Collecting qualitative data during a pandemic

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Abstract

The claims of qualitative research are often based on being physically present in a setting and the ability that gives to record interactional features unavailable to quantitative research. In a medical context, this can involve a number of scenarios which include observing medical encounters or interviewing patients. The COVID-19 pandemic, however, has made such co-presence impractical. This short paper discusses ways around this problem. It also demonstrates that, in a digital age, being 'present' in the 'field' needs to be reconsidered.

Keywords: COVID-19; fieldwork; healthcare settings; qualitative research

1. The problem in different contexts

The threat to qualitative social research – inclusive of healthcare research – has been one of the least noticeable and least sinister consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Freed from the demands of a daily commute and committee work, some researchers have actually had more time available to write up their research. By contrast, others have found doing research from home more challenging. The issues discussed in this paper draw on published reflections and on material from online personal communications I have had with colleagues.

Predictably, the situation one finds oneself in seems to vary by gender. According to one online study,

[the] challenges [of COVID] weren’t experienced equally – there was a gender divide. Female researchers were being left with much less time for their research – presumably because life still goes on at home and they still take on the bulk of domestic and caring duties. Men's research time was being impacted, that's true, but they were being impacted less and in some cases, far less. In fact, a quarter of male academics said they could continue working without any restrictions – 15% of female scholars said the same. 27% of male scholars said lockdown had provided them with more time for their writing and research compared with 18% of women. (Watchcorn and Smith 2020)
Irrespective of gender, tenured staff are at least able to shift their focus and delay their field projects. Unfortunately, the epidemic has left research students in a far worse position, as Harini Kumar argues below.

**Ethnographic disruption in the time of Covid-19: Pandemic insights**  
Harini Kumar

[...] With the COVID-19 pandemic, every single one of us has had our life upended in some way, from existential threats to suddenly having to make life decisions based on material and practical considerations. As a researcher who was in the midst of fieldwork in India, I’ve had to suddenly hit the brakes. All the interlocutors I have come to know and befriend over the past few years have been dislocated from places and sites most familiar and dear to them, with many separated from their loved ones. Of course, the ‘social’ still exists – only made more obvious by calls to replace a now ubiquitous term, ‘social distancing,’ with the more precise ‘physical distancing’ – even if it has drastically shifted from whatever it was pre-pandemic in almost all contexts across the world. But if so, much of ethnography is still about face-to-face encounters and gatherings, how do we confront a disruption of this scale, where physical distance, not proximity, is imperative, especially when proximity could likely threaten, even kill, an immunocompromised person?

In recent decades, anthropologists have been thinking critically about non-face-to-face encounters; in an era of increased internet connectivity the world over, debates around familiar anthropological concepts such as the public and the private have gained new currency. However, unless one’s ethnography is conducted only in and through the virtual world, much of ethnographic practice still heavily relies on on-the-ground, in-person encounters and observations.

[...] How can we contribute to a more robust understanding of the challenges that lie ahead when the current moment is forcing us to reimagine the ‘field’ in which we do our research? What kinds of ethnographies will be possible going forward, and what can be gained by thinking beyond dominant methodologies of the discipline?

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(Kumar 2020)

However, for the majority of researchers who prefer to use manufactured research data, minimal adjustments have been necessary. Face-to-face interviews can usually readily be replaced by online equivalents (James and Busher 2016); and online focus groups can provide good quality, recorded data.

Nonetheless, some suggest we should be wary of treating online interviews and focus groups as a one-to-one equivalent of face-to-face data. Susan Gasson made the following pertinent observations on her online data.

**Manufacturing data online**  
Susan Gasson

WHO’S THERE? As we went into the pandemic my participants began attending conversations from home. One participant set up for our conversation at his dining room table. In reviewing the video I began to wonder if he lived in an open plan house. All of a sudden in his responses to me the conversation seemed to reference the influence and engagement of his partner. I noticed he kept looking to the right of the screen during this time. Was his partner in the room or in his eye or ear shot during that phase of the interview? If I had been there I would have known. On another delightful occasion, a participant’s daughter entered the room and began skipping behind him. I was so glad we had video on as the skipping rope was hitting the back of his head each time she did a cycle of the rope. It explained the regular barely audible grunt during that phase of the conversation. If I had been there physically I wonder if his daughter would have joined us, if her father would have let her skip? So many questions.
Yet, as Christian Schmieder (pers. comm.) points out, online encounters are hardly unusual. Interacting via online media is a normal, and normalised, setting that may be just as ‘natural’ for many people as a face-to-face conversation.

But what of researchers who prefer to work with naturalistic data collected in the ‘field’? As Fine and Abramson (2020: 1) put it, the pandemic has implied

a de facto moratorium on in-person field observation – long the iconic method of ethnography [...] A return of in-place ethnography must deal with both the possibility of being a vector of disease and the psychological effects of seeing others in similar ways.

And this is more than just a problem for researchers. During the Ebola outbreak in Sierra Leone, for instance, epidemiologists found that using location data from their cell phones did not work, due to the fact they are often passed around (Erikson 2018; see also Tett 2020). Without access to observation of such everyday practices, qualitative researchers will be in a worse position to offer advice on containing the epidemic. As Fine and Abramson (2020: 2) observe, ‘the absence of ethnographic data removes a key resource for those who would imbue their work with evidence at a time in which this information is vital’.

So far I have documented the challenges that the pandemic creates for qualitative researchers who prefer to work with naturalistic data. Now I want to reflect on some possible remedies.

2. Possible remedies

Some readers may have had their fieldwork interrupted by the pandemic. Luckier ones will have completed their fieldwork before the pandemic. In the example below, Marie Buscatto reflects on how her research in Japan functioned before and during COVID.

**COVID and one research project**

Marie Buscatto

If Covid had happened in 2018, I would definitely have abandoned my project to study the trajectories of Japanese jazz musicians since I could not have spent 5 months in Japan to observe concerts, meet with musicians, have the feel of what living in Japan is all about. […] I can now continue my study on-line thanks to Facebook (I am « friend » with all my interviewees and observe their digital actions every day) and at this stage, I can complete my first papers. […] But I will need some more time in Japan to observe real-life interactions and interview some difficult-to-reach Japanese jazz people if I want to write other papers dealing with new questions, on-line observation and interviews would not be enough, it will thus all depend on the Covid situation.

(Buscatto, pers. comm.)

What would someone do if, unlike Marie, they had not entered the field before the pandemic struck? I have four suggestions.

First, the pandemic may add impetus to the expanding field of digital ethnography. Smartphones, digital diaries and photo uploads can be used ‘to peek into the lives of others’ (Boughton n.d.) Such digital data may perhaps provide a twenty-first-century equivalent to the handwritten diaries collected by Mass Observation in the 1930s (see Silverman 2013: chapter 1). Eugene Murphy has some observations on this.
Collecting qualitative data

Also, data from surveillance cameras, Zoom-like platforms and other technologically mediated modes of interaction may fruitfully be examined (Fine and Abramson 2020). But care is needed: as Fine and Abramson add (2020: 4), ‘to say the physical and digital are interchangeable or produce similar analyses is a methodologically indefensible false equivalence’.

Second, naturalistic data are obviously not limited to watching people interact. It is not hard to find how people record their activities in written form. This refers to a vast array of artefacts, from company documents, Tweets and other social media to demographic statistics and government statements. These have already been analysed in a lively, revealing way (Meredith 2021; Prior 2021) – and the COVID pandemic certainly does not interfere with the readily available character of such material.

Third, before the pandemic, secondary analysis of existing qualitative data, although increasing, was somewhat neglected. Sadly, most PhD students feel impelled to gather their own data when relevant data sets may already be available (see UK Data Service n.d.). By analysing existing data, students could save time (see Bishop 2021). Moreover, such secondary analysis need not be only an opportunity to discover new facts but to rethink how we conceptualise existing information. As Christian Schmieder (pers. comm.) has noted, COVID lockdowns provide

an opportunity not only to do secondary analysis; but to de-accelerate existing data analysis processes. To dive deeper methodologically, to take more time and invest more time in the analysis of existing data. Too often academics use ‘time saving’ opportunities to produce more work, rather than methodologically improving the work they do.

Jaber Gubrium (pers. comm.) has offered some pertinent examples of this:

A criminologist who asks what would happen if we thought of policing as a human service – protect and serve as opposed to a military force of occupation (a timely topic right now)? [Or] what would happen if we thought of prisons as human service institutions? Both in part critically conceptual, they imagine field sites that rely on existing in situ
ethnographic discovery, not as a problem of authenticity, but for critical comparative insights. So we needn’t make lack of presence a problem.

Fourth, we might create online focus groups of people from field sites which we had studied in the past. Gubrium (pers. comm.) also address this point:

A group of nursing home workers, for example, gathered together to respond to concepts and empirical insights, from other field sites presented by the ethnographic organizer, might be asked to imagine their institutional worlds in those ways. Is it like that? Is it different? Are there different angles on this from each of you because of your varied risks, stakes, and potential payoffs? Why is it different? Why not? Or the groups may combine members of different kinds of field sites. They might be asked, for example, how do residents’ worlds differ from guards in prisoners’ worlds? That focus group should contain nursing and prison worker/guard memberships, or family members or significant others with kin in both settings gathered together – all pushing not only discovery but ethnographic (re)conceptualization.

Gubrium’s pertinent observations show that thinking through our response to the pandemic involves analytical issues which extend beyond technical quick fixes. Central to this is how we conceptualise our ‘presence’ in the ‘field’.

3. Being ‘present’ in the ‘field’?

Early twentieth-century anthropologists identified field research with participant observation. In practice, this meant being present in some setting (often on the other side of the world) while observing local practices and interviewing key informants. Contemporary researchers have learnt from this experience to equate collecting naturalistic data with ‘observation’ while being present in the field. For instance, we might assume that a study of clinical encounters requires the presence of the researcher as a non-participant observer.

Many qualitative researchers would argue that there are least two things wrong with this perception:

– there are many kinds of naturalistic data including documents and digital data that are readily available without any physical presence; and
– associating naturalistic data with ‘observation’ of particular settings gives a ready excuse to researchers who cannot obtain ‘access’ to their chosen field site to revert to manufactured data. However, this depends upon naive commonsense reasoning, which associates a field site with access to one particular setting. By contrast, if an organization in which the researcher is interested would not let them in, one can study other settings where organisation members congregate or describe themselves. Or, one can examine the documents through which the organisation presents itself. Systematic field research reveals that idealised conceptions of phenomena become like a will-o’-the-wisp, allowing us to dissolve ‘organisations’ into sets of practices embedded in particular milieux.

Even if we cannot obtain access to be present in an organisation, we can obtain valuable data without physically being present. Organisational members may agree to use their smartphones to produce audio or audiovisual records of their interactions. Some may even agree to wear bodycams (Robert Dingwall, pers. comm.).

My own research on HIV-test counselling in the 1990s involved multiple sites in three countries (Silverman 1997). This meant that I could not be present on lots of occasions. Instead, I obtained data by alternative means:

– recordings of pre- and post- HIV-test counselling from US centres were kindly provided by an American colleague, Douglas Maynard;
– one centre gave me access to its video-recordings of HIV-test counselling, which it had collected for teaching purposes (Peräkylä 1995); and
– some centres were given audio-recording equipment and sent me the recordings. Counsellors told their clients that, if anything transpired that they wanted to keep confidential, the recording could stop and/or would not be passed on to me. This was ethically advantageous in part because it empowered the people being studied (see Silverman 1997).
However, this was over two decades ago. Katarina Jacobsson (pers. comm.) has pointed out that today it is extremely hard to get the mandatory ethical approval for this kind of research – or one may have permission, but it is not as easy and swift as it may sound here.

Of course, different qualitative research traditions do not agree about the need for physical presence in a research setting (Silverman 2021, 2022). My counselling research was carried out under the auspices of conversation analysis and discourse analysis. Both approaches are often content to work with secondary data. By contrast, for most ethnographers physical presence in the field is required. As Gubrium (pers. comm.) comments:

As with many, but not all, ethnographic field-workers, I personally always need to be there. In nursing homes, physical rehab hospitals, institutions for children’s behavioural problems, wards for the demented, and other real field sites.

Gubrium stresses that being present has nothing to do with ‘authenticity’ and that the ‘facts’ never speak for themselves. First, only by using what he calls ‘conceptual lenses’ do we make fruitful observations. Second, we need to deconstruct a unitary view of the field and think through different kinds of ‘fields’. As Lindsay Prior (pers. comm.) has pointed out:

The concept of the ‘field’ doesn’t necessarily refer to a geographical location, so some might argue that there is always a field […] a field of concepts, emerging data, and ‘theories’ to be examined, e.g. theories of Covid-19 origin (including conspiracy theories), construction of data (especially about cause of death, trajectories of the pandemic etc) and concepts like epidemic diseases.

Gubrium has also considered this point.

**What is the field?**

Jaber Gubrium

Doing fieldwork in prisons is quite different from doing fieldwork on streetcorners and, in turn, in doing fieldwork in home care or hospices. One way to think about field-specific ethnography is in terms of the comparative stakes and risks involved. Some of us have rather long-term involvements in specific (particular) fields. We have friends and acquaintances who work in disease-ridden field settings (‘disease’) or know people in related fields who refer us to other fields. Trust is a different matter in such cases than it might be in seeking entry and maintaining field relations in ‘new’ sites. So long-term acquaintance and presence in field sites, versus new field sites, is a very important matter hinging on matters of field-specificity.

(Gubrium, pers. comm.)

This suggests we should not over-emphasise ‘being there’. As Katarina Jacobsson (pers. comm.) argues, we do not need to choose between ‘being there’ and virtual data:

I think it’s hard to exclude either one. What is there to study in an actual space that doesn’t have a corresponding or related virtual space? And vice versa. Yes, we are all hybrid, indeed. An ethnographer should visit both spaces, or […] follow research participants where they go. And there is not really a need for specialized methodological subgroups, like ‘netnography’ etc. Ethnographers can do it all – we go where the action is!

4. **Tracing the digital consequences of the pandemic**

I hardly need to point out that the awful consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic are not limited to the methodological problems that confront qualitative researchers. Nonetheless the tragic results of COVID-19 indicate some parallels between the predicaments of researchers and ordinary people.

It is not just qualitative researchers who have turned to digital data during the pandemic. With lockdowns and other restrictions on social contact, families and friends with access to digital media have mainly kept in touch online.

I conclude by citing a recent publication which indicates a number of fruitful research topics to think about in the wake of the pandemic:
1. In the movement of labour and personal relationships to digital platforms, what differentiations – implicit or explicit – emerge between the kinds of relationships that can be materialized digitally, versus those that require face-to-face contact? What are the implications of these differentiations for power, and vulnerability?

2. How are collective experiences imagined/enacted through social media? What is the role of algorithms and other forms of amplification in creating collectives (or the illusion thereof), and across what scales?

3. As stay-at-home orders are lifted, what are the ensuing effects of public health efforts to trace, count and manage populations, or failures to perform these actions? And what role do digital media play in these efforts or omissions?

(Kelemen Saxena and Johnson 2020)

Online Resources

Crowd sourced document

Lupton, Deborah (editor) (2020) Doing field-work in a pandemic. Available online: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1cGjGABB2h2qbdTuTgfqribHmqg9b6P0NvMgVuiHZC18/

A student guide


Comments by a first year PhD student on the impact of COVID-19 on their research


Ethical issues and online resources


Interviews with six ethnographers who have carried out their research remotely


Links to remote research methods


A longer statement of methodological resources for remote researching


Anthropology during COVID

Lems, Annika (2020) The (im)possibility of ethnographic research during corona. Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology website, 11 June. Available online:
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