

Fieldwork Interrupted: Considering Implications of the COVID-19 Pandemic for Qualitative

Family Policy Research

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### Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has had significant implications for the feasibility of field research across academic disciplines. Graduate students in particular can find themselves in the challenging situation of having to re-think their research methods and research design more broadly. This essay outlines some of the implications of the Covid-19 pandemic for qualitative field research as a PhD candidate. In particular, the essay focuses on how a shift in research methods, namely from in-person to online interviews, can have an impact on methodology, i.e. on a theory-based research design. In addition, I consider how the pandemic may have an effect on substantive research results, especially in family sociology and family policy research. The challenge of managing care work during the pandemic and gendered impacts on care obligations have become a topic of political discussion in the past few months. This essay discusses some of the potential consequences of the current crisis for recent parents. Finally, I reflect on intersectionality and the importance of considering demographics of research participants and women in academia when discussing the effects of the pandemic, as Covid-19 has disproportionately impacted BIPOC communities, individuals with low SES and those with care responsibilities.

*Keywords:* Qualitative Research, Interviews, Fieldwork, PhD Research, COVID-19, Family Policy

## Fieldwork Interrupted: Considering Implications of the COVID-19 Pandemic for Qualitative Family Policy Research

In March of 2020 I was getting ready to wrap-up the first phase of my PhD fieldwork in Germany. A PhD Candidate in the School of Public Policy at Oregon State University, I had just spent three months in Northern Bavaria in Germany, recruiting and interviewing 36 first-time parents on their plans for taking parental leave.

In my PhD research I am interested in the intersection of parental leave policy design and individual parenting identities. Germany is an interesting case of a traditionally conservative welfare state which has relied on the mother as the primary caretaker, but which has also implemented ‘Scandinavian’ parental leave and early childcare models in the past 15 years. These models encourage fathers to take parental leave and facilitate parents’ return to paid work post-childbirth by establishing childcare infrastructure.

While I use both quantitative and qualitative methods, my dissertation research is centered on two sets of in-depth interviews with first-time parents before and after their baby is born. A cornerstone of my research design was two periods of fieldwork in Germany over the course of a year, which would enable me to speak with mothers and fathers separately and in person. In August 2019 I had already spent two months in Bavaria as a guest researcher at a local research institute establishing contacts for recruiting couples by connecting with midwives and parental leave advising offices. While originally from Germany, I was unfamiliar with my recruitment area, and being able to lay this groundwork on-location was imperative for the success of my research.

In mid-March, when I was about to schedule my final pre-birth interviews, the United States closed their borders to travelers from Europe because of the Covid-19 pandemic. While I

am a legal permanent resident, which means that I can return to the United States even when the borders are closed to European citizens, the situation seemed to be shifting by the minute. In the next few days, it was becoming less and less clear how many flights were still leaving Europe for the United States, and I finally made the decision to prepone my departure out of fear of being stranded in Germany. My return to the US was both accompanied by relief, because I was not going to be separated from my husband longer-term, as well as uncertainty as to when I would be able to return to Germany, both for fieldwork and to see my own family. However, not fully realizing the scope of the crisis in these early stages of the pandemic, I was still hopeful that by October – the intended start of my second fieldwork phase– I would be able to travel again.

Over the course of the next months, as the full impact of the pandemic was becoming apparent, I was forced to re-think the feasibility of on-location research and to explore other avenues, namely synchronous online interviews, as the option closest to in person interviews. In fact, the need for online interviews arose quickly upon my return, because my early departure had forced me to cancel meetings with two sets of participating parents. Furthermore, the uncertainty about future outbreaks of Covid-19 in both the United States and Germany as well as university regulations, which currently do not support international fieldwork, made it necessary for me to decide against conducting my second set of interviews in-person.

Fortunately, I had received approval for Zoom interviews by both my dissertation committee and OSU's IRB pre-pandemic, should they become necessary because of scheduling difficulties, and consequently I did not experience a delay in finishing my first wave of interviews. Nonetheless, I was now confronted with a situation in which I had to contend with a nine-hour time difference and had to rely on my laptop as well as an occasionally unstable internet connection, causing difficulties in connecting with research participants.

While these practical aspects can simply constitute a nuisance, there are more significant methodological issues which need to be considered when shifting from in-person to online interviews (Lupton 2020). More specifically, changing my mode of interviewing has had implications for the theoretical framework of my research, i.e. for the theoretical considerations which originally guided my choice of in-person interviews as the preferred data collection method.

First, speaking with parents separately is based on the understanding that individual interviews help to identify relationship dynamics which may be concealed in joint interviews (Doucet 2015). Furthermore, conducting interviews in direct succession helps to ensure that both parents go into the interview with a similar baseline understanding. Given that the nine-hour time difference between Oregon and Germany severely limits available time slots, online interviews can make it harder to speak with parents individually and in direct succession. If I need to schedule interviews with a mother and father on different days, it is likely that the couple will have talked about the content of the first conversation between interviews. This could influence their subsequent narrative and thus the reliability of my results when compared to the first set of interviews. While the substance of the interviews I have already conducted over Zoom does not appear to diverge greatly from the content of in-person interviews, changing interview modes halfway through my research still poses a risk of obtaining inconsistent results because participants may behave differently in an online environment compared to an in-person meeting. For instance, I have noticed that interacting with participants virtually can be less personal at times, even though I have been trying to adhere to ‘Zoom etiquette,’ such as looking directly into the camera when speaking. Online interaction, as opposed to speaking with couples in their homes, can create a barrier, which stands in the way of building the necessary rapport with

participants. This is relevant because I am mindful of hierarchical dynamics between the researcher and the participant and consider building professional trust imperative for qualitative interview research. However, I am hopeful that having met participants in person at least once, either during recruitment or the first interview, will positively impact their comfort level in the second set of interviews. While more of a practical concern, a lack of personal connection may also impact the level of commitment that a person feels towards participation in an online interview. My participants have recently become parents, which means that they will likely be occupied with the changes that the transition to parenthood brings. Based on my own anecdotal experience, the barrier to canceling or forgetting about an online appointment can be lower as opposed to canceling or missing an in-person meeting at one's own home. I am trying to anticipate this potential challenge as I continue scheduling my second set of interviews.

While my shift in interview methods can have implications for my methodology, I have also been thinking about how the Covid-19 crisis will impact the substantive nature of my findings. As the current crisis has likely touched all my participants' lives in some form, it is potentially necessary to adjust the scope of my analysis regarding participants' experiences between pre- and post-birth interviews. Most of my participants have become parents between February and May 2020, meaning their babies were born either shortly before or during Germany's first shelter-in-place order. Even though restrictions loosened during the summer, Germany re-instituted a second lockdown in November 2020 and recent numbers have shown a slump in the German economy, albeit with less dire consequences for the labor market than in the United States (Welna 2020). While I cannot know what participants' experiences would have been absent the pandemic, some of them are reporting unanticipated circumstances, such as fathers being home longer following the birth of their child because of working from home or

being unemployed or furloughed. These unanticipated events can provide important insights into perceptions of parental leave and parenting roles among recent parents, at a time when the lines between paid, domestic and care work are becoming more blurred. For example in the follow-up interviews I have already conducted, several couples expressed feeling thankful that changes in employment caused by the pandemic made it possible for them to have more time to parent together and to offer each other support during the first months after birth. However, most mothers in my participant pool were already planning on taking one year of well-paid, job-secured parental leave, which means that the imminent challenge of juggling childcare, employment and coping with a potential financial fallout during a pandemic was likely less pronounced than for parents with older children.<sup>1</sup> In this context, I also need to note that I focus on heterosexual couples, whose demographics skew towards being white, middle-class and college educated. While racial and class dynamics differ between Germany and the United States, there are indications that Covid-19 in Germany has had a more severe impact, medically and economically, on individuals with a lower socio-economic status and is likely to increase existing income and education gaps (Bartsch 2020; Neuhaus 2020; Stockhausen 2020).

Finally, reflecting on my own position as researcher, I consider myself quite fortunate given the circumstances, even though my PhD fieldwork has been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. I was still able to recruit participants in person and build some rapport with them during the first set of interviews, which will make continuing my research easier. Had the pandemic occurred a few months earlier I would have likely needed to reconsider my entire research design, which I know is the case for many other graduate students, especially those doing field research. Moreover, Covid-19 has disproportionately impacted racial minorities in

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<sup>1</sup> Discussing the implications of mothers taking most of the available parental leave is beyond the scope of this essay, but it will be crucial to pay attention to how the pandemic is potentially exacerbating the gendered nature of care-taking arrangements.

the United States and has posed significant professional challenges for women who are also parenting (Staniscuaski et al. 2020; Tai et al. 2020). Having spoken with colleagues who are doing research while being without childcare or the ability to take leave has highlighted my privileged position as a white woman without care obligations and puts a spotlight on the need for better (child) care infrastructure in academia and beyond.

While I regret that I will not have the opportunity to follow-along with my participants' experiences in person, I am grateful for the flexibility of my PhD advisor and the technology which allow me to complete my fieldwork from afar. Speaking from my own experience, I believe that it is highly important for universities to demonstrate both flexibility and compassion in responding to individual circumstances and for advisors to work closely with graduate students so they can complete their research successfully in these uncertain times.



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