Against Methodological Essentialism, Fragmentation, and Instrumentalism in Times of COVID-19

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Anthropologists have not been immune to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Beyond the possibility of infection and death, some have suddenly lost their incomes. Teaching assistantships, research funding, and other support have disappeared for many graduate students. Other anthropologists depend on precarious academic employment and have faced class cancellations. Contracts with NGOs or multilateral or activist organizations have disappeared, especially with travel restrictions. Many new PhDs looked forward in spring 2020 and saw hiring freezes, not hooting ceremonies; spring 2021 seemed no more promising. Graduate students commencing doctoral research saw their well-crafted plans suddenly disrupted. Institutional Review Boards revoked permission for “in-person research,” often without providing guidance on transforming protocols. After initial indications that sources of research funding might disappear, applicants were asked to reconfigure their proposals for remote research (Rutherford 2020).

Faculty advisors and graduate students alike searched for guidance in conducting remote research. An initial point of departure was work by anthropologists and media scholars on what has been variously referred to as virtual, digital, mobile, and web ethnography (see Boellstorff et al. 2012). As Robert Kozinets (2015) and others pointed out, practices associated with “netnography” are designed for digital research on virtual technologies and social worlds and are not immediately applicable to other arenas. A second wave of responses thus involved efforts by established social scientists to offer advice on how to transform previously “in-person” methodologies using digital technologies and practices. Leading Australian sociologist/media studies scholar Deborah Lupton’s (2020) crowd-sourced guide provided a widely used example. Remarkably, within a month of the World Health Organization’s announcement of a pandemic on March 11, 2020, a substantial literature on pandemic-era research had emerged.

I note several recurrent features. First, much advice produced a binary between “experienced and inexperienced researchers” (Jowett 2020), organized through the sorts of linear, teleological spatializations of ethnography whose colonial underpinnings were identified in the 1980s (see Clifford and Marcus 1986). Graduate students were projected as having been excited about leaving metropolitan centers of anthropological knowledge for “the field” until COVID-19 sparked a crisis (see Roitman 2014), engendering frustration and disappointment. An “unheard of situation” provoked a temporal rupture that threatened to “hinder [doctoral students] from properly learning the tools of our trade” (Lems 2020).

Second, pandemic disruptions seemingly invited a precarious marketplace of methodologies, fragmenting academic knowledge production into detachable modalities that could be subjected to scholarly cost-benefit analysis. Some writers naturalized pre-COVID-19 “field research on site,” arguing that the narrowness of online research cannot substitute: “only long-term immersion in the realities of a place enables us to observe phenomena in their full complexity and notice and analyse the inexplicit, unwritten rules that govern the social world” (Lems 2020). Similarly, Fine, Johnson, and Abramson (2020) suggested that without fieldwork, interpreting social worlds “becomes conjecture.” Other commentators presented a logic of commensurability. In a YouTube video, Miller (2020) suggested, for instance, that “online is kind of the same as offline. There are things that are going to be lost…. I think that there is a huge amount that is actually available to you to compensate for what is lost.” Others brought these two positions together by joining projections of methodological rupture and possibilities of commensurability through a lexicon centering on such verbs as “adapt” and “extend”: what was required was “modifying” status-quo ethnographic tools, techniques, and practices. The massive and differential effects of COVID-19 and mitigation measures on projected interlocutors’ bodies, spaces, relations, and economic bases became “conditions” that could help researchers imagine how to reconfigure familiar tropes of establishing rapport, displaying empathy, and the like.

Efforts to support students and other researchers during the pandemic are commendable. I would, however, like to highlight two features. First, this logic of fragmentation produced the illusion of a drop-down menu of individual research techniques: interviews, focus groups, virtual tours, photographs or videos produced by research participants, autoethnography, surveys, geospatial technologies, etc. Second, advice also often followed a logic of instrumentalization. Researchers got individualized as much as their techniques, pictured as clinging to their own intellectual interests and professional goals. Research requires tools: When new
challenges emerge, they may need to be sharpened or differently deployed to get the job done.

Subsequent works challenged this methodological essentialism and instrumentalization. A third wave of essays, mostly published as blogs, emerged as graduate students, many of whom were conducting fieldwork as pandemic restrictions took effect, reflected on their experiences of research disruption and adaptive responses. Their accounts offered additional nuance and complexity. Fourth, other writers decried logics of fragmentation and instrumentation as “stopgap measures” (Wood et al. 2020). Saxena and Johnson (2020) criticized the reduction of digital dimensions to “particular methods.” They suggested we see social media not as tools to be appropriated by researchers but rather as “shared ideas of experience” that constitute “pandemic imaginaries” with world-building effects. Fine, Johnson, and Abramson (2020) placed anxieties regarding slowed graduate students’ trajectories within a broader temporality and political economy, suggesting that calls to use remote techniques to speed up research should be seen in the context of demands by neoliberal universities to induce graduate students to use “efficient methods” in producing “a faster turnaround” in order “to be prepared for a rough job market.” Drawing on Isabelle Stengers’s (2005) call for “slow science,” Sabra Hussain (2020) argued that the pandemic obligates a “slowing down” that can unsettle “stable typologies.”

Stepping back a bit, we can see that totalizing projections that picture “the COVID-19 pandemic” as an “unprecedented” causal agent fall short of appreciating how increased rates of serious disease and death for Black, Latinx, and Native American populations and deeply unequal effects of mitigation measures fit into long-term “normal” health inequities and other structural dimensions of racialized violence. This broader context was made painfully evident by the murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, and by other police killings of Black Americans.

Were pandemic effects on social science methodologies “unprecedented”? The long history of racializing strategies and antiracist movement suggests otherwise. W. E. B Du Bois (1899) critiqued racializing dimensions of social science methods as the nineteenth century ended. The civil rights and antiwar movements of the 1960s led to works like Reinventing Anthropology (Hymes 1969) in which practitioners confronted how anthropology was complicit in racial inequality and state violence, a theme that Franz Boas addressed over a century ago (Price 2016). Subsequent demands to rethink anthropological research techniques as part of antiracist agendas are not lacking. Américo Paredes (1977) analyzed how white anthropologists reproduced racist stereotypes of Mexican Americans when they misconstrued their interlocutors’ playful attempts to collaboratively construct alternatives as static portraits of cultural chasms. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) famously called for “decolonizing methodologies,” arguing that research is always imbricated with dimensions of imperialism and coloniality. Tukufu Zuberi and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2008) suggested that social methods reflect “white logics” and forms of dominance in ways that are shielded from critical scrutiny. In a particularly apropos essay, Deborah Thomas (2020, 439) noted that she had planned to use her September 2020 American Anthropologist “From the Editor” remarks to challenge how projecting “business as usual” pasts for anthropology and “back to normal” post-COVID-19 futures obscure “the hierarchies and unequal processes that organize our lives and our apprehension of events.” Nevertheless, her plan to disrupt these temporalities was itself disrupted by George Floyd’s murder.

Thus, rather than offering pandemic proclamations for remote research, it might be more helpful to build on how these and other writers challenge logics of fragmentation and instrumentation in such a way as to denaturalize black-boxed research practices. I have long questioned received understandings of interviews (Briggs 1986). Interviews are extremely useful for social scientists because they are designed to efficiently produce discourse whose content, poetic (narrative) features, and technological infrastructures (pens and notebooks, tape recorders, video cameras, and now Zoom recordings) are geared to fit the contours of dissertations, articles, books, and videos. They create highly unequal power relations in which one party uses questions to shape the content of discourse and to signal if the interviewee’s words fit the discursive container provided and when it is adequately filled. These power differentials enact and obscure scalar relations when interviewers and interviewees reproduce broader racial and national inequalities. Once informed consent is “obtained,” researchers ordinarily gain exclusive rights over how the discourse circulates and is interpreted, who receives it, and who benefits. Interviews thus impose standardized social scientific knowledge-production and -circulation practices that further subordinate and obscure the knowledge-making practices that interviewees use in making social worlds and challenging forms of symbolic and other violence.

My point is not that interviews are inherently bad; I do them, too. My problem is rather with how recipes for transforming research from “in-person” to “remote” further naturalize the tremendous power of interviewing for producing elite understandings of what knowledge is and who produces it, helping to shore up how graduate programs currently hope to reproduce established practices. My alternative would be to embrace the strangeness of pandemic times in making strange accepted forms of racialized scholarly labor and their role in sustaining unconscionable forms of inequality and violence. Casting graduate students as knowledge-producers-in-waiting who require updates of existing “tools”—even as research “subjects” are construed as amenable to remote forms of knowledge extraction—is not, in my view, what the demands of the day require. If I were to offer any advice, it would be that, to repurpose Walter Benjamin’s (2003, 391) famous words, we might collectively engage a methodological rupture “as it flashes up in a moment of danger.” Rather than counseling
“inexperienced researchers” in “properly learning the tools of our trade,” we might collectively join long-standing efforts to devise innovative knowledge-making practices for creating more healthy, just, equal, and environmentally sound worlds.

NOTES
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