Covidography

Teaching Ethnographic Methods in a Pandemic

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Introduction

In this article, I introduce the idea of *covidography*, arguing that ethnographies of Covid-19 offer an opportunity for methodological innovation. I discuss the practical case of an undergraduate assignment in the course "Cultural Perspectives on Health, Lifestyle and Medicine" at Lund University. The students typically write a short ethnography based on in-person fieldwork. However, due to Covid-19 the assignment had to be re-oriented so that much of the fieldwork could be done online. I reflect on teaching online ethnographic methods and discuss practical considerations, many of which relate to working with international students. Additionally, by modifying the assignment, I was forced to engage more systematically with the literature on online ethnographic methods. This offers a reminder that teaching has the potential to reinvigorate our research.

In early spring 2020, I was excited to take over the course "Cultural Perspectives on Health, Lifestyle and Medicine" at Lund University from a colleague who had recently moved on to a different position. The course is a general medical ethnology course for undergraduates, which also draws upon anthropology, history, art history and the medical humanities in general. I had taught the course previously, but I was looking forward to taking on the course coordination responsibilities and making a few changes. Since the course always runs from March to June, I had plenty of time at the beginning of the term to calmly plan.

However, the 6th of March 2020 was hardly a good time for a new course to start, certainly not one popular amongst exchange students. Already that week a handful of students had notified me that they were being recalled by their home universities, and this continued into the following week. I did not fully grasp the seriousness of what

was to come until our neighbours, the Danes, announced on the evening of the 11th of March that they were closing public universities and schools, along with non-essential public services. On the 12th, we awakened to the news that the US would be implementing a travel ban. While it was later clarified that the ban did not include US citizens, this was not communicated initially and many of my American students rushed to book flights before the ban went into effect. Finally, on the 18th of March our university moved to online teaching at the recommendation of the Swedish government.

In the midst of the chaos, I needed to modify one of the course's main assignments: the students work in groups to carry out an ethnographic project in which they observe, describe and analyse a health or wellness-related phenomenon in society. For many students this is their first experience of ethnography. In previous years, examples of their projects have included participant observation at yoga studios, vegan restaurants and doctor's offices. They present their observations in a short paper and a 5-minute presentation.

In the sections that follow, I discuss how the assignment was re-oriented so that the students could still complete the project. I reflect on teaching online ethnographic methods, and discuss some practical considerations, many of which relate to working with international students. I also introduce the idea of *covidography*, suggesting that ethnographies of Covid-19 offer an opportunity for methodological innovations.

Covidographies

Anthropology is not short on jargon, so I hesitate to introduce *covidography* as a new term. However, I think it is useful to differentiate between ethnographies of Covid-19 and ethnographies of oth-

er pandemics, epidemics and disease outbreaks. Excellent ethnographies have been written about infectious disease, not least the recent Ebola in West Africa (2014-2016) in which anthropologists played a role in the public health response (ABRAMOWITZ 2017; VENABLES & PELLECCHIA 2017). However, with very few exceptions (VENABLES 2017), the practicalities of conducting fieldwork whilst minimising the risk of contagion are not discussed. This is perhaps in part because too often in journal articles we gloss over our methods, eager to get on to the findings. Other research has taken place after the risk for contagion was over, for instance in BRITTA LUNDGREN's work on narcolepsy as a side effect of the H1N1 vaccine after the 2009-2010 pandemic (LUNDGREN 2017). Some diseases, such as AIDS, are not spread via respiratory contact or objects so in-person fieldwork does not present the same sort of risks. Anthropologists have also studied the work around a pandemic, for instance political decision-making or public health bureaucracies. Others have focussed more on the theoretical aspects of infectious disease, rather than collecting new empirical material. In much of the literature, there may be allusions to adapting fieldwork when in-person access is not feasible, but the practicalities of this are rarely discussed.

Covid-19 is different. While not everyone is equally at risk for infection or severe disease, everyone can be infected. Many of our in-person methods are not feasible or even legal under various restrictions. The world is more digital than in previous outbreaks, which means we also have new tools for field work as well as new venues for data collection, such as social media platforms. For these reasons, a *covidography* is not simply an ethnography about Covid-19, but rather it presents a platform for methodological innovation.

The Covidography assignment

On the 13th of March, my colleague gave a lecture on medical ethnography, and I came to the lecture hall to check on the students and address their concerns. At that time we were still doing in-person education, so I talked about ways of doing the assignment while also maintaining physical distance during participant observation. However, once we moved to online education the following week it was clear that the assignment would need to change and that in-person participation observation would not be possible in many cases.

I sent a request for good sources on online ethnography to the *Anthropology Matters* mailing list, and immediately had nearly 100 responses: this sense of community is one of the best things to have happened in this awful situation. HEIKKI WILENIUS, from the University of Helsinki, put together the responses in a *Google* Document (WILENIUS 2020) Through these exchanges, I also was alerted to Deborah Lupton's Google Document on doing fieldwork in a pandemic, which includes links to practical fieldwork advice (LUPTON 2020). Since much of the research on infectious disease lacks in-depth discussions of methods, the Lupton document is particularly helpful.

The crowd-sourced documents are quite substantial, but there were so many resources that I felt it may have been overwhelming, especially for students new to ethnography. I summarised some of the main themes in the literature in a short video uploaded to our online learning platform, *Canvas*. I also provided two readings: DANIEL MILLER's entry on "Digital Anthropology" in the Cambridge Encyclopedia of Anthropology (MILLER 2018) and an article by LEESA COSTELLO and colleagues on netnography from the International Journal of Qualitative Methods (COSTELLO *et al.* 2017). These were both open access publications, so there were no problems with the students accessing them remotely. I also chose them because they are clearly written: not all ethnographers write in a way that is accessible for people new to the field!

While I have used the term online ethnography in this short piece, there are many terms that are often overlapping but also distinct: digital ethnography, virtual ethnography, cyber ethnography, or what PETER LUGOSI and colleagues have called "investigative research on the Internet (IRI)" (LUGOSI *et al.* 2012). In their article, COSTELLO and colleagues start with the history of the term "netnography," drawing upon ROBERT V. KOZINET's 2002 definition to describe it as a qualitative research methodology "that adapts ethnographic research techniques to the study of cultures and communities emerging through

electronic networks." (KOZINET in COSTELLO *et al.* 2017: 2). Their article also provides an overview of the debates on terminology and offers inspiration for different ways of approaching data collection and analysis.

MILLER'S chapter takes a broad approach to "the digital" as a concept, covering the ways digital technologies are used by anthropologists and the people we study and how social relations are restructured around them. The chapter also uses many examples to explain why we "can only understand new digital worlds in the context of wider social relations and practices" (MILLER 2018:1)

Of the 14 submissions by the students, 13 were about Covid-related phenomena. The submissions included material from Canada, Sweden, Spain, the US, Austria, Turkey, France, Norway, Japan, Singapore, Iceland, Italy, the UK, Germany, and South Korea. Some reports compared the restrictions and norms in different countries, such as mask wearing, shopping behaviour, and the way health workers have been celebrated. These were short undergraduate assignments and not systematic studies, so one should hesitate to draw conclusions. However, I was struck by the universality of the themes: while there is a range of lived experiences during Covid-19, the students—regardless of country-context—focussed on similar topics: isolation, stress, uncertainty and frustration. More positively, they also looked at successful internet socializing and the way people organized to help those in risk groups.

Students studied their topic using a mix of approaches. Some focused on social media (including memes) and looked at platforms such as Tiktok, Instagram and Facebook. Many carried out interviews via online tools, but also drew upon informal conversations, physically distanced observations (for example, in parks), and online surveys. One student was a health worker and offered autoethnographic insights from her experiences in a nursing home. Returning to the idea of *covidography* as methodological innovation, these are ways in which some of the projects hinted at unconventional approaches to gathering data and engaging with communities via the internet.

Practical considerations

Teaching during a pandemic requires practical considerations, just as much as methodological ones because of the way it has re-arranged our social relations. For example, our closest international airport is across the border in Denmark (40 minutes by train). Because the Danes had shut the border, many of my students had trouble getting home and had to rebook flights via Stockholm, a journey that required at least 5 hours on two trains in the middle of a pandemic. This was very stressful and meant I needed to be flexible with deadlines and expectations.

In moving the course online, I also had to consider time zones. I decided against holding live online lectures and instead recorded lectures so that students could watch at their convenience. I also struggled to move some material online. Normally, several copies of the course textbooks are available in the library as references. I contacted the author of one textbook who was unable to provide a digital copy of the book due to legal restrictions. A further complication was that I could not formally make any changes to the reading list during the term. Looking forward, as many of us are moving to online education for the near future, it is important to make sure that seminar readings and textbooks are available online and open access.

Finally, the students were living in different countries with various public health restrictions. Some were self-isolating, while others were in quarantine. This meant that they had different opportunities to collect and analyse data. I also choose not to require a presentation, so that the students only submitted a paper. This was easier for them to work on in groups when, for example, five people could be in five different time zones. If it had been an individual assignment, then short video recordings would have worked well.

Conclusion

For too long, I saw online ethnographic methods as an add-on to "regular" ethnography. Yet, our world has changed to the extent that in most cases, it would be difficult to do ethnographic research without engaging with the internet. This is exemplified by Covid-19: our views of the pandemic are

mediated through internet media, including the news, and we communicate via online tools. By modifying the assignment, I was forced to engage more systematically with the literature on online ethnographic methods. As I have been researching how the international media has reported on Sweden's handling of the pandemic, this has been incredibly useful for my own work (IRWIN 2020). Many of us at some point have felt that teaching gets in in the way of time spent researching, but my experience with this course provides a reminder that teaching can also reinvigorate our work. What is more, I appreciated the insights from my students and reading about their experiences from across the globe helped me to feel connected during a stressful time. Finally, although the pandemic is undeniably horrible, I also see it as an opportunity to energize anthropology and ethnography. At times, online ethnographic methods have been sidelined or stereotyped as "not real research" (GÓRALSKA 2020:48). *Covidography* presents a methodological wake-up call for all of us to rethink our fieldwork methods and our relationship to the online world, and to learn from colleagues who have many years of experience with online ethnographic research.

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