The UKRI GCRF Hub and Innovative Methods

Caitlin Hamilton
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As part of the Hub's Methodological Innovations stream, we surveyed the members of the Hub in September 2020. We wanted to understand the kinds of methods being used across the Hub, including the kinds of data being collected; how the Hub members conceived of research innovation and how their research might be employing innovative research methods; and the challenges that Hub members face.

Methods being used

We asked the Chief Investigators from each project to indicate the method(s) that they were using to undertake the research. We received a broad range of responses, spanning across qualitative and quantitative methods, desk-based and observational approaches and innovative art-based methods.

Hub researchers are using a variety of methods to collect data, including traditional approaches, such as:

- surveys
- statistical analysis
- interviews and focus groups
- case studies
- participant observation and reflection
- spatial observation and mapping
- archival research
- policy analysis, and
- process tracing.

They are also drawing from interdisciplinary methods, including:

- loose participatory action research
- ethnographic methods, and
- psychometric instruments.

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Some are using innovative creative methods of data collection, for example:
- the discussion of family photographs
- the analysis of poetry, radio programmes, and songs
- the facilitation of creative writing, scriptwriting and craft workshops
- photovoice, and
- theatre performance.

A number of projects feature mixed methods, using both qualitative and quantitative methods to analyse their data.

Researchers are using these methods to collect a variety of data. Researchers report collection of the following:

- audio data
- visual data, including photographs and videos
- textual data, including interview transcripts, scripts, testimony, and documentation
- quantitative data from psychometric instruments
- survey data
- archival data (such as election records and registers of public land allocations)
- metadata
- tabular data
- social media data, and
- fabric samples (embroidered pieces, maps).

This data is variously publicly available, collected or created specifically for the purposes of the research, or gathered under national freedom of information provisions.

Innovation

A key aspect of the Hub's work is methodological innovation. Recognising that this could represent different things, we asked the CIs 'What does methodological innovation mean to you?'.

For many, it means finding ways to improve the quality of data, in terms of reliability, credibility and accuracy. Overwhelmingly, however, the Hub researchers that we surveyed felt that innovation in research methods related to finding new ways of doing research. This can mean new methods, new theoretical models, new sites of research, and new research practices. The responses included the following, for example:

- "Finding new and better ways to get to know and understand the world"
- "The use of new methodological tools, as well as the use of traditional tools in a different way to achieve improved results in all the aspects of the research process"

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- "It means undertaking creative and multi-method research designs that enables you to collect richer data"
- "An approach to knowledge production that is creative, novel either in its combinations of methods, analysis or applications"
- "The creation of new ways to respond to the specific necessities of knowledge production, whether it be new forms of producing information or new ways to interpret the already existing information"
- "It means being able to engage with institutions, individual and communities in ways that best allow us to gain meaningful information about their practices and their knowledge"
- "Using traditional methods (survey, interview, focus group and participant observations) to look at new areas"
- "Methodological innovation could involve new methodologies, experimental or hybrid methodologies"
- "Using a new/uncommon method to elicit data through a participatory approach."
- "New ways to answer difficult questions"
- "It could involve new ways of collecting or analyzing data. It may involve the development of new techniques"
- "Producing knowledge and practice using novel and creative methods"
- "'Innovation' may then lie more in bringing existing methods into conversation, and being open about the limits of integrating methods, arguably accepting that differing methods run in parallel rather than combination, instead of seeking to invent new methods"
- "It may involve the development of new techniques, but more commonly would be the application of methods that are used in other fields to an area of research in which the methods had heretofore not been used"

Others suggested that innovation offered an opportunity to entirely rethink the research process and our relationships with research participants. Many of the researchers working on Hub projects see innovation as an opportunity to make their research more participant centred:

- "It means listening to those you are gathering data from and following their leading in identifying importance and significance"
- "Methodological innovation for our project is to upturn existing exploitative and extractive research practices that exist in conflict-affected environments. We want to explore women's rights in post-conflict environments in a way that doesn't reiterate existing hierarchies or create new ones. We want every stage of our project, right from research design to publications to our citation practices, to reflect more participatory, non-hierarchical, and feminist methods of engagement"

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- "It could mean a lot of things – I guess the version that appeals to me would be methods that increase meaningful forms of participation and feedback from those whose experiences I will be writing about"
- "It means being creative and reflexive in how we collect, analyse, and even conceive of 'data'"

Many of our researchers are employing innovative methods in their Hub research projects. This includes:
- the development of interactive spatial maps showing female migrants' mobility in the city
- the use of mixed methods to look at the role of language (poetry, proverbs, songs) and images (photos, media)
- the use of arts-based methods such as creative writing as a tool to empower participants (as a means of expression), and Photovoice, which "provides a way for people involved with our project to define the terms/categories and ideas generated in the project"
- gaining access to processes and systems that are usually inaccessible to researchers and exploring the interplay between 'insider' and 'outsider' identity.
- producing new data or making existing data available in new formats (such as the digitisation of archives)
- facilitating a theatre performance, from conception to scriptwriting and performance
- researching the researchers (and finding that researchers do not necessarily make for very responsive research participants)
- producing radio talk shows
- conducting research in 'real time', following live-streamed news and social media feeds, supplemented with communications with local leaders on the ground, and
- applying mixed methods and multi-level analyses to topics and data where this hasn't been done before, such as on land tenure regimes.

Challenges

Unsurprisingly, the key challenge currently facing Hub researchers is the COVID-19 pandemic. Plans for in-person interviews and focus groups have had to be rethought, and exchanges between colleagues (such as the Hub Conventions) have shifted online. Limited scope for travel means researchers have been unable to do in-person data collection, which has impacted interviews, focus groups, archival research, fieldwork and surveys. It has also limited opportunities for researchers to observe decision-making processes, such as parliamentary hearings and UN meetings.

The pandemic has also created new ethical considerations; as one researcher explained, "We are still grappling with the uncertainty and the ethics of doing fieldwork given the context that the world is in and particularly the context that already vulnerable populations might be in". Another noted that "The pressures created by the pandemic have, we suspect, placed stress on civil society, which may influence their capacity to collaborate".

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Some researchers have found that this shift online actually means that they can interview more people than they had initially anticipated. However, the move to digital data collection has created its own issues. One problem is that it can be more difficult to ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of data, with the concomitant concern that research participants may face surveillance, harassment or violence as a result of working with us. It can also complicate gaining local permissions, accessing participants and documents, and training on-the-ground data collectors.

Other challenges are more intrinsic to research conducted in post-conflict contexts. For example, there can be security risks for both researchers and research participants in holding interviews and focus group discussions in former conflict zones, especially when the research relates to the conflict itself. Additionally, digital data collection and storage (such as the digitisation of historical records) can be time-consuming and labour intensive, as can managing large quantities of data or documents.

Access to data and research participants is also an issue that many researchers face. One project, for example, purchased software to collect data from social media; however, the software firm went bankrupt earlier this year and our researchers lost access. In another project, the researchers are relying in part on freedom of information requests, which often result in partial or delayed responses, if they are granted at all. Finally, access to research participants may be restricted, as some of our researchers seeking to interview migrant domestic workers or live-in caregivers have found.

Conclusion

The methods that Hub researchers are adopting draw from a wide range of disciplines, traditions and approaches. In terms of collecting data, traditional methods (such as interviews and surveys) are being used alongside innovative methods (such as craft workshops). Working in post-conflict contexts tends to create challenges in and of itself, particularly around security and access; these obstacles have only been compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic. Ensuring that an ethos of innovation runs through the Hub methodologically has, however, helped many of our researchers to respond quickly and collaboratively to these challenges.

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