

Disadvantage or Blessing in Disguise? Field Research in Japan during COVID-19

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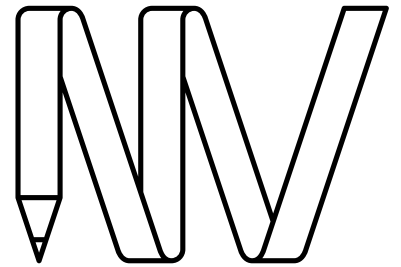
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ABSTRACT

Area studies is an interpretive research field, and fieldwork is a key enabler for area studies research projects. However, field research also results in some fundamental challenges, which are described in the varied literature available for scholars of anthropology, geography, social sciences and various other fields. Within area studies literature, there is little which deals with how to manage fieldwork without being present on the field. This paper reflects upon my experience of being on fieldwork in Japan during the global COVID-19 pandemic. It shares my experiences during 2020 and early 2021 and discusses how COVID-19 affected various aspects of fieldwork in Japan, including unexpected challenges, new opportunities, institutional support and accessing academic texts. The paper aims to give a concrete picture of fieldwork in Japan for other scholars who are yet to conduct research in the COVID-19 context. The paper maps out how the pandemic has affected the field, why it is so, and future implications while also decoding field research challenges and offering achievable solutions.

KEYWORDS

area studies; COVID-19; fieldwork; methods; qualitative research



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To link to this article:

<https://doi.org/10.21159/nvjs.13.d-02>

ISSN 2205-3166

New Voices in Japanese Studies is an interdisciplinary, peer-reviewed journal showcasing the work of emerging scholars with ties to Australia or New Zealand and research interests in Japan.

All articles can be downloaded free at newvoices.org.au

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New Voices in Japanese Studies,
Vol. 13, 2021, pp. 73-81

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted every sector across the globe. It has challenged and changed conventional ways of living and working, including the ways in which scholars conduct field research. Field research is an ever-evolving mode of qualitative research (Saumure and Given 2008), and it is not unusual for researchers to witness tremendous methodological challenges at various stages, for reasons including security risks due to political instability and violence (Bernard 1998; Clark 2006; Sriram et al. 2009; Rrustemi 2020) as well as gender-based concerns (Isidoros 2015). Today, field research is evolving in unprecedented ways due to the pandemic. An International Association of Universities survey on the impact of COVID-19 on higher education institutions conducted in March and April of 2020 showed cancellation or postponement of 80% of academic initiatives such as annual conferences, workshops, exchange programs due to the crisis (Marinoni et al. 2020). While the rate of disruption to ongoing field research is unknown, the statistics may well be similar: COVID-19 has problematised contemporary methods of conducting research, such as accessing archives, planning and scheduling interviews, and conducting place-based research. However, the need to discover alternative research methods brings with it an opportunity to achieve solutions unimagined before COVID-19. In the scholarly realm at least, the upside of the pandemic can be understood as the reinforcement of innovative research methodologies and new ideas among researchers.

This paper reflects upon the challenges of conducting research in Japan during the COVID-19 pandemic and future implications, drawing upon my personal experience of being on field research in Japan as the pandemic began. Through the lens of my own project, the paper broadly assesses some of the challenges that emerged for qualitative researchers conducting fieldwork in Japan in the context of the pandemic, and offers some possible solutions. It also highlights how, due to the nature of my research, the pandemic became an opportunity for me to engage with the field more deeply. The paper begins with a review of the challenges posed by remote fieldwork, as documented in pre-pandemic literature. It then provides an overview of my own experience as a visiting fellow in Japan as COVID-19 emerged, and discusses the challenges and opportunities I encountered with my necessary pivot to digital platforms for data collection and networking purposes.

VIRTUAL FIELDWORK IN SCHOLARSHIP

In a recent article, Jin Sato (2020) remarks upon the historical relevance of conducting “research at a distance” as a norm, quoting early modern intellectual Yukichi Fukuzawa [福沢 諭吉; 1835–1901], who emphasised the importance of “deskwork” prior to any international fieldwork endeavour (106).¹ In the pre-pandemic contemporary context, conducting area studies without actually being in the field had become almost unthinkable due to

¹ Yukichi Fukuzawa was a leading and at times controversial figure in Japan’s modernisation process. He played a prominent role in the Tokugawa shogunate’s first diplomatic tour of the United States in search of a new education system for Japan. His role and importance in Japan today can be seen through his presence on the 10,000-yen note, which is the largest denomination of Japanese currency.

increased mobility and accessibility to primary texts and informants (Sato 2020). This accessibility and flexibility was, however, tempered by the emergence of COVID-19, challenging norms and forcing scholars to turn to virtual field research. Some of the significant challenges documented in the literature on conducting virtual field research include rapport building, internet connectivity and participants' computer literacy. Some scholars have argued that it is particularly challenging to build rapport through virtual interaction, which affects the quality of data collected and raises potential ethical concerns (Flicker et al. 2004; Hamilton and Bowers 2006; Shuy 2003). Others contend that this is not the case (Kazmer and Xie 2008; Thompson-Hayes et al. 2009; Trier Bieniek 2012). Archibald et al. (2019) refer to concerns associated with inconsistent internet connectivity, as frequent dropped calls and poor video or audio quality can lead to misinterpretation of non-verbal communication.

In a similar vein, further literature suggests that the use of virtual platforms can make it more challenging for researchers to understand when to interrupt, offer breaks or modify topics (Saumure and Given 2008; Mealer and Jones 2014). Moreover, virtual platforms can limit how interviews are conducted, requiring greater focus on targeted questions and time considerations to acquire desired results (Irvine 2011). Crucially, it is also more likely for participants to discontinue or withdraw from a virtual interview than to cancel a face-to-face interview (Hanna and Mwale 2017). Even so, the literature highlights some advantages of virtual research, chief among these being the ability to connect with participants across the world, especially in regions where access is difficult otherwise (Saumure and Given 2008). While my experience of being on fieldwork during COVID-19 affirmed some of the challenges outlined in the literature, it also asserted the advantages. In the following section, I explore some of these challenges and advantages through the lens of my own direct experience.

PIVOTING TO DIGITAL RESEARCH AS COVID-19 EMERGED

I was in Japan when its first official COVID-19 case was reported on January 16th, 2020 (Japan Times 2020). In 2019, I had been selected for the Japan Foundation Japanese Studies Fellowship for doctoral candidates for a period of 12 months. As a result, I relocated from India to Japan in September 2019 and joined Waseda University's Graduate School of Asia Pacific Studies in Tokyo as a visiting research fellow. My research project primarily aimed to analyse Japan's environmental aid effectiveness, which required sourcing white papers, interviews and other data from Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), Japan's leading aid agency.

Like other countries worldwide, when COVID-19 emerged in Japan, the Japanese government responded with a set of measures including restrictions on mobility and the declaration of a state of emergency in early April (Kyodo News 2020). This led to the closure of universities and a halt to research operations, and 'panic borrowing' in libraries that mirrored panic buying

in retail stores. During this time, institutional support was invaluable. Institutions across the world shifted abruptly to online operations, and Waseda University quickly adapted to the new normal by extending remote access for online resources and allowing students in the final year of their doctoral programs to access the library with prior appointments. Moreover, the university library extended the dates for returning books, so despite the reduced mobility, at least the secondary resources required for conducting research were in place. The Japan Foundation also provided essential support during the uncertainties of Covid-19 by extending visas and housing support for fellowship recipients like myself who could not return their home countries at the end of their fellowship periods because of Covid-19 restrictions.

The sudden shift to digital communication sparked by COVID-19 created benefits as well as obstacles for scholars. In my case, a virtual setup allowed me to attend lab meetings with my host and co-supervisor in India while I was in Japan, thereby allowing me to get feedback from multiple sources at the early stages of my research. I also took advantage of some of the online networking and intellectual exchange opportunities that emerged in Japan and beyond in response to the pandemic. For example, while I was based in Tokyo, I subscribed to the academic societies of Kyoto University and National University of Singapore, and this enabled me to engage with pioneering scholars related to my research field. These societies' events had been held in-person prior to the pandemic, so membership had previously been of limited value to me. However, as online events became more frequent, I appreciated the opportunities to be involved and membership of these societies came to offer more value to my research. Kyoto University and the National University of Singapore each have specific institutions and graduate schools which are actively working on environmental aid and conservation challenges, which is my own area of research. Hence, despite the pandemic I made new connections and associations which had been inaccessible to me before. This experience contributes to my observation that the whole of academia became in some ways more engaged during the pandemic, enabled by increased connectivity.

The restrictions on mobility and social gatherings led researchers around me in Japan, as elsewhere, to switch to online data collection. The pandemic made our desks the real fieldwork ground again, just when we had begun to think that "the desk [had] collapsed into the field" (Mosse 2006). Researchers with ongoing research projects requiring face-to-face interviews were confronted with the need to switch to remote alternatives due to logistical concerns. In my own case, the unexpected switch to online methods not only made me concerned about the ethics and the feasibility of my reconfigured project, but also made me question my research capabilities. Just like any other researcher, the interruption to my fieldwork caused by COVID-19 led me to adopt virtual solutions that allowed me to continue collecting data while practicing social distancing with participants.

Challenges raised in the literature on virtual data collection, such as rapport building and internet connectivity, were expected and therefore not a major concern for me. On the contrary, my primary concern was to secure interviews while practicing social distance. COVID-19 substantially lengthened the timeframes needed to conduct my research, and it was surprising to discover how much effort and initiative virtual fieldwork took. For example, fixing an appointment for an interview with a participant had previously taken a maximum of one month's lead-time, but without in-person contact and with the increased necessity of email exchanges, I found that the required lead-time grew to almost three months. Still, it is overwhelming at times to see how much empirical data can be collected once virtual fieldwork takes off. I found the ease of recording videoconference interviews to be advantageous in situations where previously I had been solely reliant on audio recordings and/or handwritten notes. Prior to the COVID-driven online shift, my interviewees had at times been reluctant to allow audio recordings, but were more open to having online video meetings recorded.

Conducting virtual fieldwork during COVID-19 in Japan increased the importance of some practical considerations, such as creating the right networks beforehand. I found myself increasingly reliant upon the 'snowball method' of recruitment in the absence of opportunities to build new networks in person. The snowball method is well recognised in social science literature as a key enabler in accessing research participants through referrals among existing networks (Naderifar et al. 2017). It is also a highly effective way to maintain interactive associations with 'key' informants, who possess the general information required to coordinate one's research project, rather than with the 'individual' informants who are associated with the various aspects of the study itself (Beebe 1995). While conducting fieldwork in Japan I found that 'key informants' are often essential to gaining access to 'individual informants'. In my case, I had a chance to meet a visiting JICA official in India at a monthly Japan Foundation New Delhi seminar prior to my fellowship. Since then, I have been in touch with him to share updates on my research. Particularly in the absence of opportunities to make new contacts on the ground in Japan, I relied heavily on the JICA contact I had made in my home country, and he became a valuable 'key informant' for my work.

When I decided to switch from face-to-face interviews to online interviews, some participants agreed to interviews via video call, while other participants preferred e-mail interviews. Hence, I suggest that it might be beneficial for other scholars to maintain flexibility in terms of the medium used for interviews, and to plan research questionnaires in accordance with participants' preferences. I noticed a correlation between my route to these participants and their acceptance rates, as well as their preferred medium for interview. For my project, I attempted to secure interviews with almost 20 participants, where approximately 50% were contacted via the snowball method. The snowball method contacts provided 100% acceptance for an online video interview,

while through cold contacts I was able to secure online video interviews with only 30%, and the rest were email interviews. I noted that it is also important to handle refusals gracefully, even though they can be overwhelming. In the course of my research, I responded to refusals by emailing participants to thank them for taking the time to read my initial email and reply despite their busy schedule. Memorably, this gesture of gratitude prompted one individual to introduce me to another participant, whom I successfully interviewed later.

Additionally, as virtual field interviews rely heavily on internet connectivity, I carefully considered which platform to use for interviews. Where possible, I allowed participants to choose their preferred platform and offered flexibility in terms of interview timing. In my experience, although the pandemic affected the primary method of qualitative research, the shift to alternative methods produced trustworthy qualitative data in a timely way. Surprisingly, I found that email interviews were equally efficacious as video interviews, as they allowed me to question participants even up to three or four times, which would have very likely been only once if I had conducted face-to-face or video interviews. I had initially assumed that video interviews would be better than email for data collection and therefore aimed for video interviews in the first instance, but given the opportunity again, I would propose email interviews first.

Conducting qualitative research during COVID-19 involves other related methodological challenges. For example, qualitative research design may involve diverse methods of community engagement by the researcher(s) which incorporate the aim of building strong relationships with research participants, as well as providing them with a deeper understanding of the research project (Hrdličková 2017). Without this element of socialisation and relationship-building, the primary challenge within many of my virtual interviews was to know how to make interview participants feel comfortable, and to be adaptable and empathetic in order to establish rapport. Creating meaningful interactions and following the emerging norms of videoconferencing etiquette were also considerations. In my case, I worked on my Japanese-language speaking skills and incorporated Japanese work etiquette when starting and finishing my interviews. A crucial challenge for conducting efficient virtual field research in the pandemic era will be to find ways to build strong relationships with the help of the snowball method, while simultaneously considering suitable ethical protocols such as obtaining written consent from participants. In sum, the current situation calls for radical shifts in research design to help researchers access the benefits that face-to-face interviews used to offer and address the shortcomings of virtual field research, while taking advantage of new opportunities.

CONCLUSION

My experience of being on fieldwork in Japan during COVID-19 suggests that researchers can certainly have success with online fieldwork if research is carefully planned, if the researcher has access to online interview training

and is able to be flexible, and if they can connect with ‘key’ informants. Hopefully, this will only become easier as resources for dealing with these challenges emerge: already, Lupton’s (2020) “Doing Fieldwork in a Pandemic” compiles a range of useful resources for virtual fieldwork. Even so, the appeal of in-person fieldwork will no doubt remain strong due to the inherently greater possibilities it offers for network-building and deeper engagement with participants. Finally, as borders re-open, I hope that my experience as documented in this paper also serves to highlight the importance of institutional support to safeguard the efforts and wellbeing of scholars for as long as uncertainty remains.

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