Ethnography and the New Normal

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Abstract

This article responds to a number of broad-brush claims and statements per- taining to ethnographic research during the Covid-19 pandemic: namely, that ethnographic (and qualitative) research is impossible; that it is unethical; and that the pandemic represents a breach and has produced a new normal form of interaction order. The article draws from observations in public space and from one author's ongoing fieldwork. We focus on a) an empirical analytic stance toward interaction in this so called unprecedented context, b) the oc- casioned and situated character of pandemic actions and members' uses of existing methods, and, c) a discussion of ethical considerations grounded in a de-reification of the categories observer and observed. In summary, the article makes a strong case for ethnography as being possible, and possibly important, and aims to illustrate the highly contextual character of whether and when and how ethnographic research might continue during, and indeed immediately following, the pandemic.

Keywords: ethnography, interaction, public space, ethics, Covid-19

Note: This is a final version of the published article without the publisher's formatting.

Introduction

A sensitivity to social fluctuations experienced at the street level, along with the commensurability between lay and professional method, is what makes ethnography the most human of approaches to studying the social. Yet, despite a history bound-up with societal change and disruption, commentators are often quick to suggest that upheaval and transformation – be it the digital revolution (see Smith, 2014; Housley, Smith, 2017), or the current Covid-19 pandemic – threaten the possibility and

contribution of fieldwork and observational studies. There has been no shortage of such proclamations by social scientists (primarily writing on social media), that ethnography is either impossible, inappropriate, or straightforwardly unethical during the pandemic. In part response to such claims, we argue against simplifications of observational research, as well as for the necessity of ethnographic analysis and writing, both now and in future times of disruption. In short, we suggest that the recent news of ethnography's demise is, as with preceding obituaries, premature.

The article attends to two interconnected topics present in our ongo- ing fieldwork commitments, everyday observations, and conversations in and around Cardiff (Wales, U.K.). First, we outline what we see as a significant contribution of ethnographic research in describing how public interaction order adapts to lockdown and physical distancing guidelines. We outline an analytic orientation to the New Normal, drawing on ethnomethodology and Atkinson's (2017) granular ethnography, prioritising people's actual, methodical, artful practices for managing, negotiating, and accomplishing order in the context of the pandemic. Second, if ethnographic research is not only possible but possibly necessary during the pandemic, this analytic orientation provides for what we call – borrowing from Race and colleagues (2020) – a practical ethics that proceeds from the de-reification of categories of native and observer. We are not only interested in the "shit that people are taking" (Goffman, 1989), but how they are going about doing so in this unprecedented moment of disruption.

Accomplishing the New Normal or pandemic as breach?

In this section, we briefly outline what we see as the central contribution of street level ethnography during the pandemic. We start with recent treatments of the pandemic as a breach (Garfinkel, 1984) before outlining an analytic attitude toward the notion of the New Normal that recognises continuity, as well as difference. To paraphrase George Orwell, the ethnographer of everyday life recognises how any given social organisation can change out of all recognition and yet remain fundamentally the same. A consequence of such an orientation, is a tempering of the urge to readily find both novelty and casualty in observations of interactional practices in public space.

In the United Kingdom, the Conservative government – after a period of down-talking the risk to the population, and suggestions of 'taking it on the chin' – eventually reacted to the Coronavirus pandemic by introducing a series of (popularly described) 'lockdown' measures, closures, and public prohibitions as from March 23rd. Central to these measures, as with other countries, were a series of guidelines relating to social distancing. As many sociologists were quick to highlight, the term is a misnomer and misrecognises the various relations of social and physical distance and proximity that hold in public space (see Horgan, 2020). Physical distancing was required (of 2m from anyone not a member of one's own household) in limiting the spread of virus. Whilst there

are various areas worthy of attention at the present time[1], we take physical distancing measures in public space as a demonstration of the contribution of ethnography during the pandemic. We consider physical distancing measures as a local accomplishment of participants to a given setting. This is significant in challenging and moving beyond the treatment of members living the time of Covid-19 as over-socialised cultural dopes living in the behavioural scientist's models, pushed and pulled in social space by various nudge interventions[2].

As Laurier and colleagues (2020) have described, physical distancing guidelines pose immediate practical troubles for people moving in and through spaces not designed for such distanced mobile formations and passing practices. Familiar formations and units – such as withs (Goffman, 2010), in which two people display their togetherness through their mobile conduct – become problematic. Other observations (gathered by ourselves, and reported on social media by others) include: the negotiation and accountability of distancing either through politeness and thanking (for example, from one party to another when one steps in to the road); displays of patience (notably from the drivers of cars stopping when pedestrians take to the road to observe distancing); the treat- ment of distancing as problematic, as either not enough distance (akin to a close pass on the road, see Smith, 2017a), or as somehow stigmatising the person being avoided (one observation saw an older pedestrian shouting to another who had stepped in to the road, "I'm not dirty, you know!"); and increased oc- currences of greetings between strangers. Features such as doors – previously described by Goffman, and others, as being sources of organisational trouble – are newly problematic requiring new methods of practical management. Pavements, doors, and various service arrangements first had to be reconfigured in use by members of the public, before material and visual resources were enrolled in public settings. Often these measures took the form of shifting the possibilities of participation from various group formations to individualised arrangements.

In analysing interaction in public space in these unprecedented times, one might proceed by gathering up cases of institutionalised changes and interac- tional difficulties to demonstrate a drastic re-writing of the public order, and new forms of discomfort and deviance that are caused by it. Yet, treating or- ganisational phenomena, such as a queue with two metre spacing, pedestrians stepping out in to the road to avoid each other, or a shop only allowing three customers in at a time as unprecedented, or, indeed, as breache of public order, misplace the work of members in producing this apparently novel social order. When commentators describe the pandemic as a 'naturally occurring breach', but proceed to discuss how the disruption serves to expose, for example, neo-

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[1] For example, the ways in which members and 'the public' have developed lay competencies in the interpretation of lay epidemiological data (Atkinson, personal communication with Smith). And we are surprised that more commentators have not returned to Cicourel's writings on statistics and inference (see Smith and Atkinson, 2016).

[2] There is far more to say on this topic. A fully ethnomethodological critique and respe- cification of the sorts of constructions of action and of «the individual» and their capacities at the heart of behavioural scientific treatments of and responses to the pandemic would be a significant intellectual and practical contribution.

liberal social system to the public consciousness (Scambler, 2020), they do so at the expense of the interactional phenomenon that accomplish the social in the first instance.

Garfinkel's original use of the term breaching experiments – that is, intentionally making trouble in some social system, to expose the background expectancies routinely employed in finding activities in that setting as normal – does not describe the disruption caused by the pandemic as a breach of social order. Yet, rather than being a breach in social order – that is, a breakdown in people's understandings of, and trust in, the situation – the possibility of social order is sustained in and through members' existing methods for organising conduct in public settings (see e.g. Lee, Watson, 1993; Smith, 2017b). There is, as Harvey Sacks demonstrated, order at all points. It is in this sense, that social organisation can be considered a by-product of people's methodical practices for doing local activities, rather than an external container for them. The ap- pearance of the by-product can change. Queues, for example, are local systems organised in and through practices that routinely handle appropriate distance from the person in front, that manage competent participation in the system, and thus display that organisation for others joining the queue. Participants may also recognise and display context by, for example, leaving a larger gap behind the person being served in a bank or a pharmacy (and so on, and so on). Physical distancing measures, whilst new are still accomplished and negotiated locally, through the same methods that built queues previously and will build queues after.

Perhaps, more significantly, the pandemic cannot be described as a breach because pandemic itself provides an account device for any observed disruption or new or odd behaviour. Any breach is readily explainable through the pandemic and associated predicates (social distancing being one). This is problematic in analytic terms in the ways in which actions are attributed to the pandemic and distancing measure when this is not necessarily warrantable. We are reminded of preceding instances of pedestrian distancing, for example, Anderson's (2004) case of middle-class whites crossing the street to maintain social distance from young black men. Would such an observation be interpreted differently through the lens of 'the pandemic' or through the more recent anti-racism protests and subsequent public discussion?

What we find, in our own observations of interaction in public space, and members' own analyses posted on social media (in shaming videos of groups of people having picnics, for example), is routine interaction in public space being topicalised by persons going about their daily round. We were all already experts in this matter, but the disruptions have rendered shared expertise visible and thus accountable to their practitioners and observers (Garfinkel, 1984). It seems to us that catching at the moments in which people adapt to and (re-)learn how to be in public space is a primary contribution of ethnography in the time of Covid-19. If, indeed, we are living in a New Normal, then the coining thereof should be documented. As Goffman (1972: 293) reminds us:

> To walk, to cross a road, to utter a complete sentence, to wear long pants, to tie one's shoes, to add a column of figures – all these routines that allow the individual unthinking, competent performance were attained through an acquisition process whose early stages were negotiated in cold sweat.

Put another way, recalling how Agnes managed to pass by observing the behaviours of other women whilst participating in interactions fraught with the possibility of exposure (Garfinkel, 1984), we recognise how people in this new and unprecedented context, are sociologists of public space, passing with a concern for exposure of a different kind.

Considerations of mundane practices also highlight a central and unavoid- able aspect of fieldwork, of consequence for how we think about the conduct of ethnography at this moment. We want to restate a familiar enough, but often overlooked, perspective that: "Everyone is a participant observer, acquiring knowledge about the social world in the course of participating in it" (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007: 98). As we have already noted, at times of disruption, it becomes especially apparent how people become participant observers of their own circumstances as they work out how to do familiar practices in new ways. This can be felt in an embodied sense. We all experienced the first few visits to a supermarket during the lockdown as anxious occasions. There were one-way systems that had not been fully institutionalised, awkward occasions of wait- ing two metres away from another shopper as they choose soup, and unclear arrangements in terms of where and how one should wait to be served. The following example captures something of those difficulties:

> I was waiting at a supermarket checkout, standing at the taped line on the floor near the back of the checkout as the customer in front paid for his food. An older man walked up behind me, stopping close, seemingly oblivious to taped markings. He was carrying a birthday card, wearing a face mask and gloves. He kept glancing over at other queues, apparently rushed or anxious. The cashier looked up from the customer being served and said, directed to the back of the queue, "please can you follow the two-metre rule... because of the social distancing". The older man did not respond, but walked away to join a shorter queue, dropping his bank card as he walked away. The cashier nodded at the card, then looked at me. I called to the man "excuse me, you dropped your card". He didn't respond. Another customer with a trolley had joined the queue behind me and I was trapped between him, the checkout on my left, and the barrier on my right, considering whether I should pick up the man's card as I ordinarily would. I looked to the customer behind me, smiling to enlist his help. He looked at the card on the floor, then walked over to the older man, keeping a metre or so away from him, as he told him he'd dropped his card. The older man returned to collect his card. I used the space created by the customer behind me moving to step back, I gestured in front of me, saying to the older man "you go first, you only have one thing".

We trust that these are familiar enough experiences (at the very least for those in the U.K.), that demonstrate members situated negotiation and accomplishment of rules and actions. Such cases point to a contribution of fieldwork in avoiding a methodologically ironic (Lee, Watson, 1993) approach, and thus the figure of the cultural dope (Garfinkel, 1984), or overly socialised actor (Atkinson et al., 2008). Indeed, our presence in the scene, as observers, is accomplished and accountable primarily as members, not as observers. Good ethnographers – ethical, rigorous, observant, reflexive, and so on – must be competent members. As Sharrock and Anderson (1982: 210) have it:

> the native has no privileged status and that natives too can be treated as enquirers into their cultural settings ... Fieldwork activities can then be treated as a set of occasioned practices whereby the investigator and his [sic] infor-mants make sense of activities.

Practical ethics in the time of Covid-19

We can take forward this analytic orientation in responding to some suggestions that ethnography is impossible and straightforwardly unethical during the pan- demic. We hope to have already demonstrated how fieldwork and ethnography are possible, and the kinds of possibly important observations relating to social order that might result. The argument for the de-reification and dissolution of the relation between native and fieldworker provides for a different rendering of the discussion of the appropriateness and ethicality of conducting ethnography during the pandemic. We make three observations in this regard.

The first observation relates to our remarks above about how the pandemic is used as an occasioned sense-making device and, possibly, the status of what Harvey Sacks (1995, e.g.: 312-319) called an omni-relevant device. In other words, pandemic can be introduced in any number of situations, perhaps all situations, acting as a control device for orienting to the situation, from the queue, to walking on a pavement, to coughing, to washing your hands, to doing social science (indeed, the title of this special issue is a case in point). In such use, the pandemic can be treated as a universal and absolute condition – pandemic at all points – with the consequence of universal and absolute statements about whether qualitative or ethnographic research should or should not be done, and whether it is ethical or not.

What such absolutist and culturalist treatments of the pandemic miss is how the use of the pandemic device is itself occasioned in terms of its relevancy for the social organisation of interaction in public space and ethical conduct determined in situ, as briefly outlined above. Suggesting that ethnography is impossible and unethical during the pandemic seems to miss the continually negotiated nature of ethical practice that characterises ethnographic studies and everyday life. Indeed, it is this ongoing negotiation, with members of situations and as members, that positions naturalistic participant observation as a distinctly social and humanising approach to the study of social phenomena. This position is contradicted by the kinds of moral entrepreneurialism that

constructs a paternalistic gatekeeper to the realm of sociability that members (including professional ethnographers) are all already and always engaged in anyway.

A second observation is that ethical considerations are not the dominion of 'Sociology' nor institutions. Ethical conduct in public space, and indeed recording and reporting it, is a mundane matter. Ethical conduct is a situated and social matter, not dependant of de-contextualised formulations of methodological practice, but on members' methods of everyday sensemaking. We are not suggesting that all ethnography is currently appropriate and ethical. That would be to replace one absolute with another. Of course, ethical considerations are highly contextual. Different national and political contexts seriously impact the possibility and even legality of ethnography in public space. Researching in a school (Jimenez), or in a homeless hostel (Long), with public workers such as park rangers (Ablitt, 2020), or with a mountain rescue team (Smith), require distinct and differently difficult decisions both during the pandemic and, of course, more generally. Taking Smith's research, there is a «double risk» to be managed in terms of his participation in potentially hazardous situations with the additional contingencies and concerns relating to the coronavirus pandemic. This was acutely felt in the sense that this risk was not only 'in the field' but could directly impact Smith's home and family.

The team of which Smith is a member was one of the first in the U.K. to respond to a possible Covid-19 situation. Various procedures had already been put in place and communicated to the team, in online briefings. Team members were a asked to consider the additional risk associated with possible infection when responding to a call-out. The organisation of the call-out itself, reflecting our argument above, relied upon existing methods used to produce new orders of movement 'on the hill' and around the casualty site. Going 'on to the hill' is always carefully managed by an incident controller, but in this instance numbers of team members were managed in relation to maintaining physical distancing measures. The team wore PPE equipment that was part specialised (masks and gloves), part made up from existing kit (full waterproof clothing, and the goggles all team members always carry for working with helicopters). A casualty site is always organised into zones where different members are held and tasks are completed, especially in hazardous environment featuring water or a sheer drop (the 'hot zone'). Yet, in this context, newly relevant categorisations of 'clean' and 'dirty' people, objects, and zones were used in the management of potential contamination.

There is an ethic of care displayed toward the casualty, their companions if present, and to members of the public. The team currently wear full PPE on all call outs. They are aware that the donning of the PPE equipment can appear alarming to someone with only a sprained ankle, and so explanations and accounts are given. The ethic of care is also central to the operating ethos of the team, and primarily directed toward ensuring team members' safety. At the first call-out, a man out walking on the hill-top stops to take pictures or film with his mobile phone as the stretcher is being carried off. The 15 or so team members, accompanied by paramedics, all in full PPE on a bright sunny

day must have made for a spectacle. The man's filming, of course, recognises the 'unusual' nature of the incident. He is asked to stop by a senior team member walking behind the stretcher, shrugs half apologetically, and carries on his way. In fully participatory research of this nature, the ethical considerations run differently than in occasions where the researcher is dropping in solely to gather, or worse, extract (see Sinha, Back, 2014), data. The decisions relating to risk are personal and Smith's to make. They are, however, also bound up with both institutional stipulations and acting as a team member. Operating with a particular notion of research in mind, the institution might suspend all research activities. Ultimately though, the ethics of this piece of research are negotiated and made sense of with the team and their own understandings and sociology of the situation.

Our third, and final observation, draws these various threads together in critiquing the formulation of ethnography that appears to be at the heart of (potential) ethical discussions and institutional responses relating to the coronavir- us pandemic. The concern seems to be bound-up with that lingering figure of the native so engrained in the ethnographic imagination; the colonial construction of the field as somewhere one travels to and leaves; and of the members or actors observed as bound to that 'field' whilst the ethnographer drops in or is somehow spying on what the natives do, before returning to some other, privileged, space. Certainly, our conversations in Cardiff featured concerns with the appropriateness of observing members of the public as they negotiated the early stages of the lockdown 'in cold sweat'. Yet, as we argued above, ethnographers are members, and members of the public, with no-time-out, just as members of the public are not only producing, but also observing and analysing their own situation. Returning to the notion that everyone is a sociologist of public space, we make the case that dealing with ethical conduct in public space can be also be considered "as a set of occasioned practices whereby the investigator and his informants make sense of activities" together (Sharrock, Anderson, 1982, p. 210). In making observations of others' conduct, in going about permitted essential tasks – shopping, pharmacy visits, exercise – in managing their safety, the fieldworker and the native employ shared methods for negotiating public order in a practically and situationally justifiable manner. The point here is that the ethnographer should be interested in doings, not their doers.

What we have not had room to consider further here, a fourth point left unmade, are the ethics of representation in writing about and from these situations. The levelling of the relation between researcher and member is possible and even necessary in situated practice but, of course, members are not participating-to-write (Emerson et al., 2011). Further consideration is required of the ways in which fluid situations are fixed in moments of writing fieldnotes and analyses.

Conclusion
In this short piece, we aimed to make a case for the possibility and contribution of an ethnography of public space in the time of the coronavirus pandemic.

We recognise that we write from a context in which such research is possible, and that there are other means of conducting ethnography, for example, in digital and virtual spaces. Although there was not room here to have shown an analysis of members' practices for building order, we have outlined our analytic orientation in relation to claims that what we are witnessing is a 'breach' of social order and, if we are living in a New Normal, how that might be sustained by members' existing practices. In order to catch such moments of negotiation, adaptation, and re-learning, ethnographers need licence to act responsively at times of disruption before new formations and arrangements become routine. In this regard, we close with some intentionally provocative remarks relating to another maxim of ethnography: that getting too close to the native is "a common danger of ethnographic research" (Hammersley, Atkinson, 2007, p. 87).

The term going native means something like losing one's apparent objectivity in the field by straightforwardly reporting the world as the native sees it. This becomes rather problematic when the ethnographer is considered already native, and more so if we consider that the 'natives' are already, and ongoingly, negotiating the parameters of situated ethical practice. To continue, however, with the metaphor, those concerns with risks of the perceived contamination of an ethnography by getting too close to the natives perhaps find additional resonance at the present time. There might also be parallels between the distancing measures found in shops and public spaces, and the ways in which ethnographic research is often governed by formalised institutional structures. Rather than relying upon the practitioner's own judgement and skills, areas of research are demarcated, tape off, or policed. To be clear, we are not saying that such measures are unnecessary for the control of the pandemic, but that suggestions that ethnographers should keep their distance from the native can serve to further obscure the multiple ways in which ethnographers and their informants are native to this New Normal and are thus negotiating it together. The contribution of ethnography at this time, oriented to the practical ethics of the sort we have described here is, then, the respectful endeavour to capture members' artful mundane means of responding to the disruption.

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