Impact of Social Sciences Blog: How the pandemic has transformed research methods and ethics: 3 lessons from 33 rapid responses

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How the pandemic has transformed research methods and ethics: 3 lessons from 33 rapid responses

This is the fourth post in a six-week series: **Rapid or Rushed?** exploring rapid response publishing in covid times.

As part of the series, there will be a virtual roundtable on Friday 6th November, 1.30pm featuring Professor Joshua Gans (Economics in the Age of COVID-19, MIT Press and Richard Horton (The COVID-19 Catastrophe, Polity Press and Editor of The Lancet) in conversation with Philippa Grand (Bristol University Press) and Qudsiya Ahmed (Cambridge University Press, India)

Register here

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*In this post, **Helen Kara** and **Su-ming Khoo**, editors of three rapid response e-books on Researching in the Age of COVID19, outline how the pandemic has transformed the way academics conduct research. Drawing on their experience working with 90 researchers worldwide, they discuss: how the pivot to digital research methods has generated creativity and flexibility- whilst also posing challenges, how the digital divide has become more complex and new ethical dilemmas that have been posed by the pandemic.*

A scant five months ago we set out to create an e-book on Researching in the Age of COVID-19. Our call for chapters – despite the strict 2.5-week timescale – yielded over 100 submissions. Published with Policy Press as part of their Rapid Response series, we now have not one but three e-books, subtitled , Care and Resilience, Ethics and Creativity. Each has 11 chapters and all 33, collectively, provide a fascinating insight into the wide range of methods and ethical approaches being used across the globe. This post is based on information from the 90 researchers worldwide – from Tonga, Finland, Brazil, India, Ghana, the US, and many other countries – who contributed to the books.

Lesson 1: Digital methods have yielded flexibility and creativity in research

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You won't be surprised that much research has been done online, but you may be interested to know that there are many more options than moving in-person interviews onto Skype or Zoom. Working on the gendered socio-economic implications of the pandemic in rural Zimbabwe, Emmanuel Ndhlovu learned that not all his participants had Skype accounts, but they did all have WhatsApp. He found the flexibility of this platform particularly helpful because he could send questions to his participants and they could choose whether to respond through voice notes or typed notes. If clarification was needed, he could call a participant using WhatsApp. This method saved time for participants and saved time and expense for the researcher.

WhatsApp also proved useful in the UK. Nicola Gratton, Ryan Fox and Teri Elder support participatory research among community researchers who have experienced multiple disadvantages. At the start of lockdown, the group was dismayed by the withdrawal of weekly research meetings. A WhatsApp group provided a helpful substitute and facilitated several shifts in the methods and focus of data collection, which encompassed photographs, blogs, diaries, poems, a lockdown recipe book, a 'lockdown survival kit', and podcasts. This process had positive impacts on wellbeing and relationships, and led to a stronger and more resilient research team.

The online pivot has also generated creative research methods. Vanessa Braun, Victoria Clarke and Naomi Moller used story completion with adults to investigate rule-breaking in lockdown in New Zealand and the UK. Participants were presented with fictionalised 'story stems' to complete in writing, a non-intrusive technique which gave participants a high level of control over the data they provided as well as providing an outlet for some strong emotions. Getrude Gwenzi used an online diary method with children in Ghana, Nigeria, and South Africa. Nicola Jones and her colleagues worked with young people in Jordan, Lebanon and the Gaza strip, using diary methods, phone interviews, and digital storytelling within a participatory approach that built on existing relationships from ongoing longitudinal research.

Lesson 2: The digital divide has become more complex

The 'digital divide' featured strongly. Etivina Lovo, studying research ethics in Tonga, wrote of the challenges she experienced in trying to move research with Indigenous peoples online. Deborah Ikhile's community health worker participants in rural Uganda didn't have laptops, and she solved that problem by enlisting the help of a community mobiliser. Natalia Reinoso Chávez and Reyes Castro, working with displaced Afro-Colombian and Indigenous people in Colombia, experienced connectivity difficulties, scarce internet facilities, and cultural and generational gaps in understanding and use of the internet. These and other experiences demonstrate that the 'digital divide' is not a simple binary.

Researchers are using secondary data to solve some of these problems. Paramjeet Chawla, studying urban youth capabilities in India, found that although searching for and obtaining databases could be onerous, the data itself had much more potential than she originally thought. Rafael Goldstein, Rosana Vasques and Maria dos Santos, doing research with waste pickers in Brazil, used data and outputs from previous research, videos, and posts and photos from social media to build a repository about their participants.

Lesson 3: The pandemic has transformed the ethics of research

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Researchers have also been grappling with ethical dilemmas (and trilemmas and quadrilemmas). Vanessa Malila, who works in international development, tackles head-on the COVID-induced tension between individual rights/responsibilities and collective wellbeing. Through a wide-ranging exploratory literature review, she identifies common ethical questions and trends, and suggests that *adaptability and nimble decision-making are key to conducting ethical research in a crisis*. These are certainly qualities we see in the contributions to these e-books. [Helena Vicente and her colleagues in the EU](#) are studying students' perceptions of science. They had planned to hold Science Camps in six European countries, bringing together large groups of students and experts for discussion and debate. Instead, they devised a novel method of holding these events online, taking care not to turn them into just another online class. They made good use of pre-event preparation options for participants, kept the participatory online sessions as short as possible, and offered incentives for attendance. This was a swift and resource-intensive process, yet early indications are that it was worthwhile. The first online event received high levels of participation, more geographical diversity than the researchers could have achieved with an offline event, and participants showed high levels of satisfaction.

A crisis that affects everyone, no matter where they live or how privileged or marginalised they may be, overturns outdated paternalistic Euro-Western ideas that researchers must protect vulnerable participants. *In a global pandemic, anyone may be vulnerable – researcher and participant alike – and this shifts the power balance in research relationships.* Oliver Hooper, Rachel Sandford and Thomas Quarmby reflect on their research in the UK children's social care systems to ask a vital ethical question: when crisis strikes, should existing research be continued, or new research conducted, at all? Other chapters support the suggestion that, at the very least, stopping to rethink research plans when a crisis hits, rather than carrying on regardless, is an ethical imperative.

The pandemic has evidently created a lot of challenges for researchers. Nevertheless, these accounts show that extraordinary times also present opportunities to do really interesting, ethical, creative research.

Note: This post gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

Image credit: Policy Press