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Fieldwork Dynamics in a Higher Education Setting amid the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

This paper highlights how fieldwork, particularly within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, has undergone changes in response to the pandemic, considering its significance to knowledge production in the academic arena and beyond. The paper presents different fieldwork related circumstances and innovative practices linked to the COVID-19 crisis in aspects such as securing consent from participants, handling the interview process itself, dynamics surrounding interviewer and participant encounters and how they influence validity of data. A group of 8 students from the Humanities faculty and another 8 from the Sciences faculty were purposively chosen with all drawn from the extended programme. Participants also included 8 academics, 4 drawn from each of the two faculties. The implications of one's position, level of reflexivity, and understanding of epistemological assumptions are also explored. The concepts of positionality and reflexivity are used to examine the diverse ways in which the fieldwork process is mediated.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, epistemic access and success, fieldwork dynamics, positionality, precariousness, social disruption

Introduction

Fieldwork in contemporary research, specifically within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, remains one of the most valuable components of knowledge production in university settings and beyond. From a social sciences and humanities perspective, and particularly anthropology, where ethnography has emerged as the "golden egg", the advent of COVID-19 has led to disruptions of traditional methods of conducting fieldwork. The highly cherished virtue of conducting research in its natural setting and being physically part of the research participants' day-to-day activities suddenly became impossible.

As it became clear that the COVID-19 pandemic was gaining momentum, lockdown initiatives that featured different measures of curtailing physical interaction became a feature of life under the

pandemic (Chao, 2020). Will, et al. (2020) revealed how the COVID-19 pandemic and the resultant lockdown-imposed measures impacted physical contacts and brought the higher education processes to an abrupt halt. While all facets of society, such as daily life, business, politics, and education were impacted, the education sector at all levels faced a diversity of risks and uncertainty. When it comes to the restrictive measures on the higher education sector and universities in particular, the immediate suspension of contact activities becomes central. The new teaching approach broadly concerns the suspension of contact for all key activities forming part of the university core business: teaching, research, and community engagement. As one of the critical pillars in higher education, research became one of the activities affected by lockdown-related restrictions, and strategies had to be established for implementing projects that were already underway at various levels. Effects of planning uncertainty on data collection during COVID-19 is an issue that has remained essential in understanding the fieldwork challenges brought on by the pandemic, together with emerging methodological insights that have informed alternative fieldwork strategies.

Regarding the essence of education in lived experiences, Nyoni (2021) presents an argument founded on Mead's ideas which highlights how lived expertise, practices, norms, and knowledge could be positioned through education. Intersecting the ideas produced through lived experiences could result in the repositioning of their contextual significance and appropriateness to prevailing social, economic, political, and technological conditions in particular. Within this vantage point, this paper explores how the lived realities of research participants – particularly students in extended programmes who are viewed as socially and academically disadvantaged – tended to influence their responses when called to participate in the research process. Lived realities, for example, speak to the issue of physical location, in which most of the participants were either residents in townships or rural areas. In such places participation in the interviews could be easily hampered by challenges such as loadshedding, faulty gadgets, lack of privacy during the interview process, and pressures emanating from their learning commitments.

The importance of technology within the university sector in South Africa and elsewhere has remained an essential facet of teaching, learning, research, and social interactions (Nyoni & Maraz, 2021). The emphasis, in this case, ought to be placed on the potential of technology, particularly towards enhancing connectivity whilst also broadening access to education, commerce, employment and entertainment. With the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the associated rapid changes, connectivity has become an essential component for transforming engagements within the university context and beyond.

Despite concerns of technology having the potential to create unforeseen subtle forms of social exclusion for certain groups, particularly those in precarious positions, Nyoni (2021) has highlighted the significance of expanding connectivity through technologies within universities, particularly within the context of transformation and innovations. In the context of research within a teaching and learning university setting, connectivity-enhancing initiatives are essential.

Connectivity-enhancing initiatives should be related either to promoting connectivity to deal with access challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, or to fixing legacy-linked connectivity gaps. Connectivity-development initiatives are viewed as conduits for broadening inclusion in technology use and entrenching justice. The COVID-19-induced restrictions to physical contact further exacerbated the need for connectivity, as individuals and groups tried to fill the gap of physical interactions that had remained a symbolic feature in the knowledge transmission and acquisition domains. Fieldwork without physical contact, which became a standard feature under the COVID-19 restrictions, called for more innovative initiatives to deal with risks and precarity associated with key research processes. The key question of the research relates to the encounters that come with doing fieldwork during periods of social disruption, focusing on the encounters between the interviewer and participants amid the use of different technologies and fieldwork processes. The research processes being dealt with include finding and piloting the reliability of alternative data gathering methods. The research processes also involve securing respondents' participation, ethics, dealing with technological failures, and other fieldwork-related experiences. As mentioned above, this paper seeks to deal with this in detail, especially within a university setting. The university context in this case transcends its physical space due to the virtual nature of the fieldwork processes. The researchers were part of the fieldwork processes.

The paper is premised on a combination of personal experiences and research carried out through experiential teaching in the period leading up to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper focuses explicitly on qualitative research experiences conducted during qualitative research through virtual platforms such as WhatsApp calls, Zoom, and Microsoft Teams. Although most of the research experiences narrated relates to a Council of Higher Education (CHE) study conducted between 2020 and 2021, the empirical data broadly includes all other research initiatives with which the researchers got involved. In terms of researcher positionality, both researchers are post-Doctoral research fellows at one of the universities covered by the CHE research. To ensure ethical compliance, the focus of the data presented in this research does not directly bear to any of the institutions' structures or spaces. None of the participants are presented in a manner that compromises anonymity. The methodological aspects are explored in detail under the Methods section of the paper.

The paper's arguments are grounded upon the concepts of reflexivity and positionality. The two concepts extend the views further than what the aforementioned studies have accomplished. Previous studies have focused on how different pandemic-related measures have curtailed physical contact, while not directly dealing with dynamics surrounding researcher and participant interactions amid the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has impacted fieldwork, education activities and broader human initiatives that traditionally relied on physical contact (Chao, 2020). In some cases, the focus has been on how the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted face-to-face interviews due to the restrictions on physical contacts (Will, et al., 2020). In some instances, literature has focused on

how lived experience, practices, norms, and knowledge could be positioned through education whilst also extending the focus on the significance of expanding connectivity and technologies for universities (Nyoni, 2021; Nyoni & Marazi, 2021). In a slightly different dimension, this paper uses the concepts of reflexivity and positionality of researchers and participants in understanding how the lived experiences and associated practices influence participants responses during fieldwork. In addition to exploring various research processes and how they are shaped by reflexivity and positionality, the paper focuses on precarity and its significance to participants' decision-making regarding participation in interviews.

Conceptual framework

The COVID-19 pandemic and resultant precarity

Meza-Palmeros (2020) has argued that the COVID-19 pandemic presented diverse experiences to individuals that converge on precarity, and risks associated with the pandemic. Importantly, individuals and social groups tend to generate responses when confronted by uncertainty and misfortune, reflecting society's normative facet. The reactions of individual and social groups caused by adversity and uncertainty become essential when one explores how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the cooperation of research participants who are students and academic staff.

The notion of precarity relates to the uncertainties that participants usually find themselves in because of the crisis they face. While the COVID-19 pandemic presents challenges, as is the case with other crises, the severity of the pandemic within the university context meant that academics and students had to find practical means to navigate their way through their academic responsibilities and other obligations. In addition to academic commitments, duties confronting academics and students included the social, cultural, religious, family, and financial obligations that could not be isolated from their day-to-day experiences of the pandemic. As mentioned earlier, a combination of the factors shapes how an academic or student would respond to an invitation to participate in an interview, whilst equally defining the participant's general conduct during the interview in the case they agree to participate.

Under-preparedness, usually associated with students from poorer backgrounds, is characterised by a lack of adequate resources. Academically, students from poor backgrounds are primarily related to poor performance due to the lack of the requisite resources, and other experiences that expose them to precarity and risks. Van Breda (2017) has cautioned against relying on a narrow view in understanding the reasons behind some of the performance-linked challenges faced by students from low-income families. A broader perspective that incorporates social capital, coupled with inadequate career guidance and other forms of support, is viewed as having a bearing on student success. This study focuses on students from more impoverished families typically found in the extended programme in humanities and sciences. The under-prepared background is essential in understanding how precarity influenced their attitudes when approached for interviews. Equally,

it is necessary to understand the dynamic nature of their experiences with technology use and connectivity. The position of precarity can equally be said to extend to how students draw from various forms of agency in negotiating epistemic success under what Cross and Atinde (2015) term "compensational capital". The diverse forms of agency drawn upon by both researcher and participants form part of this paper's arguments through an approach-grounded on reflexivity and positionality.

Methodological reflexivity in the fieldwork process

Within the context of the fieldwork process, reflexivity involves a process in which researchers open themselves up to questioning in terms of how they approach their fieldwork, with a view that their knowledge of the subject and behaviour towards the research ultimately has a bearing on research outcomes (Moser, 2008; Santori, et al., 2021). Through methodological reflexivity, researchers are expected to critically review who they are and how they would interact with participants (Sultana, 2007) whilst equally critically reflecting upon their research methods and approaches. Methodological reflexivity involves the researcher being conscious of their role and relationships with and within a research setting (Lin, 2015; Corlett & Mavin, 2018). In addition, methodological reflexivity calls for a researcher to be reflexive towards research participants, the research questions pursued, and the resultant reports produced.

In this paper, since the writers were not part of the primary report drafting process, reflexivity will be limited to exploring how researchers should be conscious of their role and relationships with and within a research setting. This suggests that the reflexive urge of researchers towards research participants and handling the interview process ought to influence their epistemological assumptions (Corlett & Mavin, 2018). Additionally, Corlett and Mavin (2018) state that researchers are personally involved in processes leading to data production. Researcher involvement should not be construed as a source of bias or a bad practice because trying to maintain objective boundaries and separate the researcher from the empirical material could be catastrophic.

The researchers' personal immersion into the data collection process in terms of drawing from our epistemological assumptions, making the participants understand our personal and professional identities, becomes an essential component of the research outcome. Researchers ought not to objectify participants by rushing to understand their interests without understanding who the participants are and what circumstances they find themselves in. The preceding discussion is essential as it helps researchers understand what they are doing and how and why they are engaged in it, whilst equally thinking of who they are, as Hopkins (2007), Milner (2007), and O'Leary, (2017) have noted. As is presented in the paper, such a mediatory approach is essential to how the researcher and participants interact and broadly define the success of the data gathering process. The issues mentioned above are further explored in this paper through explanations drawn from fieldwork experiences and observations.

Methodological reflexivity can also be viewed as being closely related to methodological positionality. It defines the researcher's positioning in society as defined by diverse factors such as sexual identity, age, social and economic status, nationality, ethnicity, language, and level of education (Berger, 2015; Moser, 2008). The aforementioned factors play an essential role in the fieldwork process as they may inhibit or enable specific fieldwork processes and related interpretations. In some instances, researchers are motivated to research projects due to their positionality in societies where the research will be conducted.

Drawing from four questions, Cassell, et al. (2003) attempt to explain how research questions aimed at interpreting our research directly bear the views that might be generated, and what can be considered "ingenuous claims". These paper arguments are also supported by the questions, such as what findings/insights researchers hope to generate from exploring a particular subject, and on what basis will such findings contribute to knowledge? Such questions encourage researchers to be conscious of how the position of their participants may influence their response when asked to participate, while also shaping the way that participants can conduct themselves during the interview process. Furthermore, exploring such questions leaves the researcher conscious of the subjective nature of knowledge production and the need to be reflexive and flexible when dealing with participants at various stages of the research process, as noted by Cassell, et al. (2003) and Mason (2017). When one stretches the argument further, the significance of having a firm understanding of the study is brought to the fore. It therefore becomes apparent that having a clear understanding of the key research question and, by extension, whatever interview questions have been drawn from the critical question as contained in the research instrument, remain noteworthy.

Limitations to methodological reflexivity and positionality

Limitations have been identified despite reflexivity and positionality remaining essential at the methodological level in understanding fieldwork dynamics. Use of reflexivity and positionality therefore remains essential in understanding situations within crisis-ridden contexts. Moser (2008) and Wolf (2018) have emphasised the silences of the reflexivity and positionality discourses as far as they tend to pay inadequate attention towards exploring the concept of personality. This is essential considering that personality exhibited by researchers tends to enhance or constrain the research processes in particular fieldwork. Personality features such as race, gender, ethnicity, nationality, and level of education, among others, could act to enhance or hinder a researcher's access to a field (Carstensen-Egwuom, 2014; Moser, 2008). Personality features are closely linked to the formation and sustenance of friendships. However, the influence of personality features is dynamic and complex, as it is not given that a particular feature could enable or constrain the formation of fieldwork relationships (Chao, 2020). Equally, it's not clear-cut how long certain relationships established through personality-related features could last. An aspect such as respect gained through certain positions a researcher occupies could later pave the way to respect earned through

one's personality traits. Personality traits include types of skills used by researchers in navigating the social scene, including the willingness to spend more time chatting with participants, expressing empathy on participants' experiences, or being motivational during the interview process.

Methods

Qualitative methodological processes and associated strategies were adopted in dealing with the challenges that emerged when COVID-19 related restrictions on physical gatherings took place. The ban on contact learning and physical interactions and other COVID-19 related restrictions created a need for alternative approaches to fieldwork, a scenario that saw virtual platforms emerging as essential. In this context, data collection for this paper centred on virtual platforms such as WhatsApp calls, Zoom, and Teams. In terms of the instrument used, the study being mainly qualitative relied on a combination of semi-structured interview questions and informal conversations with students and academics from Science and Humanities. While the interviews with participants in the sciences faculty were more sustained and formal, engagements within the humanities faculty combined the formal and intermittent informal conversations and observations that were secured at convenience.

The qualitative methodology was found favourable during the study due the need for in-depth explanations on the issues under discussion. The study adopted a case study which involved students from one South African university located in an urban area. Equally, students in extended programmes from the Sciences and Humanities were purposively targeted as part of the case study since they are in the category of underprivileged, particularly socially and academically. Since this was a qualitative study that sought to use an in-depth focus to understand how the positionality of researchers and participants shaped the interactive process during fieldwork, the paper drew from a total of 16 students and eight academics drawn from the two faculties. Four academics involved in teaching students in the selected programmes were interviewed from each of the two faculties. In terms of the students' sample, the choice of the two faculties was motivated by the need to compare the experiences, especially considering certain prevalent assumptions that include the claims that Humanities students are more social than Science students are. The two faculties were also selected based on the general public assumptions that disciplines in the Humanities have a relatively higher chance of students' epistemic success than for Science students.

For the credibility of results, the sample of students from the two faculties focused on a cohort of African students found in the extended curriculum programmes. They usually constitute the bulk of students from underprivileged family backgrounds and usually experience diverse forms of precarity. These students face precarity in terms of having to come from a historically disadvantaged background and accordingly going through a diversity of social and economic pressures that usually have a bearing on their response to academic obligations. The experiences of the historically disadvantaged students typically determine how they respond to other commitments, such as the obligation to participate in research. At the same time, it also shapes the way they handle the

interview process. In terms of students' levels of study, the paper draws mainly from interactions with students in their final year of study, although engagements were extended to first-year students. Involving first years further assisted in exploring how the positionality of a participant could influence their response to participation in the interview or the way they ultimately handle the interview process itself. For ethical purposes, the specific institutions and disciplines involved have been kept anonymous. Participants have been identified through pseudonyms.

When it comes to the sampling procedure, purposive sampling was adopted. The two faculties and research participants for either academics or students had to be involved in the extended curriculum programme. The list had contact details, and researchers then had to call each student to secure an interview.

It needs to be noted that the shift to the virtual platform of conducting fieldwork presented its limitations. In this regard it was a challenge to secure an interview for both students and academics, although it was even worse with the latter. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic crisis and associated challenges where physical contact was restricted, access to participants was determined by other factors, such as gender and position of the participant. Female participants among both students and academics appeared more willing to participate in the interviews. The challenge of low response was, however, mitigated by widening the pool of students to choose from. For instance, as many as 142 male students were made available for drawing the four participants, while the four females were drawn from a group of 48 students, all from the extended programme and the Sciences faculty. Equally, the eight students from Humanities were drawn from a pool of 120 students. The use of a larger population assisted in ensuring that the selected participants were students who, after going through the screening process, were willing to participate in the hour-long interview. For academics, after failing to secure interviews through randomly targeting staff in the particular programmes, researchers engaged Heads of Department, which proved effective as it enhanced participation and the Head of Department was able to recommend staff who specifically dealt with the extended students.

The Findings section covers in more detail the difficulties or ease experienced during the encounters. The data from virtual interviews produced qualitative data transcripts, which were later coded, cleaned, and presented in thematic form. It is from this thematic analysis that the findings are presented in this paper.

Findings

The findings presented in this section mainly draw from the researchers' experiences as they participated in fieldwork processes of the research projects planned for face-to-face interviews. Notable is the dialogical nature of interactions between the researcher and the participants and how mediating this became a challenge due to the COVID-19-related restrictions which caught both researchers and participants unprepared. Faced with an uncertain future of pandemic postponing,

the fieldwork had to be taken off the table and alternative virtual methods had to be found. The search for the encounters that surrounded the search for the alternatives form a larger part of the findings presented under this section. The results cover interactions with participants for various projects but focuses on one of the major projects on epistemic access and success.

A switch from face to face to virtual platforms and its implications

The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic and its restrictions on physical contact meant that if fieldwork were to continue, it had to be done through alternatives. The question was what would these alternatives be and how prepared were researchers to implement these alternatives? Following a series of meetings, the coordinator of one of the research projects suggested a flexible approach, in which virtual platforms such as WhatsApp calls, Zoom, and Microsoft Teams were adopted. The most common of the methods, in particular with student participants, was the WhatsApp call platform. The platform seemed to be commonly used by students mainly due to its cost-effectiveness and accessibility, as most of them already had the app installed on their devices.

Upon being asked which platform they preferred, Zethu, one of the student participants, echoed sentiments shared by her other colleagues when she revealed:

> Oh, WhatsApp is like my life, I can't even imagine a day without it, especially now during COVID, as I have to get updates and later in the day catch up with my family. Even with limited data, I can still access important messages or do urgent calls.

In terms of which data collection platform was favourable to academics, it depended on personal preferences in terms of what they view as user friendly, though Zoom and Microsoft Teams were commonly favoured. Some academics indicated that they preferred Zoom due to better connectivity, while those who preferred Microsoft Teams highlighted its user friendliness, especially as a researcher could also do translation on the platform. Besides choosing what platform to use, it is essential to note that platforms also came with its technical glitches. For instance, many students seemed to be located in settings with poor connectivity, which led to some interviews being disconnected prematurely and recordings getting broken. In some instances, a lack of contact or at least videos associated with the WhatsApp platform, led in calls being ended abruptly as 'invisible' participants preferred attending to personal commitments over continuing with interviews. Linked to this challenge, connectivity proved a serious challenge to conducting interviews, as interviews would be interrupted and reconnecting immediately would sometimes not be possible. Also, whether a connectivity emergency was real or a fabrication by an uninterested participant was left to the researcher to guess, and follow their instincts as they try to remedy the situation. In many instances this led to the researcher being sent "from pillar to post", which had negative consequences to securing interviews. Statements such as "who is this, may you kindly call me in the evening please"

became common, especially among student participants, most of who would be experiencing pressure from academic and other commitments. Experiences in which participants simply postponed appointments willy-nilly exposed the dark side of technology as disinterested participants could easily resort to it. While technological abuse cannot be limited to participants, it was uncommon for researchers to engage in abusive tendencies. Therefore, it needed some level of relationship with the participant to be honest about dealing with other business, and researchers had to display a greater degree of empathy equally. Issues of honesty are presented in detail in the Ethics section.

Securing the participation of respondents

Researchers established that networks became essential with a shift to virtual platforms and challenges faced in securing participation. Researchers who already had previously established relationships with either students or academics found it easier to ensure participation. In one such instance where previously established relationships mattered in facilitating the research process, the researcher had a relationship with student assistants who were then used to access the students, and the research process proceeded smoothly. It is such previously established networks that researchers had to periodically draw on when faced with challenges in securing participation. The importance of networks was significant in shaping interactions between researchers and participants, but it also proved critical even among researchers. The networks also became important during the snowball efforts for attracting both students and academic participants.

Closely related to networks was the researchers' skills in establishing rapport with the participants, either during the negotiations for participation or during the interview. Since on average interviews could last up to an hour, it was important for the researcher to possess the requisite skills of understanding the study questions to establish a smooth, flowing conversation.

The limitations of virtual platforms became clear when participants were being asked to participate in interviews, mainly through emails and calls. Emails proved ineffective for use with academic staff whose contact details were not available. Despite researchers attaching all relevant documents, the response rates for emails remained very low. Only after engaging with a department head could one get staff in the particular department to respond positively. This ineffectiveness with emails highlighted the effectiveness of the traditional contact method. As one academic exclaimed,

> an email does not speak for you, so it's me and what is in front of me, so I take the decision to respond or not based on that".

Other academics indicated that the main reason why they could not respond was that they are already receiving many emails from students; hence some important emails get buried under the

many emails sent by students. One such academic who struggled with responding to email communication was Dr Frans, a male academic from the Humanities faculty, who exclaimed:

> If you don't follow up your email with a call then forget it because ever since we started online learning my inbox is always flooded with student emails.

While one may not ask whether student emails do not matter at all, such responses serve to highlight some of the COVID-19-induced paralysis within the teaching and learning spaces.

Ethics under a virtual mode

Several ethical issues came under the spotlight during the research, mainly due to the adoption of virtual platforms for interviews. The signing of consent forms to solicit consent for participation in the interview and to have the interview recorded emerged as some of the sensitive elements of the interview process that in some instances threatened the whole interview. Since the consent forms were originally meant to be signed during face-to-face interviews, in many instances it became clear that participants could not afford to make printouts, sign the forms, and scan them back to researchers. While researchers conceded with participants to verbally give their consent, some would-be participants felt uncomfortable granting consent to someone they barely knew and worried if the researcher would keep their word. The ease of getting consent and the potential to be trusted by participants also depended on the position of the researcher at the university. One participant queried:

> Sorry Sir, is it a must that I put my real name and signature on the form? Can't you take my word for it?

While researchers had been instructed to ensure that both verbal consent and signatures are solicited, due to such hesitancy with names and signatures researchers had to exercise flexibility and accept verbal consent. The issue of gaining trust from participants seemed to depend on a researcher's standing at the university, with researchers who were academics or in possession of postgraduate qualifications, particularly those with PhDs, found it relatively easier to gain trust from the participants. By virtue of being closer to students, teaching assistants also seemed to get consent much easier, even if they held a lower qualification.

By virtue of the parties not having physically met resulted in incidences where participants would agree to participate, but later change their minds during the interview. In many instances, with academics and students, participants developed feelings of distrust due to what they would have perceived as the subject's sensitivity, in particular because they know too little about the person on the other end. The permission letters and information sheets shared prior to the interview did not

seem to assist much, except for the researcher to improve their interpretive skills to convince the participants and allay their fears. Researchers who had a greater understanding of the study and were endowed with good interpretative skills fared better than those with limited experience. At the centre of being able to interpret issues was the issue of language. Language played a role at the level of understanding the key questions of the interview on the one hand, and to relate with the mother tongue of participants on the other. Observations made during the interviews revealed the need for researchers to be conversant with participants' language as key in establishing rapport. This was important if researchers were to enhance their prospects of securing participation or getting participants to feel comfortable, let alone getting them to endure the interview or freely release valid data.

Discussion

The findings have shown how a shift to virtual platforms highlights the need for researchers not to see the adoption of alternative virtual platforms as a panacea to resolving fieldwork challenges. Reference is on challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic associated with restrictions on traditional fieldwork methods, such as face-to-face interviews and direct participant observation. Instead, the study highlights the need for researchers to be reflexive to identify any emergent challenges to virtual platforms and take corrective action. Methodological reflexivity calls for researchers to be conscious of their role and relationships within the research settings in which they operate (Lin 2015; Corlett & Mavin, 2018). Reflexivity ought to draw from a combination of subjective immersion into the field and understanding epistemological aspects of the research. Corlett and Mavin (2018) noted that the researcher's personal immersion in the fieldwork processes, particularly during interviews, is linked to how researchers draw from their epistemological assumptions. Immersion happens as researchers try to ensure that participants understand their personal and professional identities. How a researcher draws from the epistemological assumptions tends to influence the research outcome. The process involving the interaction of researchers is mediated and generally has a bearing on the success of the data gathering process (Hopkins, 2007; Milner, 2007). This further implies that the researcher is subjectively at the centre of the research processes, and how they conduct themselves and draw from the skills they possess becomes essential. Researchers who fail in this regard risk failing to get issues adequately interpreted to participants, and equally bring the risk of participants declining their invitation to participate in the study. It is such a solid communicative drive combined with critical analysis of situations that Lin (2015) also highlights as essential during researcher-participants engagements. In addition, failure to have an adequate understanding of how the research question has defined, or limited what can be found, could result in researchers failing to give proper guidance during the interview process, resulting in failure to get valid data that can sufficiently deal with the research question. Researchers are thereby obliged to be actively engaged and thoughtful in their approach to fieldwork, as noted by Milner (2007).

The other key issue that arose from the findings, as noted by Moser (2008), is the significance of positionality of both the research participants and how being located in diverse positions tends to shape the research process. In addition to the importance of researchers to embrace what can be viewed as methodological reflexivity, methodological positionality is questioned. Methodological positionality defines the researcher's positioning in society as defined by diverse factors such as sexual identity, age, social and economic status, nationality, ethnicity, language, and level of education (Moser, 2008). The factors mentioned above play an essential role in the fieldwork process as they may inhibit or enable specific fieldwork processes and related interpretations. In some instances, participants are motivated to participate in research projects due to the positionality of researchers in the settings where the research will be conducted. In this case, researchers who were junior academics or academics were preferred by participants, who found it easier to relate with them and participate in the research without harbouring sentiments of mistrust. Therefore, personality features need to be viewed as significant in forming and sustenance of friendships and networks during fieldwork processes. Those researchers who can establish broader alliances and create stronger ties, either through their language prowess at a professional level or else mother tongue level, lay a firm foundation for the success of their data collection process. The risks of participants declining to participate or opt out of the interview during it are further reduced.

Conclusion

The paper has established that the transformations brought about on fieldwork by the COVID-19 pandemic are far-reaching, especially when it comes to restrictions that have negatively affected the traditional face-to-face interviews and direct observations. The virtual platforms that have been viewed as alternatives to conventional methods ought to be considered a means to a complicated end. They require researchers to be reflective and draw from their epistemological prowess to successfully deal with the risks and challenges that emerge when virtual platforms are embraced.

The paper also highlights the significance of researcher positionality in how one could successfully establish essential friendships and networks to mediate the research processes, particularly at getting participants to participate and, by extension, persevere in the data collection process, particularly in situations where interviews are involved. Closely linked to positionality are features such as one's sexual identity, age, social and economic status, ethnicity, language, and level of education. This positionality linked factors have proved significant in influencing researchers' capacity to establish friendships and networks to secure participation in interviews and ensure that participants do not prematurely opt out of the interview, as it could have dire consequences.

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