Dissertation Data Collection During a Global Pandemic: Barking Dogs, Crying Babies, and Feminist Social Work

Aman Ahluwalia-Cameron

Abstract
COVID-19 has had a profound impact on our society. Evidence has surfaced that there is a gender disparity in research productivity due to COVID-19. Notably, women in academia have been less productive in terms of academic publications since the beginning of the pandemic, likely due to the day-to-day responsibilities of childcare and domestic work; and according to pre-print literature, women of color may be more significantly impacted. As a woman of color, PhD candidate, mother of a toddler, wife, advocate for mental wellness, researcher, and social worker, reflecting on these recent articles was quite disheartening. Additionally, the impact of COVID-19 lockdowns on doctoral students has had detrimental impacts on our ability to collect data we need to forge our paths through this academic journey. This in-brief paper is written in response to the numerous questions I have been asked by other doctoral students around how I collected 41 in-depth, semi-structured interviews while working from home during a global pandemic, with my toddler at home with me. I reflect on how I pivoted to recruit participants, scheduled interviews, and conducted interviews from home, and how I believe COVID-19 has created space for a more accessible qualitative data gathering experience.

Keywords
dissertation research, feminist social work, mothering, pandemic, qualitative research

COVID-19 has had a profound impact on our society. Evidence has surfaced that there is a gender disparity in research productivity due to COVID-19 (Andersen et al., 2020; Gabster et al., 2020; Krukowski et al., 2021; Minello et al., 2020; Mogensen et al., 2021; Oleschuk, 2020; Staniscuaski et al., 2021; Yildirim & Eslen-Ziya, 2020). Notably, women in academia have been less productive in terms of publications since the beginning of the pandemic (Andersen et al., 2020) likely due to the day-to-day responsibilities of childcare and domestic work (Staniscuaski et al., 2020; Yildirim & Eslen-Ziya, 2020); and according to pre-print literature, women of color

University of Windsor, School of Social Work, Windsor, ON, Canada

Corresponding Author:
Aman Ahluwalia-Cameron, School of Social Work, University of Windsor, 167 Ferry Street, Windsor, ON N9A 0C5 Canada.
Email: ahluwal2@uwindsor.ca
may be more significantly impacted (Staniscuaski et al., 2021). As a woman of color, PhD candidate, mother of a toddler, wife, advocate for mental wellness, researcher, and social worker, reflecting on these recent articles has been quite disheartening. To add to the complexity, the impact of COVID-19 lockdowns on doctoral students has had detrimental impacts on our ability to collect data we need, to forge our paths through this academic journey. This brief paper is written in response to the numerous questions I have been asked by doctoral students about how I collected 41 in-depth, semi-structured interviews while working from home with a toddler during a global pandemic. As much of North America enters the fourth wave of the pandemic, and with the possibility of more lockdowns, these reflections may be helpful to other doctoral student researchers curating data during these unique times.

**Feminist Social Work and Reflexivity**

The importance of recognizing and labeling feminist research in social work is important for many reasons. Gringeri and colleagues (Gringeri et al., 2010) describe how feminist inquiry is about power, authority, ethics, reflexivity, praxis, and understanding difference. Focusing on the feminist social work scholarship of those before me, motivated me to write this piece for other doctoral student mothers faced with the pressure to finish graduate school during such a challenging time. I take an intersectional, feminist social work perspective when reflecting about my experience of data collection during a pandemic.

Intersectionality has predominantly been understood in social work as an examination of race, gender, and class (Mehrotra, 2010). However, Mehrotra (2010) challenges social workers to integrate a more complex understanding of intersectionality taken up from the queer diaspora feminist scholarship which recognizes intersectionality as a more complex matrix made up of sex, ability, lived experience of nationalism, colonialism, religion, age, ability, diversity, and social identity.

As an able-bodied, second-generation, South Asian Canadian, upper-year PhD candidate, who is a settler on Indigenous land, I am keenly aware of the privileged viewpoint from which I write this reflexive piece. I was fortunate that my partner did not lose their employment during the pandemic. They had their hours and pay reduced, but we were able to maintain our home and put groceries on the table. I did lose my research assistant positions, sessional teaching position, and any access to childcare (formal and informal) for 6-months, as did many other graduate students. As a Canadian, I was grateful to be able to access financial supports through the Canadian government’s COVID-19 emergency fund. However, the loss of income and childcare supports were detrimental to productivity toward data collection.

During the first few weeks of stay-at-home orders, the emotional toll (fear, anxiety) felt unbearable yet, the pressure to be productive remained immense. I remember stumbling upon the article, “Why You Should Ignore All That Productivity Pressure” by Ahmad, 2020, and breathing a sigh of relief. This article helped me better understand the conflicting feelings I was having about the grief of not finishing my dissertation “on time,” so that I could be a competitive candidate on the academic job market while weighing the pressure to keep my family safe while we all learned more about how to live with the coronavirus.

I found myself thinking: will we have enough money/food to sustain us? Will the grocery store have milk for my toddler? Will my father (who lives with severe chronic illness for the past decade) survive if he caught COVID? How will I take care of my one-year-old, and continue to be productive as it seemed many other graduate students without children were doing? There is an understanding, even as a PhD student that the academy is “a gendered institution” in which sought-after academics are those who can focus on their work and productivity 24/7. “This need for long work hours, uninterrupted by personal or family demands, has been further emphasized by the globalization of postsecondary education, which has increased the emphasis on productivity,
especially the pressure to produce scholarship” (Mirick & Wladkowski, 2018, p. 255). The gendered and cultural pressure to take care of my family, both nuclear and extended, and the classist eternalized pressure of academic productivity weighed heavily on my mind everyday.

I harnessed the pressure I felt to work, against the reality of being at home (without office space) with my partner, toddler, dog, and cat with a sense of pragmatism and a lot of flexibility and I was able to collect 41 in-depth semi-structured interviews with an incredibly passionate and diverse group of clinical social workers from across Ontario. I am fortunate that these individuals, both novice and seasoned social workers, took the time out of their very full and challenging schedules to chat with me during a global pandemic; for this, I am forever grateful.

Within, I present readers with some of the challenges and triumphs of this process by discussing what the study was about, how I recruited participants, the use of technology to streamline the interview process, how and where I conducted interviews, and final thoughts.

**What Was the Study About?**

Interview questions asked each participant about their background and training in social work, knowledge, and experience with Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD), how they manage their professional role in relation to a stigmatized diagnosis within the workplace and how they best support people living with BPD within the community. The social workers that participated in the study worked across the care continuum in which mental health services are delivered, for example, child protection, child mental health, geriatric mental health, adult mental health, concurrent disorders, private practice, inpatient hospital social workers (medical and mental health programs), law and family mediation, private Dialectical Behavior Therapy programs, community health centers, community-based mental health programs, and university health centers. COVID-19 had interrupted the work of all participants, and at the time of the interviews, most participants were working remotely. Many were managing the uncertainty of a global pandemic while working full-time and taking care of children as there were no childcare options available. The sheer strength, care, and concern the social workers had for the wellbeing of their clients and families emanated through the phone.

**How Did I Recruit Participants?**

Once approval was granted from the Research Ethics Board at my university, I had planned to reach out to my large network of social work professionals in the community via email (i.e., community organizations, hospitals, and mental health agencies). However, due to the pandemic many social workers within these organizations were deployed to other positions (e.g., moved from community to hospital roles as family facilitators for patients on medical in-patient units) or worked from home for their safety and safety of the people they work with, making many social workers inaccessible when I was recruiting. Moreover, many social workers are mothers, or caregivers to elderly parents, who had taken a leave of absence from their workplace to care for family while the “stay at home orders” were in place.

Next, I had planned to go to local agencies and organizations and post recruitment flyers within shared spaces. However, with the doors closed, I began participant recruitment by sending a mass email (with the recruitment flyer attached), to all alumni of the Bachelor and Master of Social Work students at my university. From here I began interviewing alumni, and with the help of snowball sampling, recruitment materials quickly spread to other potential participants (e.g., the preceptors of the graduates all over Ontario). Between April and May 2020, 26 in-depth, semi-structured interviews had been completed. With the help of a brief demographic questionnaire, I noticed some gaps in my recruitment strategy. Thus, I began focused recruitment for social workers from
underrepresented groups of social workers. I posted my recruitment flyer to social media in specific groups and forums to reach the potential participants. By the end of January 2021, I had collected 41-interviews from a diverse group of social workers from all over Ontario.

How Did I Utilize Technology to Help Me Schedule Interviews?

Without childcare, I had one time slot per day to conduct interviews, 1:30 p.m. to 3:00 p.m., and I had to stick to these boundaries because I had no choice. Normally, I would have made myself available anytime that was convenient for participants, but that was not feasible during COVID. I managed to schedule all the interviews by using a technological scheduling app, which helped streamline the process, as participants simply clicked a date on a calendar to book their interview. Using this tool helped me to schedule the interviews without having too many email exchanges with people (scheduling and rescheduling). The interview booking process went smoothly and followed these steps: (1) mass emails were sent out through networks with attached recruitment flyers; (2) people emailed me directly if they were interested in participating in the study; (3) I would respond with a thank you, and the link to the calendar of availability, which they would simply click on and find a date that suited them; (4) I would then receive an email confirmation that they booked an interview; (5) 24-hours before the interview participants were emailed the Information and Consent Form for their review, as well as a reminder of their interview the next day, and I would confirm their phone number via email; (6) I would call them at the scheduled appointment time and then review the consent form with them to make sure they were still interested in participating in the study. I found the scheduling app to be an extremely helpful tool. I have worked on many research projects and have learned that scheduling interviews can be very time consuming for both the researcher and participants due to all the back-and-forth email exchanges that occur, and this tool helped to streamline the process.

How and Where Did I Conduct the Interviews?

Informed by place and space literature (Gagnon et al., 2015), I have learned that my preference for telephone interviews over Teams/Zoom is likely due to the privacy I felt when participants could not see me while conducting interviews. As Gagnon and colleagues state, “interview location can be defined as both a physical ‘space’ and a ‘place’ where power dynamics, social relations, identities and meanings unfold in multiple ways” (p. 204). Most interviews were conducted in the unfinished basement, the place furthest away from where my daughter would nap so my voice would not carry to her bedroom. Some days, however, interviews were conducted from the front seat of my car because my daughter refused to nap, and I desperately wanted to maintain some sort of professionalism on the phone. Ultimately, the telephone allowed for the most privacy and flexibility.

All interviews began by outlining the numerous distractions that were in my home that may interrupt us during the interview (e.g., toddler, dog, cat, partner, the Amazon delivery that would always arrive during the interview and set the dog into a barking frenzy in our house). This authenticity and attempts towards professionalism, were always well received, as most participants were also trying to work from home in less-than-ideal conditions. Many participants were mothers and understood the complexity of working from home with children and expressed empathy.

One of the participants was a new mother and was nursing her infant during the call. This was one of the many moments during data collection, where I felt grateful to be conducting interviews from home on the phone rather than in-person, because it is unlikely that the participants I interviewed who were on maternity leave would have participated in the study during a non-COVID era because they would not have been available to chat in person at their workplace or a coffee shop (as my research protocol had originally outlined).
During a different interview, I distinctly recall that my daughter woke up halfway through the interview, and the dog barked numerous times. I was sure the participant would have lost their patience, but they simply held on, and it ended up being a very insightful interview. There is something to be said about giving ourselves, and our participants some grace. People can be very kind, understanding, and patient.

Each interview lasted between 50 and 60 min. Over 80% of participants were women and these interviews became a part of my pandemic coping. Speaking with other women (mothers or not) became an escape from the tireless *doom scrolling* and domestic responsibilities of the everyday. Each interview began by expressing my genuine concern about the participants wellbeing. These conversations were about more than just the research questions; they were about connecting with others. As the interviewer, I found that because of COVID-19, the participants and I had a shared experience (in addition to being social workers), and many people wanted to chat about how their work had been impacted by COVID-19 and how this had subsequently impacted not only themselves but also the clients and families they cared so much about. The pandemic was not a topic on the interview guide, but the semi-structured interview guide allowed space to have these authentic discussions about what was happening in their lives and workplaces. Many participants offered feedback that it was nice to talk to another social worker in regard to care provision for people living with BPD.

**Final Thoughts**

The reality is that mothering while working is challenging at the best of times, and not particularly conducive to productivity during a pandemic. As Hesse-Biber (2013) states, “much of contemporary feminist scholarship and research strive to give voice to women’s lives that have been silenced and ignored, uncover hidden knowledge contained within women’s experiences, and bring about women-centred solidarity and social change” (pp. 54-55). Uncovering the hidden knowledge and strengths we have as mothers in academia is vital to challenging the belief that the academy is a “gendered institution” whereby mothers do not fit the ideal mold.

I have described how pragmatism and flexibility have supported the creation of a rich data set for my dissertation, and how COVID-19 has created space for a more accessible, authentic, and empathetic type of qualitative research data gathering. Conducting in-depth qualitative interviews remotely can result in data that offers deep insights while keeping the costs of data collection lower, and making it easier for researchers or student researchers (with or without caregiving responsibilities), to collect the data without having to travel great distances. We are seeing trends implicating that women are publishing less than our male colleagues due to the pandemic, but my experience of data collection during this past year has shown me that interviewing people from my own home has resulted in the ability to interview participants who may not have been accessible or available outside of a global pandemic, as well as having a shared experience which created an authentic and safe interviewing environment for all. When we remove barriers and ask questions about the entangled power relationship between who gets to conduct research and make data, we emancipate the voices of those whose lives are not ideal for the academic world, such as mothers of young children.

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ORCID iD
Aman Ahluwalia-Cameron https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4805-1806

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