

Pandemic Positionalities, OR How do you locate a virus?

“A reportable event is an adverse event or incident that has the potential to be classified by the IRB as an unanticipated problem posing risks to participants or others.”

Earlier that evening we are texting, asking each other what is reportable during a pandemic. Do we say that we might be putting people at risk because we have heard there is a new virus – the coronavirus? Someone writes back, saying they think we’ll be ok – the metro doors were being wiped down today when they were heading to their field site, so things should be under control. Maybe we shouldn’t go in, I suggest (selfishly? as much for myself as someone who is severely immunocompromised, as for everyone else I’ll come in contact with?). It is still early in the pandemic, months before all kinds of IRB guidelines develop, so a third person writes in to their advisor to ask if they should stop fieldwork at hospitals. Their advisor responds, *“No, I wouldn’t let COVID sit in the passenger seat, to be honest. You don’t have to report it to the IRB, or stop your research – I would just continue all of this work, if I were you.”*

*“*NOTE: Benign behavior events are brief in duration, harmless, painless, not physically invasive: not likely to have a significant adverse lasting impact on the subjects; not offensive or embarrassing.”*

This is no longer the start of the pandemic, we reason – it is maybe even the end? Where we are it has been a few months since the lockdown ended, and there is certainly the question of going back in to get work done. More accurately, there are questions coming from field sites about why some of us are still hesitant to physically come in and get work done. We negotiate this with each other before we negotiate it with our participants, wondering what to say or ask in a way that doesn’t sound foolish. “Interviews are benign behavior events, right?,” someone asks – and we all agree that they could be benign, but that they could – should – perhaps be online? We don’t know as much as we’d like about this virus yet. COVID makes us very fragile, someone else jokes – the precarity of our lives is now heightening our sensitivity to what life is all about.

“I think someone I interviewed the other day is really sick, though,” – is another text that follows. “We didn’t do this interview in person, but we did meet in-person for another thing before the interview.”

“A major deviation is a deviation from the IRB approved protocol, human research regulations, or human research university policies that adversely affects

- *The rights of participants OR*
- *The welfare of participants, including **actual** or **potential substantive** harm, OR*
- *The scientific integrity of the study.”*

A year and some into the pandemic the boundaries of harm are still blurry. There are so few conversations about what kinds of things mitigate harm, such as about how we can access insurance as doctoral students from global North universities in ways our participants often can’t.