

Fieldwork and the Coronavirus Pandemic

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KODILI HENRY CHUKWUMA, APR 18 2020

The need to make a substantial contribution by adopting cutting-edge methodologies, methods and techniques, to reveal a phantom of previously unknown 'facts' or present new interpretive possibilities, to a large extent, constitute research in academia. At any rate, working within this framework, researchers engage in several practices in the performance of their subjectivity, which frequently include focusing on under-researched topics or seemingly controversial ones; taking up dare-devil fieldwork adventures to unfamiliar terrains; and making other personal sacrifices to produce ground-breaking studies. To be sure, knowledge production is relational and as such research outcomes are often subject to the evaluation of the academic community (this include questions around validity, reliability, and so on). Which all the more reproduces and perpetuates a system that idolizes 'rigor' as the benchmark for assessing research endeavor. But what does all this mean in the context of a global pandemic?

My doctoral research investigates counter-terrorism practices in Nigeria. It entails the study of documentary evidence (texts and talks), and extrapolating the discourses that defines the issue of terrorism in Nigeria as well as specific state responses and their implications for security. Principally, this involves visits to relevant government ministries in Nigeria's capital, Abuja, which I embarked upon in mid-February. At this time, the outbreak of the COVID-19 was raging in China, while the rest of the world looked on, so the University ethics committee had little to worry about with regard to the ethical dilemmas of my fieldwork in Nigeria.

I arrived Nigeria on 17th February from the United Kingdom, and plunged straight into the "field" like any researcher who has travelled across different continents to 'excavate' or collect data would readily oblige. Indeed my fieldwork progressed smoothly, with few obstructions, which are not unusual to field research, as Nigeria was yet to enter the eye of the storm of the pandemic (neither was it declared a pandemic at this time). However, on the 27th of February, when Nigeria announced its first confirm COVID-19 case in Lagos, widespread panic amid new restrictions started to emerge. But, Abuja, the site of my fieldwork, was statistically safe with no recorded case of the Coronavirus. I was eager to continue with my fieldwork, and this time, with more vigor before the virus and the attendant regime of restrictions envelop Abuja.

The unprecedented nature of the situation ensured that events unfolded quickly across Nigeria, and the world, and it was only a matter of days, even hours, before Abuja was affected and activities (including my fieldwork) effectively grounded. I was not prepared for this shift neither did the numerous research textbooks and trainings that I completed in the course of preparing for my fieldwork explore research processes in the context of a global pandemic. Generally, researchers are advised to exit the field when it's no longer safe to continue with the project. But the COVID-19 presents a counter-intuitive juxtaposition to the aforesaid research practice, in that other regions of the world are also affected, and blows the question of risk assessment and safety completely out of the water. On the 21st of March, three cases of the Coronavirus were reported in Abuja and beginning from this time, normal life gradually disappeared.

My PhD supervisors and my family in the UK (especially my wife) emphatically advised that I suspend all research activities and return to the UK ahead of potential travel restrictions. On the other hand, my 'research broker' in Nigeria expressed dissatisfaction with this demand to 'exit the site of research.' He argued that Nigeria was relatively safe compared to the UK which, including other European nations severely affected by the virus, had been described as a 'hotspot' by the World Health Organization. Also, he stressed that the fieldwork has progressed significantly,

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especially with regard to access to and gaining cooperation of some of the relevant government ministries. Indeed the much sought-after data (in this case policy documents, official reports, communiqués, and so on) was only a few days away, and who knows what this breakthrough might mean for the academic community and knowledge production?

I decided to go with my fixer's assumptions, but not until I received a phone call from the primary agency responsible for coordinating Nigeria's counter-terrorism approach to arrange a visit on 24th March by 4pm. After spending several weeks in Abuja and numerous failed attempts at gaining access, I imagined that this would atone for the past but more importantly secure my passage through the mist of academic rigor. I would be considered a serious researcher and my thesis would make a significant contribution to knowledge.

However, as the Coronavirus continued its rapid spread in a vastly globalized world, leaving in its wake a series of new restrictions and limitations, the Nigerian federal government rolled out orders on the 23rd of March, suspending all forms of official and commercial activities. This was followed by other restrictions and disruptions, including flight cancellations, closing of International airports, and the total lockdown of worst hit states in Nigeria (which includes Abuja). At this point I realized I had lost the bet, and my researcher identity and research project has become increasingly complicated.

How will issues surrounding data saturation, validity, and credibility be resolved? How will a second fieldwork affect the duration of the PhD research? When will it be possible to embark on a second fieldwork, as the Coronavirus rages on? What about research funding and funders? What about my mental wellbeing in coping with isolation in Nigeria?

Although I improvised my strategies for data collection—using online archives as well as communicating and indeed collecting data through email from the targeted government sites—and also registered for repatriation to the UK through a government-secured chartered flight, a few abstractions from the dilemmas, uncertainties, and decisions discussed above, could inform academic fieldwork, and research practice more broadly.

While recognizing that knowledge produced from research is inevitably partial and incomplete, we could begin to pay more attention to research process than accessing academic rigor primarily on the nature of collected data. This is especially important in the arts and humanities where research findings are often subjective and increasingly contested. Additionally, supervisors, research directors, and funders should discuss research expectations with researchers before conducting fieldwork, and this should frequently be reassessed as the study progresses. Finally, research institutions could provide training programmes that addresses the issue of a global pandemic in the context of carrying out research related activities such as fieldwork.

About the author:

Kodili Henry Chukwuma is an Assistant Professor of International Security at Durham University. His PhD was awarded by the University of East Anglia in 2022. His research (which has been published in *Security Dialogue*, *International Political Sociology*, *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, and *African Security*) focuses on the politics of security, terrorism and counter-terrorism, a regional focus on Africa, as well as interests in (the politics of) time and space of (in)security.