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notes from the field

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Working Together Apart: Remote Research Collaboration in the Time of COVID

*Erin Dean, Enock Makupa
and Kristin Phillips*

We are three social scientists, connected by broad but diverse interests in energy, the environment and social change. In late February 2020, we wrapped up a field research methods workshop in Tanzania with University of Dodoma students and said our temporary farewells, making plans to continue our work together in a few months. Those plans, like all plans that spring, were quickly upended by the COVID-19 pandemic and its ongoing rampage through our communities in both the United States and Tanzania.

Erin and Kristin are cultural anthropologists at New College of Florida and Emory University, respectively; Makupa (who is generally called by his last name) is a geographer in the Department of Geography and Environmental Studies at the University of Dodoma in Tanzania. In 2019, Erin and Kristin were awarded a National Science Foundation grant to study renewable energy development in Tanzania, focusing on gender and energy justice. We contacted Makupa, our colleague and research collaborator, about incorporating research on youth, climate change and energy education into the

project. The workshop with the Dodoma students was part of our initial effort, and we were all inspired by the enthusiasm and insights of the students. Erin and Kristin returned to the United States excited to continue and expand this work with students in subsequent research trips.

As the weeks of fear turned to months, however, it became clear that his U.S. colleagues could not rejoin Makupa for fieldwork. The three of us discussed our options for continuing research together. We decided to proceed by scheduling remote, synchronous interviews with university students and faculty in Makupa's department at the University of Dodoma. In June 2021, we conducted 40 remote interviews that aimed to explore energy biographies, energy education and perceptions of climate change and climate futures among young people and their mentors in Tanzania.

From the beginning of the pandemic, ethnographic researchers around the world have been sharing resources and advice for sustaining research agendas through virtual communication. For some, this involved developing projects focused on virtual worlds, studying meaning-making in online spaces or applying methods designed for remote or socially distanced research. But researchers already in the midst of in-person field projects were faced with postponing work or drastically rethinking methodological plans, already painstakingly plotted across the continents of our collaboration. Digital ethnography is not new to anthropology, of course, but the pandemic has made these studies and approaches more visible and useful to scholars who, like us, had not considered them previously.

For example, the multi-year, multi-sited and multi-media project *The Anthropology of Smart Phones and Smart Ageing*,¹ conducted by scholars from University College London, gives beautifully detailed and nuanced insight into the increasingly important role of smart phones in contemporary social interactions around the world. As the pandemic progressed, cell phones proved vital to preserving social relationships as well as providing education access, health information and business opportunities during lockdowns and social distancing.² In our pivot to remote interviews, we found that cell phones shaped the research in two distinct ways: by determining who could participate and by creating interview spaces that were both distant and intimate.

As Yael Navarro suggests,³ the “can do” nature of advice for continuing ethnographic work through increased digital scholarship must often be balanced by some “can’t do” reality checks. Given the University of Dodoma students’ dorm residence and access to smart phones and internet connections, we were able to reach them for online interviews. Challenges with cost and connection remained, however. We provided interviewees with a data bundle to enable them to participate and experiment with video conferencing apps such as Zoom, but the bandwidth limitations meant we often defaulted to smart phone connections through WhatsApp. And, of course, the nature of our contact with the students also changed through these mediated interviews. As we reached out to students from our home offices, they joined us through precarious internet connections or spotty cellular networks, speaking from their dorm rooms or living spaces, rather than the

public places we would have used for in-person interviews. The distance between us was underscored by the dropped words, the frozen screens and the misunderstood questions and answers, but the intimacy of the interviews was increased by our virtual presence in each others’ personal spaces.

In her contribution to the widely circulated crowd-sourced document, “Doing Ethnography in a Pandemic,”⁴ Alexia Maddox describes two ways online interviews are different from in-person interviews: (1) the role of technology in facilitating the interaction and (2) the approach the interviewer takes to building rapport and curating the interview. As we now work together remotely to analyze and write up the rich conversations we experienced, we have also found ourselves reflecting on these differences, on the medium of research and on its implications for the nature of our collaboration. Here we present an edited version of an online dialogue that considers what social distance means for the ethnographic value of “being there” from our disparate locations and perspectives and how it has shaped the ethnographic value of “collaboration” across the physical distance between North America and East Africa, as well as the historical distance of fraught research relations between the Global North and the Global South.

On the Significance of Shared History

Erin: How much has our previous collaboration enabled us to do remote work? If we hadn’t known each other and worked to-



Image 1.

gether before, do you think we could have done a project like this?

Makupa: I think it might be difficult because whenever you establish some sort of project, you need an initial meeting, and knowing each other already helps a lot. Imagine you just send an email to someone asking to collaborate to do research. Now, without engaging someone previously, it is almost impossible for somebody to catch up. For me, I found it was really interesting because I had previously been introduced to Kristin. And we had time to meet in Dodoma and talk about what

she was doing, and we maintained communication. And then I met Erin, too, and we three met together in Tanzania several times over the past two years to develop mutual interests, ask questions and engage together.

Kristin: Yes, and I would describe that as developing good faith between us — that there is a genuine kind of affinity and friendship. I don't want to overemphasize this, but in my mind there is a desire to do right by each other that has been developed. On that note, two other pieces of the foreground to this are that Erin and I did conduct some in-

interviews with university students in Tanzania already, which I think helped us with some of our topic development and question development. Second, you [Makupa] invited us to speak to your students in Tanzania as part of their field-based program. We both had students tell us that they had met us already and seen us speak, so when we interviewed people we weren't strangers to them. They had a sense they knew us already. Even some of the faculty we interviewed had been at that workshop, and so those were some other precursors to remote collaboration.

On Language & Technology

Makupa: Also, I think language is really important. I remember when I told them to contact you about the interviews, they asked me, "Would we use the English language?" And I said, "You can use Swahili with these people." They were so much more comfortable because of that. They knew that when they wanted to give a little explanation in Swahili,

you would be in a position to understand. It gave them confidence. I see language understanding between particular people matters when we want to do this kind of remote study.

Erin: That's interesting because, from my perspective, language was a challenge. It was difficult to understand over internet connections that were not great, and we ended up speaking mostly English. I could ask a clarifying question in Swahili, so that was helpful, but it was still sometimes hard for us to hear and comprehend each other.

Makupa: That gets to what I think of as the biggest challenge of remote collaboration. To me it is connectivity. Connectivity and access to the internet. Particularly in Tanzania, this is difficult. Even here in my office, I am using a mobile phone. It's not efficient. Even at the university we have the challenge of unreliable internet. These things matter when you think about doing remote research. Yes, that can be a big challenge.



Image 2.

Kristin: Yes, I experienced connectivity challenges in my own house. We had scheduled these interviews early in the morning, 6 or 7 am [in Atlanta]. I had planned to do them at home, so I didn't have to go to my office. And a few times I had to cancel and postpone the interview until I could get to my office because my own internet was not reliable. Of course that is even more of an issue for the students and for you. But even for me it was an issue and sometimes affected the quality of the conversation.

Erin: Even though connection was a challenge, the students were interested in trying technologies like Zoom. In the end, more times than not we ended up just using WhatsApp because of the poor connection. But they were still excited to experiment with new communication technologies, too.

Kristin: Because we ended up using WhatsApp, in many ways that has shaped the future relationship. I don't know about you, Erin, but I have received a number of WhatsApp greetings from the students we have interviewed. So, the interview relationship extends into the long distance. One of the students reached out to me over WhatsApp about five months after the interview to talk about ideas for her thesis. Other students will check in and say, "How are you?" So it's interesting how that technology shapes the relationship. That wouldn't have been possible with Zoom. I think it's pretty cool.

Makupa: It's really interesting that through activities for research, you create a friendship network. And equally with this young generation of university students, they feel happy and proud to contact you and be

added to your contacts. They loved it. Most of them said they enjoyed the interviews. It was a new experience to have a phone interview, so it was very interesting for them. And for my interviews with students, I used the same approach. [School was out of session] so rather than bring them into my office, I interviewed them over the phone.

On Logistics and Invisible Labor

Kristin: Makupa, do you mind if I ask a question? You did a lot of the scheduling work, and I feel that was maybe a lot of invisible labor, the kind of labor we see the benefits of but not the costs. I'm wondering what it was like to have to schedule students and mediate that process?

Makupa: Actually, most of the students were from my university, so it was easier to access them than for someone who was not faculty here. We had identified that we wanted to talk to students who were studying issues of energy or climate and also that we wanted a diversity in terms of where they came from so that we could talk to students from different regions of Tanzania. I identified students in my own department, and then I spoke to the heads and professors of other departments. We decided it was best to work through the organizational structure of the institution, the people who handle the concerns of students. So, they contacted the class representatives from each class. I invited all of the class representatives to my office and explained the project and what students would talk to you about. Then they could present the information to their classes and interested students could sign up to be interviewed.



Image 3.

Kristin: It is significant how much your relationships mattered and how your knowledge of the structures of student organization helped to recruit students. The fact that you are embedded in these networks was really important to the success of the project.

Erin: One other thing you mentioned about doing interviews with students at a university is that it is a centralized place to talk with students from all over the country. Obviously there's a certain amount of privilege because they're at university — so they're not necessarily representative of their home locations — but it was still really useful to have that diverse sample.

On Remote Research and the Future of Our Collaboration

Makupa: I think it's really great to make progress on this project and lay the groundwork for future collaborations. Also collaborations between our institutions: between Tanzanian academic institutions and other institutions in the world. So, these initial collaborations should continue.

Erin: Do you foresee more *remote* collaboration?

Makupa: It can be both. The remote collaboration is how we cope with the limitations of the existing situation. But for me, the true kinds of collaborations need to be more than remote. In person, you can observe the environment and get a sense of people's lives. But when you do the remote thing, you end up like this: on screens.

Kristin: Yes, I agree. When we sit here in this meeting, we are facing each other, but I think it is really valuable to sit beside each other and encounter things together, researching alongside each other. Being able to share those perspectives is something that being in person allows us to do much better than what we can accomplish remotely.

Makupa: Engaging together in collaboration really helps. Faculty here in Tanzania, we find ourselves knowing a lot of information, but it is not easy to find ways to communicate and publish it. Also, sometimes journals aren't as

interested in the thinking of one individual, but there is an advantage if you have different perspectives and different ideas about the data.

Erin: Yes, it is really useful to have different perspectives on the same data that we are collecting together.

Makupa: I cooperate with other scholars and media in our area, and sometimes there are failures to understand some cultural issues. So collaborations are an incredible opportunity to learn from each other.

Erin: One interesting example of that was when we were asking students about electricity challenges at the university. Some of them would say, “Everything is fine, it’s great.” We started to wonder why their response seemed so different from faculty responses. But there were cultural reasons why they were reluctant to say there were any challenges, to speak negatively about their institution or their home situation to outsiders.

So, I thought there was useful contextualization that came through our discussion of the research and its results.

Makupa: Yes. With collaboration, everyone is learning. ...

Conclusion

While virtual interviews are only a small piece of a complex toolkit, we are inspired by the creative and innovative approaches of so many of our colleagues and students working in digital ethnography. Further, we take seriously Günel, Varma and Watanabe’s call for developing a “patchwork ethnography”⁵ that recognizes the competing demands and extraordinary circumstances facing the communities in which we work and which we ourselves face. The three of us are not only researchers but also parents, teachers, mentors, spouses, colleagues and friends, and we continue to consider methodological ap-



Image 4.

proaches that honor these multiple roles and responsibilities.

Although we do not find remote interviews to be an adequate permanent substitution for our face-to-face collaborations, future ethnographic research will undoubtedly be approached differently as anthropologists collectively rethink not just what is customary but what is possible and what is ethical. The “field” continues to be a site of contestation and innovation, and the online interactions that increasingly characterize daily life from many people in the world will be part of that reimagining.

Our experiences suggest that online technologies offer possibilities to flatten some of the hierarchical and ceremonial relations of fieldwork in a way that may offer new structures for voice, communication and connection. At the same time, this project has also emphasized for us that the global research landscape remains uneven and that the disparity in resources, facilities and professional opportunities between scholars located in the Global North and those in the Global South is an entrenched problem that won’t be overcome by cooperative projects alone. The continuing inequalities in access to technology (and reliable energy) mean that digital and virtual research can reinforce these existing vulnerabilities and hierarchies. Moreover, their reduction of the research relationship to a single angle, so easily and quickly turned on and off, may render engagement less robust.

For now, we will continue to use digital technologies to build a platform for deeper research interaction, knowledge-sharing and co-authorship between and across our all-too-often insular academic worlds. We are eager for the time when we can be back together in person, but we are also happy to further ex-

plore these options for research, when “being there” and “working together” must consist of something other than physical presence.

Notes

1. <http://www.depts-live.ucl.ac.uk/anthropology/assa/discoveries>
2. Anna Baral, “Lockdown and Phones in Uganda.” 2020. <https://anthrocovid.com/2020/06/16/lockdown-and-phones-in-uganda/>.
3. Yael Navaro, “Methods and Social Reflexivity in the time of Covid-19.” 2020. <http://blog.wennergren.org/2020/06/the-future-of-anthropological-research-ethics-questions-and-methods-in-the-age-of-covid-19-part-i/>.
4. Debra Lupton, “Doing Fieldwork in a Pandemic.” 2021. <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1lxr4WwG5DBs6GYBm03tlmB6uwR2RbgaStRnLUNljDxA/edit#>.
5. Gökçe Günel, Saiba Varma, and Chika Watanabe, “A Manifesto for Patchwork Ethnography.” 2020. <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/a-manifesto-for-patchwork-ethnography>.

Erin Dean is Associate Professor of Anthropology at New College of Florida. Her research explores the intersections among environment, development and inequality in island Zanzibar and mainland Tanzania.

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