

Families, Relationships and Societies

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Open Space, Special Section on Covid-19

Article title: 'Er, not the best time': Methodological and ethical challenges of researching family life during a pandemic

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Title: ‘Er, not the best time’: Methodological and ethical challenges of researching family life during a pandemic

That the Covid-19 pandemic has had an impact on families and relationships hardly needs reiterating. For the first time in the post-industrialised era, the main institutions of social life (including education, care and work) have largely been pushed into the home, exposing ever further the inequalities (such as gender and generation) on which family life revolves – as well as making clear the huge variation in what the definition of a ‘home’, or indeed a ‘family’, is.

In this short piece, we share some reflections from a project investigating the impact of the pandemic on family life – [Families and Community in a Time of Covid](#) – and discuss some of the methodological and ethical quandaries that it has provoked. We start with a small vignette detailing a conversation around recruitment with one of our participants (conducted via text message):

Dear [Jackfruit Mum¹], This is Charlotte from the UCL Fact-Covid Study, just double checking to see if our email came through and you’d like to set up a time for interviews soon? Very best wishes, Charlotte’

‘Unfortunately the incentive is not enough for my partner to participate. Would it still be £40 for my household?’

‘Thank you for getting back to me. Yes, it’s £40 per household – which means at least two people over the age of 12 taking part in two interviews each (one now, one next year). I’m sorry we can’t offer a higher amount, but we have very limited funding! ...Would it help if we did the interview with you and your partner together? It’s not something we normally do but would be happy to if that made a difference?’

‘That would help and when would we receive payment?’

‘The first £20 would be within a week or so of completing the interview (via online/email voucher) and likewise the second one next year.’

‘Ok, when would you like to complete the first one?’

¹ All participants in the study were given a flower or fruit-based pseudonym

1 Jackfruit Mum has heard about our study through one of the adverts we posted online. She has
2 filled out the eligibility survey indicating that she is black, between 36-49 years old, living with
3 her partner and three children (aged two, nine and ten), and her mother part-time, and that she
4 has a household income of between £16-29,000. On the basis of this we have emailed her to
5 arrange an interview by phone.² We are particularly keen to speak with this family, as thus far we
6 have struggled to recruit Black families and families in lower income brackets. This adds an
7 uncomfortable dimension to our recruitment efforts: these are the most vulnerable to COVID
8 and its repercussions, and understandably the least keen to participate.
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18 When Charlotte calls at the agreed time – 5 pm on a weekday – the phone rings for a while
19 before being answered. Jackfruit Mum sounds confused, and her children can be heard shouting
20 in the background. She had the meeting down in her head as being the day after. This is ‘not the
21 best time’ because her partner has just fallen asleep. Charlotte offers to call back, but Jackfruit
22 Mum asks ‘how long will it take?’ When told between 30-45 minutes, she says she wants to ‘get it
23 out the way’ and would it be ok to do the joint interview with her mother instead? Charlotte
24 agrees, and then hears her explaining to her mother what the study is about, saying in the
25 background ‘she’s paying and I forgot I said was going to do it... she needs two adults. So just
26 sit down, she won’t be long, only 20 minutes.’
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36 Then she says ‘Ok Miss, we’re ready’.
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39 **Research in a time of COVID-19**

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43 The ethics of asking anyone to participate in research – short of that which will directly Save Lives
44 – are complicated. As a recent [blog](#) on the IJSM site asked, is it ethical to ask people to give their
45 time and energy to a research project when that time and energy is already so stretched? Can we
46 really say that a (social science) project will have ‘tangible benefits’ for the people we work with?
47 These are questions which haunt all researchers, all of the time – perhaps particularly those of us
48 who work from qualitative perspectives – but now they seem particularly pressing.
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58 ² To be eligible adult participants much live full or part with a child or children under the age of 18 in the UK. We
59 also sampled for diversity, so that we did not recruit a homogenous group in terms of ethnicity and household
60 income.
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1 In designing our study – initially unfunded – we were mindful of our participants’ lack of time,
2 and the potentially anxious or even traumatic circumstances in which we would be inserting
3 ourselves into their lives. We were also conscious of our own compressed and stretched work
4 and family lives. Nevertheless, getting our project off the ground quickly after lockdown began
5 meant that we were able to start data collection whilst the most stringent of measures were still
6 in place – a time of shock and panic for many, but also a time which we felt was important to
7 capture. We needed an approach that was flexible enough to fit into the lives of our participants,
8 but which gave scope for both cursory and more reflexive engagements with our enquiries,
9 which were themselves responsive to fast-changing circumstances.
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11 Working with 38 families (72 individuals) from across the UK, we have tried to capture rich
12 qualitative data about their experience of the pandemic, specifically as it relates to family life.
13 Coupled with the accounts of grandparents, resident or otherwise, we are operating in a multi-
14 generational way with families from across the demographic spectrum. Fifteen out of the 38
15 families identify as Black or from minority ethnic backgrounds³, and we have a third from lower
16 incomes (less than £30,000 annually). The intention is to collect data longitudinally over the
17 course of the year, running into Spring 2021.
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19 To do this, with the majority of our participants, we have used an online app ([Indeemo](#), provided
20 pro-bono for the project) which allows them to upload video clips, pictures and notes in a diary
21 as and when they have time – something we offered to all family members over the age of 12
22 who were willing to take part. The app is both reflective and responsive. We are able to pose
23 questions ‘in the moment’ as they seem relevant (such as changes to facemask regulations) at the
24 same time as leaving space for people to reflect on their responses over the course of a few days,
25 unlike in an interview. Similarly, we are able to probe our participants in a reflexive manner –
26 taking time ourselves as researchers to really think about what it is we want to know, and just
27 how to phrase it, by asking them to elaborate on a particular phrase or image. This, we hope,
28 means less wasted time and energy all round.
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30 We realised fairly quickly, however, that the Indeemo app was not something that was going to
31 help us reach everyone, and in a bid to make study participation less time-consuming we began
32 to offer telephone or online interviews, both for those participants who were already using
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34 ³ Note, this is the ethnicity declared by the family member responding to the initial eligibility questionnaire; some
35 families were mixed ethnicity.
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Indeemo and struggling to find the time to fill it out, and for those who did not have the resources (technological or otherwise) to do so. Certainly in our study, there are many families, like the Jackfruits, who are sharing one mobile phone, without a Wi-Fi connection, and living in cramped conditions. Setting up independent Zoom or Teams calls with family members in separate rooms on personal devices was not a realistic possibility.

After project commencement, we received some funding from the British Academy by which to subsidise incentives in the form of online vouchers so that we could attract participants from lower income households in particular. (Perhaps unsurprisingly we had a wealth of high-earning, middle class, white families willing to share their experiences.) For many of us in the team this in itself proved to be an ethical conundrum – in several interviews, like the one with Jackfruit Mum, it was palpable that the participants were only taking part with a view to receiving the £20 voucher (to be followed by a further instalment on a second interview at the end of the study, when a round of household level interviews with all participants will take place).

We reflected, of course, that our study would become yet another item on the ‘to do’ list for our participants, as well as something else to be risk assessed. Since all our data collection happens online, there would be no risk of infection associated, but when time and money are short, ‘choosing’ to participate in a study means different things to different families. In a WhatsApp chat between project team members, Charlotte wrote:

‘One thing that has made me really uncomfortable is how keen/desperate the Jackfruit couple are for the voucher, and how little they clearly want to do the interview. I feel horrible’.

The ethical conundrum became ever more excruciating when problems on the administrative side of university finance systems meant that even after the interview had been completed, the voucher was not emailed over in the timeframe it had been promised.

Following the interaction with the Jackfruits, Charlotte wrote about the interview in a shared ‘reflections’ document: ‘I felt profoundly uncomfortable – this was already going to be the only joint interview we would be including in the study, but also the grandmother had not heard about the study or read our information sheet and informed consent form. At the same time, I was conscious that to delay would mean a delay in the incentive being received – which was clearly the main motivation for this family taking part. In the end, I gave a quick overview of the

1 study, sought verbal consent, and asked my questions quickly. I didn't ask for elaboration even
2 when I really should have. We all raced through so that were done within 25 minutes. This is not
3 the kind of 'fieldwork' experience that leaves a good taste – much as it was also very 'useful' for
4 our study.
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9 Indeed, the rich details we would normally hope to elicit in a longer or in-person narrative are
10 absent, but the bare 'facts' of the case corroborate the accounts from other families in the study,
11 while also acting as a corrective to those more readily offered from wealthier families. Jackfruit
12 Mum talks, for example, of how lonely she has been (her partner is a keyworker, so she has been
13 largely on her own with her three children) who in turn have struggled with being 'locked up
14 indoors' for weeks on end. Her relationship with her mother has also been strained because the
15 children normally spend a period of the week at her house, and during the early stages of
16 lockdown her mother was too anxious about this – meaning she did not get 'any sort of break' at
17 all. During later weeks, after weighing up the costs to their collective physical and mental health,
18 they decided to form a bubble, before it was officially sanctioned. She feels unsupported by her
19 children's school, and has little energy to be 'a full-time carer and a full-time teacher'. As noted,
20 there are not enough electric devices to go around so plans for a system of 'home schooling'
21 quickly fell by the way-side and her time was largely spent 'coping'. When asked if there is
22 anything we haven't covered she'd like to mention, both her and her mother talk about the
23 mental impact of people dying, and particularly, the restrictions around funerals. Not being able
24 to attend them or grieve together as a family has been very painful, they say.
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39 Including diverse families highlights the cost-benefit analysis that all participants must go
40 through in a time of COVID, but which is especially charged and less easily navigated by those
41 in poorer households: there are no 'spare' laptops, no outdoor space to garden in, no partner
42 working from home to share family meal times or children's bed times with. Stepping out to get
43 groceries is no longer, if it ever was, a simple task, when the question of mortality hangs heavy in
44 the air and you have to decide whether to take the children with you or leave minors (some? all?)
45 home alone. While wealthier families can afford large weekly orders to avoid multiple trips to the
46 shop, other families, such as the Jackfruits, make several visits spending less money each time.
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55 The limitations of our ability to observe and connect with families were also, of course, framed
56 by the social distancing measures in place at that time. Doing any sort of research in a pandemic
57 requires some methodological acrobatics, particularly if that research might usually have been
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1 conducted face-to-face (arguably a hallmark of research into families and intimate relationships).
2 For those of us who normally rely on deep ‘hanging out’ (or ‘participant observation’) in which
3 the body is itself an embodied research instrument, the online interface presents challenges. Any
4 sort of social happenstance is stymied, rapport is less easily developed and – perhaps crucially for
5 those of us with a focus on inequalities – the availability of appropriate technological resources
6 on the part of our participants is a prerequisite.
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12 And as Brannen found in her work into fatherhood, with or without the added complication of
13 an incentive, an invitation to ‘tell one’s story’ is not one that is always one taken up by
14 interviewees, even if the opportunity is available. In the case of ‘Eamon’ who is asked to speak
15 about his life history, he gives only cursory answers and ‘rejects the narrative mode’ (2013: 4.12).
16 This does not mean that this interview does not provide interesting or relevant data for the
17 study; by contrast, it highlights the importance of other kinds of observations made by the
18 researcher during the interview process which go on to become critical to the analysis. In short,
19 even the small interactions around interviews, like the text exchange with Jackfruit Mum,
20 continue to inform us about the particular challenges that COVID has created for families.
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30 Our research is just one project in a wider consortium of projects we are leading in nine other
31 countries around the world. These ethical and methodological negotiations have a very different
32 hue in each of these different locations – incentives are considered non-negotiable in Chile but
33 unethical in Sweden, for example. Meanwhile, the use of Indeemo in Singapore would be
34 challenging when trying to work with the lower income, migrant worker population for many of
35 whom access to phones, Wi-Fi or knowledge of English (one of two languages the app is
36 available in) is limited. Our partners in Pakistan, meanwhile, reflect that COVID is only one
37 disaster which families are dealing with there – recent floods in the South have devastated
38 livelihoods and left many without a home. This international framework reminds us of the at
39 once local and global repercussions of COVID, and how each must be taken into account as we
40 attempt to manage the methodological and ethical encounters of an internationally comparative
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