

Ethnographic Fieldwork
Final Paper
Covid-19 Pandemic: An Anthropologist's Experience
By
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The world is never “normal” and most anthropologists realize this, even before engaging in fieldwork. When we, as anthropologists, think about doing fieldwork it is usually in some far away, strange, and even exotic landscape. We think about learning languages, culture, and ways of life from a small remote population somewhere in the world. But doing fieldwork in this “typical” way is not only impossible right now but it is also not needed during this pandemic. We have a perfectly good place to go do fieldwork right now, and that place is our own home town. Our town, our state, our country is currently gripped by this unwavering and non-discriminatory Covid-19 virus.

The first report of this virus was made public in China on November 17, 2019 but the information was not released to the world until December.¹ The information at that time was of an unknown pneumonia like virus and was thought to be contained in China.² Then the virus began to spread until it was all over Europe and then it made its way to the United States. We began to see news reports from Europe, how people were sick and dying because of this virus. It was almost like watching some TV show or movie about this horrible virus and what it was doing to people. It was unreal to most of us until the reports began coming in about our own country and our own state. Some of us stayed in denial for weeks, and some are still in denial, but deep down, we all knew it was real. So how did our country, state, and city deal with this pandemic? Most people, in my opinion, lost their minds!!!

¹ Helen Davidson, “First Covid-19 Case Happened in November, China Government Records Show,” 13 March 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/13/first-covid-19-case-happened-in-november-china-government-records-show-report?CMP=share_btn_link, accessed 15 April 2020.

² Erin Shumaker, “Timeline: How Coronavirus Got Started,” 9 April 2020, <https://abcnews.go.com/Health/timeline-coronavirus-started/story?id=69435165>, accessed 15 April 2020.

When our area began to deal with the virus it didn't seem like there would be an enormous change in our daily activities. We were still going to work and school, living our normal lives in East Tennessee. The isolation of this area, I believe, is part of the reason why we were late in reaction to the virus. But in a short period of time things changed drastically. Since I work and teach at ETSU, my first experience dealing with the impact of the virus was centered around ETSU. We received emails from the university the second week in March telling everyone that it was likely we would not come back from spring break and the rest of the semester would be conducted online. But almost everyone still expected to be able to go into our offices and work. We were told that operations of the university would continue as normal. But by March 20, 2020 we received an email stating that the university would go into a "hard shutdown" by the end of the week. We were told to set up remote access to our desktops and collect any files, papers, equipment we needed and plan to start working from home. I believe this has been the hardest thing for me to deal with during this pandemic.

I didn't have to worry about getting paid or losing my job. I had to worry about how I was going to do my job at home with small office space and living in a small house with five people. Working and studying from home has been the biggest problem for me. I am thankful I didn't have to worry about keeping a job but it has been truly difficult for me to adjust to not going to work. I have been going to a job since I was sixteen years old. I have grown accustomed to working in quiet and having everything organized but that is not possible in this situation. I know this is not an issue compared to what many people in our state and country have dealt with during this pandemic but it is the biggest issue for me personally.

I was lucky enough to have bought groceries before the quarantine really affected my area, so it was a week or two later before I experienced issues with getting supplies. I had heard

rumors and watched news reports about the hoarding and over spending but I am a skeptic and didn't really want to believe that people were behaving in this manner. But I had a real wake-up call when I finally had to go get supplies. The first observations occurred at the Elizabethton Wal-Mart. I went in to get supplies and groceries but the shelves were empty in most areas of the store. Some things were of course still in stock but my first stop was in health and beauty department. I needed ibuprofen, when I arrived at the aisle, there was not one type of ibuprofen on the shelf, it was empty.

I was in shock, I am 49 years old and I have never experienced anything like this in my lifetime. I went on to the pet aisle, my dog and cat needed food, only to find that most of that was non-existent as well. I realized then that this situation was worse than I had ever imagined. I am a historian so naturally my mind began to make comparisons to history, which of course were about the Great Depression. I remember my grandmother talking about shortages of supplies and standing in line for food when she was a young girl during the depression. I never thought I would experience anything close to what she did in my lifetime, I was wrong. My adventure through Wal-Mart continued to get increasingly difficult as I witnessed people packing their carts full of supplies, and not just one of each like me but multiples of each item. I had heard people were hoarding up toilet paper, which I didn't believe until I seen it with my own eyes. I didn't need toilet paper but I went down the aisle just to see if it was true. It was true and I observed people with carts full of toilet paper, paper towels and cleaning supplies. I am still unclear on the toilet paper issue and will leave that to a modern cultural anthropologist to figure out when this is over.

I believe the most terrible thing I witnessed was people being mean to other people, stealing from other people's carts or fighting over an item. I have not personally observed people

being mean to elderly customers but I read and heard about it through the news and social media. I was also shocked and angered by this reality. I can't imagine being mean to or taking from an elderly person because I thought I needed what they had in their cart more than they did at the time. My adventure to Wal-Mart was something I never wanted to experience again. Since the Wal-Mart trip did not yield the supplies I needed, I tried local. In particular a local butcher shop very close to my home. My husband and I went to get some meat about a week after the Wal-Mart adventure. We usually go to the butcher shop on the weekend, so this was a normal trip, but we were very surprised upon arriving at the butcher. The parking lot was full of cars and the store was full of local people buying meat and other food items. I observed one woman, who looked very financially stable, packing a cart full of any meat she could get her hands on in the store. She went to the cooler and just began taking all of the hamburger, beef tips and other meats that were out for sale.

There were people, including me and my husband, waiting in line to get into the cooler who didn't get to buy all the meat they needed because she took all of it and never asked if someone else wanted some of it. This really disturbed me, I am not sure if it was that she took the meat or that she didn't offer any to other people. I think I was in shock about the greed of people. I don't know why it shocked me because I know that people are greedy and selfish but I had never really experienced it like that, so up close and personal. Then my final shocker in the butcher shop was me running into my eighty-one-year-old uncle. I asked him why he was out and his answer was, I need toilet paper. He told me his son, my cousin, had been everywhere looking for toilet paper with no luck. It infuriated me that my elderly uncle was out in public looking for something that should have been readily available just about anywhere. But due to the hoarding behavior of people he was out taking a risk with his life. I immediately told him to

go home and that I would find him some toilet paper. My husband and I took another trip to Wal-Mart to find some toilet paper. We did find toilet paper at Wal-Mart but only because they had begun to regulate how much people could buy during a visit. We managed to get one 24 count of toilet paper for my uncle and aunt. This experience occurred only a week after my first adventure to Wal-Mart. But unfortunately, there were more experiences to come with how the quarantine brought out the greed of humanity.

My husband works for a local business owner and we realized that we might be facing a loss of income if the business had to close due to the shutdown issued by the government. He lost one day of work until the owner realized his business might be essential to some people because the shop my husband manages sells CBD, which many people rely on for pain relief or anxiety relief. This one little product saved the business from being closed. We were happy to receive the news about my husband being able to go back to work. But this brought up other issues, how was he going to be protected? My husband and his boss created a barrier of plexiglass and set it up at the door to the shop so that customers could not come into the store but could get the supplies they needed. But after the shop reopened my husband experienced other business owners coming to his shop being really rude and asking questions about why he was allowed to stay open and telling him they were going to report him to the state. This again shows the greed of people. I understand business owners being mad and upset because of loss of income but that is not a good reason to go to an essential business and make threats.

When I set down to put my notes and experiences together, I realized that these experiences had proven one thing to me that my faith in humanity had fallen to a non-existent level. I am thoroughly shocked and disappointed in humanity in general. This doesn't mean that I don't recognize people like health care workers, truckers, and other essential personnel that are

out there trying to help and make a difference and those people who have not acted in greed. But after experiencing the greed of people in my own local area and hearing news reports of the behavior in other areas of our nation, I can't get past what humans are doing to other humans. The greed of humanity is unbelievably out of control and will be the downfall of our reign as top species on this planet if something doesn't change for the better. I sincerely hope that this pandemic and the changes it has caused teach humanity one thing and that is to be humbler and more caring for our fellow human beings. But for now, my faith in humanity is only a glimmer of what it used to be, but that glimmer still holds steady like the candle I light every night for all of us.

References

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