



CHALLENGES FOR EMPIRICAL STUDIES IN SOCIAL SCIENCES AMID THE PANDEMIC

Recommendations for Researchers

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IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON SCIENCE AND RESEARCH

The global pandemic of the new coronavirus in 2020 not only caused a global health crisis but also affected important social areas around the world. Public health measures to control the spread of coronavirus have limited contacts among people and restricted travelling, which are crucial for planning and conducting research. On the one hand, the coronavirus pandemic affected planned or ongoing research, and some scientists and researchers were forced to suspend it. On the other hand, the situation has led to the initiation of new studies related to the COVID-19 pandemic, which contribute to a better understanding of the consequences of the pandemic for society and provides measures to address the challenges of the pandemic.

The object of social science research is society – economic, political, social, legal, and other aspects of society. Due to the nature of social science research, the specific social context of the study is very important for the interpretation of findings.

“THE SPECIFIC SOCIAL CONTEXT OF THE RESEARCH BEING CARRIED OUT IS IMPORTANT FOR THE RESULTS OF SOCIAL STUDIES, SO A GLOBAL PANDEMIC CAN HAVE A POWERFUL IMPACT ON THE RESULTS. ALSO, CONDUCTING SOCIAL RESEARCH IS HAMPERED BY THE LIMITATION OF SOCIAL CONTACTS, AS PART OF THE RESEARCH CAN ONLY BE DONE THROUGH DIRECT CONTACT WITH PEOPLE.”

In this respect, research in the social sciences differs from research in the natural or physical sciences, the results of the latter being more dependent on the competence and equipment of the researchers, and much less dependent on social factors. Thus, the global pandemic has a major impact on social science research, influencing research findings. Another important aspect of social science research is that often people are the participants in studies. For example, meetings with respondents take place using a variety of data collection techniques, individual interviews, survey methods, focus groups, and other methods.

To ensure the safety of researchers and research participants during a pandemic, social science researchers are forced to limit contacts with the respondents. Restricting social contacts substantially complicates the procedures of empirical research in the social sciences, as not all research can be conducted using modern information technology.

Another important aspect of social science field is that social scientists, due to the specifics of their science, tend to be very sensitive to social factors, and many are very interested in public welfare, so during a pandemic, social scientists can be very active in research and proposing solutions for mitigating the negative social consequences of the pandemic. This motivation to study the effects of a pandemic is also related to the fact that due to the pandemic, some social science researchers have to cancel or postpone ongoing research. However, the over-emphasis of social scientists on the social, economic, legal, or psychosocial consequences of a pandemic can also have a negative impact on the social sciences and their development, as researchers may abandon their research topics where they have a lot of competence and experience. In addition, crisis and disaster research is a specific research topic that requires adequate theoretical and methodological understanding, and therefore not all ongoing social science research on the impact of a pandemic meets the highest research standards.

On the other hand, although in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the limitations and challenges are mostly discussed, crises can also reveal various new opportunities. Researchers are encouraged to rethink the planning, methodological aspects of their research and to adapt to constraints. New possibilities, such as conducting or planning research using innovative technology, may improve research procedures in the future when the constraints of a pandemic will no longer be relevant. The problems and challenges posed by a pandemic also encourage the scientific community to come together and find common solutions to minimize the impact of the pandemic on society. This sense of focus can help forge new links in international cooperation, encourage a more active exchange of ideas, and sharing of good practices. In addition, there is currently a strong need to integrate scientific knowledge into practical decision-making, so researchers are encouraged to collaborate with practitioners and public authorities. This encourages them to learn to present their scientific results in a language that others can understand and to constantly consider the practical applicability of the research results. Thus, it is crucial for researchers to apply these insights gained during a pandemic to future research, thus promoting scientific progress.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESEARCHERS

The following is an overview of the main challenges faced by social science researchers in conducting empirical research, as well as recommendations on which aspects are most important to consider when planning and conducting research during a pandemic. These recommendations were produced according to the research experience of the Vilnius University Center for Psychotraumatology during the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the diversity of social science disciplines, methodologies, and a wide range of topics, it is not possible to provide comprehensive recommendations for all researchers. Still, these guidelines are a first step in identifying the key challenges faced by scientists during a pandemic.

1. ETHICAL ASPECTS OF RESEARCH

Social science research, like other research, must adhere to research ethics standards that ensure the protection of research participants. It is necessary to ensure the protection of personal data, appropriate competence of the researchers to carry out the planned research, minimization of risk, respectful relationship with the research participants is important in conducting the study. During the pandemic, challenges arise in obtaining informed consent of a person, protection of data collected remotely, and competence of researchers in using new methods of teleworking.

RECOMMENDATIONS. When conducting research, researchers must be aware of the ethical aspects of the study. It is important to assess whether the changes in the procedure of a study resulting from the pandemic are ethical. Steps must be taken to ensure that research continues to comply with all research ethics principles. If the institution has a research ethics committee, ethical permission is required to conduct empirical research. If the ethical authorization was obtained before the pandemic for the study and it is carried out during a pandemic, changes to the study protocol and the adaptation of the study to the pandemic context must be reported to the ethics committee that authorized the study.



2. PROTECTION OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS AND RESEARCHERS

It is required to avoid any harm to the participants during the research studies. During a pandemic, it is essential to protect study participants and investigators from infection and possible illness. Because scientists often work in groups, the risk of spreading the infection among a group of researchers is extremely high during a pandemic. Researchers must follow both the rules of the institution in which they work and national regulations. During a pandemic, social science researchers should avoid physical encounters with research participants, use personal protective equipment, and work remotely as much as possible. Researchers must either stop data collection (if physical contact is required) or choose remote data collection methods.

RECOMMENDATIONS. It is recommended to collect empirical data remotely during a pandemic. It is also recommended that research team meetings be organized remotely using video conferencing platforms or other appropriate means.

3. SPECIFICS OF REMOTE RESEARCH

During a pandemic, many social scientists collect data remotely. Not only surveys but also interviews, focus groups can be successful using online platforms. However, when collecting data remotely (via the Internet or by telephone), it is necessary to ensure that it is securely transmitted to the researcher and not accessible to third parties. Many popular survey platforms are not research-friendly and have shortcomings. For example, one research participant may fill in a questionnaire many times, thus distorting the survey data; European researchers are conducting a study using a platform which stores the data in non-EU countries, thus European data protection standards do not apply in handling data; interviews or survey material are transferred to third parties for commercial purposes, and so on.

RECOMMENDATIONS. Use only secure empirical data collection platforms for research that ensure secure data encoding and transmission.

4. ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON THE RESULTS OF THE INVESTIGATION

The results of social science research can be affected by a pandemic, so the results should be carefully evaluated and interpreted. As the COVID-19 pandemic is global, it may be crucial to assess the impact of the pandemic on the phenomenon in other countries as well.

RECOMMENDATIONS. In COVID-19 pandemic research, seeking to join international research consortia whenever possible is important. A study using a harmonized methodology in different countries would make it possible to consider the impact of a pandemic on the phenomenon in question in other countries as well. If such a possibility does not exist, it is possible to analyze pre-pandemic and pandemic impact studies in-home and other countries. This would allow a better assessment of the impact of the pandemic on ongoing research

5. PRESENTATION OF RESEARCH RESULTS

After carrying out their research, researchers present the results to other researchers and the public. Limited physical contact poses a challenge for presenting research results as scientific conferences are cancelled or postponed.

RECOMMENDATIONS. Research can be presented in online scientific conferences. Researchers can organize webinars to present ongoing research and its results. Scientific results can be publicized through virtual public seminars or by publishing scientific discoveries in the media.

6. ACCESS TO STUDY METHODS AND DATA

During the pandemic, the need for open access to research methods and open data became apparent as never before. Exchange of research methodologies and data enables to save resources, accelerates scientific progress, enables to discover new possibilities of data analysis methods, promotes scientific breakthrough.

RECOMMENDATIONS. It is important to share with other researchers the methodology of research, questionnaire questions, data, and other research material.

7. RESEARCH FUNDING

In many parts of the world, research is funded via research grants therefore many studies are carried out after receiving competitive funding. During a pandemic, there are significant challenges in meeting the obligations set out in the contract with the funding organization. Due to the changed research plan and the cancelled conferences, the risk that the results expected in the project application will not be achieved significantly increases.

RECOMMENDATIONS. It is important to keep in touch with the funding body about the challenges of the research project and to offer constructive solutions (e. g. budget modification, carry-overs, project extensions, report extensions, etc.). Organizations that fund research are also facing many difficulties because the challenges of the pandemic were unplanned. It is important for these institutions that the projects they fund are successfully implemented, so active cooperation can lead to mutually acceptable solutions.

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