Milena Wuerth is a research assistant for the LSE Anthropology Department. She holds a BA in Social Anthropology and is currently an MSc student at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, studying mental health and social epidemiology.

Contextualising community: the challenges of virtual ethnography

Covid-19 presented innumerable obstacles to social scientists whose research generally relied on in-person fieldwork. As a group of anthropologists, LSE's Covid & Care collective was set the particular challenge of adapting our ethnographic methods to accommodate 'social distancing'. From the early day of the pandemic, we sought to understand the impact of the viral spread and lockdown regulations without our usual tools — in-person observation and participation — to capture messy social processes. Hopping between virtual meetings, webinars and online interviews, the contextual stuff of ethnography often seemed to be missing.

An anecdote perhaps best captures this dilemma. In January 2021, as part of my virtual exploration of local pandemic-response efforts, I attended a Microsoft Teams meeting advertised as a forum to 'discuss the COVID-19 vaccines from a clinical and Islamic perspective'. Five minutes after the designated start time, my laptop screen remained dark. I was one of about 20 coloured bubbles marked only by my initials. Audio cut in and out, offering snippets of lives hidden from view — a tap running, utensils clinking, keyboards tapping, muffled chewing — before microphones were muted. The chat came alive; someone typed, 'Have we started the meeting yet?'. No response. Forty minutes passed agonisingly. Nothing happened on screen, yet offscreen, in rooms scattered across the country, potentially everything was happening. Alone in my own living/office space, I felt I was grasping at meaning in a virtual void.

Online, our methods of fieldwork and the interactions we study are fundamentally different. Social innovation in the face of unexpected events — in this case, a missing presenter — was disallowed by the pre-settings of the virtual platform. We couldn't or didn't feel comfortable confiding our confusion to a 'room' of faceless attendees, and none of us felt compelled to do much about it. Anyone with a computer and the ability to use it could technically attend, always holding the promise of expanded access. What, though, are we all now able to freely access? At the least, information, but at the most— what? If the answer is 'community'— i.e., genuine social connection despite physical distance — then we must ask ourselves what 'community' we are talking about. In investigating this question, our diligence as ethnographers is tested.

Twice over the course of the pandemic, our research group released nationwide surveys in attempts to place 'networked individuals' in more holistic social contexts (Miller et al. 2016). We asked about respondents' household composition but also about new stressors they had experienced during the pandemic, about disconnections, anxieties and hopes for the future. These surveys offered insights into the particularities of loneliness; before the pandemic, ethnographic research often involved engaging people in conversation or activity, leaving those who feel the most isolated or socially

insecure out of the anthropologist's scope. Initially, I had doubted the ability of an online form to draw rich narratives from 'strangers', but reading the answers we received, I was floored by their rawness and depth. As Nicholas Long recently noted (2020), the juxtaposition of numerical questions with reflective, open-ended questions (e.g., 'What kind of support would you have liked for yourself or someone you care for?') elicits responses that deal with such intimate issues as relationship tensions, depression, and emotional turmoil. Turkle has written that the explosion of social media has drastically lowered our expectations of one another, producing new technologically mediated forms of alienation (2011). She also notes that 'communication' and 'community' share a Latin root ('munis'), meaning exchange or sharing.

The individual respondents to our survey did not collectively represent a fieldsite or a particular 'community'. Still, the survey can be seen as an artefact of isolation circumscribed by technology. First, it is particularly suited — in its anonymity and convenience — to draw out raw, unscripted observations about the lived experiences of loneliness. Second, the survey format erects a virtual barrier between the respondent and the reader, which serves to shield the respondent and the reader from personal scrutiny. Lastly, it enacts a kind of deferred reciprocity in which a respondent offers information, but the nature and timescale of the return are often unclear.

As social scientists, virtual methods like surveys have allowed us to fill in missing ethnographic context and analyse conditions like loneliness. From here, we must challenge each other to engage people online in new ways. True reciprocity is often hard to identify online, but I am optimistic. By adapting and *extending* ethnographic methods, we can resist the reification of 'virtual communities' and highlight where they fall short of their etymological promises.

References

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