Negotiating the Field through Necessity: Transformations in Approach to Ethnographic Research on Religious Studenthood during COVID-19

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Abstract

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, ethnographic researchers have not escaped the restrictions that have resulted in physical distancing since March 2020. This piece offers a brief commentary on some practical and discursive challenges that have influenced one such researcher in a project aiming to document the lives of students that comprise Catholic university chaplaincies in the UK today. The reflection considers the unique position that this researcher holds, who typically identifies with the category of the research sample, in attempting to negotiate and adapt their methodological approach in such circumstances. In choosing to embrace the uncertainty that has characterized the pandemic, the author concludes that to have personally undergone similar experiences alongside the research sample affords opportunities for authenticity which contributes in an essential way to producing a realist account of contemporary religious life.

Introduction

Any attempt to conduct an in-person ethnography of a social group during the pandemic has not been without significant challenges, with the immediate physical threat to both researchers and researched being perhaps the most pressing concern of any institutional review board. However, transformation has the potential to be viewed propitiously if one continues to deploy one's 'sociological eye' amidst uncertainty (Collins, 1998). Due to the events and measures implemented beyond our control, my project aiming to explore UK Catholic university chaplaincies, has undergone several methodological and practical transformations.

The nature of Catholic university chaplaincies often means that constituent members' backgrounds are ethnically and culturally diverse, whilst strongly united by one confessional sensibility. Groups are also united by their common studenthood. Studenthood here refers to the biographical category that characterises learners' action whilst participating in institutions of higher education (Warmington 2002, p.585). Chaplaincies, particularly Christian ones, are often based on an 'incarnational' ontology which relies on chaplains' presence or of being available, rather than performing any specific action; a way of being rather than doing

(Threlfall-Holmes 2011:120). The restrictions imposed on physical contact have been a cause for reflection on the discursive boundaries of what constitutes university chaplaincy life when 'normal' conditions are destabilized or paused. My intention to join university chaplaincies as a participant observer therefore required methodological transformations in order to practically respond to this new reality and its accompanying discourse. Indeed, 'periods of social transformation seem to provide simultaneously the best and the worst evidence for culture's influence on social action' (Swidler 1986, p. 278).

The transformation from place (on campus) to space (on the internet) within which the chaplaincy group 'meets' together has illuminated modes of group self-definition and expectations. The sudden problemisation of embodiment demonstrated its tacit and essential nature in chaplaincy life and the role it played in determining groups' self-definition (spiritual and pastoral support) and expectations (regular participation). The groups' typical boundaries were temporarily suspended due to the inability to meet in situ (Alderson and Davie 2021, p. 19). This raised questions over self-understanding: was chaplaincy only defined by its ability to provide in-person care? If participation rates declined, in what ways could chaplaincy still constitute itself as a group, or, more specifically, a community? Responses to such rudimentary questions over group self-definition(s) and expectations would be determined by the extent to which chaplaincies were able to evolve beyond traditional, in-person ways of meeting. I had anticipated that religious online participation may not be (well-) attended, partly because of fundamental irreplaceability of in-person interaction and because of the uncertainty caused by the pandemic. I expected students may transform their routine habits and prioritize other areas, for example: academic success or mental wellbeing. For this reason, individual students may not have chosen to maintain regular contact; thereby reducing demand for group activities and consequently failing to sustain previous expectations of participation. This lack of physical presence, however, has not caused social distancing proper, insofar as we understand the social as the extent to which we relate to, identify with, or are influenced by, others. Accompanying this temporary suspension of expectations was the possibility for a transformation into the normalisation of an exclusively digital chaplaincy. Sociality could still be maintained as students quickly adapted to gathering, praying together, and receiving religious instruction via the internet, and therefore successfully transformed to constitute now-virtual Catholic university chaplaincies. Students' engagement with chaplaincy throughout the pandemic could be attributed to a need to represent their social nature in something as normal as 'corporate belonging'. In such a belonging, students as detached individuals would appeal to university and/or religious institutions to create meaning (Perfect 2021, p.56). Through digitalisation, chaplains have been able to remain useful and relevant as they like to be found wherever there is an identifiable need (Cadge, 2020). Despite this, the ability to create an online presence has not replaced the preference for in-person meetings. Rather, for groups that have been able to congregate online, the virtual has fostered anticipation for the opportunity to meet 'in real life'. This is an acknowledgment by students and staff of the somewhat superficiality and the fatigue caused by the digital, perhaps because of its ubiquity in contemporary life.

In the addition to the digitalisation, I was led to another transformation of approach, on becoming cognisant of the availability of potential research samples. I had anticipated,

pre-pandemic, that gaining access to the groups would be facile. However, it is no corollary to equate chaplain enthusiasm with students that are happy to attend chaplaincy events throughout the pandemic or allow me to join them in a research capacity. Without a group to observe and join, one chaplain regrettably informed me, there was little for him, as gatekeeper, to welcome me into, despite his personal appreciation for my project's aims. Including attempts at renegotiating access, I also received recommendations for prospective samples from those chaplains that politely declined my request. This necessity for adaptation of my sample selection method demonstrated how increasingly difficult access issues were becoming.

I soon began taking an interest in autoethnography as it seemed valuable to record my own research experiences in diary format as useful data for my final thesis. This transformation occurred within my methodological perspective as it seemed prudent to produce a personal account as a university student during the pandemic, alongside the recording of the faith lives of other Catholic university students that I endeavoured to study. In the same way that diversity is represented in chaplaincy, my postgraduate research student's perspective would not be replicable to the majority of (undergraduate) students because of the idiosyncratic and solitary nature of research. Nevertheless, some helpful parallels include: appreciating the distance incurred physically from friends, peers, substituting the lecture hall or seminar room for Zoom, or facing restrictions on library access. The practical transformation brought by the pan-digitalisation that has characterized studenthood throughout 2020 and 2021 will leave significant marks in the collective memory of all those studying at this time. Such physical detachment has caused disembedding from those sites that constitute the university experience, for example lecture halls, labs, libraries, campus coffee shops, pubs for the majority, with the addition of chaplaincy spaces, chapels, for others. Giddens (1991) describes disembedding as extracting 'social relations from local contexts of interaction' and reappropriating them 'across indefinite spans of time-space' (Giddens 1991, p. 21). The intellectual stimulation and inspiration that one associates with the university experience, whether through formal meetings or spontaneous 'water cooler' moments with tutors and peers, has been largely lost as the student is dislocated from their intended social and physical environment (Perfect, 2021).

Without this first-hand experience, my research will have undoubtedly gained a different angle and like any good ethnography close attention is paid to the data collected, rather than perhaps the data one wishes one might have collected. An ethnographer's commitment to realism engenders authenticity, however manifest. What has been crucial to recognize is that, despite any initial disappointment and the ostensibly untimely nature of the pandemic for this project, is the wealth of data that would not have been attainable otherwise. Despite appearances, the pandemic can afford new opportunities for knowledge generation. In the social sciences, I believe we are just at the beginning of the wealth of incoming research studies that attend to the experiences of people throughout and in the aftermath of this COVID-19 pandemic. In my own field - the sociology of religion -it will be fascinating to observe in what ways the experience of the virus itself and state interventions have affected people's engagement with religion and spirituality in the UK.

Conclusion

In conclusion, whilst I may not be able to operationalize my ideal ethnography, one's methodological priority is to produce data that is deeply authentic – and that surely is the purpose of all and any research. The plight that all university students have experienced over the last 12 months or so deserves attention. In order to provide a 'best account' (Taylor, 1989) of Catholic chaplaincy life, it requires acknowledging, the unavoidable complexities and the necessary transformations that help to provide a richer, more nuanced story.

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