

## **Ethnography In The Time Of Covid-19**

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If there is one thing that can be said about ethnography, it is that social intimacy, and not social distancing, is crucial. While we are to remain a six-foot distance from each other, not meet in groups of more than 10 (or of two in Berlin), or to shelter at home, what are the possibilities for ethnographic research? What is its future in the world that follows?

One answer derives from the Sufi proverb, “this too shall pass.” This may be true. Perhaps as this essay is published, the moment will have passed into the realm of historical sociology. Perhaps not. What is certain is that we are living in unsettled times with broad implications for social life and for those who study it through intensive field work.

As two ethnographers who have engaged with the worlds of older Americans, we know that even in healthier moments, ethnographers can be a vector of danger for the vulnerable. 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. But when observing those who are medically vulnerable during a pandemic, anyone can be a threat in a direct and personal way.

At this moment, we must confront immediate limitations on research as universities place moratoriums on face-to-face social science research. This leaves those currently “in the field” with limited options such as telephonic or online interviews or other technologically mediated modes of interaction. Any 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. Will this uncertainty undermine the willingness of subjects to invite us into their worlds? Further, how will this new reality shape the decisions of Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) whose preference is to be cautious in protecting both research subjects and those institutions for which they work?

At present many projects have been delayed or halted. We expect IRBs to become more guarded, both because of the looming threat of liability and uncertainty about the actual risk. This affects all human subjects research, but ethnography is unique with its focus on immersion. We may need to rely on alternative methods in the short term but must work to maintain the unique strengths of field observation.

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? Ethnographers have often needed to persuade and contribute to the organizations they study. Evolving circumstances may now require that we formalize our understandings with organizations and individuals to secure access and satisfy concerns about minimizing harm.

While physical distancing is necessary, we also must remember why this style of research has been central to sociological inquiry. Many who employ this method contend now, as we once

did, that by looking close-up, in real time, we can understand key dynamics of social life in ways that more distant methods cannot. This unique characteristic has been crucial for developing and extending theory, generating concepts, and illuminating empirical patterns in numerous ethnographic traditions. In addition, avoiding people's lives limits insights on policy issues that our informants might recognize and appreciate.

The granular details and compelling examples that field researchers have contributed have advanced our discipline in many ways, especially in learning from populations at risk. We require a "street-level" view of complex lives and challenging circumstances. We should not discard, but rather adapt and evolve, tried-and-true strategies for direct observation.

In the interim, the current crisis calls for reflection. Let us revisit the virtues and limits of conventional field work and its connection to complementary methods. Other potential complementary data sources while we are out of the field include check-in interviews with subjects, video data on public spaces, online observations, triangulation with surveys and archival data, and engagement with computational methods. Can big data and deep data contribute to each other? It is too early to suggest where such alternate and hybrid methodologies might lead, but creativity often bursts through on dark days. In a related vein, we should work to address long-standing issues of transparency in ethnographic observation, representation, and replication.

The aftermath of COVID-19 may provide fruitful opportunities for revisits. The ethnographic site is always in process, a challenge for conventional replication. However, the contextualized nature of field research is a strength, and the occurrence of historical events can provide for valuable comparisons. Research sites are always changing as participants come and go, a reality more apparent in dealing with senior populations.”

During the first author's observation of a senior political organization over 30 months many of the core members disappeared and were replaced by other recruits, some of whom also left before the research was completed. By the end of the research, 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. Revisiting sites after the ravages of COVID-19 has the potential for insights in arenas that are slower to change in the absence of stress.

In thinking of ethnography at a moment of change – of crisis – we should 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 both the utility of pluralism, the accumulation of insight, and the depth of long-form monographs. We ought also acknowledge, and perhaps learn from, the range of traditions under the ethnographic umbrella.

Perhaps our enforced pause in fieldwork may have hidden virtue amidst the broad devastation of COVID-19. Unsettled times can inspire new visions. Perhaps researchers will have time to read

and learn about different approaches and collaborate on shared challenges. But we wonder whether our professional structures will be able to evolve sufficiently to recognize in this moment the prevalence of pain, especially given that some academics are comparatively sheltered. For instance, we are grateful for the protection that tenure and endowments provide, but these privileged circumstances may blind us from hard thinking and renewed commitment to using social science in the service of the public good, which is what the current moment demands.

Our inability to provide aid and comfort and insight through ethnographic research on COVID-19 issues is frustrating for those who use participant observation as their chosen methodology. This is coupled with the dangers that our presence might bring. At some point we will return to the field. The question is whether we will be wiser and whether we will have worked to develop tools that permit us to listen as well as to protect those vulnerable. Or, will we only reproduce the status quo?

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