

Excursions

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Essays: Research in Times of Chaos

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Research During the Chaos of Covid-19

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Planning Moves Around the Pandemic: Conducting Bridge Research During the Chaos of Covid-19

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This article is dedicated to all bridge players who are missing their club, their partners, and their lifeline, and, of course, Mo and Niamh.

The potentials of a sociological study into experiences of learning and playing bridge stemmed from my longing to understand forgotten public spaces. By researching this niche leisure activity, the project could capture insights into community involvement, civic engagement and intergenerationality. Problematically, I had never played bridge; let alone visited a club. Still, my unfamiliarity could be an advantage. After taking lessons, I felt that rapport could be fostered from a shared sense of failure, learning, perseverance and resilience. My ambition to explore bridge, watching the regulars return and play through the boards, in its accustomed setting, grew as I began to get a feel for the game. Unfortunately, with the Covid-19 outbreak almost all areas of public life experienced restrictions. This included the public space of bridge clubs, closing their doors to players and this researcher.

Bridge is a card game that involves reciprocity and competition, with partnerships developed through trust and formality. In bridge, you are taught the importance of making a plan and, much like doing research, this plan emerges from reasoned problem-solving based on limited information. You need to adapt because you can only ever hope that the cards are where you think they are. Forced isolation has produced opportunities and challenges, as for this bridge project to continue, the research plan required adaptation to online and telephone interviews.

Conventional practicalities considered; it appears that there are many benefits of house-bound research. For example, the removal of travel time and costs. However, having conducted remote interviews, I am aware of how fatigued I am. My wife and I are supporting each other's workloads as we both attempt full-time academia whilst housebound. Nurseries are closed, travel is limited, and family contact has been prohibited, therefore our attempts at "normal" employment and research are tested as we care for our ten-month-old daughter. Undeniably, these exceptional circumstances have created cherished memories. We are grateful that we have been able to be with Niamh as she babbles, crawls, rolls, and stretches for everything. Nevertheless, there is a lingering concern that these positives eclipse getting research right.

As a researcher, I am as accommodating and flexible with interview participants as possible, but there are always background negotiations. Convenient times and methods for participants do not always fit with academic calendars, household schedules, online meetings or workshops, and the sleep patterns of a baby. There is also the issue of fitting in adequate time for reflection between interviews, to reassess questions, and to soak in the stories told by interviewees. Time is needed to build a foundation from notes and to record the wrong turns and dead ends that structures good research.

Understandably, many responses reflect current times with comments occasionally sticking on these issues rather than expressing the flow of what “normal” was like. It feels, simultaneously, therapeutic and stressful. For the researcher, there is a haunting thought that datasets reflect the convenience of the situation rather than good data. During conversations interviewee experiences are shared freely. Their stories reflect upon the differences of what is said, told and felt, during a time of physical detachment from clubs and partners. Most telling, perhaps, are the awkwardly framed online interviews or the routines of life that are indiscriminately captured by tablet cameras. Emotions and relationships streamed during the research experience demonstrate that bridge players continue to learn and adapt, not entirely through preference, but certainly from a passion for the game. These experiences of getting to grips with technology, to stay connected amid the chaos of Covid-19, suggests that it is entirely possible that the researcher has witnessed the catalyst for a new natural in bridge play and learning.