I think it is fair to say that the thoughtful comments on my paper were less ‘rejoinders’ than additions and elaborations. In that spirit, what follows is a summary of the arguments made and the critical questions that remain, also drawing on some personal communications I have received.

Losses

As Susan Gasson (pers. comm.) has noted, ‘The field encompasses the space shared with participants and the shared understandings that come with the context’. What, then, have we lost during COVID by not being able to enter field sites? Christian Heath (pers. comm.) points out that since COVID, video-based studies of complex work environments have proved highly problematic – since to use and understand much of the recorded data you need wide-ranging ethnographic engagement in the setting to see and recognise what is happening.

So purely digital data may not be reliable. As Johanna Ruusuvuori argues:

By using only data from technologically mediated encounters we may lose something invaluable: with the present technology, the social cues that are present in face-to-face encounters are drastically diminished in technology-mediated interactions.

Fiona Wood and Sue Ziebland point out that this may mean not just a loss of interesting data but an inability to focus on people excluded from digitally mediated encounters. As Wood puts it:

[The] risk is that the technology we use might exclude certain populations. This is particularly important for health services researchers where projects focus on populations who are vulnerable, frail or generally unwell.

This kind of exclusion is critiqued by Iedema and his co-authors, who argue that

[w]e need to insist that social science play a crucial role in how we approach and enact human conduct amidst in situ complexity. Specifically, social science must have a presence where professionals and services struggle to deliver healthcare to help contain the impact of crises such as COVID-19 illness and death.

Unfortunately, ethnographers’ justified desire to be present where the action is runs up against what we are able to do in the aftermath of the pandemic. Moreover, as I argued in my discussion paper, maybe we need to look critically at assumptions which may derive from the anthropologists of a century ago. As Lindsay Prior argues,
‘being there’ is just one of many routes to accessing data, and it can sometimes be difficult to understand why it is privileged. [...] Clearly, ‘the field’ is always much larger than the space-time coordinates in which the researcher is to be found.

Moreover, we probably should be wary of any attempt to characterise ‘good’ data. And mere presence is only as good as the analytical tools that we use to filter what we observe. Once again, Prior makes the point:

Ultimately, social science is a practice, and it is as it is practised; nothing more and nothing less. As such, there is no golden protocol specifying how the qualitative researcher must engage with the world.

Gains

Whatever position we take on co-presence, we should not neglect the ways in which the pandemic has encouraged qualitative health researchers to adopt lateral thinking. For instance, Geraldine Leydon notes that

COVID-19 has provided an opportunity to reflect on and question some long-held practices of, for example, privileging face-to-face over telephone interviews, accepting the struggle of slow-paced research approvals processes and sticking with traditional boundaries between what ‘we’ as the researchers do and what our partners who support our research do (the clinicians, service providers).

In the long run, this may lead to greater reflection on how our choice of research data produces a particular version of health-related phenomena. As Anne Murcott (pers. comm) notes, data collection methods are different ways in to slices of social life and have the capacity for illuminating some aspects [but] also limit access to others.

This can produce useful reflection about our methodological choices. As Joel Telles (pers. comm) puts it:

How would research differ if it were done through archived materials, face to face (and on which day, with whom co-present), audio, Zoom, etc?

Moreover, the assumption that a qualitative PhD could not be based on secondary data was long due for the dustbin (cf. Bishop 2021). Srikant Sarangi argues that the pandemic has meant that many young researchers have been forced to consider working with existing datasets. Prior to the pandemic,

I argued at the time – when PhD researchers were routinely expected to collect their own data – that recycling was a desirable and sustainable venture given how much collected data was generally wasted or remained under-analysed.

Even if we collect our own data, the inability to be physically present has encouraged researchers to reflect upon the opportunities created by our increasingly digitalised world. As Frederick Erickson notes:

The ubiquity of cell phones and their use for video recording by members of families and local communities provides another source of evidence for social research, documenting the occurrence of everyday interaction and pointing to its situated meanings for participants.

Rachel Grob and Jane Evered develop Erickson’s point with reference to interview data:

Cameras reveal to all parties present the spaces others occupy (homes, offices and automobiles [...] thus offering both participants and researchers an intimate view of places which might otherwise remain backstage.

And this is not just a technical point. Rebecca Dimond reminds us to attend to what ‘different spaces’ mean for both researchers and researched by considering how the bonds of community and belonging are expressed and transformed in different spaces, alongside documenting the ordinary and extraordinary research decisions made when ‘being there’.

Rodney Jones’s concept of ‘the architectures for interaction’ elegantly develops the argument:
A rejoinder

Mediation matters, [...] the media through which we interact with people, whether they be our friends, our children or our research participants, are not merely devices that transmit information from one person to another. Rather, they are architectures for interaction that fundamentally change what we can do, who we can be and the kinds of relationships we can have with people ... if we ignore the differences, we will severely limit our ability to make sense of ‘what’s going on’ and what people are saying.

Nonetheless, we have to be careful not to assume that different research settings necessarily deliver ‘good’ or ‘bad’ data. For instance, Paul Drew (pers. comm.) mentions a systematic review (Irvine et al. 2020) which did not show any differences between telephone vs in-person delivery of therapeutic interventions.

However, thinking about mediation may help to overcome the weakness of many analyses of interview data which exclude the interviewer and the interview context (cf. Potter and Hepburn 2005; Silverman 2017; Holstein and Gubrium 2021). As Sarangi notes:

The imperative is to account for the context of the data collection in our analytical commentaries – something that is routinely overlooked in interview- or focus-group-based studies adopting grounded theory or thematic/content analysis procedures.

Erickson underlines how we can fruitfully work with such data:

Transcription and analysis based on repeated viewing of recordings allows the researcher not only to describe the ‘what’ of such conduct but also its ‘how’ – how conjoint social action gets done.

The future

Fiona Stevenson and Bernadette Watson reflect upon the positives arising from new sources of data and improved data analysis. As Stevenson argues:

The hope is that we as a research community that employs qualitative research techniques will emerge from this pandemic with a richer toolkit, having reflected on what we can learn from a range of qualitative methods, both face-to-face and online, so leaving qualitative research stronger.

It is also possible that, after COVID, resultant isolation and loneliness may make people more eager to participate in our research. In her own research, Barbara Czarniawska (pers. comm.) has noted that contacts were more willing to participate in the study than it is usually the case. [...] It is a new and difficult situation for everybody, so an opportunity to sharing thoughts with somebody outside one's workplace was truly welcome.

And Alison Pilnick reminds us that, ultimately, this is not just about our research methods but touches upon our responsibilities to the wider community as we assess how fieldwork sits within all the wider responsibilities we face as individuals and researchers – to those we care for, to those we mentor, to the academic community and to the end users of our research.

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References


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David Silverman is Emeritus Professor of Sociology at Goldsmiths’ College, London, Visiting Professor at the business schools at King’s College London and the University of Technology, Sydney, and Adjunct Professor in the Education Faculty, Queensland University of Technology, Australia. His research interests focus on medical encounters. He is the author of many textbooks on qualitative research and runs workshops in qualitative research for PhD students and faculty in several European and Australian universities. Address for correspondence: King’s College Business School, London, UK, Bush House, Strand, London WC2R 2LS, UK.

Email: d.silverman@gold.ac.uk