

# Carrying out qualitative research under lockdown – Practical and ethical considerations

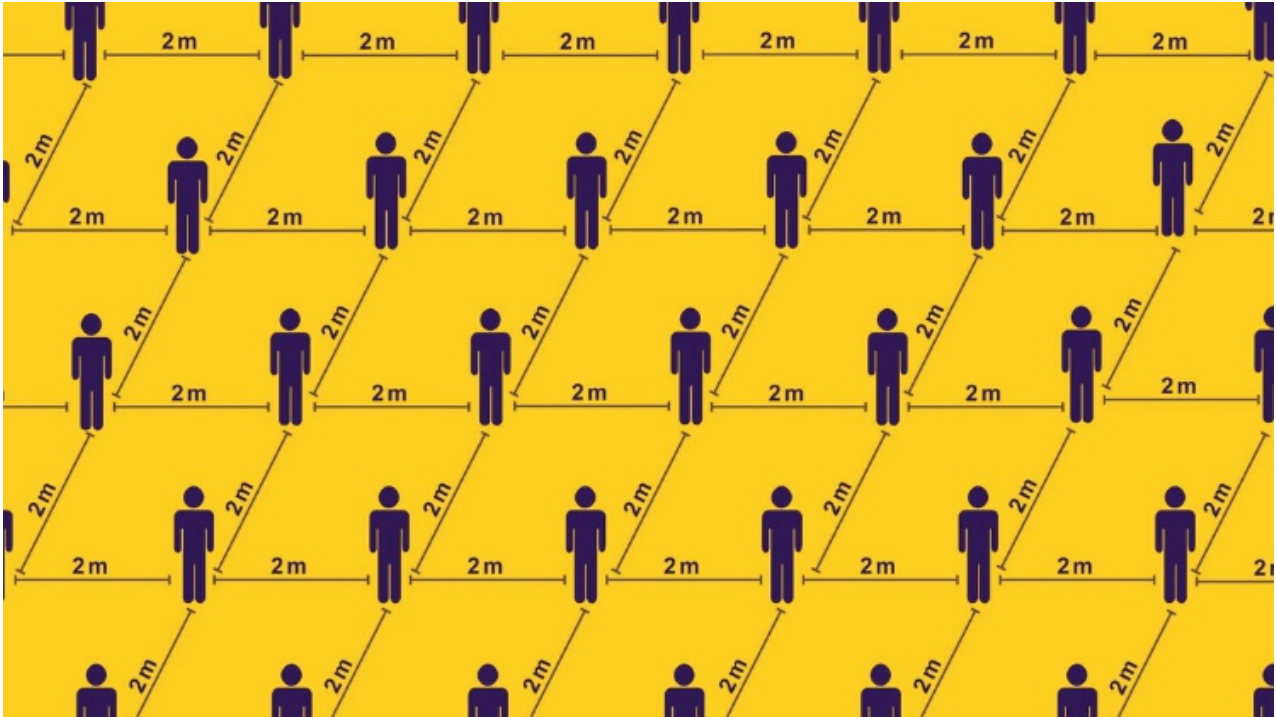
*How can qualitative researchers collect data during social-distancing measures? Adam Jowett outlines several techniques researchers can use to collect data without face-to-face contact with participants. Bringing together a number of previous studies, he also suggests such techniques have their own methodological advantages and disadvantages and that while these techniques may appear particularly apt during the coronavirus crisis, researchers should take time to reflect on ethical issues before re-designing their studies.*

The Covid-19 crisis is affecting the way that we work and we're all learning how to work more remotely. It may also affect the way we go about conducting research. Many researchers are having to suspend data collection or re-design their projects taking into account social-distancing measures.

Much qualitative research typically relies on face-to-face interaction for data collection through interviews, focus groups and field work. But there are myriad ways researchers and students can collect qualitative data online or gather textual data that already exists. A book by social scientists Virginia Braun, Victoria Clarke and Deborah Gray titled [Collecting Qualitative Data: A practical guide to textual, media and virtual techniques](#) provides useful guidance on what these various techniques have to offer, what kinds of research questions they are most suitable for answering as well as specific ethical issues that require consideration. Other useful resources that have been crowd sourced include the [LSE Digital Ethnography Collective Reading List](#) and Deborah Lupton's [Doing Fieldwork in a Pandemic](#). These techniques can be broadly divided into data generation techniques (where the researcher generates data) and data sampling techniques (where the researcher collects texts that are already in existence).

For data generation, perhaps the most obvious is the use of [video-calling](#) (e.g. Skype/Zoom) or the use of [text-based instant messaging](#) (e.g. WhatsApp) to virtually replicate the face-to-face interview or focus group. Notwithstanding problems, such as participants not being able to use the technology or having a poor WIFI connection, video-calling is a close substitute to in-person interviewing and can allow for data to be collected over large geographical areas even when social distancing measures are not in place. In addition to video-calling, [online surveys](#) can also be used to collect qualitative data by asking respondents to type their responses to open-ended questions. Although qualitative surveys generate less rich data than interviews, they do maintain some of the benefits of qualitative research (e.g. the generation of unanticipated findings) and allow for data collection from a larger number of people, relatively quickly.

In terms of data sampling techniques, there is a wealth of potential data sources available. For example, print media (e.g. [news](#) and [magazine articles](#)) can easily be used to analyse social representations of a wide range of topics. Broadcast media (e.g. [television](#) or [radio](#) discussion programmes) can imitate focus group discussions on topics, meanwhile published [autobiographies](#) or [blogs](#) can provide first-person narratives for examining a wide range of human experience. Social scientists have also conducted qualitative analyses of [textbooks](#), [websites](#), [political speeches](#) and [debates](#), [patient information literature](#) and so on. [Online discussion forums](#) and [social media](#) have also been used to examine a wide range of social phenomena. There may even be open-access qualitative [data archives](#) of research interviews and focus groups that you could use for your own purposes. Such sources of data can be useful whether you're amid a global pandemic or not. For instance, they are easily accessible and the researcher is arguably examining the 'real' social world rather than artificially generating data specifically for the purposes of research. For student research, it can also be less ethically risky than inexperienced researchers interviewing people on potentially sensitive topics.



While all of these are viable options, they come with their own methodological advantages and disadvantages. For example, some may question whether media sources produced for specific purposes and that have undergone unknown editorial processes are valid sources of data for research. This depends on what research question you are trying to answer. While the validity of novel data sources is an important issue to consider, the validity of interviews and focus groups have also been [questioned](#), not least due to social desirability biases and researchers directing the lines of questioning. Interviewing people online during a global pandemic (which is variously affecting everyone's state of mind and behaviour) may also have implications for the validity of the research. Some might decide they wish to study the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic itself. While such studies might provide a useful snapshot of life during the crisis, the benefit of hindsight might provide a fuller picture. There are also complex ethical issues to consider when thinking of conducting research during a global pandemic and each of the methodological techniques suggested above come with unique ethical considerations.

The first thing to bear in mind is that the health and wellbeing of participants and researchers should take priority over research timelines and thesis/dissertation deadlines. So, while it may be possible to change your interviews from face-to-face to online interviews, researchers should consider whether asking people to participate in research at this time will put them under any additional unnecessary stress. For example, attempting to conduct online interviews with health professionals would most likely be inappropriate in the current context. Furthermore, if you are thinking of modifying your method of data collection, you should ensure you inform your ethics committee beforehand.

While analysing media content, policy documents and other official public content is relatively straightforward ethically speaking, content generated online by the public (e.g. forums, blogs, vlogs, reader comments) can be more ethically controversial. The key consideration is what constitutes 'public' or 'private' online and how might such research be received by those individuals or communities whose content has been used. Researchers should also check if their professional bodies have any specific guidance regarding online data collection. For example, the British Psychological Society has [ethical guidelines for internet-mediated research](#). Researchers should also not assume that they do not require ethical approval to conduct such research.

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This pandemic is leading us all to reflect on how we do things. Researchers should take time to pause and reflect on whether data collection can be postponed. For example, if you're doing a PhD you could focus on desk-based aspects of the research (e.g. literature reviewing, writing up a section of the thesis). However, some students (e.g. Masters students) may not have this luxury and in the mid to longer term we may want to consider how we can conduct qualitative research at a physical distance. Many things about how we work may change as a result of this crisis and how we conduct qualitative research may well be one of them.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [comments policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.*

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