period

spent in isolation in light of the quarantine restrictions—Germany announced a strict lockdown to curb the rising number of Covid-19 cases. At the time, Germany was very much in the midst of a second and more deadly wave. It was jarring to re-accustom to a reality where the close proximity of another is grounds for panicking. I reflected on the disjoint between the lived experiences of the pandemic I had undergone in a short amount of time.

The more time I spent in my home in Eberswalde and rationalised the Covid-19-related restrictions on public and private life, the more perplexed I became: how had I managed to feel and create a sense of safety and security doing fieldwork in the pandemic? How can the same virus shape public life in different contexts in vastly different ways? While it is hard to extract an abstract answer to this question, I hope that my candid recounting of my fieldwork journey in Pakistan serves to provide an idea of how the disjointed geographies of the pandemic resulted in highly contrasting feelings and conditions regarding adequate research conduct. Of one conclusion I am clear: being in the actual, physical field had been the only way I could grasp the reality and ineffable logic of the pandemic in Pakistan and no second-hand account could have replaced this comprehension.

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Conclusion

At the time of writing this research note, harrowing images of India's makeshift funeral pyres continue to surface as the country goes through the second wave of the pandemic. It is nothing short of remarkable to note that India's neighbouring country appears to have largely—and inexplicably—avoided a similar fate so far. Scholars have barely begun to scratch the surface of the unexpected and disjointed geographies of the Covid-19 pandemic (Chung et al. 2020), but what is clear is the necessity of context-specific Covid-19 research. The research note at hand demonstrates an example of field research during the pandemic in South Punjab of Pakistan. At a time when possibilities for conducting fieldwork have been greatly reduced and there is a strong impetus to move research to the digital arena, this research note specifically sheds light on what it entails to be physically "in the field" in these tumultuous times. Currently, while the phrase "light at the end of the tunnel" is often evoked in the European context, the tunnel appears to remain pitch black for countries of the Global South as unequal access to vaccines poses serious limitations to overcoming the epidemic. In light of the persistence of the so-called pandemic order, the research note at hand concludes with some final thoughts on lessons learnt from the experience of conducting fieldwork during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The pandemic did not change research conditions in my study site in Pakistan; however, it did emphasise existing disparities in the local context. SOPs—distancing, working from home, and hygiene measures—remained a luxury subject to a fraction of the Pakistani demographic, from which much of my research participants remained excluded. Those who could indulge in pandemic precautionary measures appeared to be more concerned with the optics of SOPs, rather than their effective employment, as evidenced by the occasions of unmasking shortly after the beginning of discussions with officials. In many ways, the fact that the pandemic changed so little for my research process is quite telling. In this research note, I have illustrated how risk perception is a dynamic process—for my research participants and myself equally—and resulted in continuities in the research process. This is due to the fact that pandemic related risk does not exist in a vacuum; rather the risk of acquiring and transmitting an infectious disease is weighed in relation to other concerns that may seem more pressing. For my research participants, the agrarian crisis and other social-political turbulence held more urgent relevance. For myself, capturing the dynamisms of my research topic held relatively more relevance.

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Making ethical choices in the field is an ordeal in regular times. During the pandemic and its ever-changing phases in between sloping and flattening of curves, the compass of right and wrong conduct in the field changes rapidly. For a researcher, the commitment to context sensitive ethics may be more applicable than strictly following any abstract code of conduct, especially since the pandemic code of conduct for researchers is still in preparation. In my case, I found that relying on local sensitivities vis-à-vis the pandemic was more conducive to conducting fieldwork. The disjointed geographies of the pandemic, as outlined in this research note, demonstrate how uneven the materialities of the pandemic can be. This implies an even greater need to turn towards the 'problem context' (Bob-Milliar 2020: 10) to design methodological approaches to conduct research appropriately. Finally, while positionality generally governs access to the field, I found that it is even further accentuated in the pandemic social order particularly as heightened travel restrictions continue to shape our lives. In my case, evoking aspects of my insider-outsider position facilitated the carving of pathways to and within the study site. Evidently, the decision of conducting fieldwork in an epidemic carries with it numerous ethical and practical considerations that the readers of this note will find worth pondering, should they be considering field research during the present, or any future, pandemic.

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Endnotes

[1] The debate on what constitutes "poor" in a rural context in Pakistan is a complicated one comprising of many indices and surveys. For the purpose of this piece and relevant to my doctoral research, I refer to a 2015 definition of poor by the Pakistani government based on a calorie-based poverty line at 3,030 Pakistani rupees which is approximately 28 US dollars (IFAD 2018). However, this is a gross simplification of experienced poverty that is likely an outcome of the intersection of many deprivations, such as related to food, education, health, water and sanitation, public services, and land access.

[2] DataReportal. 2021. Digital 2021: Pakistan. January 11, https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2021-pakistan [retrieved 27.07.21].

[3] Khan, Mubarak Zeb. 2021. 12pc households in Pakistan have at least one facility of digital devices. July 27, https://www.dawn.com/news/1637075/12pc-households-in-pakistan-have-at-least-one-facility-of-digital-devices [retrieved 27.07.21].

[4] Agrarian Transformations and Social-Ecological Complexities: Local Bioeconomic Scenarios in Central and South Asia, www.transect.de [retrieved 15.07.21].

[5] Delving into the factors behind low infection numbers in Pakistan warrants its own study, the following report by Ayesha Tanzeem provides an overview: Tanzeem, Ayesha. 2020. COVID-19 Deaths, Patients Grossly Under-Reported in Pakistan. *VOA News*, 18 June, https://www.voanews.com/covid-19-pandemic/covid-19-deaths-patients-grossly-under-reported-pakistan [retrieved 17.05.21].

[6] Aljazeera. 2020. Pakistan claims devastating locust attack brought under control. *Aljazeera*, 9 Oct., https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/10/9/pakistan-claims-devastating-locust-swarm-brought-under-control [retrieved 15.05.21].

[7] TLP is known for exercising coercive power in the guise of advocating for Pakistan's blasphemy law as well as for its occasional holding of the Pakistani state hostage through extended sit-ins (see research note of Sumrin Kalia in this special section for details). This time the demand was the expulsion of the French ambassador from the country in response to a perceived affront to Prophet Muhammad, may peace be upon him, by the French government.

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