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Field Research When There Is Limited Access to the Field: Lessons from Japan

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ABSTRACT

How can scholars conduct field research when there is limited access to the field? This article first identifies how limited and uncertain field access can affect field research and then provides recommendations to address these challenges. We focus on conducting field research in Japan because of our substantive expertise, but we believe that the problems and solutions outlined in this article are applicable to a broad range of countries. Our hope is that this article contributes to the developing literature on conducting research during times of emergency and to the larger literature on best practices for field research.

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How can scholars conduct field research when access to the field is limited? Whereas this is a perennial question for researchers who work in some places, it has taken on greater importance during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has caused global travel interruptions, border closures, and many other disruptions to scholarly work. These problems have been especially disruptive for those who focus on certain geographic areas and use particular research methods. As experienced by the coauthors of this article, restrictions related to the pandemic have prevented scholars from close observation of political phenomena on the ground, reduced or eliminated access to human and textual sources, limited new data-collection efforts, and minimized opportunities for learning from local scholars who are studying the same research questions. These are frustrating obstacles for many political scientists but they have a disproportionate impact on early-career researchers, who often have the most acute need to learn from experience in the field and who face the greatest pressure to produce new work. This article focuses on the COVID-19 pandemic as a motivating example; however, access to the field also can be restricted because of other country-specific emergencies, such as wars (e.g., Russia's war in Ukraine), violent protest and repressions (e.g., Kazakhstan, Myanmar, and countries in Sub-Saharan Africa), and natural disasters (e.g., the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami in Japan).

Although the barriers to fieldwork created by the COVID-19 pandemic have hindered and transformed political science field research, there are few primers on how researchers can adapt to and mitigate these challenges. Almost all existing guides about the pandemic's influence on fieldwork focus on the natural sciences (Al-Taweel et al. 2020; Aubrey, Laverty, and Ma 2021; Corlett et al.

these problems have more profound effects for certain types of scholars, belonging to certain types of institutions, studying certain parts of the world. Second, we provide recommendations about how scholars can conduct field research when access to the field is disrupted as it has been during the COVID-19 pandemic, might be in future pandemics, and often is in the face of other national and regional emergencies.

Our suggestions center on our experiences conducting research in Japan, which can be a challenging place to do fieldwork because of language barriers, cultural and bureaucratic customs, often inaccessible data sources, immigration challenges, and a high cost of living. Japan, however, also can be a reasonably easy place for researchers because it is relatively safe and has efficient mass transportation. Whereas Japan has its own peculiarities, we believe that the problems and solutions that we describe are applicable to diverse contexts, albeit with different issue severity and necessity for adaptation. With that in mind, we believe our recommendations should be broadly useful to area experts of all types, institutional leaders responding to events that disrupt research, and (of course) Japanese politics researchers. Our suggestions for overcoming limitations to field research should be considered along with existing guides for conducting fieldwork (Kapiszewski, MacLean, and Read 2015; Ortobals and Rincker 2009), especially where access is limited due to conflict (de Guevara and Bøås 2020; Driscoll 2021; Malejacq and Mukhopadhyay 2016), and to conducting research in Japan specifically (Bestor, Steinhoff, and Bestor 2003; Kottmann and Reiher 2020; McLaughlin 2010). Whereas we present strategies for overcoming obstacles because of events that limit access to the field, these limitations also can be opportunities for research (Muñoz, Falcó-Gimeno, and Hernández 2020).

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2020; Douglas et al. 2020; Peace, Gabriel, and Eyles 2021; Reid 2020; Scerri et al. 2020; Wigginton et al. 2020), in which challenges are substantial but often different than those faced by the social sciences (Howlett 2022; Krause et al. 2021; Meza-Palmeros 2020). Furthermore, although there are numerous papers addressing best practices for the design and execution of field research, few discuss what researchers should do when they encounter sudden barriers to data collection. These are both timely and perennial concerns given that both (1) the COVID-19 pandemic continues to limit field research opportunities; and (2) other global emergencies, including other pandemics, likely will limit fieldwork in the future (Marani et al. 2021).

This article addresses the crucial need for a better understanding of how researchers can work in an ever-changing and complicated world environment. We frame the discussion based on limitations due to the COVID-19 pandemic because it has had a global reach, but the lessons from this study apply broadly across phenomena that limit access to the field. First, we present an overview of the challenges that researchers have faced during this ongoing public health crisis and the effects on area specialists. When possible, we focus on differential effects, highlighting that

FIELDWORK DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted everything from global systems to the most quotidian tasks, but it is worth discussing how significant these disruptions have been for fieldwork. Researchers considering fieldwork during this continuing global crisis first must consider their health risks and assess whether their gains from entering the field outweigh possible exposure. Thoughtful researchers also have a responsibility to consider that their activities might expose others—family and friends, colleagues, and contacts made in the field—to the virus, with potentially cascading consequences at the community level.

Researchers who accept these possible costs then must begin the fraught and complex process of actually getting to the field. Under pandemic conditions, they face severe logistical challenges. They must identify (1) the availability of research visas in their target country; (2) any limitations placed on their travel by their university or funders, which may be contradictory; (3) the possibility of working with local sponsors and other collaborators; (4) Institutional Review Board (IRB) and broad ethical considerations for in-person contact; and (5) evolving entry restrictions in

their target country and at its research sites (e.g., archives, libraries, and university facilities). Unfortunately, this information can be difficult to acquire before a planned visit because many countries and their domestic research institutions frequently change entrance requirements in response to new conditions. Volatile circumstances ensure that even carefully planned travel to the field with few anticipated logistical issues can be rendered impossible on short notice. As a result, time and resources dedicated to planning fieldwork ultimately may be wasted. This can create complications with funders—who, in many cases, have been somewhat inflexible with their requirements—if researchers are unable to meet initially proposed deadlines for entry to the field, use of funds, or submission of final reports.

As a result, most of the coauthors contributing to this article have not visited Japan, despite their research expertise, since at least the beginning of 2020. We and many of our colleagues remain in the longest period during our academic career without visiting Japan. We also experience continuing uncertainty about when returning will be possible, given the Japanese government's propensity to close the nation's borders to all foreign visitors as a safeguard against possible or realized spikes in COVID-19 cases. Those coauthors who have entered Japan since the pandemic began faced several of these challenges, such as navigating the complex set of restrictions from governments, institutions, and funders. Other contributors who have not been able to enter the

type and level of support they have offered researchers during this time, producing heterogeneous conditions across the academy. Many institutions have attempted to offset pandemic-related research disruptions by offering scholars access to financial resources such as grants or additional organizational support including proactive matching of researchers with local collaborators, opportunities, and resources. Some institutions have provided administrative assistance to researchers attempting to navigate the mutable rules of international travel and adhere to domestic or foreign visa regimes. Select institutions have provided emergency funding to cover unexpected costs related to research, travel, and health challenges. Many have made a commitment to the well-being of junior scholars, offering tenure extensions to assistant professors, additional years of funding to graduate students, and flexibility with regard to dissertation planning. However, other institutions have provided little or none of this assistance to support their scholarly community. Indeed, some inadvertently have made the situation even worse for field researchers by imposing arbitrary and severe travel restrictions that do not reflect the variation in COVID-19 case rates over time and across possible destinations.

The variability of institutional responses suggests that field researchers cannot consistently or uniformly rely on their institution to facilitate fieldwork and also must work on their own to ensure the success of their fieldwork or to find viable alternatives.

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country also faced challenges. One coauthor, for example, had to delay planned fieldwork in Japan three times due to changing border restrictions, which added considerable paperwork and stress to the project. Researchers like this are “on call” to make necessary fieldwork arrangements including travel, visas, accommodations, institutional affiliations, and COVID-19 testing as soon as a window of opportunity opens. Another coauthor was able to enter Japan during a brief period of calm but was immediately required to drastically change fieldwork plans due to an unforeseeable new “state of emergency.”

In summary, the spread of COVID-19 has fundamentally compromised researchers' mobility and access to local resources. It also has introduced tremendous uncertainty into the plans of scholars whose research projects ideally may span years. Each new COVID-19 wave or variant compels conscientious researchers to evaluate the logistical feasibility and ethics of attempting fieldwork. Opportunity costs in both time and funds can sidetrack scholars from their work, which is particularly detrimental to junior scholars, who often face the most pressing need to publish novel research.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESEARCHERS

Like many other phenomena in higher education, the COVID-19 pandemic has not affected all researchers equally. Based on the collective experience of the coauthors—who represent 14 institutions of higher learning—universities and departments vary in the

Toward these goals, we offer several suggestions based on our experiences doing fieldwork in Japan (virtual and otherwise) during the pandemic.

Before Conducting Research

One major challenge that researchers doing fieldwork have faced is how to spend their time in the field. This issue has become more pronounced during the COVID-19 pandemic, when mandatory or optional quarantines use up days abroad, and constant changes in entrance requirements and flight availability force many researchers to return home earlier than planned. In this context, we encourage researchers to begin cultivating relationships and gathering information about target destinations before they leave for the field. Cultivating relationships often is useful even under travel limitations because it may provide entry into networks for leveraging in offline and virtual research (e.g., interviews).

To begin building these connections, researchers might consider participating in virtual training, conferences, and workshops related to their target country or subject of study (Catalinac et al. 2022; Crabtree 2022). For example, one coauthor participated in a virtual course on their research topic over several weeks. Through the course, the coauthor was able to make connections with not only other researchers studying the same topic but also people whom the coauthor later interviewed for their research, including interviewees in Japan.

Virtual workshops also can be useful for presenters, who might receive beneficial feedback for polishing their research designs and allowing them to make the most of their scarce resources during limited field research. Workshops also allow researchers to begin building personal connections and to network with local scholars without entering the field. For those of us who study Japanese (and Asian) politics, these opportunities abound. As described in the online appendix, since the beginning of the pandemic, scholars have organized a variety of workshops that aim to periodically convene researchers across universities in the United States and abroad. In addition, many existing research workshops and conferences have transitioned to online meetings.

Interview Research

Interview research often is best accomplished in the field, but interviews also can be conducted without traveling to a target country. An influential (although controversial) early anthropological study of Japan, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, was produced from interviews that the author conducted while outside of the country because World War II prevented field access (Benedict 1946). Indeed, many scholars have adapted their interview research to account for the pandemic's effects. Researchers historically used various tools including email, telephone, and platforms such as Skype and Zoom to interview distant subjects (Mosley 2013), and the trend toward conducting interviews online has increased considerably in recent years. Whereas this move from physical to digital conversations can help researchers to continue their work, we believe that relatively little attention has been given to what we term the "access-representativeness tradeoff." Many people who might be willing to be interviewed at a distance might not be willing to meet in person—although, as one coauthor found, the opposite may be true as well.

Even if researchers secure an interview with willing participants, they also must consider that virtual interviews are fundamentally different from in-person interviews. It is much more difficult to "read" people virtually, which may give researchers significantly different data than what they would obtain in an in-person setting; there also can be differences in what people might say in-person, via video, and via voice (Deakin and Wakefield 2014). In the Japanese case, interview subjects such as bureaucrats and politicians often are more forthcoming in less official capacities, and online interviews create an environment in which subjects may be reluctant to speak candidly (Madge and O'Connor 2004). The possible disruptions, including faulty or inconsistent internet connections and a lack of privacy (e.g., someone walking into the room during the interview), are limitations that should be considered. Moreover, these disruptions—in addition to exhaustion from prolonged watching of the screen—could reduce interviewees' concentration, particularly for oral-history or focus-group interviews. Furthermore, to avoid participants feeling uncomfortable or awkward, researchers are advised to develop their knowledge of the political, social, and local news related to the topic and the participants before the interview and to give particular attention to the participants' facial and verbal expressions and cues during the interview. Finally, it may be extremely difficult to build the relationships, connections, and trust that are necessary for ethnographic research during online interviews, with the possible exception of research conducted in online environments (Barratt and Maddox 2016).

Research Using Observational Data

Whereas researchers might be able to conduct interviews without leaving their own location or even their office, this is not necessarily true for many types of original data collection. Scholars—particularly graduate students working on their dissertation—often conduct fieldwork to build datasets that can be used as the basis for single projects or even entire research agendas. If scholars cannot do this, however, they might be tempted to pause their promising research projects and develop other work during the pandemic. This is a reasonable option for senior scholars; however, it is potentially problematic for pre-tenured faculty, who may have already invested scarce time and resources in projects that must be completed and published soon. This option is even worse, however, for graduate students, who face hard deadlines when it comes to their dissertation and graduation. Shifting research plans always impacts those who are from institutions with fewer resources than most because they already would have consumed scarce resources in pursuing interrupted projects.

Given these real constraints, we encourage researchers to consider a range of other options. One option is to leverage existing data sources for their work. In the Japanese context, they might make use of the tremendous range of existing data sources, which are described in this article and in the online appendix. The easiest way to accomplish this would be to visit existing datasets created and assembled by political scientists. Some scholars provide their original datasets (e.g., election results) on their websites or on replication data repositories, such as the Harvard Dataverse (Catalinac 2015; Horiuchi and Natori 2019; Smith and Reed 2018). Another accessible source is government statistics. The e-Stat is a centralized portal website of almost all government statistics at the national, prefecture, and municipal levels.

Researchers may want to remix existing data instead of collecting new data. For example, meta-analyses and meta-regressions use coefficients from existing studies (Eshima and Smith 2021; Incerti 2020; Li, Owen, and Mitchell 2018; Schwarz and Coppock 2022). Alternatively, researchers who are interested in measuring new concepts might consider building an index at a higher resolution. They could do this, for example, by aggregating data from the municipal to the prefectural level and then assessing its construct validity. Although this approach might cause scholars to change their unit of analysis, it could provide them with appropriate data to test the empirical predictions of their theories. For projects like this, e-Stat could be a good starting point.

As for archival data, social scientists have long assembled historical government statistics and private research surveys in isolated projects such as the Maddison Historical Statistics Project, so the data information was decentralized. Due to a long history of recordkeeping and new digitization projects, Japan is an excellent case to conduct studies using historical and archival documents (Mitchell 2022; Mitchell and Yin 2022). For example, a recent effort by the Japanese Society for the Promotion of Science collects these projects on one web platform as the [Program for Constructing Data Infrastructure for the Humanities and Social Sciences](#). The Diet Library is a great resource for not only the proceedings since 1947 but also historical data that contain extensive governmental, cultural, and other historical documents including photographs and audio clips within a searchable database. Likewise, university libraries in Japan and the United States may have their original data collections. For instance, the

University of Washington archives Japanese military maps published from the Meiji era until the end of World War II.

If preexisting data are not acceptable for research purposes, scholars should consider the numerous ways to collect or recombine data from a distance. For example, some coauthors invested time in learning web-scraping techniques that can be used to construct new datasets, such as those that cover municipal politicians and bureaucrats who retire to the private sector (Incerti et al. 2020; McClean 2021). A wealth of data is available online but has yet to be wrangled into a format that is used easily by scholars. In the Japanese context, researchers could assemble new datasets by scraping information from the websites of the national parliament and government ministries, the National Printing Bureau's official gazette "Kanpo," and the Digital Agency's administrative data via the e-Gov portal. Text analysis can provide valuable insight from rich and granular data retrieved from decades of readily available records of newspapers, corporations, prefectural assembly meetings, governmental websites, and even social media. One coauthor, who originally planned on interviews as her primary data source, pivoted to using more text-based sources—sources that she otherwise may not have explored (Irgil et al. 2021, 1513).

In many instances, however, the data that a researcher seeks might be either inaccessible online or accessible but not in a machine-readable format. These cases provide an opportunity to involve local research assistants because they typically require either on-the-ground access or a level of human discernment that cannot be readily substituted by a computer. In the context of Japan, for instance, the government recently granted access to

knowledge, few political scientists have used these data. An annotated list of online data resources for Japanese politics work is available in the online appendix, and we encourage researchers to investigate whether analogs exist in their areas or countries of interest.

Survey Research

Scholars also may want to consider conducting survey research. Although not a replacement for fieldwork, online surveys can provide researchers with a relatively low-cost means of collecting opinions from several respondents without requiring travel. We suggest that scholars who are considering transitioning more of their research agenda to online surveys should be cognizant of not only the typical tradeoffs involved with survey research (e.g., indirect measures and sample-selection issues) but also the potential influence of the pandemic on online survey respondents. For instance, several studies documented how the influx of new workers on many popular survey platforms has resulted in an increase in "inattentiveness" (Aronow et al. 2020; Peyton, Huber, and Coppock 2021). More broadly, the tremendous disruptions that prevent access to the field also affect the daily life of respondents. Participants may be answering our questions from a heightened state of emotional distress and anxiety, which can affect their responses. Researchers thus should want to take care when considering how many of the traditional "best practices" in survey research (e.g., seeking feedback early and often, preregistration, pilot surveys, and pretreatment attention checks) would make sense during a crisis.

The tremendous disruptions that prevent access to the field also affect the daily life of respondents.

micro-level data on the census and household and business surveys—but only to applicants who visit governmental offices in person. Similarly, the government and other official bodies in Japan publish a substantial amount of data online that exist only in PDF format. However, it often is challenging for researchers to analyze these data by relying solely on optical character-recognition methods without human assistance (Catalinac and Watanabe 2019). By involving research assistants in their projects—hired through either universities or online worker marketplaces (e.g., Crowdworks and Lancers)—scholars can gain access to new types of data while also mentoring undergraduates and exposing them to the "hidden curriculum" of academic research (Barham and Wood 2021).

Nongovernmental data also can be helpful. One coauthor uses intermediaries, such as data-aggregation companies, to access non-governmental organization and company data. Many industry groups and associations provide their own statistics collection from their affiliated companies and organizations. There also is growing attention to the "Big Data" created through governments and business activities. Some companies provide their business-transaction data to researchers. Especially after the onset of COVID-19, economists collaborated with banks, mobile carriers, and financial technology companies to analyze behaviors during the pandemic (Kaneda, Kubota, and Tanaka 2021; Konishi et al. 2021; Kubota, Onishi, and Toyama 2021); however, to our

Ethics

Regardless of which approach scholars take, we believe that they should be careful to keep research ethics in mind. Part of this involves monitoring government travel advisories, university statements about travel and research protocols, and local guidelines regarding entry and quarantine requirements. Another part involves taking even more seriously the potential risks to research participants. In many parts of the world, COVID-19 has created pockets of chaos, where researchers might temporarily forget their ethics training or be caught in situations where violations might benefit their work. Although an IRB may choose to allow or disallow in-person fieldwork during the pandemic, a researcher should not rely on it to be the sole arbiter of research ethics. The pressures of conducting research at this time—combined with incentive structures that encourage the rapid, consistent production of new work—even might encourage researchers to consciously rationalize their lapses. Greater vigilance is necessary. In addition, research guidelines suggest that scholars should carefully approach vulnerable populations. The pandemic has increased the vulnerability of many people and often in ways that are difficult to observe. If scholars are fortunate to visit the field, they also should consider the degree to which their interactions with research subjects inadvertently might expose them or others to COVID-19. These and other ethical concerns also should extend to hiring local research assistants (Fujii 2012). In this sense, even if

they have met university and/or governmental guidelines, researchers nevertheless should consider carefully whether to proceed with their fieldwork during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Safety

Finally, as in the case pre-pandemic, researchers must keep their own safety in mind when conducting fieldwork. During the pandemic, social and political dynamics have changed in many contexts, making some locations potentially unsafe for them to visit. Although Japan is relatively safe, xenophobia and discrimination are real issues that non-Japanese and “non-Japanese-looking” researchers should understand likely have increased during the pandemic. Even if and when borders reopen, it is unclear whether these attitudes will improve. We recommend that researchers speak with other scholars who are demographically similar and who are conducting similar research to make informed decisions on whether safety is a concern.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has fundamentally disrupted daily life and research. This article suggests that researchers become even more entrepreneurial in their fieldwork. They should leverage local resources as much as possible before travel and even rely on local actors to conduct research for them from afar. Most important, however, we believe that researchers should embrace virtual fieldwork, exploring the many available datasets for reuse and recombination and for understanding the differences from in-person fieldwork. With creativity and luck, scholars can continue progress on their work as the world continues to manage and recover from the COVID-19 pandemic.

As researchers attempt to make the most of their available opportunities and resources in a time of almost unprecedented uncertainty, we hope that universities and departments will consider how disruptive the COVID-19 pandemic has been for researchers who must visit the field. For example, some students drafted a prospectus for their dissertation that now is almost impossible to complete. This has forced them to either abandon or dramatically rethink their research agenda, the effects of which might linger for years—even after the current upheaval has subsided. Senior scholars should keep this in mind when evaluating applicant files not only now but also in the future.

More generally, we urge senior scholars, departmental officers, and university administrators to reconsider the expectations that they normally bring to fieldwork. Although we maintain that there are ways to continue fieldwork during the pandemic, many of them require doing so virtually—often at a great distance. This practical constraint conflicts with norms about how long researchers—particularly graduate students—should be in the field. As Irgil et al. (2021, 1499–500) noted, the political science disciplinary norm, particularly for comparativists, is from several months to a year in the field. Given the ongoing nature of the global pandemic, the likelihood that future pandemics also might disrupt work, and the abundant evidence that some institutions provide better support structures for fieldwork than others, we believe that area experts increasingly should accept—and even embrace—the value of virtual fieldwork. Doing so would provide junior researchers who are struggling through this crisis an on-ramp into the community. It also would democratize the study of distant countries and regions

that addresses enduring issues related to diversity, equity, and inclusion within those area studies and the discipline.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <http://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096522000932>.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ■

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