

Kapiszewski, Diana, and Sebastian Karcher. 2021. "Transparency in Practice in Qualitative Research." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 54, no. 2 (April): 285-91. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096520000955>.

Law, David S., and Mila Versteeg. 2013. "Sham Constitutions." *California Law Review* 101, no. 4 (August): 863-952.

Lemon, Edward, and Oleg Antonov. 2020. "Authoritarian Legal Harmonization in the post-Soviet Space." *Democratization* 27 (7): 1221-39. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2020.1778671>.

Lin, Yu-Hsin, and Yun-chien Chang. 2018. "An Empirical Study of Corporate Default Rules and Menus in China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan." *Journal of Empirical Legal Studies* 15, no. 4 (December): 875-915. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jels.12200>.

Lucas, Christopher, Richard A. Nielsen, Margaret E. Roberts, Brandon M. Stewart, Alex Storer, and Dustin Tingley. 2015. "Computer-Assisted Text Analysis for Comparative Politics." *Political Analysis* 23, no. 2 (Spring): 254-77. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pan/mpu019>.

Pound, Roscoe. 1910. "Law in Books and Law in Action." *American Law Review* 44, no. 1 (January-February): 12-36.

Salminen, Joni, Maximilian Hopf, Shammur A. Chowdhury, Soon-gyo Jung, Hind Almerekhi, and Bernard J. Jansen. 2020. "Developing an Online Hate Classifier for Multiple Social Media Platforms." *Human-centric Computing and Information Sciences* 10 (1): 1-34. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13673-019-0205-6>.



Qualitative &
Multi-Method
Research

Symposium

Qualitative and Multi-Method Research

Fall 2022, Vol. 20.2

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7140148>

Back to the Field: Uncertainty and Risk in Field Research

Jannis J. Grimm
Freie Universität Berlin

Sarah E. Parkinson
Johns Hopkins University

Ellen Lust
University of Gothenburg

Isabell Schierenbeck
University of Gothenburg

Kevin Koehler
Sant'Anna School of Advanced Studies - Pisa

Dina Zayed
University of Sussex

The rapid spread of COVID-19 beginning in early 2020 caused global disruption. As the risk of infection rose and public health authorities around the world enacted measures to contain the virus, everyday life ground to a halt. Activities that seemed routine in late 2019 became fraught with uncertainty. Fieldwork was no exception. Most field researchers had to change or cancel at least some of their plans; some left their field in a hurry before travel was shut down while others had to lock down on site; most academic institutions restricted travel, with some even prohibiting all forms of international movement. In brief, many traditional forms of fieldwork became all but impossible during the pandemic.

Even as parts of the world begin to emerge from the pandemic, things have not returned to normal. Indeed, the emergence of the Omicron variant in November 2021 led to new restrictions, with some universities again moving to block field research.¹ It is important to note that such restrictions sometimes seem to be driven by factors other than the risk of infection alone. Infection rates in parts of Europe or the US were frequently just as high or even higher than in other parts of the world, yet restrictions seemed to be primarily aimed at preventing movement between the Global North and South. At the same time, global vaccine inequalities and vaccine resistance are threatening to relegate parts of the world to the category of places which are not safe

¹ For example, Arantxa Rodriguez-Urbe (@MARanzazuRU, November 30, 2021) tweeted that Princeton had just banned all international fieldwork.

for research. This is a worrying trend that might have serious consequences for knowledge production, as research efforts are being shifted to more “accessible” fields. It also further exacerbates existing inequalities in the discipline.

In this symposium, we reflect on lessons we can draw for fieldwork safety. These reflections build on our work on *Safer Field Research in the Social Sciences* (Grimm et al. 2020), a handbook to which most of the authors in this symposium contributed. The pandemic has created an unprecedented level of awareness of fieldwork risk. While attention to the issue is welcome—in fact, many of us had called for more awareness before the pandemic (Grimm et al. 2020; Lake and Parkinson 2017)—the way many academic institutions have reacted to the crisis has highlighted core weaknesses in how we think of and approach fieldwork risk.

To begin with, uncertainty in field research is not new. In fact, field research has always been subject to uncertainty and risk, especially for those who work in environments characterized by conflict or political repression (Bond, Lake, and Parkinson 2020; Glasius et al. 2018; Grimm et al. 2020; Mac Ginty, Brett, and Vogel 2020). The pandemic has certainly brought such challenges into even starker relief, yet COVID-19 is far from being the only source of risk. What is more, compared to other types of dangers, the threat of infection can be managed through vaccination, mask wearing, hygiene rules, and regular, accessible testing. While many academic institutions have implemented such measures to maintain in-person teaching despite high infection rates, mitigation measures are often not considered sufficient to enable safe fieldwork even where they are available.

We advocate for a shift to a risk management perspective. Many forms of fieldwork are risky, and they were risky before the pandemic as well. Instead of restricting physical access to the field, academic institutions should facilitate the clear-eyed management of these risks. In fact, those of us who managed to continue fieldwork during the pandemic can contribute valuable lessons in this regard (Lust and Schierenbeck, this symposium). Such a shift would require addressing perverse incentives in risk assessment procedures which frequently appear as administrative hurdles to researchers (see Koehler, this symposium); it would also necessitate a level-headed look at the risks associated with online forms of data collection which are frequently touted as alternatives (Grimm, this symposium). Finally, it would imply a different culture of academic advising that addresses the ethical and safety challenges of fieldwork (Parkinson and Zayed, this symposium). We highlight these issues in the hope that we can contribute to a

discussion on the future of fieldwork as we slowly begin to move back to a (new) normal.

Back to the Field

Early discussions on fieldwork during Covid understandably focused on how researchers could adapt (Lupton 2021). Initial measures included the increasing use of virtual platforms for data collection, such as through online interviews (Howlett 2022; Vokes and Atukunda 2021), phone interviews, or online panels instead of face-to-face survey research (Arechar and Rand 2021; Will, Becker, and Weigand 2020), or online recruitment for field experiments (Li et al. 2021), for example. Others capitalized on the fact that political activity also moved online during the pandemic. This meant that some projects could explore virtual fields, collecting data directly on Twitter, Facebook, Telegram or other online spaces (Christia and Lawson 2020; Kähkö 2020). Still others increased their reliance on local collaborators who could still enter the field (Kamara, Mokuwa, and Richards 2020).

Some of these innovations were pandemic-era stop-gap measures. Others reflect larger trends that have accelerated during the pandemic, or long-standing issues highlighted by the coronavirus crisis. Using remote techniques for qualitative data collection, for example, is certainly no invention of the last two years. There is a large literature on online research methods, including on the advantages and drawbacks of such approaches (Fielding, Lee, and Blank 2008; Namey et al. 2020). But virtual forms of fieldwork have become much more prominent during the pandemic. Similarly, the ethics and logistics of working with research assistants have also been discussed before the pandemic (Cronin-Furman and Lake 2018; Leck 2014), even though the COVID-19 crisis has given increased urgency to these debates (Nyenyenzi Bisoka 2020; Rudling 2021). From a research ethics perspective, increased reliance on research assistants becomes problematic if it is seen as a risk avoidance strategy for researchers unable or unwilling to travel. It is not; it merely shifts risks from researchers to their interlocutors or research assistants (see Grimm, this symposium).

The pandemic has highlighted the uncertainty associated with fieldwork. While this is old news for those of us working in contexts of political conflict and repression, the COVID-19 crisis has created an unprecedented degree of attention to issues of fieldwork safety. We argue that we should take this opportunity to address the uncertainty associated with field research and to review some of the processes we routinely implement. As Ellen Lust and Isabell Schierenbeck suggest in their essay, the COVID-19 pandemic has “fostered practices

that can serve field researchers well. As the pandemic subsides and fieldwork resumes, we should make sure that these practices are kept” (Lust and Schierenbeck, this symposium).

Which pandemic innovations and practices are likely to be of continued relevance in post-pandemic fieldwork? In their opening essay, Ellen Lust and Isabell Schierenbeck identify five broad lessons. They argue that the pandemic has (again) highlighted the importance of risk assessment, the pervasiveness of threats, the crucial role of adequate and up-to-date information, the need to recognize and take responsibility for ways in which our research might endanger others, as well as the issue of mental health during and after fieldwork. While none of these issues are entirely new, the pandemic highlighted their importance for researchers who were not used to thinking about their work in terms of uncertainty and risk.

Recognizing uncertainty also means developing ways of managing it. Unfortunately, many universities and research institutions have reacted to the pandemic by restricting research rather than enabling safer practices. Kevin Koehler argues that this has highlighted structural features in the way in which we conduct risk assessments. Institutional risk assessment procedures create perverse incentives for researchers. Since risk assessments frequently determine access to funding, researchers face incentives to downplay risk so as not to jeopardize their fieldwork. At the same time, the pandemic has demonstrated that such forms of risk assessment are not particularly helpful in actual crisis situations as they do not lead to appropriate contingency planning. Rather than threatening to restrict research, risk assessment procedures should be occasions for information exchange and learning which enable safer research.

The tools we increasingly resort to when we conduct online fieldwork are at the center of the contribution by Jannis Grimm. Given that researchers’ own understanding of these tools is frequently limited, their uncritical use might lead to the outsourcing of risk to interlocutors. While scholars may conduct their research from the safety of their own homes, their interlocutors are left to worry about the potential of (online) surveillance, safe and sufficient internet access, and data security. At the same time, online research methods can create “affective

detachment,” not only when it comes to the potential risks associated with the research process itself, but also in terms of the everyday needs of their interlocutors and the real-world problems they face. As the pandemic continues to impede traditional field research in many parts of the world, academic institutions can help their researchers in navigating the ethical dilemmas of remote research by establishing workflows and support structures that specifically address the risks associated with increasing technological dependence.

Finally, Sarah Parkinson and Dina Zayed introduce the notion of “reflexive advising” as a tool for managing uncertainty. Noting that academic advisors tend to significantly shape their mentees’ research projects yet are often absent from discussions on risk and uncertainty, they emphasize the need for advisers and mentees to “actively and collectively evaluate a combination of researcher positionality and contextual factors in order to open discussions of field safety” (Parkinson and Zayed, this symposium). Advisers also need to be aware of their own limitations and should actively support their mentees in seeking the feedback of relevant disciplinary networks. Such new forms of advising could go a long way in creating awareness of risks beyond COVID-19 while enabling ethically sound risk management practices.

Conclusion

As we consider ways of “returning to normal” in the fieldwork-based social sciences, scholars should heed lessons learned during the pandemic. The disruptions of COVID-19 have highlighted core weaknesses in institutional responses to fieldwork risk, as well as worrying trends of restricting research and outsourcing risks. The specific risks associated with the pandemic are certainly real, yet mitigation strategies are well known and are becoming increasingly available to researchers. At the same time, some of the solutions implemented to keep fieldwork running during the pandemic have worrisome ethical implications. It is time to take fieldwork risk for what it is—a set of challenges to be recognized and managed—and not as a collection of problems to be avoided or outsourced. We hope that the experience of conducting fieldwork during the pandemic will help push such a shift in perspective.

References

- Bond, Kanisha D., Milli Lake, and Sarah E. Parkinson. 2020. “Lessons from Conflict Studies on Research during the Coronavirus Pandemic.” *Social Science Research Council: Items*. July 2, 2020. <https://items.ssrc.org/covid-19-and-the-social-sciences/social-research-and-insecurity/lessons-from-conflict-studies-on-research-during-the-coronavirus-pandemic/>.
- Christia, Fotini, and Chappell Lawson. 2020. “Training the Covid-19 Cohort: Adapting and Preserving Social Science Research.” *Social Science Research Council: Items*. July 30, 2020. <https://items.ssrc.org/covid-19-and-the-social-sciences/social-research-and-insecurity/training-the-covid-19-cohort-adapting-and-preserving-social-science-research/>.

- Cronin-Furman, Kate, and Milli Lake. 2018. "Ethics Abroad: Fieldwork in Fragile and Violent Contexts." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 51, no. 3 (July): 607–14. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096518000379>
- Fielding, Nigel, Raymond M Lee, and Grant, Blank. 2008. *The SAGE Handbook of Online Research Methods*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publishing. <https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9780857020055>.
- Glasius, Marlies, Meta de Lange, Jos Bartman, Emanuela Dalmasso, Aofei Lv, Adele Del Sordi, Marcus Michaelsen, and Kris Ruijgrok. 2018. *Research, Ethics and Risk in the Authoritarian Field*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-68966-1>.
- Grimm, Jannis, Kevin Koehler, Ellen Lust, Ilyas Saliba, and Isabell Schierenbeck. 2020. *Safer Field Research in the Social Sciences: A Guide to Human and Digital Security in Hostile Environments*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publishing.
- Howlett, Marnie. 2022. "Looking at the "Field" through a Zoom Lens: Methodological Reflections on Conducting Online Research during a Global Pandemic." *Qualitative Research* 22, no. 3 (June): 387-402. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794120985691>.
- Käihkö, Ilmari. 2020. "Conflict Chatnography: Instant Messaging Apps, Social Media and Conflict Ethnography in Ukraine." *Ethnography* 21, no. 1 (March): 71–91. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1466138118781640>.
- Kamara, Foday Mamoud, Esther Yei Mokuwa, and Paul Richards. 2020. "How Villagers in Central Sierra Leone Understand Infection Risks under Threat of Covid-19." *PLOS ONE* 15 (6): e0235108. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0235108>.
- Lake, Milli, and Sarah E. Parkinson. 2017. "The Ethics of Fieldwork Preparedness." *Political Violence @ a Glance*. June 5, 2017. <https://politicalviolenceataglance.org/2017/06/05/the-ethics-of-fieldwork-preparedness/>.
- Leck, Hayley. 2014. "Whose Voice? Ethics and Dynamics of Working with Interpreters and Research Assistants." In *Fieldwork in the Global South*, edited by Jenny Lunn, 59-68. London: Routledge.
- Li, Zhi, Po-Hsuan Lin, Si-Yuan Kong, Dongwu Wang, and John Duffy. 2021. "Conducting Large, Repeated, Multi-Game Economic Experiments Using Mobile Platforms." *PLOS ONE* 16 (4): e0250668. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0250668>.
- Lupton, Deborah. 2021. "Doing Fieldwork in a Pandemic." Crowdsourced Document. <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1cGjGABB2h2qbduTgfrqribHmog9B6P0NvMgVuiHZCl8/edit#heading=h.ze8ug1cqk5lo>.
- Mac Ginty, Roger, Roderick Leslie Brett, and Birte Vogel, eds. 2020. *The Companion to Peace and Conflict Fieldwork*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Namey, Emily, Greg Guest, Amy O'Regan, Christine L. Godwin, Jamilah Taylor, and Andres Martinez. 2020. "How Does Mode of Qualitative Data Collection Affect Data and Cost? Findings from a Quasi-Experimental Study." *Field Methods* 32, no. 1 (February): 58–74. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X19886839>.
- Nyenyenzi Bisoka, Aymar. 2020. "Disturbing the Aesthetics of Power: Why Covid-19 Is Not an "Event" for Fieldwork-Based Social Scientists." *Social Science Research Council: Items*. May 28, 2020. <https://items.ssrc.org/covid-19-and-the-social-sciences/social-research-and-insecurity/disturbing-the-aesthetics-of-power-why-covid-19-is-not-an-event-for-fieldwork-based-social-scientists/>.
- Rodriguez-Uribe, Arantxa. 2021. "Princeton just banned all international fieldwork due to Omicron." Twitter, November 30, 2021. <https://twitter.com/MAranzazuRU/status/1465719388229685251>
- Rudling, Adriana. 2021. "Now Is the Time to Reassess Fieldwork-Based Research." *Nature Human Behaviour* 5, no. 8 (August): 967. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-021-01157-x>.
- Vokes, Richard, and Gertrude Atukunda. 2021. "Fieldwork through the Zoomiverse: Sensing Uganda in a Time of Immobility." *Anthropology in Action* 28, no. 1 (March): 73–8. <https://doi.org/10.3167/aia.2021.280114>.
- Will, Gisela, Regina Becker, and Dominik Weigand. 2020. "COVID-19 Lockdown during Field Work." *Survey Research Methods* 14 (2): 247-52. <https://doi.org/10.18148/SRM/2020.V14I2.7753>.