DOING FIELDWORK IN A PANDEMIC

Crowdsourced document initiated by Deborah Lupton (@DALupton, d.lupton@unsw.edu.au) on 17 March 2020. Please do add comments and resources below as appropriate

Isolation measures to contain the spread of COVID-19 means that social researchers who conduct face-to-face fieldwork (interviews, focus groups, participant observation, ethnographies etc) are now faced with the challenge of either delaying or re-inventing their methods so that they can continue their research until these measures are relaxed.

Social research has been conducted online for many years, of course. There are many examples of using online survey tools or doing content analyses or ethnographies using existing online interactions as research materials. Interviews have been conducted by phone or Skype for a long time. But this document is directed more at how to turn fieldwork that was initially planned as using face-to-face methods into a more ‘hands-off’ mode. People have added material about ‘born digital’ research (content already generated on the internet by online interactions), however, which provides an alternative source of social research materials.

This crowdsourced document provides a space for people to share their methods for doing fieldwork in a pandemic - specifically, ideas for avoiding in-person interactions by using mediated forms that will achieve similar ends.

Please add your ideas below - and do share useful references if available.

NB: Deborah also curates a community Facebook page ‘Innovative Social Research Methods’ which may be of interest for those wanting to think about new and creative ways of doing social research .https://www.facebook.com/groups/333716010504710/

Table of contents

Table of contents
- Photo/Video/Voice Elicitation
Diaries/journaling

Re-enactment Videos

Using Wearable Cameras (and other first-person perspective tech)

Epistolary Interviews

Online Discussion Platforms

Cultural/Mobile Probes

The Story Completion Method

App-based Methods

Using Google/Microsoft Forms for Data Collection

Autoethnography (added by F. Güzin Agca-Varoglu)

Netnography/Virtual Methods (added by Gabriella Wulff)

Digital Methods and Quali-Quant analysis (added by Anders Kristian Munk)

Using YouTube (and Online Video) for (Teaching) Observational Studies (added by Robin Smith)

Experimenting with Online Live Action Role Play (O-LARPs) (added by Alex Taylor)

Using YouTube for observational studies (added by Robin Smith)

Autoethnography (added by F. Güzin Agca-Varoglu)

LSE Digital Ethnography Collective Reading List

Arts-based project combined with Skype interviews (added by Nicole Brown)
**Photo/Video/Voice Elicitation**

A method that involves asking research participants to use a camera or voice recording app (often on their smartphone) to take photos or make videos or voice memos about their everyday practices and interactions that they can then share with the researchers. Researchers can provide them with questions or prompts to direct their recordings and documentations.

**References**

Ahlin, Tanja, and Fangfang Li (2019). From Field Sites to Field Events: Creating the field with information and communication technologies (ICTs). *Medicine, Anthropology and Theory* 6(2): 1-24. doi.org/10.17157/mat.6.2.655

http://www.medanthrotheory.org/read/11334/from-field-sites-to-field-events


**Diaries/journaling**

These methods can also be combined with asking participants to complete diaries or journals using pen and paper, voice memos or online platforms or apps. Diaries can also be combined with interviews and other methods, where sometimes the diary can act as a prompt for further discussion. Diaries can be structured (like questionnaire) and aiming for quantitative analysis, or semi- or unstructured - asking for more free-flowing reflection. Keeping in touch with participants is very important, especially for longer-term
studies, as this maintains participation (attrition can be an issue). Also receiving some entries early on in the process and giving feedback may help as sometimes relevance can be an issue too. Diaries can be used over months or hours, depending on the focus of the study. They can use interval-based sampling (i.e. record something every hour or every day) or event-based (i.e. record something when it occurs, which may be more irregular). Diaries can take many different forms including visual, collage, photo-based as well as written or spoken - it is important to consider the participants and what they would find easy to use (ask them - piloting is essential) and also what you will be able to analyse within the analytical approach you have chosen.

References

On using “Digital diary”:
Ahlin, Tanja, and Fangfang Li (2019). From Field Sites to Field Events: Creating the field with information and communication technologies (ICTs). Medicine, Anthropology and Theory 6(2): 1-24.doi.org/10.17157/mat.6.2.655
http://www.medanthrotheory.org/read/11334/from-field-sites-to-field-events


[If it’s ok to add some things to this - here’s some more diary research suggestions - suggestions/annotations by Emily Henderson @EmilyFrascatore - feel free to contact me about diary research!]:

3 great guide books on this type of research:


Day, M., & Thatcher, J. (2009). “I'm Really Embarrassed That You're Going to Read This …”: Reflections on Using Diaries in Qualitative Research. Qualitative Research in

Harvey, L. (2011). Intimate reflections: private diaries in qualitative research. Qualitative Research, 11(6), 664-682. doi:10.1177/1468794111415959 [A fascinating method where participants keep diaries but don’t show them to the researcher - the diaries act as prompts]

Waddington, K. (2005). Using diaries to explore the characteristics of work-related gossip: Methodological considerations from exploratory multimethod research. Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology, 78(2), 221-236. doi:10.1348/096317905X40817 [This one really picks up how diaries can help to record data from scenarios that would not be easily researched using e.g. observation]

Williamson, I., Leeming, D., Lyttle, S., & Johnson, S. (2012). ‘It should be the most natural thing in the world’: exploring first-time mothers’ breastfeeding difficulties in the UK using audio-diaries and interviews. Maternal & Child Nutrition, 8(4), 434-447. doi:10.1111/j.1740-8709.2011.00328.x [This one is interesting as it shows how tracking everyday experiences over a relatively short period of time reveals many different emotions and practices]


Bartlett, R. (2012). Modifying the Diary Interview Method to Research the Lives of People With Dementia. Qualitative Health Research, 22(12), 1717-1726. doi:10.1177/1049732312462240 [This one is great as it is about adapting the method in different ways for different participants, e.g. using collage]
Re-enactment Videos

Re-enactment videos have been used in ethnographic fieldwork as a way of documenting people’s everyday practices (often in the home). Researchers have usually done the video-making as they follow their participants around, asking questions as they go. This method can be revised to ask the participants to make their own re-enactment videos, using their phone or possibly provided with a wearable video camera, such as a GoPro action camera (see more below) and then sharing the videos online with the researchers.

References


Using Wearable Cameras (and other first-person perspective tech)

Using small wearable cameras such as GoPro action cameras (often used by people to film their participation in action sports) can be a way of doing ‘walk-alongs’ - or in the case of the project by Pink, Sumartojo and colleagues cited below, ‘ride-alongs’. They gave a GoPro to cyclists to wear on their helmets during one of their regular commutes to work. The camera was turned on by the cyclist when they were preparing to leave for work, recorded their ride and was turned off once they had reached their destination. The videos were viewed together by the researchers and the participants, with
questions asked about the cyclists’ experiences of using self-tracking devices and reviewing their data. This post-video interview could be conducted using Skype or similar, or could be combined with cultural probes, diaries or the like.

Think of the many possibilities of using these kinds of wearable cameras for ethnographic research - dance-alongs, eat-alongs, sing-alongs ....


**Epistolary Interviews**

Epistolary interviews, first described by Debenham (2001), are asynchronous, one-to-one interviews mediated by technology.

The method allows both interviewer and respondent to select suitable interview times, provides time to consider questions and responses, and eliminates the need for transcription. The interviewer sets the pattern for the formality of the interview, ensuring that the online format is used to organise and facilitate talk rather than to constrain it (Ferguson, 2009). Length, aims and format of the interview, the need for spontaneous or researched responses, and whether reference can be made to external material should be established at the outset.
As interviewer and respondent do not need to be co-present in time, respondents are empowered by being able to choose when to respond. They have time to consider their answers and can, if they choose, make reference to supporting materials. The method also allows a researcher to conduct several interviews simultaneously, so data from one interview can be tested in or used to develop other interviews.

The epistolary nature of such interviews means that, as in a sequence of written letters, a relationship between the correspondents can be established and developed. This can produce thoughtful exchanges in which both interviewer and respondent have opportunities to consider, clarify and expand their meaning.

The method does not aim for neutrality but builds a relationship between researcher and respondent that supports interpretation of the data. To give consistency to the data, the main questions can be worded in the same way each time they are presented.

References


Online Discussion Platforms

Instead of conducting focus groups face-to-face, there are platforms available that can customise an online group discussion that can be moderated in real-time. You can upload your questions and check in to observe people typing in their answers, meaning you can ask them to elaborate or explain in real-time. Settings can be arranged so that participants can see each others’ responses in real-time if you wish to encourage a group discussion. The discussion can be held over a number of days to allow people time to participate or add to their responses.
**References**


**Cultural/Mobile Probes**

This is an approach from design research, involving developing kits of materials that are left with research participants to complete in their own time. Once completed, they can be sent back to the researchers. Traditionally, these materials are analogue: paper cards with instructions for completion (invented by Bill Gaver and team). Probes may also be sent to participants, completed and sent back via mobile phones. The approach is then called mobile probes.

**References**


The Story Completion Method

Story completion is a writing method that can take place in face-to-face situations using pen and paper but can also be conducted using online tools such as SurveyMonkey. Alternatively, mail can be used to send the prompts to participants and they can complete them in their own time, as is often the case with cultural probe materials. The method involves the use of story ‘stems’, in which a fictional character is introduced and commonly, they face a dilemma they need to resolve. Participants are asked to complete the story. The completed narratives are then analysed for what they reveal about understandings, discourses or imaginaries concerning the topic of the story stems.

References

Story completion. Available at Story completion

(A recent special issue dedicated to Story Completion)

https://methods.sagepub.com/case/story-completion-method-more-than-human-theory-health-information

**App-based Methods**

Methods that use the connectivity of smartphone apps to get in touch with participants for in-situ, real-time research

**References**


**Using Google/Microsoft Forms for Data Collection**

Google forms could be used to collect basic demographic information and ask open questions.

More on using the Google platform:  
https://www.thinkwithgoogle.com/marketing-resources/data-measurement/google-plus-qualitative-research-best-practices/

GDPR is important. QUALTRICS (although it requires a paid license)  
http://www.qualtrics.com

added by Mark Wong, University of Glasgow, @UoG_MarkWong:
N.b. Google Form is not GDPR compliant in EU countries and the UK, as data is not stored on servers located within the EU.

**Microsoft Forms** (part of Office365) is an easy-to-use tool to set up online questionnaires, opinion polls, and quizzes. Easy to make visually appealing questionnaires quickly.  
https://forms.office.com/

**OnlineSurveys.ac.uk** (formerly known as Bristol Online Surveys) is a UK-based tool commonly used to set up online questionnaires, which is more targeted towards academic research.  
https://www.onlinesurveys.ac.uk/

Institutional/personal accounts may be required for the above tools. If you are using Microsoft Forms/Office365 via an institutional account, check with your institution data management team/guidelines to ensure data is saved within the EU only.

### The Ethics of Moving from Face-to-Face Fieldwork

This section is for discussing ethical issues related to moving from face-to-face to remote fieldwork. For a start, if your human research ethics committee has already approved your face-to-face methods and you wish to modify these along the lines of some of the suggestions above, most ethics committees will require a modification request and approval process.

You will also need to consider the ‘affective atmospheres’ of conducting any kind of social research in a pandemic, when normal routines are disrupted and many people are feeling uncertain and worried, or are ill or caring for ill family members. On the other hand, with people more confined, feeling bored or restless but in good health, they may
Welcome the opportunity to be part of a research project. Consider your target participant group very carefully when making decisions about the best way forward.

If you decide to use online data collection methods that engage with pre-existing material people have uploaded (as opposed to material you have specifically asked them to generate following a consent process, which includes many of the methods listed here), you will need to carefully consider the ethical issues. Check the Association of Internet Researchers’ document discussing these issues, available here: https://aoir.org/reports/ethics3.pdf

Books on Innovative and Creative Methods


Teaching Field Observation

This section is a bit different in context from the others. The use case is instructors who are teaching field observation techniques. How do we replicate the “outside” experience where students can go to a public place and observe behavior? Are there videos of public spaces with behaviors that could be coded? Could we use TV shows or movies as a proxy for those public spaces? What suggestions do you have?

I see that Robin Smith has added a relevant section below. Will delete this one as redundant later...
Autoethnography (added by F. Güzin Agca-Varoglu)

The autoethnographic method gives the opportunity to create a research, where the researcher puts “self” in the process as a subject. My students had to visit places like cafes, hospitals, tea-houses, mosques, museums etc. for their fieldwork. Because of the outbreak I want them to write an autoethnographic essay drawn on social distance experiences and also temporal/spatial change in their everyday lives. It could be a substitution for cancelled homework in this period that they should stay away from other people.

References


Netnography/Virtual Methods (added by Gabriella Wulff)

I often use netnography/virtual methods to conduct ethnographic research online. I also recommend my students to look into the research. Here are some reading suggestions:


I also found this one, that might be useful:


**Digital Methods and Quali-Quant analysis (added by Anders Kristian Munk)**

I encourage my students to consider ways in which computational analysis of born digital material can complement fieldwork (e.g. as a way to map relational fields) and/or be thought of as a form of fieldwork in its own right (e.g. by locating digital traces in specific media cultures/socio-technical infrastructures or by using computation exploratively and descriptively to discover questions and concerns from actors online).

**Suggested readings:**


For our own controversy mapping students I have made the following set of tutorials centered on Wikipedia as a field and introducing a range of digital methods/techniques:

- [https://medium.com/@EthnographicMachines/introduction-to-controversy-mapping-6961f03f9a8a](https://medium.com/@EthnographicMachines/introduction-to-controversy-mapping-6961f03f9a8a)
- [https://medium.com/@EthnographicMachines/mapping-controversies-with-digital-methods-scrapers-crawlers-apis-17e0c96c340a](https://medium.com/@EthnographicMachines/mapping-controversies-with-digital-methods-scrapers-crawlers-apis-17e0c96c340a)
- [https://medium.com/@EthnographicMachines/mapping-controversies-hand-in-1-d3ec9f1d0dc0](https://medium.com/@EthnographicMachines/mapping-controversies-hand-in-1-d3ec9f1d0dc0)
- [https://medium.com/@EthnographicMachines/introduction-to-semantic-analysis-with-cortext-19f355b7289a](https://medium.com/@EthnographicMachines/introduction-to-semantic-analysis-with-cortext-19f355b7289a)

### Using YouTube (and Online Video) for (Teaching) Observational Studies (added by Robin Smith)

YouTube (other video platforms are available…) has increasingly been used by those carrying out observational studies, sometimes as a means to access perspicuous phenomena that are hard to access, at other times as means to an end (my ethnography students are currently facing this challenge). A number of ethnomethodological studies have used YouTube and online video as data and there is no good reason that ethnographers more generally who are interested in things like interaction in public space, family interactions, public disputes, protests, the circulation of violence etc etc, shouldn’t make use of the resource. Some papers (including a discussion of the ethics of ‘any-misation’ (Laurier, 2016) and studies indicating the kinds of possibilities and possible topics below (please add!!):

Laurier, E. (unpublished) Youtube: using third party video as research data


Lloyd, M. " You just took the jump too slowly": A single case analysis of a mountain bike crash. *Social
Interaction. Video-Based Studies of Human Sociality, 2(2).

**Big Brother Style Observations**

If research is about people’s activities and behaviour, having consent to carry out live on-line observations might work well during these times. Researcher places a camera in the home of the participants at a particular agreed room and it gets turned on and off at convenient times where a) activity is taking place and b) it’s convenient and appropriate for the people being observed.

Just a thought as I read this doc. Great initiative!

**Experimenting with Online Live Action Role Play (O-LARPs) (added by Alex Taylor)**

I’ve been involved in Live Action Role Play (LARPs) as a method for imagining futures (specifically for a project on Algorithmic Food Justice). We worked with the Arts Collective Furtherfield who have been developing this as a method. I think there might be ways to move this into the online realm. You’d need to rethink how materials can be integrated into roles and interactions, and probably experiment with different platforms. It might be interesting to take over gaming platforms, possibly something like Roblox.

**References**

As an example, see Planet Cashless 2029, via Furtherfield.


Arts-based project combined with Skype interviews (added by Nicole Brown)

I use arts-based approaches (e.g. work with metaphors, objects, Lego models, collages, etc.) and combine that with Skype interviews, where I hold inter-views (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015) as conversations between the researcher and the participants to make sense of what the arts-based project means and stands for. Participants are given a question (e.g. Who are you? What affects you?) and are asked to find a representation of the response and to take a photo of that object/collage etc and to share that via email with a very brief statement of what they are trying to say. Once you have collected all the data that way you can then arrange for that Skype call to hold a conversation. As a researcher, you can then analyse the representation and the transcript from the interview.

The basis for this approach: human understanding is embodied (Finlay, 2008, 2015) and metaphorical (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003), language is insufficient to explain or describe certain experiences such as pain (e.g. Sontag, 2003; Scarry, 1985), and arts-based approaches can bridge that gap (e.g. Leavy, 2015; Denzin, 2016).


