

Draft Research and Social Distancing with Covid-19

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The COVID-19 Virus is having profound effects on research and data gathering and interpretation. Whether we use nominal variables, ordinal scales or intervals, information needs to be gathered or collected. This process involves investigating sources for underlying data. There are different sources to obtain information or data in bite-size chunks. There are statistical data and historical records such as grades of students, test scores, and the like. There are also qualitative studies relying on direct communication with subjects to extract information that is then analyzed for an assignable value or category and for developing questions for future use in surveys or other direct inquires.

Historical and statistical data is often obtainable through computer searches or via requests for research purposes to educational institutions and other record-keeping entities and presents no handicap to the researcher. The coronavirus Covid-19 has caused many state organizations and agencies, universities and school districts to close the brick and mortar structures and their vast array of databases. Many of these sources maintain online search capabilities for base information with requests requiring in person or requested submittal for the data.

Who is there to retrieve this information or authorize a request for research material? In a perfect world, there is an automated system that would retrieve your request and deliver it through the internet. What happens when information has to be pulled and combined from several sources within the holding silo? The integrity of the information supplied is degenerated by a lack of oversight as to who has access when employees are allowed to make decisions off-

site to allow third parties access data with lag time increases due to a lack of staff to process and uncertainty of approval from supervisors when unreachable.

Rapport and Body Language

The more disastrous collection involves human subjects being interviewed for research purposes using new online platforms. With the fear and safety of all being paramount no human contact is currently preferred. So how do you conduct an interview and read the full body language that tells a different story from what is being spoken to the investigator? There is a loss of communication making this type of information gathering less reliable. Creating a rapport with the subject or interviewee is often necessary to receive honest and reliable information on how the subject interprets what is important to them. “If rapport is not developed sufficiently, the respondent may be unwilling to respond or fail to give sufficient attention or consideration to the questions asked, and if the respondent does not understand a question properly he may give an inappropriate answer (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 1987).”

Understanding the importance of a handshake for example as an indicator. “A handshake is a well-known body language sign. Stronger handshakes signify confidence. And shy (or nervous) people sometimes have weak handshakes. If a candidate walks in and their handshake is too strong, it may be a sign of aggressiveness. (workable.com).

You can read people’s body language by spotting changes in their movements or posture. Imagine, for example, that a candidate suddenly starts tapping their foot. Maybe they feel the interview is taking too long. Or perhaps they’re facing an uncomfortable question (Workable, n.a.). These visual signs of the psychological state of a subject help the researcher evaluate the subject’s intentions and compliance

The discussion turns towards body language of the interviewer who can convey different attitudes when questioning a subject “Positive body language can make candidates relax and open up. Negative body language can spark defensive and reserved reactions. (Workable, n.a.)” “Studies have shown that mirroring and matching occur as rapport builds between two subjects. As you’re interviewing candidates, you may both begin to unconsciously coordinate movements, even movements as subtle as eye blinks and head nods, which can create a false sense of trust or likeability” (Monster Employment, 2019).

Eliminating personal contact if approached correctly takes the human element out of research, and that may be what is exactly sought by a researcher or investigator interviewing a subject or may inhibit the desired result from being accurate. The same attitude exists when examining a researcher whose body language influences the response from a subject to appease the researchers’ questions or providing an answer that the subject feels is helpful. This social tuning is described as:

“the desire to get along with another to create, preserve, or re-establish positive relations. Examples of this behavior include, acting in a pleasant manner, connecting with another person through similarities, or aligning one’s attitudes to match another’s” (Sinclair, Huntsinger, Skorinko, & Hardin, 2005).

Social Distancing and Building Trust

Here questions need to be more carefully constructed. The use of surveys would increase and loss of that personal observation so necessary for interpretation of truth and value of an answer to the subject is lost. With Social-distancing increasing anxiety in individuals in close proximity to others and the concern for participating or relaying to a stranger personal or sensitive information as perceived by the subject; information may be guarded or erroneous.

Building trust and establishing rapport over the internet is more difficult and requires a higher degree of expertise to develop the trust necessary to extract the desired information.

Coronavirus Covid-19 is making the use of platforms of Skype, Zoom, and Go to Meetings more acceptable and in time will replace in-person interviews. For the present, there are drawbacks to overcome and challenges to be met. The apprehension in relaying highly personal information or discreet interchanges with a stranger requires adjustments by the interviewer to gain that rapport making the subject feel comfortable. There are techniques being explored and developed to establish that rapport effectively. One advantage of the online video call or conferencing is it transcends greater distances with reduced costs and with the expanded bandwidths interruptions have all but ceased. The increase in the availability of interviewing subjects within a reasonable cost increases sample sizes helping to validate data collected. Deakin and Wakefield (2013) found more participants willing to talk due to less of a time restraint on the subject's free time or schedule restraints. Health and Covid-19 consequences would be null using a Zoom or Skype platform to conduct interviews and may actually make the subject feel more comfortable sitting in their own environment, a bit more relaxed and unencumbered.

Conclusion:

Deakin and Wakefield (2013, p 610) concluded that online rapport is only lacking when "interviewing an individual who is reserved or less responsive". In overcoming the reserved interviewee Deakin and Wakefield emailed exchanges sharing personal reflections and information allowing for establishing rapport making the "live" interview successful. The Deakin and Wakefield (2013) study did have a number of no shows they termed absentees. Their efforts listed doubts of establishing the rapport necessary and guilt on the researchers part for having a

high rate of reoccurring absenteeism with specific subjects compared to a 100% participation with face-to-face interviews (Deakin and Wakefield, 2013, p.612). The research indicated that subjects known to Deakin and Wakefield prior to the study all showed for the interviews and 15% of the unknown failed to meet at the agreed time online.

New techniques for establishing trust and rapport with the interviewee will need to be explored and vetted for acceptance by the scientific community before a more communal approach is accepted.

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