

Data collection at a distance – Resources for doing research during times of social distancing

In June 2020 the Greater Manchester Research Network hosted a special session about how COVID 19 impacts on our members' experience of collecting data. The membership of the network comprises predominantly of qualitative researchers – many of whom will find their ability to collect data in the usual way severely constrained by the crisis. Many felt that the situation highlights the very issues that always play a role in designing research, e.g. ethical issues, sampling bias and inclusivity. Although the issues are the same, different data collection methods will have different implications on how these are addressed. For example, whereas conducting research online may make it more inclusive for some, because it means that they do not have to travel to participate, it could present significant barriers for others, particularly if they do not have the necessary equipment or skills.

Recruitment of participants

Recruitment of participants is often a challenge and this may become increasingly so when using more remote methods. One member, who was in the situation of having to schedule follow-up interviews with participants who already knew him from a prior interview, pointed out that when he approached the most technological savvy of his participants, even they did not feel comfortable to meet him for an interview online. A lack of trust in the online platform that was going to be used for interviewing may have been to blame.

Lack of trust can be a barrier to recruitment of new participants and this may be heightened in a situation, where it is impossible to meet face-to-face. Network members discussed building trust prior to an online interview by allowing some time for casual phone conversations and/or exchanges of emails. Rather than 'meeting' online for the first time at the interview, it may be better to plan for an online encounter that precedes the actual interview.

Even for data collection methods that do not require face-to-face meetings with participants, e.g. surveys, it is often important to generate momentum for participation by meeting groups of potential participants in person and telling them about the survey – something that is not possible under distancing requirements. As a result, some members reported difficulties in attracting participants to surveys in the current situation.

When contacting participants by email, follow-up is often necessary under normal circumstances. In COVID times, when there is no reply it is often not clear what the reason for this is. Are participants on furlough or too busy to respond, or have they simply lost interest in the research? It is therefore, hard to read the situation with regard to whether it is ok to follow up with participants or not.

This ties in with a general concern about whether it is ethical to conduct research in the present circumstances. Some members reported putting their research on hold for the time being, because they deemed that people are so busy with managing the crisis that asking them to participate in research would be unreasonable. However, not all potential participants are equally busy and some may actually welcome the opportunity to speak to someone about their experience. Therefore, whether it is timely to collect data or not probably depends on the topic and the participants.

Using online communities and social media

When it is not possible to access physical communities for recruitment, a viable solution may be to use online communities or social media instead. Numerous online communities exist already, some of which may be virtual extensions of a geographical community, whereas others will be organised around a community of interest.

Some members have had experiences with using online communities or social media for their research. One member took volunteering week as an opportunity to host a Facebook discussion about people's volunteering experiences. Instigating such a discussion allows the researcher to obtain consent from participants.

There is also the possibility of using posts that have been made on Twitter or other social media or in online communities as data whilst participating in the virtual setting. As in other forms of participant observation, researchers have to make choices about how and to what extent to disclose their participation in these communities and hence inform fellow participants of the fact that what they say may be used as data. Obtaining consent in such situations is more difficult than in a setting that has specifically been set up for the purpose of collecting data.

Moving traditional methods online

The two most prevalent data collection methods, focus groups and interviews, can both be conducted online. However, doing so has implications for who can participate. Most people who are reasonably comfortable with digital platforms and who have a smartphone at their disposal will be able to participate in such online methods. However, people who are digitally excluded will still have to be approached in different ways. Whereas digital methods may level the playing field for people with physical disabilities who often have travel and access problems, they may impede participation of individuals with sensory disabilities. Language issues may also make it more difficult for prospective participants to join in.

Further, whilst participating from one's own home has considerable advantages in terms of time and access, it also has disadvantages with regard to privacy. It cannot be taken for granted that participants have privacy in their own homes, if they do not live by themselves. In addition, they must be able to trust the interviewer(s) that they, in turn, can safeguard confidentiality in their own home setting. Being online is not comparable to meeting face-to-face in a private room, as beyond the scope of the camera there may be additional people who are not visible to the person at the other end.

Network members also pointed out that it is important to factor in sufficient time for building rapport between researcher(s) and participant(s) in digital settings. Time for things to go technically wrong also needs to be allowed and therefore, digitally conducted interviews and focus groups are likely to take longer than those in a physical setting. It was noted that technical difficulties can level power dynamics between researchers and participants, because researchers are often learning along with participants how to operate in a digital environment and, in many cases, participants may be ahead on that journey. Likewise, helping each other navigate the digital environment in itself can build rapport and trust.

Effective preparation is needed on behalf of the organisers of online focus groups. During the group, more time should be given to connect, discuss, explore and a certain flexibility built in to adapt ground rules and expectations for the demands and dynamics of the particular online space. Network members who had already had some experience with online groups cautioned that it is more challenging to 'read' the room during an online discussion and that each individual who participates is more exposed and visible than in a traditional focus group.

When conducting focus groups, breakout rooms are often recommended to make it easier to discuss things, rather than in a large groups of people, particularly if these same people have

never had the chance to meet in person before. The main recommendation seemed to be to keep digital meetings as simple as possible, rather than trying to replicate hands-on processes, as this can create chaos and frustrations that can be harder to disperse than would be the case in face-to-face interaction.

Creative methods

It was also pointed out that some more creative methods may present solutions to the dilemma researchers currently face.

One idea was to conduct interviews incrementally over time using email. This may be useful in cases, where interviewees are reluctant to join an online meeting with the researcher.

In times of social distancing it is still possible to go for walks with participants. Therefore, it may be worth considering walking interviews instead of online interviews. As always, the weather is a potential barrier and, in light of the distance that needs to be kept between the interviewer and the participant, it may be challenging to record the interview. However, technologies such as lapel microphones may help with this.

Network members also thought that it may be promising to try a mix of digital and offline techniques. Participants could be sent materials to produce certain items, be asked to complete diaries, or they could be asked to take photos. These could then be discussed further during an online meeting using screen share functionality. In the case of physical artefacts, it would be possible to hold these up to the camera and pointing to details that one wishes to discuss, rather than using screen share.

One network member had experiences with conducting online storytelling workshops. These use a variety of techniques to enable participants to tell their own story about a certain topic.

Resources

- The Greater Manchester Third Sector Research Network meets every two months to discuss issues related to researching the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector in Greater Manchester. Upcoming meetings are listed here: <https://www.gmcvo.org.uk/Greater-Manchester-Third-Sector-Research-Network>
- Sage MethodSpace is a great resource, particularly this thread: <https://www.methodspace.com/research-disruption-your-burning-questions/>, where you can also ask questions as they arise.
- The webinar *When the Field is Online* by Janet Salmons is an excellent starting point for thinking through the implications of collecting data remotely: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=swuTF7Q4gTs>
- *Internet Research: Ethical Guidelines 3.0* by the Association of Internet Researchers, 2019, <https://aoir.org/reports/ethics3.pdf>
- Deborah Lupton has put together a crowd-sourced document entitled *Doing Fieldwork in a Pandemic*, accessible at <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1cIGjGABB2h2qbduTgfqribHmog9B6P0NvMgVuiHZCl8/e/dit?ts=5e88ae0a#>

- An example of storytelling: COVID Conversations www.communityreporter.net/covid-conversations
- COVID Realities – a research project about being a parent on a low income during COVID. This includes a space for methodological issues <https://covidrealities.org/research>
- Mural (www.mural.co/) and Flinga (flinga.fi) are visual online tools for collaboration. They allow participants to put up post-it like comments during virtual group discussions.
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CKKIQ4yGtl4> Creating meaning through online communities
- The Consultation Institute *Digital and analogue methods to consider* <http://www.tciwiki.com/wiki/approachingconsultation-differently-in-times-of-social-distancing-digital-and-analoguemethods-to-consider/>
- GOV.UK *Social Media Research Guidance; using social media for social research* <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/social-media-research-guidance-using-social-media-for-social-research>
- The SRA *Seven tips for managing large sample sizes in short term online communities* <https://the-sra.org.uk/SRA/Blog/Seven%20tips%20for%20managing%20large%20sample%20size%20in%20short%20term%20online%20communities.aspx>
- The National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement *Online Engagement: A guide to creating and running virtual meetings and events* https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/sites/default/files/publication/creating_and_running_virtual_events_-_april_2020_v1.pdf
- Materials from an online seminar about reaching new audiences in a virtual world, hosted by the Wessex Public Involvement Network. <https://reachingoutson.com/2020/07/13/reaching-new-public-members-in-a-virtual-world/>
- Blog by a researcher from University of Birmingham's City REDi institute looking at conducting qualitative research during times of uncertainty <https://blog.bham.ac.uk/cityredi/conducting-qualitative-research-during-times-of-uncertainty/>