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Editorial: Participatory action research in a time of COVID and beyond

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Editorial on the Research Topic

Participatory action research in a time of COVID and beyond

Participatory action research in a time of COVID and beyond

The outbreak of COVID-19 in early 2020 was a challenge for any practitioner intent on engaging in authentic dialogue for people-centered, place-based transformative praxis with the most marginalized in society—be they in Europe or the Majority World. The pandemic called on us to explore new and creative methodological approaches, to find new ways to manage the everyday challenges of project management and facilitation, and to stimulate critical thinking about the ethics and principles of undertaking PAR when travel is curtailed. It also raised important questions about the value of our work, in a context that was possibly altering the precepts of PAR itself, if not the need and reasons for it.

This Research Topic explores how researchers identifying their work as “participatory” adapted to the pandemic. It analyses how remote and virtual ways of conducting fieldwork affect the power imbalances in the researcher-participant relationship, and to what extent the pandemic might foster new opportunities to build capacity to conduct research. It further asks how knowledge co-production, co-facilitation, and co-analysis can be supported remotely, and which tools might be helpful. These questions are highly relevant to all scholar-activists and researcher-practitioners, whether using participatory or non-participatory approaches, and who will need to adapt in an increasingly uncertain future.

The 10 articles vary in scale and ambition - from a multi-actor project for city food systems in Belgium ([Medina-García et al.](#)) and across multiple cities ([Manderscheid et al.](#)) to a feminist food collective in Cape Town ([Paganini et al.](#)), farm-scale agroecological learning in Puerto Rico ([Félix and Sanfiorenzo](#)), adaptation practices among local livestock-keepers in East Africa ([Habermann et al.](#)), and ecosystem-based assessments by farmers in

Tajikistan (Spies et al.). Others focused on reconfiguring power through PAR (McKinnon et al.), navigating qualitative research (Gailloux, et al.), and the displacement of the scholar in the neoliberal university (Auerbach, Muñoz, Affiah et al.; Auerbach, Muñoz, Walsh et al.).

Methodological approaches and tools—Transitioning online

Much PAR that was already underway, be it in home countries or internationally, was faced with stark choices about whether and how to continue their work. For most researchers the initial focus was on technical access based on available internet and suitable bandwidth or mobile coverage. Project teams under pressure to remain on track sought to make quick decisions, often without time for consultation. Adapted strategies ranged from online platforms for formal communication by teams managing workshops and meetings, to more informal use of social media to keep people connected and “activated” through synchronous and asynchronous co-learning. Funder flexibility—which varied significantly—played an important role in enabling extensions or making funding available for digital software. For smaller, more localized projects, facilitators were able to be more agile, patching together solutions with mobile phones (Félix and Sanfiorenzo). Overall, teams of co-researchers were able to use online learning platforms and collaboration tools for collective reflection (Medina-García et al.).

Often the *most* marginalized have limited or no access to smartphones or requisite data, and indeed many in rural areas lack coverage. The heterogeneous impacts of COVID, depending on positionality, posed a significant challenge. At community-level, introducing new online platforms was found to be less successful (Auerbach, Muñoz, Affiah et al.; Manderscheid et al.), with higher levels of disengagement noted over time. However, informal modes of communication through common tools, such as WhatsApp, provided an important connector for sharing voice messages and images of activities, including connecting people and experiences through photovoice (McKinnon et al.). In Puerto Rico, virtual farm visits were hosted by participants as a novel way of sharing their learning and progress (Félix and Sanfiorenzo). In Cape Town co-researchers held a virtual writing retreat and used a platform to compile and co-analyse their data with the community-based co-research team (Paganini et al.). In Leuven, online collective brainstorming and discussions were conducted (Medina-García et al.), while in Tajikistan, small workshops were facilitated by Tajik scientists after receiving virtual training from their German colleagues (Spies et al.). Across projects, co-researchers experienced what Gailloux et al. called “fieldwork without the field”: unequal technological savvy and access, diminished depth of research, inability to make lasting connections and building rapport virtually, challenges to creating trust and familiarity with participants in virtual spaces. While this raised concerns about inclusion and representation, online interactions also enabled capacities in empathy and dialogue that are essential to contribute effectively as agents of change (Félix and Sanfiorenzo; McKinnon et al.).

Changing relationships and knowledge co-production

Since projects had begun either before or during the onset of COVID, levels of relationship and trust were already established or under development (Auerbach, Muñoz, Affiah et al.; Manderscheid et al.). This variable was found to have a significant impact on how projects fared, and demonstrates the value of relationships in terms of how we, as “distant” researchers, position ourselves. In Cape Town, because the project rested on a pre-existing rooted network, it was able to reach out to and engage new participants, including urban farmers, fisherwomen, food actors and activists, and community kitchen chefs (Paganini et al.). In Leuven, existing multi-actor networks of citizens, students, experts, and academics were expanded despite the difficulties in meeting and mobilizing (Medina-García et al.).

In Asia-Pacific, the pandemic presented new spaces for negotiation and interdependence that enabled the transfer of ownership and leadership to local teams, with each researcher learning more about how to enact the kind of participatory research they aspired to—one based in reciprocity and trust, shared ownership, collaborative, and self-reflexive learning (McKinnon et al.). In East Africa, decentralizing responsibilities led to more motivation and ownership, especially among field research officers and other locally-based actors involved in the project. The decentering of the researchers and a shift of focus to the local citizen, made the research more participatory (Habermann et al.). In other places, hybridized approaches did not necessarily mean involving participants at all times and stages but they promoted frequent and open communication with participants to share power, discuss or mitigate risks, and build reciprocity and mutuality (Gailloux et al.).

Methodological innovations were also present, as in the Leuven Gymkhana treasure hunt advertised through social media (Medina-García et al.) inviting residents of the city to engage with its food strategy, and also in virtually connecting farmers across territories to create farmer-led action learning opportunities (Félix and Sanfiorenzo).

Reconfiguring power

The precarity of local co-researchers, often due to low levels of recognition and unequal remuneration by funders such as research councils, was accentuated by COVID. Where lock-downs may have been staggered or less stringent, some co-researchers were expected to undertake fieldwork, putting them at risk. As the virus and national responses to it changed, some country partners were able to adapt, resume some activities and meet outdoors (Manderscheid et al.). The level of formality of participating networks also had an impact. In Letchworth (UK) the network was driven by a formally constituted and salaried team, which could not be sustained under the UK’s more stringent lock-downs, while in Tunisia, the relative informality of the networks coupled with greater freedom of movement provided for more creativity and fluidity to adapt to the needs of affected residents. In Leuven, Medina-García et al. established

an “editorial board” that sought to even out power dynamics amongst stakeholders. This fostered collaborative relationships involving mutual understanding, negotiation and co-creation. In their various case studies, Gailloux et al. also foregrounded caring, negotiating risk and culturally-appropriate conduct. As Habermann et al. put it, “letting go of controlling both narrative and implementation of the research” and the related shift of power is in fact a condition and way forward for research to remain relevant and impactful. Within and between research teams, COVID also had an impact on academic staff, creating divides between permanent and temporary, pointing to tenure implications. In their manifesto for reimagining institutional support for PAR, Auerbach, Muñoz, Walsh et al. explored what the university would need to do to support PAR and resilient communities, and considered ways to support transformative scholar activism with funding, flexibility, safety, infrastructure and prioritizing community.

Concluding remarks and outlook

In its various forms, PAR was found to produce knowledge that is emplaced, embedded and embodied. While COVID undoubtedly created obstacles for PAR the pandemic also galvanized new opportunities for inter-institutional partnerships, and diverse responses by universities and practitioners capable of enhancing participation and trust-building at different levels, as shared responsibilities led to greater equity within teams. Unsurprisingly, the experiences emphasized the need to rapidly transition to mobile or online platforms, and to also re-define the roles of research communities. As a result of COVID, and given future ethical constraints on travel in light of the climate crisis, the remote PAR exemplified in the papers of this Research Topic represents the future for place-based transdisciplinary research collaborations. One concern is that this may simply lead to offloading fieldwork without sharing risks and opportunities for

co-learning and addressing inequalities when it comes to accessing digital spaces. This requires collaboratively thinking through the different roles of and attendant risks for local, national and international co-researchers, and identifying and strengthening opportunities to enhance the agency of co-researchers in the design and analysis of PAR.

Author contributions

GM led on this Research Topic collection. All authors contributed equally to the overall process of reviewing manuscripts and co-authorship. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

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