

Professional Challenges Facing Sociologists

Archival Research During COVID-19

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My first visit to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) archive in Geneva, Switzerland was demoralizing. I had corresponded with an ICRC archivist and perused the catalog, but upon arriving I discovered that the boxes I had believed held the material needed for my dissertation thesis were gone. The archivist speculated those boxes may have been lost to fire or rats decades ago. But he also understood the questions I was pursuing, and provided boxes filed close to where the boxes I was looking for should have been. While my initial interest was in professional correspondences, the private documents I found in those other boxes—diaries, manuscript drafts, bible study notes—revealed the ethical framework behind the establishment of the Red Cross movement. Unexpectedly, this became the topic of my first book, *Above the Fray: The Red Cross and the Making of the Humanitarian NGO Sector* (2020). Even though many sources about

the Red Cross are publicly available, my time in Geneva proved crucial for the project.

While some archives are curated with the specific intention of serving a scholarly community, most are organized to serve the needs of a living organization, and thus many researchers share my experience. The archives they visit first confirm their research plans, but then reveal unexpected discoveries that would have remained hidden without an in-person visit. While the ideal is to have a fully funded year or more for archival research, many visits happen over the summer, and COVID-19 has stalled many archival research plans.

My summer plan was to use an ASA Fund for the Advancement of the Discipline (FAD) grant to visit university archives and research my current book project on Israel-Palestine student activism. While these plans were cancelled, three different university archivists responded enthusiastically to my emails and directed me to useful digitized files to explore. These

resources are helpful, but I plan to visit the archives in-person once possible because digitized materials have limitations and can introduce their own biases. Institutional (or personal) priorities decide which documents get scanned, copyright restrictions determine their public availability, and organizational resources and geographical location often determine who has the capacity to digitize in the first place. Relying solely on publicly available digitized materials poses the risk of systematically ignoring already underrepresented voices (and this is a particular risk for those conducting research in the Global South). For many historical sociologists, digitized documents supplement, but do not replace, the in-person archive visit.

While COVID-19 has affected archival researchers in all career stages, particularly affected are early career researchers. Aliza Luft (Assistant Professor, UCLA), for example, is waiting to hear whether her June visit to the Vatican Secret Archive can be rescheduled. The

Vatican has made new documents on the papacy of Pope Pius XII available, and Luft is among only 150 researchers allowed to examine them. None of these documents are digitized and, due to COVID-19, the archives themselves are now closed. It is not clear when another visit will be possible.

Graduate students are similarly working to make progress without access to their own research sites. At Yale's graduate program, Chloe Sariago is conducting a legal history on a sealed case that has never been made public. While her archive visit is cancelled, she was able to access documents on a comparative case through an online database. The costs of access are coming out of her pocket. In the same program, Anne Taylor found a colleague willing to share scanned collection of 18th century documents from the archive she had planned to visit. Cresa Pugh (Harvard) is currently analyzing a trove of photographed documents from her previous archive visits, but this analysis revealed that another visit to the archive is necessary, and

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Finding Our Way

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assist our students—for example, by loaning out hundreds of laptops. But many still struggle with limited wireless bandwidth, unforeseen childcare responsibilities, or working in crowded family homes. Even in the best situations, the uncertainty and anxiety make it difficult for students to focus. In some of the most heartbreaking cases, struggles manifest in mental health issues—everything from crippling frustration to suicidal ideation. Our program has developed close relationships with campus units addressing those issues, such as Counselling and Psychological Services, and our Campus Access, Retention & Equity team. Those ongoing relationships have allowed faculty to facilitate critical connections more rapidly.

While we are all doing our best to maintain learning, this crisis has demanded that we adjust our collective expectations. For example, many courses with service-learning components, or those undertaking research with human subjects, have simply had to eliminate those elements. And pedagogical goals have been reduced unavoidably. The inevitable erosion of incremental skill-building is particularly disconcerting as we have worked to build a rigorous and scaffolded curriculum. (See *Teaching Sociology* 47(2) for a discussion of that process.) We know that we'll have some ground to make up with our students in the fall, but we'll simply have to cross that bridge when we get to it.

Even as we're immersed in weathering the current crisis, we must push forward with planning for the future. The role of the chair

as an information conduit has never been so important. I frequently find myself shuttling vital communications between faculty and administration and students about contingency plans for the coming semesters – questions about course modalities, faculty training programs, expanded services and accommodations, and many others. On a more routine level, we are now adjusting fall schedules as enrollments proceed (thankfully, adding sections to accommodate high student demand). I am also completing my final term as department chair and working with our next chair on a smooth transition. So, the cycle continues, even as the future remains uncertain. One thing is certain: If we have to continue in a virtual mode in the fall, we'll be much better prepared to do so. We learn from crises. For better

or worse, our university has had a lot of experience with crises in recent years – multiple evacuations and closings due to massive wildfires, and supporting each other through a mass shooting close to campus, which affected students directly. It would be easy to say that constant crises have made us stronger. I imagine that is true in a way—but I also know that it has taken energy away from important collective efforts, and tasks go undone or have to be put off because we simply can't get to them. Still, it has been a remarkable effort on the part of faculty and students just to keep the wheels on the proverbial cart as we have barreled down a very rocky path. And in contemporary higher education—especially at public, regional, comprehensive universities—the only paths forward are rocky ones.

Professional Challenges Facing Sociologists

Ethnography in the Time of COVID-19

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If there is one thing that can be said about ethnography, it is that social intimacy, and not social distancing, is crucial. While we are to remain a six-foot distance from each other, not meet in groups of more than 10 (or of two in Berlin), or to shelter at home, what are the possibilities for ethnographic research? What is its future in the world that follows?

One answer derives from the Sufi proverb, “this too shall pass.” This may be true. Perhaps as this essay is published, the moment will have passed into the realm of historical sociology. Perhaps not. What is certain is that we are living in unsettled times with broad implications for social life and for those who study it through intensive field work.

As two ethnographers who have engaged with the worlds of older Americans, we know that even in healthier moments, ethnographers can be a vector of danger for the vulnerable. As anthropology’s history of colonialism and sociology’s elitism remind us, without care, the work we do as social scientists can harm the groups we aim to understand. But when observing those who are medically vulnerable during a pandemic, anyone can be a threat in a direct and personal way.

At this moment, we must confront immediate limitations on research as universities place moratoriums on face-to-face social science research. This leaves those currently “in the field” with limited options such as telephonic or online

interviews or other technologically mediated modes of interaction. Any return of in-place ethnography must deal with both the possibility of being a vector of disease and the psychological effects of seeing others in similar ways. Will this uncertainty undermine the willingness of subjects to invite us into their worlds? Further, how will this new reality shape the decisions of Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) whose preference is to be cautious in protecting both research subjects and those institutions for which they work?

At present many projects have been delayed or halted. We expect IRBs to become more guarded, both because of the looming threat of liability and uncertainty about the actual risk. This affects all human subjects research, but ethnography is unique with its focus on immersion. We may need to rely on alternative methods in the short term but must work to maintain the unique strengths of field observation.

These issues are not only salient for those studying communities, but also for understanding organizations. Ethnographers have benefited from the willingness of organizations to provide access. But what happens when these organizations are weary or are overwhelmed? Ethnographers have often needed to persuade and contribute to the organizations they study. Evolving circumstances may now require that we formalize our understandings with organizations and individuals to secure access and satisfy concerns about minimizing harm.

While physical distancing is

necessary, we also must remember why this style of research has been central to sociological inquiry. Many who employ this method contend now, as we once did, that by looking close-up, in real time, we can understand key dynamics of social life in ways that more distant methods cannot. This unique characteristic has been crucial for developing and extending theory, generating concepts, and illuminating empirical patterns in numerous ethnographic traditions. In addition, avoiding people’s lives limits insights on policy issues that our informants might recognize and appreciate.

The granular details and compelling examples that field researchers have contributed have advanced our discipline in many ways, especially in learning from populations at risk. We require a “street-level” view of complex lives and challenging circumstances. We should not discard, but rather adapt and evolve, tried-and-true strategies for direct observation.

In the interim, the current crisis calls for reflection. Let us revisit the virtues and limits of conventional field work and its connection to complementary methods. Other potential complementary data sources while we are out of the field include check-in interviews with subjects, video data on public spaces, online observations, triangulation with surveys and archival data, and engagement with computational methods. Can big data and deep data contribute to each other? It is too early to suggest where such alternate and hybrid methodologies might lead, but creativity often bursts through on dark days.

In a related vein, we should work to address long-standing issues of transparency in ethnographic observation, representation, and replication. (As this paper was accepted for publication on April 15, 2020, some of the information within has evolved.)

The aftermath of COVID-19 may provide fruitful opportunities for revisits. The ethnographic site is always in process, a challenge for conventional replication. However, the contextualized nature of field research is a strength, and the occurrence of historical events can provide for valuable comparisons. Research sites are always changing as participants come and go, a reality more apparent in dealing with senior populations.

During the first author’s observation of a senior political organization over 30 months many of the core members disappeared and were replaced by other recruits, some of whom also left before the research was completed. By the end of the research, the first author had become a long-standing member of the group. The second author examined how older adults’ lives were shaped by the convergence of American inequality and everyday challenges related to health, illness, and death. Historical events, like the great recession, provided a window into seeing the differential impact of shifting policies on those in impoverished versus affluent neighborhoods. Revisiting sites after the ravages of COVID-19 has the potential for insights in arenas that are slower to change in the absence of stress.

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with teaching responsibilities it is not clear when this visit will be possible beyond this summer. In short, while researchers are finding ways to adjust in the short-term, COVID-19 is posing a serious challenge to

their long-term research plans.

Archival researchers have numerous resources at their disposal for the time being. First, university librarians should be an initial point of contact. Given the COVID-19 closures, many providers are allowing free access to their content, including various useful resources for archival research.

Second, online services like Google Books have made some resources publicly available—especially public domain ones. Third, many archivists welcome inquiries over email, and a brief phone call can yield digitized resources and other repositories that might have relevant material. Fourth, past researchers in the same

archive can offer advice and help with obtaining anything from general tips to scanned documents they no longer need. Universities can and should support historical sociologists by helping cover newly incurred expenses of accessing databases remotely and providing deferrals and flexibility with travel funding.