

The NCRM wayfinder guide to creative methods combinations in Covid-19



The Covid-19 pandemic has necessitated considerable changes to research practices. Crises can stimulate and inhibit creativity. NCRM's project *Changing research practices: social research in the context of covid-19* highlighted that researchers are carrying on research under changeable circumstances and social restrictions by finding creative ways to adapt and combine methods in their projects. This guide outlines creative responses to research problems presenting in Covid-19 times. Readers are pointed towards examples from the recent research literature and research community as well as wider literatures that might continue to inspire research in the pandemic.

Creativity & inventiveness in social research methods

Creativity is a difficult concept to pin down. For this guide we can talk of research inventiveness and creative methods, although these forms are often closely linked. Creativity generally encompasses ways researchers conceive of their projects and, more specifically, how they interact with research participants and research objects to generate findings. A typology of creative methods¹ is:

1. Arts-based methods
2. Embodied research
3. Research using technology
4. Multi-modal research
5. Transformative research frameworks (e.g. feminist and community-based methodologies).

These types of methods are not distinct and specific uses often overlap any theoretical boundaries. In a research environment prioritising research impact, engagement and interdisciplinarity, creative methods and inventiveness might be motivated by epistemological drivers to create insights, comprehensive coverage or comparative data as well as making research accessible and engaging to different populations and participants. Alternatively, the driver might be some kind of crisis.

“The creativity of crisis”

The social and physical restrictions emerging in response to the Covid-19 pandemic mean that researchers have had to adapt projects and this has

frequently involved creative responses. The *Rapid Evidence Review of methods successfully used or adapted for Covid-19 times*² identified various adaptations to and combinations of methods. Participants in our workshops indicated that creative responses depended on the phase the project had reached as the pandemic restrictions and risks increased, as well as the project's aims. One of our workshop participants referred to the “*creativity of crisis*”.

Many articles and participants discuss the challenges, affordances and ethics of combining their existing methods with **digital technologies**. Crucially, creativity is deeply connected to **ethical research** in the pandemic³.

Adapting and combining methods in the pandemic

Researchers using participant observation, community-based participatory research, sensory methods, creative methods, as well as interviews (see the [NCRM wayfinder guide to adapting interview practices in Covid-19](#)), have been adapting their research designs by combining elements of different approaches.

Research exploring **embodied phenomena** or using **arts-based methods** might be anticipated to struggle significantly with the pandemic restrictions. However, researchers have been able to combine sensory ethnography with digital methods to create data about changes to touch and tactility⁴ and to research dialect and language using combinations of multisensory technologies⁵. Others have been delivering boxes of arts-based resources to participants⁶ and reconfiguring

cultural probes to use objects found in participants' homes⁴.

In **survey research**, groups have responded quickly to the pandemic by combining postal and online survey modes⁷; face-to-face and remote interviews⁸ and longitudinal studies have compared and accounted for mode effects using subsamples⁹ and switching mid-wave from face-to-face to online and computer-assisted telephone-interviews (CATI)^{10,11}. Surveys have continued generating data despite confounding issues in access, mode and context by blending face-to-face and remote methods.

Researchers using **participatory** and **community-based approaches** are continuing to find solutions to continue researching. Expressive elicitations include diaries by children¹², digital storytelling and diary writing by young people¹³. Meanwhile, some **ethnographers** have begun attending to previously overlooked methods in their work practices, such as using a non-representative survey method to explore diversity¹⁴ or using digital approaches towards the end of a long career¹⁵.

While digital connectivity has enabled continued interaction researchers have needed to rethink how best to **care** for participants because creative responses can generate further issues. For instance, the challenges of combining community-based participatory research with digital technologies when the community has been disproportionately affected by COVID19 have been recognised¹⁶ as well as working with participants with disabilities.

Inspiration for combinations

There are many strategies for creatively combining in research methods: in research design, theory, action, analysis and in communicating findings. Below are a few sources that might help inspire responses to the pandemic.

Research approaches that emphasise political philosophy, for example, where **feminist** and **participatory philosophies** can help create coherent combinations and conditions for empowerment¹.

Bricolage research¹⁷ is a way for researchers to work in an interdisciplinary fashion and is potentially a way for researchers to rigorously theorise their combinatorial research designs in the context of Covid-19. There are recent efforts to rethink how **interdisciplinary methods**

traverse disciplinary boundaries and show imaginative ways to conceive of "method"¹⁸.

Mason's¹⁹ **facet methodology**, alternatively, is an approach to combining different methods to create strategic insights into the topic of interest. The research orientation is about designing mini-investigations that illuminate specific elements of the topic of investigation and, as such, may offer ways for researchers to creatively combine different methods. "**Material methods**"²⁰ and "**Mundane methods**"²¹ are useful sources for sparking methodological vitality in different affective, sensory, tacit, spatial and temporal dimensions.

Mixed methods research is an established set of strategies for combining qualitative and quantitative research approaches such as viewpoints, data collection, analysis and inference techniques to achieve breadth and depth²². Bryman²³ provides a typology of ways to combine quantitative and qualitative research and Bellotti²⁴ shows an adaptation for **social network analysis**. Mixed methods may be appropriate to enable research to carry on in the pandemic, where a combination of different data sources is indicated as the best way to answer (adapted) research questions.

Researchers will continue to adapt to the uncertainties and dynamics of the Covid-19 pandemic: creative methods and combinatorial problem-solving are two important resources for the research community to draw upon and cultivate for inspiration.

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See also: [The NCRM wayfinder guide to alternatives to interviewing](#). National Centre for Research methods.

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