**Covid-19 and *Bryman’s Social Research Methods* 6e**

**Considerations for reading this edition**

We provided the information within the 6th edition of *Bryman’s Social Research Methods* with ‘normal’ social interactions in mind. However, December 2019 marked the start of a global pandemic that brought unprecedented and rapid changes to all aspects of social life and turned ‘normal’ on its head.

Whatever your discipline and your research topic, it is likely that it will have been touched by the Covid-19 pandemic, with new issues revealed and existing issues highlighted or exacerbated. There has never been such a need for social research as a tool to accurately and transparently observe, record, and report on behaviours, attitudes, and beliefs. As social researchers, we can help answer the many new questions that emerge during (and following) a time of crisis and ensure that all sectors of society have a voice.

When we went to press with the sixth edition the pandemic was ongoing and it was far too early for us to predict its longer-term impact for social research and research methods. We therefore produced [a series of four short videos](https://learninglink.oup.com/access/srm6e-student-resources#tag_video-reflections-from-the-authors-on-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-social-research) in which we (the authors) reflect on this theme. We will update the videos regularly to respond to the latest developments as we continue to live through what is likely to be an ever-evolving ‘new normal’.

We strongly encourage you to watch our videos before beginning to use this book, but here we have also provided some written comments on the additional considerations the pandemic poses for each topic. These notes were written in summer 2021.

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# Part 1: The research process

## Chapter 2: Social research strategies: quantitative research and qualitative research

The pandemic has highlighted the benefits of both qualitative and quantitative research strategies—it has shown them to be equally useful and also complementary. We need quantitative data to get an overall picture of the situation and to make generalizations, but we also need rich qualitative data to understand the human impacts and see through the eyes of the people being studied.

## Chapter 3: Research designs

The pandemic presents an externally-generated shock upon society. While your choice of research design may not change as a result of the situation, consider quite how much things have shifted over the past year or so. For cross-sectional studies, you might find that the snapshot you take of society right now is very different to previous accounts. Likewise, if you conduct any in-depth case studies of communities at the moment, the data you gather will be very different to when a pandemic is not occurring. Be aware of the impact the pandemic might have on your ability to test and replicate previous findings from the literature, but embrace the value of your research in furthering our understanding of the impact of the pandemic.

## Chapter 4: Planning a research project and formulating research questions

Any work that looks at the impact of the pandemic on society is going to be important, and your own research can contribute to this endeavour. For example, you could choose to study the impact of the pandemic on a particular group or aspect of life. However, the pandemic also means that research is constrained in a way that remains unfamiliar—consider how difficult face-to-face interactions have been at different points, and how flexible and adaptable we have had to be as the situation and restrictions change rapidly. The pace of change can pose challenges, as although it is still essential to plan your research carefully, you need to be open to changing those plans. For example, organizations you have previously secured access to might no longer be able to facilitate your research (e.g. schools), and/or you may experience unusual delays. Our advice is to plan accordingly, to always have a back-up (and another back-up, or two!), and to make sure you leave plenty of extra time in case things don’t go to plan.

## Chapter 5: Reviewing the literature

You might not be able to visit the library, so start to work on those online searching skills. There are a lot of resources online, but sometimes it can be hard to distinguish the quality of web sources. Remember that your librarians are still working, even if the library is closed. Email them for help and support.

## Chapter 6: Ethics and politics in social research

Don’t put yourself, or your research participants, at risk. Consult your institutional guidance on whether any face-to-face research is allowed or not, and remember that the situation can improve or deteriorate very rapidly—so keep checking for changes in what you can and cannot do. Consider the ethical implications of who can, and cannot, take part in your study if it’s conducted entirely online. Ensure that any data generated from online interactions is collated and stored appropriately.

# Part 2: Quantitative research

## Chapter 7: The nature of quantitative research

An important point to consider when reading this chapter is that quantitative research has arguably never been so visible or so highly valued as it is right now. The pandemic has provided a clear illustration of the importance of quantitative data and has resulted in huge numbers of people becoming familiar with data analysis and statistical terms. In this chapter we also note the increasing opportunities for online approaches to quantitative research, which is clearly a key consideration when Covid restrictions limit opportunities for face-to-face research.

## Chapter 8: Sampling in quantitative research

Accessing an appropriate sample has considerable implications for the success of your project. The pandemic has led to changes in many people’s circumstances. For some people, changing personal circumstances including home-working, more flexible hours, or even periods where they are not in a position to work, may mean that it is easier for you to access a larger sample. However, for other people health challenges or additional child care responsibilities may affect their ability to take part in social research. It is also possible that—depending on your location, the local restrictions, and the nature of your study—the pandemic could completely prevent you from accessing a sample on a face-to-face basis. As such, it is important to think carefully about your sampling strategies in light of the pandemic.

## Chapter 9: Structured interviewing

The pandemic has implications for the way in which structured interviews can be conducted. For instance, restrictions may mean they cannot take place on a face-to-face basis, meaning that other online or telephone approaches need to be used. If face-to-face structured interviews are allowed, they will need to be conducted in accordance with any national/regional and university restrictions and protocols. These could include holding the structured interviews outdoors, in a socially distanced manner, and wearing face masks.

## Chapter 10: Self-completion questionnaires

The main effect of the pandemic on self-completion questionnaires is that respondents may have either more time or less time (e.g. if they have childcare responsibilities, or care for dependents) to engage with the research. Restrictions may also prevent you from handing out and collecting hard copy self-completion questionnaires, so an online or telephone method may be the only option. The fact that many more people, especially older groups, have become much more comfortable with using the internet as a result of the pandemic may make online questionnaires more feasible and effective.

## Chapter 11: Asking questions

The pandemic has obviously presented challenges for people. This means that it is particularly important to be sensitive in the types of questions you ask, and you may want to give participants opportunities to skip over some questions.

## Chapter 12: Structured observation

Depending on the requirements and protocols associated with the pandemic, you may not be able to conduct a structured observation on a face-to-face basis—although this method could be compatible with social distancing measures. The increase in online activities may mean there are more opportunities for you to undertake virtual structured observations.

## Chapter 13: Content analysis

There are multiple forms of content that can be explored quantitatively, and many do not require face-to-face contact (which may not be feasible during the pandemic). You can conduct content analysis of online sources, including social media, blogs, online forums, and websites, and all of these may provide more—and perhaps more useful and relevant—data as a result of the increase in online activities during and following the pandemic.

## Chapter 14: Using existing data

In this chapter we highlight the expansion of easily accessible secondary data online, including on social media. Secondary data analysis is well worth considering even without factoring in a pandemic, but it may present particularly interesting and fruitful opportunities at a time when primary data collection faces additional challenges.

## Chapter 15: Quantitative data analysis

These techniques can be employed regardless of how your data has been collected, whether during/following a pandemic or not.

# Part 3: Qualitative research

## Chapter 16: The nature of qualitative research

Quantitative research has been very visible at numerous points throughout the pandemic, as governments, organizations, and individuals have relied on data and statistical analysis to inform their plans and decisions. But qualitative research has proved equally important—and will undoubtedly continue to do so—as a way to help us understand the human impact of the pandemic, whether on wellbeing, education, or workers’ feelings about returning to their offices or moving to a ‘hybrid working’ model. The qualitative research preoccupations with seeing through the eyes of others and gathering rich, deep data will help us all understand the effects of the pandemic, empathize with others, and find ways of moving forward.

## Chapter 17: Sampling in qualitative research

Sampling remains an often-overlooked element of qualitative studies. However, the pandemic may have actually helped to open up new avenues for access that could help you gain an ‘information-rich’ sample. As people have become more aware of and comfortable with online communication, we are no longer limited by the usual constraints of time and space. This means that the pool of people you can contact is much larger. As the pandemic has driven more people to interact online, there is also more opportunity for ethnographic work, while the push to place archived documents online makes them much more accessible. Of course, this might also result in more work to develop contacts and more refusals. There will always be people who can’t access the internet, and many archives remain in physical form only. What you can achieve will also depend on your specific project, but if you think creatively, the pandemic might have enhanced your potential fields of vision.

## Chapter 18: Ethnography and participant observation

Much face-to-face ethnographic work will have been curtailed by the pandemic, but that in itself can be interesting to observe—provided you maintain social distancing rules! But given that many people have migrated online to continue and develop interaction, there are almost infinite possibilities for online ethnographies. Whether it be community sites like Discord or internet forums and message boards, individuals and groups use many different platforms to interact, and all of this has great potential for social research.

## Chapter 19: Interviewing in qualitative research

## Chapter 20: Focus groups

At this point (summer 2021), you are likely to have to conduct interviews and focus groups over the phone or online, using platforms like Zoom. Fortunately, researchers have been investigating the impact of using online technologies for these purposes for a number of years and in both of these chapters we spend time considering such issues. However, key considerations when using these methods rather than meeting participants face to face include:

* + Potential difficulties building rapport, when you are not in the same physical space as your participant, when there is likely to be a slight audio and visual delay, and when you cannot ‘read’ their body language.
  + Potential difficulties/additional factors for moderating a focus group, especially in terms of managing the ‘flow’ of conversation online.
  + Audio-video methods also mean you can’t pick up so much non-verbal information, e.g. body language, this can be particularly important in knowing when, and how, to manage discussion.
  + There are some major differences but also many important similarities with using audio-video versus face-to-face methods. You may not need to book a physical room for interviewing or consider transport arrangements when doing data collection online, but you still need to give careful consideration to logistics, data storage/security, and the process of recording.
  + Once you are familiar with the technology, transcription and note-taking can be easier online, and there are third party applications that can help you automatically transcribe.

## Chapter 21: Language in qualitative research

Language has been vitally important during the pandemic because of the restrictions on in-person interaction, and therefore on non-verbal methods of communication. Conversation and discourse analysis provide opportunities for analysing language which could provide useful insights into the events and impact of the pandemic. For example, ‘digital CA’ (see Thinking deeply 21.1) could allow you to compare face-to-face talk with online interaction. DA is broader and can be applied to other forms of communication, not just talk, so it could (for example) help you understand how a government used discourse to construct power and justify the restrictions it imposed on social life.

## Chapter 22: Documents as sources of data

Evidently, travel restrictions and lockdowns limit your capacity to visit physical archives. But the pandemic has reinvigorated discussion about the relationship between digitization and archival records. Again, issues concerning how to index digital records have been considered long before the pandemic, but many of the bigger archives have been made more accessible to the public during the pandemic, providing an even greater array of online documents to choose from. Of course, this is not always possible for some of the smaller archives or more specific records, but many more researchers have turned toward documentary methods during the pandemic, too, so there should be some interesting debates about the use of such material going forward.

## Chapter 23: Qualitative data analysis

These techniques can be employed regardless of how your data has been collected, whether during/following a pandemic or not.

# Part 4: Mixed methods research and writing up

## Chapter 24: Mixed methods research

Mixed methods projects can be particularly illuminating during public health scares (see, for example, Research in focus 24.2 and 24.3). With the pandemic governing how we can interact with each other, how we work, and how we live, this rapid change in behaviour and the impact it has on us all needs urgent exploration. In areas in which there is little previous research, it would make perfect sense to start with a qualitative approach to understand the impacts of the pandemic on a particular area of life, and then to see if this is experienced more broadly through a qualitative exercise. Alternatively, you might establish the broad pattern of a phenomenon via a survey (such as prevalence of adherence to social distancing) and then explore it in greater depth through interviews (what really motivates people to act in line with the rules, or not).

## Chapter 25: Writing up research

When writing up your work you should reflect on any limitations you have observed in your study. You are expected to consider how best to overcome them, but you can’t overcome everything—and during a pandemic you might find more limitations than ever. However, if something didn’t go according to plan then do not try to hide it; be honest and tell the reader. This will show your ability to reflect on how the context of the pandemic has impacted upon your own project, and such reflections are strongly encouraged in dissertations.

# Further reading suggestions

* <https://esrc.ukri.org/files/news-events-and-publications/news/esrc-covid-19-activity/>
* <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41562-020-0884-z>
* <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2020/08/25/what-is-the-role-of-the-social-sciences-in-the-response-to-covid-19-4-priorities-for-shaping-the-post-pandemic-world/>
* <https://www.bmj.com/content/370/bmj.m2982/rr-2>
* <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1clGjGABB2h2qbduTgfqribHmog9B6P0NvMgVuiHZCl8/preview>
* <https://www.gov.uk/service-manual/user-research/doing-user-research-during-coronavirus-covid-19-choosing-face-to-face-or-remote-research>
* <https://www.ncrm.ac.uk/research/socscicovid19/>