'Isn't it ironic…!?!' - mobility researchers go sedentary. A group auto-ethnography on collective coping and care in pandemic times

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'Isn't it ironic?!' - Mobility researchers go sedentary: a group auto-ethnography on collective coping and care in pandemic times

We moved places and places moved us, until force majeure detained us on the spot. Signed-up to be hyper-mobile PhD-candidates, we became hyper-reflective pandemic intimates. We moved together into a space that felt safe, OUR safe space. Suspended. Did the pandemic open this door, or had this space always existed, even back in the old days? Probably the latter, although we were not sensitive enough to perceive it, too busy to push the door, too lonesome to CARE. Not attentive to its possibilities, not imaginative of its POWER, too confident to be capable of succeeding alone. Even if we might have secretly wished for this space to exist. The present piece of work, and JOY, might be described by others as a 'side-step', a 'hobby project', a "shadow activity". For us, it is a recollection of shocks and wonders, a sentience of precious, ephemeral instances that last.

We are a group of eight early career researchers who study global mobility and labour migration from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. With prior international mobility experience, we left our previous countries of residence in 2018 to join an EU-funded research project, whilst being located in different European cities. One could classify us, for example, as highly qualified, privileged migrants. The present paper is the outcome of a collaborative, auto-ethnographic study, conducted in 2020, in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, when we suddenly were forced not to travel anymore. We got together online every week to 'refaire le monde,' and we conducted virtual, dialogical self-interrogations and group reflections. Based on an emic approach, in line with Chang, Ngunjiri, and Hernandez (2013), we applied an iterative process of data collection and analysis. Our weekly conversations naturally emerged as a safe space for exchange and understanding, as we were facing similar situations, despite staying at different places. Suddenly, as the privilege of 'always being on the move,' 'always socializing and networking' disappeared due to closed borders and pandemic threats, we experienced anxieties and isolation and had to re-evaluate our perceptions on life, work, and international mobility. The very purpose and meaning of our broader research endeavors and employment perspectives suddenly faded away. We realized more than ever before, what it means to us to be allowed to move, to travel freely across continents.

> "A mood can be what assails from the outside; deciding for us what we can and cannot do. A mood can imply something that hangs around, despite our best intentions, despite even our own selves". (Ahmed, 2014: 13)

Telling our own story? What for…?

When all the tiny things and wonderful whereabouts that made up the big picture of your transnational life suddenly disappear, when the passion for being on the move transforms into claustrophobia, the horizon darkens and your arrangements and plans convert into utopia: you just want to scream, to cry out loud, letting the universe know that you will not accept this to happen! Fear, rage, anger, sadness. Maybe you are lucky, and some of your fellow colleagues and friends are feeling the same, and you start chatting about what is happening, 'what this pandemic is doing' to you, what it all means for society, for humanity. You meet every week and speak about your thoughts, opinions and feelings regarding 'the situation', which suddenly makes your world appear completely unknown and hostile. You share your experiences about the new living and working, about ways of coping, resisting … and performing. When connecting to your 'buddies' over the months, you connect 'virtually' as well as mentally, emotionally and professionally. You are reading faces and bodies, start seeing beyond the screen and grasp the unarticulated. When you are feeling down, they pick you up. Comfort, jokes, confidence, joy. You start sensing the *mood* immediately each time you reconnect. Beyond geographic distances, whilst being spread across space, you start understanding what it is like when life is out of joint, when nothing falls into place anymore, when everything seems to be falling apart. You can keep going because you have a go-to place, a safe space that saves you. You are becoming aware of how you are affected individually, how seeing your colleagues' struggles affect you, and you start realizing that you care for each other.

But what is it that motivates us to write this all up, to share what we have lived through since the beginning of the pandemic, to voice 'our story'? Aren't we just experiencing what millions of others do, too? With other 'knowledge-workers' we have in common to be forced to work from home - to have the *privilege* of being able to do our work from home. With countless other 'foreigners,' we share the situation of unexpectedly being bound to a place that is quite unfamiliar to us, where we do not speak the local language, to be tight to a city where we barely know anyone, where we are passive observers, rather than active participants in local society. We lost our highly dynamic, intense life-style, a life in motion. The "horizontal sense of being on the move" described by Urry in "Mobilities" (2007: 8) was a present for us, which seems to belong to the past. By losing the physical movement and ability to travel, it seems as if we lost a major source of our energy, of our inspiration, our *élan vital* (Bergson, 1907). Simultaneously the very foundation and purpose of our work, of our research, the phenomenon of global mobility, suddenly vanished.

We have realized over the past months how strongly the content of our work is intertwined with our personal affinity for borderless mobility and the international lives that we have led, how our curiosity for global migrations is entangled with how we make sense of our transnational life. We lost it. Something that we will never ever catch up on, a special time of our life. A time that we had imagined as one of our best, that we had prepared for: conducting mobility research whilst constantly being on the move. Is it right to claim that we 'lost something,' to reify time, mobility and purpose? We shall rather affirm that the external constraints and restrictions have forced us to reflect and to become more conscious about what movement, social contacts, travel, family connections etc. meant for us. We can recomfort the reader, and ourselves, about the bright side of the encountered constraints: over months of immobility, multiple layers of our existence have been in motion - confused, mixed-up,

questioned, disentangled and re-assembled, so that it all will make sense… one day. Whatever we have done for this paper, this paper has done a lot for us! We are grateful.

As 'global mobility researchers' the processes of globalization and its ever more complex implications for societies, organizations and individuals are in the center of our work. Given the stark implications of pandemic-related travel restrictions on mobility in general and for transnational workers across the globe more specifically, 'our story' might as well generate additional insights and questions for future research. Anteby (2013) encourages organizational researchers to "relax the taboo" that has apparently built up amongst scholars in this field of study, when it comes to "telling their own stories". She says that she uses the expression of "telling our own stories" as "a proxy for field research projects that, in their written form, explicitly rely on a scholar's personal involvement in a field" (2013: 1277). She further defines this approach in reference to Elias (1956) as engaging with a set of mental activities that "connect" the researcher to a field. For us, such a connection with the field exists, indeed. We are identifying with the idea of free movement within the EU and globally, from a personal standpoint and as academics. "Engaging with the world intellectually" as suggested by Christensen and colleagues "can be framed as empathic intellectual work […] while acknowledging the position of academic as a privilege." (Christensen et al., 2018: 866)

The re-erection of borders, surveillance and limitation of movement on a local level are described by Yuval-Davis (2018) as re-bordering process, a phenomenon, which we have intensively experienced ourselves, fueled by the pandemic, and it is not over. When re-bordering activities appeared and have been fostered by nation states since the early days of the pandemic in the first quarter of 2020, they were most visible and tangible for us and felt most threatening. In a recent statement, Wemyss and Yuval-Davis (2020) underline that

> […] everyday bordering, from the lockdown of individuals in their homes to the lockdown of regional and national borders, is at the heart of the technologies of control used to try to contain the pandemic and it is thus hard to believe that free movement would be restored any time soon. (Wemyss &Yuval-Davis 2020: paragraph2)

This process has deeply affected us, shocked us. It immediately got under our skin and sparked the urgent need to reflect and to discuss amongst us. Suddenly, the *privilege* that we had shared with millions of other travelers and in-betweeners, thanks to the quality of our passports and qualifications, has evaporated. Now and in the near future, our capacity to travel across borders and to join places and people that matter to us will be conditioned by our body temperature, by our financial and organizational capacity to testify our momentary sanitary status with a 'PCR', and by our ability to prove an act of Covid-19 vaccination. And at times, despite all precautions and guarantees, we will continue to be locked-in at a place, just because another 'wave' on national territory commands governmental restrictions. This makes it palpable how *privileged* we have been in the past. Since we have found ourselves physically stuck, our restless minds were caught in the minefield of forced sedentariness. We sensed the end of an era and the threat of being forced to surrender to a new biopolitics chapter, such as Foucault (1978-79) anticipated, where "inequalities and the transgressive politics […] saturate our early experiences with be(com)ing humans and living during the pandemic", as Plotnikof et al. (2020: 805) describe it in their collage of academics' individual experiences at an early state of the pandemic.

Is this Social Science? - 16 hands to write a paper

Before we narrate 'who we are and why this is so ironic,' we would like to examine the overall consultative process that led us to choose our approach and the research design. In the case of the present piece of work - and bliss - we can affirm that it is the result of total immersion into the world of eight knowledge-working labour migrants who happen to prepare their Ph.D.

theses during a worldwide pandemic. In this so-called auto-ethnographic or endo-ethnographic study (Goulet, 2011), We, researchers, are the exclusive informants of ourselves and the overall process that we have been through as a group and individuals characterized by steady reflections, confrontations, and debates within the group. Through this collective voice and an evocative writing style, we are able to embody both our individual and group struggles, and turn them into words, as demonstrated in other collective writing projects, for example by Ahonen and colleagues (2020). We are insiders doing "at-home research" (Järventie-Thesleff et al. 2016; Karra & Phillips 2008; Merton, 1972) - in the most literal sense and despite living abroad. While positivist convictions guide a substantial share of organizational and management scholars, ethnographic work in this field does emphasize the need to take researchers' positionalities into account, especially with regards to so-called "at-home ethnography" (Alvesson, 2009). Being acutely aware that understanding the researcher's relation to the research field and topic is crucial, we will elaborate on our positionality as follows.

As a matter of fact, in our broader individual research projects, we address labour migration and organizational expatriation, thereby investigating various aspects of global mobility from distinct paradigmatic stances. Some are, for example, researching return-migration and repatriation, others psychological well-being and coping strategies in hostile environments or the processes of identification and belonging across time and space. In addition, all of us are representatives of the population that we are studying, we have been internationally mobile employees for some time. After having left our previous countries of residence in 2018, frequent travels for international workshops, academic conferences and research stays were on the Horizon2020 for the entire duration of our three-year contracts. Most

of us had lived and worked somewhere in Europe before, but half of our team joined from 'overseas': the Americas, India or South-East Asia.

Of course, we are not, 'just' a homogenous, unified group, but individuals at different life stages with multiple background stories, from distinct socio-cultural environments who contribute with diverse attitudes and perspectives to their work. All of us are plurilingual; none of us is a native English speaker nor writer. For some of us Europe is 'home home', for some others the EU is at times just a working station, were administrative instances require regular updates of visas and residence permits. In addition to the geographical distances covered, the cross-disciplinary nature of our work adds to pluri-linguism and multicultural ways of being, thinking and perceiving. The colorful mix of psychologists, economists, political and social scientists in our work environment has forced us to suspend judgment and to listen before taking a stance. Each of us was challenged to choose, cultivate, reflect on, and eventually defend a positioning. Understanding - wanting to understand - other disciplinary angles, convictions, and underlying epistemologies is not as obvious as it seems though, despite the fact that we are all investigating interconnected phenomena triggered by globalization and global mobility.

During our first gatherings, we did not know about all the things yet to come in 2020 and beyond. Back in March 2020, when we still thought that the '*new virus*' was only going to be around for a couple of weeks or months, we felt in a rush, wanting to do research on the situation, wanting to decide on a research question, sometimes discussing very seriously:

"[...] what type of study can we conduct in relation to the pandemic? Maybe let us start with theories on coping strategies and hostile environments, look into the literature first"

"[...] let us just collect ideas and start recording our meetings, we will see where it brings us".
(March, 2020)

Did we realize back then that the deductive/inductive choice was brought up, that our research interests and knowledge on methods and epistemologies haunted our debates and our ways of interacting with each other, of envisioning this joint effort? After several rounds of discussions, we concluded that we would continue to record all future conversations and see where it would lead us. After all, the situation was very specific, unique, extreme to a certain extent, and many things that have become normalized over the past nine months were still unimaginable in March 2020. At the time we were curious to understand: "what is this doing to us?" and "how are we coping with work under these circumstances?". For several researchers in the group, a qualitative, inductive and interpretivist approach was unfamiliar. Not starting off with a hypothesis or a model to be tested felt uncomfortable, for example for those who usually base their research on psychological theory.

It was an adventure to discuss and to try understanding the purpose and underlying epistemology of ethnographic work within a group of eight researchers with different social science backgrounds. Throughout the process we frequently questioned methodological and ethical choices, but nonetheless some misunderstandings might remain blind-spots for good. Conducting a collective auto-ethnography under these conditions meant to go through many iterations of opening up and fostering mutual acceptance and respect. It meant composing with the tensions of a fragmented 'We', that was evolving kaleidoscopically. An ongoing process of coming together and splitting apart, which has lasted from the initial discussions over data analysis workshops until the act of writing. On the surface, we were 'all in it together', 'sitting in the same boat', given the professional ties between fellow researchers on an EU-funded project on global mobility. However, the obvious common ground and similarities created an illusion of sameness that called for deconstruction.

Through iterative dialogical self-interrogations and group reflections as per Chang, Ngunjiri, and Hernandez' (2013) approach, we have explored a unique way of reflecting on our interactions and circumstances, as a collective, as individuals, and in smaller formations and pairs: our *modus vivendi*. We identified patterns, took care of inclusiveness, without forcing anyone to participate at all times in all get-togethers. We believe that this *freedom* to join the discussion, or not, was very precious and beneficial for the overall process. Having the room to decline, the *freedom* to drop out and come back in, somehow reproduced our former lifestyle of being on the move, of checking in to different places, with different groups of friends – or not, depending on our *mood*. Probably it was not the fastest way to 'produce' a paper, but it left us time to mature, and to – perhaps – 'become what we are' (Nietzsche, 1908).

We reckon that we are potentially biased and selective with regards to what we see and what we do not see, what topics we choose to address, and in what way. We have at least eight different ways of interpreting our personal and professional situations, as well as our conversations, according to the *mood* of the day and to the vibes that surround us. Memo writing, reflexive journaling and doodling helped us to decenter and to enrich our discussions. Indeed, we are aware of the subtle differences in our individual voices, and intuitively we were attentive to allowing everyone to express oneself - one of the conditions mentioned by Whittemore (2001) to ensure the validity of auto-ethnographic work. During our conversations, we were intuitively reacting to our fellows' comments and questions, thus allowing us to explore our personal situations in rapport to the collective, thereby approaching ourselves from new angles throughout a long series of unprecedented instances of sharing and of identifying with the other. We believe that we have been fast in opening up ourselves, in expressing personal hesitations and intimate fears, encouraged by sympathy and empathetic questioning within the group. This again triggered new debates and nurtured common ground.

The multiple loops that we, as research informants of our own research went through allowed us to be reflective and even hyper-reflective (Goulet, 2011, "sur-réflexivité"): with regards to the research design, to our situation and to the development of individual and group dynamics over time. We can further demonstrate the validity of our findings based on conscious decision making with regards to the research design. Most of us were trained to preserve a certain distance to the research subjects of our studies, especially as they work in organizations and environments that are rather unfamiliar to us, thereby ensuring what Weber (1949, 2011) calls "axiological neutrality". When some of us suggested conducting a collaborative, auto-ethnographic study, concerns arose from fellow perspectives, such as:

"[...] shouldn't we look at all this, at the data, as if we were outsiders to the question, in order to be neutral and objective? Shouldn't we anonymize the conversation before we analyze?"
(September, 2020)

"[...] why should our personal emotions and feelings matter with regards to the analysis?"
(April, 2020)

Some suggested theoretical frameworks of emotional coping; others saw the major topic being analyzed around the concept of hostile environments and the implications of external factors on individuals. But then we realized: the entire world had just become a hostile environment due to the pandemic! – Maybe we could start with exploring how this exceptional and unusual event, and the occurring circumstances, affect us in our current life span…? Not only as individuals and "psychological entities", but as a group, as a constantly evolving, interacting network of mobility researchers within a given setting. As individuals with agency, as actors who contribute to the construction of their environment – do we really have agency? Understanding psychological patterns of trauma, anxiety and resilience (Bonanno, 2020) and

uncertainty regulation (Griffin & Grothe, 2020) was certainly beneficial for a deeper understanding of underlying schemes during pandemic times. However, we needed to account for additional complexity due to the close entanglements of our translocational life worlds with the phenomenon of boundaryless global mobility and the purpose of our work. Our life and career plans were heavily disrupted when pandemic restrictions hit.

Our positions as PhD fellows and foreigners on time limited contracts, separated from significant others, appeared, all of a sudden, *precarious*. We immediately sensed the potential damages that the pandemic could cause, and we felt that it affected us in similar ways. The mentioned entanglements affirmed our preference for an interactionist, socio-anthropological approach, in order to account for "affective practice" for the "ongoingness" and patterns in process (Wetherell 2012: 23). Thus, the emphasis of this paper lays on relationality and emotions as 'complexes', in line with Wetherell's understanding, where "affect is always intersecting and interacting" and where "an emotion like anger or fear is not an object inside the self […], but is a relation to others, a response to a situation and to the world" (Wetherell 2012: 24). In 2018 all of us had moved to a foreign country for our new employer, and at the start of the pandemic, we were all in a third country for a research stay, i.e. not in our country of residence, nor in our country of origin, which brought up some additional questions: "what can we learn about experiencing external hostilities or disruptions (like the pandemic) as a labour migrant?" and "what are the resources that we have left when our *privileges* of *free movement* and international relationships vanish?" The exceptional situation that we were all in triggered our curiosity as researchers right at the beginning of the pandemic:

*"We have, as you say, such a diversity of backgrounds and conditions. But at the same time, **we have this unique natural experiment where we were all sent** [abroad] **at the same time**… so we have that big unifying factor…" (Meeting, March 30th)*

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And at the same time, it affected us and generated fears about the deep changes that darkened the horizon:

*"**I am scared**. More scared to get out than to stay inside. **I feel small**. **Feels like I'm slowly getting crazy**. I don't want to sit inside alone anymore. And I don't want to get outside. **I am scared of the changes**. Of things that are happening now and of the things that are about to happen. I just want to hide away from reality. What is reality? Everything is in my head. I know. **I just want a hug**".*

(Journal entry, March 28th)

These excerpts stem from our early conversations and journal entries in March 2020. Since then, we have recorded and documented more than thirty informal and formal encounters, of a group of eight fellow PhD researchers, from March to December 2020. Accepting the fact that we, as researchers, are strongly cognitively involved in the topic and are, in addition, feeling passionate about mobility and migration related phenomena led us to express our auto-ethnographic observations through multi-vocal writing. As recently stated by Einola et al. (2020), a multi-vocal form of writing can well capture 'our' changing lives throughout the current world crisis. Along with affective tensions, we would like to address our collective experience, 'our story' in this paper, whilst oscillating between closeness and distance with regards to the research phenomenon, between the "hyphen-space *engagement-distance*", as described by Cunliffe and Karunanayake (2013). When suggesting four "hyphen-spaces" of assessing researchers' positionality they ask among others the question "to what degree is the researcher emotionally involved?". In the present case, our affective engagement with the phenomenon of global mobility not only underpinning our research activities and our personal way of life. In the specific situation of a pandemic, where all of us are immobilized and feel 'stuck' in more or less 'foreign' places, our emotional involvement becomes even more visible and most salient. In addition, the overall aversive situation and different pandemic related

disruptions have exposed us to various psychological stressors that reinforce negative affective experiences.

In parallel, the time that has passed between group conversations and its interpretivist analysis lay between one and six months, which has allowed us to take some distance, to 'step back' and to adopt different lenses before re-engaging with the content in depth. As researchers who are personally familiar with the field, we are not only oscillating between the "hyphen-spaces" *engagement-distance*, as mentioned earlier, but as well between that of the *insider-outsider* and the "hyphen-space" *sameness-difference*, thereby taking a stance regarding *political activism vs. active neutrality* (Cunliffe and Karunanayake's, 2013), for example when addressing precariousness of professional isolation and limited contracts in early career research career. As stipulated by Gosovic (2018), these oscillations necessitate a ethnographic posture that allows for "fluctuating researcher identities", which are at times intuitively, at times purposefully chosen.

Given that our weekly meetings were most interactive, we realized after a few weeks, that our conversations and virtual 'hang-outs' contributed significantly to our well-being, that it brought moments of delight and faith during the 'first wave', during the very first period of 'confinement' of our lives. We realized that, together, we had created a safe space where we could freely share what preoccupied us in that specific moment or week. A space where we felt shielded from omnipresent performance pressures and from the gravity of the pandemic, simply by expressing, by voicing the heaviness of it all. Thanks to the similarities of our professional situations and lifestyles, our worries and struggles resonated within this space and in the minds and hearts of our companions. During all these months, before proceeding with data analysis, pre-writing or writing, our gatherings were characterized by an intimate atmosphere and friendship, which might be difficult to imagine or appear romanticized for the reader. Debates

and constructive frictions rather occurred at a later stage, when it came to disclosing our experiences through auto-ethnographic writing, as multiple external influences and authorities had to be accounted for.

In addition to amiable chats, a hyper-reflexive environment was nurtured throughout the autoethnographic process, mainly reinforced by our familiarity with conducting research in the field of international mobility and migration and by our awareness about various frameworks and theories in the field: adjustment and acculturation, psychological coping with separations, well-being when working abroad, and questions related to language, belonging and identities. We have been "alternating, juggling, and entangling" (Richard-Frève; 2017: 5) ourselves in our feelings of belonging, swinging between the group and the self and all the insignificant and significant others that surround us, between the breaking news, the fake news, the shocking events and the many decisive happenings that have been transforming our world(views) throughout 2020. We have recorded and transcribed major parts of our video conversations (60 to 180 minutes each) that were conducted via Zoom and Skype. In combination with individual journal entries and WhatsApp group conversations these constitute a rich data repository, complemented with memos, written during a preliminary round of interpretative analysis and broken down by "coding" various themes. During our heart-to-hearts talks we spontaneously addressed many different topics over the months that were of concern for us personally and as a group, as synthesized in the following overview (see table 1).

Insert table 1 (see end of this document)

Within each of the meetings we observed shifts in terms of tonalities and *moods*, which were interrelated with the topics addressed or with the affective patterns expressed by individuals: "from short duration bursts, like panic attacks to semi-continuous background

feelings which are longer lasting - all of which are embodied." (Wetherell, 2012: 23). In the early weeks and months of the pandemic we were obviously shocked. Nonetheless, our discussions convey a certain excitement and curiosity about the newness of the situation and its consequences for the social world within the first month, in combination with darker *moods* and fear. Early summer, with upcoming holidays and the prospect to travel, even 'just within the same country' led to more optimistic conversations whereas after summer, when it became apparent that we had to let go of the dream of 'going back to normal', a gloomy, less lively *mood* started to settle in during fall, with a strong focus on getting work done. Over the winter months and with new lockdowns and even stricter constraints, the accumulation of social isolation and separation, of blocked field research and vanishing career prospects in our field dominated the tonality of our conversations. Figure 1 illustrates these evolutions over time. It is noteworthy though, that momentary external events, such as pandemic news of the day, work related conflicts or personal sorrows – as well as personal feats - appeared to strongly influence the choice of topics and *vibe* of a session, whereas the overall, *fundamental mood* was rather fluctuating over longer cycles.

Insert figure 1 (see separate pdf file)

The *intense affective experiences* that occurred in our lives and became apparent throughout our conversations over a period of nine months are crucial findings that guided us in determining the framework and format of this paper. We agreed on wanting to share lived moments and sensitivities in a manner that brings it closer to the reader, whilst maintaining an interpretivist rigor. Wetherell's (2012) social science perspective on affect and emotion confirmed our choice of transmitting *what it is/was like*, rather than explaining why it might have been, like it was. "Rather than have to think, always and endlessly, what else there could

be, we sometimes seem to connect with a layer in our existence that simply wants the things of the world close to our skins." (Gumbrecht 2004: 106, cited by Wetherhell 2012). We accepted and enjoyed writing without compromising on the affective dimension of our life and our work as researchers. We agreed to understand affect as a dynamic, *embodied process* about sense and sensibility, where "bits of the body get patterned together with feelings and thoughts, interaction patterns and relationships, personal histories and ways of life" (Wetherell, 2012: 24). In this way intertwined complexities of our individual lives and the mood of the group were taken into consideration.

We chose to write the following sections of the present paper in a tone of voice, that mirrors the character and tone of voice of our conversations, the flows captured in our memos and the affect that still remains with us in our bodies. - We wrote most of the central part "in one go", highlighting words whilst writing, in order to convey the tone. In a second round, we inserted verbatims into the text, whenever suited, to illustrate specific situations, without major editing of the initial writing. In an additional round of revisions, we spent some time arguing and "wrestling" around the value and necessity of certain statements and related situations, which might potentially be misinterpreted by some readers, especially when expressed by PhD fellows who are situated at the bottom of the academic hierarchy. We did not always agree when wondering to what degree and in what depth it was legitimate to share our lived experiences perceptions about systemic constraints or power constellations in our environments. Events that deeply affected some of us, appear neutral and inoffensive, "normal" when observed from the outside. There are things that are part of the story, but that cannot be told. There are conditions that nurtured an activist "We", but that are difficult to grasp (Horowitz 2017; Just, Muhr and Risberg, 2018). Throughout the consensual research process, we started to understand this difficult balancing act that auto-ethnographic research entails: walking on a fine line between

self-censorship and research integrity, voicing challenges and precarities, that are to some extent embedded into institutional structures and academia. Only a unified voice and the closeness and trust amongst us as a collective of 'early stage researchers' allows us to express our experiences. We agree with Christensen and colleagues (2018) when they suggest that "it is essential that we do not become atomized within a system that sees collective action as a threat" (2018: 869).

In line with Pullen, Helin and Harding (2020), we claim that some type of social science research legitimates a writing style that is atypical for academic papers, that can be described as progressive or just "different". We are convinced that "writing differently" contributes to accentuating and nuancing the findings of our collective auto-ethnography. Like Pullen and colleagues

> We do not wish to abandon academic rigour, by which I/we mean the reflection and interpretation that develops understanding of the world. Without academic rigour we become journalists, and trained journalists are far better reporters than are we. Rather, in the place of the stultifying format we must use if our stories are to be judged 'good social science', we will tell those stories in formats through which they can be understood, valued, cherished and passed around from reader to reader. (Pullen, Helin & Harding, 2020: 2)

After several rounds of iterative review of our data, it became clear that a semantic and positivist analysis of themes and formulations is certainly insightful, but as well somehow reductionist. Our experience is not about the choice of conversation topics, nor about psychological stressors of the pandemic or the impact on our academic performance over time. It is more. Holistic. All embracing. We sensed the need to voice how deeply we have been – and still are – affected, how we dis-connected and re-connected ourselves, without referring to 'phases' or 'stressors' or 'coping strategies', without artificially reifying and alienating the organic, the embodied, the lived experience. We speak with a voice that shares the rhythm of our lives and the pace of our hearts, that carries an intensity which is more easily perceivable

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in laughter and tears, in tired faces and silence than in words. A voice that speaks to all the restless minds, forced upon a place. A voice that confuses time and space, the inner and the outer worlds, that bursts the unifying force of our conversations apart into vagabonding fragments. A boundless voice that conveys the elasticity of our souls.

Who we are and why this is so ironic!

We were apparently **in the right place at the right time** – spread all over the globe, at different stages of our respective lives and careers – when we were recruited for an international research program. We, the authors, are eight PhD fellows, so-called early-stage researchers (ESRs). Becoming part of an international social sciences research project, funded by the European Unions' Horizon 2020 program: **a privilege**, **an achievement**, an important step on our professional path. We felt very **proud** when hearing the good news that our applications and individual research proposals were accepted. *We***?** Yes, every single one of us, in total 15 fellows, in their places, without ever having met, probably felt that this was **something relevant and meaningful to them – personally**. It seemed to be the perfect alignment between our personal international profiles with the research topic of 'mobility' and the aspiration to perform a PhD dissertation and to, maybe, join academia. We were utmost motivated and keen on investigating and **experiencing mobility** for three full years, from September 2018 until August 2021. This was maybe the first instant that connected us, **the moment where a first glimpse of a *We* surfaced**, without being expressed explicitly, there was this sense of purpose and positive outlook into the future that we had in common.

It was time to not only **pack our bags**, but also to move properly to another country, to our employing universities' cities where we were enrolled as PhD candidates in the UK, Denmark, Finland, Germany, France and the Netherlands. The 'Mobility Rule' in the research

agreement stipulates clearly our **obligation to move**: "Researchers must not have resided or carried out their main activity (work, studies, etc.) in the country of the recruiting beneficiary for more than 12 months in the 3 years immediately before the recruitment date." (Grant Agreement, 2018). Obligation? For us this **opportunity** to discover and **live in yet another place** was not an obligation, but our mobility and the travels to come were one of **the key motivators** to apply for this job for most of us!

The *We* materialized during the first month of employment in September 2018, during a joint kick-off seminar for a bigger research project. Despite different ages, genders, nationalities and various cultural, professional and social backgrounds, it felt **easy for us to 'connect'** and to relate to each other: our curiosity and desire to academically explore international research topics, our travel records and pluri-linguism as well as the many left-behind places and people... *We*, **the 'internationals'**... The "large we-context" (Brewer & Gardner, 1996: 90) seemingly sparked a high level of inclusiveness that felt just natural. This initial week of meet and greet in a research environment was certainly **an experience** that brought us closer, made us 'buddies' right away: we still remember the joyful social gatherings amongst us after a day of workshop somewhere in Europe, which stand in stark contrast to a relatively **rough landing** when arriving to this new social space, the power field called 'academia', which already intrigued Bourdieu (1990) when exploring the *homo academicus*. We had to present our first individual pitches to a broad committee of senior researchers right at the start. **Pressure**. "ESR number 2, 3, …15 please present." **Alienation**. Not being called by our names was… surprising, at least. For some of us, it felt really awkward, especially for those who had worked for many years in private organizations. This was our first glimpse into an unfamiliar professional culture, our start as researchers in a context where the **demarcation line** between 'us' and 'them' seemed to be unmistakably drawn in the very beginning. At that

point in time, we did not realize if we might have landed in an environment that Søndergaard (2001) describes as a social space "where the combat of others at times becomes more important than producing one's own work" (2001: 145), a disensual university culture, or a consensual one, where one could debate for the stake of intellectual curiosity and responsible scholarship...

We were just looking forward to the many new, international experiences to come, impatient to explore and curious to learn more. Happy to be in a context where we could research the phenomena that we live and breathe every day ourselves, **grateful** for the dynamics and the **intensity** that is concurrent to mobility and migration. Many shared moments and experiences re-connected us multiple times, allowing for **enriching oscillations** between the voluptuous '*We*' and the isolated 'I's', tackling their individual PhD voyages, discovering the world of academia in local institutions and in various disciplines. To speak from a socio-psychological perspective, common bonds and shared experiences have rapidly fostered our group identity (Prentice, Miller, & Lightdale, 1994). There are multiple, interrelated processes and transformations that *We*, as a group and every single one of individually, lived through, experienced and shared: as **researchers**, as women, as men, as cosmopolitans, as highly qualified labour migrants, as experienced professionals, as transnational career-starters in academia, as **foreigners,** as adults…

And then this! Covid-19 is making the round. Adults whose vagabonding lifestyles and passion for researching international careers and mobilities have been **promptly disrupted**, held up, even proscribed. Suddenly we were **stuck**. Shock. "It's a bit like post-apocalyptic…" Where did our *freedom* go? What does it do to us that we suddenly cannot move around anymore? Do you feel how it hurts? **Claustrophobia**. **SEDENTARIOPHOBIA**. How can we continue to be motivated for our research when the mobile world that we have known is about to disappear? Schengen adieu? We suddenly did not have any agency for our lives and careers

anymore, it seemed. Isn't this ironic? Mobility researchers who are stuck, who suddenly become **simply sedentary**. Researchers whose limited-contract-clocks are ticking, whilst they find themselves **mentally STUCK in mobility.** We literally lived through what our research subjects – internationally mobile individuals and labour migrants – are going through in general and specifically in the present period. Maybe this is why we have been always so **cynical** during our conversations: we have seen the **sense and purpose** of our lives vanishing with every cancelled flight and every closed border.

"Just so you know, my flight's flight back to the UK got cancelled, so I'm staying in Germany until at least the 18th of May. Because on the 18th of May there's the first direct flight from Munich to the UK. And, yeah... If it doesn't get canceled, then, when I will come back on the 18th. Otherwise ... no idea [laughter]." (April 28th)

Cynicism as a coping mechanism in double and **triple fold hostile** environments? Maybe. For sure, our cynical comments and black humor often **transformed the *mood***. "So good to see your smiling faces." **GRATEFUL**. We can confirm Ahmed's claim that "attunement becomes a way of being for, as well as being with others in a relation of harmony" (2014: 18). Here is where the **irony** of our situation kicks in once again: during the first year of employment some fellows were facing the rule to be in the office all day, every day, without any exceptions. The practice of working from home or remotely from time to time was encouraged by some employers, proscribed by others. Nowadays, two years later, most of us had to work from home and were literally banned from their offices for a big chunk of 2020. **Unprecedented times**. Funny how situations can just **flip around**, how suddenly power fields are shifting… We are wondering: what else is this pandemic good for, other than changing opinions on telework? - In any case, virtual meetings have become the norm… "Do you remember the first 'virtual aperitivo', with all fellows, by the way?" This is how what we now

call a paper commenced. During an informal virtual touch base 'aperitivo' during lockdown with 15 of us in March 2020. After various pandemic related chitchat one of us affirmed: "the current situation is crazy, especially when you are working like me on 'hostile environments': guys, **the entire world has just become a hostile environment**…I don't even know where to start with my research." And as the discussion went on, two fellows proposed to "look into this Covid-19 crisis and maybe even write a paper on it." Some were enthusiastic confirming the "need to explore how people are coping with this. What are the **coping mechanisms and strategies**, what is the **organizational support** that people are getting…?" Others were less aflame about yet another paper and "all this covid-paper hype" in the profession, some asked to "just join the conversation, without committing to produce anything." And off we went, eight of us. **Ever since we have been getting together virtually** once a week (or rather every other week).

When it all started, back in March 2020, we suddenly were all in "**lockdown**", all forced to work from home (or, let us call it, from a rented apartment), with more or less strict coercive legal reinforcements, depending on the **state of emergency** declared in our respective countries of residence. At the time when lockdowns and travel restrictions were announced, we were all on a three to four months research stay in a partner institution in another country – some of us managed to go back to their universities and homes in a rush, others stayed in temporary homes in host countries due to **cancelled flights**, and again others chose to stay with a family member at a third place, decisions made under pressure and at the very last minute: searching for a flight, finding a way out. **'Survival' mode**. What flights are not cancelled yet and **what country allows me to enter based on my visa or citizenship**? The sudden restrictions and bans of any travel within and outside Europe for several months: **traumatizing**.

*"Yes, you are an #EUcitizen, of course, my friend! You and 4% of your fellows live and work outside your country of birth. You are a minority, indeed. For decades you have embraced the cozy #illusion of unlimited #freedom of movement. You live and breathe #Schengen. But in times of hardship you realize that no one seems to care how #EUROPEAN you feel... Yes, until yesterday you truly believed that your ID card allows you to settle wherever you find #work, #friends or #love: today in Paris, tomorrow in Sofia and next month, who knows, maybe in Helsinki. - Hold on, I have to stop you right here, amigo! This was before #covid19 joined the show. Today it's time for a #realitycheck. You have to decide within the next THREE HOURS or so: where do you want to go, to be? Physically, I mean. Not just today, or tomorrow, but for the coming three, six or many more MONTHS to come... #Where do you want to be during #lockdown? And with whom, by the way? Your partner is European, but does not share your nationality... too bad! **Erasmus just died, you know**. Try to reconvene wherever you can! #Move now, tomorrow might be too late. Where do you #belong? Your decision. Your call now. - See you on the other side! - - - #yourflightiscancelled"* (March 2020; personal social media post)

Being stuck! For how long? The fears and anxieties that emerged were numerous and the baseline was similar to all those fellow knowledge workers around the world who found themselves working from home (a luxury that not all workers had during that time, by the way). Feeling **disoriented**, and **worried** about their health and that of their loved ones, feeling **lonely**.

*"**So it's like it feels like I am living the Matrix. You know, I'm locked to those wires.** I can go outside only via Skype or I don't know via Simms, whatever. So that's kind of scary. Yeah."* (April 3rd)

And here is the specificity that was new for us, but that many less privileged migrants and refugees have certainly gone through many times: the **FEARS** about those who are not with us, who are far away and even unreachable. Every single phone call and video call is important, the only way to keep in touch, to get a feel of what is going on 'there'. "How can I help, even

though I am far away?" "Can they manage without me?" "Normally I would just take a plane and tensions would resolve once I arrive…"

"I had three very bad weeks then I had two good weeks. And then I have a feeling that it's bad again. Maybe, maybe, I'm not sure, but what could have triggered it could be the situation in my real home country." (April 28th)

"It is just is just a time that we spend your entire energy. You try to help. And I feel guilty because I'm far away, you know? And all this is some kind of things I know. And I'm supposed to feel like that, it's not my fault." (April 28th)

A deep **sense of responsibility** are surfacing and taking all your mental and affective space. **Worries** about our significant others abroad were peaking with every single horrific news, captured on multiple channels and reiterated in our minds during sleepless nights: the **macabre counting** in the international and local news outlets of number of sick and number of deaths, as well as the warnings for 'risk groups' to take special care scared us - many of our parents are in the risk group.

*"But for example, tonight, **I didn't sleep** the entire night and I woke up and just in the end, I was sitting on the sofa and reading for three hours from, I don't know, from 2:00 in the morning until 5:00 in the morning. And then I went to bed. I couldn't sleep and I don't know. Yeah. And I had a meeting this morning, which I cancelled because I got up at eight and I had a feeling that **my head was banging** […] (April 3rd)*

The more you feel helpless the deeper it goes: the record-breaking **cyclone** Amphan in the Bay of Bengal devastating hometown Kolkata, the **economic collapse** and record inflation in home country Lebanon and then the **dreadful explosion** in Beirut, raising **authoritarian ruling** in home country Brazil… the **passing away** of a godmother and a brother's forceful **separation** from his only child, the need to find a care home for a **mother overseas**, and the

hope to meet your grandmother at least once again in her lifetime. The fear that your family's restaurant will be closed for good and the helplessness when listening to your **friends' voices full of despair** after having lost their jobs… And the list is getting longer every day.

We are tired. Maybe overworked. Certainly overworked. Maybe just bored. **Feeling GUILTY**? Our families and friends are asking again and again "when will I see you again?" "**are you coming home for the holidays**?" whilst we are pushing our limits to deliver, to **get papers ready** for journal submissions; whilst we are wondering how to **transform** our multi-methods field research design into **pandemic friendly** online interviews; whilst some of us are facing surprising emails from senior scholars. Fullstop. Obviously, we are trying to be mindful. **Strong. Resilient. Outwardly**. Do you think we are allowed to be weak, to be vulnerable from time to time? **We are privileged. Why should we be complaining**? Maybe to learn about power, to open the door for a conversation and for new collectives, as suggested by Ahmed (2021). Are we allowed to put things on hold for an hour or two, to enjoy that we encountered open ears, to face honest eyes and to hear some comforting words from fellow colleagues? It is in our own interest to find the time we need to succeed. We are not counting the hours. Is this a 'shadow activity'? A clandestine research activity? **Speakeasy**. From time to time, no matter if in the midst of a storm, of a pandemic or of paper "deadlines" **are we allowed to pause** for a second?

"[…] But the pressure is coming from the fact that there is nothing else to do. So I should be like super productive, why wouldn't I be productive? And this itself is stressing me out. I mean, I'm kind of upset this [the lockdown] would end too soon before I manage to do something! [laughing]. This is… crazy!" (April 4th)

*"I worked today in the first part of the day and then when having lunch started watching Gilmore Girls. And did that until the evening. I somehow got very anxious. Starting to ask myself what is it about? I think I was frustrated as well. **What is it that makes me anxious and***

*blocks me from working? I did stick a note to the wall yesterday saying, **"give yourself more credit".** And it helped. It also helped to work this morning. And yet, there was something more. **But there's a big part of pressure coming out from myself. It is a difficult job. And I know not everyone can do this."** (April 24th, journal)*

"I'm trying not to care so much, but I feel like somehow they're going to twist and make me feel like I'm not doing the work..." (June 9th)

"So I'm trying to focus on my work, but as I said, I'm a very anxious person and I don't know nothing. I don't know nothing…" (June 9th)

"We are not production machines" (November 2020)

We allow each other to **be what we want to be** for the time of our weekly conversations. Exposing oneself. Feeling **VULNERABLE**. Staying **strong**, staying fragile. **SENSITIVITY. Losing our face or winning a smile?** Shouldn't we feel a little bit **ashamed** for complaining? We realize how *privileged* we are. We are not out there in the hospitals, caring and seeing people die of this illness. We are not the ones sitting at the cashier of the supermarkets. And we have a decent enough salary to **pay our flights 'home home',** if there happen to be flights. We have valid passports and visas that allowed us to travel during our entire lives across the world. Others are not that lucky. We are not exiled, we were not forced to leave our homes, **we chose** to do so. We have to be a little patient these days, but it can work out:

*"Yesterday I came back from Germany to Lithuania. The journey was long but everything went smoothly (apart from the fully loaded plane). Now I am at my dad's place in quarantine for 14 days. I will be tested for Covid-19 tomorrow morning. I already heard […] that the procedure (at least in France) is very quick and straight forward. That's why **I feel calmer** about it**. It feels strange** to see my family, but not to being able to hug each other. **I am fine. Just very tired.** It's a big change for me. Many things are happening. Life is happening and **it feels like I go through it by being wrapped in a plastic film**. **It's fine but it's just strange.** (May 2020)*

*"[…] the impact this has had on our lives, on many, many different aspects. But I think we all agreed that the biggest impact is the **loss of choice**. So… we cannot choose either to stay or go…"* (April 3rd)

This is NOT about writing a paper.

"Can we meet next week again? - It is sooo good to see you!" (May 2020)

"It is like a therapy talking to you guys every week" (June 2020)

"It really motivates me for the week when we are having our chat. - I am so glad I joined." (June 2020)

Why don't we just leave it there, **why do we want to write this paper**? Yes, certainly, it is always nice to have an additional publication, if this works out. But all of us are already experiencing a lot of pressure, many requirements to '**produce**', to '**deliver**' and to '**publish**' papers in line with the research project's requirements and for our doctoral dissertation. But we sense that **there is something that is worth to be shared**, described and discussed, amongst us and with others. This growing sense of **comfort** when getting together as a group, the attention and empathy that we all brought into our conversations seems to be **something precious** these days. **SOLIDARITY**. And something new: maybe something that we had missed out on in the past, during the first year in academia, something we had missed, even without knowing that this type of peer-support existed. **CARING COLLECTIVELY.**

"Well, you were not on your own. I got out of bed before the call and otherwise I wouldn't have been out of bed today. It was really a bad day. So you're not alone. Don't worry." (April 28th)

Sure, we could argue from a very instrumental perspective, with a means-end rationale that our conversations helped us to deal with our daily struggles. Trauma psychologists emphasize indeed the importance of **social** bonding, **distractions**, **fun** and **LAUGHTER**, as

potential resources to maintain mental health and reduce isolation during a pandemic (Chen & Bonanno, 2020). They state that human **resilience** develops over time, depending on the severity of the disruption for individual functioning and the nature of aversive circumstances. Indeed, they point out individual psychological differences as one predictor for resilient outcomes, but in reference to Bonanno (2004), they attribute crucial importance to social context and **family and COMMUNITY interactions** as valuable resources to develop resilience and flexibility when coping with stressors and traumatic experiences. Somehow intuitively we had taken the initiative of regular get-togethers, pretexting the objective to study the pandemic situation, but quickly we realized that it really **FELT GOOD** to chat, to speak, to grumble and to grouse. The presence and attention of the other **shifted our *mood*** and affected us in a very positive way.

When we shared our concerns about **increasing pressure** on us to '**deliver**' papers and research outputs, despite all of us experiencing difficulties and personal **disruptions**, we discussed the sensation of deep **DECEPTION** and **FRUSTRATION** about lacking recognition and missing empathy around us. When some, for example, political games, power abuse or other upsetting events happened in our surroundings, we could observe a similar pattern of interaction and coping repeating itself during our conversations: we pick each other up, by joking, by being cynical, mimicking the cynical tone and injecting some **IRONY**, **laughing together**: "**communities of feelings**" (Scheler, 1970). We confirm that "attunement and connection overcome the isolation and alienation of being disconnected from being" (Kossak, 2007: 2019).

We experienced **IRRITATION** and **ANGER** that we certainly share with all the millions of **migrants** and **mobile individuals** who witnessed their only flight connections to their preferred places and significant others cancelled and who suddenly realized that the

precious visas and passports might have lost their value for the years to come – they were once a guarantee to move, our **passports**, a **decent salary**, **paid vacation**: in this sense we were **privileged**, we could **freely move and travel** for work and leisure. What else did you need in the past, before Covid-19, to be able to change places and to spend some time with those whom you left behind? This is certainly an important motivation: **a sense of COMMUNITY** that we have developed and imagined since we entered this **new world, since the time is out of joint.** Most of us joined the academic world only a few years ago, some changed professions and all of us were living in a new country and facing the very unfamiliar situation of a pandemic:

"[...]it's the first time I actually feel limited by my nationality, because they are in the in the administration, I rely on themnow to get my documents. I haven't started the process yet, but I'm seeing the website and how chaotic it looks today. [...]" (May 12th)

"[...]for me,as I have the Brazilian Italian citizenship, but then I had to go back to Brazil and somehow, I put my passport in my travel luggage and then I had to unpack it in the beginning in the plane. So they explained to me that because I was a national, I could present a different passport even though it was expired, because they cannot forbid my entry." (May 12th)

"It's strange because I'm wondering if I need to be a resident to enter [the country]... I don't have work or residence in France or in Germany, butI have both passports. When I was in [city], I couldn't even borrow books at the library because I didn't have a permanent residence in Germany, even though I have a German passport and was willing to give my credit card and everything, I couldn't." (May 15th)

    Sharing these and other practical concerns raised awareness about the usefulness of citizenship and nationality, for example. A matter that several of us had not to worry about in the past. Beyond the practical concerns many of us realized that new conditions to travel had shifted somehow the value of their passport(s) and thereby limited their *freedom*. We had already established a certain **TRUST** amongst us during informal and formal meeting occasions **'before covid'** and many of us had developed friendships and close fellowship with some others. But at times this basic level **of trust was not sufficient**: "can I say this, can I share this, without my fellow repeating this to anybody outside the group, to our supervisors…?", "doesn't this jeopardize my career?". We all signed a **non-disclosure** agreement quite early in the

process, which seemed crucial when starting. Over time, our trustful relationship seemed to be fostered through the many conversations and iterations of sharing quite personal stories, feelings and thoughts - within a space that felt very safe and more and more comfortable. We started **knowing each other** even better, our environments, for example, to the point where we recognized small changes in the backgrounds ("did you paint your wall?") and got sensible to the others' states of mind and **WELL-BEING** and **HEALTH** ("you look tired, are you okay?").

Feeling gloomy - forever???

Needless to say, that the external **threat** of the pandemic and **endured restrictions triggered ANXIETIES** for all of us. Similarities in our professional situations and the specific ongoings on our research projects facilitated mutual understanding for issues that some of us were facing. Recognizing the **suffering** endured by every single one of us **in our distinct ways**, resulted in **CARING**. It was a true effort to **win back our inner SMILES**. We truly hoped that they were not lost forever! At times, our upset discussions and debates, and jokes and laughter, were replaced by … **SILENCE**. In October it was. Silence. Long silence. And all eight of us in the meeting. We just had discussed the **bad career outlook** for 'people like us' and the **new peaks of the *virus*,** and aggressive, **totalitarian politicians** … **SILENCE**. Someone said *"let's talk about something positive."* **SILENCE**. *"Something, anything guys!"* We did not come up with anything for minutes. It felt like eternity, it felt as if **time just froze**. SILENCE. Until suddenly someone announced the possibility of maybe being accepted as a trustworthy dog parent: *"I am in the second round of interviews to **adopt a puppy**."* **SMILES**. Wow, this was truly something positive that **shifted our perspectives on POWER**: it is not the human choosing or buying a dog: in this country the wishful adopters need to prove their aptitude! "Is there a hidden meaning here that we could learn from?" **LAUGHTER**. Humor still worked over all these months, luckily! **COMPLICITY.**

Ahmed (2014) reminds us that Heidegger thought about *moods* as being transmittable like a germ from one organism to another. "We do indeed say that attunement (*Stimmung*) or **mood is infectious**" bringing about "an emotional experience which is then transmitted to others…" In current pandemic times one would easily be tempted to compare the transmissivity of a *mood* to that of a ***virus***. Once the subject is 'contaminated' the mood sticks around and the subject might develop **symptoms of the *mood*** – a smile, laughter or bright eyes in the case of a good *mood* – whereas other subjects might not demonstrate nor feel any relevant symptoms ... They are stuck in their own *mood*, resisting not shifting, insisting to maintain the status quo, remaining in their sphere. **DROWNING.** In pandemic times one wishes to be able to **RESIST** not only to the *virus*, but foremost to the **negative ambient *mood***, which surrounds us in media and seizes us in daily life. "We are caught up in feelings that are not our own", states Ahmed (2014), caught for example by a lively atmosphere that a **body** brings into a room, that can be picked-up or not by others, that sometimes leaves when a person leaves a room or that lingers around. Does this work in the virtual room? Probably. While the metaphor of infection, something that happens to us without being conscious, is passive, the "**communities of feelings**" that Scheler (1970) exemplifies in "The Nature of Sympathy", are constituted when sharing a feeling, affect in relation to a specific situation or object: in our case the pandemic, or work, or formerly mobile life. From a social-psychological perspective our conversations affected us positively: "positive affect (PA) reflects one's level of pleasurable engagement with the environment. High PA is composed of terms reflecting enthusiasm, energy, mental alertness and determination" (Watson, 1988: 1020). How did our collective *mood* evolve over the past 9 months? How did the **ENERGY** change? How did **We** change the **ENERGY**?

FLASHBACK: Early on it felt as if we will never cope with spending all this time **at home alone**, to cook our own meals, not to go to the gym, the movies or to university. And on top of it we could not even travel! We were very optimistic in the beginning that things will be back to normal soon. No doubt.

"I think it's going better. I'm finding more energy to focus on the positive things. My girlfriend and I managed to find a better routine to exercise in the apartment. That really gives me a lot of energy to actually burn some energy. It was a big problem in the beginning. I felt tired. I was sleeping, falling asleep early, being tired in the morning. Now I feel that's maybe not as bad anymore because you just cope in some ways, figure out routines." (April 28th)

But there was this **FEAR** to catch the naughty, some would say pestilent, *virus*. Getting sick in a country where you do not speak the language seems terrible. When 'it all started' we were under **SHOCK**, but in a way as well **excited**: there were so many **novelties** going on, news to be understood, announcements to make sense of. We were certainly upset, but as well **intrigued** by the situation. We were trying to comprehend its complexity by joining the dots, by sharing what we knew from local and social media, from hear-say, from governments in our countries of residence or other places that we are connected with. At that time, in March and April we still had vast hopes that we could simply 'go back' to our life after a few months, that this was just an uncomfortable new experience, a **parenthesis** that we would joke about soon when gathering in Dublin in a few months.

We had differing opinions, of course, about the origin of the *virus*, considering or distancing from conspiracy theories, about the potential implications for economies and social systems. But we mutually persuaded ourselves during our conversations that this 'situation' was not going to last, that the *virus* would probably go away as it came or that *we* **– humanity**

– would find a cure very soon. **DENIAL**. During those days it was difficult to focus on work, impossible to formulate a clear train of thought, to continue our research as if nothing had happened. **No mental space** was available and attention spans were minimal. **OVERLOAD**. Everything was about the pandemic. It caught us by surprise and affected all of us in a most negative way. State of emergency. **DISRUPTION**. Back in March 2020 a martial vocabulary of **war**, **attack** and **battleground** made the round amongst political leaders and monarchs speaking on TV at prime time, first time since World War 2. Our enemy, the *virus*, invisible, sparking long **forgotten FEARS**, awakening grandparents' narratives in our minds and **archaic ANGST** in our bodies. This was about **SURVIVAL**.

Our work suddenly felt insignificant. Management and organization studies: what for? Our **work lost its SENSE** overnight, as societal priorities shifted from business and employment to health and care. In the early days, videos about solidarity and self-irony went viral: musicians and singers on balconies, hilarious clips about creative ways of hoarding and spending time during lockdown were soon replaced with standing ovations for care workers and **coffin counting** in protective gear. Caught by **news and social media** and by getting in touch with everybody you know, weeks went by. When being locked-in for the very first time in your life, **days are endless**! You watch the plants growing new leaves, see the sky changing colours, you focus on a raindrop running down the window. You can hear the **silence**. Hear the birds singing, for the first time since you have moved here. **PRESENCING**. Sleepless nights are endless, too. Watching dusk at four in the morning: feeling **PEACE**. Only late at night you might dare to go for a walk, attempting to avoid any potential carrier of the *virus* on your way. **PARANOIA**. Some of us picked-up work after a few weeks, others were still following the curve and the cures or calling family overseas during night-time, trying to catch up sleep in the afternoon. Most of us did not find the necessary resources to keep going, to pick-up data

analysis or paper writing as if nothing had changed. No energy, no mental space available. **EMPTINESS**. And the more our days felt unproductive the more did feelings of guilt and failure grow. **ANXIETY**. As stated by Watson (1988: 1020), "negative affect (NA) is a general factor of subjective distress and subsumes a broad range of aversive *mood* states, including distressed, nervous, afraid, angry, guilty, and scornful." *Mood* factors can be measured "either as traits, i.e. persistent differences in general affective level or as states, i.e., transient fluctuations in *mood*."(Watson, 1988:1020)

We were complaining about being "stuck" at home and about the sudden **BOREDOM** and new daily routines that the situation imposed on us: working in private spaces, preparing and eating all meals at home. During the first couple of weeks during the first lockdown, we complained about restricted *freedom* and the lost privileges of moving around freely, about staying at home during Easter vacation! Virtual meetings were not new to us, as we all worked internationally in the past, and it was nice to reach out to friends, family and colleagues through one click:

"[…] my family feels very close now, because I live with my husband again after one year of separation and my sister is self-isolating with my parents […] It is easy to spend time together in just one call" (April 2020)

We were looking forward to meeting in Dublin for a conference in July, but as this was cancelled, we thought that at the latest we would meet in Finland in September:

*"I think that when we meet in person, at least, I have this excitement of seeing everyone again in person and having the coffee breaks and I like the international environment and things like that, even though it might be physically more exhausting because I have to prepare and go and blah, blah, blah. The whole experience is, I don't know, **it is more worth it, I would say**. But in*

*here [in the virtual meeting] **my head was exploding** in the middle of the meeting with a **headache** because like staring at the screen for so long and speaking and listening and participating." (June 9th)*

"Honestly, it just felt like circus online, you know, instead of live performance you are just watching it…" (June 9th)

"[…] And, you know, my reply, what I miss from our meetings is that we're going to have beers virtually because when we're together, we go out together and then we can...gossip." (June 9th)

As weeks went by, days got brighter, **spring** was coming, spending light on us. We had picked-up work in one way or another. Paradoxically, our collective **complaining** about precarious working conditions and lacking institutional support comforted us during that time. **RESISTANCE**. Listening to your fellow buddies' sorrows and **FRUSTRATIONS** helps to open up yourself, to admit that you are struggling, too, that you are **less productive**, that you cannot **perform** as you wished. **NODDING.**

"I can identify with what you just said. I just cannot focus." (April)

"At times I randomly started crying. Never ever I felt so angry. Sometimes I cry out of… deep sadness, too. Never before I felt so helpless." (April)

VULNERABILITY. Sometimes one is just not in the mood to talk. **CYNICISM** is dark and sharp, but it makes us laugh, releases some tension. Watching the reactions and listening to smart comments and jokes brings you back, dissolves the knot in your stomach, eases your migraine. **RELIEF**. Time flies and you stay online for the entire meeting, for one hour or two… Warm words and attentive ears make you realize that they care. You feel touched when they look sad or exhausted, you realize that you care about them. **CONNECTION**. In the early

months of lockdowns easing, in June-July 2020 we have been (and still are) sharing stories about **HOPE** to travel again, vacation plans, plans to meet at a conference next winter:

"Well, I really hope it's going to be possible to go to Norway this summer because Denmark and Norway are kind of they have similar trajectories in the pandemic. They actually Norway's actually faring even better because it's a more scattered country. So you have less concentrations of the population. And I would really love to see my parents because it's been a while. (May 12th)

"Now, up till now, it's like the all the airports are closed. So the only flights that are being allowed right now are the ones that are flying in all the stranded tourists from US or from the Middle East or from the Europe. So there are no passenger flights that I can get on and go back. And even if they had I don't think I would would have wanted to go to India at this point. I don't know. I mean, my father is over 60 and he's in the target group who can get it from me if I do get it while travelling. And then it's the number of cases and the mortality rate is really, really going up in India right now. So it's… it's… it's not looking so well…. So maybe it won't be a good decision for me to travel right now or over the summer, I guess." (May 12th)

"[...] So it's actually pretty safe to be inside the plane while the airlines have made similar statements about their airplane models. So, yeah, I wouldn't I think the problem with planes is if they if they overfill, it's so good to have someone sitting right next to your breathing down your neck. But many people are worried about the air filtration system in the beginning. But I don't think that's too much to worry about." (June 9th)

Even though all group members appear to be **negatively affected**, **shocked**, **sad** or **anxious** with regards to the pandemic, the specific reasons that trigger the negative *moods* are distinct and at the same time diffuse, difficult to identify: **"it is just everything that goes wrong at the moment."** The following vignettes from a group conversation in May and June 2020 are a few examples of how **"a *mood* becomes an affective lens, affecting how we are affected"** (Ahmed, 2014). The quality of the emotional state and the overall attunement affect

how the environment affects us. Our work does make less sense, we are wondering if there is any point in continuing, given all the catastrophes happening. All eight of us experienced a similar downturn, wondering why suddenly everything goes wrong, how it can be that everything bad seemingly just falls on me, that I attract all of it? This was the general *mood* after the first shock and over the summer, i.e. from May to August 2020.

*"I know **I'm supposed to be writing** and everything like that. Well, last week I was having **a he adache for like five or actually six days in a row**, which was really crappy. And I **couldn't slee p at night** like nightmares and then couldnot fall asleep. So, like falling asleep at six in the morn ing, four in the morning and things like that. And now I have my sleeping pills again. So that's b etter at least to sleep. But yeah, I don't know. It's like **I'm doing basic things what I need to do, like I get up, I brush my teeth, I cook, I do like mandatory things for work**, I do meetings, I , **I force myself to write** and but at the same time it's like, you know, it's like you're doing this b ecause you know that at least **this is the minimum that you have to do**, like to at least know tha t you are doing something. But at the same time, it's like, I don't know, it feels like why, why am I doing any of this? Like, I'm thinking about my career and like thinking, you knowinternationa l aspects of this project was one of the biggest, things that attracted me there. And now that aspe ct is like… you know, we cannot travel, we cannot go out. And I think, yeah, …It's been quite he avy on me lately, so. Oh, yeah. Anyways, so that's me." (May 12th)*

*"So the pandemic has already so many months now. I'm living here, my parents are back in India, whatever. But now there's so **many more elements, environmental elements that are adding on to the situation**. For example, India is kind of political tension with China, so there is some talk that there might be some kind of… between the two and then... I still have friends and family there [in USA] and it's crazy out there…! The cities are burning because of the Black Lives Matter movement and **everything** that's going on. So it's really... I really don't know how to feel **about the thing that's been going on these past three, four months**. It feels like I'm living like in a movie. Like anything that I find that can only happen in a movie or in the fictional environment is actually happening. So **everything that can go wrong is actually going wrong**. It's… I cannot wrap my head around the situations that's going on. So, yeah, it's it's kind of…. hard to take on as soon as you kind of added one issue something else is arising, kind of. Hmm, I don't know. But hoping for the best, **I guess**." (June 2nd)*

*"So I'm feeling very hormonal. And with that, I think this is a very feminine thing, it is strange to me to adapt again to this country. **I'm feeling a little bit incapable**. This is the feeling [….] I'm feeling hormonal. So there is this a bit of feeling that 'why it's always me ?' All the changes [...] ... and will I be able to afford my place with all this? Anyways, yeah. So **it's a bit too much** and I'm feeling that way. **It's always me, you know, like it's unfair** and I'm not sure how much of it is true and how much is made of me being hormonal right now. So, I'm trying to distract myself and be productive with the interviews. So, this is how it is being productive…"* (June 6th)*

The pandemic and its restrictions have generated an **underlying depressive and negative *mood* that lingers around**, that has caught us over time, so that even events that are unrelated appear to be part of a series of bad news that are adding up endlessly. It significantly affects how we feel, it generates **DOUBTS** and attacks, not only our well-being, but our self-confidence as well. Possibly, without the underlying **GLOOMY** mood that has built up around the worldwide pandemic, various unconnected events like geopolitical tensions or frustrations at work would not have affected us in the same intense and negative way. But now, in a situation of isolation paired with physical distance from loved ones and restrained *freedom*, every additional event seems to be a confirmation for the **'downward spiral' that dominates our minds.**

With all of our research meetings being cancelled or turned into virtual meetings we were starting to realize that the situation might last for longer. **FATIGUE** generated through multiple long virtual meetings and conferences and cancelled vacations appeared increasingly heavy. The **PRESSURE** to continue delivering project results and academic papers was maintained, despite the challenging situations we were all in. When looking back and listening to our conversations, we observe that our **ILLUSIONS** have decomposed over the months, that they have transformed into a vacuum filled with **DECEPTIONS** and pessimistic statements from our surroundings, generating within dark thoughts and gloomy prospects. After the

summer, when the so-called 'second wave' inundated Europe, we were less concerned about the immediate constraints during our daily local life. Stay home, again. Used to it. That's how it is. **ACCEPTANCE**.

At this point we realized: this will not be over any time soon. The implications for our professional and personal aspirations and plans started to trickle down to our consciousness. And the steadily high and even growing requirements in the broader research group generated fear and anxieties: Why aren't 'they' a little more understanding and flexible? Am I able to live up to others' expectations and to my own aspirations? **PRESSURE**. Every day felt the same.

"[...] like going around in a circle."

"Weekend or weekday, no idea, I am working, no matter what day or what time."

"Work is everything that is left. At least I am productive."

"I start hating the word 'deadline'. I swear to myself that from now on I will only call the defined latest date of delivery 'due date' – who dies when I miss it?"

As everything around us started feeling like 'the end of the world' or at least like **the end of *our* world,** the world of international moves, global mobility and transnational belonging – the purpose of our work, and the foundations of our life modes had abruptly vanished. The threat of the viruis was less perceived as a threat for our lives or the lives of significant others than in the early months. But towards the end of 2020 we realized that the pandemic and its implications has become a **threat for our ways of living, for our worldviews, aspirations and our sense of purpose**. These **FEARS** are vague and diffuse and the more we discuss our sorrows, the more all domains and parts of our lives seem to be affected. There is just nothing positive left saying, barely any optimism left. **Chronic moodiness**. **GLOOMINESS.**

… and the clock keeps ticking

We situate our contribution in the field of transnational evolutions of society at large (Vertovec, 2009; Pries, 2010), such as transnational care (Merla, Kilkey and Baldassar, 2020) and translocational belonging (Anthias, 2018; Davis, Ghorashi & Smets, 2018) in the field of migration studies. As Özkazanç-Pan (2020) state, in reference to Levitt and Schiller (2004), a transnational approach allows consideration for "the ways in which people create a sense of *belonging* in different contexts beyond a sense of being or simply existing in a place." (Özkazanç-Pan (2020: page 17) Not only are we, the research subjects and interacting protagonists of this collective autoethnographic narrative, from various geographic and cultural origins, but in addition, each of us has a distinct approach to professional and relationship building and bonding across national or locational boundaries, a distinct sense of belongingness. All of us have been experiencing life and work abroad for many years, and we have somehow intuitively developed the need to understand ourselves better, whilst reflecting on the processes linked to our transnational, mobile lives. This seemingly naturally occurring reflexivity and "new formations, ways of understanding oneself, the world and others emergent in a transnational mode has been a growing subset of research in migration studies," as Özkazanç-Pan & Pullen (2020: page 17) states.

What we have been experiencing since the beginning of the pandemic, is tightly linked to our professional activity as mobility researchers working and building relationality across borders. Our joint research interests and field work in various places were a common denominator, but only recent external events of crisis have affected us and our work in such a negative way, that they have seemingly reinforced our sense of belonging to this group of 'C-crisis buddies'. ('C' stands for the two worn-off terms that we have become acutely tired of.) Previously, 'before the pandemic', we tended to keep our reflections regarding personal

situations rather to ourselves, except for a few informal occasions where some of us discussed personal or professional concerns with close colleagues. Sharing experiences and feelings in addition to thoughts, allowed to go beyond 'information sharing' on specific topics, such as the 'sanitary safety of flights'. The *intuitive triangulation* of the latest news not only from various national media in countries we have ties to and in our 10+ languages, but as well observations from our direct local environments, appeared to be reassuring for many of us, giving us a cognitive sense of control over the situation. By crossing various pieces of contradictory information and news about the pandemic, the *virus*, the illness and resulting restrictions, we had the impression to get closer to the truth. Our distinct and complementary knowledge and interpretations of news from international media, led apparently to nuanced opinions and judgements of risks, threats and possibilities. Our conversations and exchange of different layers of understanding triggered acts of decentering, of stepping back and repeatingly detaching oneself from our narrow viewpoints and from evens that affected us.

We realized when identifying outbursts of affect during data revisions that our professional situation as 'immobilized mobility researchers on limited working contracts living abroad', what Gill and Pratt call the "precariousness of neo-liberal workplaces" (Gill and Pratt, 2008), especially as we were entering the last year of our contracts. Being 'stuck' physically and geographically, cognitively and affectively, has led over the months to the impression of being 'stuck' professionally. The expressed restlessness along with frustrations, deceptions, anger and anxieties indicate that the fragile balance of our life plans got disrupted. Here we can refer to Sullivan and Arthur (2006), who distinguish between physical and psychological mobility: the physical mobility dimension refers to actual career movements and transitions across physical boundaries (reallocations among countries, companies and jobs), whereas psychological mobility ('boundaryless mindset') refers to one's psychological orientation towards making those movements. The pandemic interfered with physical mobility, whereas

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psychological mobility was not supposed to be impacted, but in this case, we can state that it was…. Listening to, analyzing, and reflecting on our conversations together in small teams has been a reminder and eye-opener: by sharing how we were affected, we were forced to confront ourselves with the obvious connection that exists between our research interest, our personal journeys, and the very purpose of our course of action. Realizing how vulnerable we had become during the pademic due to our transnational life modes and work-life entanglements generated anger for some, sadness for others, despair for most of us.

For the first time, most of us apprehended through the magnifying lens of the pandemic that we did not have any significant social ties or friendships in our current 'countries of residence'. After all, we had only spent a little more than one year at our destinations. We had been travelling a lot for work and private life during this first year, which was not beneficial for participating in local life, except at university. During the initial year we had to learn about a new professional environment, experiencing academia as 'early stage researchers' in different national settings, institutions and within a multidisciplinary project environment. Several scholars have observed the general complexity of international PhD journeys and transnational academic careers in the past (Elliot et al. 2016; Acker & Haque, 2015) and most recently Schaer and colleagues (Schaer, Jacot, Dahinden, 2021) investigated transnational ties and networks in this context. As Elliot, Baumfield and Reid (2016) underline in reference to Walsh (2010), already in non-pandemic times "the nature of the PhD necessitates the cultivation of a critical, analytical and reflective way of thinking and research orientation, during this conventionally long and often isolated endeavour." Preparing a PhD is pictured as a 'solo journey' (Brydon & Flemming, 2011: 1008) that necessitates a continuous adjustment to unexpected events. It appears that the 'usual' isolation that can be expected when preparing a PhD dissertation, has been overly intensified in the illustrated case:

1) Due to local restrictions of the pandemic that forced individuals to work from home, to reduce social contacts and to practice physical distancing:

"How really, you can be judged for being cautious?! I saw those friends, they were really like making fun of me for staying a bit far away, etc. And then this friend called me again yesterday, and he was like: "seriously, do you think what you're doing is normal? You should start going back to normal" (May 25th)

Meeting an acquaintance in London: "He wanted to hug me. And I'm like, what the hell? So I pushed him kind of, you know, I yelled at him and I'm like, no, no, I'm not hugging anyone!" [...] (May 25th)

"That, yes, we live by ourselves and it's a very, very different feeling when you choose to be by yourself and when you are obliged to be by yourself, because I do enjoy having my whole apartment, but because I spend my day among people and I love socializing. So it's a choice and now it's not a choice. And this is really messing with my head. And so I'm trying to find the coping mechanisms, which is the video chat, OK, which is sometimes having a drink and loosen up and it helps to sleep. But I miss touching people and it comes from the inside. But it's it's it's so strange... because I'm not hugging you." (June 2020)

2) Due to a sudden travel stop that resulted in the cancellation of all planned data collection in the field, network development with other researchers, research stays at partner institutions and in person conference and workshops were cancelled for the rest of the funding period:

"I thought about one thing, which is that when you were in the middle of your PhD and you cannot go to conferences, you cannot do any networking, you cannot identify journals and editors you would like to work with and this and that... you lose the whole year, actually! And that's something universal... It's also you cannot travel, and you cannot meet people, you cannot network ... but that's an essential part of the job as well, especially if you have to prepare for the job market" (May 25th)

3) Due to settlement in a relatively new city and country of residence, with only little local contacts outside the work environment and often scarce local language skills and unfamiliar patterns of interaction at work and in an academic environment in general: facing role changes.

"It has been a shock to the situation itself, but the Covid-19 increases this complexity, as people have less time and patience, and they are not at the office. I need to learn quantitative analysis now and I do not find help. My perception: the Covid-19 amplified my challenges. I need to be more flexible in my learning process and to adapt to the local context. It has been a bit more stressful for me. So, less help, more challenges, less time and support. But the deadlines are all the same." (November 2020)

"I was considering that my corporate life is over that I would be a student again. I stayed 1.5 years in a student home – in university A. I am staff, not a student, but I do not have access to staff meetings. At university B. I participated in Erasmus excursions etc. [like other students] I am registered as a student, [...] I never felt part of staff. The only corporate event I attended, I felt like a complete stranger, none of the professors was there… my department does not do any social gatherings… (other departments act more like a team (December 2020*)*

4) Due to the impossibility to travel and to take responsibilities for family members and friends abroad as we used to do:

"I have been around and faced different kinds of problems. My international experiences help me to develop competencies and increase resilience, but now, Covid-19 put me in a situation that all my competencies developed so far seem not to help. My family is in danger in Rio, especially my mom, and I feel useless. In any other situation, I would go to Rio now to help her, but I cannot do it. This feeling, like I lost freedom, is horrible, and it undermines my work now." (November 2020)

Overall we can state that multiple factors reinforced pre-existent isolation and that extreme environmental hostility (a pandemic) led to *alienation* and a *loss of personal freedom*: formerly available resources that we leveraged before to cope with isolation and professional

pressure were not accessible anymore (hedonist lifestyle, receiving visitors, partying, mingling with colleagues, developing transnational networks and opportunities through professional travel and events, leveraging multiple languages, connecting with people in multiple settings and places). Realizing how vulnerable we had become during the pandemic due to our transnational life modes and work-life entanglements generated anger for some, sadness for others, despair for most of us. Throughout the first round of analysis of our conversations we quickly grasped that the external constraints linked to the pandemic had brought us closer together. We had created a safe space, a comfortable environment with people who cared. We could easily share some of our concerns related to perceived work pressure, chronic fatigue and deception about lacking support, because we were affected in similar ways, with only slight variations in degree and timing. And these ways of experiencing, of interconnected embodied feeling and affect are what this autho-ethnographic work helps exploring.

Our positions, the concurring affect and *moods* are multidimensional and complex, dense and intense. At times, our conversations appear taking place in the 'researchers life-world', when we are discussing research content, when debriefing on events after meetings, or exchanging on potential conference participations. At other times, we are chatting amongst 'friends', about insomnia, family issues, travel dreams or the wish to move houses. And again, at other times we find ourselves discussing political decisions in our countries of residence, as a community of destiny, as 'foreigners' in the society we are living in. When sharing news and insights about the pandemic from our so called 'home countries', we find ourselves in the same positions as other migrants, as expats who connect with other 'non-locals', occasionally mistaking ourselves for experts of epidemiology, pandemic evolutions or political conspiracy. Entanglements of overlapping roles and contradictory narratives, external expectations and internal psychological forces constitute a vicious plot, where layers of affect and fluctuations

of *moods* are perceptible, but diffuse, root causes are situational, but blurred. There is little, in terms of negative emotions, that we missed out on during all these months. Nonetheless, ephemeral instances of collective support and attention left traces of mutual esteem and the assurance of not being alone, even during passages of loneliness. Our bodies seemingly have incorporated what we tried to erase from our memories - fear, insecurity, sadness, anger - as multiple cases of insomnia, migraines, chills and panic attacks demonstrate.

We had to consciously put the academic/expert view aside at times to observe more clearly what was happening with us as a group, as a person. Crossing and discussing our interpretations led to additional insights. Yes, indeed, we certainly "deploy coping strategies", which is what HR or psychologically informed literature states, but what does this really mean? We observe that such processes are not necessarily conscious and certainly not merely cognitively supported, but influenced by instances of affect and rapport. When looking into the literature you learn that there are coping mechanisms and coping strategies, that individuals are developing resilience during and after traumatic experiences. But what are the events and circumstances that have made a difference for us? What were significant moments when our personal *moods*, well-being and motivations shifted throughout the pandemic? There is nothing such as a true or unique response to it. With our weekly video conversations, we gave comfort to each other, by listening, by speaking out loud many of the things that have been circling around in our hyper-active, hyper-reflective, restless minds. Pausing, taking a deep breath, relaxing, laughing out loud, dreaming. Complaining, grumbling, moaning, grousing…

What we will remember, after all, are the good moments of cheering each other up, of laughing and joking. The moments where someone else cared for me and my momentous state. As the implications of pandemic related constraints on individuals and societies are slowly

becoming visible and tangible through social science research, we encourage fellow researchers to continue looking out for the tone of voice, the atmosphere and the vibe that constitute *moods:* those of their research subjects, their own and their writings. We realized that geographic mobility and mobility of thought are interlinked, that geographical mobility is constitutive for our way of being and becoming, our sense of purpose. This underlines the remaining need for a mobilities turn in social sciences, as initiated by Sheller and Urry (2006), and speaks for mobility as an ontology in diversity studies and organizational research, as suggested by Ozkazanc-Pan (2019). We have become aware that our transnational life modes depend upon the privilege of free movement across borders, that the outcome of our academic journey will depend on us, our resilience and our ability to adapt to new circumstances. We are amazed that the *freedom* and lightness that we lost whilst being physically stuck, could find a new emanation through this collective work and writing.

In it together, for worse… and for better!

With every closed border and shut-down airport, with every economic collapse, the penalties for cross-border mobility and free movement have become increasingly perceptible. The prominence of **global vagabonding** and travel, our modus vivendi in 'former times', have reversed into a distant dream and desperate hopefulness. **GRIEF.** With every shut-down boutique, coiffeur and fitness club, our hedonist habits freeze deeper, and our self-indulging customs of care get condensed to a warm shower, a walk in the park and a glass of gin tonic in front of the screen. **SUBSTITUTION.** With every new lockdown, every closed bar and restaurant, our social insouciance vanishes, and our bodies start missing the **physical closeness.** Our souls are, still today, craving for hugs and kisses and a warm, unveiled smile. Cruising through time and space with nonchalance and joy seems to belong to another era. Nowadays

such *freedom* is reserved to our fiction heroes. **ALIENATION**. We do not know where we are heading. **CONFUSION**.

When listening to our conversations, it is striking how our **DESIRE** to meet, chat, laugh and cheer each other up has carried us collectively through many months. We were in a **GOOD MOOD**: when lockdowns were easing, when project deliverables were accomplished, when bright summer days were around the corner and whenever we got together to speak our minds and hearts. **Nine months** have passed, since it all started in March 2020. Coincidentally this is just the time it needs for a human being to mature in mama's tummy. Have we **matured**? Are we more complete, better equipped in order to face the world out there, than we were three, six or nine months go? Possibly. Certainly. Although we feel more **drained** than in the beginning. **EXHAUSTION**. The newness of the situation has faded away and staying informed about the latest pandemic related recommendations and restrictions has become a sad **routine**. Maybe it happened when we fell into fall? The start of the **dark winter** season was certainly not helping. And when we passed August, we realized: **only 12 months left** out of 36. We just want some **REST**, we urgently need a distraction, some light and delight… lightness. But the clock is ticking. Let us get together on another video call tomorrow. **JOY**.

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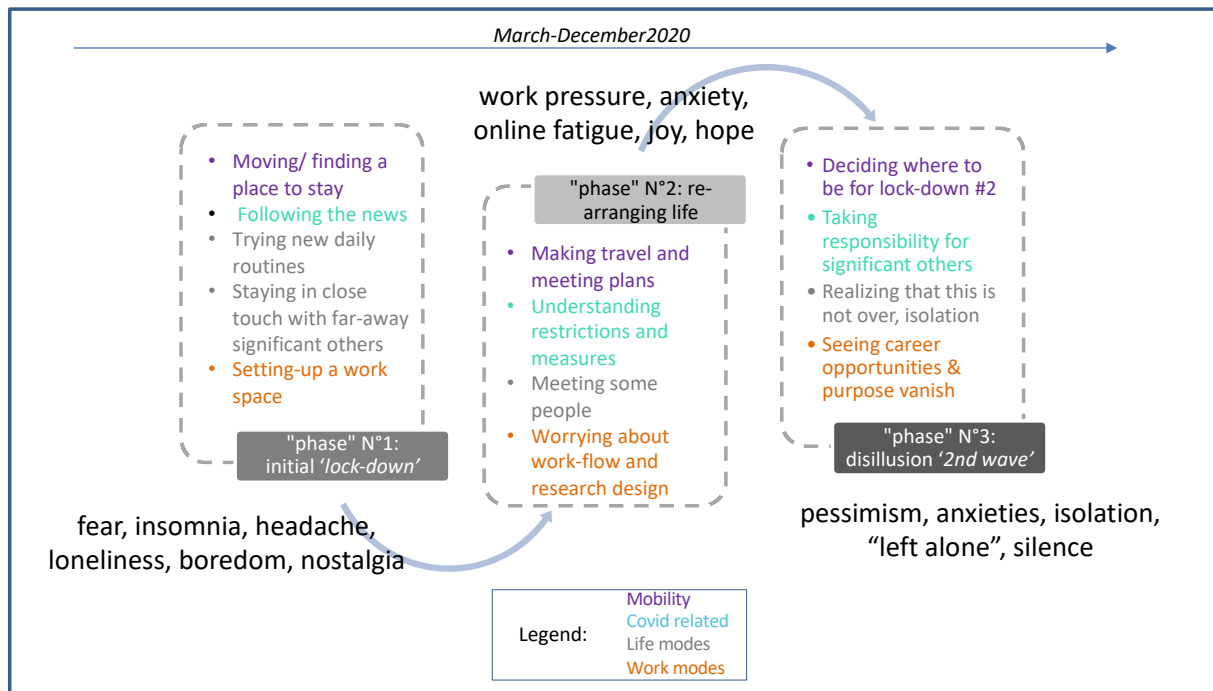
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Table1: conversational themes

Corona News	lockdown rules, health, behaviour of others, masks, guidelines, infection curves, testing, quarantining, conspiracy, travel restrictions…
Mobility & Travel	plans, vacation, going 'home' or 'home home', restrictions, tests, swaps, quarantine requirements…
Places and Locations	secondments, research stays, where are we now, where to go, where to stay, with whom, visa issues, restrictions and rules…
Home and 'home home'	what is happening back home, distance, separation, country situation, family, friends, concerns, how we keep in touch…
Activities/distractions	cooking, drinking, netflix, gym, travel, meditation, walking, therapy, flexibility, food delivery, social support…
Social life	going out, meeting friends, meeting colleagues, ties and relationship amongst us…
Institutions	university rules, university support, latest covid19 guidelines, office-lock-downs…
Broader Research Context	meetings, emails, politics, deliverables, pressure, expectations, deception, frustration…
PhD Research	this collab. project, phd, other papers, other deliverables, conferences, current work, readings, writings, publishing…
Virtual/Home working	online conferences, online meetings, online interviews, cancellation of confs, screen time…
Organizing Work	workspace, noise, productivity, hours, flexibility, attention span, concentration, motivation…
Mental and Physical Health – embodied emotions	headache, insomnia, fatigue, shaking, doctors, psychological support, therapy…
Feelings and Emotions observed/expressed	anxious, frustrated, upset, lonely, feeling of failure, feeling pressured, feeling insecure, confused, not feeling respected, felling lost, proud, happy, relieved, being sarcastic, cynical, ironic…
Future Outlook & Sense of life	travel, dreaming, moving, meeting again, going to Tallin/Vaasa/Dublin/Canada for conferences…or not? - future of global mobility research, careers in academia or not, economic outlook, private life, places, visa issues…

Source: Developed by the authors

Figure 1: Over-time perspective: themes, dominant moods and affective patterns

Source: Developed by the authors