Reflections on Reconfiguring Methods During COVID-19: Lessons in Trust, Partnership, and Care

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This paper is a set of reflections from researchers in the Center for Sustainable Communities, University of Canberra, drawing out emerging lessons from the process of re-configuring research methods during COVID-19. The pandemic has presented new spaces of negotiation, struggle, and interdependence within research projects and research teams. It has left researchers often uncertain about how to do their work effectively. At the same time, it has opened up opportunities to re-think how researchers undertake the work of research. In this paper we reflect on several current research programs that have had to undergo rapid design shifts to adjust to new conditions under COVID-19. The rapid shift has afforded some surprisingly positive outcomes and raised important questions for the future. In our reflections we look at the impact of COVID-19 at different stages of designing research with partners, establishing new relationships with partners and distant field sites, and data collection and analysis. We draw on Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodological ideas and highlight ways in which we have adapted and experimented with PAR methods during the pandemic. We reflect on the aspects of PAR that have assisted us to continue in our work, in particular, how PAR foregrounds diverse ways of knowing, being and doing, and prioritizes local aspirations, concerns and world views to drive the research agenda and the processes of social or economic change that accompany it. PAR also helps us to reflect on methods for building relationships of mutual trust, having genuine and authentic collaborations, and open conversations. We reflect on the potential lessons for PAR and community engaged research more generally. Amidst the challenges, our experience reveals new pathways for research practice to rebalance power relationships and support local place-conscious capacity for action.

Keywords: COVID-19, qualitative research methods, relationality, reflexivity, trust, ownership, care, place

INTRODUCTION

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is an umbrella term for a set of approaches that builds research around the needs and aspirations of participants, enabling a research process that is inclusive and empowering, and that challenges "the dynamics of inequalities by furthering the struggle for social justice" (Gill et al., 2012). The work to enable inclusive and empowering research processes

is far from simple, and, as we discuss below, requires continued effort to reflect on methods—interrogating assumptions, questioning power imbalances inherent to the research process, and engaging reflexively. This paper is the product of one such process of methodological reflection that was imposed by the travel bans and lockdowns associated with the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021. The rapid shifts required to allow research projects to continue and our international partnerships to be maintained have enabled new insights into ways our projects had been falling short of our intentions to be inclusive and empowering. Through a series of reflections on the projects we were in the midst of when the pandemic hit, we explore the question of what can be learned about PAR from the experience of rapidly adapting our methods as required by COVID-19 lockdowns.

Time spent in the field has been a core element of our methods in the past, with stints of fieldwork being relied upon not only to gather data but to build relationships, enable co-design of projects, and develop mutual understanding. However, COVID-19 forced us to reconsider our reliance on face-to-face fieldwork. In early 2020, as COVID-19 first began to appear in the news all the authors of this paper were engaged in ongoing research programs that had been designed to be undertaken through field-based research, in partnership and close collaboration with stakeholders in a range of Asia-Pacific communities: Laos, the Philippines, Papua New Guinea (PNG), Solomon Islands and Australia. Katharine, for example, was on one such trip to Laos in January 2020 when COVID-19 first began to appear in the news. As is typical of such fieldwork trips, her work was squeezed into a 2-week period between family commitments at home and the commencement of the teaching semester. It was her third such visit to northern Laos, and followed a long chain of email communications, WhatsApp messaging, and exchange of documentation, all leading to the intense period of time during which the Australia-based and Laos-based team members would be face-to-face, conducting workshops and training sessions at communities in the mountains. While regular communications between visits were important, the feeling in the team was that neither the collaborative partnership between Australian and Laos team members, or the workshops themselves, would be possible without the interpersonal relationships and exchange that were cultivated during time spent together. The opportunity to be together, sharing not only the purposeful work time but also sharing "down time": delicious meals, taking walks, and squeezing together into 4WD cars for long and uncomfortable road journeys, all contributed to a sense of connection, mutual trust and respect. Strong relationships built through these periods of fieldwork had been essential for sustaining the research. As the COVID-19 pandemic took hold and Australia closed its borders to almost all international travel, it was clear that a different way of working had to be found for this type of project.

As we were forced to shift our research practice to a "remote research" format, we were unsure if PAR could be conducted remotely and still enable diverse ways of knowing, being and doing to come to the fore. We were uncertain if the relational approach that underpinned our work could be maintained effectively while we were physically absent from people and

places. Being together through purposeful research activities and the informal shared "down time" was what we relied upon to enable meaningful conversations to take place, relationships to develop, and ensure projects were oriented to local aspirations, concerns and world views. Building relationships of mutual trust, having genuine and authentic collaborations, and open conversations were integral to the approach, especially given that a desire to build research around the needs and aspirations of participants does not mean that the process unfolds smoothly—it rarely does.

The shift to remote research process has taught us about different ways to build and maintain research relationships. It provided new opportunities through which to learn about strengthening self-reflexive practice and disrupting the relations of power so often embedded in the research process. For us, this highlights further opportunities to extend what Lauzon (2013) identifies as the opportunity for basing development work with farmers on intimate, empathic and connected relationships rather than didactic information transfer. Lauzon (2013) challenges us to consider how "we, as professionals who aspire to work with others and to assist them in living full and rich lives must also enter into intimacy—intimacy with the people and contexts in which we work—and do so with an openness and freedom where we are willing to be changed too." In this paper, our reflections on the ways we adapted research methods during the COVID-19 lockdowns highlight experimentation with ways to achieve such intimacy in spite of distance, and offer some hopeful insights.

In the paper we discuss four projects, in each outlining the adaptations to method that were attempted and the lessons learned. In these sections each project leader presents a COVID-19 research "moment in time" that challenged and then deepened her PAR practice and relationship with the in-country researchers/participants. First, however, we collectively situate ourselves and our research in relation to the range of approaches and methods that come under the umbrella of PAR.

SITUATING OURSELVES, SITUATING PAR

We are researchers located in the Center for Sustainable Communities at the University of Canberra, Australia. Our common interest is in understanding and supporting processes of community learning and transformation, whether it is with farming families in Melanesia, urban gardeners in the Philippines, or the teaching and learning we do with students. Our disciplinary backgrounds are broad: from adult learning and education (Barbara and Margie) to human geography (Ann and Katharine) and linguistics (Deborah and Jo). However, we share a privileged position in the Australian context, as white women with (fairly) secure employment in the university sector. The privilege of this position has been especially clear during the pandemic as we have experienced effects of COVID-19 very differently to our research partners elsewhere.

From this position, we all conduct research in and across specific settings in the Asia-Pacific region. We use a place-based approach that begins with the assumption research agendas

should be informed by participants' deep understandings of their context (Genat, 2009). We seek to embed ourselves in place-consciousness that recognizes that the "rooted experience of people has both a spatial and temporal dimension… and therefore must include consciousness of the historical memory of a place, and the traditions that emerged there, whether these have been disrupted or conserved" (Gruenewald and Smith, 2014). As researchers who live and work in Australia, this consciousness is apparent in efforts to acknowledge with gratitude our relation to place as Country, the Aboriginal English term that denotes an understanding of Country as an interconnected, interdependent and entangled co-becoming in place (Country et al., 2015). While we seek to honor Country, begin from place-consciousness, and be directed by the research participants, in practice the institutions and funding models with which we work sometimes make this difficult, as the examples below will elaborate. Nevertheless, PAR, especially PAR that emphasizes place conscious engagements with power (Gruenewald and Smith, 2014; Mason, 2015), provides a recognized framework through which to work toward research that is led by people in place.

PAR as a general set of approaches emerged from the work of Freire (1970) and Fals Borda and Rahman (1991) in Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s. Shared across the field is a commitment to research agendas driven by social justice concerns, and to methods designed to harness the transformative and performative potential of the research process in order to enact change during research, rather than just relying upon research findings to inform future change (Carr and Kemmis, 1986; Chevalier and Buckles, 2013). Some of the common elements to PAR are that it involves learning cycles of engagement and reflection that are place-based and informed by an emancipatory ethic.

The examples we discuss below fit within this tradition but are also informed by critical and post-structural feminism, post-colonialism, and the growing area of decolonizing methods. Both feminist and postcolonial thinking provide direction to an approach that resists the universalizing impetus of much social science and seeks to deliberately uncover the heterogeneous knowledge and experiences that sit outside dominant ways of knowing, being and doing (see for example Gibson-Graham, 2006; de Sousa Santos, 2014). It is an approach that resists a simplistic emancipatory framing of PAR and the paternalistic overtones that come along with the idea that some people in the world need emancipation, while others are equipped to grant it to them. In contrast, we prefer to align our approaches with the idea that any such movement toward transformation must be mutual, using knowledge and solutions co-created by researchers and participants. As Askins (2018) notes, in valuing the voices of our participants and pursuing an understanding of shifting and complex subjectivities, we are enacting an ethics of care as researchers.

Enacting such an ethic involves de-centering Eurocentric modes of thought and making space for diverse ways of knowing being and doing, and is far from easy (de Leeuw and Hunt, 2018; Cammock et al., 2021). As Smith (2012) reminds us, the very institutions that enable our work to take place also impose

expectations and processes that continue to privilege dominant epistemological and ontological norms. Research practice thus inadvertently continues the process of colonization because it remains based in Eurocentric principles and values (Wright, 2011). While PAR has become widely accepted as "an inquiry paradigm that engages local insiders' perspectives and affirms the local cultural context" (Blodgett et al., 2011), this is different from decentering Eurocentric epistemologies. However, the learning cycles of PAR do make space for researchers to learn and be challenged in and through our relationships with partners and participants.

The examples discussed below offer insight into one moment in this learning cycle. Each example adds a new layer of complexity to the ethics of care that we aspire to in our research. Each summary presents new understandings that emerged in which our previous practices or procedures may have fallen short of our aspirational ethics of care and/or offered opportunities to shift methods that more closely matched our intentions.

In structuring our reflections, we look to Genat (2009) who proposes a practice framework for PAR that puts in the center the nature of the partnership between researcher and participant. Genat framework Genat (2009) consists of seven key considerations:

1. Establish reciprocity and an equal relationship of trust with the key group of research participants,
2. Collaboratively develop a research project that is valued and of benefit to the key group of research participants,
3. Build solidarity around a research question significant to the key group of research participants,
4. Acknowledge, respect, value and privilege local knowledge,
5. Facilitate learning and develop local capacity,
6. Bring a self-reflexive component to practice by consistently interrogating standpoints and use of power along the dimensions of gender, race and class, and
7. Ensure emergent representations are credible with the key group of research participants.

As COVID-19 forced us to reconfigure our place-based research, one of the major emerging concerns was how to maintain relationships. In the examples below, we use Genat (2009) framework as a touchstone, guiding our reflection on the challenges to participatory practice during COVID. The reflections were gathered in conversation with each other, through email, phone or internet conversations with in-country partners and in Margie's case, by a survey of research participants. A set of shared themes emerged, showing us that as relationships were reconfigured at a distance, what also had to be reconfigured was power, positionality, and capacity within those relationships. As the process unfolded, each researcher learned 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.

Each of the reflections and PAR insights below has been written by the researcher leading the project. In the first section, Deborah reflects on the role of transparency in building and maintaining relations of trust; in the second section, Jo discusses the rewards of transferring ownership and leadership

to in-country partners; in the third section, Ann focuses on the capacity to extend connection, care and collective action at a physical distance; and in the final case study section, Margie explores the place of self-reflexive co-creation of knowledge through collective interrogation of stereotypes and bias.

RECONFIGURING RELATIONS OF TRUST AND TRANSPARENCY

Our first example from Deborah's research in the Solomons Islands shows how the design shifts needed to negotiate research at a distance enabled new ways to increase the depth of trust and relations of reciprocity. The project, "Improving agricultural development opportunities for female smallholders in rural Solomon Islands", explores opportunities to improve agricultural livelihoods and sustainable food systems for subsistence and semi-subsistence farmers. In collaboration with three Solomon Islands partners, the project assesses how to adapt the Family Farm Teams approach (Pamphilon, 2019; CSC, 2021) to the Solomon Islands context. The Family Farm Teams approach was developed through action research for development in PNG to develop the business acumen, skills and knowledge of semi-subsistence women farmers and their households to build sustainable agricultural livelihoods in a gender equitable and effective way.

The pre-COVID design of the Solomon's project relied on frequent international travel to spend time with partner non-government organizations (NGOs) in Honiara and support the development of relationships between community-based team members and the NGO project officers. Significant levels of trust existed between community members and Deborah because of decades of linguistic research and time she had spent in their community. This provided a level of confidence, but not certainty, that as a research team they could work well together, develop trust, and respect and value local knowledge.

At the same time, as a funded project in its initial stages, some aspects of the project lacked transparency. These issues may have been overcome through time spent in the field, but COVID-19 created a different kind of opportunity to work collaboratively and increase levels of understanding about the interconnection of project activities, and the importance of different voices, during various project stages: planning, training, evaluation, and reporting. The shift to a remote research format required greater reflection on how to ensure that all team members could contribute to as many aspects of the project as possible. To achieve this, the project needed to make transparent how the voices of all team members play a role in the success of the project.

One adaptation was the development of a "living document" addressing all aspects of evaluation and collection of research data that the project team (including NGO partners and community members), could think of. The document included information about who collected or contributed the information. For example, community team members were asked to record their thoughts on a mobile phone during the training week so that the team could identify challenges and successes from their

perspective. The document describes how information may be used, letting contributors know that their comments may be included in a report to the funding body. It outlines different communication channels, actors, and processes of providing feedback that can contribute to the sustainability of the program (Servaes et al., 2012).

The document also sets out the relationships between activities. For example, a daily evaluation activity that collected gender-disaggregated information by asking participants to drop stones into a culturally significant basket to indicate their preferred activity was then recorded in a written report. The written report, along with photographic evidence of the activity, was incorporated into a report to the funding body. By writing everything down in one shared document, the project team had to consider numerous ways that information can be collected. For example, a checklist was used to ensure that different languages were included in data collection and evaluation. It provided a way to make visible to all that different modalities are used, e.g., culturally appropriate activities like counting with objects (stones) as opposed to numerals (1,2,3), and made explicit the workflow and connections between project stages. The document speaks particularly to Genat view of PAR Genat (2009) as something that provides "clarity about the form of the data, how it will be evoked, recorded, analyzed, interpreted and written up, and by whom."

The document also highlighted and encouraged the use of different languages in the project. It specifies that participants should be able to use their preferred language and that written and oral activities and feedback are valued. Working within PAR should demonstrate a commitment to valuing and supporting local knowledge. As Bearth (2013) notes, it is important to use the "appropriate" language in development projects. The "appropriate" language does not need to be the local language, but the local language cannot be ignored. Although English is one of the official languages, and the language of education, in the Solomon Islands, it is not the language through which people express their culture and beliefs.

Developing and working with this document impacted aspects of the project workflow. It initially required time to write down a guide to training in workshops, how training activities can be evaluated, and how participants and project team members could provide feedback and contribute to the research. Without COVID-19, these things would still have happened, but we would have relied much more on discussions in the field. Instead, many things that would happen in the field had to be considered and planned for ahead of time.

An evaluation of the document by two capital city-based project officers was undertaken on completion of the Family Farm Team training modules in late 2021. The feedback confirmed that the working document was a useful tool for capacity building of trainers. Of note, the document was used differently by the two project officers, reflecting their roles. One said that the document was not used in the planning stage and the other more senior officer said it was important in the planning stage. Their feedback included suggestions about what could be added to the document and how it could be used by the community-based team members. The final document, then, will

reflect a collaborative process, leading to something that can be used in future training, regardless of whether all research team members are in the field. The use of the document by all research participants demonstrates our relationality and further supports our trust in and understanding of the roles and voices of all research participants.

Lessons to Take Forward

COVID has shifted the responsibility of the day-to-day logistics of the project firmly to the project team in the Solomon Islands. Deborah summed up her experience by saying that while she could not be in the place, she knew what the place was like and, together, they developed interdependent ways of working that reflected their place, its richness, and constraints. The introduction of the living document offered new ways to incorporate and encourage the knowledge, voices, and language of the community in the processes and outcomes of the project—extending the capacity to privilege local knowledge in the way Genat (2009) advises.

Because of COVID-19, and the design shifts required as a result, we are learning more about the inequities embedded in the research process and the administration of projects. Deborah's reflections on her project in the Solomons show how communications strategies can support the work of establishing "reciprocity and an equal relationship of trust with the key group of research participants" (Genat, 2009). COVID-19 is revealing the extent to which there is still more room to give ownership of projects to partners and participants in country. In the example below, Jo explains how complementary learning has emerged from her work in PNG, in this case as the changes made in response to the pandemic increased local ownership of the project.

SHARING CO-DESIGN, OWNERSHIP AND TRUST

The project, "Gender equitable agricultural extension through institutions and youth engagement in Papua New Guinea", began just 4 months before the COVID-19 pandemic restricted international and national travel. To help build sustainable local farm food systems, this project was designed to strengthen PNG women farmers' and youth engagement in managing equitable workloads and decision-making on their family farm.

The project also explores challenges and successes in building gender equitable approaches within PNG churches and aims to further understand the agricultural aspirations of PNG youth. The project applies a PAR process that uses youth participants' own knowledge, lived experience, concerns, language and culture to, as much as possible, build a genuine and authentic research collaboration (Anyon et al., 2018; Bettencourt, 2020).

Jo is the Australian-based project leader and the project team includes an in-country project leader based in Port Moresby and two provincial project coordinators in East New Britain (ENB) and in Western Province. Like the Solomon Islands project discussed above, the original co-design of the project included

frequent international travel for training and research but during 2020 the team had to make rapid project design shifts to ensure the project could continue. The in-country team took on aspects of the project that were going to be conducted by Jo, learning new skills required to do the bulk of the research and training, as well as the monitoring and evaluation required by the funding body. Below Jo discusses the process through which the project team co-created a new way to undertake the planning, preparation and delivery of a fundamental project activity and the challenges they faced in doing so.

The project is trialing an adaption of the Family Farm Team approach (referenced in Deborah's discussion above) with youth and their families in ENB as well as developing a "Youth as Change Agent" program to help further engage youth in the future of agriculture in a manner that is appropriate for them and their families. A Youth Advisory Committee, co-chaired by two youth (one female and one male) was established to inform and guide the project team and to ensure the project's activities are grounded in local customs, language, and practices. The community expectations were that the committee would meet regularly with the ENB project team, with a formal annual meeting held during which the committee would advise the project team of project adaptions, challenges and successes. The committee requested that Jo facilitate the annual meeting as the project leader. However, COVID-19 travel restrictions prevented her travel to PNG for the 2021 annual meeting. Through much team discussion and consultation with the committee members, it was agreed that the in-country project leader and ENB Coordinator would facilitate the meeting and collect the relevant data and advice from the committee members. A new date was arranged, and new materials were jointly prepared. Unexpectedly, PNG implemented a State of Emergency, which meant the in-country project leader could not travel from Port Moresby to facilitate the meeting, so it had to be postponed again. Once the travel restrictions eased, the team set a new date, but the week before the planned meeting, the in-country project leader contracted COVID-19 and could not travel. At the same time, government restrictions that no more than ten people could gather meant that the whole committee could not come together in one place. The project team agreed they could not postpone the annual meeting for a third time, so the Australian and ENB team co-designed a new delivery method so the meeting could go ahead.

Through much discussion, *via* email, Zoom, phone and WhatsApp, Jo and the ENB coordinator designed a meeting format that would satisfy the communities' expectations and meet the project's requirements. Due to the restrictions on numbers of people allowed to gather, they decided to meet with the committee members in their own districts, which meant holding four separate meetings. Their negotiations relied upon a sense of trust and support of one another, and on the ENB coordinator being willing to take on more responsibility and leadership.

Whilst the ENB coordinator agreed that she would facilitate the meetings and collect the necessary data, she was nervous as she had not led a meeting like this before. She needed support and

training on how to facilitate such a participatory meeting. Jo and the coordinator worked together in an intensive and collaborative manner online, over several days to develop appropriate meeting materials and videos and to ensure the coordinator felt confident and prepared for her new role.

Finding a solution to allow Jo to "take part" in the meetings was a further challenge as internet access was limited. After much discussion and negotiation between the ENB coordinator and Jo, they created videos in which Jo "spoke with" participants at the meeting, as the participants expected. This included Jo speaking directly to the committee about the project's activities, progress, and outcomes to date. These videos were embedded in a PowerPoint presentation so the ENB coordinator could play the videos/slides as if Jo was speaking directly to the participants and included a conversational component in which Jo would say something in the video, and the coordinator would offer a live response. This required joint planning and design through online discussions and practice so the coordinator could facilitate the meeting in a confident, constructive and participatory manner.

The outcome of the design shift was that the meetings were held in four remote districts of PNG with no internet connection; the necessary advice to progress the project was received; and the communities' expectations of an annual general meeting were met, all whilst abiding by the COVID-19 restrictions. In the process, the ENB project coordinator took on a greater sense of ownership of the project, expressing a sense of empowerment and importance.

Lessons to Take Forward

The COVID-19 adaptions co-designed for this project helped the research team to reconsider the role of the project leader and that of the in-country project team. During the initial project design, Jo and the in-country project team planned to do much of the research together, whilst having distinct roles. However, COVID-19 travel restrictions meant that they had to let go of some of their research preferences and learn new skills whilst finding new ways to maintain and strengthen the relationship of mutual trust. The in-country project team rapidly learnt new skills, including leadership, data collection and training, so they could undertake more of the role that Jo would have fulfilled if travel had been possible. Jo had to shift to more of a project management role, rather than researcher, whilst building the team and supporting a process of building mutual trust with new staff. In the process the whole project team became invested in a core component of Genat (2009) framework through facilitating learning and developing local capacity founded on a strong collaborative, trusting relationships.

Through the process the in-country project team has been able to take more ownership of the project, make decisions on the go and adapt the project to suit the place, language and culture of the people they are working with, and all know and trust that the decisions made on the fly are respected by the wider team. The relationship they all had built prior to the COVID-19 challenges was strengthened in ways that they did not predict or realize was needed, and as such illuminated the importance of working within the spirit of negotiation and interdependence.

In the next project example, Ann further explores how an online environment can foster relations of care and nurture moments of collective action.

BUILDING CONNECTION, CARE, AND COLLECTIVE ACTION AT A PHYSICAL DISTANCE

Ann has been partnering with Philippines-based researchers and neighborhood-based food provisioning projects in Manila and Mindanao since 2008. In 2018 she began working with Filipino colleagues in The Global Garden Project which was established as a research collaboration promoting peer-to-peer links between neighborhood food provisioning efforts in Mindanao, The Philippines, and Canberra and the Capital Region, Australia. The vision of Global Garden is to be a research space across time and place where ideas, resources and skills are shared and learning across socio-cultural and economic difference occurs. Global Garden is also about working "in place" to enhance food security and nutrition through promoting vegetable production and consumption. It aims to create opportunities for community learning, for reconnecting people with their food and with sustainable agroecology practices, and for improving livelihood and health outcomes. These opportunities had been structured around targeted face-to-face workshops, for example, to map urban food production sites. When COVID-19 first started to take effect globally and severe lockdowns began in Mindanao, Global Garden researchers paused to take stock and reconfigure the project's research design considering the pandemic. This has meant an ongoing and evolving effort to shift the research design. Below, Ann explores one design shift of the Global Garden Project, namely, using social media to extend capacity for connection, care and collective action at a physical distance.

Prior to 2020, Global Garden had been using Facebook as a way of tapping into existing networks and education efforts across government, non-government and community sectors in Mindanao. Facebook Messenger was also used by the project for communication between the research team members in Australia, Ethiopia and the Philippines, and among the core group of stakeholders that formed a group in 2019 in Mindanao. However, COVID-19 restrictions to working in place physically prompted reconsideration of how Facebook and Messenger might be used more strategically to grow new practice in vegetable production, consumption and marketing while at a physical distance.

In the Philippines, communication through smartphones using Facebook and other social media networking platforms is ubiquitous. Things go viral quickly and effectively. On the 14th April 2021, for example, a bamboo food cart stocked with vegetables, and other gifted foods was placed on a street corner in Manila with a handwritten sign in Tagalog: "*Magbigay ayon sa kakayahan, kumuha batay sa pangangailangan*" which translates as: "Give according to one's ability, get according to one's need", a sentiment inspired by the writings of Karl Marx. News of this food provisioning cart was posted and re-posted online and dubbed a community pantry. Three days later, over 44

similar community pantries had sprouted up across Manila and as far south as Mindanao. A month later there were over 800 pantries across the Philippines and a crowd sourced digital map that helped people locate them (Mongaya Global Voices Blog, 2021). In a context where social media is already widely used, community initiatives like this prompted the Global Garden team to consider how they might better utilize it as a conduit for supporting food systems innovations at a physical distance.

Ann struck up a Messenger conversation with Global Garden team member Jimboy Eugenio who works for the Department of Education promoting food and nutrition security in Cagayan de Oro. Jimboy identified several things. First, social networks enable a globally connected community of practice across difference to coalesce around what Jimboy described as "common advocacy". Jimboy has had the opportunity to travel to see food systems innovations in Cuba and The Netherlands and to work with researchers from Australia, Canada and Germany, and he has prioritized staying connected to the global research community he has met along the way. He maintained knowledge sharing with this community through Facebook and he was motivated by being connected to it, as something bigger than his own efforts. Second, Jimboy and other Global Garden researchers are champions of the project vision and use Facebook and other social media platforms to promote food security activities like vegetable gardening in the belief that their advocacy will lead to new practice. Third, specifically in response to the pandemic, Jimboy saw his promotion of food gardening and provisioning as a mental and physical health strategy that could help divert people away from their sense of hopelessness and the dire situation they found themselves in economically (personal communication, Jimboy Eugenio, 28 May 2021).[1]

The work undertaken by Jimboy and others in the Philippines to utilize social media for knowledge-sharing linked together a geographically distant network of urban food producers at a time when the Philippines was hit hard with economic impacts of the pandemic. Many companies, factories, and business establishments had to close, and unemployment levels had hit a new high. COVID-19 heightened existing challenges among people already politically, economically, socio-culturally marginalized. Sadly, places like Cagayan de Oro saw a rise in suicide and suicidal attempts. Jimboy reflected that in the previous year, Mindanao had experienced frequent cases of suicide and suicide attempts:

This might be because of the effect of the pandemic. A lot of people were displaced from work and were affected by the economic impact of COVID-19. I used the social media, in my own effort, that maybe I could share some motivations to the people. I would like to stress to them that by doing gardening at home and rearing some livestock and poultry animals would help them divert their hopelessness during the pandemic. I would like to emphasize to them that by getting busy with the backyard garden and raising backyards animals for food and income generations, that would help them stay at home with a purpose

rather than going outside risking themselves be infected with the virus.

For Jimboy and the Global Garden Project work in Mindanao COVID-19 presented new opportunities to facilitate learning and local capacity to grow food at home. PAR at a physical distance entailed helping people stay at home with a purpose and supporting their wellbeing. Social media networks provided a conduit for support and collective wellbeing so that even when people were physically isolated, they were virtually connected, and felt as though they were part of collective effort, generating a sense of empowerment beyond the present challenges.

Lessons to Take Forward

The pandemic has shone a different kind of light on working "in place" and the importance of place-based participatory action in fostering interdependence and relationships of care. The community pantries and the promotion of home and neighborhood food provisioning during COVID-19 played an important role not only in sustaining people's mental and physical wellbeing, but also connecting people through collective action. Facebook and social media communication have become a mechanism by which, in Genat (2009) terms, acknowledging, respecting, valuing and privileging local knowledge and action has occurred and developing local capacity for action has been enhanced by connectivity online to an international network. In response to COVID-19 restrictions to face-to-face gathering social media tools came into their own to fulfill the aims of the Global Garden Project and support urban food provisioning.

Below, Margie reflects on how the shift to online engagement carried additional, unexpected benefits as a result of the sense of solidarity and accompanying opportunities for collective self-reflexivity.

ENABLING COLLECTIVE SELF-REFLEXIVITY

This research differs from the examples above as it is a project not directly engaged in work on sustainable food systems, but around broader issues of cross-cultural understanding and intercultural dialogue, both concerns central to PAR as we understand it. Margie's project is in education research and is part of a PhD working with Australian-based pre-service teachers to explore what culturally responsive practice looks like following a cultural immersion trip to China. The focus of the work is on how to widen the capacity for an openness toward the diversity of doing, being and thinking aligned to culturally responsive teaching and critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970). In line with the action and reflection cycle of PAR, the original design was intended to facilitate transformation through the research process for both the participants and researcher. The original design involved semi-structured interviews with 22 participants who had traveled to China on immersion tours. Face-to-face focus groups using participatory photo elicitation were planned to continue the students' in-country dialogic reflection, when local cases of COVID-19 led to the closure of the university campus. This

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[1]Jimboy was given the opportunity to review his comments in this paper and has given his full permission to be quoted here.

required a swift move online, and a steep learning curve as Margie attempted to create an online space that would still provide a platform for authentic relationship-building dialogue.

Surprisingly, holding the focus groups online via Zoom worked well to establish reciprocity and an equal relationship, as Genat (2009) recognizes is a priority in PAR research. This was confirmed by a short survey with participants in which all respondents rated the experience "good" or "excellent" in terms of effectiveness and ease of communication. In the interviews, participants spoke about how the shared experience of lockdown enhanced the sense of solidarity felt by the group. As this was at the beginning of lockdown, participants were missing their normal day to day human contact and had not yet experienced the exhaustion from continuous online conferencing, now known as "Zoom fatigue" (Fauville et al., 2021). This shared experience of isolation and disruption to normal routines was an easy introductory discussion topic that quickly established rapport and reciprocity. It was evident from the level of engagement that the group leaned into the sharing of different experiences of frustration at being restricted in their movements or conversely, the relief at having time to slow down. In common with the participants, Margie too was finding it hard to adjust to the "new normal," (working from home, teaching online) and feeling apprehensive about the future. The solidarity that had been initiated within the group on their trip to China was therefore reinforced during the focus groups by the shared experience of the isolation and frustration associated with the pandemic.

The use of photo elicitation was a significant contributing factor to the enthusiastic communication which quickly developed in the focus groups as well as the opportunity for critical reflexivity. Photo elicitation, a participatory visual methodology which utilizes images to generate discussion, was chosen for its ability to enrich data due to increased communication and collaboration (Pain, 2012). Visual methodologies have been shown to enhance relationships in qualitative research due to rapport building, expression of emotions and to encourage reflections. These benefits were evident in the rich conversations and reflections focused on the images presented in the focus groups which proved to run smoothly online. Participant generated images were used, with each person selecting two photographs from their trip to illustrate something they felt was surprising and something that was challenging during their immersion experience in China. The use of the photo elicitation method was able to recreate a level of informality which is often available with face-to-face meetings through storytelling, a meaning making mechanism, allowing people to express ways of knowing and being (Lewis, 2011). Each narrative initiated free-flowing conversation, adding both depth of understanding and added information to the data from previous interviews. As the participants ruminated on the photos, Margie felt able, as the researcher, to relinquish control, which served to help eliminate the power imbalance which she strives for as a critical researcher (Gomez, 2020). She was able to sit back and witness the participants take advantage of the opportunity to hear both alternative or confirmatory viewpoints on similar experiences.

During the focus groups, the sharing of stories provided an opportunity for critical reflexivity and an opportunity for both participants and researcher to reflect on and shift previous assumptions and biases. This was intentional as part of decolonizing research that encourages recognition of power imbalances and attitudinal change (Young, 2016; Thambinathan and Kinsella, 2021). Participants examined their pre-existing assumptions and biases as they reflected on their experiences in China, and, as in Genat framework (Genat, 2009), participants displayed this self-reflexive stance as they contemplated their changing assumptions about race. These conversations added layers to what they had learned on the trip and to how they were applying that knowledge to their lives and teaching back home. The self-selected photos and lack of coercion involved in this method created a relaxed environment where participants could be open to alternative points of view and acted as a trigger for reflection and transformation.

Surprisingly, conducting the focus groups online turned out to offer benefits and possibilities for both the researcher and participants. The first of these advantages was evident in terms of the temporality through which the research unfolded, and understandings were built. The convenience of organizing a time to conduct the groups was expedited by the time saved on travel and the irrelevance of geographical location. Participants were able to locate and share their digital photos quickly while narrating their story and parents with young children found the online meeting to be an easier commitment. Another unexpected benefit of the online platform was the opportunity for Margie to view body language and facial expressions during analysis of the recording. Although interpreting body language was identified by participants as one of the challenges of the online platform, conversely, one participant claimed the relative ease of concealing body language when disagreeing to be one of the benefits.

Lessons to Take Forward

Despite the fact that all participants rated the online focus groups highly in terms of practicality and ease of communication, the majority would have preferred to meet face-to-face. The drawback of the prospect of missing social cues online and the less natural flow of communication were challenges cited by participants in the post research survey, as well as their concern with talking over the top of others. Notably, one participant preferred the online space, as they were more comfortable with vulnerability at home than in an unfamiliar space during a face-to-face meeting. The ease of communication when transitioning online was certainly assisted by the fact that participants and researcher came from similar cultural backgrounds and were fluent English speakers.

The relative ease and speed of the transition online and the quality of the conversations with participants in the online space was both surprising and a powerful learning experience and demonstrated the potential of online photo elicitation for critical participatory research. The foundation of solidarity provided by shared experiences of COVID-19 lockdowns reinforces how

important solidarity remains in enabling a collective self-reflection process (Genat, 2009), and teaches us that it can be achieved in an online environment.

CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

As we alter research designs in response to travel bans and the loss of face-to-face relationships and connections, we are learning a great deal about what we might want to retain as the pandemic recedes: ways of enacting the research process in solidarity, practices that build transparency, and actions that can engender deeper relations of trust and productively displace the control of project leaders over research procedures. We are aware that further learning awaits us as the projects in which we are engaged reach the stage of generating results, and we grasp for new ways to engage our partners in critical conversations around making sense of what has been learned.

We remain concerned about the degree to which PAR at a distance can enable collaborative and socially critical reflection. The iterative learning cycles of PAR in principle provide a productive communicative space in which all members can contribute their various knowledge and expertise however this does not happen by simply inviting a group to share and affirming their contributions, important though that is. Given the dominance of "deficit-based" understandings of disadvantaged communities and the concomitant inequitable hierarchies of knowledge (Chilisa and Ntseana, 2010), the many types of situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988) need to be made visible and conceptually accessible to all. The productive sharing of stories and reflections, as demonstrated with Margie's participants, provides hope that PAR at a distance can still create an opportunity for reflexive dialogue (Ripamonti et al., 2016). However, we remain unsure how well such tools will work across the cultural and language divides that exist between researchers based in Australia and partners elsewhere. A concern is that without strong collaborative analysis, in-country contributions to a project may become an indigenous "additive" that does not harness the power of indigenous knowledge systems as critical and relevant in their own right (Rasool and Harms-Smith, 2021).

The reflections shared in this paper highlight some of the significant learning that is happening as we adapt methods to the conditions of travel restrictions and regional lockdowns, shifting engagement to telephone and online communications while striving to enact an ethics of care informed by critical feminist PAR. For us, face-to-face encounters and shared learning through conversation and relationship building *while in the same place* has, in the past, been essential. Relationships have been strengthened and nurtured most during the time we could be physically present alongside our co-researchers, partners, and participants. While the disadvantages of shifting to remote modes are apparent, in this paper we have highlighted some of the benefits to our understanding of how to do PAR, structuring our reflections around the PAR framework suggested by Genat (2009). In Deborah's case the inability to maintain synchronous communications prompted increased use of documentation that provided new opportunities for transparency and strengthened

relationships of trust. In Jo's case the inability for project leaders to be with partners in the field made space for them to take greater ownership of the research. Both these examples highlight an aspect of research practice missing in Genat framework, that is the governance of research and the methods by which research processes and procedures are managed. Here lie opportunities for enacting solidarity with research participants that we had not been so conscious of in the past.

In Ann's case connecting more with social media networks in partner countries has shed new light on place-based innovations, resourcefulness, and capacities of people to care for each other and to take action in whatever ways they can, in and across place. In Margie's case being forced to move to online platforms created new spaces for more equitable exchange. In both these examples, access to internet-based communications reveals the value of a new set of tools and their potential to offer reprieve from the power dynamics of face-to-face interpersonal communications, and a different conduit for offering support and care within the research relationship. At the same time, such online methods throw up new technical and ethical conundrums (Roberts et al., 2021) that must be given serious consideration against the backdrop of a PAR ethics of care. Genat framework, while useful, does not prompt the detailed methodological questions that ought to be addressed in light of these concerns.

While a place-based approach has been important in all the projects we have discussed, the experiences of COVID-19 have prompted us to reconsider the importance of our being "in the place" and instead to consider how we continue to *engage deeply* with people in place when we are at a physical distance. Our sense of what it means to work in and across place through relationships and our sense of place-consciousness has had to be re-configured. Although we have always sought to work with our local colleagues to understand their place, their strengths and needs and to identify place-based knowledge that could be harnessed in our collaborative work, the pandemic has helped us see some of the limitations of this. As Gruenewald and Smith (2014) highlight, our own privilege as Western white knowledge-makers inevitably inflect our interactions in and across place, and we carry that privilege with us when we are present "in the place". Regardless of our intention, this brings with it an imbalanced set of power relationships and privileges certain ways of knowing, doing and being. Whilst the co-construction of knowledge with partners and participants is for the express reason of building power with/by people, we can now more clearly see the complexity of the relational dynamics and the need to be constantly alert to the pervasiveness of colonizing relationships (McGregor et al., 2018). Whilst our COVID-19 research adaptations have indeed helped to reconfigure these power dynamics, we are challenged to consider further how we can support our partners in critical PAR that is more deeply "place-conscious".

Overall, one of the most significant outcomes is that COVID-19 travel restrictions have enabled (forced) a greater degree of control over the research to be handed to in-country partners and participants. It has also highlighted some of the key challenges that remain for research that

is more radically participatory. While the university-based researchers are the ones in charge of reporting, managing the research grants, and finalizing research outputs, there will continue to be considerable limitations to how inclusive or emancipatory PAR can be. Our COVID-19 adaptations have revealed new options for working within the current institutional constraints as we seek to undertake research that will serve local interests and provide research leadership opportunities to local people, particularly in relation to how it is undertaken, and the process of analysis. Our reflections have highlighted that PAR research relationships are complex and dynamic and as such they demand on-going reflexivity, especially in times of challenge. We believe that working within an ethics of care enables mutual learning and reciprocal relationships to develop—essential foundations for research that will make a difference.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because of the ethics conditions.

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ETHICS STATEMENT

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by University of Canberra. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors listed have made a substantial, direct, and intellectual contribution to the work and approved it for publication.

FUNDING

Fauville, G., Luo, M., Muller Queiroz, A. C., Bailenson, J. N., and Hancock, J. (2021). Nonverbal mechanisms predict Zoom fatigue and explain why women experience higher levels than men. *SSRN*. doi: 10.2139/ssrn.3820035

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Conflict of Interest: The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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