nordia geographical publications

Discussions and interventions

Teaching human geography fieldwork during COVID-19: challenges and new possibilities

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Abstract

Fieldwork has long been a cornerstone of geographical research, and field courses have likewise served as an essential means of engaging with the key issues that define the discipline, both in physical and human geography. In human geography field courses, students learn to use qualitative methods such as interviews and participant observation among people. In this intervention paper I discuss what practical challenges the COVID-19 pandemic posed to the organisation of a field course in human geography in the University of Oulu in Finland, during spring 2020. The key questions and challenges back then were how the main idea of leaving the university classrooms and going among the people to learn geography was even possible at the same time when governments around the globe strongly advised people to stay home and avoid human connections. Regardless of the challenges, the field course was organised. In the course, students managed to come up with creative solutions to achieve the course's learning goals and learn to use qualitative methods in practice. The course required the redefinition for the concept of 'field', which at the same time challenged geography's disciplinary history.

Keywords: field course, fieldwork, COVID-19, qualitative methods, human geography

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Introduction: geography in the field

> *"The ideal geographer should be able to do two things: He should be able to read his newspaper with understanding, and he should be able to take his country walk - or maybe his town walk - with interest." (H. C. Darby, inaugural lecture, University of Liverpool, 1946, cited in Hart 1975)*

The history of geography can be narrated in multiple ways. The starting and turning points of the discipline can be interpreted as lying somewhere between the works of ancient philosophers and the establishment of geographical societies during the 19th century which led to the institutionalisation of geography as a university discipline. It has been argued that one of the crucial turning points in the development of modern geography occurred in 1769, when James Cook sailed into the Pacific on the first expedition specifically intended to achieve scientific objectives. Travel as an educational activity gained momentum among the European aristocracy, and the idea of *"geography as exploration"* was born (Heffernan 2006: 5–6). Over the years, geographical research has diverged into several methodological and theoretical directions but conducting research *in the field* has remained a defining feature and a core principle characterising geography as an academic discipline (Wilson, Leydon & Wincentak 2017).

As France and Haigh (2018: 498) put it, *"fieldwork is where Geographers learn 'from doing' geography to 'do' Geography."* There is widespread agreement among geography lecturers that fieldwork constitutes a fundamental element of effective teaching in the discipline (Kent, Gilbertson & Hunt 1997: 313). Pedagogically, fieldwork in geography is about "learning by doing", a cognitive strategy for understanding the environment that also fosters strong environmental values (Gerber & Chuan 2000: 4–5). Fieldwork involves active learning and students "seeing it for themselves," which not only provides direct experiences of the environment but also challenges preconceptions (Hope 2009: 169).

The tradition of conducting fieldwork is long, and the ways and methods of working in the field have become routine. However, what happens when conditions suddenly change due to a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic when accessing the research field is literally restricted? From a teaching perspective, crisis situations are particularly problematic, as the best—and perhaps the only—way to learn fieldwork is by working *in the field*. In this intervention paper I examine the practical challenges that the COVID-19 pandemic created for organising a human geography field course at the University of Oulu in Finland during the spring of 2020. The key question and challenge at that time concerned how the main idea of leaving the office and engaging directly with people to learn geography could be implemented at a time when governments worldwide, including in Finland, were strongly advising people to stay at home and avoid human contact.

The following chapter introduces the main concerns regarding how COVID-19 affected teaching at the University of Oulu, particularly the human geography field course. This is followed by a more detailed discussion of how the pandemic influenced the use of different field methods, such as interviews, participant observation, and landscape analysis, after which it is examined how the impacts of COVID-19 themselves became a geographical research topic. Finally, the discussion turns to how conducting fieldwork online – studying "home from home" – functions as a novel way to approach the concept of the "field."

Fieldwork in human geography at the University of Oulu during the COVID-19 pandemic

COVID-19, declared as a global pandemic on 11 March 2020, quickly became a worldwide crisis affecting many aspects of human life, including education. Although COVID-19 was a global phenomenon, countries adopted different strategies for guiding and controlling social behaviour, sometimes even opposing ones, as was the case between neighbouring countries Finland and Sweden (see Prokkola & Ridanpää 2022). The University of Oulu announced detailed guidelines on 12 March 2020, which, in terms of teaching activities, were relatively general. All employees received an email announcing:

> *"In all university activities the physical distance between people is recommended. Online lectures and distance learning opportunities will be increased. If a student has flu symptoms, he/she must not come to the campus or attend a general lecture, other teaching situation or exam session."*

No guidelines regarding activities at the university had been given before this. Four days later, on 16 March 2020, the Government of Finland declared a state of emergency under the Emergency Powers Act (1552/2011) in response to the coronavirus outbreak (Finnish Government 2020).

For me, the situation was critical, as the course *Fieldwork in Human Geography*, which I was organising in the Geography Research Unit at the University of Oulu, was scheduled to start on 23 March—only 11 days after the university announced its first guidelines. *Fieldwork in Human Geography* is a continuation of the qualitative methods course. Its aim is to learn how to apply qualitative study methods in real-life circumstances—among people, outside the office. Students conduct fieldwork in groups and learn to use interview methods, participant observation, and landscape analysis in the field. Typically, the fieldwork takes place in the city centre of Oulu. Due to the changed circumstances, the course objectives and implementation had to be updated quickly, as it was clear that it would not be possible to organise the course according to the previously announced plan.

When planning how to respond to radically changed circumstances, three factors proved particularly problematic. First, there was the basic question of how to work *in the field* if official guidance advises not to go there. Second, what is the teacher's moral responsibility when organising activities that may involve contact with other people? Third, how should one respond to uncertainty? Uncertainty, often accompanied by varying levels of panic, was globally a key feature characterising the challenges of organising teaching during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic (Bonnett & Glazier 2025; Gilead & Dishon 2022).

No matter how problematic the situation was, the course was organised according to the announced timetable. Students, 22 in total, were given alternative ways to conduct their fieldwork. This was a morally challenging decision to make. Students were given the option to carry out fieldwork in the usual way, but only by strictly following the officially announced safety guidelines. Although the officials strongly guided avoiding mobility, in Finland the COVID-19 pandemic did not include restrictions preventing people from leaving their homes or going outside (i.e., no lockdown) and by that means conducting traditional fieldwork was possible.

The second option was to rethink the idea of the *field*, which in practice meant that the entire fieldwork was conducted online—studying home (as a place) from home

(as a field). Students were also given the opportunity to conduct a self-reflective study focusing on the challenges of doing fieldwork during the crisis, but no one chose this option. While under normal circumstances fieldwork is conducted in groups, students were also given the possibility to work alone. They were free to select their own research topics, and with only two exceptions, the projects focused thematically on how COVID-19 had altered people's lives and perceptions. Altogether, 11 field reports were submitted.

Impacts of COVID-19 on the course *Fieldwork in human geography*

The first challenge that students faced was how to find interviewees. In previous years, the fieldwork had been planned so that interviews could be conducted alongside participant observations *in the field*. Now, however, it was clear that interviews would have to be held online. Interviewees were first contacted by email and then interviewed remotely via phone or video conferencing platforms such as Skype and Zoom. In a few cases, the interviewees were friends or family members, which went against the learning objective of "how to build trust with interviewees," but given the circumstances, this choice was understandable and even recommended.

Students paid particular attention to the difficulty of maintaining a close connection with interviewees during remote interviews. The lack of close interaction was considered a significant hindrance, especially because the use of online platforms in research and studies was not very common before COVID-19. In fact, according to some, the pandemic compelled the public to adapt to technology, fostering a new "online culture" in which communication and daily routines are increasingly conducted digitally (Nupus 2021). Although students noted that the inability to conduct face-to-face interviews did not fully meet the original goals, remote interviews still provided a solid foundation for participant observations and landscape analysis. Additionally, using digital communication tools for interviews proved to be a valuable lesson in employing new research methods creatively, a learning outcome that was not originally planned.

Other obstacles students faced concerned the unpredictability of rapidly changing circumstances. As official regulations and restrictions were changing almost daily, the sense of uncertainty made it highly difficult to draft coherent plans. In fact, students considered sticking to the original study plans highly difficult. Students raised issues regarding how, in Finland, free mobility was considered a self-evident civil right and how uncertainty was a dominant feature characterising the prevailing situation. Students noted how quickly shifting guidelines regarding mobility restrictions became apparent, for example, during participant observations. However, despite, or perhaps because of, the complex situation, some students interestingly concluded that the changing research environment created new research questions.

Changes in the use of space during COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic made it difficult to conduct field studies, but ultimately, students had several interesting findings, specifically due to the unique societal

circumstances. Some of these findings went beyond COVID-19 and offered students broader insights into one of the key questions in human geography: how do people use space? During the course, students went to public places to conduct participant observations, but it was uncertain whether there would be any people to observe, given that everyone was advised to stay at home. Since Finland did not implement lockdowns or restrictions on movement, the situation allowed for a geographical research question to emerge regarding the use of space: had the pandemic emptied the streets? It turned out that the pandemic had not emptied the streets, and conducting participant observations was relatively similar to times before the pandemic, although some differences were notable.

A common theme during the field course was how city space and cityscape—including both people and physical surroundings (landscape)—had transformed because of COVID-19. The choice of research topics was influenced by students' personal observations of how the use of space had changed during the pandemic. For example, some students noticed a sudden increase in the number of people on jogging tracks compared to previous years. Given that no comparable research design existed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the findings should be viewed as open to interpretation. One study made participant observations on how store interior designs were rearranged to comply with guidelines announced by authorities, as well as the moral responsibilities that shopkeepers felt towards their customers. It also examined how guidelines, such as maintaining safe distances, were visually communicated to customers. As fieldwork, this was relatively straightforward to implement. The topic was cleverly chosen because it illustrated how COVID-19 altered the use of space in everyday life in unexpected ways, while simultaneously demonstrating how our fixed daily routines became visible when we were forced to behave in unusual ways.

Home as a research field

> *"Home is given over to the hidden processes of life. It protects life, not only from inclement weather and predators but also from bright sunlight and the glare of the public eye." (Tuan 1975: 155).*

To give students the opportunity to participate in the course from home, they had an option to re-think the idea of *the field* differently and plan their study designs accordingly. Three students decided to conduct the course in this way and all of them chose the use of home space (or place) as their study theme. In the end, it was discovered that studying home from home provided a fresh alternative approach to fieldwork and to understanding the meaning of "field." This was not only in a reverse manner, by demonstrating what we miss by not going outside, but also by showing what living in isolation feels like and means in practice. The sense of loneliness (Hones 2020) and seriousness (Ridanpää 2020), both characterising the emotional aspects of COVID-19, were experienced by students in a very concrete way when observing home from home. The studies revealed how home, as a lived space, became meaningful and how the globally announced moral demand to stay at home changed our conceptions and feelings about home.

Participant observations were not conducted in the typical field setting where this method usually takes place, but in a new kind of field where people in isolation typically gather and interact—namely, social media conversations. The research

method shifted from participant observation to textual analysis, but the object of study remained the same. The study still focused on social interaction, particularly the limitations COVID-19 imposed on it. Conducting landscape analysis from home was obviously tricky, and some students addressed this challenge by asking interviewees to send photos of their homes. Part of the students conducted participant observation through video connections, which they found awkward and felt that it did not serve the method's intended purpose. Some students reported that answering their original research questions was challenging.

On the one hand, the course showed that virtual attendance can be disadvantageous to both teaching and learning. Key transferable skills learned during geography field courses, such as teamwork and communication, were compromised due to reduced social interaction (Li et al. 2023). On the other hand, as mentioned above, digital video communication was a relatively new way of conducting studies and research, and applying these types of methods has now become much more natural, simply because it was taught to everyone due to COVID-19. The observations students made revealed how restricted the space and living environment at home were. Overall, COVID-19 offered (or forced) a new opportunity to conduct an exceptional study of other people's everyday lives. Challenges faced during the study included issues such as how openly people were actually willing to share their home spaces.

Although the limitations of studying home from home were significant, the course made it possible to consider whether, for example, conducting visual analysis through a webcam captured the very essence of spatial isolation. As digitalisation required students to master new tools and skills, it changed the ways they comprehended their learning environments. Additionally, students observed that research ethics needed to be addressed differently compared to studies conducted in natural environments as, for example, keeping safe distance had become a matter of research ethics. The insights students gained about everyday life at home would not have been possible without the pandemic.

Concluding remarks

Organising a field course in human geography was challenging, particularly due to uncertainty, changing conditions, and a lack of detailed guidelines. In addition, I struggled with my personal moral principles regarding how to be a good teacher. What if a student conducting participant observations, for example, became infected? My initial expectation was that the course would somehow fail and that the learning goals would not be reached. In the end, the result was quite the opposite. The original idea of 'meeting people' needed to be reformulated, diverting the course goals more towards how the COVID-19 crisis changed our conceptions of the field. It also became clear that, as researchers, we need to study the world as it is, considering the conditions that surround us and restrict our work. Correspondingly, studying the obstacles that hindered the field research forced everyone participating in the course to acknowledge how restricted and controlled our everyday use of space is. The COVID-19 pandemic compelled me, as both a teacher and researcher, to reflect more deeply on what 'field' actually means, why geographers have defined it in certain ways for centuries, and how firmly the conventional definition of 'field' is embedded in geography as a discipline.

Fieldwork does not have to mean only 'working in the field'; rather, the various ways of reflecting on and redefining the field can be fieldwork in themselves.

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