

Bridging a Pandemic-Sized Distance: Community-Based and Participatory Research During COVID-19

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The spread of SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11, 2020. In the following days and weeks, those who were able to do so began to figure out how to navigate the world in digital and distanced ways: leaving behind offices for improvised at-home workspaces, taking receipt of groceries and other supplies ordered online, truly dining *out* at outdoor tables and bubble-like spaces, and many other adaptive behaviors to slow the spread of COVID-19. While these efforts did protect human health, in two years, nearly 15 million deaths worldwide were directly or indirectly associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, with millions more sickened or suffering with long-term complications and symptoms (WHO 2022).

As we enter the third year of this crisis and the pandemic turns endemic, we as anthropologists, social scientists, and practitioners consider how our work has also become digital and distanced. In the papers of this special issue, we and our co-authors reflect on how we adapted our research methods and practices so that we could connect with study communities sheltering in place, and we consider the ways in which community-based research practices may be altered moving forward. As we do, we also pause to recognize the immense privilege it is to have the space and capacity to extract lessons from a crisis and tragedy that has upended people's lives, leaving so many struggling with day-to-day survival.

Researchers who conduct community-based participatory research (CBPR) or otherwise rely on community engagement tools and methodologies to collect research data have long prioritized in-person, face-to-face interactions in their work. They rely on body language, leaning in when others speak,

and making eye contact to forge the connections needed for a trusting and meaningful research partnership. Behaviors and shared experiences, like shaking hands and eating a meal, among others, that often occur during face-to-face meetings make important contributions towards the development of trust between researchers and community partners. When researchers spend time in the community beyond research activities, they demonstrate a commitment to the community that also deepens relationships (Springer and Skolarus 2019). In a survey of the academic community at a Swedish university designed to understand how well digital solutions replaced traveling, responding researchers found it impossible or difficult to perform fieldwork and establish new contacts when only digital solutions were available during the pandemic (Smidvik et al. 2020).

CBPR is not a method but rather a suite of "research activities carried out *in local settings* in which community members actively collaborate with professionally trained researchers" (italics ours; Duke 2020). There is limited consensus on the threshold of community participation required for a project to be labeled CBPR. In many cases, the work of applied anthropology includes local involvement of some kind, relying on rapport and trust-building as core building blocks. As an approach to research, CBPR extends this involvement such that the community provides oversight and actively participates in the research process. Other core principles that should characterize a CBPR project include drawing from community strengths and resources, facilitating equitable partnerships and power-sharing arrangements, and promoting co-learning and capacity building among all partners (Israel et al. 1998). Maintaining these and other closely held principles of CBPR was challenged when researchers and communities could not come together *in local settings* during COVID-19 and where community resources had to be directed toward pandemic-related issues and needs. This was especially so where the inequities of social and economic marginalization were laid bare by the pandemic's unbalanced distribution of burdens and outcomes across communities.

Like other types of collaboration, collaborative research conducted under the umbrella of CBPR often has an

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improvisational quality, where emergent relationships and information change or fill in the details of research plans as the project progresses. When travel to and gatherings in local community settings became impossible during the COVID-19 pandemic, researchers had to rely on these improvisation skills to navigate constantly changing guidelines, restrictions, and needs. After a two-year-long improvisation, what perspectives are we bringing to the third year of this disruption? What have anthropologists, other social scientists, and practitioners learned after navigating CBPR spaces during a pandemic for multiple years? What have these experiences taught us about ourselves, our work, and our communities? How have the core tenets of community-engaged research been challenged by the need to isolate and by living through a crisis? What lessons and modified methods might be retained in the future, even in “post-pandemic” times?

We asked the authors in this special issue to reflect on these questions and share their experiences of conducting research with communities during the pandemic. These authors were already actively engaged in the research they describe or just beginning it when the pandemic began. All the research projects were originally intended to be carried out in-person but had to be adapted for virtual settings due to the pandemic. The resulting seven papers emerge from research efforts across a spectrum of topics and communities and employ a variety of methodologies, from ethnography to focus groups to photovoice. They feature variable levels and types of community participation, all of which were transitioned to virtual engagements.

While the papers document a variety of pathways through which research objectives and methods were altered due to the pandemic, they describe similar difficulties and shared experiences. A number of common themes are evident across this collection. First, while community-engaged research conducted in shared spaces already requires flexibility, the authors note that they relied heavily on an ability to flex approaches and methods to meet the ever-shifting moment as the pandemic continued. In addition, the authors highlight a commitment to balance. They describe a necessity to find a balance between the daily stressors of life for their community partners as well as themselves during the pandemic and their commitments to their projects, many of which were designed prior to the global crisis. As researchers and practitioners who hold a deep concern for the communities with which we work and for whom deep personal connection with our partners is at the core of our commitment to community-based research, it can be very difficult to let go of our research plans as originally conceived and reimagine them without a face-to-face component. Though it took time to adjust to the new realities of interacting with partners virtually, many of the authors describe how their deep-rooted concerns for the well-being of their community partners translated into prioritizing the safety, confidentiality, and mental health of participants in virtual spaces. Third, several of the papers offer advice as to factors that must be taken into account when conducting virtual community-based research methods. For example,

several research teams emphasized the need for researchers to consider underlying inequities that exist in terms of which potential participants have access to the technology and internet bandwidth necessary to participate in virtual projects, how that can bias whose voices are being included in virtual processes, and what steps researchers can take to facilitate more representative and complete participation.

The first paper in this issue, “Virtually Engineering Community Engagement: Training for Undergraduate Engineers During the COVID-19 Pandemic” (Grace-McCaskey et al.), describes the authors’ experiences conducting an interdisciplinary project and community engagement during the pandemic. Designed to bring together undergraduate engineering students and community members from a rural community in eastern North Carolina to develop community-driven engineering designs that could address ongoing flooding and water quality issues, COVID-19 restrictions necessitated completing all public meetings, focus groups, and interviews virtually. This heavily limited the level and frequency of community engagement training and practice experienced by the students and reduced the extent of feedback and exchange between students and community members regarding the designs. Despite this, interviews conducted with the students revealed they felt they still gained experience and skills valuable to their professional and personal futures. The project contributes to a growing recognition of the need for and value of stakeholder engagement training for pre-professional engineers. In addition to student outcomes, the authors describe the implications for the community-driven design process and their own experiences as researchers and instructors trying to balance achieving the project goals as originally planned with safeguarding the students’ mental and emotional health, as well as their own, during an unprecedented and uncertain time.

In the next paper, Mathews et al. also describe a research effort focused on training, this one a program to train and retain palliative care lay advisors (PCLAs). Their paper, “Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on a Community-based, Palliative Care Lay Advisor Project for Latinos with Cancer,” discusses the impacts of COVID-19 on a CBPR project in rural eastern North Carolina to train PCLAs to deliver information on cancer symptom management and advance care planning to Latino adults with cancer. After their research was halted by their university due to COVID-19, the authors had to redesign their study, including extending the PCLA recruitment region and changing the mode of intervention delivery. The authors implemented innovative strategies to facilitate open communication, engagement, and support among PCLAs, study team members, advocacy groups, and the regional cancer center, and when PCLAs reported a need for COVID-19 information in Spanish among the study population, the project was able to pivot to provide these resources. These strategies allowed them to remain committed to CBPR principles while also meeting research aims and retaining 73 percent of PCLAs in the program during the pandemic. Further, reimagining recruitment efforts to include participation

by the regional cancer center resulted in adopting the goal of improving cultural care for Latino patients at the center in the coming year.

A similar commitment to and continued emphasis on the tenets of CBPR, including authentic engagement and the establishment of trust between community and academic partners, allowed Black et al. to effectively adapt their photovoice methods to a virtual environment. In their paper, “How Community-Based Participatory Research Can Thrive in Virtual Spaces: Connecting Through Photovoice,” the authors describe how they navigated the process of rapidly shifting their research design to conduct a virtual photovoice project with Black and White parents that explored parenting during the concurrent structural racism reckoning and COVID-19 pandemic in the United States. Relying on the principles of CBPR throughout the research and engagement processes, the project resulted in the building of meaningful and trusting relationships between community participants and research facilitators. The authors also highlight the lessons they learned through the research process and discuss what researchers should consider when deciding between in-person and virtual methodologies.

While Black et al. demonstrate how taking time to build trust and a shared experience can overcome the disconnect attendant in virtual meetings, work by Cook et al. illustrates there are benefits to a virtual format, including reduced research travel costs and greater flexibility in scheduling. In their paper, “The Zoom Where It Happens: Using a Virtual, Mixed-Methods Focus Group Approach to Assess Community Well-Being in Natural Resource Contexts,” Cook et al. describe their experience using a virtual, mixed-methods focus group approach to assess community well-being in commercial fishing communities in California. They describe the processes they used to develop and implement their approach, which allowed them to collect both quantitative and qualitative data from “community experts” about several aspects of community well-being. The focus groups were conducted over Zoom, using both open discussions as well as Zoom polling, and the authors discuss the deliberate steps they took to ensure the effective and open participation of focus group members, such as including time at the beginning of each focus group to demonstrate the functionality of the virtual platform and having multiple team members or staff available to fulfill various roles during the focus group, such as acting as facilitators, providing technical support, and managing Zoom features.

Hinds et al. also discuss the benefits they found when conducting their ethnographic fieldwork virtually. “Performing Interdisciplinary Coastal Research During a Pandemic” (Hinds et al.) describes the authors’ experience conducting interdisciplinary fieldwork examining social and ecological aspects of coral reef monitoring and restoration in the Florida Reef Tract. As in the other articles in this special issue, the project was originally intended to be carried out using in-person ethnographic research methods. Instead, Hinds et al. employed digital ethnographic methodologies. In the paper, the authors describe their process for redesigning their interview methods and strategies for data analysis, purposefully

making decisions by taking careful consideration of their interviewees’ safety, confidentiality, and emotional health in virtual settings, as well as that of the research team. The article concludes by positing potential implications for the future of interdisciplinary research.

To realize the benefits of working in digital and distanced ways, Harrington et al. found opportunities to bring their whole selves to the virtual medium. In “Building Community in Virtual Space: A Community Collaborative Sustains its Exploration of Environmental Justice and Migration Issues in the Midst of COVID-19,” Harrington et al. discuss how they continued their research and community organizing efforts around issues of migration, climate, and environmental justice in two North Carolina communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. The team used a legislative theatre process conducted over Zoom wherein university students and community members collaboratively created and workshopped scenes about food insecurity, language barriers, and access to health care and then identified policy recommendations. Like other authors in this issue, Harrington et al. (2022) note that flexibility was a key factor in maintaining partnership through the pandemic, including adjusting meeting plans to meet team members’ needs. They also describe their use of embodied practices and creating spaces to respond to what was happening within their physical selves to overcome the limitations of two-dimensional virtual meetings. While the authors make note of the limitations of virtual work, they outline the next steps for carrying their engagement and connection forward.

Finally, in the Capstone to this issue, Rivera-Gonzalez et al. remind us that, rather than a novel episode, the COVID-19 pandemic is a continuation of existing issues of disenfranchisement, vulnerability, and risk such that fieldwork during the pandemic underscores the ethical dilemmas of conducting ethnographic fieldwork in general. “Imagining an Ethnographic Otherwise During a Pandemic” (Rivera-Gonzalez et al.) offers a consideration of “breaking up” with normative conceptualizations of the field. The authors describe their attempts at ethical decision making regarding their engagements with the field when the pandemic shone a light on the constraints inherent in these efforts. If fieldwork is to be truly responsive to circumstances and collaborators’ needs, the authors posit that other than existing norms, including methods other than ethnography, are needed.

By drawing on their own experiences, the authors in this issue present what Rivera-Gonzalez et al. called “the messiness, doubts, and failures” inherent in CBPR and other forms of community-engaged applied anthropological methods and research during a major disruption and disaster like the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the papers in this special issue cover a breadth of topics across various research sites, they collectively illustrate the challenges, considerations, benefits, inequities, and trade-offs community-based researchers faced as they redefined research objectives and modified methodologies during the past two years. By holding fast to the important tenets of community-engaged work—such as emphasizing equitable partnerships and concern for the well-being of everyone

involved—but reimagining the work of realizing them in digital and distanced spaces, these authors created new knowledge and insights. Their work often led to outcomes they had not originally planned or proposed. By maintaining flexibility and committing to balance, two key qualities that echo throughout this special issue, they were able to stay engaged and connected with communities throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

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