



Conducting Social Science Research During Crisis

Research is often interrupted for a variety of reasons. Sometimes we encounter personal loss, tragedy and illness. We also confront depression, burnout, and other mental health issues. Currently, researchers across the social sciences, humanities, public health and medicine, physical, and biological sciences are grappling with how to keep themselves, loved ones, and neighbors safe during the COVID-19 global pandemic like everyone else. But they are also contemplating how to keep their research programs afloat during the crisis, if possible. While the pandemic presents challenges of a different nature and magnitude than we are likely accustomed to, researchers must constantly assess and adjust our research projects at different stages of development for myriad reasons.

I prepared this memo originally for graduate students in my Mixed Methods in the Social Sciences research seminar at Wayne State with the hope that it would give them a set of questions to contemplate as they navigate how to move their MA and dissertation projects forward. I'm sharing it now with a broader audience since graduate students in our MA and PhD program report that working through the document helped them feel more empowered at a time when very little else seems in their control.

Note: I realize that some may find thinking about what is possible or even fruitful about a horrifying crisis crude and misguided. The spirit of this outline is to give students a set of practical questions to consider as they continue with their dissertation research and move forward with their academic career objectives. I am not advocating that the global pandemic should be celebrated for its research potential. That could not be farther from the truth. What I do hope is that students develop a plan to adjust when the time is right for them.

1. Take a deep breath. As you work through this outline and answer the questions, I invite you to be as gentle and kind with yourself as possible. As different concerns/answers/realities surface, you are likely to experience a range of emotions (I know I did) as you confront your research agenda and assess a realistic, new timeline for completion.
2. As much is possible, begin to accept that you are in the middle of a transition and liminality is UNCOMFORTABLE. Offer yourself grace at every turn. I think once you've gone through all of the questions below, it will be helpful to go through your answers again with trusted friends, colleagues, and your advisors to process your revised trajectory and work through places where you may feel stuck.
3. I suggest starting this process by writing out answers to the following: What are the central goals of your research project? Why do you study this question? And why does it matter (the 'so what' question)? I strongly encourage that you write out your answers to fully articulate the underlying social/political/economic/cultural problem at the heart of your research from where you sit right now. Reconnecting with your central question will help to clarify a few possible ways forward (even if it isn't clear at the outset).
4. Remind yourself about the empirical scope of your project. What method or methods are you using to collect original data? Why did you initially choose this empirical path? In other words, how did you justify that methodological approach? What were the strengths and limitations of that approach? Were



you planning on using the empirical world to generate theory and/or test theoretical claims or some combination of both? Finally, where are you in the process of data collection and/or analyses? Again, sketch your answers out in writing, on a white board, a big piece of paper, etc. You are welcome to look back at your dissertation proposal but I think you should still write it out again. So much thinking happens in the writing, you don't want to miss out on any nuggets of wisdom buried in your subconscious mind.

5. Now that you have reconnected with your research goals and data collection and analysis plans, take a moment to re-acknowledge that a massive, unexpected global pandemic is intruding your plans. You are not at fault for the slowdown. You did not make this happen. It's OK if you are not productive right now. It is normal that you may feel a bit lost, anxious, or you don't have the cognitive capacity to work on your research now. Covid-19 is fundamentally interrupting life as we know it in our households and families, in our communities, neighborhoods, cities, school districts, and other major institutional landscapes as it is having ramifications on a multi-scalar dimension. Let's take time to recognize the gravity of the situation, accept it for what it is, and then, when you are ready, begin to ask yourselves the following questions:

- Does the data collection strategy you are using (or planning to pursue for my MA/dissertation) need to change? Why or why not? What parts? If you must change data collection efforts, how does this change or set of changes introduce bias into the analysis that you must consider?
- How about the timeline you planned for the data collection? How is that likely to change?
- Would altering the timeline of your data collection plan affect your timeline to degree? Is that of concern to you? What kinds of new concerns does this raise for you? Be real with yourself here. The answer for someone drafting a dissertation proposal or recently defending a proposal will be different than for someone who is in the middle of data collection and plans to go on the job market this fall or the following year.

If you are using qualitative methods such as face-to-face interviewing techniques or ethnographic methods that require you to be in a field research site or if you are using quantitative methods including disseminating an original survey instrument or field experiment, you must assess how your recruitment strategy, sampling procedures, and your presence in the field will need to change in response to the pandemic. Will you be able to pick up your research in 3, 6 or 9 months as if the pause never occurred? Likely not. The difference in timing of when you recruit and sample your data must be carefully examined. If you have a survey currently in the field, how are participants' responses likely to be altered by the current situation? Will you need to weight the sample or model time in a way that captures the disjuncture introduced by the pandemic in the data collection process?

All face-to-face (F2F) interviews and field research must be delayed until all stay-at-home orders are lifted. Even then, you must carefully consider how F2F interviews or your presence in a field site will pose new risks to the participants you recruit or observe. You will also need to make sure all interview protocols and field research plans are approved by your advisors and any additional provisions created by IRB at your college or university. If conducting F2F interviews is no longer an option or waiting to be able to conduct additional F2F interviews will delay your timeline in a way that jeopardizes your funding, you may consider switching to online interviewing model. But switching your method of data



collection in the middle of the process introduces a new set of issues and challenges that must be tackled reasonably and with a great deal of transparency (i.e. explaining how the pandemic interrupted your data collection process, how you handled it, the likely effects this had on your analysis etc. in a series of methodological appendices).

As you negotiate questions pertaining to your empirical strategy, I encourage you to ask yourself at every turn: 1) To what extent does using a different data collection method (e.g. switching from F2F interviews to Zoom/Skype/telephone interviews) than the one I began with affect how I recruit, who I am able to recruit, and when I am able to recruit them?; 2) Another way to think about this is – has the change in your empirical strategy introduced any new kinds of implicit or explicit bias that you must be aware of?; and if so, how can you mitigate those biases in the course of your data collection?; 3) What are the implications of the change in your data collection plans for the conclusions you draw?

6. Ok, now let's mastermind a few different scenarios for moving forward. Assess the best case scenario, a moderate scenario (or scenarios) and the worst case scenario for your data collection strategy. I've been contemplating the three scenarios for my second book project and you really need to be realistic about what is possible moving forward. It's also easy to start going down too many rabbit holes and what-ifs. I encourage you not to invent too many unknowns along the way. The key here is to get a big picture idea of how your plans will need to change without getting too bogged down in the unknowns of the current crisis. Guestimate. Make your best, most informed guess about what the best, moderate, and worst case outcomes for your research program.

I'll offer a quick example using my empirical strategy. I'm currently writing a book about naturalization and threat in the United States. It's a mixed methods project that draws on 150 interviews in 3 states (CA, MI, and TX) with two different comparison groups: Latino/as and Arab-origin immigrants. The statistical analysis is from 1900-2018 at the national level and from 1996-2018 at the state and local level. I also planned to conduct a field experiment with the New Americans Campaign in Detroit, MI this spring and summer. I am almost finished with all the large-N analysis and about 2/3 of the way through the interviews. I still have to collect some Arab origin interviews in CA, finish about 15 more interviews in MI, and all of the Texas interviews, which were scheduled for this summer and fall.

Best case scenario: I finish the quant on schedule. (yay!) And I finish all the remaining interviews F2F (as planned) but on a (much) longer time horizon. Here I'll need to think carefully about how the timing from when I started the first phase of interviews differs to the last and what issues that brings to the analysis.

Moderate scenario: Same as above but the Texas interviews all have to happen over skype/phone/zoom. I have to hire a local partner to help me finish the remaining CA sample (if traveling is off the table) and I finish the MI sample when its safe to do so. Field experiment gets pushed to next year when risk to field participants is removed. Issues are same as above but more problematic.

Worse scenario: A few options here. The field experiment is axed and becomes a series of stand-alone papers. Texas is axed. Recruiting is too hard from afar and/or F2F interviews can't happen at all because travel is too difficult *and* time difference between data collection in each state and for origin groups becomes too contaminated (for lack of a better term). I finish all the interviews either F2F or online (and deal with mixed sampling and those consequences) in all states but lose the comparison between groups. The field experiment is still axed.



Without sounding too much like your therapist, I want to validate all your feelings in reaction to the different scenarios that emerge from your process. I CRIED when I thought about the worst case scenario for my current book project. It's OK to grieve the loss of your control over your project. I give you permission to feel crappy for a little while before you feel ready to make sense of this situation and start to plan the path ahead. Sudden changes happen frequently in social science research in different degrees of magnitude and as researchers we are always assessing and adjusting our research activities. Have all your feelings and let them move through you, acknowledge them, and then, when you are ready, begin to plan how you will move forward.

7. After you work through the three scenarios give yourself some time and space to reflect on the possible course of action that you can take (and start the conversation with your advisors). Here is where I hope you find some empowerment and agency. Your research program WILL be affected by the pandemic in ways big and small. It will affect your empirical strategy and data collection format. Be clear about how the crisis will do that and write about it as much as possible. Writing is thinking.

8. The crisis will also affect your object/subject(s) of study. You will also need to begin thinking as broadly and deeply as possible about the following: How is the crisis affecting the explanatory variables you (plan) examine? What about the outcome variables you (intend) to focus on, how are they affected? Recall that the crisis affects the entire interdependent network of connections in our social world at multiple scales and dimensions and over time. How are the social/political/cultural/economic problems you study affected now and how is it likely to evolve and change over the next 3, 6, and 12 months? What about over a longer time horizon? Be careful to consider health consequences, financial and economic repercussions, institutional and policy changes, etc. at the micro, meso, and macro scale. How does the crises affect the social milieu in which your object or subjects of study are embedded? Begin to make sense of how the pandemic is affecting your problem of inquiry.

8. So many factors are out of your immediate control. The idea is to consider how the social context will affect the object or subjects of your study and begin to anticipate some of those changes as you move forward. You may need to make some adjustments to interview guides/field site locations/confounding variables in your qual and quant analysis, etc. If possible, consider adding questions to your interview protocol/survey that help illuminate differences in individual/groups/orgs everyday experiences and responses to the crises and/or how the crisis affects the thing you study.

9. Here is where I hope you experience some hope. I want you to ask yourself: Where is the maybe in all of this for my research project? What is still possible? What is newly possible? And what parts of my research project have to go?

10. Another way to think about #9 is to consider what new lens the crisis brings to the study of your dissertation or MA? Is it possible that COVID-19 (or something particular about the pandemic or response to the pandemic?

... creates a natural experiment that helps you assess social and behavioral reactions/behaviors?

... can be considered a kind of exogenous shock that reveals underlying group differences? Racial inequalities or other forms of stratification that were always present but seen more clearly now?

... serves as an instrumental variable in your quantitative analysis?



- ... becomes a new variable that proxies for time or some other unobservable factor?
- ... invites a new set of case comparisons?
- ... shows you how an institution works or fails or succeeds and why?
- ... illuminates tensions between structure and agency that you didn't appreciate before?
- ... encourages you to consider different levels of analyses?

You may also need to consider that you have to control for the pandemic as a potential confounder or intervening/mediating variable in your quant and qual analysis.

11. The focus of your research or the way you collect data and analyze it is likely to change. You need to consider any new ethical or safety considerations for the populations you study. How will you need to be sensitive and responsive to group(s) anonymity or safety as you move forward?

12. You are likely to change in response to the crisis. What new considerations about your positionality vis-à-vis your subject matter or participants do you need to be aware of? What are the implications of your positionality for how you ask questions, analyze data, and draw conclusions? What new kinds of implicit or explicit bias may arise that you had not considered before? Here is a good time to confront the thorny question: Am I being opportunistic? And am I doing enough to protect the integrity and safety of the groups I study?

13. How can other researchers who have confronted interruptions in their research serve as beacons of light? What can I learn from ethnographers conducting research in conflict zones about how they adjusted their research programs? What can I learn from researchers who experienced loss or illness while conducting research? Here is one place to find excellent resources:
https://www.maxwell.syr.edu/moynihan/cqrm/About_CORM/. I talk about some issues I encountered in the field in my book (<https://www.ucpress.edu/book/9780520321960/exit-and-voice>) that may be of service to you. Many ethnographers have rich, detailed methodological appendices that explain how they negotiated issues while in the field that may help you think about some of the issues you are currently confronting.

14. What new demands for transparency are incumbent on me to provide the audience of my research? Here's one of many resources that may be helpful to you:
<https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/dromney/files/ssrn-id2652097.pdf>

15. How will I need to adjust the internal narrative I use as I navigate and negotiate the way forward? Everyone conducting research is facing similar kinds of challenges right now and will have to make sacrifices for the wellbeing of the populations we/they study. Lives are being upended every day and, at the very least, the timeline of your data collection will need to change. Please be kind to yourself as you discuss your new research plans. For example, instead of "my dissertation is ruined" maybe consider a more empowering frame such as *"I'm being pushed to consider new avenues to make sense of the social world amid unexpected crisis. I'm going to learn a great deal about myself as a researcher and my ability to adjust and about social structures, agentic behavior of the groups I study, and institutions in the process."* Or, instead of "the world is falling apart, I can't study it now" consider *"this new reality may help us design interventions to improve the quality of life and imagine a better future for the population I study. Maybe my research can contribute to a more equitable path forward."*



16. Finally, be in contact with funding organizations that support your research (as needed) to learn what they may be doing to support their grantees.

I hope this memo is helpful as you begin to assess, adjust, and continue your research plans. I believe that you will do your absolute best. And that is all we can ever do.

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