Covid-19 and research in conflict-affected contexts: distanced methods and the digitalisation of suffering

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Abstract

This research note explores the pressing ethical challenges associated with increased online platforming of sensitive research on conflict-affected settings since the onset of Covid-19. We argue that moving research online and the 'digitalisation of suffering' risks reducing complexity of social phenomena and omission of important aspects of lived experiences of violence or peace-building. Immersion, 'contexting' and trust-building are fundamental to research in repressive and/or conflict-affected settings and these are vitally eclipsed in online exchanges and platforms. 'Distanced research' thus bears very real epistemological limitations. Neither proximity not distance are in themselves liberating vectors. Nonetheless, we consider the opportunities that distancing offers in terms of its decolonial potential, principally in giving local researcher affiliates' agency in the research process and building more equitable collaborations. This research note therefore aims to propose a series of questions and launch a debate amongst interested scholars, practitioners and other researchers working in qualitative research methods in the social sciences.

Keywords

Qualitative research methods, Research in conflict settings, Remote research, Digital data collection, Covid-19

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Introduction

Every crisis presents an opportunity to re-think research practice (Mwambari, 2020; Macamo, 2017) as it opens a 'process of redefinition' (Cave and Sloan, 2014) and adaptation. It is this lasting process of reshaping of research, methods and ethics in the wake of Covid-19 that this research note explores. In *Listening on the Edge: Oral History in the Aftermath of Crisis*, Cave, Sloan and their contributors (2014) explore crisis as a 'historical constant' and a transformative force but rarely has there been a crisis that has enveloped most of the globe within weeks and forced millions to reshape their working practices, including research production. At the start of 2021, we know a series of vaccines have been developed but challenges remain in their full roll-out around the world and inequalities in vaccine access are delaying its distribution. The pandemic might linger into the foreseeable future (Yong, 2020). With many researchers pausing their research, some reshaping their projects and methodologies, there is no doubt that 'the Covid-19 global pandemic has had a significant impact on researchers and education [. . .] and our way of life has drastically changed' (Lawrence, 2020: 1). It is therefore vital to launch a debate on this topic.

   No doubt many who will continue to do research are turning today to exploring the different facets this change in blogs and new guidelines (Abedi Dunia et al., 2020; Mwambari, 2021; UKCDR, 2020). Our contribution is meant to be a small and targeted part of this emerging conversation, reflecting specifically on core ethical challenges that arise as we increasingly conduct qualitative research – interviews, oral histories, on difficult topics such as past violence online and as more researchers physically distance from their research sites and subjects. Our focus on conflict-affected settings is due both to our positionality as researchers working on these contexts and because some of these ethical dilemmas arise with special urgency in such contexts (Mwambari, 2019; Ansoms, et al., 2021; Nyenyezi Bisoka et al., 2020; Nyenyezi Bisoka, 2020). What does the increased online platforming of research in the wake of Covid-19 imply for the qualitative study of sensitive and conflict-affected settings? What are the ethical challenges of learning about violence online? And what of 'distanced research's' risk of re-colonisation?

   In what follows, we focus on three areas where ethical challenges arise: state surveillance, digitalisation of suffering and recalibration of power in research relationships. In sum, we propose that moving research online and the 'digitalisation of suffering' risks reducing complexity of social phenomena and omission of important aspects of lived experiences of violence or peace-building. Immersion, 'contexting' and trust-building are fundamental to research in conflict-affected settings and these are vitally eclipsed in online exchanges and platforms. 'Distanced research' thus bears very real epistemological limitations. Nonetheless, we also consider the significant opportunities that distancing offers in terms of its decolonial potential, principally in giving local researchers agency in research process and building more equitable collaborations. Neither proximity not distance are in themselves liberating vectors. While we realize that in the current political economy of research, proximity does not stand in for opportunity, and distanced research bears real risks of re-colonisation under a new guise, we take Covid-19 as a

global event with the potential to re-imagine new norms in qualitative research in sensitive contexts in Africa.

Rather than offering guidelines, this research note is – first and foremost – meant to launch a much-needed debate amongst interested scholars, practitioners and other researchers working in qualitative research methods in social sciences. While the note is focused on exploring *ethical challenges*, it does not deny there are also advantages to online research such as cost, time and continuation of already existing offline research relationships. While the note explores *three particular* ethical dilemmas in conflict-affected and politically charged research settings, this debate is in fact relevant much beyond the contexts we study. It will speak to any researcher committed to the discussion on advancing qualitative methodological considerations amidst and in the wake of Covid-19, and in the context of related crises of climate and research finance.

Setting parameters for debate and analysis

State surveillance

New 'sites' of research such as Skype and Zoom bring in new challenges, surveillance being a prominent one. Interviewing on virtual platforms offers a more ready site for 'capture' and 'listening in' than physical encounter. South Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda and Ethiopia, among others, are counties known to use various means to surveil their citizens (Chachage, 2010; Workneh, 2015; Grinberg, 2017; Okech et al., 2021). In UK itself, Echeleon is used to track communication where subjects such as 'terrorism' are the topic and more broadly, post-9/11 we have seen a global rise of surveillant assemblage (Bauman and Lyon, 2013; Lyon, 2003). Surveillance is an issue on *both* sides of the screen and online encounter.

Surveillance also reaches beyond the state framework. It is increasingly used by innovative private companies in the field of harvesting data and as such poses more complex challenges to online activity. Further to this, ethical and political challenges arise from the big data race that information technology companies are taking on. Any digitization of research must thus take these inter-related challenges seriously.

In field sites where state surveillance is rampant, research often requires less – not more – technical capture and the avoidance of technology, such as recorders, phones or online communication platforms. In such settings, the interpretation of what constitutes critique or 'sensitive' topics is shifting and expansive (Nyabola, 2018). What matters is not only proof but people's perception of surveillance (Purdekova, 2011, 2015, 2016).

As we learn from conflict-affected contexts in Africa, people find narrative strategies to relay concerns and critique without announcing them directly (Fujii, 2010), strategies which are harder to 'read' online and precisely for this must be captured with greater determination. Moving research online will likely mean researchers have to become quickly attuned to what Lee-Ann Fujii (2010) in her offline research in post-genocide Rwanda called 'meta-data' – a wide variety of non-verbal clues such as evasions and silencing, facial expressions, or tone of voice – which communicate meaning without verbalising. These meta-data will be present in online encounters too, but yet others

might appear that are unique to online platforms such as pausing videos and/or audios, or 'framing-out' of gestures or even expressions. Online research will have to carefully enact 'thick reading' (Purdekova, 2015) of cyber-produced narratives. In physical encounters, thick reading is aided by contexting – when testimonies and narratives are read against the wider political, social, and cultural contexts (ibid). Further, immediate context of the interview matters as well and this information becomes harder to source online. Both interviewer and interviewee's positionality will matter even more than in face-to-face interactions (Njeri, 2020; Okech, 2013; Wamai, 2014).

The fact that some researchers will now not be immersed in the contexts they study has also important implications. Immersion leads to better appreciation of risk, not only or primarily to self but to the interlocutors (Eriksson Baaz and Utas, 2019; Jenkins, 2018). Moving research online risks more insensitive gauging of what is and should be done, and how. For one, researchers might not be physically 'there' to assure a safe encounter and a safe space is created for the interviewee, or to check on them after. Researchers based abroad might also create batteries of questions that put the interlocutor at risk. In this context, collaboration between local and international researchers becomes ever more crucial but also more complex (Bouka, 2018). The real risk of surveillance requires careful protocols for cyber-safety – researching what constitutes 'unsafe' topics, sourcing local perceptions and knowledge of risk, careful choice of online platforms as some seem more vulnerable to surveillance such as Zoom. In sum, we urge reflection around the following core questions: What does it mean when interviews and testimonies are related to interviewers exclusively online? How will this affect who speaks, what they choose to speak about, and how?

Digitalisation of suffering

Even before the current global pandemic, 'there has been a trend to conduct interviews soon after, or even in the midst of, crisis' (Cave and Sloan, 2014: 1). But to add distancing to the study of phenomena such as violence, reconciliation or indeed peace-building raises pressing questions, which we subsume under the heading 'digitalisaton of suffering.' For us, the term 'suffering' is here a metaphor capturing aspects of life that cannot be understood solely from the rationalised discourse represented by a controlled interview of focus group setting, whether online or offline. Indeed, we see online research as fundamentally threatening to the capture of complexity in settings affected by conflict and trauma.

On the issue of multiple traumas and crises interacting, the ethical rules need to follow well-tested practice. A participant's willingness to talk should guide the interviewer as the process of testimony can be validating of one's experience but can at the same time be retraumatising and overwhelming. Thus a constant review of consent needs to be in place as do clear ways of addressing the potential for harm.

The moving of research online opens space for qualitative researchers becoming more rigorous about the protocols they use. In this sense, Covid-19 can help positively to reshape and expand existing ethical practices. Online communication can also open doors to greater control for those who are interviewed – the microphone and video can be temporarily turned off as a way to collect thoughts or instantaneously (even

if momentarily) to disconnect. Telephone calls, Skype and WhatsApp allow for easier disconnection and more control than a visitor in one's house. This, however, presupposes access to, control and knowledge of the technology itself. The technology might cause intrusion when brought in and distrust if it is unfamiliar, undercutting rather than building control. Disengagement from research is also ultimately an impoverished frame to read for control. Research respondents often find multiple ways to shape and influence a relationship in conflict-affected contexts (Fujii, 2012; Schultz, 2020) by providing opportunities, brokering relationships or physical security. We therefore need to reflect on whether online research will enable, or rather preclude, these ways to 'flip' power. Similarly, physical presence in context allows originally excluded topics or categories of respondents to claim attention, as it has happened multiple times in our field research in Burundi, Rwanda, in Uganda, South Sudan and Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). We thus need to explore whether online qualitative methods allow for agentive reframing of research 'from below.'

But before any consent is given, trust needs to be built. Building trust and rapport is key to research on sensitive topics – arguably, 'being there' and 'shared space' matters for people to open up about difficult subjects (Berry and Lake, 2020). While time before and after interviews allows for informal discussion and the informant's own questions, queries and discovery, and this certainly can happen online, close rapport typically requires longer-term interaction and relationship-building. Physical and social proximity are usually understood to lie at the core of ethical research (Schatz and deVolo, 2004) and researchers must ask whether and to what extent online research can dispense with these.

If research becomes remote, trust becomes more complicated to build. Local researchers might build rapport more successfully, but international partners who will also benefit from this research and use its findings, will struggle with the same, potentially affecting the research as a whole. In a sense, the trust issue is an inverse of the surveillance issue – it is about 'not seeing enough' – of the interviewer on the other of the screen, and what is outside that screen, the constraints of the frame. The danger is that the situation might encourage more commodification of pain as trust is replaced by material incentives in determining participation. Here again, more systematic attention needs to be paid to how distancing and online interaction affect trust in the research relationship, and with what effect. Finally, digitalisation of suffering carries the very real risk of an impoverished understanding and a circumscribed production of knowledge. Researchers carrying out interviews and focus groups online must ensure they deploy all means possible to reach beyond these instruments to 'grasp' their topic.

In a distanced social science context, locally based researchers must take the lead to produce vital knowledge. More than ever before, the role of local collaborators emerges as a misnomer, as we discuss below. But local researchers themselves need to navigate restrictions and social distancing guidelines. Any project team will need to assure that no undue risks are created through asymmetries of power in the relationship, where some become more vulnerable through exposure, either in contracting the virus or becoming a vector of transmission. For those affiliated to local institutions, they will also grapple with challenges that have affected higher education in Africa due to Covid-19 related crisis (Azah-Awah, 2020; Ismael, 2020). Funding applications will need to factor in

these new costs especially of affordable and preferably sourced technological tools where available.

Even when travel restrictions are lifted and researchers from global north are able to travel again, communities might refuse to welcome foreigners. The WHO warned that we not only face a threat of a virus but also that of 'fear, rumours and stigma' (York, 2020). This has already been witnessed in South Africa where Covid-19 crisis has heightened xenophobia (ibid). Cases of Covid-19-related discrimination against people coming from China and then Europe were also reported in rural Kenya where they were called 'Corona' (British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), March 9, 2020). Foreign researchers will have to think through possible restrictions and how to confront stigma if directed against them during fieldwork. We therefore propose a debate on the following: Can research be distanced and still (i) get at the emic understanding of social and power dynamics and (ii) offer rich description and contexting that immersion and direct observation offer?

Decolonisation or re-colonisation of knowledge production?

Researchers and commentators have started a debate on the potential of the Covid-19 crisis as an opportunity to advance decolonisation in approaches to fighting Coronavirus and also in the knowledge production about the crisis (Mwambari, 2020; Pailey, 2020). More specifically yet, a discussion has evolved around the missed opportunity to decolonise how the media reports about this crisis in Africa (Filipi and Witig, 2020).

Decolonisation has different interpretation and application in knowledge production debates (Branch, 2018; Diagne, 2011; Mamdani, 2016; Mbembe, 2016; Tamale, 2020) yet its core message remains to de-center Eurocentric approaches and a quest for epistemic freedom in Africa (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). Similarly, recent scholarship on qualitative research methods has questioned power dynamics and imbalances in research design and implementation that originate from colonial research practices (Mwambari, 2019; Cronin-Furman and Lake, 2018; Parashar, 2019). The question of who sets the research agenda and for what purposes is at the core of these debates that have a long history in post-independent Africa including insecure contexts (Kebede, 2004; Mama, 2007; Mazrui, 2002; Olonisakin, 2020). Covid-19 crisis has opened an opportunity to advance these debates and envision transformation in qualitative research methods that goes beyond privileging outsiders' interests and instead prioritizing interests of the researched contexts (Mama, 2007; Mkandawire, 2005; Prah, 2009).

Yet, even if Covid-19 is an opportunity for decolonisation, it also presents the risk of re-colonisation if a methodological turn is not imagined for field research. The turn away from the ethnographic privileging of emic views has the real potential to promote top-down, etic knowledge, 'universal theoretical models' privileging dominant epistemes, and technical/non-critical paradigms privileging intervention. This dynamic, which we already see unfolding, not only limits understanding of sensitive contexts but severely impacts decolonial agendas in knowledge production. Ultimately, the decolonial project is about questioning the limits of Western social science methods in its desire to know the 'other.' We then ask what does 'dewesternisation' (Rutazibwa, 2020 citing Vasquez and Mignolo) and the crumbling of epistemic privilege imply for

research in the wake of Covid-19, and do the research shifts we observe allow a greater space for such project?

Conclusion

Distanced research and methods amidst Covid-19 pose unique challenges for the study of conflict-affected contexts, but also foreshadow openings and decolonial potential of distanced research. We propose that the ethical questions that Covid-19 poses to the digitization of research are also fundamentally epistemological. 'Surveillance' and 'digitalisation of suffering' call on the researcher to ensure the safety and care research subjects. At the same time, this ethical requirement is a fundamental precondition for being able to really know the condition studied. In other words, we cannot know enough about the phenomena studied in the field if our witnesses feel insecure or poorly protected.

Second and connected to the above, Covid-19 makes us question the boundaries generally established in the social sciences between ethics and epistemology – between the requirement of 'do no harm' and that of understanding enough to claim scientificity. Indeed, we know very well that if the literature on ethical challenges in the field has particularly developed in fields such as ethnography or anthropology, it is because these disciplines believe that immersion in the field guarantees in-depth knowledge of the phenomena studied and, thereby, the validity of the research. However, the distance that Covid-19 creates risks eroding this in-depth knowledge of the terrain and producing partial, approximate and otherwise erroneous data.

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