**[PREPRINT]** Hidalgo, Anna and Shamus Khan. 2020. "Blindsight Ethnography and Exceptional Moments." *Etnografia e Ricerca Qualitativa* 2: 185-193. doi: 10.3240/97804

# Blindsight Ethnography and Exceptional Moments

Anna Hidalgo
Columbia University

Shamus Khan
Columbia University

In this essay we outline two conceptual frameworks that may help ethnographers do their research and analysis during COVID-19. First we develop the concept of "Blindsight ethnography," a means through which ethnographers may be able to detect that which they cannot see. Second, we turn to Ermakoff's (2014) conceptualization of "the exceptional"—cases that stand apart due to their peculiar nature, but which allow for classificatory, paradigmatic, and heuristic innovation. Drawing upon Hidalgo's experience of doing ethnographic research in the wake of COVID-19, we outline some ways to navigate and even leverage this current moment, and articulate three practical steps ethnographers can take in exceptional times.

We begin this essay with an excerpt drawn from fieldwork conducted by the first author. [1]

*I was evacuated from Peru by the US government on Saturday, April 4th, 2020. Since September I had been living in Máncora, a small coastal town in the north of Peru, doing ethnographic research. For six months I'd been studying the relationships that developed between locals and tourists. In recent years tourism had permeated the town's everyday life, transforming public spaces as well as the intimate and economic lives of visitors and locals alike. On March 15th my research ground to a halt. The Peruvian President, Martín Vizcarra, declared a national emergency as Peru's first cases of COVID-19 were reported. Within hours the country's borders were closed to all entries and exits. All non-essential businesses were ordered to close, and the government banned private vehicles and most other forms of transportation. State officials declared a nationwide quarantine and eventually a curfew. Between 4 AM and 4 PM one person per household could leave only for a limited set of necessary errands (e.g., buying food, going to*

[1] For narrative ease, all sections drawing upon fieldnotes use the pronoun "I" to refer to the first author's role as the field researcher.

*the bank, picking up necessities at the pharmacy), but after 4 PM and eventually every Sunday, no one could be outside. A new phrase started to trend: #quedateencasa, or Yo me quedo en casa (#stayathome, or 'I stay at home'). The streets and other public spaces abruptly emptied of the people I'd spent time with, filling instead with the police and military. From my apartment I watched as they patrolled the small remote town ensuring compliance with the new orders. The streets, which usually bustled with foot traffic and the hum of mototaxis, felt eerily quiet. The beach, which just days before had been crowded with people, was completely empty. The human life and exchange that so vividly exemplified Máncora had seemingly ceased.*

*Yet, within a matter of hours, social life reemerged. Those who were able quickly reconstituted parts of their community and communal life "virtually." Days after the shutdown, Máncora Municipality's Facebook page surfaced as a site of new activity. It aired nightly livestreams of the police and armed forces conducing rounds in the town, sweeping up people breaking quarantine or curfew. The comments section quickly became a source of entertainment for the hundreds who tuned in, signaling their virtue for staying home and publicly shaming those who refused to. Watching the videos and conversations unfold, I was able to observe a sector of public life in Máncora that I hadn't previously had access to, and whose salience had been brought to the fore by the pandemic and quarantine. Up to that point the majority of my daily participant observation was conducted within the commercial and touristic life of the town; occasionally I had glimpsed into the domestic lives of some of my participants. The sociality that emerged via the Facebook page, however, gave me a window into the machination of local authorities, and into the interactions of people in Máncora who lived and operated entirely outside of the realms of the tourism sector. These were people who in the past I could only peripherally engage with. I saw how these newly visible people were joined by still other members of their community: those who had emigrated from the town, but had flocked to this platform for an opportunity to engage with their old home lives.*

*The community I had been more rooted in reemerged just as powerfully too. Earlier in my fieldwork I'd been added as a member of a group chat for a crew of surf teachers that I'd embedded with (even going so far as to manage their surf school for two weeks). Previously the group chat was sporadic, with small bursts of activity. But with the quarantine, communication became far more frequent. The men lamented the social and economic disruption that COVID-19 had invited into their lives; swapped news, rumors, jokes, memes, and conspiracy theories; and chastised each*

*other for breaking curfew or quarantine. Similar themes emerged in my personal exchanges with them, interspersed with more mundane complaints about boredom and loneliness. Another participant, a woman from Canada who I had grown especially close to, turned to me to vent or reflect on her relationships with people in the town. She sent me screenshots of text exchanges she had with them, discussions and arguments she had with her local boyfriend, and messages from other local men flirting with her online. We laughed at some of the more outrageous messages, and sometimes I helped her to translate or decipher them, or to formulate responses. In a roundabout way I found myself inserted as an observer of, and participant in, intimate exchanges that before COVID-19 were difficult to see. On my last day in Máncora, with a less than 24-hour notice of my evacuation, I rushed to say goodbye and to tie up the loose ends I could. I was unsure if and when I would see some people again. Just before curfew began, I made a final stop at the home of a friend who had texted me the day before. I had never visited the part of Máncora where he lived, and don't know that I would ever have had the opportunity to under "normal" circumstances. But before I left there was something important he wanted. He asked me to be the godmother to his new grandson. Invited into his neighborhood for the first time, I soon found myself at his doorstep, ready to fulfill my final role in Máncora before I left.*

*In the wake of COVID-19, life carried on in Máncora, but in new ways. I felt like an outsider as much as I ever had, but having immersed myself deeply in daily life in Máncora, I also felt the deep sense of connection and responsibility that I had formed to the place and its people. Some of the above interactions were not necessarily unique to the context of COVID-19, and many built on pre-existing relationships that I'd cultivated over time while in Máncora. But others emerged precisely because of the new moment we were facing together, and their salience became apparent precisely because I'd suddenly found myself in an exceptional moment, cut off from typical public life and regular interactions.*

In this essay we attend to two of the myriad challenges that ethnographers may face due to COVID-19. The first is the challenge of detecting what is happening without actually seeing it. The second challenge is what to do with exceptional cases. Rather than propose a new set of analytic tools, we draw upon existing practice, neighboring disciplines, and already developed theoretical frameworks to provide concrete suggestions for how ethnographers might conceptualize and do their work in this exceptional time.

**Blindsight: Detecting Without Seeing**

Public life has been radically transformed by the rise of COVID-19. Where it has not ceased, it has changed in extraordinary ways and on an individual and global scale, from far-flung places like Máncora, to major metropolises like New York City. As researchers, and particularly as ethnographers who rely upon the methodology of participation-observation, we are faced with daunting challenges for forging a path forward. Simultaneously locked in and locked out, forced away from public life, how can we go about our tasks of accounting for the interactions, behaviors, routines, institutions, and events that we typically study? Yet this radically different context does not automatically make our existing tools insufficient, and these unprecedented times do not necessarily pose unique challenges for ethnographers. Indeed, observing without seeing has long been a part of ethnographic practice. This moment therefore provides ethnographers an opportunity to be clearer about the techniques we can deploy to do what we call, "blindsight ethnography." By "blindsight" we borrow a term from psychology (Sanders et al. 1974; Weiskrantz et al. 1974) and more recently, neuroscience (Leopold 2012).

These disciplines developed the concept of "blindsight" to describe patients who, despite an inability to consciously see visual stimuli, nevertheless detect visual stimuli with higher accuracy than would be expected by chance alone (Sanders et al. 1974; Weiskrantz et al. 1974). More parsimoniously, blindsight is detection without observation. Cases of "blindsight" always involve patients who previously had the capacity to see and lost it, typically through some kind of physical trauma. Within the fields of psychology and neuroscience, observations of blindsight have been used to challenge the assumption that perceptions must enter consciousness to affect us.

This concept provides us with a useful analogy for what many ethnographers already practice in their day-to-day work. That is, how it is that they come to *detect without seeing*. Analytically we make a distinction between observation—that which the researcher sees directly, and detection—that which the researcher comes to know, but through indirect means. Blindsight ethnography rests on two possibilities. The first, like the blind patient who could previously see, is that the ethnographer has some previous experience observing that which she can no longer "see"; previous experiences facilitate detection. This dynamic of detecting without seeing is allied with a host of arguments about embodied knowledge—that form of knowing that may not require

active cognition, but instead operates through a feel for the possible or the probable, helping the researcher sense, based upon our previous experiences seeing things, what might be there.

The second possibility for blindsight ethnography arises from detecting phenomena by observing related things around them. This is well-trodden methodological terrain. Scholars have reconstructed observations of spaces and relations we cannot see through interviews, analyses of virtual interactions, textual materials or visual content, and secondary analyses of other documents and artifacts of social life. Solutions that rely upon subject narratives or other secondary accounts have, as Khan has previously argued, their limitations (Jerolmack and Khan 2014a, 2014b), but such limitations are necessary for us to observe some of the most important parts of social life.

Ethnography is replete with examples of "blindsight." Joss Greene's work on the experiences of transgender people within the criminal justice system uses a mix of archival work, interviews and life histories, and participant observation in alternative spaces, in order to study prisons and other closed institutions that he is otherwise systematically prohibited from embedding in (Greene ND). Hidalgo's dissertation on the intimate lives of men and women in Máncora takes as its object, in the most literal sense, a set of practices which are not directly observable (Hidalgo ND). Khan's recent work (Hirsch et al 2019; Hirsch and Khan 2020; Khan et al. 2018) has the same quality: it seeks to explain a phenomenon—sexual assault—without ever being able to directly observe that phenomenon. From the most intimate moments of our lives, to the inner workings of political and economic power, social life is filled with spaces ethnographers observe but cannot see. But in having seen a wide range of other things—related, intertwined, connected—detection of that which we can't see becomes more possible. Critically, having a sense of what might be there is essential. A sense of what is visible, combined with the capacity to reconstruct observations through indirect means, makes blindsight ethnography possible. In this way, ethnographers are equipped to meet the challenges they may encounter in the post COVID-19 world, now and in the future.

**Exceptional Moments**

We have argued that the disruption of COVID-19 does not necessarily present an unprecedented quandary in asking us to find ways to detect without seeing. Yet in this moment we also see an opportunity for ethnographers to ask new questions or to follow new leads. Sometimes ethnographers "theorize absence." This is a form of counterfactual thinking: we consider those

things that we are *not* seeing in order to make better sense of those we are. When studying financial elites, for example, one might theorize the absence of crime. Why is it that prosecution for crime is so rare? Rather than focusing on things that are happening that we are blind to, we instead focus on things that are not happening in order to understand more clearly what we have already observed. Theorizing absence works as a kind of analytic lever, lifting up those things we could not previously make sense of or foregrounding what had recessed into the background.

The current moment, however, does not require theorization of absence; instead, through a kind of exogenous shock, the absence we might normally theorize is present. It can therefore be used not as a counterfactual imaginary, but instead a material reality. For guidance on how to exploit this kind of shock, we turn to the work of Ivan Ermakoff, who in a 2014 essay highlighted the advantages of thinking with "exceptional cases." Exceptional cases are "at odds with the typical" and "have no intrinsic revelatory character" (2014: 224). Rather, "they become research opportunities in light of the analytical work…[t]heir revealing character is a function of their analytics" (2014: 225). We can think of COVID-19 as providing an "exceptional case" which, "takes shape in contrast to a pattern identified as such" (2014: 227). Ermakoff argues that this provides us with three main advantages for our thinking:

> First, exceptional cases reveal the limits of standard classification categories. In so doing, they problematize usual classificatory grids... Second, exceptional cases point to new classes of objects. They acquire paradigmatic status when they exemplify the characteristic features of these new classes with utmost clarity. Third, exceptional cases magnify relational patterns that in more mundane contexts lack visibility. Here their contribution is heuristic. These three contributions become possible when we put at bay normative expectations of what should happen, and specify cases by reference to an analytical space of constitutive dimensions (Ermakoff 2014: 223).

COVID-19 thus provides us with a paradox and an opportunity: precisely because so much of what we previously took for granted has become invisible, a new range of things become, for the first time, visible. While Blindsight is a process to detect what we cannot see, the exceptional allows us to see what we were blind to before. In this sense, COVID-19's disruption can provide

opportunities to glimpse what was previously *unseen*. The absence that had to be theorized is now a presence that can be observed. In the age of COVID-19, what new relational patterns will we see? What new categories or class of objects will emerge? Pushed out of our "normative expectations of what should happen" ethnographers may be especially well positioned to tell us new things about the social world in an unsettled time. To conclude, we return to Hidalgo's final moments in the field, and offer three practical steps ethnographers can take in this exceptional moment.

**Ethnography During COVID-19**

*As the ripple effects of COVID-19 swept through Máncora, upending our expectations for what everyday life was supposed to look like, and my exceptions for how my final months of research would end, I experienced the despair that I know many researchers and fellow ethnographers were (and are) also feeling acutely. I had moved to Máncora with the task of embedding myself in order to understand social life and a particular set of relationships within the community. Just as I was beginning to feel that the months of work I'd put in were finally paying off, I was abruptly cut off. Even more disconcertingly, I had made an uneasy peace, and developed ways to cope with the feeling of being distant and cut off from my community at home while I conducted fieldwork. Now, I was being faced with the prospect of being cut off from the community that I had formed and nurtured in the field. The isolation, the new regulations and norms, and the relentless barrage of unknowns brought on by the arrival of COVID-19 managed to make the few kilometers that separated me from my social life in Máncora feel equal to the oceans and continent that separated me from my family and friends back home. But social life did not wholly disappear with the arrival of COVID-19. Rather, it began to adapt and to take a new shape, even while also falling back into some of the rhythms that we were already accustomed to. The bonds and life I'd built in Máncora did not disappear either, instead they shifted into new configurations that allowed me to glimpse at things I hadn't and couldn't have seen before.*

*On my last day in Máncora, I cradled my new godson, only a week old, in my arms and smiled at his young mother and her family, who stood in a semi-circle around me. They would baptize him when I returned to Máncora, they told me. With that final promise of my return, another new delicate thread of relationship tied me closer to Máncora, to the people there, and their lives. I am not sure what I will return to in Máncora, or how the town, the people, and the*

*relationships I study will have been further transformed by COVID-19. I had been told that my fieldwork would follow new and unexpected turns once I arrived to the field, though I think no one anticipated a change like this. I never imagined that I would spend an evening writing a pros and cons list of the merits of staying or leaving my field site in the middle of a pandemic that was already infecting and killing tens of thousands globally. COVID-19 has already transformed me, my research, and the people and place I study in unprecedented ways.*

Some ethnographers may never get to carry out the projects that they have spent months or years developing, and we acknowledge and mourn that loss. But we also hope that this essay and the concepts we have introduced will provide a new orientation to the social world that we now live in, and for the ever-evolving, and new, unexpected, and exceptional ways in which it has transformed, and could be as abruptly transformed again. In this essay we have offered two distinct concepts, "blindsight ethnography" and "the exceptional," that may help ethnographers to parse out the current moment and strategize for the time ahead. Ultimately, the task at hand is to continue the work that we've always done: to find ways to detect that which we cannot see and to reorient ourselves to this exceptional moment so that we can be open to seeing what is being newly revealed for us to see; that which in absence newly emerges. During her fieldwork, Hidalgo employed different strategies including interviews, digital content and interactions, and photo voice and elicitation, in order to help her detect what she could not directly observe. In a moment of intense disruption, she was given an opportunity to observe new types and patterns of interactions that had previously been invisible or were emergent in a new context. In both cases, using what she had previously seen served as a basis upon which to evaluate and think through what newly arose.

We close this essay by offering three practical ways to reorient our work as ethnographers, both for those in the midst of carrying out existing projects and those who will embark on new ones. First, make use of the tools that researchers have already spent decades developing when tasked with doing "blindsight ethnography." Think expansively and creatively about the ways that you can begin to detect that which you cannot observe. We are enormously fortunate for the work scholars have done to crowdsource resources that make blindsight ethnography more possible (Lupton 2020).

Second, approach COVID-19 as an "exceptional case" that allows us to see those things that, before, were invisible to us. Use this moment to challenge our usual classificatory grids, to

discover new classes of objects, and to observe relational patterns that in more mundane contexts lack visibility. Even in 'ordinary' times the strength of ethnography does not lie in its ability to seek "representativeness," but rather in its ability to help us understand mechanisms, meaning-making, and interpretative work. Aim to exploit the exceptions that COVID-19's disruption brings to light.

Finally, as ethnographers we should use this moment as an opportunity for broader introspection into our craft. In doing so, we might begin to challenge what the work of ethnographers is "supposed" to look like, and to think about new more holistic ways that our work can be done (Hanson and Richards 2019). In particular, we suspect there are likely to be more, not fewer disruptions like COVID-19. And even without these levels of disruption, fieldwork and the academic lifestyle, particularly graduate school, are already well understood to be sites of tremendous challenges to our individual and collective well-being and mental health. We therefore encourage everyone to begin to explicitly create and integrate mental health plans as part of our proposals, fieldwork plans, institutional review processes, etc. It should not take moments of such acute crisis for us to pay attention to and prepare for these realities. Doing these three things can help us think with this moment in ways that may be generative for a richer understanding of our social world.

**References**


Ermakoff, Ivan. "Exceptional cases: Epistemic contributions and normative expectations." *European Journal of Sociology/Archives Européennes de Sociologie* 55.2 (2014): 223-243.

Greene, Joss, ND, "Gender Bound: The Politics of Prison Gender Classification, 1941-2018" Dissertation manuscript, Department of Sociology, Columbia University

Hanson, Rebecca and Patricia Richards, 2019, *Harassed: Gender, Bodies, and Ethnographic Research,* University of California Press

Hidalgo, Anna, ND, "Intimacy and Globalization: An Ethnography in Máncora, Peru" Dissertation manuscript, Department of Sociology, Columbia University

Hirsch, Jennifer S. and Shamus Khan, 2020, *Sexual Citizens: A Landmark Study of Sex, Power, and Assault on Campus*, W.W. Norton

Hirsch, Jennifer S. et al. 2018, "Social Dimensions of Sexual Consent Among College Students: Insights from ethnographic research," *Journal of Adolescent Health*

Jerolmack, Colin and Shamus Khan, 2014a, "Talk is Cheap: Ethnography and the Attitudinal Fallacy," *Sociological Methods and Research*, 43: 178-209.

Jerolmack, Colin and Shamus Khan, 2014b, "Toward an Understanding of the Relationship between Accounts and Action," *Sociological Methods and Research*, 43: 236-247.

Khan, Shamus et al., 2018, "'I didn't want to be 'that girl'": the Social Risks of labeling, telling, and reporting sexual assault," *Sociological Science,* 5: 432-460.

Leopold, David A. "Primary visual cortex: awareness and blindsight." *Annual review of neuroscience* 35 (2012): 91-109.

Lupton, D. (editor) (2020) Doing fieldwork in a pandemic (crowd-sourced document). Available at: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1clGjGABB2h2qbduTgfqribHmog9B6P0NvMgVuiHZCl8/edit?ts=5e88ae0a#

Sanders, M. D., et al. "" Blindsight": Vision in a field defect." *The Lancet* 303.7860 (1974): 707-708.

Weiskrantz, Lawrence, et al. "Visual capacity in the hemianopic field following a restricted occipital ablation." *Brain* 97.1 (1974): 709-728.