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Research Note

Sociology

Portholes of Ethnography: The Methodological Learning from 'Being There' at a Distance

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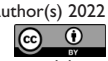
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Abstract

Ethnography is, in essence, an approach to social research reliant on 'being there' and ethnographic approaches to the social world have been widely taken up in sociological research. In this research note, we share our UK-based experiences of ethnographic fieldwork with professional practitioners during the initial months of the COVID-19 pandemic, when 'staying at home' was the antithesis of 'being there'. In doing so, we highlight opportunities the pandemic presented to re-evaluate familiar qualitative methods, to develop new, remote ethnographic research strategies and to examine the limitations of conducting ethnography from a distance. We consider how far we stretch 'ethnography' in a socially distanced context, using what we call 'portholes of ethnography', and we outline how our learning informs the ways in which we can adapt research approaches – driven by relationality – in times of crises.

Keywords

ethnography, remote methods, serendipity, undesigned relationality

Introduction

While diverse disciplines understand the term ethnography differently it is, in essence, a research approach reliant on 'being there' (Borneman and Hammoudi, 2009). More specifically, from a sociological and anthropological perspective, it is an 'intellectual

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enterprise informed by fieldwork' (Bell, 2019: 10), 'practised and produced in-situ by ethnographers who come to share the space/s of the field *with* Others' (Hickey and Smith, 2020: 820, emphasis in original). The colonial origins of ethnography mean that, historically, 'being there' often positioned people living in communities as 'other' and inferior (Middleton and Pradhan, 2014). By contrast, contemporary sociological approaches increasingly define and justify themselves by 'being there' to develop mutually respectful, reciprocal research relationships (Mason, 2021), and to take part in the conversations and interactions that constitute social life (Mische, 2011). However, in spring 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic led to those of us living in the UK being mandated to 'stay at home' (Gov.UK, 2020). As a research team about to embark on a lengthy period of ethnographic fieldwork, we encountered an unfamiliar environment; 'staying at home' was the antithesis of 'being there' in the field as we had planned.

Our ethnographic approach included working collaboratively with two organisations, social care practitioners working in the organisations and migrant families they support. In this research note we focus on our experiences of conducting fieldwork with professional practitioners in unprecedented circumstances. In doing so, we outline the opportunities the pandemic presented to develop new ethnographically driven research strategies, and to re-evaluate qualitative methods – online interviews and focus groups – previously (largely) seen to have few advantages compared with their face-to-face counterparts (Lobe and Morgan, 2020). We also reflect on the limitations of 'socially distanced' research with a focus on relationality within sociology, specifically 'undesigned relationality' (Lederman, 2013) and 'serendipity' (Rivoal and Salazar, 2013) in the ethnographic encounter. As such, we consider how adaptable 'ethnography' is and how 'portholes of ethnography' – by which we mean windows into the day-to-day lives of practitioners – became a key ethnographic strategy for the project's data generation.

The Research Context

This fieldwork we draw upon was conducted as part of the ongoing ESRC funded project, 'Everyday Bordering in the UK: The impact on social care practitioners and the migrant families with whom they work'. The objectives of the study are shaped by the sociological concept of 'everyday bordering', which describes how, in a policy and media environment that is increasingly hostile towards immigration, bordering practices extend further into everyday life (Crawford et al., 2016; Yuval-Davis et al., 2017). In this environment, for example, professional practitioners come under pressure to check a person's entitlement to access state funded services, and may act in ways that generate patterns of hostility towards the people they ostensibly intend to support (Humphries, 2016; Walsh et al., 2021). The overall aim of the study is, then, to explore if and how social care practitioners in the UK enact and/or resist such bordering practices and how this is experienced by the migrant families they support. By working with collaborating organisations in cities in northern England – Hull and Sheffield – the study also explores the significance of 'place' in these experiences.

As the project is collaborative and ethnographic in approach, it is underpinned by relationally driven research practice, an approach that works *with* communities to generate empathic understandings of, and solutions to, social phenomenon and problems

(Facer and Enright, 2016). Consequently, working face-to-face with practitioners and migrant families over time, and facilitating focus groups, interviews and engagement activities, was central to the research plan and to ensuring outcomes meaningful to participants' lives (McIntyre, 2008). When the UK government announced the first national 'lockdown' measures, elements of the project's research design became untenable.

This led to revisiting the project's entire research design. Initially, fieldwork was paused for a month to accommodate the complexities of the changing world for collaborating organisations. In this time, we worked with practitioners to discuss what was happening for them, and how the research plan could be changed to accommodate the research objectives in a way that remained achievable. By May 2020, collaborators began to feel that the intensity of the crisis management they experienced in the initial weeks of the UK's first 'lockdown' had passed. They felt able to engage with the study and agreed that it was ethically possible to develop relationships, gain informed consent and conduct focus groups and interviews with practitioners via online platforms. We also agreed to pause work with migrant families, and revisit this in six months. Our reflections here, therefore, consider the creative possibilities for ethnography and the ways in which our work with *practitioners* achieved some of the necessary relational aspects of the approach. We do this by focusing on how fostering trust and knowledge creation, via reflective conversations and humanising the research relationship during online focus groups and interviews, is possible remotely. We then explore the significance of 'undesigned relationality' (Lederman, 2013) and the role of 'serendipity' (Rivoal and Salazar, 2013) in the ethnographic encounter.

Fostering Trust and Knowledge Creation via Online Reflective Conversations

Digital approaches to ethnography are not, however, a new phenomenon but, rather, a growing methodological field of sociological enquiry (Pink et al., 2016) referred to using a range of terms. These include 'netnography' (Kozinets, 2015), 'virtual ethnography' (Hine, 2000) and 'cyber-ethnography' (Ward, 1999). Understandings of digital ethnographic approaches are contended with some scholars describing the approach as a passive non-participatory observation of online interactions and others advocating a move towards positioning it as 'more human-centred' and 'participative' (Kozinets, 2015: 96). That said, each of the terms used, typically refer to the study of societies and cultures in digital spaces, such as, social media (Góralska, 2020). Researchers also document adopting digital methods during the pandemic, including, text communications, written or video diaries and photovoice technologies (Lupton, 2020). Despite this, for us, the social media focus of digital ethnographies and the noted digital methods did not support the in-person, 'being there' ethnographic approach of our project. However, the creative possibilities inherent in the ethnographic encounter (Hickey and Smith, 2020) provided us with opportunities to address this fieldwork problem in new ways. While practitioners with whom we were working were under intense pressure in the early days of the pandemic, we progressed with caution and worked with collaborators to develop 'portholes of ethnography'. These 'portholes' differ to the digital methods and ethnography described, in that they provided remote, temporary windows of communication that

allowed unfamiliar participants and researchers to gradually develop relationships. By enabling dialogue, these channels allowed us to explore the everyday practices central to social research (Mills, 1959), and to replace some of the detailed knowledge sharing and trust building that results from physically spending time in organisations.

One 'porthole' was created by having 'reflective conversations' via extended (30 minutes–1 hour) audio or video calls with practitioners. We did this by approaching practitioners with whom we had developed relationships via emails and phone calls while the fieldwork start date was paused. We explained that we would like to speak with them at regular intervals, defined by them, to gradually build an understanding of their work with migrant families, and that this would hopefully also provide a space for reflection. We emphasised that these conversations would not be audio recorded but, with their consent, written notes would be taken. For us, this replicated the research notes that we would usually make in an ethnographic diary to record our learning in relation to the project's research objectives. These regular 'reflective conversations' enabled the development of sustained ethnographic relationships with six practitioners, with whom we held 30 conversations over a 10-month period. The research diary notes below – made during a conversation with a practitioner we call Irene – show that this reflective space gave practitioners an opportunity to describe their day-to-day work and allowed us to piece together a detailed understanding of their working practices, despite the absence of physical proximity:

> In a previous conversation, Irene told me she's supporting a Polish mum that has recently left an abusive relationship. I ask her how this is going. She tells me that the 'mum's struggling a bit financially' because she's working part time, but that she's helped mum apply for a funded nursery place and for a grant to get bunkbeds. Unprompted, Irene says that she was able to help mum because she can 'get benefits', but that she wouldn't have been able to if mum didn't have access to public funds. (fieldnotes)

Irene's comments also illustrate how, during our conversations, practitioners began to make connections between their work and the research project that they found beneficial. As such, one practitioner – whom we call Simon – expressed remorse when we brought these conversations to an end, and he asked us to note down that:

> The reflective conversations have become something I look forward to. They've reminded me of my time at university studying youth and community work, where we got to un-pick our practice in a space that was free of the day-to-day pressures of the workplace. This space has allowed me to reflect in real time and to look at all the different work we do and spot things that need work, or in some cases have a total re-think. (Simon)

These reflective conversations go some way to replacing the 'learning from people' at the heart of ethnography and that would have occurred if in-person work were possible (Borneman and Hammoudi, 2009). Simon's reflection also evidences that these 'portholes' fostered trust and engaged us – practitioners and researchers – in the reciprocal practices and ethnographic knowledge creation. While the 'portholes' provide a restricted lens, mediated by practitioners' decisions about what is significant to share, and our interpretation of this, these conversations are a method with future utility for sociological

enquiry in both online and in-person environments. By scheduling unstructured conversations, we created what Simon describes as space, 'free of the day-to-day pressures of the workplace' and established a new opportunity for reciprocity in the research relationship. Consequently, we argue that this methodological response to an unprecedented situation should be retained as an innovative addition to the social research toolbox.

Humanising the Research Relationship: The Shared Experience of 'Being There' at Home

Conducting qualitative interviews and focus groups via video calling platforms has historically been positioned as inferior to doing so in person. Reasons cited include: difficulties reading visual cues when researchers only see a participant's head and shoulders (Lo Iacono et al., 2016); differences in digital literacy between participants and researchers, exacerbating unequal power dynamics in the research relationship (Archibald et al., 2019); and participants' exclusion from participation if they do not have access to technology (Lobe and Morgan, 2020). However, documented advantages of using video calling platforms include: the lower costs of online research; the ease of organisation when people are geographically dispersed; and improving access for so-called 'hard to reach' research participants (Lobe and Morgan, 2020). During the pandemic, reliance on communication technologies has necessarily mushroomed and, as researchers on a live project, while being mindful of the negatives noted, we agreed with collaborators to conduct practitioner interviews and focus groups online.

As sociologists, we were alert to inequalities in research relationships (Edwards and Brannelly, 2017) and concerned about using online platforms and the impact of the pandemic on exacerbating unequal access to digital technologies (Holmes and Burgess, 2020). Our collaborators had, however, provided employees with appropriate devices and Wi-Fi connections to support remote working. Potential participants were also professionals who had access to and were familiar with digital technologies. We therefore felt comfortable conducting online focus groups and interviews with practitioners, and gained ethical clearance to progress. In doing so, our experience revealed that online research interactions, in some circumstances, can contribute to the development of more equal research relationships between researchers and participants.

When working with professionals – or 'studying-up' – navigating the ways in which the position of 'expert' oscillates between researchers and professionals is complex (Conti and O'Neil, 2007). However, we found that this was eased by the unique context of the pandemic, because all involved were unfamiliar with remote working and were learning to use new technologies together. This made the position of 'expert' more fluid than it would be ordinarily and softened the positioning of expert participants as holders of knowledge 'not otherwise available' (Robinson, 2021: 673) or researchers as being 'emotionally detached' and 'in control' (Nilan, 2002: 372). For us, conducting focus groups, interviews and ethnographic activities via video platforms, when all involved were in their own homes, disrupted the power inherent in the researcher/researched relationship in ways that we can learn from for future social research. In our online interactions, neither practitioner nor researcher were on neutral territory; rather in the comfort of the familiar spaces of their kitchen, bedroom and, on occasion, their cars. This did, of

course, highlight some of the inequalities illuminated by COVID-19 (Xu and Blundell, 2020) – for example, access to workspaces in residential settings – and remove the protective anonymity of the workplace. However, contrary to concerns that the restricted nature of the camera lens limits the richness of the online research encounter (Lo Iacono et al., 2016), we argue that the frame of the video image gives participants additional control over what and whom they choose to include and exclude in the encounter. In our experience, children and pets were often brought into the frame, and enquiries from researchers about objects in the frame – a guitar amp or wallpaper design – were often reciprocated with enquiries about objects within our frame, such as, participants asking 'what's that picture behind you?' and, 'is your cat a rescue?'. As such, we observed a levelling in the ownership people exerted over these glimpses into their lives, bringing a particularly humanising aspect to the research relationship that would not be replicated in face-to-face interactions in apparently neutral professional spaces. Despite not 'being there' in the traditional ethnographic sense, our research revealed that, by exposing features of domestic life, via 'portholes', *online* ethnography can remain a situated and embodied experience (Hickey and Smith, 2020: 821). Rather than create a sense of distance, this approach amplified the 'hauntingly personal' (Van Maneed, 2011: ix) nature of ethnography and highlighted how online methods, supported by video calling technologies, have adaptable capacities for ethnographic research situations.

Adding to 'Portholes': The Continued Significance of Physical Proximity

The flexibility of ethnography allowed us to successfully achieve some of the necessary sociological relational aspects of 'being there' (Borneman and Hammoudi, 2009); other features of the approach were, however, difficult to replicate in the context of restricted physical proximity. For ethnographers, the slow accumulation of understanding relies on a researcher's commitment to 'building, negotiating, losing, and celebrating relationships with fellow human beings' (Bielo, 2015: 47). Although the 'portholes' described did go some way to enabling this, we argue that developing such relationships is partly reliant on the fieldwork phenomena of 'undesigned relationality' (Lederman, 2013) and 'serendipity' (Rivoal and Salazar, 2013), which are better supported when physically embedded within a community. This is grounded in our comparative experiences of working in Hull and Sheffield.

For Lederman (2013), 'undesigned relationality' refers to the multiple roles a researcher has in the field, and the ways in which these roles – or relationships – support multiple cross-cutting conversations across diverse contexts. These conversations help build trust and rapport with communities and present serendipitous opportunities that lead to unexpected knowledge creation and/or methodological creativity (Rivoal and Salazar, 2013). In the project's original research design, researchers were to foster these relational characteristics of ethnography by physically immersing themselves in communities and organisations, but 'staying at home' due to COVID-19 made this challenging. For one project researcher Julie, Hull had, however, been 'home' for over 30 years, while neither researcher lived in Sheffield. Julie therefore had multiple roles in Hull established pre-pandemic – mother, neighbour, friend, practitioner and researcher – all having equal significance and weight. While historically, in research ethics, relationality

beyond that of researcher/participant is treated as a problem to be solved (Bell, 2019: 10), anthropologically the potential of these multiple relationships is central to knowledge creation.

Indeed, we found having a researcher embedded in Hull invaluable when developing trusting relationships in the context of using remote research methods. This was also supported by Hull being a small city, and there being a concentration of professionals from the public and third sector living in the same local authority ward as the researcher. During early online interactions, Julie was able to draw on the 'undesigned relationality' related to her multiple community roles, and local networks. During informal conversations at the start of online encounters with professional participants, she was able to engage in locality-based conversation thereby easing discomfort and developing rapport. Furthermore, living locally meant that Julie regularly encountered four representatives from collaborative organisations during lockdown permitted daily walks. She also experienced serendipitous moments, often bumping into key gatekeepers during the school run and in local 'essential' shops. On these occasions, she was able to exchange comments about the nature of the school run, the weather or just share social greetings. The collaborator would sometimes also refer to the project, promising to respond to an email when they got home. During these brief, *undesigned* meetings, research arrangements were moved along, but research relationships became more embedded as both parties experienced each other outside of the research context. These moments allowed them to observe each other experiencing the trials and tribulations of daily life, bringing an authenticity to field relationships that nurtured the 'real friendships' central to the ethnographer's slow accumulation of knowledge (O'Connell Davidson, 2008).

By contrast, our starting point in Sheffield differed, because 'staying at home' meant being in geographical locations outside of Sheffield for the research team. While online interviews and focus groups provided opportunities to discuss our lives beyond the research, and to reveal our multiple roles in the field, this was more orchestrated than in Hull. These opportunities were time bound and scheduled and what might be described as *designed* relationality. While we were able to develop multifaceted relationships in these *virtual* spaces, we found the unpredictability of *physically* 'sharing the space/s of the field *with* Others', typical of traditional ethnography (Hickey and Smith, 2020: 820, emphasis in original), made it easier to convey our commitment to collaboration, and to build trust.

Concluding Reflections

In this research note, we have drawn on our ethnographic experiences of being 'in the field' during the COVID-19 pandemic, to share the paradox of how working remotely allowed unexpected and effective opportunities for closing distance, and applying ideas of relationality within sociology (Mische, 2011) in ethnographic approaches.

While a growing number of ethnographers examine social interactions in digital spaces (Góralska, 2020), few consider the ways in which relational, sociological aspects of 'being there' – collaboration, reciprocity in the research relationship and creation of more equal relationships – can be achieved when physical proximity is inhibited. The fluid and contingent nature of ethnography allowed us to work with collaborators to

develop inventive ways to get to know and understand the everyday work and lives of practitioners. The examples provided are online interviews and focus groups conducted while all involved are in their homes and 'reflective conversations'. In doing so, we show that the window provided by video calling technologies, into both researchers' and practitioners' homes, can humanise and create everyday life intimacies in research relationships not possible in in-person interactions. Furthermore, we show how scheduled 'reflective conversations', held via telephone or video calls, provide a space for researchers and practitioners to successfully engage in reciprocal practices of knowledge creation and relationality. The professional location of practitioners, their familiarity with talking with researchers and their access to digital resources, supported the closing of social distance described. While we are mindful that working in these ways with more marginalised and/or vulnerable participants may present different challenges, these approaches still have potential. Consequently, we feel that these methodological responses to an unprecedented situation should be retained and that 'porthole' conversations, in particular, offer an innovative extension to the ethnographer's toolbox.

Our experiences across two comparative contexts also reveal the continued relational significance of a researcher's embeddedness, 'undesigned relationality' (Lederman, 2013) and 'serendipity' (Rivoal and Salazar, 2013), even when the ethnographic encounter is primarily remote. While we argue that the necessary development of authentic, 'real relationships' with our 'fellow human beings' (Bielo, 2015: 47) is possible when engaging in remote ethnographies, our experience also shows that this is lubricated when a researcher is geographically proximate, and that this should be prioritised in all contexts.

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