

Disrupted Fieldwork: Navigating Innovation, Redesign, and Ethics during an Ongoing Pandemic

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Many of us were conducting or planning fieldwork this spring 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic spread across the globe. Some of us had optimistically hoped that the virus might be waning or somehow under control within a few months. While the situation has improved in some countries such that everyday life is shifting to a “new normal,” in other countries, the pandemic has worsened or reemerged after briefly subsiding.

All of this continues to disrupt fieldwork and make the future difficult to plan.

Researchers from across the social sciences and humanities engage in fieldwork, so this disruption has broad and potentially long-term impacts. Fieldwork is already marginalized in some disciplines due to the time and resources it requires relative to other forms of data collection. The COVID-19 pandemic ratchets up the pressure on established scholars who do this type of work regularly. We must consider other ways of conducting our research and even reevaluate the questions we are asking. A generation of graduate students might be discouraged from attempting fieldwork at all and never gain the experience.

We are persistently hopeful, but we are also profoundly unsure when things will genuinely open up. Any process of opening up will not be linear or unidirectional. Much more likely is a zig zag of ups and downs, or an opening and closing of windows that will be difficult to

predict, evaluate, or know with any certainty whether and how to proceed.

Meanwhile, we remain absolutely convinced of the indispensable value of fieldwork for understanding politics and the social world (Kapiszweski, MacLean, and Read 2015; Krause and Szekely 2020). In fact, it seems more important than ever.

So, how do we do fieldwork in the COVID-19 world? Many of us have been struggling to rethink how we approach field research under these constraints. This essay is an attempt to pull together thoughts from discussions with graduate students and faculty colleagues, various writing projects, published blogs, public webinars, and collaborative Google Docs. It is neither wholly original nor exhaustive, but, hopefully, it provides a touchstone in a time when we are all extremely disoriented.

Taking the Time to Acknowledge the Emotion of Disruption

When fieldwork is disrupted, whether from a global health crisis like COVID, or some other source (e.g., a dramatic change in the political dynamics in the field site; a change in your own or your family’s health), it is important to first acknowledge the emotional weight of the disruption. For many scholars, months and years of work have been dedicated to planning a project design and methodology. Lots of effort has been invested toward obtaining the expertise, funding, and time to carry out the fieldwork.

¹ This essay emerged from the discussion among Jack Corbett, Diana Kim, Lauren MacLean, Nabila Rahman and Robin L. Turner, as well as the participants who engaged in the IQMR Webinar, “Conducting Fieldwork Under COVID Constraints: Interpretive Approaches and Ethnography,” July 21, 2020, at https://www.maxwell.syr.edu/moynihan/cqrm/Summer_2020_Panels_and_Webinars/.

When fieldwork is disrupted, either in process or before it even begins, it can feel like a devastating loss. It can seem like our whole life's plan has been unmoored, and we have become aimless, without purpose. This loss can be heavy on its own. And, it can also remind us of other challenging times when we may have felt similar losses. Perhaps we remember another national crisis or international turning point, or when we have lost someone close to us. This remembering of other hard times can magnify the sadness that we feel.

In the U.S., the impact of COVID is amplified by systemic injustices, including racial, ethnic, and gender disparities. Not only are Black, Indigenous, and Latinx communities disproportionately affected by the pandemic (see, e.g., Lakhani 2020), they are further impacted by the devastation and repeated losses incurred through police violence (Males 2014). Asians, Asian-Americans, and Pacific Islanders have experienced aggravated stereotypes and scapegoating. In light of these inequalities, the loss of our planned fieldwork may not be at the forefront of our minds, particularly for scholars directly impacted by these disparities. Since COVID has magnified intersecting injustices around the world, scholars based outside the U.S. may also have similar experiences and emotions (see, e.g., Johnston, Mohammed, and van der Linden 2020; Public Health England 2020).

It is important to first recognize these intense and sometimes conflicting feelings. Preparing to do fieldwork and then not being able to carry it out is not akin to missing a conference panel or other professional meeting. It is much bigger. Whether fieldwork involves learning new languages, research methods, and literatures, or sifting through old newspapers and microfilm in archives, scholars were ready to move away from the comforts of home and immerse themselves in a new context. They had said their goodbyes and had begun to create new networks of colleagues and contacts in a new field site community. Getting ready to do fieldwork consumes extensive energy and time for both the intellectual and logistical preparations.

Similarly, leaving the field suddenly, or putting a trip on indefinite hold, also takes a lot of intellectual, logistical, and emotional time and energy. We have very little time to say goodbye to new colleagues and friends in the field. We have to cancel flights, hotels, transportation, apartment leases, etc., and try to fight for refunds where they are due. We may need to arrange new accommodation wherever we land or let our roommate or family members know to expect us back! If students, we might need to communicate quickly with our graduate

program to see if funding can be reinstated. Or, as faculty, we may need to try and work ourselves back into the teaching rotation on our campus because we have postponed our sabbatical leave for later. So many things to do at once right when we have no energy and feel little motivation. So many emails and correspondence to follow up on right when it is so difficult to focus on a single thought.

It's important to stop. Take a breath. Get some rest. Eat well. Exercise and get some fresh air. And feel the grief.

This really sucks.

There is no other way to say it.

But, then... we need to pick ourselves up, adapt, and keep moving. So how can we do that?

Some Options for Innovative Data Collection while Maintaining Social Distance

After initially being stunned by the disruption and not being able to move, we may then experience a wave of panic. Does the pandemic preclude qualitative or interpretive analysis when it is difficult to get close and talk to people?

While extremely difficult, we contend that it is not impossible. When we cannot travel or immerse ourselves in the field, we need to innovate to try and access the field remotely. We need to be creative about how to access evidence about how people are thinking and what politics means to them. We discuss below several options for innovation including alternate digital sources of evidence; revisiting previously known sources; remote interviewing via technology; and contracting out to field-based team members.

Identifying Alternate Digital Sources Already Available Online: First, we highlight a range of digital data sources that emerge from the field but are available remotely. Several possible sources of evidence that are available online include but are not limited to:

- Government websites that include policy documents, government regulations, press briefings, speeches, or other mission statements online;
- National, regional, state, or supranational legislatures that post their minutes of debate, proposed bills, and passed legislation online;
- Judicial records, court cases, and judicial opinions that are digitized and available on government websites or in archives;
- Colonial, national, and organizational archival

documents that have been digitized and are available online with some of these archives expanding open access temporarily due to the COVID-19 disruption;

- Social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, or WhatsApp, which may have pages or organizations or comments on the topic by the participants of interest, including public accounts by key political leaders;
- Traditional media outlets that may include letters to the editor, opinion pieces, features, or interviews with the participants of interest and may be available online or be digitized in library collections;
- Maps and geo-spatial data that may be available on government or library websites;
- Political party campaign ads, posters, or pamphlets that may be digitized and available through party or library websites;
- Local NGOs and think tanks that may have press briefings with policy documents and statements or analysis by scholars and citizens;
- Local artists including painters, sculptors, performance artists, cartoonists, videographers, photographers, etc., that may have Instagram and Facebook pages where they share images and commentary on their work;
- Local musicians that may post music videos or lyrics on political events or topics on Instagram and Facebook pages with commentary and responses by followers;
- Published autobiographies of political elites or travelers during earlier historical periods that may be available in libraries;
- Published secondary literature that often includes extended quotation of primary sources and can be cited and analyzed from a new theoretical perspective.

And there are many other examples of data sources that may be available publicly online. Some of these sources are highlighted in the “crowdsourced” thinking on disrupted fieldwork cited below (e.g. Lupton 2020).² There are other sources that may be available privately, collected previously by scholars who, if contacted, might be willing to share.

Revisiting Previously Known Sources: In addition to searching for alternate sources of digital evidence, it can

be fruitful to revisit or reanalyze old materials. These may be data we have collected ourselves or archived by other researchers. The key point of this secondary analysis is that revisiting this material may bring a fresh perspective that allows for new insights and conclusions.³ Moreover, new evidence and concepts that did not exist at the start of a project will have emerged and may shed new light on old data. In this way, a fresh analysis can make a novel contribution.

Remote Data Collection Using Voice or Video Technology: Beyond thinking creatively about sources of evidence that may be available online, technology such as Skype, WhatsApp, FaceTime, or Zoom, offer the possibility of doing remote data collection including in-depth, survey, or focus group interviews, or even ethnographic-style observation depending on the field site context. For example, in South Africa, government legislative hearings are now being shown online and permit remote observation.

On the one hand, interviews of any type may be more convenient to schedule and organize if they are done remotely and participants can choose their location. Remote observation of public events obscures the presence of the observing scholar to the participants, perhaps reducing their awareness or possible discomfort at being observed.

On the other hand, while it is possible to establish some rapport in a video or telephone meeting, this is much more difficult if the researcher and participant do not already have a “working relationship.”⁴ If researchers are working in a brand new field site, it will be essential to reach out, introduce themselves, and begin to build a network of interlocutors. In the past, this was often done via email or phone in advance of a field visit. What is challenging is that the researcher may not ever be able to visit in person and may be limited to a virtual encounter. Further, remote observation does not permit immersion in the context, which is usually understood to be a part of the ethnographic method (see , e.g., Schatz 2009).

Researchers will also need to consider participants’ privacy (or the lack thereof) during virtual interviews. It might make sense to seek consent from others who share the living or meeting space and may be present during remote interviews.

Contracting Out: Some researchers may also

² See also DeHart (2020), who draws on ethnography to rethink ideas of location and generate alternative sources or “traces of local sentiment.”

³ Thanks to Diana Kim for sharing this point.

⁴ According to Lee Ann Fujii (2017, 15): “A working relationship simply means that interviewer and interviewee arrive, explicitly or implicitly, at mutually agreeable terms for interacting, conversing, listening, and talking with one another.”

consider contracting out qualitative in-depth or focus group interviewing, survey interviewing, or even archival research to a local research firm or RA in the field site if they are unable to travel. In some situations, contractors will be able to conduct in-person interviews, and, in others, they will offer to facilitate phone interviews or short text-based surveys using their own call centers. In some instances, if a scholar has contacts in the field site already, they may be able to make a connection with a local graduate student who can conduct some archival or policy research on their behalf.

Of course, contracting out requires significant financial resources and professional contacts with reliable firms or assistants that scholars can collaborate with and trust to act in their stead. Researchers should actively work to decolonize knowledge production within these partnerships through collaborative methodologies and approaches (see, e.g., Firchow and Gellman, forthcoming; Asiamah, Awal, and MacLean forthcoming; Fransman and Newman 2019; Smith 2012).

The bottom line from the above discussion is that, even in a pandemic, and sometimes precisely because of the pandemic, researchers still have a variety of options for data collection from or in the field. Each of us may therefore choose a different combination of data sources given the changed reality, or may elect to put more weight on a data source that was previously more of a bonus item.

Project Redesign and the Value of Multiple Contingency Plans

After surveying the range of options, the hard part comes next: going back to the drawing table and engaging in a redesign of the project. To be honest, most field-based projects require some updating and redesign in the field under “normal” conditions, but the pandemic certainly necessitates major rethinking (see Kapiszewski, MacLean, and Read, n.d.; Boswell, Corbett, and Rhodes 2019).

The pandemic not only raises new logistical challenges with theoretical and intellectual implications. It also poses many new ethical dilemmas (discussed in more detail in the next section) that must be at the forefront of any redesign.⁵ The crisis of the pandemic does not grant researchers an “exception” to skimp on ethical requirements to complete our research; quite the reverse.⁶ All of the evaluations involved with a major redesign should require further consultation with a

diverse range of local experts and interlocutors from field sites in addition to one’s collaborators and mentors at the home institution.

Before deciding on changes to the research design, researchers should reexamine their research questions and the key concepts under study. The questions may be formulated in a way that was so heavily dependent on original field-based data that is now simply impossible to obtain, even with all of the creativity and innovation imaginable. Rarely does a project need to be scratched completely. Often the research question can be tweaked or revised so that it is both theoretically interesting and practically feasible to answer given the COVID constraints.

Once the question is clarified and confirmed, scholars should think carefully about the key concepts or hypothesized causal process and how they may be influenced by the pandemic. Are these concepts or processes likely to be independently and significantly shaped by the dramatic changes in politics, the economy, and society related to COVID? Even in normal times, many political scientists are cautious about planning large research projects around high-stakes elections. Or when some significant and unexpected political event surprises them in the field, they attempt to untangle the new complexity on the ground. No one can predict how long COVID will last, but at the time of this writing, it is not going away any time soon. Researchers must be mindful that the pandemic’s effects are experienced unequally across space and by different racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and age groups. This COVID impact analysis might suggest a new approach to conceptualization and measurement, revised hypotheses, or a new case selection strategy.

Of course, any research project should be developed with contingencies in mind for various research design elements that are impossible to fully know and plan in advance.⁷ Scholars should highlight where they lack key information and think about what they might need to know and when to make decisions.

During a pandemic, we may need to think through a Plan A, B, and C, with more than one contingency plan depending on how the situation for travel and public health evolves. Plan A may be based on the best case scenario with full availability of travel and interaction; Plan B may be a mid-range scenario where accessibility to the field site is hindered or timing is delayed or reduced;

5 See Bond, Lake, and Parkinson (2020) for lessons drawn from conflict studies on situations of changing risk and vulnerability.

6 See London and Kimmelman (2020) for an argument against “pandemic exceptionalism” in biomedical research trials.

7 See Kapiszewski, MacLean, and Read (n.d.) for approaches to dynamically updating research designs.

and Plan C is the worst case scenario where the field is completely inaccessible.

These changes to the research design should be done in consultation with collaborators, mentors, or the graduate student's dissertation committee. Even if the graduate student has successfully defended the proposal, the scale of revision required may merit a Zoom meeting with some or all of the committee members. The full committee ultimately needs to sign off on the dissertation, so it is important to gain their support and input for the redesign.

All relevant Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) at the home institution and elsewhere must also be consulted and provide approvals for changes to the study scope and protocols, although IRB procedures cannot be the sole arbiter of the wide-ranging ethical dilemmas arising from research interactions in pandemic contexts (Cronin-Furman and Lake 2018; Michelson 2016; Kapiszewski, MacLean, and Read 2015; Wood et al. 2020). Already an insufficient indicator of whether research is ethical, the requirements and expectation for restarting research with human subjects vary tremendously across universities and national contexts for different IRBs. For example, on the same day, with the same information, the IRB at Indiana University did not require an amendment to proceed with survey research for an exempt project in Kenya, whereas a Canadian university prohibited any interaction with any human subjects. Researchers should also consult in an ongoing manner with local researchers and other scholars who have worked previously in the field sites to get feedback and adjudicate whether and how best to proceed.

If external or internal funding has already been obtained or is being sought, researchers should contact program officers or grant administrators early to understand how the pandemic may change the availability and requirements of the grant. Timing of future grant cycles may be changed, and extensions to current grants are often possible when requested.

Finally, changes to the research design will inevitably necessitate changes to the proposed writing. Scholars should reconsider the timeline and content for their future articles and book publications. Graduate students should revise an annotated table of contents, which summarizes the argument for each chapter and the evidence used to build the argument. Researchers can also create a project workplan document that includes the revised estimated timeline and sequencing for drafting

of each chapter. They can then revise the full project timeline to estimate the time needed to complete the new types of data collection, analysis, writing, and submission of publications.

Ethics of Digital Innovation

Redesigning a project for a COVID world requires us to rethink the ethics of doing field research. Even though there may be a good bit of data available online, and in some cases the available evidence may be so “abundant” that it is actually disorienting,⁸ we need to be continually mindful of: what is missing; what is not curated; what is not digitized; what voices are underrepresented or even absent entirely; and how we are working to address these absences and erasures.

Of course, this is not a new issue, but it may be obscured by our current remoteness. When we interact with evidence physically, we are continually reminded to think critically about our data. We need to do the same when the data is digitized. Often, the digital archive's final product may present itself to the viewer as more polished and complete when compared to a dusty box of records, loosely tied together with a tattered string, where you can see the missing or torn pages, and be viscerally reminded of the often intentional partiality of the archiving process.⁹

Just as with digital sources, scholars need to again think critically about what types of participants are even accessible for remote interviews, focus groups, or surveys. How do disparities in personal resources or in local infrastructure prevent some from participating in these kinds of virtual interactions? Who is left out completely? It is likely that those who are poor, rural, older, and/or marginalized would have less cellphone and internet connectivity, and therefore be less represented. We need to interrogate the consequences of digital engagement on the range of participants that we include in our work.

It is also vital to reflect on how digital engagement will shape the quality of the relationship we are able to construct with study participants. Even if they are able to use a video connection, much physical presence and body language is obscured from the field of view. Since everyone is seated and “ready” when they open the online platform, there is often little to no time spent on “small talk” and getting settled. Language barriers may be magnified as well when using Skype, Zoom, or the phone.

Regardless of the platform we use, we need to maintain and uphold our ethical commitments to our

8 Thanks to Diana Kim for sharing this point. See also Kim (2020).

9 Thanks to Diana Kim for sharing this point.

study participants as we navigate data collection from a distance. We must consider whether our research and methods are appropriate even if it is IRB-approved. In particular, we need to be sure that participants who agree to an interview or survey are able to do so safely. Will they have privacy from others in their household, or even from predatory hackers or the state? We may need to think about privacy and consent more broadly if household members are present and either participating or visible. Focus groups are always more challenging because the entire group of participants needs to abide by the ethical commitment to confidentiality of what is shared in the group discussion.

When contracting out to a field-based team, numerous hurdles must also be overcome for this strategy to be feasible and ethical (Mani and Barooah 2020; Copper and Sautmann 2020). To begin, researchers should seek multiple, independent sources of information about the situation on the ground and whether it is legally permissible and locally acceptable for hired enumerators or RAs to be conducting interviews or doing archival and policy research in the areas. The health and safety of the research team members as well as the study participants must be paramount.

Researchers should ensure that the research firm or RA is aware of and implementing public health protocols fully and consistently.¹⁰ As with any project, scholars should verify that any local approvals were obtained and reconfirmed given public health changes. Just like the IRB however, local responses to the pandemic vary considerably, thus necessitating careful considerations of public health practices that go above and beyond what local laws or customs may dictate. Moreover, the researcher should be aware of visa restrictions, internal mobility restrictions, evening curfews, and quarantine requirements for whatever travel is planned. In some areas, even if the data suggests that COVID cases are on the decline and the research team/RA follows strict protocols of social distance and wearing masks, residents in the field site communities may nonetheless perceive a threat and harm could result, especially if the people gathering data are considered “outsiders.”

Another issue to consider is whether participants (or RAs) would experience undue inducement to participate in a study that might pose some risk and

thus compromise the process of informed consent. In the pandemic environment of high uncertainty and economic contraction, any type of compensation or even the perception of future benefit from a connection to an outside researcher or local political elites could result in a changed calculation of risk and greater willingness to consent.¹¹ As always, the process of informed consent should take place early, be thorough, and allow for questions and discussion. The pandemic is not a time for hurriedly checking the box on voluntary and informed consent, and, yet, enumerators and participants’ shared concerns about social interactions may push them to rush the process. Ill-equipped as political scientists are to offer specific guidance, we nevertheless believe it is essential to gather up-to-date information about potential health risks in field sites and to adapt our plans as necessary to minimize risks to researchers, enumerators, and participants.

At some point, consulates and universities may begin to permit greater international travel. Or, some scholars may be already located or able to travel to their field site. These researchers still need to evaluate the ethics of continuing their project. Several scholars have argued that ethnographic and in-person, semi-structured interviews should frequently be discontinued and will be the last field methods to be restarted.¹² Researchers should think carefully about the big picture and the opportunity costs that involvement with their research project presents to participants and RAs during a traumatic time. Is this an ethical use of people’s time given the added burdens that COVID places on many people in terms of their work, caregiving, and staying healthy? If researchers do proceed with virtual, contracted, or in-person interviews, the introductions and informed consent process might need to be extended while the length and time spent on interview questions could be trimmed. Researchers also should take both social/physical distance and participant privacy into account in negotiating interview locations.

Finally, these additional ethical considerations regarding whether and how we can conduct fieldwork need to be acknowledged explicitly and discussed clearly in our writing. It is important to document the difficult tradeoffs faced and the rationale for the choices we made as we navigate this new terrain. Reflexive openness about research ethics is not simply a response necessitated by

10 Thanks to Chris Gore, Jennifer Brass, Elizabeth Baldwin, and Alesha Porisky for many of the below points as we discussed the halt and continued pause of our collaborative project.

11 Cronin-Furman and Lake (2018) discuss perverse incentives in conflict zones that also apply in the pandemic context. They usefully provide questions for scholars, reviewers, and readers to consider. See also Philipps (2011) and MacLean and Porisky (n.d.)

12 See a discussion by Pacheco-Vega (2020) on the ethical dilemmas he faced in an ethnographic project with vulnerable communities in Latin America. Wood et al. (2020) provide principles for evaluating whether and how to restart ethnographic field research.

the COVID pandemic, however. This is equally motivated by a broader discussion taking place in the discipline (see, e.g., Fujii 2012). In April 2020, APSA published new principles and guidance on research with human subjects (American Political Science Association 2020). In response, some journals are developing new policies for external review processes.¹³ For example, the editors of *American Political Science Review* are encouraging authors to be open about the ethical decisions they made in the process of conducting their research, and they are asking reviewers to consider research ethics as a dimension of their evaluation (American Political Science Review Editors 2020).

Clearly methodological innovation during COVID will not be easy. But while these new ways of working have inherent challenges that we need to articulate, acknowledge, and discuss, they should not mean that doing this type of research is impossible. Rather, COVID asks us to actively reconsider the perennial ethical questions centered on respect, justice, and beneficence—who is included, how they are treated, and what costs and benefits they experience.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed our world. Clearly, some aspects of fieldwork may no longer be

possible. But new possibilities may have emerged.

We need to acknowledge the intense emotions associated with this massive disruption to our professional plans and every aspect of our lives, but we also need to adapt and be flexible and keep moving toward our goals. We may be able to think creatively about our research questions and develop alternative perspectives and approaches to the data collection and analysis. As hard as everything is, we need to dig in and keep thinking and writing.

Importantly, the same strategies and creative approaches that are offered here are also relevant for scholars who may not be constrained by COVID-19 but are limited by a lack of fieldwork funding. Other scholars may have the resources, but they are restricted in terms of their time. They may not have the same freedom to leave their professional and family obligations at home or in their home institutions.

Fieldwork remains invaluable for understanding politics. We are unable to do it the way that we have done in the past, but there may be creative alternatives that are ethically sound, methodologically rigorous, and provide some new theoretical insights into the meaning of politics in particular contexts. This may be a while, so it is worth trying.

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