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How to Win Dissertation Arguments and Influence Readers: Reflections on Conducting Focused Ethnographic Research Online

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated a radical and rapid change in qualitative research. My planned in-person dissertation research shifted almost overnight to an online-only setting. Methodologically, I had to adapt my research quickly into an Internet-friendly format. I adapted focused ethnographic methods for use in online spaces in my research. Using vignettes and reflections on the dissertation experience, this essay offers a behind-the-curtain look at the work required to gain access to an online research site and tips for conducting online qualitative research.

Keywords

financial aid, focused ethnography, online research

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How to Win Dissertation Arguments and Influence Readers: Reflections on Conducting Focused Ethnographic Research Online

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The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated a radical and rapid change in qualitative research. My planned in-person dissertation research shifted almost overnight to an online-only setting. Methodologically, I had to adapt my research quickly into an Internet-friendly format. I adapted focused ethnographic methods for use in online spaces in my research. Using vignettes and reflections on the dissertation experience, this essay offers a behind-the-curtain look at the work required to gain access to an online research site and tips for conducting online qualitative research.

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Introduction

Completing any research project is a difficult, time-consuming endeavor, full of unexpected twists and turns (Rabinow, 2007). All research requires contingency plans. The unexpected onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in late 2019 and 2020, however, entailed nearly unprecedented contortions in research design due to the transformation of the world (e.g., Mourad et al., 2020), including but not limited to educational spaces (Day et al., 2021). In this paper, I show how I completed my dissertation work in these circumstances, both in terms of research argumentation and justification for the methodological changes and offer tips for researchers operating in an online environment. I share the narrative of how I changed my methods, conducted research during the 2020 phase of the COVID-19 pandemic—both practically and theoretically—and justified my decisions. This article is about my journey to retroactively scramble and turn a decidedly in-person methodology into an electronic-friendly one. I aim to show research as it is conducted, not how it is depicted in polished manuscripts after the fact.

These stories and lessons are presented as a series of vignettes about my research processes during the dissertation, paired with reflections serving as annotations of the process. In the reflections, I follow the guidance of Lustick (2021) in attuning to my emotions as a researcher as a source of data in qualitative research. I view these vignettes as the supports holding up a theater backdrop—they serve a crucial and underappreciated role in making the stage look audience-ready. Though I am confident I am not alone in facing this kind of methodological situation due to the pandemic, I hope I can give some guidance for qualitative scholars facing this dilemma in the future. My goal is to depict research in action, warts, and all. This piece contributes to qualitative research methods literature by demystifying the process of research development and provides specific lessons that may be useful for other researchers in the reflection sections.

Vignette 1: Proposal and Dissertation

In my dissertation research I focused on financial aid at a community college from the staff and the student perspective. There is very little research about financial staff, especially at the community college level, and rare is the research conducted with a qualitative approach to studying student experiences with aid, with some exceptions such as Goldrick-Rab (2016), Frick Cardelle (2013), and White (2013). I treat financial aid as a culture, and for those reasons wanted to use ethnographic approaches. In a classical vein, I wanted to use in-person participant observation (Glesne, 2010; Spradley, 1980), making the familiar strange in a very strict sense and treating the financial aid office as a culture under study. As someone with a student affairs background who had never worked in financial aid, higher education in general is quite familiar to me, but financial aid only so through research. I called my dissertation a case study using ethnographic methods (Yin, 2018), saying I was drawing from applied, rapid ethnographic methods, and citing an ethnographic handbook for support (Bernard, 2005). I planned to supplement participant observation with interviews and document analysis.

Because I was interested in the conversational details that staff and students employ when talking about financial aid, and because my outside reader was a discourse analysis methodologist, I wanted to use tools from conversation analysis (e.g., Vázquez, 2010) and critical discourse analysis (e.g., Patton, 2014) to dive into the detailed nuances of interactions between staff and students. Though financial aid personnel are highly concerned with student financial privacy (Tonsager & Skeath, 2017), other discourse analysts have successfully observed visits at doctor's offices (Wodak, 1997), so I thought financial aid would be a slightly easier sell. IRB—Institutional Review Board—approval from my home institution sailed through with no issues. In my proposal, I tried to justify this method. I think it was convincing—it sounds like an interesting dissertation to me. Perhaps convincing yourself is the first step to methodological success.

I did not forecast an entirely smooth journey from proposal to dissertation, however. When I had conducted a pilot study in my 2018 qualitative methods class before proposing my dissertation, I had a very difficult time selling the participant observation research piece to even a friendly financial aid office. I spent what felt like hours crafting perfectly worded e-mails to potential sites with whom I had some connection. These other institutions to which my networks had given me access were initially excited about the pilot study research, but eventually said "no." Student privacy was, understandably, paramount for staff. Even when trying to conduct a pilot study, I had to regroup and frame that participant observation study as an interview study, with results to be shared exclusively with my class. The pilot study is and will remain unpublished because I needed to promise not to publish before I could interview staff members. So, with that in mind, it was a big risk to aim for participant observation research in a dissertation. This research was, in fact, already scaled back from my original proposal plan, which was to do a month's worth of research at each of three different institutional types (a community college, a four-year public, and a four-year private institution).

The proposal had set the stage for my dissertation. Through my arguments, I had built the proscenium, designed, and painted the set, picked the script, and knew the intended opening date—Fall 2020. All I needed were actors to fill the stage: my participants. That was the final piece to bring this production to the theater. This is where a curse threatened the production. I had defended my proposal in early February 2020, when the rumblings of a global pandemic were a distant, unreal possibility. As we all know now, that was false. Those possibilities came true.

Vignette 1: Reflection

Honestly, I was always a bit skeptical that this dissertation as outlined above would ever happen. It always felt like a long shot and possessed an air of unreality. Between the pilot study difficulties and my own instincts about the feasibility of the research, I did not think it would happen as I described above. I learned from this experience that scholarly plans do not always match participant plans, and especially appreciated the importance of connections to the research site. For the pilot study, I compromised my goals of using the material for publication in favor of testing my planned dissertation research methods with staff. Because I could promise absolute confidentiality and no mention of interview content outside of the methods class, I hope I received especially honest answers. The interview protocol developed for the pilot study was quite close to the protocol I used in the dissertation. While this data will always be unpublished, it helped me with my future dissertation goal.

Vignette 2: In Research, You Can't Always Get What You Want

After I defended my proposal in February 2020, the real work began. I had previously spent months cultivating a key informant at "Institution X" (Muecke, 1994), based on the advice of a friend who had assured me that *that* was the place for my dissertation research. My friend said that Institution X was on board and happy to help with my dissertation research. In the meantime, I had temporarily moved out of the country and had planned to return to the United States on frequent research trips—I even bought a Global Entry pass to enable quick trips through customs. This was my third attempt to secure a dissertation site; after initial interest from staff and department heads of financial aid at two other institutions, my proposal had been rejected at a higher level, both citing the newness of staff as the main reason for rejection. This may have been both true and misleading; it is suspicious that both institutions gave the same rationale.

After building up my courage and making all requested proposal changes from my committee, March 2020 meant IRB time. By March, Institution X, like many institutions, had gone fully online. No one knew when in-person work might be possible for non-essential workers. My first post-proposal hurdle appeared. I had to adapt my carefully reasoned and argued methodology into an online format. I transformed my original participant observation goal of hanging around the office as a researcher and sitting in on student meetings—which was already going to be a stretch! —into an online simulacrum. The head of IRB at Institution X had a reputation for being a stickler. Stressing the voluntary nature of participation, I suggested in Institution X's IRB form that I would interview willing staff and students and observe only online meetings for which I had been granted permission to attend by both parties. Initially, as mentioned above, I intended to observe informal interactions between staff members, formal meetings between students and staff, as well as more perfunctory questions between students and staff members such as "how do I get scholarships?". I emphasized interviews as the primary vehicle of data collection rather than observation. After waiting 6 weeks, in April I received a terrifying e-mail.

Institution X was unable to accept my submission to conduct research for privacy concerns, and because their staff were busy due to the COVID-19 pandemic. They were sorry. I read these words, swallowing waves of panic. When I received the rejection notice from Institution X's IRB, citing both student privacy concerns and staff overwork due to COVID, it hurt a lot. My network had failed at a crucial point. If Barley (1990) is right and networks are the only thing that matters for site access, what had gone wrong? How could I rebuild? What about the carefully-constructed arguments in my proposal—what would happen to them? What if I never wrote a dissertation? What if my academic life were over here and now? Square one had never looked so terrifying.

Vignette 2: Reflection

It is emotionally draining to recall those few months. Living through a global pandemic—in a different country and time zone than most of your loved ones— is already hard enough. On top of that, I also had to figure out how to re-do a dissertation proposal for an online environment and start from scratch to find a dissertation site. I knew dissertating was supposed to be difficult, but this was dissertating in extra-hard mode. Of course, I was not going through this in a vacuum. Everyone else with whom I was interacting was also in a global pandemic and struggling with day-to-day life in a radically changed world. As always, the social part of the social sciences is the best and worst part of the work.

I learned from this experience that although a dissertation project can feel like an all-encompassing fog covering every aspect of your life, it is not as important to anyone else as it is to you. To gain clarity and perspective, remember that other people do not hold the same values and priorities as you do. Similarly, your timeline is not a universal, fixed, objective one, written in the stars for all to see and abide by. Roll with the punches.

Vignette 3: Subterranean IRB-sick Blues

Let me assure you of a happy ending. I did indeed conduct dissertation research at a different institution (which I call MCC, Metro Community College), and I have received my PhD. In April 2020, I went back to the drawing board, asking my committee members to help facilitate an introduction to higher-level staff at a place I call MCC. I had made a spreadsheet in the meantime, containing a list of every single community college in the state of Texas to start cold-calling (or cold-e-mailing, I suppose) for my research. I wanted to wait to pursue MCC specifically because I wanted to try to avoid the hard sell from my committee members, so to speak, and do this on my own. My goal was a lateral rather than top-down, hierarchal approach to dissertation site access. Because I am deeply committed to making sure participants do not feel coerced in any way to participate in my research (Smith, 2001), I wanted to make the whole experience as voluntary as possible. Networks really do help with site access, as my own experience confirmed (Barley, 1990). The process went relatively smoothly, with my contacts getting approval from the president of MCC and then tentative approval from the IRB head, who found a key informant for me as well. The experience felt like a *deus ex machina*.

When writing the IRB for MCC, downright desperate for approval, I had to emphasize my interview and (public) document analysis methods. From there, I received permission to conduct my research, with the caveat that I would share my findings with MCC leadership, in a format to be determined; later I wrote up a short summary of the research, shared it with all participants to make sure it was both accurate and not identifiable to them, and shared it with MCC's IRB.

Vignette 3: Reflection

I was so relieved that this happened. When I got the e-mail that the MCC higher-ups had approved my study and had even figured out a person with whom I could work to facilitate my data collection, I told my spouse: "I'm going to have a dissertation. I'm going to graduate. I'm going to get a Ph.D." After all the months of work, starting with finding the pilot study site, the cultivation of networks, and the proposal defense, it happened. I had a site. I could complete a dissertation.

The lessons I learned from this were, again, the importance of networks and back-up plans. In addition, your networks and your connections shape access to the research site. If a different person or office had approved my research first—such as if I knew someone in Human Resources who forwarded my request onto a colleague in financial aid or IRB—the request for research participants would be read differently by participants. This is an underreported element of data collection for both qualitative and quantitative research. I always want to know: how did you get access to the site?

Vignette 4: A Hero Appears—Focused Ethnography

While all the IRB machinations were happening, I figured out relatively quickly that I was not going to be able to conduct any participant observations due to the pandemic (Spradley, 1980). Since I had grounded my methodological justification within participant observation, I had to find a different argumentative route. When hunting down references to what I had in a somewhat facile manner called rapid, applied ethnographic procedures in my proposal (Bernard, 2005), I started a deep dive into the minutiae of ethnographic procedures that are of a shorter length than typical projects. I use this circumlocution advisedly, since there are many, many different types of this ethnography, including quick ethnography (Handwerker, 2001), quick and dirty ethnography (Hughes et al., 1994), mini- or short-term ethnographies (Muecke, 1994), participatory rural appraisal (Baker, 1996; Chambers, 1995), rapid ethnographic assessment (Bentley et al., 1988), rapid ethnography (Millen, 2000), and focused ethnography (Wall, 2015). Thankfully, an article by Wall (2015) about focused ethnography opened my eyes to both a fascinating methodology and a way to justify my increasingly-less-participant observation research methods.

Briefly, focused ethnography starts with the assertion that what makes a study ethnographic is the unit of analysis—culture—rather than the methods used to investigate that culture. Originally formulated by Knoblauch (2005), focused ethnographers go into the field—so to speak—having already achieved a preliminary understanding of the site due to an insider perspective. Further, researchers bring into the field a clear, pre-articulated question, and thereby collect data using multiple methods and careful sampling (Knoblauch, 2005). Focused ethnography has been used especially often in nursing due to concerns about patient privacy, and the insider perspective many nursing researchers employ (e.g., Higginbottom et al., 2013).

Focused ethnography frankly seemed like a gift sent from above as I re-argued my dissertation's methods. Perhaps it is better described as planned happenstance (Mitchell, 1999). Because treating financial aid as a culture is one of my scholarly interventions into financial aid research, I wanted to keep that part of my methods. Ethnography is my favorite. Case study methodology (Stake, 2008), which is how I ended up framing my dissertation, was just a way to smuggle ethnography in without having to repeatedly explain why I was not going to spend a year in a particular field. I had heard from a colleague that using "ethnography" as a method in higher education journals was frowned upon given a perhaps cursory understanding of ethnographic approaches by some reviewers due to the common conflation of ethnography with sustained participant observation (Cruz & Higginbottom, 2013). If I had learned about focused ethnography prior to writing my proposal, I would almost certainly have used it instead of a case study as justification for my research methods (Stake, 2008).

Vignette 4: Reflection

Research as conducted differs from research as planned. Recall from earlier that I was originally planning to travel back and forth between the U.S. and abroad to conduct dissertation research in person. That was, thankfully, not necessary because of the pandemic. I could live, move, and have my research being in an online world. The trick was having to argue my way into this new methodological justification I had discovered while I had nothing else to do for my dissertation other than read (and copy-edit, and match cited works in the dissertation to the reference section and reformat my proposal using the graduate school's required style). The barrier of waiting for IRB approval turned into a boon, since I had time to read and shore up my argumentation.

I learned from this experience that even in a dissertation, there is always more to read, always a different argument to pursue, always an unspooled thread to pick up later. Ending a project is just pressing pause on the manuscript. For dissertations in particular, the temptation is to read to forgo writing, which can be especially seductive given the need to demonstrate expertise in a format that can feel unlimited by time and length. Researching is a mix of both agency and chance. There are many different dissertations I could have argued and written, but this is the one I chose. Or, perhaps, the pandemic chose it for me.

Vignette 5: Actually Conducting Research

At this juncture, I had figured out how to justify the choice of focused ethnography, somewhat after the fact. It would have been nice to carry the research plan from my proposal through from start to finish, but sometimes that is the way the research cookie crumbles. Since August was an especially busy month for MCC financial aid staff, I wanted to complete all interviews in July 2020. Based on time constraints, I made decisions about how to conduct the virtual research at the spur of the moment, based on my best judgement. The logistical decisions I made going into and during the first interview would become sedimented and solidified over time. Since this was for my dissertation, I wanted to have an especially carefully documented paper trail as I pursued honesty in my research (Richardson, 2000). Because I had already gone so far afield from my original proposal, I lacked much pre-determined, pre-written, pre-argued guidance from my past self. My instincts had to be my guide. Afterward, when writing up the argumentation, I drew on Paulus et al.'s (2015) work on conducting digital research online, since that was all I had to hand.

I had determined and stated in the IRB I would do interviews and then analyze MCC's website. Though I had always planned to analyze the website as a way of collecting additional data and meeting my goal of triangulating data like a good case study methodologist should (Yin, 2018), the website took on even greater importance when it had to stand on its own, bereft of participant observation. After reading about document analysis (e.g., Atkinson & Coffey, 2004; Bowen, 2009; Connell et al., 2001; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Prior, 2003, 2004; Scott, 1990), I decided to call the website a document and froze it in time by copying the text of a website into individual documents, titled by page. In some cases, I could not copy the text of website drop-down menus and had to resort to manually typing in the drop-down menu text by hand, which was exhausting. For pictures, I took screenshots, and saved all of these into individual NVivo documents. I chose to restrict myself to only MCC-internal websites related to financial aid, reasoning that if I were a student (and indeed, I was one at the time), I would trust the institution's website more than external pages as a source of information.

In making the choice to turn a potentially dynamic and active, thoroughly editable website into a static document, I grappled with some features of documents that I otherwise could have ignored. I followed Prior (2003) in viewing documents as social actors, existing in certain contexts and possessing the ability to impact human realities. For example, patient charts in hospitals are documents, created by medical staff for multiple purposes (Prior, 2004). They maintain a record of care using jargon specific to the profession and serve as a retroactive justification for insurance and other claims (Prior, 2004). The patient's care and diagnoses do not exist outside of the chart, the sole meaningful record of patient treatment (Prior, 2004). That chart, then, creates and impacts social realities; an undocumented dose of medicine does not exist in the hospital setting.

Taking the concept that documents are social actors seriously (Prior, 2003), document analysis therefore shares the same limitations and delimitations as research with human subjects. Documents have their own historical realities and contexts, which may differ from the researcher's own experiences. Even if a document is static, like the copied text of a website into an NVivo document, it will still change as the researcher's context changes. Atkinson and Coffey (2004) expressed this point well when they stated that documents "suppress time, by lifting events out of the flow of lived experience and recording them in the decontextualized language and formats of official records" (p. 69). Interpretation of official records and other records are, however, governed by the researcher's own context. For example, my reading of MCC's website is not the same as a MCC student's reading of the website. I wrote all this down in my dissertation to justify my focus on document analysis, about which I had been quite brief in the proposal. Now, work was required to justify my finding of new and exciting sources.

Thanks to focused ethnography, case studies, and document analysis, I had made an argument for including the website as a key pillar of my research. But, since I could not use participant observation as a method, it was time to center interviews. They needed to be the structural support or the stage in this research production of research. They were one of the main items of data collection left to me. In what follows I explain how I conducted them during the pandemic, in a time zone seven hours behind mine.

Interviews

I had opted to interview both financial aid staff and students at MCC in my research, wanting to get both of their perspectives on the culture of financial aid. The key informant sent my recruitment e-mail to all financial aid staff at MCC, and e-mailed students receiving financial aid in Summer 2020 in random samples. All participants self-selected into my research, though as noted above, the method through which I had gained access to MCC meant that that self-selection might feel a little different. I had some grant money and was able to pay students with a $15 Amazon.com gift card; I was dissuaded from paying staff because it might be seen as double-dipping by being paid twice for an interview conducted during work times. Eventually, I was able to speak with all 15 staff who wanted to talk to me, including some former financial aid staff who still worked at MCC. Some staff expressed concern about how confidential the interview processes would be, leading me to change my introductory interview script to emphasize the precautions I would take to disguise their identities. I had four students not appear for interviews and one attempt to sign up after I had run out of grant money with which to pay them.

At this point of my research career, I was a seasoned in-person interviewer, and a well-practiced phone interviewer. In previous research teams, I had conducted several phone interviews, learning the tricks of the trade like including more verbal pauses than usually encouraged in an in-person interview ("Mm-hm. Right.") and making sure I did not have my computer on during the interview. The siren call of an unread e-mail could hamper full attention during that time. When folks signed up for an interview time, they had the option of choosing a phone interview, Skype, Zoom, Google Meetings, or a write-in way of speaking with me. To my surprise, many participants under 25 opted for phone interviews, contradicting the stereotype of phone aversion with that group. I did have two memorable non-phone interviews with participants, one of which was conducted via Zoom outside of a Laundromat and another that was supposed to be a phone interview but ended up being conducted via FaceTime since I could not get my WiFi phone calling to work. Afterward, my arm was very sore from holding the phone at a good angle while still taking notes and reading the protocol.

Phone interviews proved a little difficult with the student group. Sometimes, I heard them tapping on the phone while talking to me. Perhaps they were texting, though in some cases they researched information about questions I asked them regarding their financial aid, which was certainly helpful. I was read quite a few official-sounding texts containing information about financial aid packages. For one interview question, I asked them their definition of financial aid, assuring them that there were no right or wrong answers. Despite that, I am confident that at least a few students looked up a definition on their phones and then read that to me. Almost all staff members decided to speak with me over Google Meetings, most with their cameras on.

Logistically, I used my computer for these video interviews. I put my computer up on a higher platform, placed my audio recorder on the computer itself, and took notes on paper, below the sight line of the camera. When I asked questions or otherwise verbally interacted with the participant, I looked directly into the camera; otherwise, I looked at their displayed faces. Two did, however, turn their cameras off while we were speaking. I left mine on out of courtesy, but then felt like I was performing a pantomime. Reacting to individuals with facial expressions when I could not see their faces was not easy. It seemed like I was behind one-way glass at a police station, since it was easy to forget I was being observed as well as heard. Deciding where to look when listening was also tricky; I opted for the center of the screen.

Vignette 5: Reflection

In hindsight, it was wise to always keep my camera on to increase the sense of connection and trust over the screen. I would consider removing the phone as an option for the interviews to avoid some of the experiences I faced in talking to students while they were clearly using the device for other purposes. FaceTime did work well, however! I am also glad I thought through my logistical choices in advance and had a sort of pre-interview ritual to help enter the right headspace for conducting an interview.

Any research, no matter how well-planned, comes with a bounty of choices. The choices I made in moving from a conceptualized and imagined in-person dissertation to one conducted wholly online and via phone were forced due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but they also provided opportunities to read about a new method. Perhaps it only feels like this in retrospect, but the restrictions provided by the pandemic environment forced me to draw limits on what could otherwise feel like an out-of-control, nebulous monster of a project. Though I did mourn the dream of my originally designed dissertation, I was still able to come up with a perfectly serviceable one given my realities. I did not have to ask too much of myself because the research limits were already there.

Though I do not plan on writing another dissertation at present, I believe the lessons I learned from the process of planning a research production, facing delays, and then adapting to the available resources will be useful in future writing. Research does not always work out as planned, but that does not mean the original plan was better—just different. Delays can be opportunities to think and reflect, to determine what is essential about the study design and what can be optional.

Conclusion

In this paper, I shared the gory details involved in moving from a dissertation proposal to actual research, including the argumentation and the practical decisions made along the way. My purpose in doing so is to show the real work and the happenstance elements of research in practice. Research is messy. Researchers can be messy, too. When I wrote up my methods section for my dissertation itself, I was encouraged to delete details like the time zone difference and its impact on my interviewing ability—it was hard to conduct interviews at 7 p.m.—which could foster the perception that researchers are always able-bodied and perfectly-capable, ignoring our bodily realities (Kerschbaum & Price, 2017). I suspect that social scientists try to make their research seem cleaner, neater, and altogether more orderly than it is to justify the label social science (cf., Latour, 2000; St. Pierre, 2011), and apply these insights to the process of completing a dissertation during a pandemic. The lure of the scientific method is difficult to dispel.

In this essay, I have tried to honestly depict what it was really like to make research happen, both in terms of the mechanics and the intellectual work necessary to help the research look more methodical than it was. I envision this piece as showing the design and the construction work—plus setbacks—that go into a theatrical production, rather than simply depicting a freshly-built, highly polished structure. I do not think I was dishonest in my dissertation, nor am I accusing others of being dishonest in their work presenting completing research. Rather, I think we do a disservice to beginning and newly minted qualitative researchers by only showing completed sets rather than the scaffolding, the mistakes, and the production delays that go into research as published. Unpublished, unfiltered research is hidden from view.

I want readers to know that research as written is not always research as conducted. For that matter, research as designed is not always research as conducted. Particularly for students completing their dissertations, changing methods based on site access—especially during a global pandemic—is a perfectly acceptable part of the process. For anyone conducting digital qualitative research (Paulus et al., 2015), which I suspect is going to be even more common in the future, the point is not that there is a single, correct, best-practices way to conduct phone or video conference-based interviews. What is important is to document and think through each decision carefully so that each choice is a reasoned one, no matter whether the methods used spring from focused ethnographic or other research. Keep track of decisions in field notes, jottings, or journaling so they can be recalled and written about later, noting why those choices were made (Emerson et al., 1995). That advice applies to every aspect of methods from where to place the camera to how to record an interview. Write everything down and assume you will remember nothing later. I have shared what I did in a difficult time and the choices I made within the constraints of my circumstances. Your reader's mileage may vary.

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