

This is an Open Access document downloaded from ORCA, Cardiff University's institutional repository: <https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/152987/>

This is the author's version of a work that was submitted to / accepted for publication.

Citation for final published version:

Dimond, Rebecca 2022. On 'being there': A rejoinder to 'Collecting qualitative data during a pandemic' by David Silverman. *Communication & Medicine* 17 (2) , pp. 173-176. 10.1558/cam.19753

Publishers page: <https://doi.org/10.1558/cam.19753>

Please note:

Changes made as a result of publishing processes such as copy-editing, formatting and page numbers may not be reflected in this version. For the definitive version of this publication, please refer to the published source. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite this paper.

This version is being made available in accordance with publisher policies. See <http://orca.cf.ac.uk/policies.html> for usage policies. Copyright and moral rights for publications made available in ORCA are retained by the copyright holders.



**On 'being there': A rejoinder to 'Collecting qualitative data during a pandemic' by David Silverman  
REBECCA DIMOND Cardiff University, Wales**

### Introduction

In his timely article, Silverman discusses the implications of the pandemic for ethnographic research. He refers to Kumar's comment, that 'unless one's ethnography is conducted only in and through the virtual world, much of ethnographic practice still heavily relies on on-the-ground, in-person encounters and observations'. As the pandemic has led to severe restrictions on collective, face-to-face activities, ethnographic researchers have had to adapt to extraordinary circumstances which have shaped their research, their field and their work environment.

Silverman's article is particularly interesting in the questions it asks about 'being present' in research. Silverman suggests that when faced with barriers to access, such as is the case in the pandemic, the researcher might consider alternative methods or resources. This was the position he found himself in many years ago, when he accessed recordings of clinical consultations for his HIV counselling research, in place of witnessing the consultations himself. Silverman reminds us to be reflexive and flexible about what we consider to be the nature and location of our field. With the increasing move online, he points us to Katarina Jacobsson, who suggests that we do not need to distinguish between 'being there' and 'virtual' data; instead, we should 'follow research participants where they go'.

### Ethnographic research and conferences

A key part of my ethnographic research, in my tracking of the rare disease field and its participants, is observing conferences. Conferences can play an important role in a research project, as both a site of data collection and a forum for collegial interaction. We have clearly witnessed a transformation of the conference space during lockdown restrictions: while face-to-face events have been prevented, online events to an extent have become the new norm. Thus it was with the continued prohibition, yet new possibilities for conferences in mind, that I read Silverman's article, and which I consider further in this rejoinder. Here I consider the role of conferences in research and conclude by thinking about the impact of COVID restrictions both on conferences and on ethnographic research.

Despite many benefits of the move to online (such as widening access, and saving time and money), COVID restrictions have highlighted the value of physical connections, even in the age of the internet. The bonds of community – witnessed at the church, the workplace, the local high street – have long been of interest to social scientists. While the power of shared emotion has religious connotations, Durkheim's (2001 [1912]) 'collective effervescence' has been used to understand the intense emotional connection between people, at sports or youth culture events, and in my own research (Dimond et al. 2015). 'Being there', for both participant and ethnographer, forms an important part of the experience.

Ethnographic studies which provide rich and detailed accounts of science or medicine in practice do not just focus on the hospital and laboratory. Increasingly, conferences are explicitly recognised as part of these social worlds, as an extension of the workplace and as an important site for communicating information, professional socialisation, collaborative working and building a sense of community (González-Santos and Dimond 2015). These are performative occasions, and places

where skills are demonstrated, experiences are shared, identities are performed and relationships are managed.

When I began to research my field of study (tracking the emergence of a rare genetic disease), I attended patient/professional conferences initially to find out what topics were on the agenda and what kind of information was communicated, and to identify key speakers. My starting point, of course, was to focus on the words of the presenters, but I soon realised that my attention was drawn to the reaction of the audience. On one occasion, a cleft surgeon, who was presenting on stage, showed the result of a successful operation:

The cleft surgeon directed our attention to a section of the girl's palate on the X-ray, whereas before this piece was static, it now moved when the girl spoke. There were gasps in the audience and everyone spontaneously started clapping. The person next to me turned to the woman behind and said, 'that's quite amazing', the woman responded with a beam 'yes, it all makes sense now' (field note, Dimond 2014)

On another occasion, a presenter attracted a very different response when he showed slides of a young child undergoing an operation:

There were loud gasps from the audience. The surgeon said 'oh dear, if you think that's bad, I'll skip over the others' and proceeded to 'skip' through each of his slides until he found one that he felt was suitable for the audience. However, while 'skipping through' the audience saw every one of his slides. At each image the audience gasped and several people left the room. At one slide in particular the audience took a collective intake of breath. (field note, Dimond 2014)

It was because of these reactions that I recognised why my 'being there' was so important for my study. Without witnessing this reaction, I would not have recognised just how powerful, yet 'out of place' this presentation was, and because of that I was able to understand how conferences facilitated medical work. Conferences reproduced a form of doctor-patient relationship (generally it was professionals on stage, parents/families in the audience), but that this could leave parents vulnerable.

But conferences are also a valuable resource for the ethnographer, particularly because they facilitate interaction. Collins (2004) has for a long time highlighted the value of conferences 'as places where the community learns the etiquette of today's truth' (Collins 2004: 451). He is explicit about why informal face-to-face interaction matters, such as the unplanned discussions in the corridor or at the bar at the end of the day, and he identifies these interactions as moments 'where tokens of trust are exchanged, the trust that holds the whole scientific community together' (Collins 2004: 451). Conferences provide an opportunity to gain rich insight into a topic and its community, and as moments for marking triumphs and failures, conferences can also shape the field (Richmond 2006). The researcher can use the incidental interaction offered by making connections with gatekeepers and potential research participants. Indeed, my own research began when my future supervisor sat by a prominent scientist at a conference dinner, where they discussed his recent book focusing on a rare disease which became the focus of my PhD study.

#### The impact of COVID on conferences and ethnography

Silverman ends by tracing the digital consequences of the pandemic, with one particularly relevant question, asked by Keleman Saxena and Johnson (2020):

In the movement of labor and personal relationships to digital platforms, what differentiations – implicit or explicit – emerge between the kinds of relationships that can be materialized digitally, versus those that require face-to-face contact? What are the implications of these differentiations for power, and vulnerability?

The long-term impact of COVID on large face-to-face events and the shape of the conference of the future remain uncertain. However, the bounded nature of place-based conferences has already been challenged by mobile technologies. The use of live streaming, blogging and tweeting during conferences poses interesting questions, particularly around who makes up ‘the audience’ and where conversations are happening. But while we are certainly more familiar with being online, it is not yet clear the extent to which online conferences could ever replicate the interactive opportunities of physical events.

I am probably not alone in being confused during the first experience of an online conference. All the normal rites and rituals, which are so familiar in academic life, became opaque. Each speaker was interesting, but how to show my appreciation? I knew there were almost 500 people attending, but where were they? Attendees were visible in the form of a chat box, asking questions that the chair would then pass on to the speaker. At the end I left the conference by pressing the red ‘leave’ button, no waves of goodbye, no exchange of email addresses and no opportunity to discuss the event over an after-event drink.

Over the last year, it has become clear that online conferences are now more sophisticated, with greater interaction encouraged. Attendees might be persuaded to turn on their cameras at the beginning and end, to start up private chats with other members, to put up a hand signal to show their appreciation or to attend specially designated networking events. But despite this encouragement, the conferences I have attended as part of my research observations have lacked the complex interactions between participants, and between presenter and audience, through which I have previously learned so much. Indeed, there remains a tendency for online conferences to be reduced to the words and images of the presenter, and audience participation to typed questions. Thus the move to online has implications not just for the field, but also for how the researcher moves around it. Although ethnographers can still follow the topic wherever it goes, the field itself becomes diminished without these rich face-to-face events.

However, taking up Silverman’s challenge, we might rethink this moment as an opportunity to reflect on how we experience and document collective events. While the glossy conference brochure and name badge might be less necessary, there will be an even greater digital footprint, particularly in easily stored and shared digital recordings, which potentially means greater opportunities for future conference ethnographers. And this raises questions about researcher ethics and etiquette. How is consent and the role of the researcher managed in these spaces attended by tens, hundreds or thousands of people, either in real time or recorded? How does the researcher navigate between being both an observer and a participant? I therefore encourage future research to focus on how the bonds of community and belonging are expressed and transformed in different spaces, alongside documenting the ordinary and extraordinary research decisions made when ‘being there’.

## References

Collins, Harry (2004) *Gravity’s Shadow: The Search for Gravitational Waves*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Dimond, Rebecca (2014) Parent-led conferences as sites of medical work. *Health: An Interdisciplinary Journal for the Social Study of Health, Illness and Medicine* 18 (6): 631–645.

Dimond, Rebecca, Andrew Bartlett and Jamie T. Lewis (2015) What binds biosociality? The collective effervescence of the parent conference. *Social Science & Medicine* 126: 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2014.12.005>

Durkheim, Emile 2001 [1912]. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Trans. Carol Cosman. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

González-Santos, Sandra and Rebecca Dimond (2015) Medical and scientific conferences as sites of sociological interest: A review of the field. *Sociology Compass* 9 (3): 235–245.

Keleman Saxena, Alder and Jennifer Johnson (2020) Cues for ethnography in pandamning times: Thinking with digital sociality in the Covid-19 pandemic. *Somatosphere*, 31 May. Online: <http://somatosphere.net/2020/ethnography-inpandamning-times.html/>

Richmond, Marsha (2006) The 1909 Darwin celebration re-examining evolution in the light of Mendel, mutation, and meiosis. *Isis* 97 (3): 447–484.

Rebecca Dimond is a lecturer and researcher in medical sociology. Her research interests include classification of genetic syndromes and their consequences; reproductive technologies; sociology of donation; and patient, family and professional perspectives. Before taking up her teaching role, Rebecca was awarded an ESRC Future Research Leaders grant to explore the development of reproductive technologies involving mitochondria donation. Her PhD, completed in 2011, examined the social construction of a rare genetic disorder, 22q11 deletion syndrome. This was a multi-sited ethnography, drawing on observation of clinical consultations and conferences, and interviews with families and health professionals. Address for correspondence: Cardiff University School of Social Sciences, Glamorgan Building, King Edward VII Avenue, Cardiff, CF10 3WT, UK. Email: [DimondR1@Cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:DimondR1@Cardiff.ac.uk)