

Leverhulme Doctoral Scholarships Programme for Interdisciplinary Resilience Studies (PIRS) University of Southampton

RECRUITMENT CYCLE for studentships starting: October 2024

SUPERVISORY TEAM

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STUDENTSHIP PROJECT TITLE

Resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic: Evidence from the Mass
Observation Archive

OVERVIEW

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Mass Observation Archive collected thousands of diaries and other writing from British residents. This project will combine methods from human geography and the digital humanities to analyse this large qualitative dataset and to advance understandings of individual and group resilience during pandemic-like societal disruptions.

SUMMARY

The COVID-19 pandemic was one of the most significant disruptions to human life across the globe for a century or more. During the pandemic, the Mass Observation Archive collected thousands of diaries and other biographical writing from British residents. This project will analyse Mass Observation's COVID-19 Collections for evidence of how individuals, families, friendship groups, and communities responded to the shock of the pandemic; and the factors explaining why some individuals and groups

responded – to bereavement, illness, social distancing, lockdown, shielding, fulough, home-schooling – with more or less brittleness or elasticity. Theoretical frameworks and methods of analysis will be drawn from human geography and the digital humanities, and may include: systems approaches to resilience; conjunctural approaches to crises; narrative analysis; sentiment estimation and tracking; entity recognition of institutions, places, and social relationships; and digital forensic analysis. Training will be provided in approaches and techniques as appropriate. The student will develop skills and experience in organising and analysing large qualitative datasets. The project will advance understandings of how individuals and groups respond to shocks like pandemics, and why some respond with more resilience. Findings and recommendations will contribute to preparedness for future pandemics and other crises (social, economic, environmental). In communicating these findings and recommendations, the student will benefit from placement on the Programme for Interdisciplinary Resilience Studies (PIRS). They will also benefit from membership of the Economy, Society, Governance (ESG) Research Group in the School of Geography and Environmental Science, and Southampton Digital Humanities (SDH) in the School of Humanities.

PROJECT CONCEPT

The COVID-19 pandemic was one of the most significant disruptions to human life across the globe for a century or more. It was first and foremost a tragic event involving the early deaths of millions of people. From a resilience research perspective, however, it was also a natural experiment in which people, organisations, and societies were subjected to the same crisis or shock – mediated, of course, by multiple intervening factors – and responses could be observed; not only immediate responses, but also responses as they developed over the period following the first cases identified in late 2019.

This project focuses on data collected by the Mass Observation Archive during 2020 and 2021. Mass Observation (MO) has a long history of collecting diaries and other biographical writing about everyday life from British residents. During the pandemic, it collected the following items: roughly 8,000 ‘day diaries’ kept by members of the public on 12 May 2020 and 12 May 2021; over 2,000 responses from MO panellists to sets of open-answer questions asked by the archivists (known as ‘directives’) on topics including lockdown, testing, and vaccination; roughly 1,000 diaries collected from older people by U3A during the first year of the pandemic; and over 30 pieces of biographical writing collected from marginalised people – homeless people, addicts, prisoners – by Paperchains. All these items make up MO’s COVID-19 collections.

What can these collections tell us about resilience during the pandemic (and more broadly)? The puzzle they pose is that some individuals, families, and communities appear to have responded to the virus and associated public

health measures – social distancing, lockdown, shielding, furlough, home schooling etc. – with more or less brittleness; or, put positively, with more or less elasticity. The promise of MO's COVID-19 collections is that in them could be found explanatory mechanisms for this variation; in them could be found new evidence for what makes individuals and groups resilient to societal disruptions – not only pandemics (of which there are likely to be more in the coming decades), but also wars, economic crises, extreme weather events, and so on.

Objectives

The study's objectives are to analyse MO's COVID-19 collections:

1. To describe how individuals, families, friendship groups, and communities responded to the shock of the pandemic – both initially and over time.
2. To identify the factors explaining why some individuals and groups responded to societal disruption with more or less brittleness or elasticity.
3. To establish the role played by writing for MO in these responses, since previous studies have suggested that writing for MO is a purposeful activity, a social and cultural practice, encouraging and facilitating writers to achieve things – whether identity formation, or relationship building, or positioning in relation to authorities and institutions (Sheridan et al 2000).

Methods

An interdisciplinary theoretical framework will be constructed from systems approaches to resilience that are well-established in human geography (e.g. Martin and Sunley 2007) and conjunctural approaches to crises that are more commonly found in cultural studies (e.g. Clarke 2023). This framework will guide the analysis without determining it. The MO dataset is large and unstructured, meaning that some degree of deductive shape will be helpful. Given MO's historical roots in anthropology, however, some degree of inductive freedom will also be appropriate.

Most of the material in MO's COVID-19 collections is biographical writing. A well-established mode of analysing such writing in geography and related disciplines is narrative analysis (Clarke and Barnett 2023). However, MO's COVID-19 collections are significantly larger than any other MO collections. They pose methodological challenges to scholars used to analysing relatively small samples of writing for MO using narrative analysis. In this interdisciplinary project, therefore, techniques will also be used from the digital humanities, especially corpus-linguistic techniques (see Salway and Baker 2020). Furthermore, lessons will be taken from the digital humanities regarding knowledge organisation. This will be a large dataset to handle: almost 50,000 sides of text in total, or almost 20 million words. The digital humanities will offer options for sorting and coding such a dataset, including: sentiment estimation and tracking; entity recognition of institutions, places, and social relationships; and detecting fragments of writing practices using digital forensic analysis.

How the analysis proceeds will depend on the interests and skills developed by the student during their first year of PhD study when they will interact with supervisors from human geography and the digital humanities, and other students and supervisors in the interdisciplinary doctoral programme. At this early stage, we can say that analysis will involve: sampling of the writers using metadata provided by MO (covering age, gender, occupation, and region); cross-sectional analysis of the day diaries kept on 12 May 2020 and 12 May 2021 (since many of these diaries were submitted to MO by individuals with no prior or ongoing relationship to MO); and longitudinal analysis of panellist responses to MO directives during 2020 and 2021 (since individual panel members wrote for MO every three months or so, and this writing can be used to follow the development of responses to the pandemic over time).

Wider implications

The research will bring new approaches to resilience studies, including conjunctural analysis of crises and corpus techniques for analysing large qualitative datasets. It will advance understandings of how individuals and groups respond to shocks like pandemics, and why some individuals and groups respond with more or less brittleness or elasticity. The interdisciplinary context of the doctoral programme will help the student to ensure findings and insights are communicated widely.

The research will also have implications for MO studies – an interdisciplinary field of enquiry centred on the Mass Observation Archive. There is much interest in MO's COVID-19 collections. The Wellcome Trust funded a project to make them available for analysis ('Mass Observing COVID-19'). The British Academy funded a seminar series on 'Using Mass Observation's COVID-19 collections', which identified numerous methodological challenges. By addressing some of these challenges, the proposed study will advance MO studies, open up MO's COVID-19 collections to further analysis by future researchers, and contribute to emerging histories of the pandemic.

Contribution to interdisciplinary resilience studies:

The project will combine approaches and methods from human geography (systems approaches to resilience; conjunctural approaches to crises; narrative analysis of biographical writing) and the digital humanities (sentiment estimation and tracking; entity recognition of institutions, places, and social relationships; digital forensic analysis). It will be truly interdisciplinary, with two supervisors in two different groups (Economy, Society, Governance; Southampton Digital Humanities), schools, (Geography and Environmental Science; Humanities) and faculties (FELS; FAH).

The project will also bring perspectives from the social sciences and humanities to the wider field of resilience studies; for example, conjunctural analysis of crises, which emphasises the complexity of crises, their

overdetermination by multiple factors, the different spatialities and temporalities of these multiple factors, and the role of cultural work (translation, articulation) in constructing crises *as crises* (in making meaning from events) and in governing responses to crises (in mobilising people towards more or less brittle/elastic responses).

Finally, it is worth noting that Mass Observation is itself an interdisciplinary research field. Over the decades, as a research organisation and archive, it has brought together scholars from anthropology, history, sociology, human geography, and other disciplines to debate and develop approaches to qualitative data analysis, everyday life studies, and the writing of social history. Therefore, the student will join an interdisciplinary community of scholars not only at Southampton (associated with the Programme for Interdisciplinary Resilience Studies), but also beyond Southampton (associated with the Mass Observation Archive).

Please list and describe any specific/additional technical training or support to undertake and successfully deliver this project. *Note that students recruited into this programme will undertake a bespoke training curriculum. Students and their supervisory teams will also identify generic skills gaps to address through training courses offered by the University's Doctoral College.*

Depending on the student's academic background, they may need technical training in organising and analysing large qualitative datasets. This may involve supervisor-supported use of generally available training resources (e.g. introductions to software packages on LinkedIn Learning). It may involve participation in workshops co-ordinated by Southampton Digital Humanities (e.g. 'Working with textual data' or 'Data visualisation'). It may involve auditing of one or two UG or PGT modules (e.g. LING2013 Corpus Linguistics, or the new DIGI6XXX Methods in Humanities Data Science). And it may involve completion of a short course or two provided by the CPD unit of this or another university (e.g. in recent years, we've paid for students to complete short courses in using Nvivo and similar software – at roughly £300 per course).
