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Yasmin Y. ORTIGA

Singapore Management University, [yasmino@smu.edu.sg](mailto:yasmino@smu.edu.sg)

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# Teaching migration in a year of pandemic

Yasmin Y. Ortega  
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In August 2020, I faced the ironic task of teaching a class on international migration in the midst of a pandemic that halted most forms of cross-border movement in the world.

While there was no shortage of “teachable moments” featured in the news, I struggled with the question of how migration studies can move forward in a post-COVID era. At that time, few migration scholars had done any research on the impact of the pandemic (or even left their homes). In the many webinars I attended online, expert after expert simply said,

“We don’t know. Here’s our guess.”

I knew that my class needed to discuss how the pandemic affected the migration process and experience. Yet, a part of me just did not want to say, “I don’t know. Here is my guess.” In the end, I discovered a simple solution to my dilemma: students answered the question for themselves.

For their final class project, I asked 16 groups of students to interview a relative, a stranger, or a friend on how the pandemic had impacted their migration experiences.

In each interview, students discussed how these stories challenged or reinforced what we knew about international migration.

## Immobilty

One striking theme in the students’ interview projects was the different forms of immobility that migrants experienced during the pandemic.

Here, the story of Ling Fong, a 29-year-old Malaysian chef in Singapore, was particularly poignant. Fearing a possible lockdown in March 2020, Ling Fong rushed across the border to the Malaysian state of Johor Bahru so he could be with his wife who was due to give birth. What he did not expect was that Singapore’s borders would remain closed for the next four months, making him unable to work.

When Singapore started to accept returning Malaysian workers again in July 2020, Ling Fong decided to return to his work, even if it meant being stuck in Singapore for an indefinite period. While it pained him to be away from his family, he did not want to lose a well-paying job in Singapore.

As my students noted, Ling Fong went through two experiences of immobility. However, he made meaning of each experience in different ways. Ling Fong was involuntarily immobile when he was stranded in Malaysia for four months, but he was willing to be stuck in Singapore even if it meant being away from his daughter.

His story reinforces the arguments of scholars who have pushed against the notion that immobility is a merely a passive default state of being.

### Precarity

Student interviews also revealed many stories of how being a migrant compounds feelings of insecurity in the midst of a pandemic. One group's interview with Nikita, an Indian flight attendant, detailed the anxiety of possible retrenchment within an industry battered by border closures.

Yet, another group raised the question of whether precarity is only felt in terms of jobs and income. Their interviewee GY, a Korean nurse in Singapore, expressed the same sense of uncertainty seen in Nikita's story. Yet, in GY's case, this anxiety did not stem from work. As a nursing graduate and government scholar, she had a full-time job as an essential worker and a bond that required her to work in Singapore for 3 years.

Rather, GY was worried about her health. Even before the pandemic, GY flew to Korea regularly for medical checkups, using Korean state subsidies to cover the cost of her healthcare. As a foreigner in Singapore, GY is ineligible for any government-funded health coverage, forcing her to pay the full cost of her medical expenses.

The students who interviewed her saw the irony of the situation: As a nurse, GY is secure in a job that she is unlikely to lose. Yet, as a foreign nurse, she feels precarious because the state will not support the treatment of her existing health issues.

### Diversity within diversity

Lastly, for one group, their interview with Shohan, a Bangladeshi construction worker in Singapore, sent a humbling reminder to not underestimate migrants' agency and abilities.

Shohan was actually one of the thousands of migrant construction workers isolated in their rooms for months, as a COVID-19 outbreak spread among migrant worker dormitories in Singapore. My students began the interview expecting to hear only stories of Shohan's hardships and struggles. Yet, during the interview, they found out that he was actually an activist within the migrant worker community!

An engineering graduate from the National University of Bangladesh, Shohan came to Singapore to escape escalating political unrest. Rather than feel helpless during Singapore's lockdown, he spent most of his time organizing virtual gatherings to help others deal with their isolation.

Shohan's story prompted this group to question how we had come to support migrant workers. They note that while migrant workers do benefit from individuals who organize efforts for them, perhaps it is also important to have partners who can work with them against precarious work and Covid-19.

Where do we go from here?

It is obvious that my students' interviews were diverse and isolated, gathered from a convenience sample of family friends, former classmates, and colleagues at work, and so would not be treated as a formal research study. Yet, I believe that these disparate stories hint at themes that can inform future studies, as scholars move to make sense of how the pandemic can impact international migration. The nuances, arguments and connections that my students made in their interviews have helped me overcome current limitations as their professor, unsure of how things will move forward. Sharing this process of figuring out the impact of the pandemic has served as an important lesson for me.

How has COVID-19 impacted how we make sense of international migration as a whole? Based on a diverse set of stories that emerged from immigrants within, from, and beyond Singapore, my students respond:

"We're not sure. Here is what we learned."

Read more of our migration stories here: <https://socg225.wordpress.com/>

Yasmin Y. Ortiga is Assistant Professor of Sociology at the School of Social Sciences, Singapore Management University.