

The NCRM wayfinder guide to adapting participatory methods for Covid-19



The Covid-19 pandemic has brought about significant changes to social research practices. The need for social distancing and restrictions to travel have particularly affected research that relies on establishing and maintaining a collaborative relationship with participants. This guide outlines alternative ways of conducting participatory research and how methods associated with participatory research might be adapted around the constraints of the pandemic. It also suggests how participatory methods may be used to either replace or supplement other research methods.

What is participatory research?

Participatory research approaches aim for more democratic relationships in the production of knowledge. The research is conducted *with* participants, who are often referred to as co-researchers, and who become invested and engaged in the research process (see e.g. Nind¹). Practically, this can mean participants being more actively involved in the different stages of a study, including planning the research agenda, developing the research design, generating and analysing data, and disseminating findings. Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a specific model that combines participatory approaches with a cyclical process of action, reflection and evaluation involving all stakeholders to bring about positive change. Participatory research generally is strongly linked with inclusivity, ensuring that people and communities who are often marginalised in research projects are not excluded.

Common participatory methods

Because of the nature of participatory research, methodologies and methods can vary considerably depending on the context and the collaborative approach to shared decision-making in the research design process. If participatory research is about the paradigm or set of epistemological principles, it might be that the methods themselves are less important to you than the intent. Yet the methods and the context in which they are used are important to researchers working to do their research within a participatory framework. You might use qualitative methods suited to working collaboratively, such as focus groups² or you might offer a choice of methods. You might prefer creative methods that enable participants to tell their

own stories and to capture aspects of their lives and reflect on them. These methods can include drawing, audio and video diaries, digital storytelling, and photovoice.

In times of crisis

In times of crisis, research designs need to be sufficiently flexible to accommodate the shifting needs and burdens placed on the research community³. This can involve critically re-evaluating 'standard procedures'⁴, adopting multiple methods and approaches to offer more choice to participants, and providing participants with additional information on what is expected of them when things change. For Monchuk et al.⁵, imperative to this approach is an:

ongoing participant engagement in inquiry, reflection, dialogue and collaborative sense making as a democratic 'engaged research' process.

The evidence from the *Changing Research Practices for Covid-19* study suggests that participatory approaches and methods are robust enough to withstand the significant adaptations required in these challenging times as there tends to be strong commitment to them. Participatory methods can also be introduced to replace or supplement other methods⁶. However, forced changes to participatory methods come with significant practical, technical and ethical challenges. As Marzi⁷ suggests, these can lead to an 'uncomfortable loss of control' for researchers. But in entrusting participants with greater independence and responsibilities, researchers are reinforcing the empowering principles of co-production and collaboration.

Using participatory methods remotely

Travel restrictions and constraints on physical contact have made the type of face-to-face research communication often regarded as essential to participatory methods almost impossible⁷. In response, many social researchers have transferred existing methods to online and digital environments and used online communication such as video calls to maintain regular contact with participants/co-researchers.

Researchers have also successfully employed creative methods remotely through the use of digital platforms and tools harnessed by web connectivity. Marzi⁷ describes PAR with migrant women in Medellín using video diaries to document and co-produce knowledge remotely. As the three 5-week cycles evolved, participants were encouraged to shift from video content based on pre-determined themes to those of their own choosing and become more involved in the editing process.

Following the suspension of interviews and focus groups and other face-to-face participatory methods with young people in Jordan, Lebanon and the Gaza strip, Jones et al.⁶ introduced written and audio diaries, structured around open-ended question prompts, and digital storytelling through reflective discussions based on photographs taken by participants. Others have also used audio and video diaries and photo-elicitation with a wide range of creative and participatory methods including embroidery and drawing⁵, blogs, podcasts and even a lockdown recipe book⁸.

Mosteanu³ explored cognitive mapping in her place-based research, connecting participants' drawings, maps and photos with online discussions about their local community. Visual materials can be used in this way to inform conversations about the social landscape and an understanding of participants' lived experiences. Over 300 participants from 19 countries shared diaries and photos in Clarke & Watson's⁹ narrative inquiry project around craft making. The diaries provided structured reflection opportunities, while sharing promoted connectivity and rapport between participants. However, the use of creative methods remotely may not be appropriate for all participants or their circumstances during the pandemic¹⁰.

Challenges and limitations

Going online has its own set of challenges and limitations. The pandemic has highlighted familiar concerns around inequalities in digital access and digital divides³. For participatory researchers in particular, moving methods online tends to reduce the opportunities for spending the additional, informal time together that can play a part in establishing and developing relationships. You might want to explore other ways to do this. Further, digital communication can restrict inclusive gestures such as small talk and interpreting and responding to body language, while specific participatory and communicative features of technologies may be overly complicated or unfamiliar to some participants, potentially limiting engagement¹¹. Researchers can promote inclusion by choosing technologies that are already familiar to participants, such as the use of WhatsApp¹², though this can prove problematic for research governance when platforms may not be GDPR compliant⁵.

We have also seen examples where social researchers have explored and adopted remote participatory methods when internet connectivity is unreliable or there have been concerns over digital access. Having abandoned their original methods of interviews and observations, Goldstein et al.¹³ faced the challenge of conducting ethnographic research remotely with homeless youths in São Paulo without reliable internet access. They used their close collaboration with a community co-operative to distribute disposable cameras and mobile phones to participants for them to capture their experiences during the pandemic. Paphitis¹⁴ recommends using existing networks of community leaders to establish connections with participants. They ran a 'drop and collect' service in the Eastern Cape to provide digital research resources, enabling participants to create photo-biographies to map family and personal histories in the context of local geographies.

Keeping in touch

Several researchers observe that the successful take up of adapted methods can be dependent on maintaining and reinforcing pre-established relationships with participants^{6,15}, and gatekeepers and local contacts play a critical role in ensuring support for research communities when researchers can no longer gain access such as in the pandemic⁷. In a participatory snowballing method described by Mosteanu³ initial

participants identified through local contacts recommend and/or recruit further participants from their community. Established participants might also require additional training, guidance or support in using any new methods or technologies.

As lockdown restrictions ease, researchers may consider using in-person but socially distanced methods such as walking methods¹⁶, which can be used as a way of interviewing or can be combined with visualisation, mapping and photo elicitation exercises to facilitate connections with participants' communities and their lived experiences, though the wearing of face coverings will limit communicative cues.

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