Transformation to socially distanced research: Reflections from qualitative social sciences fieldwork

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Introduction

Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, a proliferation of resources emerged on the transformation, mitigation, and adaptation of social science research projects (see Lupton, 2020; Lobe et al., 2020). Many of these include redefining the 'field' – with travel bans and enforced social distancing removing the possibility of in-situ research. For many, the 'field' became a predominantly digital, online space. Whilst online research methods are not a new phenomenon, they have rapidly increased in pervasiveness and popularity. As a result, methodologies and data collection methods have, and continue, to evolve. Here, I offer personal reflections from my international fieldwork interviewing students and key stakeholders involved in the student housing landscape in Dublin on the transformation from face-to-face to socially distanced research. I discuss the opportunities and challenges involved in this transformation, including flexibility, cost, understanding of place, recruitment, and sustaining connections. In doing so, I provoke a space for reflection, rather than presenting a 'how to' guide, for the planning of future qualitative social sciences research.

The digital shift

In March 2020 I was in Dublin conducting face-to-face interviews and focus groups for my PhD research on the financialisation of student housing. A UK based researcher, I was two weeks into my trip when on 12th March Ireland announced the first of its pandemic related restrictions, announcing the closure of its schools and colleges. Initially, as I had another two weeks of accommodation in Dublin paid for, I was committed to remaining. However, as the severity of the pandemic became more apparent, I paused my fieldwork and returned to the UK. Whilst research projects across the globe were paused or delayed, for others, funding clocks and deadlines kept ticking. I, like many others, faced the challenge of conducting research in a socially distanced world.

Cue the digital shift. After a short pause, my research continued relatively smoothly. I had built up contacts from previous time spent in Dublin, and snowballing assisted in identifying future interview participants. Face-to-face interviews became online or telephone interviews. To encourage recruitment, participants were initially given the choice of either a phone call or a video call using Zoom. Where a phone call was chosen, a WhatsApp voice call was used where possible to avoid international call charges. Prior to the interviews, participants were emailed a consent form and asked to either sign and return the form or reply in writing that

they were happy to proceed. As the research progressed, I noticed participants favoured phone over video interviews. I was mindful that due to 'stay at home' messages many of my research participants would be participating from their own homes, and not all would have a private space in which to participate. This was also the case in my position as a researcher. A phone interview therefore gave participants greater control of the setting of the interview. Several participants were out walking during our interview, with one explaining they had left their apartment due to noisy construction work outside. Phone interviews therefore offered participants greater convenience and flexibility, as well as providing the anonymity of non-face-to-face interaction. Flexibility in the medium that participants can take part in qualitative research can improve participant access to research (Heath et al., 2018).

The biggest challenge came when seeking new participants beyond the scope of snowballing. I had previously benefited from being 'in' the field, attending events and being able to make face-to-face introductions to potential participants. In a socially distanced world, identifying and motivating potential participants proved more difficult. Using purposive sampling, potential informants were invited to participate via email or Twitter (if they had a public and active profile). Though some participants were recruited this way, I was often met with silence. Occasionally, initial enthusiasm from participants was short-lived and they disconnected soon after the conversation moved from discussing the research topic itself to confirming the interview and gaining informed consent. This proved both frustrating and time-consuming. I began to question the importance of my research – did this mean people weren't interested in the research? Did this mean the research wasn't meaningful? Whilst the pandemic could suggest a limit to snowballing, other scholars have commented upon the suitability of an online snowball approach using gatekeepers (Souleimanov, in Krause et al., 2021). However, without the benefit of a gatekeeper, my experience supports literature that access and rapport can be difficult to establish online (Jowett et al., 2011). Kristensen and Ravn (2015, p.725) note how researchers 'suffer personal costs from being repeatedly turned down, and embarrassment and faintheartedness can easily become their daily partners in a slow recruitment process'. It is important to highlight the recruitment process as emotional work that 'should not be underestimated' (ibid, p.725).

Discussion

The COVID-19 pandemic has transformed our experiences of social sciences research. Whilst in-person research has traditionally been perceived as the 'gold-standard' for qualitative data collection (Reñosa et al., 2021), the ongoing pandemic continues to present obstacles for in-person research. This requires approaching flexibility as 'a necessary tool' in the research process (Billo and Hiemstra, 2013, p.317). Souleimanov (in Krause et al., 2021) proposes a hybrid approach to data collection where possible, suggesting distributing online questionnaires and following up with respondents with particularly interesting answers for interviews during 'post-lockdown' stages of the research. Beyond interviews, Zukerman (in Krause et al., 2021) suggest archived primary and secondary materials, including ethnographies, field reports, and journalists' renderings, can be important substitutes for field research. The digital shift presented my research with unique opportunities and challenges, most notably that research could continue to some degree amidst a pandemic. Financial savings and reduced time

required are important advantages. Whilst my ability to observe happenings in the field were curtailed by the pandemic, to some extent I was able to achieve 'remote embeddedness' through online observations and interviews (Howlett, 2021). Howlett (2021) noted how digital methods revealed angles of the field that would not normally be observed during in-personal fieldwork. However, this could not replace 'being in' Dublin itself, experiencing and living in the city I was researching. I built a stronger rapport with research participants I met face-to-face. These participants remained more engaged with the research over time and were more willing to participate in longitudinal research.

It is important to recognise that the digital shift is not possible for all research projects. In the context of my research, I did not experience language barriers, nor differences in time zone, and all participants had access to and were confident in using technology. In their research on land transformation in West Bengal, Banerjee (2021) highlights participants access to technology and network connectivity as a major constraint. Furthermore, Reñosa et al. (2012) discuss the challenges collecting qualitative data in four 'resource-constrained' settings. Even when access to technology is possible, Mirua (in Krause et al., 2021) explains how due to concerns about surveillance, conducting interviews on Zoom or similar online platforms with their participants in China is not possible. Technological advancements, accessibility, and security play a major role in contemporary social research.

COVID-19 is a global, but geographical uneven, pandemic. Remote research can offer a valuable opportunity to rise to the challenge of social distancing whilst maintaining data collection efforts. However, differently abled populations may encounter different barriers to remote research (Reñosa et al., 2021.) Social science researchers must therefore remain context-sensitive (Holloway and Todres, 2003). Looking to the future, it is important to consider the lasting impacts of the pandemic on the practice of conducting social sciences research. What are the impacts of conducting research from significant temporal and spatial distances on research data, the researcher, and the participants themselves? I conclude by suggesting that future social sciences research should consider a blended approach to data collection, combining elements of both face-to-face and socially distanced research. Researcher flexibility is important and, when possible, research can benefit from offering participants a choice of participation method. Regardless of pandemic-related restrictions, a flexible approach to data collection and field research is essential.

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