

Changing PhD research in response to COVID19: key considerations

*Changing course as a PhD student is hardly uncommon. However, during a crisis, the temptation to respond intellectually combined with the external limitations imposed on pre-existing research plans makes this pull even greater. In this post, **Nimesh Dhungana** outlines his own experience of changing PhD topic in response to a crisis and gives advice for PhD students thinking of doing the same.*

The COVID19 crisis is profoundly shaping the academic sector. Whilst [innovative ways](#) of doing research in crisis context have been found, current and prospective PhD students are in many instances, silently [bearing the brunt](#) of the ongoing uncertainty. Among other changes, it has compelled many to cancel postpone, or change their planned research trajectory.

Whilst the urge to change course in response to a crisis can itself be a major source of anxiety that can interfere with our future research undertaking, it is hardly uncommon.

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Take, for example, my PhD experience. Merely three months into my PhD programme, a major earthquake struck Nepal. As a native of Nepal, I was deeply distracted by the humanitarian crisis triggered by the earthquake. At the same time, the political contestation in the wake of the crisis sparked my intellectual curiosity on the topic of politics of disasters. Despite facing an initial dilemma, I changed my PhD topic from health governance to disaster governance and managed to complete my [PhD research](#) on time.

As we deal with the ongoing crisis, I reflect on some of the methodological 'lessons' from my PhD research. This, by no means, is an exhaustive list of lessons, but meant to supplement [ongoing efforts](#) to support PhD students, who may be impacted by or considering changing the direction of their research.

Lesson 1: Scanning before switching

It is not surprising that an all-encompassing nature of a large-scale crisis can force or tempt us to reorient our research focus. This is common even among experienced researchers. As a prospective or current PhD student, the decision to divert the original research interest should follow careful assessment of the overall crisis context. It is important to avoid being an ['opportunistic researcher'](#), with little regard to the ethical and practical demands of the crisis. Given the time-bound nature of PhD research, taking stock of the situation in relation to one's own intellectual preparation is of vital importance. In my case, before deciding to change my PhD focus, I spent the first few weeks after the crisis keeping track of relevant news articles from Nepal. I compiled key policy and programmatic responses from the government and international aid community, and remotely brainstormed emerging ideas with friends and colleagues in Nepal and beyond. I also kept rough notes, which I could bring to bear in my subsequent analysis. A critical consideration is not to deviate too much from our original research interest. Doing so may mean being inundated by the task of rewriting the literature review or finding a proper framing, for example. Having shifted my research direction from health governance to disaster governance, I managed to keep original focus on 'governance' intact, which significantly reduced the burden of additional background work.

Lesson 2: Thinking beyond 'doing no harm'

To 'do no harm' to research participants is of foremost importance in any social research. This is further heightened in the context of crisis that is characterised by widespread anxiety and even suffering. Indeed, as a major health crisis, protecting oneself and one's research participants against the potential health risk from COVID19 should be our overriding concern. Beyond the risk avoidance approach, our attention should also go into the well-being and rights of our research participants. Crisis often prompts people to share their feelings and experiences. But, often, we tend to overlook the fact that crisis-affected people have the 'right to forget'. They may choose not to talk. Such right and agency of research participants should be respected, as we determine our sample and sampling strategy. Another critical consideration is that if our research involves government officials, policymakers, NGO workers, the data collection process should avoid interfering with their potentially new and pressing responsibilities of handling the crisis.

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Related to above, if an ethnographic fieldwork is considered, it is important to know that 'accessing field' is far from straightforward even within a familiar context. In the current crisis, fieldwork is proving further complicated due to ongoing lockdowns, coupled with international travel restrictions that are not only unpredictable but likely to last longer. Dealing with 'gatekeepers' may demand high levels of patience and creativity.

Lesson 3: Flexibility and improvisation

Crisis is known to spark interesting social scientific questions. But having an intellectual question doesn't mean it is readily researchable, particularly amidst the constrained and unexpected environment of crisis. Instead, doing research in crisis context demands distinct social scientific expertise involving constant flexibility and improvisation. Despite having managed to keep my PhD topic within the familiar realm of 'governance', I was subsequently overwhelmed by the vast landscape of disaster and humanitarian literature, about which I had little to no background knowledge. I struggled to find focus and clarity. This is not to mean the focus must be set at the outset. But it demands continual flexibility and improvisation in order to find a proper framing. Even though I conducted my research in the familiar context of Nepal where I am originally from, my fieldwork was full of surprises. Because of the fluid and uncertain nature of the field, recruiting interviewees proved daunting. I had to change my planned case study because of lack of cooperation from the 'gatekeepers'.

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The difficulty in recruiting people also meant being extra creative about our choice of data sources and data collection methods, moving beyond interviews or surveys, for example, to consider using textual data such as policies, reports etc. The process and extent of improvisation also depends on the timing of PhD research. Because I was in the early stage of my PhD research when the earthquake struck, I was able to change my topic and exercise flexibility in fieldwork. I was also lucky to have a supportive supervisor, who was on board from the time I considered a change in topic, providing strong intellectual and pastoral support throughout my research.

Conclusion

Doing social research means, as [Marshall and Rossman](#) argue, striking a right balance between 'should-do-ability' (intellectual puzzle) 'do-ability' (practical preparation), and 'want-to-do-ability' (personal motivation COVID19 crisis has forced (and enticed) many PhD researchers to change their original research focus. An immediate impulse to change the topic is best avoided, or at least, seriously reconsidered to avoid future disappointments. But if you are personally driven, timing of the PhD research is in your favour, and most crucially, you have a 'big picture' intellectual puzzle that COVID19 has ignited, then changing the course of your PhD research may be a worthwhile journey.

This is an edited version of a post originally published on the [LSE Department of Methodology blog](#).

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