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Field Research under Pandemic and Hybrid Remote Field Research

ABSTRACT

The scientific fields that generate data for research through interaction with people in socio-cultural contexts have been cut off from their basis of work due to the restrictions resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic. Abrupt interruption of any activities that were taken for granted in traditional field research puts especially linguistic, sociological and cultural anthropological researchers in an unprecedented state of shock. The methodology and technical tools of traditional field research do not include a scenario that would catch the social consequences of a pandemic and replace the missing central aspects of documenting a life practice. The following article describes the seemingly unmanageable problems of field research under pandemic conditions and presents an attempt to find a methodological way out.

Key words: Covid-19 pandemic, definition of the "field", "observer paradox".

The definition of the "field" as a complex environment of different social and cultural practices with a human at the center is not easily adaptable or re-definable to a situation where the human object is not accessible for observation. "Accessibility" here refers to the shared temporal and spatial situatedness of the observer and human object. This essential specification describes the ideal starting point of field research and marginalizes the use of technological tools as an adequate compensation. The field researcher documents the context in which he has to find himself in order to control the process of documentation on the one hand and to get an adequate and bias-free picture of reality on the other hand (Gippert at all 2006).[1]

The "observer paradox" describes the field researcher and observation process triggered by him as the main factors of

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[1] A. Dwyer's five ethical principles for field research are: (1) Do no harm, (2) Reciprocity and equality, (3) Do good (for the community and for science), (4) Obtain informed consent before beginning research, (5) Archive and publish data and results. In: "Ethics and practicalities of cooperative fieldwork and analysis.").

reality bias. In real field research, however, the negative influence of the observer is substantially reduced by the working relationship with the human object - in the perception of the person observed, the field researcher ideally appears as an organic part of his or her own life practice. The term "language assistant" (instead of "informant") established in recent years in linguistic field research emphasizes exactly this aspect: the observed does not represent a passive participant in the field researcher's plan, but acts as a collaborator with wide-ranging mechanisms of control in the process.

In the preparation of classical field research, the establishment of a confidential working relationship with the observed plays a decisive role, so that after an extensive field research phase, the participants on both sides of the process meet each other on a different human level. The quality of the possible results of field research depends significantly on such interactions. The personal narratives of many veteran field researchers confirm this conviction (Dixon, 2010). Apart from the personal relation, in a field research there is a different degree of involvement in the community of the assistant. At the same time, documenting a life practice also represents a certain form of

transferring information about the cultural network. Often it is not done without the knowledge and consent of the represented network or community. For this reason, fieldwork with the human object often also means working with the corresponding community.

The worldwide pandemic caused by Covid-19 initially forced a complete shutdown of logistical and transportation routes for the get-together of participants in a field research. Accessibility to distant locations was not the only problem in realizing field research plans. Urban field research in geographically close places also turns out to be difficult to implement, because both the initial contact and the maintenance of an existing contact with the assistant prove to be difficult. The state-authorized orders of restrictions on social contact create an atmosphere in which the willingness to respond positively, if at all, to the fieldworker's requests is extraordinarily low. All social interactions that are not part of everyday core relations are avoided, and a scientific context is one of them. The readiness to act as a test subject for the Covid-19 test vaccination can be seen as an exception.

The first way out of this situation for humanities scholars seems to be the use

of technical methods of communication. The technologically mediated ways field research existed even before the pandemic (Burke at all 2001). Described scenarios range from simple telephone interviews to video conferencing using Skype as an option for qualitative field research (Lo Lacono at all 2016). Such deployments were traditionally implemented in the first phase of an interview.

In the pre-interview phase of a field research, there is a lot of clarification work regarding confidentiality. The assistants have to be informed about the purpose for which the data are collected and what will be done with them after documentation. However, this presupposes that a common basis for cooperation has already been established. The targeted use of technical communication tools can only be successful if the communication participants on both sides are familiar with each other and the intentions are clarified in advance.

Another difference between the immediate conversation in situ and the dialogue over the various technical media is the handling of the speech overlaps. In a telephone interview, almost any interruption is possible only with the foreign choice of the speaker, which leads to an exhausting conversation. The modern videoconference rooms, which are equipped with chat options in parallel, enable an announcement of a speaker's self-selection or foreign choice.

The fact that technical communication tools are taking up more and more space in everyday life, and that the pandemic has extremely increased this use, helps the field research in that the potential assistants do not need to be additionally sensitized to the technical environment. As expected, they are adept at using the technical tools and demonstrate advanced competencies in terms of " self-presentation" in the technologically framed dialogue.

Initial contact is one of the biggest problems in field research under pandemic conditions. The search for suitable field research assistants in the already existing virtual groups and online networks seems to be one of many solutions. Whereby even such groups are now overflowing with inquiries about the test subjects.

Figure 1. example of a proband search advertisement.

After a successful initial contact, the establishment of the "field" as an observation space is the next methodological challenge. The questions, which socio-cultural practices remain outside the observation in a virtual interview and how can they be compensated, will be part of the scientific discussion for a long time.

Hybrid remote field research is based on the combination of digital (virtual) and analog field research methods. This implies the different realization of field research phases.

The concept thus combines traditional field research methods with the unavoidable digital phases of the realization of a field research project with the aim to gain qualitative data and to get as adequate a picture as possible of the socio-cultural setting.

A virtual first contact and the establishment of a familiar working relationship with the assistant can be differentiated as a generation-related problem and an assumption can be made: the virtual first contact seems to be more promising with the usually younger persons who have high digital competences.

Two interlocking pictures emerge in the given context: (1) The logistical simplification of the field research phases through the "short" digital paths of

communication limits the observation space to the social and cultural practices of the assistant; (2) The digital content from the assistant's everyday life represents the life practice on a different level of observation.

It can be assumed that the shift of focus in the field research methods in favor of more digitalization takes a decisive influence on the content of the obtained data - the socio-cultural practices concern accordingly more and more virtual networks and social media. The confidential connection between the field researcher and assistant can be established based on the assistant making digital content accessible to the observer. Thus, the documentation of language in the context of future field research can mean the documentation of digital language content generated in a specific socio-cultural context.

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