Ethnography in the Time of COVID-19: Vectors and the Vulnerable

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ABSTRACT

We examine the choices, dilemmas, and opportunities confronting ethnography at a moment in which face-to-face interaction is deemed dangerous and prohibited by many university human subjects committees. As scholars who have examined vulnerable seniors through intense engagement, we recognize that our presence can spread disease, just as we might become infected by those very informants. Yet, ethnography serves a necessary role in charting the conditions of the vulnerable and identifying points of intervention. The COVID-19 virus and its effects on research might truncate the granular observations that have made ethnography such a profoundly incisive method in the short term, but it may also permits reflection and methodological innovation that can contribute to both theory and policy. In this vein, our unwanted hiatus provides an opportunity to work on longstanding concerns such as ethnographic transparency while simultaneously advancing innovative new styles of research. Whether we seize this opportunity remains uncertain.

If there is one profound truth about ethnography, it is that intimacy, and not distancing, is crucial. Given this, what are the implications as we readjust our research at a moment defined by the wide-reaching effects of the novel coronavirus COVID-19?

While the pandemic with its hotspots, shutdowns, and selective victims has yet to fully play out, some immediate effects are apparent. The current pandemic and its likely aftermath create profound ethical and practical challenges for the practice of ethnography. What will the "new normal" of fieldwork look like? In the absence of a vaccine, physical distancing has been one of the most effective tools in limiting the spread of the pandemic. Yet, one outcome is a de facto moratorium on in-person field observation – long the iconic method of ethnography. While this is understandable and necessary in the short term, the result is that on the ground observations are absent when they are most needed both to understand the lifeworlds of the affected and produce evidence-based policy responses. As a result, ethnographers find ourselves gazing from the sidelines, unable to use our method to make crucial contributions. These realities raise a question of existential significance for ethnographic methods: what does the shifting biosocial landscape portend for the future of ethnography, today and in the world that follows the initial waves of COVID-19?

One possible answer follows from the Sufi proverb, "this too shall pass." This may be true. While historical ruptures can lead to profound societal transformations (Sewell 1996), critical moments of intense structural and cultural change are rare. Often, even seemingly revolutionary happenings, ultimately result in retrenchment of a status quo defined by "durable inequalities"

(Tilly 1999). Perhaps as this essay is published, the crisis will have lifted and current discussions will fade into the realm of historical sociology, little more than a footnote in science studies. But perhaps not. Change seems thrust upon us. What is certain is that we are living in unsettled times with broad implications for local life in the present and, given the topic of this essay, for those who study it through intensive field work.

The Ethnography of the Vulnerable

As two ethnographers who have observed the worlds of older Americans, we know that even in healthier moments, ethnographers can be a vector of danger for the vulnerable. We each took care in interacting with subjects to prevent spreading infectious disease within the public and private spaces in our studies. Even a bad cold or seasonal flu can easily harm or kill those with weakened immune systems, particularly those in close contact in settings such as assisted living facilities. The risk climbs quickly for a virus that is both highly contagious and poorly understood. Further, as anthropology's history of colonialism and sociology's elitism remind us, without care, the work we do as social scientists can harm the groups we aim to understand (sometimes in ways we may not foresee). We must balance the merits and dangers of our presence. Being in the field allows for the production of important insights that would be impossible to gain using more distant methods. Yet, when studying the vulnerable during a pandemic, the threat of our simple presence as potential asymptomatic carries of a silent killer is salient, personal, and consequential. Ethnographers are often trained to accept risk to themselves and see protecting their subjects as a potential life and death issue. But today, the possibility of direct harm is possibly higher than at any point in the recent past. Depending on how events unfold, being a potential disease vector may become a new "master status" (Hughes 1971).

At the same time, the absence of ethnographic observation creates dangers as well. In this, we note but set aside the friendships and tokens of respect that field researchers provide their vulnerable informants. Shelving the method that provides social science's most powerful tool for observing human behavior as it occurs limits our ability to address problems of practical and scientific import. While epidemiological estimates track disease diffusion, and polls assess attitudes, without field work the process by which people navigate their social worlds becomes conjecture. In the absence of ethnography, anecdotes, determinism (e.g. rational choice theories or totalizing cultural accounts), and strategic media frames (Gitlin 2003) supplant data-driven accounts of in situ behavior in both quantitative research and public discourse to the detriment of our understandings. This process may happen even when ethnography is not subject to quarantine, but 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. While we respect the expertise of epidemiologists in suggesting how people *should* self-isolate, this helps us little if we do not understand how people respond to the recommendations and policies that mandate this.

The Vulnerabilities of Ethnography

At this moment, we confront limitations on research as universities place moratoriums on face-to-face social science research. This leaves those currently "in the field" with limited options and imperfect alternatives for direct observation such as telephonic or online interviews, video data

of public spaces, zoom-like platforms, and other technologically mediated modes of interaction. 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. Further, it is possible that the parallels between demands for contact tracing and increased surveillance may make some communities less amenable to accepting outsiders. In addition, this new reality may shape the decisions of human subject committees (labeled Institutional Review Boards or IRBs in the United States) whose mandate is to be cautious in protecting both research subjects and the interests of the institutions in which they are embedded (Bosk and DeVries 2004; Stark 2011).

At present, many projects have been delayed or halted. Human subject committees are becoming more guarded with research observing vulnerable informants, both because of the threat of liability and uncertainty about the actual risk. This affects all social science research, but ethnography is unique with its focus on immersion and prolonged contact. We may need to consider alternative methods in the short term, but must also defend the unique strengths of field observation and avoid false equivalences that would treat ethnography as interchangeable with other qualitative methods. We do not denigrate other methods such as in-depth interviews or analyses of digital media, or advance anachronistic blanket statements about ethnography's superiority. Rather, we argue that the various styles of qualitative research are distinct – each has its own strengths and weaknesses, a desirable toolkit in an era of methodological pluralism (Lamont and Swidler 2014).

These issues are not only salient for those studying communities, but also for understanding organizations. Ethnographers have benefited from the willingness of organizations to provide access. But what happens when these organizations are weary or are overwhelmed? We must confront the reality that we can be seen as, and may be, a burden: a novel virus. Evolving circumstances may require that we formalize our understandings with organizations and individuals to secure access and satisfy concerns about harm and disruption. Further, the structure of interaction may change as physical distance and remote work becomes normalized. How to study the lives of those who are physically and socially isolated has long been a challenge, as the presence of a researcher changes the very phenomenon that is being studied.

The Challenges of Precarity

Our involuntary hiatus, while necessary, places disproportionate stress on younger academics. The next generation of ethnographers were already pressured to spend less time in the field, to focus on more efficient methods, and to be prepared for a rough job market that often privileges articles over the scholarly monograph (once the coin of the realm in ethnography). At the same time, the expected volume of publications necessary for hiring has been rising, creating another push towards methodological approaches that have a faster turnaround The precarity of pursuing ethnography in the contemporary academy seems to be growing— especially for graduate students and those outside the sheltered walls of sociology's most-elite institutions. Ethnography has become a high-risk/high-reward endeavor that is now becoming less accessible to many especially in light of the pressures of COVID-19. As universities, such as our own, are pushing to have graduate students complete their degrees more quickly, extended stays in field sites place students and their projects at risk. The expected delay in collecting data will abort many

ethnographies. COVID-19 and its future viral siblings may deter those who would pursue ambitious field studies.

Given these challenges, well-intentioned colleagues are circulating crowdsourced documents that purport to offer solutions for "avoiding in-person interactions by using mediated forms that will achieve similar ends" (Lupton 2020) The reality is that part of what makes in person fieldwork uniquely useful for many questions is the real-time observation of people in the environments in which they spend much of their lives (Cicourel 2020). Certainly digital ethnographies can be tremendously insightful as Tom Boellstorff's (2008) *Coming of Age in Second Life* demonstrated. Although we do not have many canonical digital ethnographies, they may become more influential as norms of sociability and opportunities for observation shift. However, to say the physical and digital are interchangeable or produce similar analyses is a methodologically indefensible false equivalence.

In thinking of ethnography at this moment of crisis, we must reflect on the limitations and the strictures of sociology as a discipline and of ethnography as a fragmented method. Our gatekeeping journals privilege novel theory and intellectual challenge. Too often, we face a push for concise "tweetable" punchlines and public dust-ups, which hamper the growth of ethnographic pluralism, and the deep insights and flexibility of long-form monographs. The quick has replaced the slow in ways that indicate the shifting conventions of a field of cultural production rather than evidence of linear progress. The findings from the range of traditions under the ethnographic umbrella are packaged in accordance with the conventions of short form social science and the need to fit ethnography, and ethnographers, in neat boxes that strip the field of its diversity (Abramson and Gong, 2020).

Reflection and Growth

While physical distancing is simultaneously necessary and intellectually costly, we must remember why ethnographic research has been central to sociological inquiry over the past century. Many who employ this method contend, persuasively we believe, that by close observation, we can understand the processes of social life in ways that methods that are more distant cannot (Gans 1999). This is especially the case for populations like impoverished seniors that might otherwise be invisible to academics. This unique characteristic has been crucial for developing and extending theory, generating concepts, and illuminating empirical patterns in a host of ethnographic traditions including symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, interpretivism, local sociology, grounded theory, the extended case method, and analytical sociology (for a review see Atkinson et al. 2001). In addition, avoiding a detailed account of the practices that individuals and groups use to construct meaning limits the policy prescriptions, enhancing the life chances of those groups with which we engage. Observing the struggles of seniors to gain adequate housing in an inflexible economy, as we both have seen, allows us to understand the complexity of the rental market and governmental attempts at providing shelter for those at risk.

However, our concern extends beyond the challenges that vulnerable seniors face (cf. Abramson 2015, Hocschild 1973; Freidenberg 2000; Gubrium 1975; Myerhoff 1980). The granular details and compelling examples that field researchers have penned advance our discipline in myriad

ways in fields ranging from urbanism to small group interaction (Fine 2003). In all cases, we require a "street-level" view of complex lives and challenging circumstances. While we admit the limits of our method, we must never discard the benefits of participant observation and its tried-and-true strategies for direct observation.

The current crisis demands a moment of reflection. Let us revisit the virtues and limits of traditional fieldwork in its connection to complementary data sources that observe from afar. Better integrating interviews, video data on public spaces, online observations, triangulation with surveys, archival, and geospatial data, and engagement with a growing array of computational methods may open new avenues of inquiry. Likewise, examining how "big data" and "deep data" complement each other, both in data collection and analysis, is an arena that seems ripe for investigation (Bernstein and Dohan, 2020). As we are physically (or socially) distanced, perhaps it is also a time to expand approaches that include "subjects" as distributed researchers or collaborators: a more inclusive form of participant observation. This could lead to a new wave of ethnographic crowdsourcing, a contemporary version of the pre-WWII Mass Observation project in Great Britain (Hubble 2006). The evolution of technology may permit new forms of data presentation and ethnographic replications (Abramson and Dohan 2015). It is too early to suggest where such alternate and hybrid methodologies might lead, but creativity often emerges on dark days.

Ethnographers must continue to explore long-standing issues related to transparency, representation, and replication (Sánchez-Jankowski 2002). For decades, ethnography has needed alternatives to asking for blind trust or treating research claims skeptically. COVID-19 demands that we turn our awareness to this risk as we justify our approach. In truth, we have avoided meaningful replications of both theoretical developments and empirical projects: at times, conflating cursory revisits and ex post facto interviews with replication (e.g. Boelen 1992). Combined with our failures to develop protocols for sharing deidentified data, these issues have left us vulnerable to critics both within and outside our field (Goldthorpe 2000; Lubet 2017). As many of us find ourselves out of the field for the first time in years or decades, perhaps we can generate alternatives as COVID-19 raises issues of the demands for and the limits of confidentiality.

COVID-19: Revisiting a Changed World

Scholars such as Michael Burawoy (2003) have pushed ethnographers to revisit the sites of their own and others' observations. The aftermath of COVID-19 may provide fruitful opportunities for a reassessment of prior projects, returning to the scene of the theory. The ethnographic site is always in process, creating challenges for replication. Revisiting the same physical space does not mean we are visiting the same social space. Neighborhoods change and become gentrified or hollowed out, hospitals change protocols, organizations wither and die, and seniors age out of the scene. Whether ethnographic replication exists and whether this is a possible basis for theory remains a point of contention. Still, the importance of context in field research is a strength and the recognition of the effects of historical events can allow for powerful comparisons.

The fact that research sites are always changing as participants come and go is a reality that is especially apparent in dealing with aging populations. During the first author's observation of a

senior political organization over thirty months, many of the core members left the scene and were replaced by other recruits. Some of these newcomers left before the research was completed. Others died during the project. By the end, the first author had become a long-standing member of the group. The second author examined how older adults' lives were shaped by the convergence of American inequality and everyday challenges related to health, illness, and death. Historical events, like the great recession, provided a window into seeing the differential impact of shifting policies on those in impoverished versus affluent neighborhoods (Abramson 2015). Revisiting sites after the ravages of COVID-19 could allow for tracking changes in arenas that are slower to change in the absence of stress. While a workplace, neighborhood, or senior community may be newly organized after the Covid-19 crisis, this change provides analytic leverage for understanding how this pandemic generates group culture and interaction orders (Fine 2021).

Post-Viral Ethnography

The rupture of ethnographic observation during the COVID-19 pandemic is both painful and essential. Like the disease itself, its effect disproportionately harms the most vulnerable. Yet, even in the shadow of this viral cloud and its vast devastation, especially for senior populations, there may be hidden opportunities. Unsettled times can inspire new visions. Perhaps we might pause from our discursive approximation of a "combat sport" and collaborate on shared challenges. But perhaps not. Can our professional structures become more flexible or will we accept the bars of our current iron cage?

Our inability to provide aid and comfort through ethnographic research of vulnerable populations today is immensely frustrating for those who use participant observation as an entry into wisdom. We realize the dangers of our presence. The world's contours have changed, although for how long and how much remains to be seen. The same is true for the ethnographers that chart them. Yet, we know – we hope – at some point, we *will* return to the field. The question is whether we will be wiser and bring tools better to listen, observe, and protect those we study. Or, will we only reproduce our world pre-Covid? Must the new normal be the old normal?

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