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‘I guess I really survived many crises’: On the benefits of longitudinal ethnographic research

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Abstract

Building on my ongoing ethnographic research with people living with HIV in different European countries, the paper focuses on RD, a Catalan man I have interviewed three times since 2014. In RD's life narrative, ‘crisis’ is a recurring theme including both the most blatant forms, like the severe housing crisis in Spain that followed the global financial crisis, and the most ordinary ones like domestic violence. Analysing the impact of crises in RD's perception and experience of the present, interwoven with the past(s) and the future(s), the paper discusses two main benefits of longitudinal ethnographic research. First, it allows to capture how crisis is not just a moment or a phase in RD's life, but acts as context generating a recurring experience of an ‘uncanny present’ shaped by logics of return and repetition of the past, and anticipation of the future. Second, it supports RD's self-awareness around his ability to navigate the unknown when experiencing the ‘uncanny present’; this highlights the ethical care dimension entailed by such methodology.

KEYWORDS

care ethics, Catalonia, lifecourse, longitudinal research, temporalities, uncanny

1 | INTRODUCTION

(...) you can feel it, it's a *deep sense of crisis* all around you.

(RD, 2017 interview, emphasis added)

(...) there has always been something else going on in the background, a new big problem to face, (...), in one way or another *I have always been in a crisis mode*.

(RD, 2020 interview, emphasis added)

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We are used to think of crises as exceptional circumstances that threat and disrupt the stability of economies, lives, and environments, reshaping our sense of the present and expectations towards the future. What about those for whom crisis is not an exception but a constant? What are the best theoretical and methodological tools to research the lives of those for whom crisis acts *as* context, rather than *in* context (Vigh, 2008)? This paper addresses these questions by analysing the life narrative of RD, a Catalan gay man living with HIV that I have interviewed three times since 2014 within my broader ethnographic research on the life trajectories of people living with HIV (PLHIV).

As evidenced in the quotes above, RD makes frequent use of 'crisis talk' when narrating his life history, different events across his lifecourse creating this sense of constant crisis. RD's crises include both the most blatant forms, like the severe housing crisis in Spain that followed the global financial crisis (GFC) (Di Felicianonio, 2017a), and the most ordinary ones like domestic violence (Brickell, 2020). Analysing the impact of crises in RD's perception and experience of the present, interwoven with the past(s) and the future(s), the paper discusses two main benefits of longitudinal ethnographic research. First, it allows to capture how crisis is not just a moment in RD's life, but acts *as* context generating a recurring experience of an 'uncanny present' (Bryant, 2016) shaped by logics of return and repetition of the past, and anticipation of the future that make the *unknown somehow known* through previous knowledge and experiences (Hitchen, 2021). According to Rebecca Bryant (2016, p. 21), 'the present becomes uncanny precisely because of the severing or questioning of the links between past, present, and future that ordinarily allow us to anticipate'. Second, longitudinal ethnography supports RD's self-awareness of his ability to navigate the unknown when experiencing the 'uncanny present'; this highlights the *ethical care dimension* (Askins & Blazek, 2017) entailed by such methodology. This way, the paper contributes to the methodological literature on longitudinal research (in human geography and beyond), highlighting the potential for research to act as a support mechanism towards participants in a project driven by a *care ethics* that challenges standardized ethical institutional practices.

The choice to focus the analysis on one research participant is aimed at giving a rich, detailed picture of both the experience of 'crisis as context' in one's life (see van Lanen, 2021 for a similar choice) and the sense of familiarity developed between RD and myself thanks to the longitudinal character of the research.

The engagement with the everyday, 'very personal' dimension of crisis (Hall, 2019a) follows the growing interest with its lived dimension among human geographers (e.g. Di Felicianonio, 2016, 2017b; García-Lamarca & Kaika, 2016; Hall, 2019a, 2019b; Hitchen, 2021; van Lanen, 2022). The conceptualization of crisis (and its temporalities) proposed in the paper builds on the work of anthropologist Henrik Vigh (2008) who has challenged the representation of crisis as a singular, traumatic event bringing rupture and chaos in people's lives, highlighting the ongoing, prolonged dimension of crisis experienced by some (people, communities and/or areas). The use of Vigh's conceptualization of 'crisis as context' broadens the breath of human geography scholarship on crises and their temporalities by looking at the constant presence of a feeling of crisis in one's life as determined by a multiplicity of events across the lifecourse. As the paper demonstrates, RD's life history makes a separation among different crises and their effects impossible, one crisis fuelling the other, their temporalities becoming intertwined.

The paper is structured as follows. The next section reviews recent geographical scholarship on the everyday, personal dimension of crises together with anthropological work that has challenged conventional analyses of the temporalities of crises. The third section gives an overview of the research methodology and RD's life history, followed by two sections analysing the abovementioned benefits of longitudinal ethnographic research. Finally, the conclusions highlight briefly how longitudinal ethnographic research might advance current human geography debates around the lifecourse, the relationship between temporalities and everyday spaces, research impact, and the role of familiarity, reflexivity and care in the research process.

2 | GEOGRAPHIES AND TEMPORALITIES OF CRISES

Human geographers' engagement with 'crisis' has mostly centred on economic and financial crises, even more so after the GFC, most analyses highlighting its multi-scalar, uneven geographical dimension, from the global to the household and everyday life (e.g. Aalbers, 2009). The unequal effects of the GFC have been heightened by austerity, leading to the cut of essential services and benefits, making those who relied on them more vulnerable (e.g. Lambie-Mumford & Green, 2017). Therefore, austerity and crises can be conceptualized as 'very personal', i.e. 'lived in, through, and punctuating everyday life, manifesting as a life crisis, and shaping lifecourses, biographies and imaginaries of the future' (Hall, 2019a, p. 480). For Sarah Marie Hall, crises are marked by a temporal disruption and change, i.e. 'the fracturing, fragility, rupturing, and instability of the current, or anticipated, situation' (Hall, 2019a, p. 480), opening new possibilities

for rupture (or continuity) without predetermined outcomes. Through ethnographic work with six households in a Northern English town hit by deprivation, her analysis offers important insights for understanding the everyday, intimate dimension of crises, notably: (i) the role of previous experiences of crisis in a present disrupted by a 'new' crisis as well as in shaping future life choices; (ii) for some people who have already been experiencing hardship, the effects of crisis are mundane and expected, they do not mark an unexperienced situation; (iii) different crises involve different relational and temporal geographies; (iv) crises can be incorporated within (individual, family and community) memories, making them somehow more acceptable. Taken together, these insights call for 'a revised epistemological focus that sees crises as not always groundbreaking, horizon-shifting, paradigm-shaking events' (Hall, 2019a, p. 490).

Hall's work echoes recent contributions across the social sciences aimed at rethinking the temporalities of crises, often reduced to singular, temporary moments that determine a collapse of the present, thus erasing their enduring effects in the present (and in shaping futures). Against this tendency, Vigh (2008) notes how, for some, crisis is a long-term, *chronic* condition acting 'as context', i.e. 'as a terrain of action and meaning rather than an aberration, (...), not a short-term explosive situation but a much more durable and persistent circumstance. Not a moment of decisive change but a condition' (pp. 8–9). When considering people's perceptions and experiences, 'crisis' cannot be separated from its hegemonic negative connotation: people's agency is not associated to capacity but to possibility, i.e. the range of choices/actions available to people can be constrained in some circumstances. Acknowledging the chronic dimension of crisis does not imply the disappearance of the experience of crisis; on the contrary, crises push people to reflect upon their lives (including previous experiences of crisis even if related to different circumstances), generating a feeling of regaining control over them and the future (Horton, 2016). For Vigh (2008, p. 20), this new understanding of crisis as context 'allows us to see how people (...) navigate their life through difficult environments, we become aware that people constantly produce future scenarios and terrains of action by anticipating and predicting the near and distant future (...)'. Building on these insights, the paper adopts 'crisis as context' as a framework for RD's life, characterized by the persisting return of an 'uncanny present' that he tries to navigate interweaving past(s), present(s) and future(s) through the logics of return, repetition and anticipation.

3 | A LIFE SHAPED BY CRISES: RD

This paper centres on the life history of RD, a Catalan gay man living with HIV in the metropolitan area of Barcelona that I interviewed for the first time in 2014 (he was aged 25–34). Since then, I have interviewed RD again in 2017 and 2020 as part of my ongoing ethnographic research on the life trajectories of PLHIV in England, Italy and Spain. Funded through different grants, my research has relied on several research methods so far, such as biographic interviews with PLHIV, participant observation to events for PLHIV, semi-structured interviews with service providers and representatives of organizations, an online survey and media discourse analysis.

My research has a longitudinal component as it relies on multiple iterations of data collection, i.e. I have decided to 'follow' some research participants over time by interviewing them around every three years. As acknowledged by several scholars (e.g. Cuomo, 2022; Thomson & McLeod, 2015), there is no consensus on what constitutes longitudinal qualitative research as it might appear quite close to other approaches, such as long-term ethnography and re-visits (O'Reilly, 2012). However, there is a strong emphasis on engaging with *change over time* (Thomson & Holland, 2003), as in my research. Longitudinal qualitative research requires careful consideration of how the relationship with participants is going to change over time (see section 5). Moreover, it has been noted how 'longitudinal interviews (...) resist any easy assimilation to one theoretical framework; (...) interpreting longitudinal qualitative 'data' requires multiple theoretical lenses, and the usual way of presenting theoretical arguments in a binary logic—either this approach or the other—seems inadequate and reductive' (McLeod, 2003, p. 202).

The original interview with RD followed the guidelines of the biographic narrative interpretive method (BNIM; Wengraf, 2001), i.e. it was realized in two parts, in the first I only asked a very broad question about his life and RD was free to discuss whatever he felt like, while the second was more like a standard semi-structured interview, the questions based on what (not) discussed in the first. The 2017 and 2020 interviews were less structured, i.e. I started by asking him to tell me about what was going on and the changes in his life. Informed consent was obtained first in 2014 and then renewed before each interview. The main language of the interviews is Spanish, all the quotes included in the paper have been translated by me.

As anticipated in the introduction, in RD's narrative 'crisis' is a recurring theme, starting when he was a kid with the AIDS-related death of his uncle, an injecting drug user that he loved very much. This occurred in the years of the AIDS

crisis that hit many countries around the globe, bringing the ‘crisis’ that people feared about in his homelife. When diagnosed with AIDS, his uncle spent ‘some months, probably a couple of years? I can’t say it, we [the family] don’t really talk about it’ (2014 interview) in his grandmother’s house where RD lived with his mother. Neither his mum nor his grandmother pronounced the word ‘AIDS’ to him, he was just told not to tell anyone that his uncle was at home and sick. One day RD heard the word ‘AIDS’ during an argument between his grandmother and his uncle, this explaining to him why no one seemed to visit them anymore and his mum’s new obsession with house cleaning. This experience marked RD’s perception of HIV/AIDS deeply, therefore his life ‘seemed to collapse’ (2014 interview) when, many years later, he tested positive to HIV. According to RD, he contracted HIV through his partner of the time, their relationship described as one of abuse, violence and submission. RD’s description of domestic violence reveals different rhythms: a ‘slow’, ordinary one made of abusive comments and pervasive fear and tensions, mixed to sudden moments of extreme physical and sexual violence. In his words, ‘(...) in a way you get used to violence, you don’t see anything strange with it, (...), each day there is something more serious, more violent, more humiliating’ (2014 interview).

The experience of abuse and HIV led RD to feel like a ‘complete failure’ (a term used several times across the interviews) towards his family and friends. Despite a precarious job and a modest income, he convinced himself that buying a house through a mortgage would have given him some sort of social redemption, making him more responsible, especially towards sexualized drug use (years before the panic discourse around the ‘chemsex epidemic’, see Stuart, 2013; for a geographical analysis of chemsex, see Di Felicianonio, 2023). Critical scholarship in human geography has shown how indebtedness (which homeownership increasingly relies on) ‘is immediately *subjective*, i.e. it produces specific indebted subjects following specific moral imperatives functional to the reproduction of credit as key paradigm of (uneven) social relations’ (Di Felicianonio, 2016, p. 1209; see also García-Lamarca & Kaika, 2016). However, like many other Catalan and Spanish households, RD’s finances did not manage to bear the weight of the mortgage after the burst of the bubble, so he ended up losing his house in 2010/2011. This provoked a serious mental breakdown, including suicidal thoughts, leading him to require the support of mental health professionals, this being another known impact of the GFC in the Spanish context (Gili et al., 2013).

4 | THE (RECURRING) ‘UNCANNY PRESENT’

This section shows how longitudinal ethnographic research is in a unique position to unveil the chronic dimension of ‘crisis as context’ generating a recurring experience of the ‘uncanny present’ in RD’s lifecourse, shaped by logics of anticipation, repetition and return intertwining past(s), present(s) and future(s).

According to Bryant (2016, p. 21), ‘[T]he uncanny present appears to portend the future to the extent that it is either a repetition or a return of the past. That past, however, is not any past but is the traumatic past that here had been retained as a visceral experience of the relationship between past and future that emerges at particular moments’. One of its main effects appears to be a renewed experience of the past based on return and repetition. ‘While repetition implies taking lessons from the past, but more importantly shaping our comportment and intentionality towards the future, return instead implies the past as a type of haunting of the present, where uncanniness arises not from intentionality but from the past’s unpredictability in relation to the future’ (Bryant, 2016, p. 29).

Writing about the ‘uncanny’ generated by the cyclical and ongoing temporality of austerity- a temporality that echoes the recurrence of crisis in RD’s narrative- Hitchen (2021, p. 304) highlights two main consequences from an *experienced* and *felt* perspective: (i) it makes ‘the unknown an acutely familiar feeling (...) that generates an eerie sense of having “been here before”’; (ii) ‘this temporality means that the unknowns are now experienced as *always more than* unknowns’ (emphasis in original), i.e. the unknowns are now felt as known. In her conceptualization, the uncanny cannot be separated from paranoia, framed as ‘a way in which to *live within* and *resolve* the uncanny atmosphere – as a way to *make known* the unknowns’ (p. 298, emphasis in original). Paranoia is characterized by a temporality ‘that looks both *forward* and *backwards*’ (p. 306, emphasis in original), i.e. forwards through the unknown knowledge, and backwards through knowledge from past experiences. Quoting Sedgwick (2002, p. 130), Hitchen argues that ‘paranoia requires that “bad news be always already known”’ (p. 307).

The logics of anticipation, repetition and return shaping the experience of the ‘uncanny’ (and paranoia) emerge clearly in the following examples from RD’s history. The first one concerns the 2014 interviews in which RD expressed the feeling that he was somehow losing control over sexualized drug use. In describing this feeling, RD made a direct connection with the previous experience of domestic abuse: ‘it’s like it was with [name of partner], I know this isn’t good for me, I know I should stop it, I know I should get support but I can’t, (...), I’m weak, (...), I’ll probably get Hep C after

HIV! (*nervous laugh*) That might actually help, HIV helped me realizing that I needed to leave him'. Facing an 'uncanny present' determined by the inability to predict whether he would manage to control sexualized drug use, RD feels like 'the past is back', a past made of abuse and violence leading to a serious infection that, however, brought him awareness and strength to end an abusive relationship. Sensing the return of this ambivalent past, in the quote RD is anticipating a future based on repetition of the same past, i.e. the loss of control over sexualized drug use will lead him to contract another serious infection that will possibly help him with gaining back control over sexualized drug use. It is important to note that, up to today, RD has not contracted Hepatitis C and has (at different stages) been able to feel back in control of his chemsex practice.

The second example relates to the 2020 interview when, jobless because of the COVID-19 pandemic, RD narrated a very strong fear that he might lose the flat that he bought in 2018 with his current partner, this fear threatening the sense of joy that he had been experiencing since being with him. Based on his experience of losing a house, RD was already anticipating the worst possible outcome for the whole situation: losing the flat and possibly breaking up with his partner. As a consequence, he had already acted on this anticipation in multiple ways: (i) he was not going to spend any money on the flat's maintenance work; (ii) he was already preparing all the paperwork required when one is unable to repay their mortgage; (iii) having lost some objects he really cared for when he previously lost his house, he had already given some valuables to his mother to store them away 'because those things [the eviction] can accelerate and you might lose lucidity'; (iv) he perceived his relationship as going cold, probably because of himself 'getting ready for the worst'; (v) he felt like he was again losing control of sexualized drug use as a result of being locked at home all day with little to do as well as because, in his own words, 'this is what I do when I feel like I'm going down, I don't try to go up, I try to go down even faster'.

Through this example we can see how the 'uncanny present' determined by COVID-19 led RD to perceive the return of the past, this time in the form of the house loss combined with a breakup and the loss of control over chemsex. This reveals how multiple pasts and experiences shaped RD's perception of the 'uncanny', the negative feelings and consequences generated by one crisis intertwining with those generated by others. RD '*lives within and resolves*' (Hitchen, 2021, p. 298) the 'uncanny' through paranoia that makes him *act* in preparation of the future by trying to minimize the consequences of the loss. Albeit the future is unknown, these acts make RD perceive it as *somehow known*. It is important to note that, up to the moment of writing (January 2023), RD has not lost his flat and he is still with his partner.

Such a detailed analysis of the recurrence of the 'uncanny present' in RD's lifecourse through the return of different, intertwined past crises, has been made possible by the longitudinal character of the research, notably its emphasis on time and change in the formulation of interview questions. Giving RD the possibility to narrate his life in-depth over time allows to fully explore the ongoing, chronic temporalities of 'crisis as context' and the ways they interweave past(s), present(s) and future(s) through return, repetition and anticipation, making the *unknown somehow known* through previous knowledge and experiences. However, as the case of RD demonstrates, life events unfold in unexpected ways, reaffirming the open and contested character of crises (Hall, 2019a, 2019c).

5 | THE CARE ETHICS OF LONGITUDINAL ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

Together with the recurring emphasis on 'crisis', there is another phrase repeated by RD several times: the feeling of being unable 'to make it'. In the 2020 interview, discussing the possibility to lose his flat again, RD said: '(...), it's a scary feeling, (...) I know it can happen again, I feel like it can happen again, I'm just not sure this time I'll go through it. (...) I really don't feel like I can go through this again'.

From that moment on the interview turned more into a friendly and very personal chat with me inviting RD to think about all the things he had gone through, even at times when he did not really have any support from others. In this case, not only he was facing a 'known unknown' giving him knowledge of what to do, he was also lucky enough to have someone to share this burden with, I said. RD cried for a while, he was clearly overwhelmed so I suggested to stop and reconvene at another time.

The next day I found a message from RD in my email inbox: 'thanks, I really needed to let it out'. He contacted me again the same day to arrange another interview. When we met (remotely) the next day, he thanked me again for the support I had given him and commented: 'I guess I really survived many crises, sometimes it's hard to believe I really managed to go through all that and still be here trying to live my life, thanks for reminding me that'.

My encouraging RD to think about how strong he has really proven to be represents another prime example of the benefits of longitudinal ethnographic research. The complexity of the boundaries between researchers, participants and

the 'fieldwork' has been widely discussed by feminist and critical geographers who have contested the idea of the 'distant', 'objective' researcher (e.g. Rose, 1997). A similar point has been made also in the methodological literature on longitudinal methods, not just qualitative but also quantitative (e.g. Adler & Adler, 2007). Building on these insights, I here argue that the sense of familiarity and the personal connection established through the long-term involvement in the research process can support research participants in dealing with the issues they are facing. Feeling like he could not go through the 'uncanny present' again, RD found in the (longitudinal) ethnographic encounter a reminder of his strengths. Had I not known him for years and known his life history in detail, I would have not been able to support him, and the interview would have probably been a source of distress rather than comfort and increased self-awareness.

Longitudinal qualitative research involves the establishment of a powerful connection and sense of familiarity between researcher and participants whose management cannot be reduced to the abstract ethical guidelines implemented by an increasing number of institutions based on the model of biomedical research. These guidelines assume participants in need of protection from possible harm through protocols and informed consent procedures, reproducing the idea of academic knowledge as 'the God trick' (Haraway, 1988). Acknowledging the relational and situated character of research, critical geographers have called for the adoption of *care ethics* as the leading principle for research. For Lawson (2007), care ethics is about mutuality and trust, not dependence. Care cannot be separated from emotions, Askins and Blazek (2017) remind us in their call for a project based on *care with* as a generative process of encounter towards social justice, 'a conscious political stance enveloping practices of caring-for and -about collectively as a cornerstone of our academic identities, presents and futures' (1098, emphasis in original).

Adopting *care ethics* as the leading principle of research implies acknowledging that the needs of participants might exceed data collection, therefore questioning the (temporal and spatial) boundaries of the 'fieldwork' (Di Felicianantonio & Gadelha, 2017). This is accentuated in the case of longitudinal ethnographic research as it involves multiple, often frequent, iterations of encounter, making necessary to critically reflect on the evolving relationship between researchers and participants. Since our 2020 interview RD has contacted me few times to update me about the situation with his partner and the flat; on one occasion, he asked to have a phone call because he wanted to hear my opinion about a particular issue. Should I have declined because that was not part of our 'formal' research agreement (as possibly suggested by institutional ethical guidelines)? For me, RD contacting me when facing an issue that somehow reminded him of our conversations was a demonstration of the non-extractive, empowering, 'very personal' (Hall, 2019a) character of longitudinal ethnographic research, so agreeing to have that call was the best way to *ethically* prove that I *care* about him, and I *care with* him for the relationship we have developed through research.

6 | CONCLUSIONS

In this paper I have broadened the breath of recent human geography scholarship on crises and their temporalities by analysing the life trajectory of RD, for whom 'crisis' does not represent a singular moment of interruption, but a recurring experience determined by a multiplicity of events across the lifecourse. Building on the work of Vigh (2008), I have framed RD's biographic narrative as shaped by 'crisis as context' in order to highlight its ongoing, chronic character. When analysing RD's life trajectory, I have focused on the benefits of the longitudinal ethnographic approach adopted, arguing that (i) it allows to capture the temporalities of 'crisis as context' as they interweave past(s) and future(s) in an 'uncanny present' (Bryant, 2016) through return, repetition and anticipation, making the unknown *somehow known* through previous knowledge and experiences (Hitchen, 2021); (ii) it supports RD's self-awareness around his ability to navigate the unknown brought by the 'uncanny present', this highlighting the *ethical care* dimension of the research.

Although ethnographic longitudinal research is very demanding in time and resources (for researchers and participants), it brings important benefits that can be of great use for human geographers. First, it can favour a better understanding of lifecourse geographies (Bailey, 2009) as it allows to explore what logics and past experiences people rely on when facing difficult circumstances. Moreover, it offers the possibility to explore the relationship between the lifecourse of participants and the lifecourse of the researcher in every stage of the research process as they progress together, this being overlooked in geographical literature (Di Felicianantonio, 2021; Fois, 2017). Second, it allows a nuanced understanding of the ambivalent and mutually constitutive relationship between temporalities (in non-teleological ways) and everyday spaces, this being an increasing domain of scrutiny (e.g. Ho, 2021). Third, at a time of intense debates around research impact (e.g. Evans, 2016; Machen, 2020), having the opportunity to interact with a person over time can really make a difference in the real world, helping people to be self-aware and reflect upon their lives. Finally, ethnographic longitudinal research pushes the boundaries of geographical scholarship by calling for a more reflective and

open stance around the benefits of familiarity in the research process (Zhao, 2017). This poses very important questions about what kind of ethical practices are to be implemented in order to really care *with/for/about* research participants. Acknowledging and interrogating the challenges posed by these ethical questions around care can represent a step towards the promotion of non-extractive academic practices and scholarship based on meaningful connections between researchers and participants.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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