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COVID-19 and Fieldwork: Challenges and Solutions

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ABSTRACT

This reflection article presents insights on conducting fieldwork during and after COVID-19 from a diverse collection of political scientists—from department heads to graduate students based at public and private universities in the United States and abroad. Many of them contributed to a newly published volume, *Stories from the Field: A Guide to Navigating Fieldwork in Political Science* (Krause and Szekely 2020). As in the book, these contributors draw on their years of experience in the field to identify the unique ethical and logistical challenges posed by COVID-19 and offer suggestions for how to adjust and continue research in the face of the pandemic's disruptions. Key themes include how contingency planning must now be a central part of our research designs; how cyberspace has increasingly become “the field” for the time being; and how scholars can build lasting, mutually beneficial partnerships with “field citizens,” now and in the future.

C OVID-19 has changed life as we know it across the globe, generating social and economic repercussions that will be with us for years to come. Amid this tragedy, everyone's first concern is and should be their health and the health of those around them. Nonetheless, political scientists still have a job to do, which in many ways is more important than ever.

Many scholars face additional challenges due to the pandemic, including a weak job market, disappearing research and travel funds, and added stresses of working from home. Those who conduct fieldwork are particularly vulnerable to research disruptions as global travel restrictions, frozen travel budgets, and at-risk local populations make prior models of international research logistically and ethically impossible for the foreseeable future. Nonetheless, we know that journals, fellowships, and hiring and tenure committees will continue to increase their expectations with regard to the quality and quantity of scholarship. Can field research continue and, if so, how?

Practically speaking, the uncertainties of the pandemic have at once created new challenges and made planning for those challenges far more difficult. Researchers must anticipate the unforeseeable and find ways to plan for contingencies that may be

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difficult to imagine. This includes protecting the safety of our research participants as well as our own; building in flexibility to handle present and future disruptions to travel and funding; and finding ways to build relationships and gather data in new and creative ways, at least in the short term. In other words, the pandemic has made contingency planning a central part of our research designs.

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based at public and private universities in the United States and abroad. Many of them contributed to a newly published volume, *Stories from the Field: A Guide to Navigating Fieldwork in Political Science* (Krause and Szekely 2020). As in the book, these contributors draw on their years of experience in the field to identify the unique challenges posed by COVID-19 and offer suggestions for how to adjust and continue research in the face of the pandemic's disruptions. Scholars at different stages of their career and from different backgrounds face very different pressures but, as a field, we are all in this together. A collective discussion from a diverse group of engaged political scientists is a great place to start.

DEPARTMENT CHAIRS, GRADUATE STUDENTS, AND INCOMING FACULTY DISCUSS THE CHALLENGES OF COVID-19

Department chairs, faculty, and graduate students face different demands and challenges, but all have had to adjust their research plans due to the pandemic.

Contingency Planning from Top to Bottom

William Reno, Professor and Chair of Political Science, Northwestern University

Thirty years of field research in conflict zones has provided critical training to serve as chair of a 45-member political science department during a pandemic. Although the mid-March shutdown in Illinois was far from a conflict situation, there were familiar features from my experience in wartime Sierra Leone and Liberia in the 1990s and, more recently, in Somalia. There is that moment of realization during a routine activity that causes one to pause and think: "When will I see this scene again?" Then the rapid shrinkage in physical and conceptual space begins. Plans are upended as they are being made. Panic shopping follows. Experience diverges from that point, with the sudden deceleration of time during pandemic shutdown instead of the constant wartime frenzy to collect and trade information about what to do next.

Contingency planning to conduct research amid wartime conditions was the most valuable training. It teaches one how to identify clear lines of effort amid confusion. This means building flexibilities into plans while giving colleagues and students a clear sense of what is likely to happen next. Uncertainty and confusion are the enemies of effort, and it required much unvarnished and frank communication to prepare faculty for online teaching and also to prepare 80 graduate students who were realizing that their career plans would be upended. Experience also gave me an

appreciation for the urgency of frequent contact with the many students who were abroad for field research. Many were not fully aware of how the crisis would affect international transportation. Contingency planning—multiple reservations to deal with the collapsing international transportation networks, changing document requirements, and so forth—is critical to get everyone out of the field and to their preferred places of shelter. Contingency planning: We are still at it as we try to figure out how to restart this enterprise and, in particular, to get our researchers back out in the field!

Planning a Modular Dissertation

Aidan Milliff, PhD Candidate at Massachusetts Institute of Technology

I had planned to spend the spring of 2020 conducting interviews in India. That lasted two weeks and 10 interviews. My experience illustrates a challenge for many students during COVID-19: mitigating risk without losing time. It will be a while before returning to India is safe, but waiting to resume research is costly, given the rigid timelines imposed by PhD funding packages.

Students often feel career incentives to take risks during research, but tolerating significant risk is wrong in the current moment. First, no one takes risks without putting others at risk. My work relies on support from Indian colleagues and the kindness of interviewees. Risking their health for a dissertation chapter is clearly unacceptable. Second, the usual logistical risks have unusual consequences right now. Quickly leaving India (e.g., to avoid getting stuck) is difficult when not in a major city such as Delhi or Mumbai. One of my colleagues remains trapped at his parents' farm in Punjab—India's lockdown started during a week-end trip to see them. So, what to do?

During 14 days of post-travel quarantine, I restarted my dissertation as a modular project with an ideal strategy and one or more desk-bound strategies for each chapter. Nothing replaces the professional and scholarly value of "being there" to collect data and experience a place firsthand, but some desk-bound alternatives look fairly promising. India generates large quantities of survey data, so I have read dozens of codebooks to find existing surveys that measure my key variables. Moreover, India has good internet penetration, so I am weighing the representativeness penalty associated with moving my decision-making experiments online.

I hope to resume work in India once it is both safe and ethical to do so. For now, I am trying to write a quality dissertation that does not depend on travel. In the best case, I might collect two dissertations' worth of evidence. In the worst case, I am trying to ensure I have enough for one.

Adjusting to COVID-19 as an Incoming Faculty Member Researching China

Kacie Miura, Assistant Professor, University of San Diego

I arrived in Beijing in August 2017, eager to implement the research plan that I had laid out in my dissertation proposal. I had an entire academic year to collect data and travel to eight additional cities, where I planned to conduct interviews with local officials and scholars, as well as members of foreign

diplomatic and business communities. A year felt like plenty of time.

By December 2019, however, I was panicking. The interviews that I had conducted challenged a core assumption on which my theory rested. I had been focusing on the role of performance metrics in shaping local leader participation in foreign economic retaliation, but informants repeatedly brought up concerns about “political correctness.” I knew that I had to retool my theory and research design, but I was reluctant to do so because I did not at that time have enough funding to return to the field. I was advised beforehand to stay flexible and adapt to unexpected obstacles and discoveries. However, the financial constraints that I faced as a graduate student left me ill-equipped to do so, especially midway through my time in the field.

I found ways to fund additional trips to China, but my plans to visit the last city on my list, Wuhan, were abruptly dashed due to the coronavirus outbreak. Although I defended the dissertation without that last case study, the book manuscript risks being delayed by the pandemic. Due to concerns about surveillance, conducting interviews on Zoom, WeChat, and other online platforms simply is not feasible. Moreover, even if it becomes possible to visit Wuhan in the near future, whether I will be able to speak safely with sources in an environment of heightened political oversight remains an open question.

In the summer of 2020, I started on the tenure track with a research portfolio focused on a country that I may no longer be able to access (at least to the same extent or in the same way). As the tenure clock begins to tick, I recognize the urgency of pivoting to projects that will not require fieldwork. However, doing so also entails pivoting away from the types of methods that I find most enjoyable and the types of questions that I find most exciting.

Whether due to constraints arising from the pandemic, violent conflict, or climate change, it is increasingly important for “field researchers” to build highly functional and mutual research partnerships with “field citizens,” the people living in contexts that scholars want to understand.

HOW TO CONTINUE RESEARCH ETHICALLY AND EFFECTIVELY AMID THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Despite the challenges posed by COVID-19, we believe that there are ethical ways to continue fieldwork and even reshape one’s research approach for the better.

An Opportunity to Rectify Inequalities in Fieldwork

Zoe Marks, Lecturer, Harvard University

Aliyu Zakayo, Visiting Fellow, Harvard University

As we look forward to recommencing research travel, scholars who do fieldwork have been asking themselves, “Is this time different? What is new here?” (Wood et al. 2020). Responsible scholars have always carefully assessed potential harms and benefits prior to conducting field research in communities and contexts whose social complexity, hierarchies, and indeterminate risks—whether at home or abroad—make them worth studying. In conflict research in particular, there have long been inequalities in who can conduct fieldwork and where, while minimizing risk to themselves, the research team/collaborators, and host communities.

Our ongoing failures and some lessons learned can guide us as we navigate this latest global health threat. During a pre-COVID-19 transnational collaborative project with humanitarian organizations in Nigeria, we had to constantly monitor risks to the team in the field. An ever-changing conflict environment meant that research locations had to be adjusted according to government-imposed security developments and our own internal safety protocols, regardless of the impact on our research design. This experience parallels how travel bans, quarantines, and unanticipated public health responses might disrupt access to field sites in nonrandom ways going forward.

Other risks are not emergent but instead structural. Visibly foreign researchers often cannot—or choose not to—travel into certain conflict zones because doing so creates unacceptable and disproportionate risks for themselves and their local counterparts. In the time of COVID-19, we know that traveling to engage intensively with dozens of people in research sites—through meetings, interviews, focus groups, and workshops—risks researchers becoming superspreaders in our communities and in communities not our own. The greatest burden of exposure risk is carried by researchers already living in the field site (Bisoka 2020). These risks are rarely underwritten by sponsoring agencies or academic institutions, which often fail to provide contract researchers with health insurance for injuries or illnesses arising from project-related activities and exposure. In light of COVID-19, we have an opportunity to build better, more equitable ecosystems of collaboration. Whether due to constraints arising from the pandemic, violent conflict, or climate change, it is increasingly important for “field researchers” to build highly functional and mutual research partnerships with “field citizens,” the people living in contexts that scholars

want to understand. This should be an opportunity for collaborative agenda setting and knowledge production; designing more nimble research; and rectifying practical, structural, and labor inequalities that have been overlooked for too long.

Building Your Interviewee Network from Afar

Emil Aslan Souleimanov, Research Fellow, Institute of International Relations, Prague

For those considering launching a new research project—or, paradoxically, entering a new “field”—the pandemic may be a blessing in disguise. Indeed, if you want to kick-start your ethnographic research, then you would benefit from initiating your community engagement by using less intrusive communication channels to ask less sensitive questions of community members who seem less central to your project. This will help build your network and develop local social knowledge, sharpening your understanding, and setting you up for more effective engagement with the most significant interview subjects for your research.

First, after you have secured Institutional Review Board approval, try to contact as many people as possible; even in one-to-one communication, would-be respondents often are anxious about discussing sensitive topics with outsiders. When you ask questions that relate to accessible topics, the response rate to your inquiries naturally will increase. For example, if you want to interview former militants, do not start by directly contacting militants because they likely will ignore you; in any case, you will not have deep knowledge and polished questions. Instead, your best bet is to contact their network first. Increasing the number of individuals that you approach leads to a higher likelihood that you will encounter “gatekeepers,” who will play a crucial role in introducing you to their communities. If the topic allows, contact individuals via online platforms (e.g., Facebook), introduce yourself and your research, and express genuine interest in the broader community that you intend to access. If you already have made these contacts, you may ask these gatekeepers to connect you with others in the community via WhatsApp, Skype, or otherwise if they are comfortable with the idea. The “snowball approach”—if you stick to noncontroversial themes—will work just fine via online platforms.

Second, if the pool of people you have contacted is sufficiently numerous, it may be useful to distribute (online) questionnaires to

particular, they offer an ability to embed visual content and may even facilitate sensitive questioning when self-administered. Delivered through a widespread platform like WhatsApp, these surveys could reach even difficult-to-access populations.

In any case, conducting fieldwork—particularly fieldwork involving human subjects and a team of assistants and enumerators—engenders critical responsibilities for researchers. They become charged with protecting the human subjects and field team and ensuring that they do not come into harm’s way during the course of the research. COVID-19 only intensifies these responsibilities. It collapses the boundaries between social science and health, and it requires that our protocols reconsider the direct implications of our field research on public health.

Moving to Fieldwork in a Virtual Space

*Fotini Christia, Professor, Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Chappell Lawson, Associate Professor, Massachusetts Institute of Technology*

As the pandemic is closing off traditional fieldwork options, it is opening others. In a world of social distancing, cyberspace is “the field.” With COVID-19 pushing an array of interactions to the virtual space on platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and

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them. In fact, brief open-ended questionnaires are a good choice to formulate straightforward questions that revolve around noncontroversial themes. They also may provide a fairly quick understanding of the relevance of your tentative thoughts, possible flaws of your research design, and your respondents’ general attitudes. You could build on this information in subsequent “post-lockdown” stages of your research by contacting those with particularly interesting responses to arrange face-to-face interviews.

How to Continue Inductive “Field” Research Amid a Pandemic

Sarah Zukerman Daly, Assistant Professor, Columbia University
Mucking around in the field sparks inductive theories that reflect realities on the ground. However, the COVID-19 pandemic renders such mucking too risky for its uncertain rewards. It shifts the research endeavor from inductive to deductive and the fieldwork endeavor from theory generation to theory testing (at some unknown point in the future). In effect, it closes the inductive-deductive loop that, when executed transparently, has produced some of political science’s most penetrating insights about our world. This is a significant loss.

What are some ways around this? Archived primary and secondary materials, including ethnographies, field reports, and journalists’ renderings, may be woven together as fodder for theory generation to (temporarily) substitute for the invaluable material gained from seeing, hearing, and analyzing with one’s own eyes. In environments where researchers already have extensive field experience, strong networks may create opportunities for meaningful in-depth interviews over Skype or Zoom. Virtual conversations have become increasingly comfortable and, for some, available time also has trended upwards. For difficult topics, nothing can substitute for face-to-face interviews. However, online surveys do provide unique opportunities that may be leveraged. In

Telegram, the online population has become increasingly representative of society as a whole and therefore considerably more interesting to scholars. Now, instead of thinking about the selection effects of who is online—the typical critique of existing social media research—it will be easier to consider the bias in who is not.

Fieldwork in this virtual realm requires a particular type of toolkit. Students must consider whether and how their existing methods training is suited to the new environment and also hone a particular set of skills. They should seek out the requisite methodological training, either in their department or via online learning platforms (e.g., edX and Coursera). This includes enhanced training in web scraping, machine-learning techniques such as natural language processing for text and voice, and new methods for image and video processing.

The migration to the virtual space also affords real openings for computational social science research as well as for scholarship in digital humanities, and it offers unprecedented opportunities for fruitful interdisciplinary collaborations. Students should actively seek out those opportunities!

Political science scholars also should consider how to adapt traditional qualitative-interpretive research methods to the virtual space for communities that have migrated online. “Virtual ethnography” is now a fully legitimate method of inquiry and will renew attention to questions of researcher positionality, embeddedness, and the ethics of online fieldwork, including privacy concerns.

Research Opportunities Emerge When Political Actors Are Active Online

Mia Bloom, Professor, Georgia State University
Violent extremists seek to capitalize on crises: war, economic downturns, natural disasters, and the current global pandemic open

up a political vacuum for terrorists to fill with misinformation, foster mistrust in legitimate governments, and exacerbate people's fears of "the other." During the COVID-19 pandemic, researchers can track what extremists are saying with regard to the virus and its consequences in real time.

On the surface web and semi-encrypted platforms (e.g., Telegram), researchers can use an electronic ethnography based on passive participant observation. Chat room users post a variety of media, including recruitment videos, training manuals, memes, and images intended to stimulate support and instigate action. As such, we can chart the increased activities of bad actors resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. Leveraging our existing access to terrorist messaging on encrypted platforms, we can highlight the types of messaging strategies and cross-reference them with actual events.

The pandemic has afforded jihadis and the extreme right wing a fresh opportunity to recruit new followers online. ISIS platforms have provided a virtual Netflix of jihadi propaganda, from older ISIS videos taken during its glory days of the "Caliphate" (2015–2016) to sermons by a gamut of fiery preachers in multiple languages. Rather than decreasing the quantity and quality of propaganda, all of this time spent in isolation has provided the opportunity to enhance their online functionality and technical skills. Academic researchers on jihadi online messaging observed a fivefold increase in the number of messages being posted on a daily basis throughout April 2020, matching the quantity of posts in 2015—the heyday of ISIS propaganda. Violent extremist groups on the far right, such as the boogaloo, Oath Keepers, and 3%ers, have emerged online by using memes and incendiary language and by emulating the online behavior of jihadis to recruit and encourage members to foment chaos at the "open protests" (and later during the George Floyd protests). This pandemic-driven surge across all of the violent extremist groups is ominous, but it also presents an opportunity for researchers to better study these groups in a virtual space and, if desired, offer policy recommendations to blunt their impact.

Balancing Activism and Professional Development

Richard Nielsen, Associate Professor, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

When COVID-19 shut down the United States in mid-March 2020, my advice to researchers involved various strategies to "keep calm and carry on." However, in June 2020, I watched the largest mass mobilization for racial justice I have ever witnessed in the United States and advised my colleagues to do the opposite, if they felt so inclined. Two observations continue to serve me well: (1) researchers manage risk by diversifying their research portfolios, and (2) people in professions with a "ladder" to climb may face a difficult tradeoff between activism now and activism later.

Experienced scholars manage research risks by simultaneously pursuing diverse projects. When one project is stymied—by bad weather, bad luck, or a global pandemic—scholars transition their effort to other research streams (Hill 2019). For those with research stalled by COVID-19, I urge rapid diversification with an eye to the risks (described in other contributions) that the pandemic portends for the next five years.

When I feel torn between work and activism, I weigh the question, "Is it better for me to engage in activism now, or could I do more later with more job security?" The answer is not

straightforward. At times, I kept my head down and carried on with my research; at other times, I delayed my research to mobilize for change. Our responses to varying situations demand dynamism. Later today, I will take my kids to a socially distanced protest and then I will be back to research in the evening, rethinking a project for which I would have been in Morocco at this very moment if not for pandemic-related travel disruptions. These difficult decisions force me to recognize that professional and personal life are intimately intertwined. Remember that we are humans learning, not machines learning.

CONCLUSION

Field research always requires the balancing of risks—to the researcher and, perhaps more importantly, to research participants—with the broader benefits of the research. The COVID-19 pandemic has only made those tradeoffs clearer and, perhaps, more painful. Even when conducting research remotely, we owe the individuals and communities who participate in our research the same level of care we would offer in the context of in-person research. Interviews with political activists at home and abroad (including those involved in the ongoing protests for racial justice) should be conducted using the most secure communications platforms available; participant observation in online communities should be conducted with the same respect that we would require of face-to-face interactions; and data should continue to be stored securely to safeguard the rights and privacy of research participants (Social Science Research Council 2020).

As universities grapple with how, whether, and when to resume some version of their normal operations, the question of when to resume field research will arise for many of us. At what point are the risks to research participants as well as to researchers sufficiently reduced that field research is feasible? What does that answer look like for those who do field research in their own communities versus those who do research in other regions or countries? These questions do not have obvious answers, but we hope that researchers will be guided by the same ethical principles that guide all of our research, including the duty to do no harm (US Department of Health and Human Services 1979). Some researchers will conclude that their fieldwork cannot resume until an effective vaccine has been developed and COVID-19 is no longer a global threat. For others, national policies and closed borders may remove that choice altogether. Still others may find ways to resume some fieldwork—either remotely or by using other workarounds suggested herein—that do not put the safety of their participants at risk. These decisions are far from simple, but we hope that, as a discipline, we can have this important conversation in a way that is productive and ethical and that generates possibilities for creative responses to this crisis. ■

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