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Special Issue: Qualitative Research in Conflict-Affected Settings in the wake Covid-19: Transformations, Disruptions, Re-engagement
Guest Editors: David Mwambari, Andrea Purdekova and Aymar Bisoka

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Global crisis and research production: COVID-19 as shaper and shaker or micro-interruption?

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David Mwambari
Faculty of Social Sciences, KU Leuven, Leuven, Belgium

Andrea Purdeková
University of Bath, Bath, UK

Aymar Nyenyezi Bisoka
UMONS, Mons, Belgium

Abstract
This special issue asks what happens to international research and collaboration when the research community becomes temporarily immobilized. The COVID-19 global pandemic powerfully disrupted normal ways of doing research and, therefore, created a perfect natural experiment of the "otherwise" for digital qualitative research in sensitive contexts. The collected papers argue that the lessons extracted from this recent global health crisis should shape our thinking on qualitative research *amid* crisis and research *on* the crisis. The authors speak to core themes like the digital platforming of research, continued inequality in research relations, and the concept of compounding crises. The special issue reflects on the authors' own experiences with international collaborations during COVID-19 in a multiplicity of contexts from Peru, to Pakistan, Mexico and the Great Lakes Region of Africa. This introductory essay argues that the uniquely rapid and global context of COVID-19 offered a glimpse into one possible alterity of research production. It extracts lessons for the present and future, not only for other global crises, but for willed disruptions of research relations so that these are marked by less inequality and more balanced power relations.

Keywords
Qualitative research, COVID-19, global crises, research in conflict settings, digitalization of suffering

Corresponding author:
David Mwambari, Faculty of Social Sciences, KU Leuven, Parkstraat 45, 3000 Leuven, Belgium.
Email: david.mwambari@kuleuven.be

Introduction

The global pandemic powerfully disrupted normal ways of doing research, making it a perfect natural experiment of the "otherwise." International research and collaboration were temporarily immobilized and data production and research travel were restricted by lockdowns. The COVID-19 crisis's uniquely rapid and global spread forced one possible alterity of research production and has generated many lessons for the future of international research collaborations. The pandemic's lessons can be applied to research on other global crises. Furthermore, its lessons can be applied to efforts at more managed, purposeful change, that is, disruptions that purposefully invoke less inequality and more balanced power relations. It is important to consider whether the pandemic's major mobility disruptions reshaped relations for temporary or lasting improvement. In other words, did COVID-19 disrupt deeper relations and modalities of research or merely create a "microinterruption" in the wider trend of business as usual?

This special issue proposes that the lessons learned can shape our thinking on research *amidst* crisis and research *on* crisis. The authors collectively reflect on core themes like the digital platforming of research, ongoing inequality in research relations, and the concept of compounding crises. The first cross-cutting theme investigates the increased use of online research and its effects. The second theme investigates the impact of immobilization on North–South power relations in research and its decolonial effects (if any). Finally, the last theme considers the exceptionality (if any) of the pandemic and how it intersected with other registers of vulnerability in conflict-affected contexts. Notably, the pandemic had differential impacts across the Global North and South, so its exceptionality should always be contextualized and questioned.

In 2020, the global COVID-19 pandemic slowly started to halt life around the world. Researchers and analysts initially assumed the pandemic would kill many more people in the Global South, especially in Africa, than in Western contexts which turned out to be false (Mwambari, 2020; Okech et al., 2021). Most research institutions continued as normal until about March or April, when public health officials and the World Health Organization warned of severe consequences if people continued to move and interact. What followed was a mixture of lockdowns, lockdown easing, and counting the dead on television screens. In universities, learning migrated to digital platforms. This continued throughout much of 2020 and, in some parts of the world, travel was restricted into 2021. Millions of people died and many more were affected with long-term health consequences.

All researchers were professionally affected. The editors of this special issue began collaborating online to discuss and explore timely questions, including the multiple meanings of global movement restrictions. Our frequent debates discussed the dilemma researchers faced, especially in international collaborations that had previously relied on scholarly travel—mainly from the Global North to the Global South. We observed that many researchers with grant-attached deadlines began conducting research online, often with partners in the Global South who had no reliable digital infrastructure at their disposal. In some cases, grants were flexible and allowed extensions. However, this was often not the case for large funded projects and smaller projects that relied on individuals' own limited funds. Numerous such projects were affected and, in some cases, ended prematurely. We debated the gravity of these changes and the spontaneous

(even ad-hoc) research initiatives that emerged, especially in international collaborative qualitative research.

These discussions culminated in an article addressing the questions preoccupying researchers, funding agencies, higher education institutions, NGOs and research organizations involved in collaborations around the world. Our article "COVID-19 and research in conflict-affected contexts: distanced methods and the digitalization of suffering" was published in *Qualitative Research* after a series of debates with reviewers who were themselves deeply engaged with the topic. The article was well received and continues to be cited and used in classes. Many researchers responded, engaging with us directly and through social media. Some of these scholars sent long reflections on their own research collaborations from Mexico, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Pakistan, and the United States—some of these contributions feature in this special issue. We selected authors who were involved in large international projects, those working across different languages and geographical contexts, and a mixture of early career and senior researchers.

The articles in this special issue build on the arguments and questions featured in our original article and expand our reflections beyond the COVID-19 context. They address ongoing questions about the continued use of online platforms to conduct qualitative research (Eggeling, 2023; Hall et al, 2021; Kim et al., 2023; Pelek et al., 2023). There are many reasons to use online platforms, especially in conflict settings. Researchers may be restricted from traveling due to visa restrictions, limited funding, safety considerations in war zones, or climate change-related crises. We therefore expand on what it means to do qualitative research through these online platforms, especially as they continue to be available (but not necessarily affordable) around the world. In the sections below, we explore the methodological, ethical, and political implications of increased digital platforming of conflict research.

All in all, while COVID-19 undoubtedly transformed research production and taught us much about the use of digital platforms, it did not disrupt deeper relations of power in research production. On the one hand, the articles in this special edition argue that the COVID-19 crisis was a turning point in North–South collaborative research. The crisis highlighted the central role that the digitalization of qualitative research could play in making these collaborations possible. The digitalization of qualitative research *temporarily* reshaped roles and responsibilities as researchers from the North became even more dependent on those in the South, who garnered more leeway in directing research at different levels.

On the other hand, while these reconfigurations should have led to more equitable collaborations after COVID-19, the authors suggest that this was not always the case. Researchers in the South continued to be affected by the same structural challenges that complicated their work before COVID-19. The pandemic's impacts in the South must be seen as part of compounding, multiple, and intersecting crises (e.g., health, security, politics, democracy, and the place of women in society). This reality creates an unequal distribution of vulnerabilities between researchers in the North and those in the South (Dunia et al., 2020; Nyenyezi Bisoka, 2020). It also exposes the notion of "exceptionality" itself as laden with a particular geographical vantage point and thus imposing a perspective that is not shared universally. In many contexts, COVID-19 was one crisis among others, and interacted with them in ways important to understand.

The challenge to exceptionality and elaboration of the notion of compounding crises are some of the key contributions of the present special issue.

In other words, the digitalization of research produced "microinterruptions" in the power relationships between researchers in the Global North and South (Bouka, 2018; Mwambari, 2019; Mwambari and Owor, 2019; Siriwardane-de Zoysa et al., 2023). It also forced all of us to rethink the unequal relationships underpinning these collaborations (Dunia et al., 2023a, 2023b). However, deeper reflection on the epistemological and political implications of digitalizing qualitative research is needed to address its many limitations.

This introduction considers the fundamental issues at stake in the digitalization of qualitative research in North–South collaborative projects. We position the South as a "territory constructed through history, geography and time, and characterized by relations of domination and othering, which are starkly visible in racial divisions wrought on the world through slavery, colonialism and recent struggles around migration" (Sud and Sánchez-Ancochea, 2022). The new digital terrain risks simply extending these offline relations of domination.

We also argue that the ongoing digitalization of qualitative research goes beyond technical adaptations. Instead, it represents an epistemological transformation with major political consequences. While such tools may appear to be purely technical, they are embedded with logics of representation that significantly limit the type of knowledge creation that is possible. In other words, the digitalization of qualitative research involves using online digital technologies to optimize access to field data. It also relies on the intermediations of the digital in the production of specific meanings with real effects on the world. This is a fundamentally epistemological and political phenomenon that compels us to think seriously about the type of qualitative research imposed by digitalization (especially in the South).

We first review the central message of each article in this special issue. We then consider the digitalization of qualitative research beyond COVID-19 by considering how major global crises make access to information difficult and how the digitalization of research can continue to be useful. We then discuss the epistemological and political consequences of digitalization in qualitative research.

Contributions to the special issue: Opportunities and challenges of the digitalization of qualitative research

The articles in this special issue examine three fundamental points. Firstly, they consider how COVID-19 accelerated the digitalization of qualitative research, presenting a major opportunity to reconfigure research relations between researchers in the South and those in the North (who could not access Southern fields). Secondly, this reconfiguration of relationships was an opportunity to experiment with relatively equitable collaboration between partners from the North and the South. Third, however, this reconfiguration faced a number of challenges (during and after the COVID-19 crisis) in terms of reflexivity, concrete actions to improve collaboration, and more structural obstacles.

Indeed, Ansoms et al. examine how the COVID-19 crisis profoundly disrupted the research dynamics in a collaborative research project between researchers in Belgium

and the African Great Lakes region. Reduced international and regional mobility forced partners in the North and the South to reinvent their methods. The researchers in the field —those who were physically "on site"—had never been so crucial. Their rootedness in the field foregrounded their complementary strengths in digital interactions with researchers in the North. However, this article also considers how vulnerabilities were unevenly distributed between partners. Researchers in the South continued to be exposed to difficult environments and unstable employment in order to produce data. These experiences led the research partners to reflect on new ways of working together to overcome postcolonial dynamics in North–South research collaboration. While the Global South scholars were able to showcase their skills and strengths in research, the process also revealed their vulnerabilities in knowledge production.

Bolin et al. also frame crises like COVID-19—with its sudden restrictions on Northern researchers accessing Southern research sites—as an opportunity to create discontinuities in power relations. The authors show the extent to which some researchers in the North depend on easy access to research sites in the South. The digitalization of research created room for various forms of collaboration but fairer practices were envisioned and in some cases emerged after the status quo of North-controlled research was shattered. It provided an opportunity to eradicate colonial practices and address the power imbalances that penalize researchers based in the South. It was also an opportunity to redirect these collaborations toward more ethical forms of research. However, the authors are also acutely aware of the immensity of the challenges in North–South collaborative research, from ignorance of duty of care to paternalistic approaches and funding challenges. They suggest continuing to reflect on these issues to eventually establish more equitable ways of fully reengaging North–South research and collaboration.

Holguin et al. situate these challenges of reflexivity within the ethical complexities of digital qualitative research. The authors draw on experiences doing digital research with survivors of collective violence and the families of the disappeared in Peru. They question how a history of political violence can have a particular impact on digital research processes. They reflect on the implications and potential challenges of digital qualitative research in light of diverse dimensions of revictimization, including survivors' processes of understanding agency, the silencing of traumatic experiences within communities, survivors' collective identifications, intersectionality, and survivors' social justice commitments. Finally, the article highlights the importance of ethical reflections throughout the investigative process and proposes a reflective research practice that aims to align digital research with the relational and social context of survivors of collective violence.

Mendez's contribution proposes a political understanding of reflexivity in the context of "crisis-time" research. The author explains that, in 2022, Mexico ranked third for the number of COVID-19 deaths; nearly 80,000 people were officially reported missing and 52,000 corpses preserved by the state had not been identified. However, COVID-19 was not an unusual crisis for families used to searching for missing family members. Civil society groups focused on urgent issues like the proper treatment of bodies, fearing that they would be cremated before being identified. In such a context, reflexivity is closely linked to positionality. It is not a universal exercise in finding ethical answers within a "transparent and knowable self, waiting to be revealed" ("transparent reflexivity"). On the contrary, it is a political construction, that is to say, its own construction which necessarily depends on its own positionality ("critical reflexivity" of the actors).

Therefore, Mendez argues against COVID-19 as an exception (cf. global and Western-centric discourse), instead positioning it as a compounding crisis—a situation that aggravated already-existing crises in contexts of chronic violence and vulnerability

Khan continues with this political understanding of reflexivity by arguing that the researcher's feelings, position, and embodied reflexivity should be central concerns in post-COVID voice-only online interviewing. Khan also reflects on gender relations as a unique challenge when researching in a supposedly disembodied online space. He draws on his experiences as a male researcher using voice-only WhatsApp interviews to study women's affect and Taliban violence in Pakistan's Swat Valley to position remote interviewing as both an embodied and embedded practice. This understanding situates the embodied reflexivity and gendered position of the researcher in relation to research participants—a relationship largely absent from the literature on voice-only qualitative interviewing. While internet-mediated environments do offer certain opportunities, Khan argues that their ability to bypass gender boundaries has been widely over-celebrated without sufficient critical scrutiny.

Finally, in "North–South Research Collaboration during Complex Global Emergencies: Qualitative Knowledge Production and Sharing during COVID-19" Rudling et al. highlight other political and structural challenges that hindered truly equitable reconfigurations stemming from the COVID-19 digitalization. The article considers how large multinational qualitative teams of academics and activist practitioners in peace and conflict studies depend on teams in the South for "local" knowledge and expertise. Using the center–periphery framework and adopting an autoethnographic approach, the article shows how the pandemic has not only reinforced existing structural and institutional asymmetries through reduced funding, professional uncertainty and personal loss and insecurity but has added new ethical concerns. This has challenged multinational teams' ability to commit to the decolonization of knowledge. The article reaffirms that research ethics and the politics of qualitative knowledge production are situated in durable Global North–South power structures.

These articles go beyond the COVID-19 context to raise questions about the ongoing digitalization of research on major global crises where accessing information is challenging. In such cases, the digitalization of research may be decisive in the creation of social science knowledge.

Global crises and the specter of digitalization in qualitative research

Most contributors in this collection argue against the exceptionality of the COVID-19 moment and this also holds for online interviewing, which as a technique certainly preceded the pandemic. Yet, the pandemic was an intensification and a "magnifying glass" (Khan, this collection) for understanding key ethical and methodological issues. A more fine-tuned understanding is certainly needed going forward. Remote collaboration and data collection procedures continue to be developed and perfected as scholars embrace ongoing digitalization in conflict-related research. New generations increasingly turn to artificial intelligence and digital software while conducting research in sensitive contexts. Similarly, global conflicts themselves also incorporate the digital—treating digital space

as another field of confrontation. All of this makes digitalization ever more relevant in the fraught and fast-evolving research landscape, especially in war zones that are increasingly difficult to physically access.[1] Researchers continue to use WhatsApp messages and videos in areas like the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, Gaza, Sudan, Ukraine, Syria, and Yemen.

Researchers embracing hybrid or fully digital platforms must be attuned to the broader political economies of digital knowledge production as they enter an arena of unequally "globalized" conflicts. That is, not all conflicts garner equal digital attention, production, and learning. Ongoing conflicts in Sudan and Ethiopia have been pushed out of global attention, and the underreported humanitarian crisis in Yemen is one of the worst in the world. This unequal online "live production" of qualitative data revolves around limited access to digital technologies and attention from key epistemic communities.

Digital platforms can be well suited to studying such marginalized conflicts and gaining access to the least accessible spaces. Douedari et al. (2021), who have carried out qualitative digital research in Syria's active war zones, highlight the limits and contributions of such research: "We conducted remote interviews in three different military-controlled areas in Syria, without travelling from one area to another and talking to participants in places and times suitable for them, reducing potential security risks for all." Clearly, digital platforms can be crucial for accessing the perspectives and voices of ordinary people living in active war zones.

However, the articles in this special issue push us to nuance the notion of access. As Khan highlights, it is fundamentally important to consider embodied reflexivity and the positionality of online researchers. Online, remote research remains "both embodied and embedded." The online researcher should be attuned to their own embodied presence and to the body and embodiment of their research participants if they are to facilitate epistemic access in addition to facilitating conventional access (in the sense of bridging distance).

Equally, we must ensure that digital space does not become yet another platform of extraction or retraumatization. As Farfan Mendez shows in this collection, for Sinaloans in Mexico searching for the disappeared amid chronic insecurity and vulnerability, COVID-19 comes to compound and complicate an already existing crisis rather than introduce it. As Holguin et al. highlight in the case of Peru, researchers must be attuned and prevent online spaces from becoming arenas of revictimization in the wake of violence. They show very effectively how crises compound each other, in this case how COVID-19 army checks and lockdowns "provoked reexperiencing of symptoms of fear and panic" related to earlier counter-insurgency (Holguin et al., this collection). The researchers realized that their own online procedures related to digital follow-up research risked to contribute to the revictimization. Holguin et al.'s work is thus a key intervention in creating a more reflective research practice in sensitive conflict-affected contexts preventing "revictimizing participants in digital research practice" (ibid). They contribute to our understanding of the complex ways in which such revictimization actually happens in contexts of compounded crises.

In their research on Syria, Duedari et al. aimed to control for safety, consent, representativeness of voices, and psychosocial support in their study of Syria's war zones:

> We recruited a UK-licensed Arabic-speaking psychotherapist to provide on call psychological grounding sessions that we offered free to participants exhibiting distress during (online)

> interviews. For example, sensitive issues touching upon experiences of personal losses and sexual abuse in the community arose in interviewing a female health worker, triggering her emotional distress. The researcher had been trained in psychological first aid and drew on active listening skills, paused the interview, and created space for silence. Afterward, the researcher organized sessions between the psychotherapist and the participant. However, only one session took place before government bombardment of the participant's city forced her to evacuate and ended her efforts to engage.

As this extract shows, digital research can grapple with serious ethical dilemmas and its own helplessness in alleviating not only psychological stresses related to research but also the immediate physical threats participants face. However, online psychosocial mitigation strategies, while useful, are vulnerable to the abrupt termination of online access in violence-affected spaces. Furthermore, the human experience of war cannot be fully verbalized/narrativized by respondents and/or elicited by remote research teams. To mitigate this issue of immersion, digital research teams could include refugees from conflict zones who have a direct understanding of the area.

Active armed conflict is not the only thing limiting access to distant field sites (e.g., climate change or future pandemic crises). Digital platforms also offer solutions for individuals with disabilities and resource constraints (both temporary and permanent) who cannot always travel to conduct their research. Family responsibilities and gender restrictions may also extend this digital shift and hybrid research collection. Donor bodies and individual researchers also increasingly turn to digitalization and online video conferencing for their cost-saving aspects—in terms of both finances and time. Both UKRI's Environmental Sustainability Strategy and Wellcome Trust's Guidelines on Good Environmental Practice included digitalization in their public commitment to reduce the climate impact of funded research. Universities have also elaborated climate action frameworks and pledges to lower carbon emissions associated with research. Researchers are now asked to balance research benefits and risks for individual human participants *and* the climate and living ecosystems. Travel is unlikely to disappear; however, until green energy sustainably replaces fossil fuels, large research budgets will be closely scrutinized for their climate impact and be pushed toward climate-friendly and climate-ethical data-gathering alternatives.

For all these reasons, hybrid global research collaborations are here to stay. Greater sensitivity to climate impacts must go hand in hand with greater equity in North–South research collaborations. We need to heed the lessons of the COVID-19 "natural" experiment. We cannot allow "business as usual" (Ansoms et al., this collection) under a new guise—just as crises compound, so must mitigations related to access and equity concerns. To fully overcome barriers and increase inclusivity, the research encounter needs equal payoffs on both sides. This requires explicit reflections on the nature and impact of collaboration across vastly unequal geographical spaces. Such reflection needs to assess how risks, responsibilities, and benefits of collaboration are reshaped by crisis and the digital platforming of research. As Ansoms et al. explain, disruptions like COVID-19 need to be accompanied by strategies to prevent postcolonial dynamics in collaboration from re-asserting themselves in a new form.

Epistemological issues: Digital intermediation in the production of meaning

Mendez's work in this collection indirectly highlights the epistemological and theoretical constraints that digital methods may impose on qualitative research. She illustrates how a researcher's absence from the field can lead to an overreliance on initial research questions, potentially causing them to overlook contextual elements that could otherwise prompt a reevaluation or a deepening of these inquiries. From a constructivist perspective on reflexivity, Mendez demonstrates that truly enriching fieldwork demands a researcher's ability to be continuously stimulated by their surroundings. For instance, Mendez points out that understanding how her respondents in Sinaloa perceive COVID-19 requires linking this experience to contexts of disappearance. To connect these phenomena is to narrate a unique account of COVID-19, distinct from that in the United States where she resides. It also means generating insights that transcend the discursive frameworks typically constraining our initial hypotheses. Mendez's research exemplifies how digital-based studies, devoid of physical field presence, struggle to break free from such limiting discursive orders, shaped by the researcher's positionality.

Similarly, Holguin et al., in their discussion on digital research experiences with survivors of collective violence and families of the disappeared in Peru, emphasize the need to acknowledge how our assumptions influence remote knowledge production. This reflexive stance brings forth epistemological considerations by questioning the relationship between the generated knowledge and the researcher's perspective. Holguin et al. show that researchers are not merely external observers but integral components of the research subject. Mere reflexivity on one's position is inadequate; researchers must also delve into the contextual and communal dynamics that frame participants' narratives, which is crucial for accurately situating their meanings. Such meanings are often sculpted by the researchers' own perspectives (including ethnocentric views such as stereotypes, colonial attitudes, and victimization) and their views on the social changes deemed beneficial for the participants.

By confining themselves to the complexity of respondents' digital representations, researchers might adopt a limited interpretation of their worlds, thus generating skewed understandings.

On a more theoretical level, the digital shift in qualitative research is more than an opportunity to overcome practical limitations. It is a chance to consider how intermediaries' involvement affects knowledge production. In other words, using digital technology as an intermediary in qualitative research can affect the data we produce and the interpretation of our studies, as shown by the article by Holgiun et al., Mendez, and Khan in this collection. This insight challenges the still-dominant perspective that values the immediate relationship between the subject of knowledge (the researcher) and the object of knowledge (the field),[2] which underpins much contemporary qualitative research practice.

The Kantian rationalist approach and ontological *a priori* still underpin many theories and methods in the social sciences. However, these concepts have been increasingly questioned by new materialism and posthumanism perspectives. For instance, Latour's actor-network theory proposes that objects and discourses (in addition to humans) possess agency in the semiotic process and can be considered "actants." The basic difference

between actors and actants is that the former can put the latter in circulation. Latour's ideas question the ontological position of humans as both self-contained entities and the only entities possessing agency. A multiplicity of relationships bind the human and the nonhuman without ontological differentiation to produce meaning.

Discussions on the production of meaning must consider research methods and platforms. Such a proposal reverses rationalism's notion that reason is the beginning and end of knowledge. Human cultures and technologies are coconstitutive (Paulus & Lester, 2021). Technologies are not simply diffractions of something immutable "out there." They shape our inner worlds, our approaches, thinking, and affects on the world. Meaning becomes constituted by networks and mediations (Latour, 2007) that integrate several nonhuman factors that enter the composition of a "collective" producer of meaning. According to actor-network theory, scientific knowledge is the result of repeated interactions by heterogeneous actors (i.e., the network actor).

Such ideas help us understand digital tools in social science research as actants—nonhuman entities that intervene not only in research production but in the construction of meaning. The field data collected through this association of heterogeneous entities is impacted by the digital techniques and tools used. We should consider (i) how researchers in the North, their digital tools, the observations of researchers, and the stakeholders in the field interact; (ii) how, from one situation to another, knowledge is formed, deformed, and reshaped according to the tools used and (iii) how this produces a singular meaning. Recent work on "digital witnessing" (Awan, 2021; Gynnild, 2014) and the "objective witness" (Sidiki, 2021)—in terms of drones, remote sensing and mapping, satellite imagery, and social media in conflict areas explores such entanglements of human and nonhuman and the ensuing diffraction of knowledge production.

Framing digital research tools as actors participating in the network of meaning production prompts us to reconsider what these technologies do with our data and their meaning. For example, it can be difficult for researchers working remotely to engage with issues of emotion (Mwambari et al., 2021) or capture linguistic complexities. Digital tools will always seek to standardize because that is how they are constructed.

Political questioning: From colonial hegemony to digital innovation in the Global South

In his article, Khan argues that the physical presence of researchers in qualitative studies is not inherently beneficial but context-dependent. However, he also underscores that distance can pose significant challenges that must be addressed to avoid diluting the richness of data. He discusses how voice-only online interviews lack the nuance provided by the physical proximity of the interviewee and interviewer. This proximity enhances the interview process, transforming it from mere data collection to an active coconstruction of knowledge, as the interactions between the interviewee and interviewer generate new insights. Drawing from his research experiences in Pakistan's Swat Valley, Khan explains that Internet-mediated methods necessitate an additional layer of cultural mediation to prevent biases in understanding during such interviews.

Indirectly, Khan reveals that without these mediations, the interpretation of the data is not only compromised but could also produce a distorted view of conflict and

counterinsurgency operations in Pakistan. Without established local connections in the Swat region, the trust required for meaningful interviews between the women respondents and the male interviewer would be absent. Yet, this does not mean that women are unable to express themselves, or that the researcher cannot derive meaningful insights from their expressions. Khan illustrates that, even in this context, while technology is useful, it produces somewhat simplistic interpretations. He notes that during interviews, elements such as pauses, changes in the interviewee's tone, or abrupt topic shifts, significantly shape the meaning.

Recognizing these nuances is not just an epistemological choice but a political one, as it has implications for the subjects of our research. Indeed, as Holguin et al. emphasize, the interpretations and conclusions we draw from our research on vulnerable populations involve decisions about the social changes we envision for them, influencing the actual impact of our research on their lives.

Thus, Rudling et al. discuss how peace and conflict studies often perpetuate essentialist and infantilizing narratives that depict field subjects as helpless, reinforcing central–peripheral dynamics that legitimatize the Global North as the epicenter of power and knowledge, tasked with rectifying the "deficient" conditions of the locals. They also highlight how expertise remains in the North while data and experiences are extracted from the South, perpetuating the criticized knowledge-power dynamics identified by postcolonial scholars.

Moreover, as Bolin et al. suggest, the constraints imposed by COVID-19 and the resulting shift toward digital research methodologies may have intensified these power imbalances, enabling researchers in the North to control field research from afar. Control over the research process extends to controlling research directions and, ultimately, the political recommendations concerning the living conditions of local actors.

More theoretically, for many studies, the use of technologies merely serves a functionalist purpose in adapting to various constraints in the field (e.g., site inaccessibility). However, work combining social sciences and technology studies (a la Latour) reveals that the choice of tools is a political decision (conscious or unconscious). Choosing online tools will foster specific representations, induce realities about the other, and create particular problematizations (Akrich et al., 2006; Lascoumes and Le Galès, 2005). Technology goes beyond impacting meaning; it shapes how others are envisioned. This means that the digitalization of qualitative research poses political issues.

We must overcome the positivist approach to digital tools and consider their role in the political process of producing the "other." Digital tools adapt and inscribe change within a group of actors (researchers from the North, researchers from the South, respondents, etc.) and actants (social networks, IT tools, etc.). In defining meaning, they become part of a network and claim a specific action, the reality of the other. The papers in this collection begin unpacking these realities; for example, Khan explores the fundamentally embodied and multiply-embedded process of voice-only online interviewing in Pakistan. His article illustrates how voice-only online interviewing not only shapes our understanding of interviewees' experiences but also constrains our ability to perceive aspects beyond the limitations imposed by this methodological approach.

Even in cases where both the researcher and the research objectives claim political neutrality, the digital tools used in qualitative research are never neutral (Mwambari, 2022). These tools have their own logic. Knowledge policy can no longer simply note

that researchers from the North are omnipresent in the production of knowledge on their subjects and fields on behalf of the South. We must also investigate the logic of the discourse imposed by digital tools and their political and economic effects. The hegemony of digital tools and methodologies is achieved through standardization; the world's multiple experiences are lumped into a single historical Euro-Western experience (Schoon et al., 2020). The resulting impoverishment of diversity and the imposition of meaning stems from the limits of the digital method. The digitalization of qualitative research may erase different ways to make sense of and act upon the world (Turner, 2023) by imposing a singular geographic, cultural, and political perspective.

Conversations on the digitalization of qualitative research should go beyond methodological efficiency (i.e., accessing the field) and epistemological efficiency (i.e., limiting the margins of access to the field). Digitalization also limits the possibilities of meaning, with political effects. Importantly, the methodological tools involved in the digitalization of qualitative research are not secondary and insignificant; they carry political meaning and produce specific effects—more or less discreet, often unexpected—that transform the operating methods and content of the discourses and concrete actions of the people we are studying.

Bilateral and multilateral international cooperation agencies are increasingly using qualitative research to inform their policies. These policies affect the lives and material conditions of millions of people in the South. Moreover, as the decolonial turn becomes more widespread in the social sciences, we must interrogate the colonial dimensions of these processes. Ansoms et al. and Rudling et al. offer such a blueprint for self-reflective analysis on the decolonial impacts of North–South collaboration in an era of digitalization. These authors move away from an anthropocentric approach to decolonization to consider the coloniality of Western-centric tools (Nyenyezi Bisoka, 2020). Digital technology—an instrument of political power that constructs a homogeneous vision of the world and imposes concrete actions on it—must be decolonized.

The decolonization of digital research would address the economic and geopolitical implications of having digital knowledge controlled by major companies in the North (Lazem et al., 2022; Mwambari, 2022). It must also raise the issue of cultural pluralism to develop sustainable alternative technologies that respect linguistic, cultural, and biological diversity. We should pursue technodiversity (Hui and Lemmens, 2021), including the "rejection" of invasive or harmful technology in certain cultural contexts. This will contribute to the fight against "digital colonialism" and promote solutions that respect the ecology, cultures, and languages involved in creating multiple visions of the world. We must avoid epistemicide—the "systematic destruction of rival forms of knowledge"—that imposes a determined and hegemonic meaning (Fiormonte, 2021).

Conclusion

The COVID-19 crisis accelerated the digitalization of qualitative research and presented a major opportunity to reconfigure research relations between researchers in the South and those in the North (as the latter could not access Southern fields). The pandemic became a moment to experiment with equitable collaboration between research partners; however, a number of challenges arose during and after the COVID-19 crisis, including in the areas of reflexivity, concrete actions, and more structural challenges.

Overall, COVID-19 did not fundamentally alter power relations in academic production, and is more meaningfully understood as a series of "microinterruptions." As the papers highlighted powerfully, the COVID-19 pandemic created unequal risks and effects across the geogrpaphies of the world. Broder inequalities and structural violence in different country contexts created differential health impacts and threats, different regimes of constriction—simply different "corona rhythms" (Farfan Mendez, this collection), and different forms of collaborative configurations. In many contexts, COVID-19 was one crisis among many and an additional source of vulnerability, and as such created compounded effects. Understanding the way in which crises interact and the notion of "compounded crises" is a key contribution here in articles such as that by Farfan Mendez on Mexico, Holguin et al. on Peru and Ansoms et al. on the Great Lakes Region of Africa and one that must be taken further in theorization and applied research. The perspective of compounded crises and the nonsingularity and nonuniqueness of COVID-19—COVID-19 as "(un)exceptional times" (Farfan Mendez, this collection) in some violence-affected contexts—reverts the Western-centric perspective of the pandemic and the pandemic as a "hegemonic reference" point for crisis (Ansoms et al., this collection). At the same time, as Farfan Mendez so clearly points out, unexceptional does not mean nonexistent, and the additional stress of COVID-19 deepened vulnerabilities in her research sites even as it produced further benefits to the global North research, deepening research-related inequalities.

But the collection and findings with regard to COVID-19 are relevant going forward. As highlighted above, a series of major global crises are making access to information difficult. In these contexts, the digitalization of research will be decisive and so will be a critical and self-reflexive approach to such platforming of research. As articles by Holguin et al. and Khan show in very different contexts of Peru and Pakistan, digital research is embodied and embedded, and must be consciously mitigating against retraumatization, revictimization of participants as well as form of exclusion and epistemic erasure. Therefore, critical and self-reflexive approaches will be essential in such platforming of research. The decolonization of (qualitative) research must seriously consider how digital intermediations affect the production of meaning. Scholars must promote digital innovation and heterogeneity to confront the colonial hegemony of the digital.

Posthumanism usefully proposes a rethink of the relationship between humans and technology. It also elevates the ethical challenges posed by the development and use of digital techniques. The posthumanist question has led to a redefinition of the human being; this implies that the rewriting of society and the epistemological conditions of this rewriting have political consequences. It demonstrates the value of "taking an interest in practices that erect barriers between the notions of human and nonhuman in order to better challenge our vision of these categories" (Barad, 2003, 808).

The proliferation of digital technologies will upend much qualitative research. Therefore, scholars must actively promote epistemic diversity and technological plurality to ensure that the South continues to play a role in the production of meaning. We need not completely reject hegemonic technologies; rather, we should promote diversity and integrate as many worldviews as possible. Southern countries have already created avenues for technological innovation toward digital decolonization in their quest for technological independence. These include "indigenous data sovereignty" and "Big Data Sur" projects, a "nonaligned technologies" movement, projects inspired by the

commons such as the "FLOK Society," the "community networks movement" in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, and open access scientific publication initiatives such as Redalyc, Scielo, and AmeliCa (Fiormonte, 2021). It is now time to imagine these forms of decolonization in qualitative research. The decolonization of (qualitative) research can only arise from a transdisciplinary, epistemological, and political critique that takes seriously the production of decolonizing technological research tools.

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ORCID iD

David Mwambari https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9126-6538

Notes

1. https://kq.freepressunlimited.org/themes/media-and-conflict/difficulties-of-accessing-the-conflict-zone/
2. This perspective is part of a Kantian rationalist approach that sees the production of knowledge as an immediate subject–object relationship, although the subject is doubled in the Kantian perspective (Kant, 2007). The epistemic rules that Kant proposes submit knowledge of reality to claims of truth stemming from a rationalist postulate that requires the exclusive or essential use of reason. Said differently, the operation of knowledge involves an essential connection between the subject being analyzed and how it is perceived and understood. In qualitative research, the researcher gathers qualitative data through their various senses (perception) and interprets using their reasoning (understanding).

   The rationalist idea is of an instantaneous link between subject and knowledge remains intact at the subject level, as evidenced by the Kantian "empirically transcendental doublet" (perception and understanding) (Foucault, 1966). However, it is based on an ontological *a priori*, according to which the human subject (researcher) is the only factor involved in the semiotic process. There is no intermediary between perception and understanding; between subject and object. Despite Kantian rationalism suggesting the necessity of criticism to limit the possible consequences of this hegemonic reason, reason itself is once again cited as the source of its limitation (Colebrook, 2005). This special issue is marked by its critique of reflexivity, which tends to justify the monopoly of knowledge production and its *a posteriori* verification (Rose, 1997).

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Author biographies

David Mwambari is an Associate Professor in Social Sciences. His area of research is politics of knowledge production, peace and security, memory, and mobility in post-conflict societies.

Andrea Purdeková is Senior Lecturer/Associate Professor in Conflict and Security. Her area of research is politics of reconciliation, nation-building and memory in societies divided by violent conflict.

Aymar Nyenyezi Bisoka is an Associate Professor of Political Anthropology. His area of research is political ecology, focusing on knowledge, power, and resistance related to access to natural resources, approached from an Afrocritical perspective.

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Turning the tables or business as usual? COVID-19 as a catalyst in North–South research collaborations

An Ansoms
Université catholique de Louvain, Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium

Anuarite Bashizi
Université catholique de Louvain, Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium

Romuald Adili Amani
Independent Researcher, Goma, Congo

Joel Baraka Akilimali
Université catholique de Louvain, Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium

Lionel Bisimwa Matabaro
Institut supérieur du développement rural de Bukavu, Bukavu, Congo

Parfait Kaningu Bushenyula
Institut supérieur du développement rural de Bukavu, Bukavu, Congo

David Mutabesha
Institut supérieur du développement rural de Bukavu, Bukavu, Congo

Sylvie Bashizi Nabintu
Institut supérieur du développement rural de Bukavu, Bukavu, Congo

Guillaume Ndayikengurutse
Université du Burundi, Bujumbura, Burundi

Joseph Nsabimana
Independent Researcher, Kigali, Rwanda

Corresponding author:
An Ansoms, Université catholique de Louvain, Louvain-la-Neuve, Montesquieu 1, L2.08.03, 1348 Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium.
Email: an.ansoms@uclouvain.be

Patient Polepole
Institut supérieur du développement rural de Bukavu, Bukavu, Congo

Abstract
Since February 2020, we have witnessed COVID-19 profoundly disturb ongoing research dynamics – including research collaborations between the Global North and the Global South. Reduced international and regional mobility obliged research collaborations to reinvent their modalities. The role of field-based researchers (those physically 'there') has never been more crucial. This article draws on the testimonies of researchers from the African Great Lakes region to reflect on the positionality of field-based researchers in North–South research collaborations throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Their embeddedness in the field foregrounded their complementary strengths in interactions with scholars from the Global North. We also illustrate how vulnerabilities – both unstable employment and field-related risks – were unevenly shared by partners in the Global South and the Global North. In conclusion, the COVID-19 experience inspired us to adhere to new collaboration modalities that move beyond post-colonial dynamics in North–South research collaborations.

Keywords
COVID19, research ethics, decolonisation of knowledge production, Great Lakes of Africa, North–South research collaborations

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic generated profound societal upheavals, including its human toll, significant economic losses, and social fragmentation. The pandemic also led to significant changes in work practices, particularly in relation to mobility. The academic world adapted, and scholars increasingly worked through online encounters. However, these new practices brought significant challenges for social sciences qualitative research, which is primarily based on social interactions and physical encounters with actors and practices. Creating deep understandings of social phenomena often requires an assiduous presence in the field (Olivier de Sardan, 2008). The omnipresent quarantines, travel suspensions, border closures and social distancing measures forced many researchers to reinvent their research methods (Mwambari et al., 2021; Wood et al., 2020).

For some, the travel restrictions incited experimentation with technological innovations (Howlett, 2021). Even before the pandemic, there was growing acceptance that face-to-face interactions were no longer "the gold standard against which the performance of computer-mediated interaction is judged" (Hine, 2005: 4; see also Fielding et al., 2008; Jenner and Myers, 2018). However, for several authors, remote forms of research remain a 'second choice' (Deakin and Wakefield, 2014; see also Johnson et al., 2019). Some cite technical (Jowett et al., 2011) and ethical challenges (Schatz and Volo, 2004); others note the difficulties in establishing trust from a distance (Abidin and De Seta, 2020), particularly in situations where violence and conflict may impede interviewees' safety (Mwambari et al., 2021).

Other research teams leaned intensely on their researchers 'on the ground' since remote partners were obliged to (indefinitely) function 'from a distance'. In many North–South

research collaborations, the 'object' of research is located in the Global South, while the funding and decision-making about research management happen in the Global North.[1] These collaborations are often characterised by skewed power relations anchored in neo-colonial structures and normative frameworks that inherently push researchers from the Global South to the periphery of knowledge generation (Bradley, 2007; McKenzie, 2019). Researchers from the Global South (especially those who are locally embedded in the field) have limited opportunities to participate in the entire cycle of research – from conception to valorisation of research results. Instead, they are mobilised as human capital in the margins – data gatherers, research assistants, and research brokers working on temporary contracts (Nyenyezi et al., 2020).

However, the global pandemic restricted the researcher movement, thereby reshaping positionality and the broader power relations characterising these North–South collaborations. This article illustrates how the COVID-19 crisis provided a moment of catharsis in the organisation of North–South research collaborations. We focus on research collaborations between Belgium and the Great Lakes Region of Africa to highlight how researchers of diverse positionalities were affected. Embeddedness in the field allowed researchers in the South to foreground their complementary strengths in interactions with scholars from the Global North. Yet, we also illustrate how vulnerabilities – namely, unstable employment and field-related risks – were unevenly shared by partners in the Global South and the Global North.

These findings have relevance for the post-COVID-19 period since restrictions on international mobility will continue to determine our working conditions. For example, mobility restrictions in the DRC are far from exceptional (e.g., the 2018–2020 Ebola crisis in Eastern DRC, see Nyenyezi et al., 2021) and security problems regularly impede access for outsiders. At a more global scale, climate change should make us question the ecological footprint of our travels.[2] Alternatively, scholars from the Global South have long faced many restrictions on their international mobility due to increasingly strict Northern migration laws. Organising physical encounters with people from various continents will likely remain a challenging endeavour.

Power relations in collaborative North–South research

Over the past two decades, a growing cross-disciplinary literature has reflected upon ethical challenges in field research (Adenaike and Vansina, 1996; Ansoms et al., 2021; Lee-Treweek and Linkogle, 2000; Legrand and Gutron, 2016; Nordstrom and Robben, 1995; Sanford and Angel-Ajani, 2006; Thomson et al., 2012; Wall and Mollinga, 2008). Questions about research collaborations between the Global South and the Global North are frequently raised, though often in a peripheral way. This section directly reflects on the achievements and challenges of such collaborative South–North research, including the post-colonial legacies and power relations that characterise such initiatives.

Collaborative research is based on the principle of establishing links and partnerships between different actors with a common goal in the research process (Smulyan, 1987). In North–South collaborative research, these partnerships involve scientific institutions (research organisations, universities, science academies) or researchers from countries in both the Global South and the Global North. Also framed as North–South research partnerships, these collaborative research initiatives

are key to enhancing opportunities for researchers from the Global South in knowledge production systems (Baud, 2002).

North–South research partnerships were first encouraged by the 1979 United Nations Conference on Science and Technology for Development (Gaillard, 1996). At this conference, the concept was strongly supported by the representatives of Global South countries (ibid.). Bilateral cooperation agreements were later established between research institutions from the North and the South, specifying the objectives, methods, means and duration of projects (Barré and Chabbal, 1996). In 1999, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development in Vienna determined specific characteristics of North–South cooperative research (UNCTAD 1999, see also Gaillard, 1996). According to these principles, North–South collaborative research should favour Southern countries' development priorities, guarantee the participation of Southern partners as much as possible, involve joint follow-up, and provide a training component (ibid.).

Despite good intentions, the inherent assumptions of North–South collaboration often situate the Global North as the holder of the knowledge and the Global South as an apprentice (Bradley, 2007). Northern institutions are said to bring theoretical and methodological knowledge, while the South institutions are agents who generate and deliver the data. Many programmes assume the need to reinforce Global South research institutions' local capacities as a starting point (Carbonnier and Kontinen, 2015; Mwambari et al., 2022). The transfer of knowledge and technology is said to develop local capacity to produce 'objective' knowledge to counterbalance traditional forms of knowledge (Gaillard, 1996).

These assumptions were called into question over 20 years ago (Engelhard and Box, 1999; De la Rive Box 2001), and have only garnered increasing criticism since. For example, Ogden and Porter (2000) have noted the high-quality research (from various fields) produced by researchers in countries like Brazil, India and China. Others have highlighted how North–South collaborations also offer Global North partners the opportunities to learn (e.g., how to complexify theory and historical-framed ways of thinking (Bhambra et al., 2020) or navigate complex research environments and adapt research tools (Jentsch, 2004). However, persistent discriminatory mechanisms continue to push African scholars to the background. Briggs and Weathers (2016) illustrated how Africa-based scholars – who, on average, opt for a deeper more locally specific focus in contrast to the more generalising cross-country preferences of journals – are less likely to publish or be cited in top-ranked journals on African dynamics.

Today, mainstream discourse seems to acknowledge that North–South research partnerships strengthen the research capacities of everyone involved. Each partner should be recognised for how their expertise complemented the research team (Cole and Knowle, 1993). The mutual strengthening of capacities (Jentsch, 2004), the production of scientifically relevant knowledge, and the translation of research results into policy interventions are all important achievements that can be expected from a North–South research partnership (Droz and Mayor, 2009; Vidal, 2017). At the same time, North–South collaborative research is confronted with numerous challenges. Asymmetrical power relations favour the Global North (Anderson, 2002; McKenzie, 2019), resulting in inequitable access to information, training, funding, exchange, and publication possibilities (Bradley, 2007; Jentsch and Pilley, 2003). Northern institutions and their researchers also have more

control over the project design and management since most research funding is managed in the Global North (Maina-Ahlberg et al., 1997).

North–South partnerships tend to revolve around the Global North, while "disconnected peripheries … follow more than they collaborate" (McKenzie, 2019: 427). Structural inequalities and colonial legacies result in situations where the North is considered as a *provider* and the South as a *receiver* (Jentsh and Pilly, 2003). Both sides often have an interest in perpetuating this imagination: the partner in the Global South depends on the resources this architecture provides, while the partner in the Global North bolsters its scientific (and cooperation) legitimacy by generating a perception of quality (McKenzie, 2019).

The evaluations of North–South research partnerships are generally coordinated by Northern institutions or Northern-based consultants. Thus, Southern reflections on North–South research partnerships (and their everyday implications) are quite rare (Bradley, 2007; Vidal, 2017). An interesting exception is the 'Bukavu Series', a series of blogs written by researchers from the Global South and North, reflecting on the realities of North–South collaborative research. The "Bukavu" authors reveal how researchers from the Global South are pushed to the periphery of knowledge production. They reflect on the challenges facing locally embedded researchers and the deeper mechanisms that define the power relations in North–South research collaborations (Nyenyezi et al., 2020). They criticise how researchers from the Global South remain invisible in collaborative projects; their specific ethical and emotional challenges often remain unaddressed (Mwambari and Owor, 2019).

Effective partnerships jointly pursue research questions, methodologies, field research, and analysis (Ansoms et al., 2021; Patel, 2001). Although many authors believe that collaboration should serve mutual interests and benefit all partners equally (see, e.g., White, 2020), this ideal is not simple to enact in practice. Even in cases where North–South interests are compatible, they are rarely identical (Bradley, 2007; Gunasekara, 2020). Asymmetries in power relations within North–South research partnerships have deep roots and are often unconsciously (sometimes consciously) reasserted and prolonged by new collaborations (see also Vogel and Musamba, 2022).

Exploring the 'potential to equalize inequalities in research' (Monson, 2020) in North–South research partnerships is therefore crucial for understanding how power relations work and evolve. This article takes such an approach to explore how power relations in our own South–North research group – and other North–South partnerships – have evolved throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. We are aware that each of our positionalities affects how our team members and interlocutors express themselves. This article fits within a long history of joint discussions on ethical dilemmas, emotional challenges, and power relations in our own South–North collaborations.

Collaborative research during the COVID-19 pandemic: A case study

The COVID-19 period has impacted almost everyone's research trajectories, regardless of whether they are embedded in the Global South or the Global North. However, the wider power relations of scientific knowledge production influenced the scope of

individual researchers' coping strategies. For some, COVID-19 brought new opportunities; for others, the pandemic presented a huge obstacle to their research activities. This section analyses how researchers working in and on the African Great Lakes Region have experienced their profession over the 2020–2022 period. We reflect on how the crisis provided an opportunity to explore North–South research collaborations and individual contributions therein in new ways. We also consider the unevenly distributed risks and vulnerabilities that researchers were exposed to throughout the pandemic.

The inspiration for this article initially emerged from a collaboration between the authors – eight of whom were based in the South (Rwanda, Burundi and the DRC) during COVID-19 and three in the North (in Belgium). Together, we have conducted research on political governance of the COVID-19 pandemic and forms of local resilience in the context of crises. Our team includes diverse backgrounds and positionalities; some are PhD students, post-doc researchers, or professors at a Belgian university, while others hold positions at universities in Burundi, Rwanda or the DRC. Others are engaged with civil society organisations or research institutes (on longer-term or very short-term temporary contracts). All researchers in our team were somehow connected through a joint network prior to the COVID-19 crisis, and several of us had already collaborated in joint research.

At the outbreak of the pandemic, we decided to collaboratively analyse how the COVID-19 crisis was interconnected with other societal crises in the Great Lakes Region. We had people on the ground in Kinshasa, Bukavu, and Goma (DRC), Bujumbura (Burundi), Kigali (Rwanda); three others were based in Belgium. In the initial phases of the research, we worked with very limited funds (only covering local transportation costs); we later managed to secure funding from the *Fonds National de la Recherche Scientifique* (based in Belgium). This funding pushed us to refocus the scope of our project (to the border dynamics of Rwanda, Burundi and the DRC), with some team members leaving the project and others joining. The funding also improved our team's working conditions and expanded the scope of our project from urban to rural settings.

The qualitative data for this article were collected in different phases of research. In the first phase, we held monthly or bi-monthly online discussions to work out the analytical, methodological, ethical and emotional challenges of our research. These discussions were often informal – something in between reflections on findings and analysis. They took the form of unstructured talks about how we experienced our professions and our collaboration during the COVID-19 period. The first two authors used these reflections to write a preliminary analysis that was shared with the entire team.

In the second phase, the entire team commented on and enriched this draft during an online meeting in May 2021. Many oral comments were added, including detailed testimonies from our team's researchers. We also reflected on broader research experiences during the pandemic, as almost all of us were also engaged with other research projects. Three researchers from our own team formalised their reactions to the May 2021 report in written form (July/August 2021). We collectively determined that more information was needed from people outside our team to cross-check our analysis.

In the third phase, four members of our team conducted online and face-to-face interviews with 18 other social sciences researchers (four women and 14 men) in May and September 2021. Each of these locally embedded researchers works for universities,

research institutions or non-governmental organisations; they all depend on temporary contracts to fund their role in research projects. These semi-structured interviews considered three key questions: (1) How did COVID-19 affect them in their research profession? (2) How did COVID-19 affect the methodological, ethical and emotional challenges of field research? (3) How did COVID-19 affect their positionality in North–South research collaborations? Some replied orally (and their responses were transcribed); others responded with written statements. We asked for explicit consent from each respondent and guaranteed them anonymity.

The final phase consisted of two team meetings in April and September 2022. We used innovative tools (applied theatre and a game) to collectively reflect on the ethical challenges of our own North–South research collaboration during the COVID-19 period. During the first meeting, 10 team members engaged in non-verbal sketch improvisations on ethical dilemmas of research during COVID-19. These sketches were discussed collectively. During a second meeting, six old and two new team members (not among the authors) engaged in a serious game, named EDICO, which facilitates discussion on ethical dilemmas in contemporary organisations.[3] Detailed written reports of both meetings were shared with the team members present for comments.

Our collaboration for this article began informally in March 2020. Therefore, we did not immediately engage in a formal ethical clearance procedure. However, when we obtained funding for a four-year project from the *Fonds National de la Recherche Scientifique* (Belgium) by the end of 2020, we applied for official ethical approval. In February 2021, we obtained ethical approval from the IACCHOS social sciences ethics committee based at UCLouvain in Belgium. This committee engages the researcher in a thorough reflection on ethical practices but accepts that practices on the ground may require moving beyond standardised protocols (we return to this below).[4]

Different positionalities – different opportunities

Several recent contributions highlight how power relations mark North–South research collaborations and determine the positionalities of researchers embedded in such initiatives (see, e.g., Mwambari, 2019; Nyenyezi et al., 2020). Positionality plays an important role in determining a researcher's working conditions. The COVID-19 crisis illustrated how researchers' positionality before the crisis affected the challenges they experienced throughout it.

At the start of the pandemic, researchers in the Global North were blocked from accessing the field due to restrictions on global mobility. While this was frustrating for everyone, there were clear divergences in how different researchers experienced it. In our team, the only non-African researcher, who works with a permanent contract as a professor at a Belgian university, testified:

> I'm very frustrated with the fact that I will probably not be able to go to Central Africa for months to come. It's as if I'm cut off from half of my life. However, I do realise that I'm very privileged in comparison to other colleagues who don't have permanent contracts. In my case, the pandemic is not affecting my financial situation. For many others, COVID-19 is undermining their capacity to develop their career, and even to secure the livelihoods of their families. (Personal testimony of our team member, June 2020, Phase 1)

Other researchers working on longer-term contracts in the Global North wondered how confinement would affect their research careers. An African PhD researcher on a scholarship in a North–South partnership testified:

> I'm working on a sandwich scholarship.[5] I only have 24 months of research funding in the Global North. Now that I'm "stuck" here (in Belgium), I wonder how this will affect the course of my research. Courses are suspended, the library is closed. And I can't do any fieldwork either. I'm basically stuck in my room 24/7, in total isolation, living on a scholarship that I should normally use in one or two years in order to finalise my PhD. (Personal testimony of our team member, June 2020, Phase 1)

An African researcher residing in Belgium during the pandemic added:

> I wondered how I was going to continue my research as I could no longer go into the field. Fortunately, I managed to organise Zoom meetings with people in the field, and virtual discussion sessions around results, analysis and information processing with other researchers on site. Somehow, thanks to Zoom, Skype and WhatsApp, I was able to continue my field research while being in Belgium. But I must admit that this can in no way replace the physical interactions, which are warmer and livelier, especially for the sociological studies that we carry out. We must admit that everything was not perfect, with poor connections from partners in the south. Several times, unpleasant hiccups impeded the smooth running of the discussions. (Personal testimony of our team member, July 2021, Phase 2)

Others faced many difficulties in reaching the field. An African researcher who was stuck in Kenya at the start of COVID-19 testified:

> The pandemic was a very difficult period. Because of the context, I postponed my work schedule and this meant that I faced a lot of delay in the collection of the data for my research. Also, given the sanitary measures, the cost of data collection hugely increased because it was necessary to include expenses related to the purchase of masks, disinfectants, private transport, etc. Furthermore, (finding the appropriate) means of transport was a real headache. Travelling from Nairobi to my research areas was difficult because the airports were closed, and when they opened, the plane tickets had doubled in price due to the shortage of flights and travellers at that time. (Testimony of a Congolese researcher working in Kenya, September 2021, Phase 3)

In the Great Lakes Region, the political response to COVID-19 greatly differed between countries. Throughout 2020 and parts of 2021, the Rwandan government imposed very strict COVID-19 measures, while the DRC adopted highly pragmatic stances on banning mobility and gatherings. The Burundian government chose to ignore the COVID-19 crisis for quite some time (Bashizi et al., 2021). These measures did have some impact on researchers' ability to access the field; however, the bigger problem for locally embedded researchers was the lack of research funding (testimonies from our joint team meeting in May 2021, Phase 2).

The research agenda in the African Great Lakes region is largely determined by international institutions, non-governmental organisations, and foreign universities (due to a lack of local research funding). Many Western-based organisations halted

their research programmes since the 'international' staff could no longer travel. While the Great Lakes Region soon returned to more flexible working and travelling conditions (see Bashizi et al., 2021), ongoing research initiatives were slow to return. The suspension of internationally funded research projects plunged some locally based researchers into unemployment. While funding organisations' international staff are generally on long-term contracts, this is often not the case for the African researchers hired to conduct fieldwork. Three researchers mentioned the difficult economic situation created by COVID-19. A female researcher based in Bukavu testified:

> The COVID-19 pandemic affected us in a negative way because we had fewer and fewer requests from partners to continue ongoing research or to launch new research projects that we were expecting. Several donors or research partners had closed their doors and suspended their agendas. However, some partners kept in touch with us. We had regular online meetings where they asked about the local situation, but when we asked when we would resume the research, no one could tell us exactly when, all promising to resume after COVID-19. So we found ourselves unemployed until the pandemic was over. (Personal testimony of a Congolese researcher, September 2021, Phase 2)

However, other researchers (in our team as well as three of the eighteen researchers we interviewed) used their proximity to the field as an advantage. Researchers stuck in the Global North (and detached from the field) depended on local informants to keep up-to-date. After the first few challenging months, the major societal upheavals as a result of COVID-19 inspired some international research teams to begin new research initiatives. These initiatives required the intensive involvement of locally embedded researchers, who were the only ones who could provide on-the-ground insights. Those with already strong international networks capitalised on such opportunities. One of the researchers in our team explained how his embeddedness in the field, alongside his previously constructed networks in the Global North, resulted in many well-paid research opportunities (personal testimony of a Burundian researcher, team meeting May 2021). At the same time, it were still the Northern institutions who pulled the strings.[6]

In short, our discussions revealed major differences in researchers' preoccupations during the COVID-19 pandemic, depending upon their positionalities in North-South collaborations. Researchers 'stuck' in the Global North were frustrated by the lack of access to the field. Those working on temporary PhD contracts were worried about how 'lost time' spent in confinement would impact their research careers. The researchers in the Global South all depended on short-term research contracts, so when internationally funded research initiatives were suspended, they experienced harsh economic challenges. However, those with pre-existing international research networks could mobilise when new research initiatives on COVID-19 challenges were launched.

The relevance of voices from the Global South

Soon after the outbreak, numerous (semi-)scientific voices began speculating about COVID-19's potential impact in sub-Saharan Africa. The opinions ranged from rather

moderate reflections on COVID-19 as yet-another-crisis to apocalyptic prospects predicting millions of victims. What united many of these accounts was that they came from 'African specialists' based in the West who, at that point, were physically banned from much of Africa (CNUCED, 2020; UNECA, 2020).

Most pieces warned that if Western health systems were largely deficient in coping with the health challenges, the world should not forget about Africa, where access to health services is far worse. There seemed to be little space for more nuanced accounts. A Congolese researcher based in Belgium during the pandemic noted,

> We have observed the disenchantment of scientific imagination with this pandemic. Faced with all the uncertainties, some knowledge was absorbed by the public opinion as "legitimate" knowledge, while other voices were very strongly discredited by the establishment. It raises questions about the place of research and knowledge in contemporary societies; (and of non-Western perspectives in that knowledge). (Team member, joint meeting May 2021)

Many of the highly publicised voices did not have deep knowledge of what was happening on the ground (Pailey, 2020). Furthermore, they ignored the already existing human capital on the continent (Happi and Nkengasong, 2022). This inspired our team to establish an initially modest research initiative to document the impact of the COVID-19 crisis. We soon confirmed the non-negligible health crisis; however, most societal problems originated in how preventative measures affected people's livelihoods and social lives. People who depended on daily mobility for income lacked access to food; farmers were blocked from their fields; cities were disconnected from food chain provisions; regions were disconnected from each other and deprived of the benefits of mutual interdependency. While Western-inspired governance responses were implemented (particularly in Rwanda and, to a lesser extent, in the DRC), authorities on the ground had to strike a balance between the danger of virus propagation and people's need to survive. Citizens developed coping strategies like those mobilised in response to other crises (Bashizi et al., 2021). Our findings clearly illustrated what should always have been evident – in the analysis of crises, field research and on-the-ground expertise are key.

The importance of researchers on the ground also became evident in our own team. While the researchers in Belgium secured (initially very modest) funding and set up the necessary mechanisms to coordinate and communicate, those in the Great Lakes region provided indispensable expertise for this project. Our locally embedded researchers could clearly discern which research questions were relevant and which hypotheses were beyond the scope of possibility. Ours was not the only research initiative that emerged. Two of our interviewees explained how the pandemic brought several new requests to collaborate from researchers 'stuck' in the Global North (interviews May–September 2021). Our own team members also confirmed this, with our collaborator in Burundi stating:

> The context of COVID-19 has greatly increased the volume of my research this year. We have been solicited a lot by researchers from the (Global) North. They needed us more than ever because they can't do (the research) without us. (Personal testimony of our team member, July 2021, Phase 2)

Another researcher from Congo said:

> This year I had the opportunity to be integrated into a research team with researchers from the (Global) North and the (Global) South and to access a series of dynamics in connection to this team. The (COVID-19) crisis has widened the fields of reflection on societies and on crisis management. I've found it very interesting to discover the links between cities and countryside zones in crisis management, and to analyse the key role of rural areas in food supplies to the town. (Personal testimony of our team member, July 2021, Phase 2)

The role of locally embedded researchers could not be pushed to the periphery of knowledge production in these new initiatives. Researchers in the Global North were extremely dependent upon locally embedded expertise. Such new working modalities made new ways of collaborating possible (or reinforced pre-existing innovative collaborative approaches). These modalities emerged in the field of communication and coordination, of valorisation of local know-how in fieldwork, and of recognising the key role of locally embedded researchers in data analysis.

Firstly, North–South research teams working through the pandemic reinvented their communication tactics, mainly by integrating electronic platforms. These modalities connected the distant North with the field and also helped researchers within the region interact. Within our team, a researcher in the DRC explained how 'these technological means of communication have really opened up the world to us' (Personal testimony of our team member, July 2021, Phase 2).

Another researcher in Burundi said:

> The pandemic crisis has been accompanied by the opening of new avenues of connection. The use of modern tools has made it possible to better bring together actors from the North and the South. During this year, I was able to attend conferences and thesis defences held elsewhere while I was in Burundi. This would not have been possible before. Moreover, we now realise that the system before where meetings were held face-to-face, excluded actors from the South for nothing. For once, we were aware that access to scientific networks for researchers from the South is easier and more equal. COVID-19 has put us all around the same table, facing the same communication conditions. (Personal testimony of our team member, July 2021, Phase 2)

Other team members however highlighted that the quality of networks was still very different; and the regular connection problems were a source of frustration during several of our joint meetings.

Secondly, South–North research teams had to continuously adapt when ideas were not possible on the ground. They relied almost exclusively on the know-how of locally embedded researchers to trace the trajectories of possibilities. Our team was frequently confronted with a mismatch between the assumptions made by researchers in Belgium and the (im-)possibilities in the field, as experienced by locally embedded researchers. Researchers operating from a distance often underestimated the diverse fieldwork conditions and speed with which conditions could change. For example, our Burundian researcher could move freely, while researchers in Rwanda faced strict confinement. Researchers in Belgium also insisted on following official policy instructions, while

researchers in the region pointed to their many incoherencies and navigated based on what was feasible on the ground.

An interesting moment in our collaboration occurred when we obtained research funding from the Belgian National Research Fund, and the team coordinators had to solicit ethical clearance from an ethical committee based in Belgium. The team had to guarantee a minimised risk of virus propagation among research participants in accordance with the do-no-harm principle. However, several of our locally embedded team members noted the impossibility of using masks or disinfectant in the field (various informal discussions during Phase 1). They relayed that rural populations might interpret the appearance of a researcher with a mask as 'completely ridiculous' or even as 'an insult'. Many rural populations were deeply unhappy with the anti-COVID measures that 'the city' (referring to national politicians) or 'the West' (referring to international guidelines) had imposed. During a joint discussion in 2020, one researcher mentioned that they risked being sent away if they appeared with a mask. Another added that he could even be attacked by the research participants. These experiences on the ground were extensively cited throughout the ethical clearance procedure and helped the research team work out an ethical protocol that could reconcile standard ethical guidelines with the complexities on the ground. We also used a WhatsApp group to provide instant feedback when any of our team members were confronted with ethical dilemmas in the field.

Finally, locally embedded researchers' voices were indispensable in enriching the data analyses. Indeed, relevant data are not limited to the words people share – they also include the broader context in which they are shared and the body language people employ while talking (Fujii, 2017). Our team often realised how, despite very frequent exchanges on research data, the team members based in Belgium had missed crucial aspects of the analysis. A continuous back and forth between the researchers was essential to develop sound interpretations of complex field material. As one researcher who was located in both Belgium and the Congo during the pandemic explained:

> I think the bulk of the work has been done by the local researchers and that should be visible in the deliverables. This crisis has further demonstrated that local researchers are important actors in research. Rightly recognising their role can only be beneficial for research. Personally, having been on both sides of the spectrum allowed me to understand the pivotal role of local researchers and the limits of research from a distance (by proxy). (Personal testimony of our team member, July 2021, Phase 2)

We invited all the research collaborators to participate as authors in joint publications to honour the entire team's commitment and complementary roles. We also guaranteed each locally embedded researcher ownership over their collected research data. We agree with Bouka (2018) that 'the failure to acknowledge the intellectual property of non-Western scholars during collaborative research is not only unethical, but it also constitutes a violent act'.

Vulnerability

Locally embedded researchers in the region are used to working under harsh circumstances. Crises – geopolitical conflict and war, climatic instability with drought, flooding,

volcanic eruptions, and sanitary problems resulting in outbreaks of Ebola, cholera, and malaria – are part of everyday life. Our research participants indicated that COVID-19's effects did not outpace other crises; on the contrary, it allowed for research on the multiple and interconnected nature of crises (see, e.g., Nyenyezi et al., 2021). However, the gathered testimonies also revealed how the risks and vulnerabilities were not evenly distributed among partners from the Global South and North.

First of all, even though field research was possible, it was far from easy. Ethical, methodological and emotional challenges presented themselves to those working on the ground. For example, a locally embedded researcher-journalist from the DRC declared:

> The meetings on the ground had to gather several people. COVID pushed us to split up meetings into small groups of 5 or 6 persons instead of 20. This exercise required the mobilisation of a lot of energy, financial means and time. Ethical principles were certainly not affected (not breached), but the methodology was (affected and continuously adapted). From an emotional point of view, human interactions with certain community members and interviewees were amputated. I couldn't embrace or greet them (appropriately) when we met. (Personal testimony of a Congolese researcher, July 2021)

Another respondent explained:

> Research in the context of COVID-19 has (presented us with particular challenges) in comparison to (previous situations in which we navigated through) contexts of war, communal conflict, poverty and other epidemics. Data collection was very difficult because of the social distancing measures. Limiting the number of participants in group meetings meant that the number of discussion sessions had to be multiplied. The consequences of this measure had an impact on our budget, on the timing of the research, but also on the physical exhaustion of the researcher. Similarly, the wearing of masks negatively affected our comprehension of research participants and greatly affected the fluidity of our exchanges. Likewise, the closure of public services and certain institutions – or a reduction in their operational modus – made it difficult to access certain resource persons. (Personal testimony of a Congolese researcher working in Kenya, June 2021)

Researchers are worried about the health risks of navigating in the field. As one of our interlocutors highlighted:

> We often found ourselves in situations where we were forced to expose ourselves to the risk of contamination with the COVID-19 disease by ignoring sanitary measures. Often, when we went to the villages wearing a mask, we were very badly perceived. Some peasants suspected us of being ill and of bringing the disease from the city to the countryside. Others, looking at us (while we were wearing our masks), thought that we suspected them of being sick and that as a precaution we covered ourselves out of fear of being contaminated. So we met people who (were very suspicious of us) and refused to approach us or talk to us. It was later that we understood that they were suspicious of people wearing masks. In order to avoid causing controversy, we had to ignore the sanitary measures and act as if nothing was happening. (And so, we) conducted interviews without a mask, we shook hands with research participants to say hello or

> goodbye, etc. We were aware of the risks we were running, but for research we could not do otherwise. (Personal testimony of our team member, September 2021)

Moreover, the COVID-19 crisis could not be isolated from the other ongoing crises and risks that locally embedded researchers face (see also Nyenyezi, 2020). In fact, as one researcher in the DRC pointed out, 'in a context where security, economic, political and environmental crises coexist; COVID-19 only (further) complicated the problems of research' (joint team meeting, April 2022, Phase 4). Locally embedded researchers testified to how COVID-19 interacted with other crises, and intensified problems of poverty, conflicts over resources, and pre-existing conflicts. Some were frustrated that COVID-19 absorbed so much global attention worldwide, while many other crises were ignored. When reflecting on what it meant to be a researcher, one of our team researchers explained,

> This period also illustrated the disconnection between the worlds of the elites and the rural world. The mobility cut between town and country has, for example, limited the possibilities of contact. This can generate the impression for people living in the countryside that the elites (including scientists) only come when everything is ok; and that if not, they hide in their ivory tower. Being present as a researcher in the field – also in times of crisis – is very important in committed research projects. (joint team meeting, April 2022)

In some South–North collaborations, locally embedded researchers perceive little or no space to discuss the complex challenges faced in the field with their partners in the Global North. As a Congolese researcher explained,

> During (the) COVID (pandemic), I worked on research on (topic) in Eastern DRC. I had to travel and meet people for interviews and focus groups. Mobility was very difficult, and once on the ground, the restrictions imposed by social distancing measures made logistics complicated. The methodology had to be adapted, the number of people taking part in the focus groups was reduced, and some interviews were carried out by telephone. We faced difficulties to meet up with the heads of the international NGOs and (international) agencies (who had commissioned the research), given that most had been repatriated to their homes due to COVID. At the same time, there was a gap between the members of the team, (as we) did not have the same understanding of the research object since the main researcher was in Europe and only two local researchers were able to do the field. It must also be said that beyond the stress in relation to deadlines and difficulties of meeting interview respondents, the uncertain health situation and demoralising information found on social networks played a major role in the emotional and psychological state of the researchers and thus affected the proper conduct of the research. (Personal testimony of a Congolese researcher, September 2021)

The (perceived) lack of space to discuss personal or contextual complications during field research even pushed some researchers to go into the field while being contaminated with COVID.[7] After one researcher tested positive, he took some rest but still had COVID symptoms when he had to take up research again. Before going into the field, he decided to take another test at the Congolese border. However, on that day, the test centre did not dispose of the necessary reagent fluid, and everyone tested negative. He did not feel

empowered to inform the research contractor about the impossibility of going into the field without the documentation of a positive test result. He conducted the research while struggling with fatigue and COVID symptoms (Personal testimony of a Congolese researcher, joint team meeting, April 2022).

Another researcher went into the field after being diagnosed with COVID because he did not feel like he could explain this to the (distant) project coordinator:

> Especially when you're new. (The coordinator) doesn't know me. He can google me and find out what I do. But then, (when I fall sick), I imagine how he'll think "was he unable to do this job?" (…) If you're already further along (in the collaboration), he'll know, "ah, his work is about that. That's his thing. And besides, he has a good reputation. He's worked with (person A) and with (person B)' But that's what junior researchers don't have. (…) There is so much talent that exists. Real talent. But if you (referring to researchers from the Global North) come across this guy who by misfortune came, and from the first activity, baf, sick, five months? Serious? It ruins everything. It's easy when people know each other. But when people don't know each other, it's a disaster for the guy who got sick. And that was my fear. (Personal testimony of a Congolese researcher, joint team meeting, April 2022)

Even in our own project, some of the researchers did not share COVID-19-related health challenges with the research coordinators. Our researchers did not go into the field while sick, but at least two of them were sick while analysing the results. They only felt comfortable enough to openly discuss this during our joint face-to-face team meeting addressing the challenges of research during COVID-19 in April 2022. One of them shared:

> I also got sick. I couldn't even use my computer. And I had two articles that I had to hand in so that by the time you (addressing the project coordinator) would come, there would be something. Fortunately, the deadline was rescheduled (actually as the result of health problems of the projects' coordinators), and allowed me to recover a bit. He continued explaining how worried he was about not having delivered an analysis of good quality, adding how "I think that this is a reality, especially for junior researchers". Junior researchers don't have this possibility of negotiating agendas (with project coordinators in the North). (Personal testimony of a Congolese researcher, joint team meeting, April 2022, Phase 4)

During this meeting in April 2022, we realised that certain dimensions had remained unstated in our collective encounters. With time and many discussions, we collectively developed more space to talk about ethical and emotional challenges. All the team members believed these were crucial in developing the individual and collective resilience needed to respond to the many challenges of research. Four researchers also mentioned that the 'rather horizontal, less hierarchical' relationship with the coordinators located in the Global North was an important aspect of the collaboration. The researchers felt supported as a team through the WhatsApp and online discussions, the many shared jokes, and the friendships that developed through the professional lines of collaboration (Joint team meeting, April 2022, Phase 4). Yet, we also realised that, despite our efforts, the power imbalance between researchers in the Global North and the Global South as well as among researchers from the Global South continued to influence the (perceived) space to talk openly about health problems within our team. We collectively reflected on

how we might move beyond such constraints (and the challenges of doing so). Three elements were highlighted as key in doing so.

First, we identified the importance of continually creating spaces to talk about the ethical and emotional challenges of research, including informal and formal opportunities to interact in the group and one-on-one. Secondly, three members of the group reiterated that we must never underestimate the impact of power relations on what group members feel free to share or not share, regardless of any initiatives to create space for discussion. The terms of collaboration are anchored in a colonial heritage that continues to shape our imaginaries of what is possible. Recognising this is key. Thirdly, the researchers emphatically noted the importance of long-term collaborations. A long-term perspective helps to build the trust needed for team members to share their vulnerabilities, including challenges they encounter in their research.

Conclusion: Turning the tables or business as usual?

The COVID-19 period deeply influenced the evolution of North–South research partnerships. This article considered how locally embedded scholars reflect on their research experiences and involvement with North–South collaborations throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. In this conclusion, we review the four main lessons for North–South collaborations.

The first important lesson is that Western reference patterns still dominate the conditions of international knowledge production. In the early phases of the pandemic, numerous Western voices (nearly all distanced from the field) warned of disaster in sub-Saharan Africa. There was little recognition of African voices who were actually embedded within the field. In most Western societies, the crisis remains an exceptional situation; many opinion makers simply failed to grasp the possibility that a global health crisis could hit the Western world harder than 'poor' countries in the Global South. The spectacular reorienting of research funding towards health topics and the centrality of COVID-19 in many global research initiatives often neglected the importance of other interconnected crises that were more damaging to countries in the Global South. It is crucial to question the centrality of Western reference frames in the architecture of global funding and methodological research standards. We must adopt procedures to equalise these power relations in favour of Southern-based scholarship.

Second, the COVID-19 pandemic clearly illustrated how a global crisis hits regions, countries and continents in diverse ways. Locally embedded research is key to understanding on-the-ground dynamics. Only researchers with physical access to the field can elucidate complexities in the data collection phase. In fact, the presence of locally embedded researchers is key in every phase of research, from conception to analysis and restitution. They must be equal partners and should be invited 'to the table' throughout any North–South partnership research cycle.

As the testimonies illustrated, researchers' vulnerability is largely dependent on their positionality within North–South partnerships. Most researchers in the Global North have formal contracts and a multiple-year perspective, while researchers in the Global South often work on temporary contracts. They also face more pronounced risks than their Northern counterparts, given that they often navigate in potentially unstable settings. Many of the researchers who provided testimonies for this paper had to find the right

balance between exposing themselves to health risks (alongside other calamities due to increased poverty and frustration) and having access to an income opportunity. North–South research collaborations should explicitly create space for scholars from the Global South to voice their concerns about these dilemmas. There should also be safety nets to give locally embedded researchers the option to (temporarily) halt their fieldwork.

Fourth, the international scientific community has shown great resilience in coping with the reduced mobility of scholars worldwide. Interestingly, this brought new opportunities for scholars in the Global South who could fully participate in online seminars, conferences, and research platforms. Now, as mobility options increase, the scientific community should remember that scholars from the Global South still face huge barriers to international mobility. While mobility from the Global North to the Global South is again self-evident, the other direction is marked by complex procedures and invasive immigration laws. Thus, researchers from the Global North often travel to the South to 'kick-start', 'coordinate', 'wrap up' or 'evaluate' a research project. As a result, the positionality of locally embedded researchers is predetermined by the agendas and availability of those who come from the Global North (Alom, 2018; Parker and Kingori, 2016). The global scientific community should lobby to remove these barriers. And, regardless of whether they can travel, researchers from the Global South must be allowed to participate in global scientific life.

These four recommendations help us to explicitly acknowledge and move beyond the neo-colonial heritage embedded within the normative frameworks and organisational modalities of the academic world. They help guide us in creating more equitable research partnerships that allow North–South and South–North perspectives to be mutually exchanged.

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ORCID iD

An Ansoms https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9553-0263

Notes

1. The terms "Global North" and "Global South" are used to describe two broad socio-economic and geopolitical divisions. Countries from the global North are generally located in North America and Europe; whereas countries in the global South are predominantly located in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean. In this article, we particularly focus on the relationships between Western Europe and Central Africa.

2. See for example the mobility charter of UCLouvain, the Belgian university that hosts the project in which the authors of this article collaborate: https://uclouvain.be/fr/decouvrir/universite-transition/mobilite-internationale.html.
3. All materials are available through open access on https://oer.uclouvain.be/jspui/handle/20.500.12279/646.
4. All citations in the text below have left out any element (name and context) that could lead to the identification of the research respondent. None of the interviews were recorded.
5. A sandwich scholarship is a term used in Belgian inter-university cooperation to refer to a principle of co-funding for PhD trajectories of candidates from the global South. In many cases, the scholar in question receives a Belgian PhD scholarship of two to three years instead of the standard four years; whereas the partner institution is assumed to cover for the remaining period. However, in practice, many partner institutions in the Global South do not dispose of similar scholarship systems. In that case, the scholar is obliged to cover his salary through teaching or consultancy work; which limits time for research activities.
6. This was also the case in our own team. Regardless of how much we tried to equilibrate power relations within the team, the inherent injustice of offering short-term contracts to locally embedded researchers could not be avoided due to a lack of funding for longer-term perspectives. Also the reorganisation within the team between the first phase (concentrating on cities in all three countries) and the second phase (focusing upon the countryside, but only in regions around the lakes), with the exit of some and the entry of other team members, illustrated how power relations remained skewed.
7. The following two testimonies refer to other research projects that involved certain members of our team.

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Author biographies

An Ansoms is professor in Social Sciences at UCLouvain (Belgium). She coordinates a research group on rural transformations in Central and Eastern Africa, involved in interdisciplinary research on climate change and natural resource conflicts. She is also an expert on ethical and emotional dilemmas in difficult research fields.

Anuarite Bashizi is a postdoctoral researcher at UCLouvain at the University of Antwerp (Belgium). An economist and PhD in political and social sciences, she specializes in ecological transition and environmental and territorial conflicts in the mining sector in the DRC. She also works compounded crises in rural areas of the Great Lakes region in Africa.

Romuald Adili Amani is an independent researcher who works for local and international organizations based in Goma, in the eastern North Kivu province of the Democratic Republic of Congo. He has studied philosophy and public health. Romuald's research interests concentrate on peace-building, public health and contemplative practices.

Joel Baraka Akilimali is a post-doctoral researcher at UCLouvain (Belgium). He holds a PhD in political and social sciences (UCLouvain), and various degrees in Development Studies, Administration, and Law. His current research focuses on Governance of hybrid religious patrimonies.

Lionel Bisimwa Matabaro is a PhD student at the University of Mons, in Belgium. He holds a Master on Biodiversity Sustainable Management from the University of Kisangani (DRC). His research

focuses on the polycrisis context, nature conservation and environmental autochthonous justice in the DRC.

Parfait Kaningu Bushenyula is a Master student in Transitions and social innovation at the University of Mons (Belgium). He received his Bachelor in rural development from the Institute of Rural Development of Bukavu (DRC). His research focuses on peasantry, conflicts over natural resources, especially water, and armed conflict.

David Mutabesha is a researcher at ISDR-Bukavu, and currently undertaking a Master in socio-anthropology at UCLouvain (Belgium). He received his Bachelor in rural development from the Institute of Rural Development of Bukavu (DRC). His research focuses on political ecology, environmental justice and development cooperation in Africa's great lakes.

Sylvie Bashizi Nabintu is a Master student in the Department of Gender and Territorial Governance at the Institute of Rural Development of Bukavu (DRC). Her research focuses on gender, conflicts and climate change.

Guillaume Ndayikengurutse is Professor in the Department of Political Science and International Relations at the University of Burundi. He holds a PhD in Political and Social Sciences from the University of Namur (Belgium). His research focuses on issues of governance, civil society, democratisation and peace-building in post-conflict contexts.

Joseph Nsabimana is a specialist in irrigation schemes and water management, with extensive experience in agricultural development projects in Rwanda. He holds a Master in Development, Environment and Society from UCLouvain (Belgium) and a Bachelor in Agricultural Sciences from the University of Rwanda.

Patient Polepole is a researcher at ISDR-Bukavu, and currently a PhD student at UCLouvain (Belgium). He holds a Master in environmental assessment and audit from the University of Yaoundé 1 (Cameroun) and a Bachelor from the Institute of Rural Development of Bukavu (DRC). His research focuses on land governance, gender, masculinity, customary power, and transformations to sustainability.

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A day without Global North researchers: Making space for equitable collaboration after COVID-19

Annalisa Bolin
Social Science Research Council, USA and Aarhus University, Denmark

Tatiana Carayannis
Social Science Research Council, USA

Gino Vlavonou
Independent Researcher, Canada

David Nkusi
Rwanda Cultural Heritage Academy, Rwanda

Abstract

What happens when researchers based in the Global North are suddenly unable to access research sites, especially those in the Global South? In 2020, COVID-related public health measures and travel restrictions made clear how dependent certain categories of researchers in the North are on easy access to research sites in the South. The space opened up by their pandemic-imposed retreat and the solutions devised in response have provoked both challenges and opportunities. In this article, we reflect on this space, focusing on how forms of more just collaboration become possible when the inertia of Global North-controlled research is interrupted. Many scholars have argued for change in how Global North-South scholarly collaborations proceed, seeking to root out colonial practices and attend to power imbalances that disadvantage South-based scholars. COVID's disruptions offer a chance to reorient these collaborations toward more ethical forms of research. We examine the ethical and practical questions inherent in such collaborations and explore two case studies of attempts to reorient collaborative work, drawing primarily on examples of collaboration between African, European, and North American scholars. Cognizant that these efforts are only initial attempts toward reworking collaborative practice, we also trace the challenges they bring, from the duty of care and paternalistic approaches to funding and practical problems. We suggest that a careful consideration of these issues can help to establish more just ways to fully reengage North-South research and collaboration in the wake of the global pandemic.

Corresponding author:
Annalisa Bolin, Social Science Research Council, 300 Cadman Plaza West, 15th Floor, Brooklyn, NY 11201, USA.
Email: bolin@ssrc.org

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COVID as crisis and opportunity

On its opening weekend in May 2004, Sergio Arau's film *A Day Without a Mexican* became an instant box office hit in Mexico. It begins with Californians waking up one morning to find all Mexicans in the state suddenly gone. The film, which won several awards, is a satirical depiction of what would happen to the US economy—particularly California's, the ninth largest in the world—if Mexican laborers, professionals, students, and their families suddenly disappeared. It would, the film posited, grind to a halt.

In a parallel development, the events of 2020 demonstrated what happens when researchers based in the Global North were suddenly unable to access research sites, especially those in the Global South. While in *A Day Without a Mexican* the migrant labor-dependent California economy collapsed, the research economy in the Global South, so often involving research funding from institutions in wealthy states, did not. COVID-19-related public health measures and travel restrictions meant that most North-based scholars who research in the South returned to their homes and institutions in North America, Europe, and elsewhere. This retreat provoked innumerable discussions of how to handle such research disruptions. But at the same time, much research continued: some Northern-based researchers used new technological opportunities to continue research remotely, while many researchers based in the South proceeded with their own projects and initiated new ones, even as local conditions similarly disrupted their work.

In the process, COVID restrictions made clear how dependent certain categories of researchers in the North are on easy mobility and physical and spatial access to research sites. In turn, the space opened up by their retreat and the solutions devised in response have provoked both challenges and opportunities. Acknowledging the potential for this to solidify power imbalances—such as through field research remote-controlled by distant Global North researchers, or through pushing health risks onto less-powerful collaborators—we also note the opportunities that this newly opened space has provided for South-based scholars. Our objective in this article is to reflect on the space created by such sudden immobility. In particular, we focus on the possibility of more just collaboration which opens up when the inertia of Global North-controlled research is interrupted.

Our area of focus is collaboration as a working method within the field of qualitative social science research, and our examples are drawn from cases involving cooperation between scholars based in Africa, Europe, and North America. This reflects our own experiences and areas of expertise and shapes our commentary on the challenges and opportunities facing researchers; many of our references and both of our case studies focus on research in Africa. To a certain extent, we aim for this analysis to be applicable in other regions of the world, with something to contribute to those undertaking collaborations between the Global North and South in Latin America, Asia, and elsewhere.

At the same time, we are aware that local conditions vary widely, not only between regions but also within them. In Africa itself, scholars at various well-resourced institutions in South Africa, for example, are in a very different position than those at underfunded institutions in places such as the Democratic Republic of Congo in terms of resources, support, and access to scholarly networks, among other factors. In applying our analysis and lessons from our case studies to other contexts, such local conditions must be kept in mind.

Our discussion engages with a larger body of literature in qualitative research in which scholars have argued for change in Global North-Global South scholarly collaborations, seeking to root out colonial practices and attend to power imbalances. In a series of publications curated by the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) during the pandemic,[1] scholars not only reflected on how the pandemic revealed preexisting power dynamics but also presented a chance for South-based researchers to reclaim space for themselves, and for Global North institutions to institute more ethical forms of research. Models for more equitable collaboration, involving partnerships in research design and execution rather than academics from well-resourced Northern institutions simply hiring local assistants at their research sites in the South, have long existed. The Congolese Research Network on Peace and Security (ResCongo), developed in partnership with the SSRC in New York and Ghent University, provides one example. The pandemic itself provoked some scholars to collaborate differently as well; in some cases, including one explored in this paper, Global South scholars have inverted the usual format by approaching Global North scholars for collaboration, with positive ramifications for the power dynamics of research.

The shifts sparked by the pandemic have added to both the intensity of the need for change in the direction of equitable collaboration and the time pressure for change by spurring the sudden retreat of Northern-based scholars. This provides a remarkable opportunity for reassessment. How can we hold on to certain advances in ethical collaboration, while ensuring that when and if ordinary travel conditions resume, scholars from Global North institutions do not reclaim all of the space that they were forced to cede? We outline ways to capitalize on this opening by leaning on extant and developing models such as those mentioned above, as well as highlighting the conflicts inherent in it: from the tension between the duty of care and colonialist paternalism, to the necessity of funders supporting researchers based in the Global South. These considerations help to establish more just ways to fully reengage research and collaboration.

Scholarship on North-South research collaborations

In 2020, the SSRC published a series of essays by scholars reflecting on the ethics of field research in the time of COVID. One of the overarching concerns these essays highlighted was how the pandemic both revealed and exacerbated problems of inequality in research involving Global North-South connections. This could mean research in the South done by researchers based in the North, enabled by travel and suddenly impeded; it could mean North-based researchers working with "facilitating researchers" (Dunia et al., 2020) in the South, whether in person or, increasingly, remotely.

Research collaboration between the North and the South has long faced power imbalances that favor Northern researchers. These range from the focus on researcher safety to

the notion of research responsibility (Eriksson Baaz and Utas, 2019). Many authors have addressed their collaborators during research as fixers, brokers, research assistants, gatekeepers, and more recently, facilitating researchers. Each of these terms has political and ethical implications. They also highlight different axes of power in the relationship between researchers and their collaborators, who are usually (but not necessarily) located in the Global South.

These relationships, and models of research involving team members from both Global North and South, can contain varying degrees of exploitation in terms of their approach to the Southern facilitating researcher. As the (Silent) Voices/Bukavu Series (hosted at Ghent University) has argued, Southern collaborators often bear the brunt of risks and vulnerabilities that appear in the course of field research, while their contributions to the research product are simultaneously erased. This the (Silent) Voices collective describes as the "premeditated violence" of academic knowledge production, ultimately culminating in the "dehumanization and the erasure of researchers from the Global South."[2] In the COVID era, collaborative efforts enabled research to proceed during the pandemic, but they can also produce devastatingly unequal working conditions: "resource divides" and different levels of privilege in terms of access to data (Monson, 2020); varying levels of institutional support and funding for research; the ability or inability to control research design, procedures, and outcomes. These imbalances can be found not only between North and South writ large but also between countries and contexts within regions, reflecting local conditions. At one extreme of imbalance can be found—as Nyenyezi Bisoka (2020) put it—the rendering of Black African research assistants as mere "body instruments" for data collection for Global North-based, often White, researchers. These dynamics provoke questions, particularly heightened in the context of disease, about "how, when, why, and for whom our research is 'safe'" (Bond et al., 2020)—to which we might also add how, when, why, and for whom our research is ethical, beneficial, necessary, or disadvantageous. In this section, we review a range of scholarship which touches on the ethical valences of Global North-South research collaboration.

One model which has drastically expanded during the pandemic is the trend toward remote research, which had already existed but continued to grow in recent years (Peter and Strazzari, 2017; Mwambari et al., 2021). Aijazi et al. (2021: 75) ask, for instance, "At what point does remote management of fieldwork become just another technology of control, expediency, and ontological safety?" This question takes on new relevance in the context of COVID and given the historical absence of collaborators from research accounts. It is fundamental to remember that colonial legacies of academic practices are difficult to uproot. The remote management of fieldwork and the use of distance methods are part of a broader dynamic in which scholars "scramble to put into place long-term ethnographic fieldwork or collaborative arrangements. Thus, the motivations for instituting research partnerships are not necessarily only egalitarian, but also rooted in a calculus intended to render ethnographic research more convenient and conducive to the changing expectations and roles of scholars in Western universities" (Aijazi et al., 2021: 75). Two main ethical issues that feature in equitable collaboration discussions center on authorship and ownership of the research results, and the financial implication of collaborative practices.

The question of authorship has received increased attention and critique in the literature in recent years (Gupta, 2014; Middleton and Pradhan, 2014), partly because

collaborators perform various tasks in a given research project. These could be "translation, collection of data, analysis and interpretation, brokering access to local communities, finding safe places to stay, providing security, mediating conflicts[; collaborators] occupy various levels of socioeconomic privilege and have a range of occupations (e.g., journalists, university lecturers, students, NGO workers, politicians, combatants in armed groups or soldiers/officers in state armed forces)" (Eriksson Baaz and Utas, 2019; see also Bouka, 2018). Making visible such a heterogeneous group of people forces us to notice that they tend to remain invisible in the published product of the research.

Collaborations with researchers from the Global North have always been present, from linguistic competence to facilitation of research (de Jong, 2018). But Southern collaborators have usually been rendered invisible, and this is part of a larger colonial dimension ingrained in academic research. Omanga and Mainye (2019: 1) show that when it comes to collaborative research, "Africa is understood as an object of research and a mere source of primary data." Information is usually "extracted" from research participants who do not receive benefits stemming from their participation. This is in line with a longer history of how the African continent is perceived and constructed. To be sure, African researchers from the diaspora have also benefited from the extractive nature of research (Ba, 2022), and so are not really outside the colonial dynamics involved in academic and collaborative research. Recognizing the important role of the many collaborators and interveners in research, Eriksson Baaz and Utas (2019: 158) argue that "[b]rokers could, therefore, be considered as full-blown 'coauthors' of research without writing a single word."

In prepandemic times, scholars had already recognized that research collaborators have received little sustained attention in the literature (Eriksson Baaz and Utas, 2019; Middleton and Cons, 2014: 280). In recent years, there has been a growing discussion of the need to decolonize research and make space for various collaborators. For instance, Jenkins (2018) highlights that "the identity and social position of assistants not only shapes patterns of access—opening up some avenues, while closing off others—but also the stories participants tell" (Jenkins, 2018: 145; see also Middleton and Pradhan, 2014). For others, "neglecting the role of research assistants in influencing the processes of data collection and research design leads to biased data and possibly misleading results" (Deane and Stevano, 2016: 214). But rarely are these collaborators' voices acknowledged in finished research products. That said, in recent years, some scholars have made the effort to showcase the importance of their collaborators during research (Jenkins, 2018), while others have published coauthored academic pieces (Aijazi et al., 2021; Asiamah et al., 2021; Middleton and Pradhan, 2014).

The question of authorship is linked also with broad calls to decolonize academia. In that sense, "[d]ecolonization can occur when we first decolonize the research team" (Asiamah et al., 2021: 549). Making visible the involvement of collaborators in the Global South is a step in decolonizing research. This concurs with the general observation that "there remains an urgent need to have more robust conversations about the ethics that are unique to collaborative research between resource-rich and resource-constrained institutions and researchers" (Bouka, 2018). Indeed, not recognizing the labor and role of collaborators has real-life consequences. As Bouka (2018) explains, denying authorship to collaborators from the South can "[plant] seeds of doubts and inadequacy well beyond the

conclusion of the project. In some cases, the failure to be acknowledged can result in financial hardship as researchers' work is appropriated by others, making it more challenging to find other research opportunities." Conversely, Bouka also presents an account of a researcher whose work was acknowledged via coauthorship, who "was quickly and repeatedly approached and offered more research opportunities by other institutions, thereby improving her reputation, career, and financial security." Hence, if there are calls for better ethical practices in collaborative research, it is also because of their real-life impact.

In order to address some of the colonial legacies of academic research, some scholars have made visible in their research their reliance on local collaborators when it comes to security. They have tried to move beyond the colonial legacy of some disciplines (such as anthropology) in directing danger away from their collaborators and research participants (Kovats-Bernat, 2002). Kovats-Bernat (2002) discusses, for instance, "local ethics," hence making more space for how he relies on his informants for the most up-to-date information about how to behave while conducting research. Some researchers have discussed a "mutual responsibility" of both researchers and collaborators during field research when it comes to ensuring the safety of all involved in a research project (Jenkins, 2018; Kovats-Bernat, 2002). However, as Eriksson Baaz and Utas (2019, 163) reveal, mutual responsibility is "problematic as it somehow connotes an equality of risk and privilege." For instance, researchers from wealthier universities or institutions "have access to a range of security measures that are out of reach for most brokers" (Eriksson Baaz and Utas, 2019: 164). As Mwambari (2019) notes, Southern collaborators often bear the brunt of insecurity and safety concerns, without the institutional support that comes from richer universities or the privilege of powerful passports. Also, in terms of authorship, the fact that some collaborators are located in dangerous settings make disclosing their names problematic; others prefer to keep their identities concealed for political and personal reasons. For instance, the research collaborators Townsend Middleton and Eklavya Pradhan have copublished a piece reflecting on their work together, but Pradhan is a pseudonym used at his request (Middleton and Pradhan, 2014).

When it comes to the financial implications of collaborative research, Deane and Stevano (2016: 219) argue that "the relation between researcher and research assistant is primarily characterized by its employer–employee nature. This is the foundational trait that should guide any analysis of the power relations between these two categories involved in processes of data collection." Indeed, the contractual nature of collaboration has made collaborators located in the Global South vulnerable to abuse and poor working conditions. Aijazi et al. argue "that collaboration does not necessarily equate to a more equitable research arrangement … but that a sustained commitment to supporting and valuing joint research requires uncomfortable and, at times, inconclusive dialogue between all members of a partnership team" (Aijazi et al., 2021: 60). Negotiating power imbalances, even where teams are committed to equitable collaboration, may require significant effort and potential discomfort.

The imbalanced dynamics outlined here have long existed in global research. But, as Dunia et al. (2020) insisted in their contribution to the SSRC's pandemic research series, "by highlighting inequalities and immobility," COVID-19 "offers an opportunity to rethink and push for more ethical—and more equal—research practices." The upheavals

of the pandemic threw a wrench into the gears of ongoing research. This sudden grinding to a halt could be viewed as a mere impediment to be overcome as soon as possible, returning to the original conditions of fieldwork. But we argue, along the lines of Dunia et al., that instead, the pandemic can be an opportunity to step back, view the ethical landscape, and identify ways to transform it. We hope to take up, at least as an initial foray, the challenge laid down by Nyenyezi Bisoka in his essay (2020): "An analysis of the relationship between Covid-19 and fieldwork in difficult contexts should start from the deconstruction of the community of fieldwork-based social scientists and the distribution of privileges in that community." We are now in a situation where COVID has been both a devastating pandemic and a pause which, if we allow it, could force reflection and reinvention.

Efforts toward equitable collaborative models before and during COVID

In the COVID era, with travel impeded, logistically complicated, dangerous, and sometimes shut down entirely, much research involving Global South-Global North connections has proceeded through collaborations. As noted in the previous section, this is hardly new: North-based researchers who work in the South usually do so with some form of support from the country which "hosts" them, whether this means working with facilitating researchers, research brokers, research assistants, or other forms of connection. We refer to these as "collaborations" for simplicity, but they are not necessarily actually collaborative models, although they can be; perhaps more often, as noted above, they involve clear hierarchies of power, control, and access to resources, with the North-based researcher usually at the top. Such dynamics and pitfalls are relevant in every era, but have taken on new salience during COVID, where ever-more North-based researchers under pressure to continue or resume research have resorted to remote fieldwork facilitated by technology and collaboration with local partners (Wood et al., 2020).

But there are ways to navigate these challenges, and they are not entirely novel. Indeed, numerous attempts at more ethical collaboration predate COVID. Some have been addressed in the literature discussed previously, such as the (Silent) Voices/Bukavu Series and other work; so does ResCongo, a model described below of North-derived support for a research network based in the South. At the same time, the pandemic opened up opportunities for projects which—even if their form is not new—would not have existed pre-COVID. In outlining these case studies, we demonstrate that, first, there are ways for North-South research collaborations to confront the ethical problems which tend to pervade such collaboration; and second, that COVID may, paradoxically, be particularly fertile ground for encouraging these forms of scholarship.

Bolin and Nkusi's research in Rwanda

In 2020, co-author Annalisa Bolin was working as a postdoctoral fellow at Linnaeus University in Sweden. Her research project at the time, which focused on the cultural heritage-mediated relationship between Rwanda and Germany, had been designed to

incorporate fieldwork in both countries—a plan the pandemic destroyed. However, at the same time as Bolin faced the collapse of her project, co-author David Nkusi, a heritage scholar and practitioner at a Rwandan institution, was developing research plans of his own. He was working in Nyanza District, a rural area of Rwanda with major significance for Rwandan culture and especially its royal history, and had an idea for researching the management of Nyanza's heritage sites. Nkusi's long-term embedding with Nyanza's heritage landscape gave him the perspective and knowledge necessary for a qualitative project on a question that interested both researchers: the relationship between Nyanza's local communities and its heritage resources. What Nkusi lacked was the necessary funding support to carry out field research and the experience with academic journals needed for scholarly publication. He decided to approach Bolin because of their preexisting relationship: they had met during her long-term research in Rwanda, but had never previously collaborated. Still, Nkusi felt that Bolin's experience in the Rwandan heritage sector would be a good fit for the project he hoped to complete.

Rwanda's heritage landscape is shaped particularly by state institutions, including Nkusi's employer, Rwanda Cultural Heritage Academy (RCHA). But even with government resources behind it, the state cultural heritage sector is less well-supported than other institutions, reflecting both government priorities and a stark assessment of which parts of Rwandan government are more capable of producing results in terms of economic development. This means that, despite the numerous extremely capable researchers and practitioners in its employ, RCHA is limited in the support it is able to provide for scholarship. This is not surprising, given the Rwandan government's tight budget, but it is unfortunate, given that RCHA employees are the best-positioned to produce knowledge about Rwanda's uses of heritage today. Despite these constraints, they have managed to make significant scholarly contributions (Giblin et al., 2011, 2017; Ishizawa and Karangwa, 2021; Mugabowagahunde, 2015; Ntagwabira and Kusimba, 2021; Watts et al., 2020).

Bolin received funding from Linnaeus University to support research in Nyanza in late 2020.[3] Nkusi and Bolin codesigned the fieldwork plan, making use of the remote work tools that became common in the pandemic era: Google Docs for creating a plan of work, drafting questionnaires and interview guides, and cowriting, with extensive use of track-changes and commenting features; shared online folders for scholarly resources; regular WhatsApp calls and Zoom meetings for discussion. Fieldwork, however, had to be done mainly in person in order to reach interlocutors in rural and small-city Rwanda. Following local COVID-19 guidelines—and buoyed by the fact that Rwanda had the pandemic fairly well under control at that time—Nkusi conducted interviews in person, as well as sending surveys and questionnaires via email. The two researchers wrote up their results using the same remote-work tools as before. Their collaboration has, thus far, produced a peer-reviewed article, a book chapter, and an essay for an anthropology magazine, in addition to invited presentations and, for that matter, this article—not a bad rate of return for a small field research project carried out during the pandemic.

A major challenge for so many Global South-based researchers is access to the financial and resource support required to both carry out and publish research. In Rwanda, Nkusi had an idea, but needed institutional support; in Sweden, Bolin could locate it. The university could make available only a relatively small amount of funding, but this was sufficient to support a brief, tightly focused project. It is not irrelevant, either,

that the project being located in Rwanda meant costs were manageable from a Swedish perspective, enabling the university to fund the entire project. At the same time, the space opened up by the collapse of Bolin's own field research enabled her to pivot: COVID had made space for a new collaboration. It further introduced what Bolin sees as a positive shift in her scholarly practice through a movement away from solo scholarship or the use of research assistants.

On the other side of the project, Nkusi was driven by his long-term engagement with Nyanza's communities and felt that international publication would be a channel through which he could amplify their voices to reach a wider audience. Given his interest in decolonizing heritage management in Nyanza, he also felt that he could bring this topic to greater attention by riding the wave of scholarly research and publication on decolonization in African museums, a topic which has been increasingly visible over the last several years. Finally, in practical terms, international collaboration and publication would benefit RCHA, by raising its profile to an international stage, and Nkusi's own career, which would be enhanced through contributing and sharing knowledge at the global level. Publication, presentations, and collaboration would help to establish Nkusi's network and, importantly, contribute to building trust with RCHA and the Rwandan government, enabling him to make increasingly meaningful contributions to his field going forward. While a separate discussion can be had about the politics of knowledge and reputation, the fact remains that international publication and collaboration with foreign researchers and universities can, in some cases, be significantly beneficial for South-based scholars.

ResCongo

Other collaborative models are more extensive than Nkusi and Bolin's researcher-to-researcher efforts, as the example of ResCongo (Réseau congolais de recherche sur la paix et la sécurité) demonstrates. This is the first and only national network of Congolese researchers working on peace and security. It is a virtual platform that promotes and facilitates exchanges among Congolese scholars and analysts and connects and enhances the participation of these researchers in national and international academic and policy discussions. It brings together Congolese researchers from all human and social disciplines working on conflict dynamics, post-conflict reconstruction, peacebuilding, security, and justice issues from across the country. ResCongo was officially launched on October 5, 2016, at the University of Kinshasa (UNIKIN). Since its founding, the Network has held three annual conferences (in 2018, 2019, and 2021). It has also further developed its listserv of researchers, scholars, and interested contacts and established a Group of Friends network for guidance. ResCongo launched its blog platform in 2019, which provides another outlet for research dissemination.

ResCongo grew out of an earlier (2012–2016) international research collaboration, the Justice and Security Research Programme (JSRP), funded by the UK and co-led by the London School of Economics, Ghent University (UGhent), the SSRC, and partners across the Great Lakes region. The JSRP's program in the DRC (led by co-author Tatiana Carayannis) was supported by a rigorous, multicited ethnographic research methodology, a network of Congolese researchers, and the mobilization of carefully selected locally based partners. One of the key objectives of the program was to reinforce and

support Congolese scholarship. As in many conflict-affected contexts, Congo's university system has little space for academic research. The absence of research funding and infrastructure leads many Congolese scholars to exit universities for higher paying jobs in the NGO or public sectors, leaving junior faculty with heavy teaching loads and without research mentorship opportunities.[4] And far too often, policies that exacerbate conflicts or fail to resolve them are developed elsewhere.

The JSRP DRC research team thus sought to address these deficits. It consisted of a mixture of scholars from the SSRC, UGhent, UNIKIN, ISP-Bukavu, and several individuals and local organizations based in Kinshasa, Nord-Ubangi, Haut-Uélé, Kongo-Central, Ituri, and South Kivu. The team included researchers from the eastern provinces and their counterparts in the western provinces, bridging an artificial divide of contexts exacerbated by the wars of the last two decades and the donor community's focus on the east. Locally based researchers were equal partners in all stages of the research, that is, from defining the research question and research design to the collection and analysis of data, the writing up of findings, and the publication and dissemination of results; and to the discussion, validation, and presentation of findings to the communities under study. In most other research projects carried out in the DRC, locally based partners are limited to data collection (at the level of the execution of research activities) or to producing research outputs as consultants, reinforcing the trend toward the "consultification of research" (Carayannis and Weiss, 2021) and donor-driven research agendas. This co-production of knowledge with Congolese researchers created shared ownership in the research at all stages.

ResCongo is led and managed directly by two ResCongo scholars based in the western capital (Kinshasa) and eastern DRC (Bukavu): Professor José Mvuezolo Bazonzi, with the Faculty of Social Sciences at the UNIKIN, who in 2022 also founded the Groupe de recherche et d'études stratégiques sur le Congo; and Professor Godefroid Muzalia Kihangu, Director of the Study Group on Conflict and Human Security (GEC-SH) at the Centre de recherches universitaires du Kivu (CERUKI) ISP-Bukavu, which he founded after the conclusion of the JSRP. The group collaborates with the SSRC and UGhent. Carayannis and Koen Vlassenoot of UGhent serve solely in an advisory capacity and help identify funding opportunities. These partnerships permitted a continuation of research collaboration both after the JSRP consortium concluded its work in 2016 and during the pandemic, despite the disruptions of field research wrought by the pandemic. The purposeful equitable collaborative practices honed during these earlier partnerships and networks allowed researchers from both the Global North and South to overcome these disruptions. Thus, building such networks and establishing ethical research practices have long-term value, including in navigating disruptions like COVID-19.

Models for rethinking

We suggest, then, that there are opportunities in the COVID-19 era to rethink collectively how North-South research collaborations proceed. With an eye to the many inequalities of knowledge production in these undertakings, we argue that there are models of both preexisting and initiated-during-the-pandemic research that can help to shift our work

toward more equitable collaboration: both supporting Global South researchers and networks themselves with Global North funding and resources, and being receptive to or actively seeking out collaborative research projects initiated by Southern researchers.

There have always been Southern researchers doing their own, rigorous scholarship, and Southern scholars and research networks in need of the financial and institutional resources which are more broadly available in the North. Indeed, we do not suggest that it is only during COVID that more ethical collaborations have been pursued: ResCongo dates to before this period, as do other researchers' efforts, like those of Vogel and Musamba (2022) in the DRC over the last decade and the Transregional Collaboratory on the Indian Ocean project at the SSRC. These projects need to be nurtured and exploitative research starved of resources. The pause forced by the pandemic can enable personal and institutional reflection in both the North and South, offering a chance to break with the inertia of preexisting practices.

Limitations of these collaborative research models

However, these models are not a panacea. Indeed, they raise their own set of concerns to navigate, both ethical and practical. One of the key ethical challenges is the conflict between duty of care and paternalism. As outlined above, Global North-South research collaborations tend to include significant power imbalances, which become particularly relevant when research is undertaken in spaces of insecurity—from conflict zones to pandemic times. As scholars have noted, Southern research collaborators often bear the brunt of such insecurity, being asked to risk their own health and safety in the interest of carrying out research either with or on behalf of Global North scholars. Global North researchers involved in collaborations, especially where their Northern institutions control funding and conditions of research, must seek to minimize their Southern collaborators' vulnerability. This may mean providing multiple forms of support, being flexible about timelines, redesigning research plans, and other modes of attending to the duty of care toward collaborators who may not, due to power imbalances, feel sufficiently empowered to say no to requests that threaten their well-being.

But Northern researchers need, also, to balance this duty of care against the potential to condescend to Southern collaborators. Although this statement is obvious, it perhaps bears repeating: Global South-based researchers are fully capable of assessing their own level of risk and responsibility. In fact, especially where Southern researchers are involved in a collaboration specifically because of their local knowledge and embedding, they are likely to know *more* about security conditions (broadly construed) than their Northern collaborators. To illustrate by drawing on Nkusi and Bolin's project, conducting field research during a pandemic poses significant challenges for personal safety, of both the researchers and research participants. But COVID regulations and responses have varied place to place: what "safety" meant to institutions in Sweden was quite unlike what it meant to Rwandans and could not be transposed to another context, making Nkusi's knowledge of local conditions essential for planning fieldwork. In ongoing collaborations with ResCongo partners in the DRC, such as those with GEC-SH in Bukavu, ensuring that Global South researchers are full partners and part of the research design from the start helps to mitigate their exposure and risk and provides space for them to raise concerns about security. This does not mean that Northern researchers should simply assume

Southern researchers will push back against unsafe requests. Instead, actively seeking out Southern researchers' input on research plans is likely to be a better route than unilaterally designing "safer" research with the input only of Northern researchers and institutions. This is what "collaboration" means, in other words: a two-way street that avoids making paternalistic decisions on behalf of some of the collaborators.

Another significant challenge for collaboration is funding. This raises big-picture questions about the politics involved: who sets the agendas that determine what kinds of research are funded? What forms of knowledge production are prioritized by funders? As Indigenous and Global South scholars have long noted, institutional structures in, but not limited to, the Global North tend to privilege Western over Indigenous and non-Western forms of knowledge and research.[5] Moreover, many Western donors will not fund researchers and institutions in the South directly but only through their Global North partners. This was the case with both the JSRP and ResCongo. This structure inevitably leads to funders validating certain kinds of research as worthy of support and to reproducing imbalanced power dynamics, despite efforts by individual researchers to collaborate equitably.

These challenges are part of broader, problematic macro trends for research funding (Carayannis and Weiss, 2021: 117–118). Increasingly, philanthropic foundations no longer fund basic research. Western governments that have been generous donors for applied research are tightening their belts and are under pressure from their own institutions and taxpayers to justify investments in research. Research contractors compete with academic institutions for dwindling research funding. Donor-driven research and high-impact philanthropy are setting agendas and demanding quick results that are often incompatible with the pace and process of scientific inquiry.

There are additional complications of funding in terms of implementation. As noted above, the funding structures of many Global North-based projects place Southern collaborators in the slot of "employee." This has implications for how thoroughly Southern-based researchers are integrated into the planning and design of research projects, whether deliberately or unconsciously. Funding can further benefit (or, conversely, its restrictions can impede benefits to) both Southern collaborators and communities involved in research. Aijazi et al. (2021: 69) highlight, for instance, that in collaborative research, "it is essential to think more purposefully how the project and its outcomes will benefit communities, both in the short-term and long-term, and throughout the research process. This might be a way to minimize research extractivism and improve the lives of our interlocutors." They suggest, for example, that researchers might set money aside from their research projects, designating it for communities in great need. Of course, setting money aside would require that funders provide the needed flexibility —and that researchers think about the politics of such a "gift." In cases where Global North-based researchers bring funding to Southern collaborators or institutions, the former must be receptive to the latter's description of funding needs. At times, this could simply be about having access to academic articles, research databases, and software, and not necessarily fieldwork. Such collaborations are a two-way street; open discussions that are serious about power imbalances should guide such financing practices. Finally, funding matters are settled to the best of the ability of the researchers *in situ*; there can always be unintended consequences—but if discussion channels are available, there is a possibility to attenuate them.

In the pandemic context—but likely to remain so going forward—Global North-South collaborations rely more than ever on remote work. This presents its own challenges, which have been discussed in many venues, including the SSRC's essay series. A few are particularly relevant to the funding discussion: the availability and cost of reliable internet and cell networks, as well as devices capable of handling increasingly bandwidth-heavy video chats and meetings. Simply having the capacity to engage in remote collaboration—including the preproject meetings that enable a project to be planned—can be cost-prohibitive and/or pose complex problems to solve, sometimes not taken into account by funders.

Indeed, Bolin and Nkusi's experience points out another underappreciated challenge: funding can operate on a reimbursement basis, which effectively entails the researcher providing the funder an interest-free loan. This presents obvious problems for Global South collaborators (and precariously employed or underfunded Global North ones) who cannot afford such arrangements. This was a major issue for Nkusi's field research, as he needed financial support to carry out his work. However, the Swedish university, as a government institution, statutorily could not advance funding and only reimbursed upon receiving physical receipts in the mail—another major challenge for field research in locations where the kind of printed receipts a Northern institution requires may not be available. If we hope to produce more and better collaborative research projects, this points to the necessity of pushing for more flexible processes from institutions and funders in the Global North which are suited to actual conditions in the Global South on a country-by-country or case-by-case basis.

As a final note on collaboration: we should not assume that all South-based scholars welcome collaboration. While this may be an effective way to access research support and increase their reach of their scholarship—as exemplified in the Nkusi–Bolin project described here—it should not be the only way in which these possibilities open up to Southern scholars, which points to structural problems in global research dynamics. And, as described in several instances in our review of the literature, such scholars may not always want their names associated with collaborative research for a variety of reasons. The key point here is a consistent one: that collaboration must always proceed with equitable attention to the needs of collaborators.

Conclusion

We do not lose sight of the fact that COVID-19 has been enormously destructive. At the same time, we hope to salvage something beneficial from its devastation: a chance for a reorientation.

In the inverse of the collapse portrayed in *A Day Without a Mexican*, the pause that COVID forced did not cause research in the Global South to implode in the absence of scholars from the Global North. When COVID-19 halted global mobility for North-based scholars, it disrupted entrenched patterns of research and sparked a moment of possibility. As many scholars have argued, Global North-South research collaborations have very often not been collaborative at all, but projects of exploitation and inequity. Researchers have pushed back, but inertia is a powerful force. COVID's disruptions, where Global North researchers were largely forced to retreat from their research sites in the Global South, present exactly the sort of break in this inertia that is necessary to rethink research practice—and start again, differently.

Stated broadly, when mobility is restricted, Global North-based scholars can respond by listening, paying attention to the needs of their collaborators in the South, and channeling funding toward them. Moreover, in the case of preexisting research collaborations, North-based scholars can use this pause to reflect on their modes of collaboration with South-based scholars. In this paper, we have presented ideas for how to push for more equitable collaboration. We have recounted both preexisting (ResCongo) and newly developed (Nkusi and Bolin) projects that explicitly seek to rebalance power in such collaborations. We do not claim that these are fully perfected projects: rather, they are manifestations of a will to work differently on the parts of multiple scholars based across Africa, Europe, and North America, involving cases wherein collaborations are desired by all partners. There remain many issues to be addressed. These include the challenges we have noted above, such as the conflict between paternalism and duty of care, and the issues of funding. But more importantly, we acknowledge that systemic issues in terms of resource imbalances, biases toward and against certain forms of knowledge production, and power dynamics derived from colonialism and structural violence which shape discrimination, (dis)empowerment, and other problems, cannot be effectively tackled by individual scholars and small projects. These require critical masses of scholars to participate in a broader rethinking of how our institutions and collaborations function. COVID has produced a pause in which the will to work differently can grow, but it is a start, and only a start, to an ongoing process of making collaboration more just within a larger context.

It is hard to change ingrained habits. For Northern researchers and institutions accustomed to having final say over research processes and outcomes, equitable collaboration in research may require giving up some control, an uncomfortable proposal. But in spaces occupied by Northern money and power, it is precisely this sort of receding that is necessary in order to make space for Global South scholars and research.

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ORCID iD

Annalisa Bolin https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1639-8976

Notes

1. Available at https://items.ssrc.org/category/covid-19-and-the-social-sciences/social-research-and-insecurity/
2. https://www.gicnetwork.be/silent-voices-blog-bukavu-series-eng/
3. This collaboration also had advantages for Linnaeus University, which actively sought to provide evidence of the "internationalization" of its employees' research; funding this project thus fulfilled its need to demonstrate this internationalization.
4. We thank Godefroid Muzalia for these insights.
5. This argument can be traced through the work of Quijano (e.g., 2000) and Mignolo (e.g., 2007), among other decolonial scholars, and has been operationalized as a critique of epistemology in a wide variety of fields, from African studies/political science (e.g., Iroulo and Tappe Ortiz 2022; Ndlovu 2018) to archaeology/heritage (e.g. Atalay 2006; Sinamai 2021) to any number of other disciplines.

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Author biographies

Annalisa Bolin is an archaeologist and anthropologist whose research focuses on the politics of heritage in Rwanda, the US Virgin Islands, and elsewhere. She has been a postdoctoral fellow in the Department of Archaeology and Heritage Studies at Aarhus University and in the UNESCO Chair on Heritage Futures at Linnaeus University, as well as a research associate at the Social Science Research Council. She holds a PhD from Stanford University.

Tatiana Carayannis currently serves as global affairs and technology advisor at the Institute for Advanced Study's Nelson Science, Technology, and Social Values Lab. Until recently she was a program director at the Social Science Research Council, where she directed a suite of international

programs that strengthen the evidence base of UN regional and thematic priorities, including frontier issues. She also directed multiple initiatives on China's engagement with the UN and with the Global South. Tatiana has had visiting appointments at LSE and NYU and has been research director and co-PI for several international research collaborations. A scholar of international organizations and Central Africa, her latest book is *The Third UN: How a Knowledge Ecology Helps the UN Think* (Oxford University Press, 2021). Her current research focuses on the globalization of war networks, including the use of new technologies, and international responses. Tatiana holds a PhD in Political Science from The City University of NY Graduate Center and an MA from NYU.

Gino Vlavonou has a PhD from the University of Ottawa. He is a former program officer with the Conflict Prevention and Peace Forum program of the Social Science Research Council. His research focuses on identity, discourses, armed conflict dynamics, and peacekeeping in Africa. His first book, *Belonging, Identity and Conflict in the Central African Republic*, was published by the University of Wisconsin Press (2023).

David Nkusi is a seasoned heritage management and heritage studies professional. He holds a bachelor's degree in Philosophy and History from Makerere University in Uganda and an MA in Heritage Management from the University of Kent and the Athens University of Economics and Business. Since 2023, he has been a lecturer in Heritage Studies at the University of Rwanda. He has spent over ten years as a Heritage Sites Protection Specialist at Rwanda Cultural Heritage Academy, with work and publications on decolonization, cultural heritage, tourism, and community engagement.

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Remote qualitative research after the COVID-19 pandemic: Ethical reflections from a prepandemic study with families of the enforced disappeared in Perú

Miryam Rivera-Holguín
Grupo de Investigación en Psicología Comunitaria de la Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú

Sofie de Smet
University of Leuven, Louvain, Belgium
S:PAM (Studies in Performing Arts & Media), Faculty of Arts and Philosophy, Louvain, Ghent

Victoria Cavero Huapaya
Grupo de Investigación en Psicología Comunitaria de la Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú

Jozef Corveleyn
University of Leuven, Louvain, Belgium

Lucia De Haene
University of Leuven, Louvain, Belgium

Abstract
This article considers the ethical complexities of remote research practices in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. It draws on an analysis of prepandemic in-person fieldwork with survivors of collective violence and families of the enforced disappeared in Perú. We shed light on the specific challenges of using remote research processes with victims of human rights abuses. We propose a reflective research practice that is oriented on closely aligning the remote research process to the relational and social context of the research participants. Our main contribution is to reflect on the potential implications and challenges of conducting remote qualitative research

Corresponding author:
Miryam Rivera-Holguín, Grupo de Investigacion en Psicología Comunitaria de la Pontificia Universidad Catolica del Perú, University of Leuven.
Email: mriverah@pucp.edu.pe

with survivors of political violence, and on remote qualitative research more broadly. We outline three challenges and propose key recommendations.

Keywords
remote qualitative research, ethical reflexivity, collective violence, Perú

Introduction

This article draws on our experiences with in-person multiple case study in a prepandemic Perú to reflect on the potential implications of conducting remote qualitative research with survivors of collective violence. Remote research refers to projects that include empirical data collection that could have been done in a shared physical setting with the research participants (Konken and Howlett, 2022). We address several relational and social dynamics that are particular to the predicament of survivors of collective violence. This work contributes to current academic conversations about researchers' ethical responsibilities when conducting research far from the sociopolitical contexts they study (Konken and Howlett, 2022; Lobe et al., 2020; Reñosa et al., 2021). Scholars need to ensure continued attention to reflexivity, positionality, and ethical representations when working with hard-to-reach populations who have previously experienced certain abuses. Therefore, based on insights from our prepandemic empirical study with survivors in Perú, we reflect on how to prevent revictimization when conducting remote qualitative research with survivors of human rights abuses.

The next section reviews the context of the pandemic in Perú, to situate the conditions qualitative research took place within and the potential challenges remote research may face. We then review the literature on remote qualitative research and its ethical considerations for vulnerable populations. Next, we review our decision *not* to continue our in-person research remotely during the pandemic. We explore three methodological concerns with remote research—victimhood, silence, and ethical representation—before adding nuances on the value of in-person qualitative interviews and offering guidance and recommendations for future (remote) researchers.

The COVID-19 pandemic

Perú was deeply affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, both in terms of registered deceased persons and the positivity incidence rate per 100,000 inhabitants (Statista, 2022). This was due to many factors, including privatization of health services, weak democracy, institutionalized corruption, job precarity, and inequity (Fraser, 2020). For instance, 76% of Peruvians rely on informal work (INEI, 2022), which made it impossible to abide by lockdown and quarantine rules. The country also failed to provide health care to the most vulnerable people, including indigenous rural populations, people living in poverty, and conflict-affected survivors (Vázquez-Rowe and Gandolfi, 2020).

Lives were marked by chronic stress and grieving processes from the multiple losses caused by Covid-19 (e.g., death without burials, a lack of healthcare service provisions,

massive job losses, the two-year shutdown of schools and universities, and an increase in gender violence, rape, and femicide (WHO, 2020). Furthermore, Perú was not able to supply its citizens with basic public services or economic stimulus due to multiple bureaucratic barriers, limited digitization, and weak bank penetration. This significantly burdened those already living in poverty, individuals with previous or chronic illnesses, ethnic minorities, refugees, conflict-affected survivors, and those living in rural areas.

Existing social problems (e.g., classism) were also sharpened by the health crisis. The notion of public goods was surrendered, and only those with socioeconomic power could access medical services. Most of the population was left with saturated and weak public health services. The large informal economy and colonial legacies collided with Covid-19's severe challenges. After 20 years of steady economic development, in just one-year Perú experienced an increase in extreme poverty (Malamud and Nuñez, 2021). All this upheaval fueled polarization and anger within the population, accentuating the existing social and political fractures, weakening democratic institutions, and creating political unrest and human rights abuses.

Remote qualitative research in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic

An important literature outlines the best practices and challenges of remote digital research (Cousineau, 2022; Gruber, 2021; Howlett, 2022; Kaufmann and Tzanetakis, 2020; Konken and Howlett, 2022). Particularly, some researchers believe that remote procedures could foster access to marginalized participants and strengthen the multiplicity of voices in data collection (Keen et al., 2022). Others seek to conceptualize the "field" more broadly to postpone colocating with research participants in field sites (Ahlin and Li, 2019; Howlett, 2022). Remote qualitative research procedures can also increase interviewees' sense of flexibility, control, and safety—participants could, for example, switch off their cameras or sign out with one click (Edwards and Holland, 2020; Sipes et al., 2019).

However, remote research raises some critical ethical questions. We must inquire where our obligations and responsibilities start and end regarding research participants and sites, especially after we leave the field site (Konken and Howlett, 2022; Knott, 2019). Such ethical responsibilities carry through the whole research process (i.e., data collection, analysis, publication, and replication). Scholars have also expressed concerns about remote qualitative research's limited ability to include nonverbal and visual cues such as body language and signs of distress. The need to ensure digital proficiency, digital security, and confidentiality is another important topic (Edward and Holland, 2020; Jenner and Myers, 2019; Sipes et al., 2019).

While in-person research helps researchers build situated knowledge, remote research embeds a selection bias defined by the digital divide (access to stable and fast internet) and digital native-ness (comfort using WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, Zoom, Google Meets, etc.). Moreover, people from rural areas, those over 50, and some people with disabilities (that make computer or phone use challenging) may face additional difficulties. Furthermore, in low- and middle-income countries, access to mobile data and digital devices is gendered, with women being significantly less likely to have access (Reñosa

et al., 2021). Here, we need to critically consider research participant recruitment and access, informed consent, and the publication and dissemination of our findings when conducting remote research (Konken and Howlett, 2022).

Remote qualitative research invoke a critical ethical stance in each step of the research process (Cousineau, 2022; Roberts et al., 2021; Townsend and Cushion, 2021). Therefore, aligning remote qualitative research procedures requires an in-depth understanding of research participants' social contexts. However, asymmetric remote contact between researchers and participants risks eroding ethical standards, since researchers have little information or control over the participant's situated context. For example, the researcher may fail to fully understand the dynamics of participants' safety to express themselves within the remote research environment (if alone or someone listening) and grasp what is happening beyond the screen (if "on") (Chiumento et al., 2018b). The ethic of care includes cultural concerns and an ongoing negotiation of insider–outsider positions (Aroussi, 2020; Cousineau, 2022; Kaufmann and Tzanetakis, 2020; Mwambari, 2019).

Context matters greatly for fieldwork, including in remote research's nonstatic and evolving reality (Konken and Howlett, 2022). This is particularly true when working with survivors of human rights abuses who are confronted with unstable and limited access to justice. Ethical approaches in conflict-affected contexts rely on the researcher's judgment, unlike in other settings where ethical dilemmas are guided by procedural ethics. Here, remote research narrows the window for grounding solid judgments and insights about the participant's setting (Wood, 2007). Indeed, it is more difficult to pay systematic attention to unplanned moments or notice easily-overlooked everyday scenes with remote research (Fujii, 2015).

The COVID-19 pandemic raised specific risks of revictimizing survivors of collective violence through remote research practices. Therefore, we need to align qualitative remote research with the particular social and relational context of participants. This includes specifying the community's history of political violence (which may encroach on the research process and the research relationship) when setting up remote research. Communities with a legacy of collective violence often deal with long-term economic disparities and sequelae in community and family relationships (De Haene et al., 2018; Kirmayer and Pedersen, 2014; Rivera Holguín et al., 2019). Social relations may be characterized by exclusion, polarization, and hostility in the aftermath of collective violence (Rousseau, 2018). Collective violence and persecution not only expose individuals and families to extreme violence but they may also fracture family relationships through isolation and marginalization, which is further compounded by socioeconomic difficulties and chronic stressors (Rivera Holguín and other, 2021). Armed conflict targets people's social worlds, so survivor populations adapt and recover on a collective basis (Summerfield, 2004). This is especially true in rural populations, where everyday life, cosmovisions, and cultural practices rely on community dynamics and collective relationships (Lykes et al., 2021).

Scholars have raised concerns about the potential limitations and challenges that remote research poses, especially for qualitative research with conflict-affected communities (Cronin-Furman and Lake, 2018; Lobe et al., 2020). First, scholars have pointed to the epistemological limitations of remote research such as state surveillance, digitalization of suffering, and the recalibration of power relations (Mwambari et al., 2021),

which are closely connected to the core relational experiences provoked by human rights abuses and State crimes. Second, the possibility of remotely researching human rights abuses is fundamentally influenced by the political context. It is important to ensure ethical security and logistical reflexivity in the research. Therefore, some have questioned the use of social media and online platforms that may be subject to political surveillance (Lawrence, 2020), potentially re-silencing the stories and voices of families and entire communities faced with political violence. Third, major sociopolitical and health challenges were perpetuated by social asymmetries during the pandemic (Cash and Patel, 2020; Fraser, 2020). Here we should investigate how relationships between the government and the citizens continue to be fractured by the state's failure to protect lives, broken democracy, and political violence (Vasquez and Gandolfi, 2020). In this context of turmoil and continuing forms of violence and inequality, research participants may not be able to refuse research initiatives as they hope to connect with potential outsider-supporters (Sixtensson, 2022).

We must reflect on the risks of revictimization and the potential to counteract these processes when conducting remote qualitative (post-Covid) research with participants with histories of collective violence, forced migration, and ongoing marginalization. Doing so answers the ethical call to engage in remote research practices that challenge legacies of inequities and promote social change (Aroussi, 2020; Nyenyezi et al., 2020; Schultz, 2020).

Prepandemic fieldwork

Our prepandemic qualitative study with families of enforced disappeared persons in Perú investigated how family members' long-term involvement in collective engagement affected intrafamilial coping mechanisms in the aftermath of armed conflict. This multiple-case study was conducted with nine Andean families, totaling 33 family members, men and women from three generations (i.e., wives, sons, daughters, sisters, brothers, and grandchildren of disappeared persons). Research participants were recruited through a local human rights organization. We selected families that had a disappeared family member from the Peruvian armed conflict (1980–2000), fled from rural areas to the city, were engaged with human rights organizations to find their disappeared ones, and were not in clinical treatment. The project received ethical approval from our university's ethics committee.

The prepandemic data collection included in-depth, semistructured interviews, and on-site participant observation in family houses, community meetings, and local events. Semistructured family interviews were conducted to explore intrafamily dynamics and their engagement with human rights platforms to search for the human remains of their disappeared and to advocate for human rights. The 22 semistructured interviews were conducted with the nine families in their own houses (two-to-five members from each family participated). Approximately 2–3 interviews were held with each family, and the 33 family members who participated provided signed informed consent. On-site participant observation (including taking notes in a diary after every visit or meeting) helped us understand the social conditions, group activities, and family interactions. At the end of the fieldwork, the notes were digitalized and included in each family's case transcripts.

A second fieldwork phase was planned for June–July 2020 to discuss the findings and final analysis with the research participants. However, the trip had to be canceled due to the Covid-19 pandemic regulations and the indefinite closing of Perú's borders. In September–November 2020, first author held discussions with the research team about conducting remote group discussions and remote interviews with participant families. However, we decided to forgo remote research out of care and respect for the families' current losses. The Covid-19 crisis in Perú had become unmanageable (several members of the research family groups died), and a national economic crisis created political unrest (three presidents of the country in a month).

The interview transcripts and field notes were stored, organized, and systematized using case and cross-case inductive thematic analysis. In the first stage, the data were carefully scrutinized, allowing the first author to become familiar with the narration and accounts (Riessman, 2008).

Then, after a close contextualized reading and re-reviewing of the entire dataset, the coding was done with the aid of qualitative data analysis software (Atlas-ti). The last author read family interviews and participated in close discussions with first author regarding coding and analysis of the transcripts. The wider research team—consisting of two senior researchers and two other scholars—held regular reflection meetings to further scrutinize the analysis and coding process.

During the joint data analysis process, we recognized the risks of proposing remote conversations, especially with vulnerable population on sensitive topics as human rights abuses. Here, we closely examine and analyze all the interview transcripts, field notes, fieldwork stories, memo-notes, and written reports from team meetings. This assessment process aimed to scrutinize the potential dynamics and ethical complexities and challenges of conducting remote research. We first identified various relational and social contexts that were specific to the participants as survivors of collective violence from the Peruvian armed conflict. This joint analytical engagement included several research meetings with the involved researchers—including meetings of the Europe-based team (Rivera Holguín and De Haene) and between Europe and Perú (Rivera Holguín and Victoria Cavero)—to jointly develop and refine the dimensions of possible revictimization through several feedback loops.

Finally, we reflected on our own positionality as researchers. Positionality refers to how we stand in relation to the Other in the research process (Merriam et al., 2001, p. 411). Here, the researcher has an ethical responsibility to identify research participants' fluid positions and consider how insider, outsider or combined positions may change over contexts and time. Such fluidity may affect relation-building processes (Adeagbo, 2021; Mwambari, 2019). We found that the first author's positionality was marked by her social position as a highly educated and privileged Peruvian woman, and an expert in human rights and mental health. Research participants saw her as a close ally due to her active participation in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and her commitment to the defence of human rights (however, she was not fully an insider, as she had no direct experiences of human rights abuses in her own family). The second, fourth, and fifth authors' positionalities were defined by academic engagement and practice with survivors of collective violence in Europe. The third author's positionality was a highly educated and privileged Peruvian woman doing remote research on mental health and public services

in Lima; the research participants saw her as a young professional engaged in mental health services.

The following sections delineate three dimensions of possible revictimization present in remote qualitative research. These three dimensions are related to: (1) the fluid positionalities of research participants, (2) the role of silence and voice when giving meaning to the life histories of collective violence, and (3) the survivors' various complementary and intersecting roles.

Acknowledging fluid positionalities: The coexistence of victimhood and agency

We gradually realized how our implicit assumptions about the positionality of our research participants—as victims of collective violence—colored our interactions. We initially adhered to the dominant understanding of participants as human rights abuse victims. For example, in our first interactions, we vigilantly considered the potential burden of narrating difficult experiences for the research project (Berger, 2015; Halilovich, 2019). Yet, later in the study, we realized that participants had already shared their stories in trials, on the streets, and in national and international platforms. We also observed how they had arranged diverse social and psychological support to help others along with the years and adhered to a strong collective identity that connected them with group support. These observations help balance our original view (i.e., victimhood positionality) with other layers, such as agency, strengths, and predicaments. We also began to roll back our preventive measures like individual-based emotional support spaces, as they were not necessarily needed in the face of participants' inner collective strengths (Sewimfura et al., 2022).

It is essential to include such reflexivity in research practice (e.g., problematizing our linguistic categories to prevent reproducing the sociopolitical order). Scholars propose the "identification of critical junctures for problematization and the reflexive understanding of the role of categories in knowledge production" (Alejandro, 2021, p. 5). At the same time, it is still important to uphold care measures (rather than neglecting them), especially in unstable contexts. We gradually acknowledged that our participants' positionalities were fluid—victims' positionalities coexisted with others like human rights activist (Schultz, 2020).

As researchers, it is important to continuously reflect on participants' fluid positionality. We should invite participants to openly discuss how they define themselves and how they experience ongoing dynamics of positionality. Direct observation of participants (e.g., accompanying them in their daily activities) or exploring participants' feedback can strengthen our understandings of participants' fluid positionalities as survivors. Such in-depth and open discussions are built with trust, time, and space—elements that may be absent from remote qualitative research. Therefore, remote researchers should consider allying with local organizations to gain more knowledge about the participants' potentially challenging context. Such a dialogue could foster suitable coping strategies that are embedded within communities and share the expertise of local organizations to ensure support within research relationships and even after the research project is over (Chiumento et al., 2018a; Konken and Howlett, 2022; Knott, 2019).

In order to capture the fluid positionalities of research participants, it is also important to allocate additional time for introducing each other; creating trustful spaces should take place during the whole process, with emphasis on the recruitment and informed consent stages (Chiumento et al., 2018b; Lawrence, 2020). Participants' perceptions of the researchers are also built over time and through consecutive encounters. Remote researchers may have more challenges to discuss the relevant aspects of the research process with the participants with limited remote encounters. Additionally, their visual image hardly goes beyond a portrait; nonverbal reactions, body language, and the interviewee's immediate physical surroundings cannot be observed through a screen (Howlett, 2022; Fujii, 2015). This raises concerns about the suitability of remote research for some research questions (Howlett, 2022) and about the risks of conducting remote research without being fully aware of the participant's immediate spatial context.

Negotiating silence and voice when giving meaning to life histories after collective violence

Literature on collective violence highlights the protective role of silence in giving meaning to life histories of man-made atrocity embedded within the familial, sociocultural, and political community (De Haene et al., 2018). This raises complex methodological and ethical questions about the role of research in voicing (potentially silenced) experiences (Kronick et al., 2021). Feminist scholars assert that women's "silent position" regarding experiences of abuse can only be engaged through a contextualizing and immersing approach (Theidon, 2013). Thus, remote approaches may not be suitable for all types of research questions (Howlett, 2022).

An in-depth understanding of survivors' narrating processes is critical. For instance, women not only narrate the suffering of their families—their process of narration also involves their own resistance, which could be overlooked without a contextualized understanding (De Haene and other, 2020; Rivera Holguín et al., 2022). In our research, Andean women shared how they found the strength to cope with adversity when they had no safe place to sleep, no food to feed their families, and no legal or social systems to support them (Rivera Holguín et al., 2022; Suárez, 2015). Similarly, Maya women narrated how they endured and responded to gendered racialized genocidal violence and that they rebuilt their communities with their own hands (Lykes et al., 2021).

We observed that female participants negotiated their silent positions based on family-specific dynamics (e.g., who is present, who is entering/leaving the room, emotional ambience, and reactions/expressions of other family members). Similarly, their decision to engage or disengage in rebuilding local community platforms (victims' groups or human rights organizations) is balanced with families' experiences and their contextual position. Their silent-voicing for meaning-making was a continuous negotiation process that accounted for different dimensions such as family members' safety, moral cultural values, and the current sociopolitical context.

Such complex understandings of narration and silencing, which give meaning to past experiences, may be limited by remote approaches. Remote research practices may engage mainly with survivors' experiences at the level of words and verbalizations which seem to be limited (Theidon, 2013). Yet, many difficult experiences are embedded

within relational interactions that survivors perform in their natural contexts, observable only through immersive in-person contact (Howlett, 2022). Therefore, it would seem crucial to investigate these relational interactions and community relations to capture broader narratives (Lykes et al., 2021).

One final challenge for remote research is that it risks giving voice only to community members who are close to gatekeepers, to those with access to the internet and a digital device, or those who experience less anxiety about interacting with and through a digital device (Abidin and De Seta, 2020; Lobe et al., 2020). In conflict-affected settings, like Andean regions, there is a huge digital gap that is stratified across socioeconomic class lines. Training local researchers and key participants to support remote research procedures could foster broader research participation. These local partners would act as "digital translators" to facilitate access and the digital relationship between remote researchers and local participants. This would be particularly important in communities that value in-person interactions. Such structural cooperation could also strengthen the collaborative links between outsider researchers and local researchers. Finally, it could help local researchers pursue certified training to develop stronger capacities to perform leading roles in research.

Representing survivors' intersecting and multiple social roles

Representing survivors of conflicts continuously risks reproducing a predominant representation of victimhood, as well as instrumentalizing suffering (De Haene et al., 2010). Such representations may neglect the diverse dimensions of agency that survivors use to cope with human rights abuses, continue with life, and advocate for social justice. Indeed, Latin American survivors have diverse experiences engaging in collective organizations and advocating for "never again" policies by citing their own subjective experiences (Bosco, 2006). Therefore, research practices must engage in adequately representing survivors' communities as contextually embedded in individual and collective experiences.

In the post-Covid-19 world, representation beyond victimhood is crucial. Communities engage in the provision of peer and kinship supports, traditional and ancestral healing practices, and the reactivation of social networks (Romio et al., 2022). Yet, such vehicles of agency may be overlooked by outsiders who cannot identify regular local practices. When representing survivors in research practice, we must go beyond the experience of victimization to capture participants' other roles and the intersecting experiences. For instance, participants advocating for social justice in their role as a daughter or sister of a disappeared person may generate conflict with their role as a mother or wife. Such conflicts derive from the overlapping responsibilities of being a human rights activist but postponing other family responsibilities, resulting in intrafamily tensions and conflicts.

Capturing these ambivalences within the family provides a more nuanced and dynamic representation of survivors' experiences. It is unclear how these complexities can be captured by remote research. The researcher's remote perspective will lack observations (e.g., important social interactions with family members in the room before, during, and after an interview (Gruber et al., 2021)). Thus, remote researchers should make additional efforts to capture the diversities of a participant's context to avoid a one-sided representation, likely the victimization facet (Adeagbo, 2021; Pacheco-Vega and

Parizeau, 2018). Including the participant's family members or other contacts, or following relevant contextual events through social media could help foster such understandings. Importantly, remote research may also be able to incorporate other data sources (e.g., social media or news) to better understand the research participants' contexts.

In our study, participants' trajectories were embedded in their individual, cultural, and collective identities, as both violence and healing are embedded in the local context (Rousseau, 2018). Participants shared narratives and raised common cultural understandings to make meaning, produce insights, and frame collective goals after conflict (Lykes et al., 2021; Milton, 2013; Rivera Holguín et al., 2022). They seemed to follow more collective trajectories of citizenship that could raise social awareness of human rights abuses (Zarco, 2011). It is unclear whether remote research strategies could explore participants' cultural and collective roles, as situated within a particular sociopolitical context and communal, cultural life-worlds.

Such issues are particularly relevant in postcolonial contexts, where core questions have been raised about how research knowledge is produced (Curtis, 2019). It is vital to explore participants' interests and needs, and how they can concretely benefit and receive acknowledgement from research participation (Nyenyezi et al. 2020). It may indeed be possible for remote researchers to foster collaboration with local actors to contribute benefice and justice for survivors of human rights abuses. In sum, remote research —like in-person research—needs to connect the project to participants' interests, motivations, and personal or societal goals. Such research practices acknowledge participants as both survivors and active social agents working toward specific goals in their society.

Final thoughts

This article reflected on the ethical implications and challenges of conducting remote qualitative research with survivors of political violence (and other vulnerable populations). We outlined the importance of continuous ethical reflections to propose a reflective research practice that closely aligns with the participants' relational and social context. We also made key recommendations to overcome some difficulties and enhance qualitative research practice.

Armed conflict erodes people's relational worlds, so we must consider people's relational experiences and understandings (Summerfield, 2004). Unfortunately, remote research may not be able to fully scrutinize these in-depth relational and social aspects (e.g., participants' roles, social interactions, and social change actions within the family and community). This is especially true for indigenous rural populations, who are embedded in daily collective relationships (Lykes et al., 2021). Indigenous people frame their experiences and cope with challenges based on the people surrounding them and by raising common understandings (Rivera Holguín et al., 2022). Hereto, approaching survivors of collective violence by including the relevant relations they shape and perform—in their natural spaces—may be an important step to capture the richness of their experiences (Theidon, 2013), which may go beyond only spoken words through a camera.

Research approaches that enter into survivors' natural spaces to gather in-depth explorations of their daily lives may enrich our understandings of collective experiences. As Wood (2007) states, personal interactions with participants in their own settings are essential for research on rights and politics. Remote encounters are limited in capturing

such collective experiences, but they still should integrate a relational perspective with collective violence survivors. To achieve this, remote researchers could implement diverse collaborations with local organizations and support the active participation of local researchers. Such a relational perspective increases the research's ability to mobilize rights, autonomy, and citizenship.

Researchers should carefully consider remote approaches for victims of human rights abuses in post-conflict societies. Such methods may risk revictimizing participants if overlooking the context, as participants may still be embedded in contexts of impunity, marginalization, and insecurity that are challenging their everyday life. Moreover, human rights victims in low- and middle-income countries were often vulnerable even before the human rights abuses; some of these vulnerabilities include poverty and exclusion, cultural and language gaps, and restricted access to public services. Remote approaches risk overlooking such vulnerabilities, which should always be assessed by researchers before, during, and after the research process. Ethical considerations of "do no harm" need to go beyond procedural guidelines to include ethical reflexivity in the whole research process. They must underscore how we, as researchers, relate to our research participants and their contexts, and the structural asymmetries and the embedded power relations that nuance our interactions.

Remote research allowed us to "reach" research participants during the Covid-19 crisis. Yet, studying the settings and contexts that give meaning to research participants' experiences is still a challenge that needs to be addressed (and not only for vulnerable populations). Remote research will continue to build its methods; ethical questions will consider diverse domains such as recruitment bias, informed consent, privacy and security (of researchers and participants), data management, replicability, and dissemination. Many of our insights and analyses are applicable to broader discussions on ethics and reflexivity for remote research in the post-pandemic world. We need to consider what kinds of questions remote research can answer and the types of data it can produce. Furthermore, we must not gloss over the irreplaceability of close personal interactions, which should still be considered 'the gold standard' for qualitative research.

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ORCID iDs

Miryam Rivera-Holguín https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0044-7788
Sofie de Smet https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6747-2916

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Author biographies

Miryam Rivera-Holguín is a professor at the Pontifical Catholic University of Peru. She has developed her research and practice in the fields of Community Psychology, focusing on human rights and community mental health, public policies and vulnerable contexts. She is a member of the Editorial Board of *INTERVENTION, the Journal of Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Conflict Affected Areas*. She holds a PhD in Psychology from the University of Leuven, Belgium.

Sofie de Smet is a postdoctoral researcher affiliated to the Parenting and Special Education Research Unit (KU Leuven). Sofie obtained a joint PhD in Psychology (KU Leuven) and Theatre Studies (Ghent University) in 2019. Her research focuses on the development of refugee posttrauma care in the field of transcultural psychology and applied theatre in western host societies.

Victoria Cavero Huapaya is a psychologist with a Master's degree in Global Mental Health (University of London). She is a researcher at Universidad Peruana Cayetano Heredia working on projects related to mental health and public policy. She is a member of the Research Group of Community Psychology at Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú.

Jozef Corveleyn is an emeritus professor of clinical psychology and psychology of religion at the University of Leuven; Doctor Honoris Causa of Semmelweis University, Universidad Ricardo Palma and Universidad Femenina del Sagrado Corazon. Jozef is a professor honorario at the Universidad de Lima, Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos and Pontificia Universidad Catolica del Peru.

Lucia De Haene is an associate professor at University of Leuven, working on clinical and psychosocial migration research with refugees and immigrants. She leads the clinic trans-cultural trauma care for refugees at the Faculty Clinical Centre PraxisP, and co-leads the psychiatric day programme for refugee minors at the University Psychiatric Hospital.

Article

(Un) exceptional times: Compounding crises and local stakeholders in field work during COVID-19

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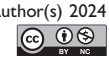

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Cecilia Farfán-Méndez
University of California San Diego, USA

Marcos Vizcarra
Revista Espejo, Mexico

Abstract

From the positionality of a Mexican scholar in security studies who identifies as female and an investigative journalist born and working in Sinaloa, Mexico, this article builds on existing scholarship examining the positionality of local stakeholders who are integral to the production of knowledge in conflict settings. In early 2021, Mexico had the world's third-highest number of deaths caused by Covid-19. Additionally, close to 80,000 people were officially missing and 52,000 remains in state custody lacked identification. In this context, civil society groups raised concerns about the proper handling of bodies, fearing cremation prior to identification of the remains. The article highlights two phenomena as evidence of a reflexivity process followed by the authors: first, for mothers searching for their children, Covid-19 was an *additional* life-threatening risk (not the main health risk, as in the general population). Second, we consider how global pandemics produce compounding crises in contexts of chronic violence and vulnerability, while simultaneously bolstering advantages for scholars in the Global North. The article is a call to action for more ethical qualitative research methodologies within the emerging social science community working on illicit economies and extralegal actors.

Keywords

Covid-19, field work, disappearances, compounding crises, Sinaloa, Mexico, positionally, reflexivity, *colectivos*

Corresponding author:
Cecilia Farfán-Méndez, Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation, University of California San Diego, La Jolla, CA 92093, USA.
Email: cecilia.farfan.mendez@gmail.com

Introduction

On 4 June 2020, Mexico's Undersecretary of Health asserted that reaching 60,000 Covid-19 deaths would be a "catastrophic scenario." By August 2020, it was clear that Mexico would reach and surpass that number. By the end of 2021, almost two years after the first Covid-19 case was detected in Mexico, close to 300,000 people had died from the virus (INEGI, 2021a), making Mexico one of the most affected countries. Covid-19 landed into a context with at least two other important developments. First, lethal violence has continued unabated. After the declaration of the "war on drugs" in 2006, Mexico's homicide rate increased from 8 per 100,000 in 2006 (slightly above the global average of 6 per 100,000) to 29 per 100,000 as of 2020. Homicides have steadily increased every year (except for a two-year reduction in 2014 and 2015 (INEGI, 2021b), resulting in a pervasive annual cycle of discussing new "record-high years" of violence[1].

Second, it is not hyperbole to say the country faces a disappearance and forensic crisis, with 100,000 people officially forcibly disappeared (Comisión Nacional de Busqueda, 2021) either by state or criminal actors. To put this number into perspective, Argentina's dirty war—arguably one of the best-known incidences of disappearances in the region, resulted in approximately 30,000 cases (EAAF, 2021). In 2017, Mexico created the National Search Commission with the mandate of coordinating federal and state authorities to locate those who have disappeared. The head of the recently created National Search Commission has officially recognized Mexico's forensic crisis, but this national agenda is arguably set by vernacular or bottom-up approaches[2]. Families across the country, and mothers in particular, have personally taken on the search for their loved ones. These family-created groups—widely known as *colectivos* (collectives) or *buscadoras* (searchers)—know their work is the remit of the state. However, the *colectivos* still search, knowing that a lack of political will and lack of state capacity means their loved ones may never be found otherwise.

As the Mexican government grappled with how to contain the pandemic, another urgent problem surfaced: *colectivos* raised concerns over the proper handling of newly discovered bodies. While public health officials advocated quick cremation, this could permanently prevent the effective identification of the remains. The panic was not baseless: as of August 2021, there were 52,000 unidentified remains in state custody. Civil society groups had low levels of trust in authorities, and yet another instance of egregious mishandling of human remains was not unimaginable.

The goal of this article is twofold. First, it engages in an intersectional reflexivity exercise to understand the author's position and how qualitative research experiences during Covid-19 renewed and altered epistemological and theoretical critiques of research in settings with ongoing violence. In doing so, it builds on existing work examining the positionality of local stakeholders who are integral to the production of knowledge and central to the research process (not as an afterthought). This recognition is important when studying violent contexts, but *fundamental* in conflict settings *and* a global pandemic.

Importantly, the notion of conflict settings increasingly goes beyond traditional state-state conflicts. Social sciences (beyond criminology) have begun to study illicit economies and extralegal actors involved in criminal activities (see, e.g., the 2022 application for a new section on Illicit Economies and Extra-Legal Actors within the American

Political Science Association). The move is a recognition that in the same way political scientists study political organizations and parties, they are increasingly applying their toolkit for researching complex dynamics of the Global South, including those that operate in illicit spaces.

Second, this article advances the concept of *compounding crises* to challenge the exceptionalism narrative of Covid-19 and situate the pandemic within contexts of chronic violence. The exceptionalism narrative purports that Covid-19, for a period, was the main risk faced by people everywhere. Challenging this exceptionalism does not imply that there were no effects of Covid-19. In fact, the pandemic bolstered (albeit gendered) privileges for many researchers working in the Global North. Furthermore, in contexts of chronic violence and vulnerability, it became an *additional* life-threatening risk to the well-being of individuals. To do so, this article builds on existing scholarship that challenges positivistic approaches to generating knowledge in conflict settings (Fujii, 2015; Jenkins, 2018; Bell-Martin and Marston Jr, 2021; de Vries and Glawion, 2021; Thomson et al., 2021). It focuses on the positionality of local stakeholders (Crowhurst, 2013; Jenkins, 2018; Mwambari, 2019; Parashar, 2019; Schulz, 2021) and emerging literature on Covid-19's impacts on qualitative research (Verweijen et al., 2020; Bashizi et al., 2021; Erll, 2020; Mwambari et al., 2021).

The article is organized as follows: "Self-construction and the simultaneity of insider/outsider status" section explains the author's stance on reflexivity and discusses her positionality researching violence in Sinaloa, with a focus on how her insider/outsider status impacted other sites of privilege. "Going to the field during a global pandemic: An opportunity to rethink the role of local stakeholders in knowledge production?" section explains the decision to conduct research in Sinaloa during the pandemic (before the deployment of vaccines either in the United States or Mexico). I also discuss the positionality of a Sinaloa-based journalist who I worked with. The section interrogates how the phenomena of compounding crises became visible through collaborative work in an otherwise separate research project. "(Un) Exceptional times: Covid-19 and territories of compounding crises" section briefly reviews how the Mexican government managed the pandemic to further illustrate the concept of compounding crises. This section, which places the Covid-19 crisis into the context of other crises unfolding in Sinaloa, draws on fieldwork conducted in November 2020 and August 2021.

Self-construction and the simultaneity of insider/outsider status

Before discussing the reasons informing my decision to conduct research and my positionality in Sinaloa during a global pandemic, it is important to clarify my stance on reflexivity. First, in line with other scholars researching violence, this section is not intended to be an "indulgent account of the 'me' in fieldwork" (Hume, 2007: 481). Rather, it seeks to "challenge the view of knowledge production as independent of the researcher producing it and of knowledge as objective" (Berger, 2015: 220). Furthermore, following Rose (1997), this reflexivity exercise rejects the possibility of "transparent reflexivity." That is to say, "there is a visible landscape of power, external to the researcher, transparently visible and spatially organized through scale and distribution [….] depend[ent] on certain notions of agency (as conscious) and power (as context), and assumes that both are knowable" (Rose, 1997: 311). Rather than thinking there is a

"'transparent' self waiting to be revealed," I subscribe to the notion of reflexivity as a process of self-construction, not self-discovery (Rose, 1997: 313).

There are several sites of privilege that provide advantages in my work. In line with self-construction over self-discovery, I discuss those that I know impact my positionality without assuming a complete accounting. These sites of privilege are significantly mediated through the insider/outsider status I have as a born-and-raised Mexican researching violence in the country, albeit in states other than my own. As discussed by Merriam et al. (2001) and Parashar (2019), I am always a local to the extent that I am Mexican, but I am an outsider in the specific regions where I conduct my work. This simultaneity of being an insider/outsider is perhaps best illustrated by my interlocutors in Sinaloa who quip about granting me "culichi citizenship" after my many visits to the state. "Culichi" is the demonym used for inhabitants of Culiacán, the capital city of the state of Sinaloa in Mexico.

My insider/outsider status is also informed by being a Mexican who presents as white. Racism and discrimination remain powerful forces in Mexico. According to official data, over 50% of the population 18 years and older report being discriminated against because of their appearance (INEGI, 2020), while 75.6% of indigenous people believe they are undervalued by others (INEGI, 2020). Whiteness often grants access where other populations are restricted or refused. I have been told, "you do not look Mexican" (which is intended as a compliment) and, in some cases, interviewees have noted my "good Spanish." For my interlocutors, whiteness sometimes signals higher perceived levels of socioeconomic status and greater potential for social mobility,[3] or even foreign citizenship from a predominantly white country.

Furthermore, interviewees were more willing to speak with me as a scholar trained and working in the US. They may *perceive* scholars in the US to do more relevant and important work than scholars who live and work in Mexico. Conversely, some individuals are more likely to grant me interviews precisely because they want to ensure I bring "real" information about Mexico back to the US, even though I am Mexican. To be sure, some individuals agree to meet with me out of real interest in my work and a genuine desire to help with my research. Furthermore, the reasons outlined above are not mutually exclusive categories. However, to reiterate, because I consider reflexivity as self-construction rather than a self-discovery process, I do not pretend to identify all the reasons why individuals choose to speak with me. Regardless of their reasons, I appreciate everyone who takes time out of their busy lives to speak with me.

Sites of privilege as a cisgender woman are more ambiguous than perceived skin tone and professional links to the US. In a context where *machismo* prevails, women can be interpreted as a nonthreat, paradoxically resulting in significant disclosures of information. This is to say, some male interlocutors speak with me not from an equitable position but from a place of perceived gender dominance. These interviews are dynamics of power, whereby male interviewees "elucidate" complexity to a female interviewer. Equally, being a woman, particularly a woman researching organized crime and violence, can translate into exclusion from territories, and consequently, information. As Álvarez (2021) has so eloquently written,

> when a territory is classified as insecure or unsafe it means that only people with certain attributes are allowed to transit through them. Characterizing a place as *dangerous* justifies the

> exclusion of certain bodies and the prominence of others. In this way, masculine and armed corporealities belong in those types of contexts while feminine bodies are deliberately excluded under the guise of amplified vulnerability. In this sense, referencing danger is, frequently, a strategy to marginalize women of war and conflict (translated from the Spanish by the author, emphasis in the original)

This shows how identifying as female can both produce access to information and exclusion from spaces, and in consequence, knowledge-generating interactions. Reflecting on access to individuals and territories should be central to discussions about how knowledge is generated in conflict and post-conflict settings. This task, however, is even more important in the context of pandemics (in this case, Covid-19) and the global mobility ordeals and risks they create.

I also want to explicitly state, as part of the reflexivity exercise, that my work largely benefited from the opportunities and resources available to me as a scholar based in the United States conducting research in Mexico. This included the opportunity to travel and return to the United States during a partial border closure on the US and Mexico border. Again, this underscores the benefits of having insider/outsider status in my research pursuits. I am aware that other scholars, especially those residing in the Global South, did not enjoy equal opportunities to travel even within their own territories. The next section discusses my decision to "go to the field" during a global pandemic and the positionality of my local partner in the production of the present research.

Going to the field during a global pandemic: An opportunity to rethink the role of local stakeholders in knowledge production?

The Covid-19 pandemic presented an important window of opportunity for qualitative scholars who were not trained to consider reflexivity and positionality. As scholars working in conflict and post-conflict settings pursue embracing emotions as central to an ethical research practice (Thomson et al., 2021: 141) insofar "to grapple with emotion is foremost to negotiate and make sense of the *relationships* that define the fieldwork enterprise" (Thomson et al., 2021: 141, emphasis added), the pandemic offered a low barrier of entry for scholars (especially those who could conduct fieldwork in a time of global crisis) to seriously reflect on their multiple sites of privilege. Such work is about both epistemology and accountability. The growing social science interest in illicit economies and extralegal actors (e.g., in Political Science, Economics, and Sociology) demands engagement with these questions of power and privilege, which are generally more common in the humanities (see e.g., the proposition of a militant anthropology by Scheper-Hughes (1995) and the ethics of researching global organ trafficking 2004). They ought to be fundamental to the development of this emerging intellectual community.

Following Jenkins (2018), Cronin-Furman and Lake (2018), and Mwambari (2019), we must underscore the positionality of local stakeholders who are integral to generating knowledge by providing access to research spaces and individuals (among other functions). The pandemic, therefore, also presented an opportunity to advance emerging research that seriously considers the positionality of local stakeholders/research

brokers (as conceptualized by Mwambari (2019) and Parashar (2019), respectively). Doing so interrogates how knowledge is produced (for an extensive discussion on the production of knowledge and violence, see Baird, 2018; Eriksson Baaz and Utas, 2019). Arguably, such work is even more critical in conflict settings, where the pandemic brought additional risks and challenges for those often involved, yet invisibilized, in the knowledge-generating process.

My decision to travel during the pandemic was linked to my work on mass graves and formal burial sites which I began before Covid-19. This work argues that not all lives lost in the context of Mexico's "war on drugs" are treated equally. Following Butler's (2016) *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable*?, I examine how criminal groups and the state treat the deceased. Case studies from Sinaloa show how perceived status or social standing shapes how corpses are cared for. Furthermore, the disproportionate effects of the "war on drugs" do not end with homicide but are perpetuated even after death.

Collecting information for this project required site visits to public and private cemeteries, areas where clandestine graves had been found, and cenotaphs located in different areas of the city. My aim was to photograph these spaces, not to meet with people, so I was not exposing potential interviewees to Covid-19. Since I would be arriving from the United States, I wanted to be sure I was not creating additional risks for a population already living in a precarious state. According to official data, the main cause of death in Sinaloa in 2020, for both men and women, was Covid-19 (INEGI, 2021a). Therefore, my decision to travel was heavily informed by the fact that my research on grievable life only involved visiting the dead.

There was one exception. Before arranging my travel, I discussed this research with the foremost journalist working on disappearances in Sinaloa, Marcos Vizcarra[4]. Manuel and I have collaborated on several occasions, and we agreed this trip could be another partnership. My work with Marcos has never replicated the contractual schemes that characterize "fixer" relationships in the foreign media (local journalists are paid a daily rate). As an academic who wants to be mindful of how payment can distort work in certain contexts, and without the resources of large international media conglomerates, I have attempted to develop mutually beneficial working relationships. This is particularly important considering the job precarity of journalists in Mexico and the life-threatening risks they face when covering certain topics, including those related to organized crime. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, a nonprofit organization that promotes global press freedom, Mexico is among the deadliest countries in the world to be a journalist (CPJ, 2022).

Marcos agreed to take me to the site visits (I would cover the cost of fuel and food) and in turn, he would collect his own photographs that he could either use in his work or sell to the foreign press, which often contacts local journalists when they need images related to the war on drugs in Sinaloa. Furthermore, if an interesting story emerged in the process of our site visits, he could report on the material[5]. Before meeting Marcos for the Dignity in the Afterlife project, we agreed I would take a Covid-19 rapid test to verify (as much as was possible under the circumstances) that I had not contracted Covid-19 while traveling from the US. This was the best option since, in November 2020, Covid-19 testing was only available in Mexico for those who presented symptoms and were at risk of being hospitalized. I was able to secure a home rapid test from a contact in the pharmaceutical industry who was in the process of negotiating distribution contracts in Mexico and had

samples they could sell me. Being able to purchase a rapid-home test for Covid-19 when they were largely unavailable for the general population is, undoubtedly, another site of privilege.

During the reflexivity process for this article, I reached out to Marcos to ask, in his view, which site of privilege was most important during my visit to Sinaloa in November 2020. According to Marcos, while the abovementioned elements (insider/outsider status, whiteness, US links, and gender) mattered, the instrumental piece was that he accompanied me. Here, Marcos is not trying to become a protagonist, but rather have a conversation about *his* positionality vis-à-vis my work in Sinaloa. Marcos was born in Culiacán, Sinaloa and has worked as a journalist for the main media outlets in the state. Sinaloa has a robust tradition of investigative journalism (the reasons why are beyond the scope of this article). Marcos honed his skills and became a main contributor, making a name for himself in recent years covering disappearances. He is the recipient of several international awards recognizing his work.

Marcos has also been a "fixer" for international media, which has pushed him to reflect on his positionality when working with outsiders. Sometimes he is never even paid (despite signing a contract with the outlet), but he is also sometimes credited in the resulting article. Like local stakeholders elsewhere (e.g., Mwambari 2019), Marcos's reflections center power imbalances: he had less power negotiating compensation, work hours, and safety, but greater power as a gatekeeper. He also experienced the phenomenon of "research" fatigue (Eckl 2008; Rogers, 2008; Wood, 2006 in Mwambari, 2019), in which local assistants eventually tell their clients what they want to hear. My perception is that research fatigue and safety were often heightened when Marcos was working as a fixer. As Marcos explains, the international media often seeks "narco narratives" in Sinaloa and want the so-called "narco tour," including site visits to shrines allegedly frequented and sustained by local illicit actors and clandestine labs where illicit drugs are manufactured. Local journalists who work as fixers know these "narco tours" hardly reveal the truth of illicit dynamics in the state but agree to take the jobs because they can often make the equivalent of their monthly salaries, if not more, in the span of a few days.

I fully agree that transiting these spaces with Marcos, as opposed to by myself, not only granted access and better negotiation of potential physical risks but also permitted the collection of photographic evidence. Even though I have worked in Sinaloa extensively, Marcos is arguably one of the most knowledgeable persons about disappearances in Sinaloa. This means that he knows the locations (cemetery addresses aside, much of this is not public information in Mexico), and the lookouts who work in these sites (clandestine, public, or legal) also know him[6]. If Marcos decided not to collaborate with me on this occasion, my research would have been limited to documenting graves, mausoleums, and to a lesser extent clandestine graves without affording an opportunity to reflect on his positionality in my work in the context of a global pandemic.

The empirical phenomenon I discuss later in this paper (compounding crises) became visible when working with Marcos and discussing the work I was trying to do, what I was experiencing through the site visits, and what he was experiencing in his professional and personal life. This is akin to Fujii's (2015) "accidental ethnography," "the unplanned moments that take place outside an interview, survey, or other structured methods […] The importance of these observations lies not in what they tell us about the particular,

but rather what they suggest about the larger political and social world in which they (and the researcher) are embedded" (Fujii, 2015: 525). To be sure, the fact that my fellow special issue authors and I can reflect on how qualitative experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic created opportunities to renew and alter epistemological and theoretical critiques of research in conflict settings speaks volumes to the diverse sites of privilege at play. It also underscores the opportunity we had to continue with our work, while many of our colleagues and friends could not, due to the life-altering dynamics Covid-19 set in motion.

An emerging scholarship on conducting research during a global pandemic, in particular, in conflict (including illicit economies) and post-conflict settings (where a diverse range of violences are experienced daily) has called for more sustainable and ethical research practices (Verweijen et al., 2020; see also Knott, 2019). As Mwambari, Purdeková and Nyenyezi Bisoka argue, "as research has moved to online platforms, there is potential for the "digitalization of suffering [which] risks reducing complexity of social phenomena and omit[ing] important aspects of lived experiences of violence or peace-building" (2021:1). Conversely, for those privileged scholars like myself who were able to travel, the pandemic presented an important opportunity to expand on research that examines the positionality of local stakeholders involved in the production of knowledge. Marcos's positionality was central to my research in Sinaloa, even more so in the context of a global pandemic where several risks had to be negotiated, including the (heightened) mobility challenges of places with chronic violence.

This process of reflexivity—for the researcher and local stakeholders—matters because it visibilizes how intersectionality shapes the context and the individuals we work with as social scientists (Shields, 2008; Clarke and McCall, 2013; Kerner, 2017; Mason-Bish, 2019). While Covid-19 intensified existing sites of privilege for my work, it exacerbated vulnerabilities for the *colectivos*. While I was in Sinaloa in August 2020, the insular proximity of doing fieldwork on death, I had a measure of emotional protection even as I was physically intimate with it. This was mirrored by the exposed distance of the *buscadoras*, who are continuously exposed both emotionally and physically, and are—in a perverse way—almost always farther from death than they would like. And these risks and distance, only intensified with the pandemic.

(Un) Exceptional times: COVID-19 and territories of compounding crises

This section proposes the concept of compounding crises based on my work in Sinaloa in November 2020 and August 2021. I build on the notions of chronic violence (Pearce, 2007) and chronic vulnerability (Baird, 2020) and, in doing so, challenge the Covid-19 exceptionalism narrative. Compounding crises are periods where *additional* risks for populations living under chronic violence and chronic vulnerability emerge due to shifting dynamics. This working concept for research in conflict settings is not presented here as a stand-alone idea but rather as a concept that became visible through engaging with reflexivity. Had I not engaged with reflexivity and positionality discussions with Marcos, this phenomenon would remain hidden from [my] view. Therefore, this section can also be interpreted as evidence of my reflexivity process and the self-construction discussed in

"Self-construction and the simultaneity of insider/outsider status" section. I also review key factors that have aided in the construction of Sinaloa as "a violent place." This review should not be construed as an exhaustive history of violence in the state nor the origin of these narratives. Rather, it highlights how Covid-19 was an unexceptional event against this sometimes imagined (sometimes factual) backdrop of violence. For the members of the *colectivos* searching for their loved ones, it became an additional, but hardly the most pressing, risk.

On 28 February 2020, the Mexican government confirmed the first case of Covid-19 in the country. On 23 March 2020, the government announced the "Sana Distancia" campaign, which called for social distancing and a stay-at-home mandate; however, the Mexican government's response to Covid-19 was generally suboptimal. In 2020, Covid-19 was the first and third cause of death for men and women, respectively. Per official data, excess mortality—the difference between the observed number of deaths and expected number of deaths in the same time period—in 2020 in Mexico was 43.6% (INEGI, 2021a). December 2020 became the second most lethal month of the year, as Mexico surpassed its "catastrophic scenario" of 60,000 deaths. As of June 2022, Mexico has accumulated 325,000 Covid-19 deaths, placing it among the top five countries with the highest Covid-19 mortality behind the US, Brazil, India, and Russia (World Health Organization 2022).

In June 2020, when official Covid-19 cases (not deaths) had reached 75,000, the federal government adamantly rejected introducing tax reliefs or stimulus measures. They stated that a stimulus would only benefit a select few and that tax relief was simply tax amnesty, which was "antithetical to the government's anti-corruption stance, given the perceived abuses to which past tax amnesties were subject" (Martínez D'Meza and Gonzalez Orta, 2020). Notably, the López Obrador administration continued disbursing cash benefits for low-income citizens, unemployed youth, and the elderly. While these stipends have some merit, taxpayers—whose payments fund these stipends—initially received no support. Even when the government did provide some economic relief from the effects of the pandemic, the policies closely adhered to fiscal conservatism. Mexico's stimulus plan amounted to 1.1% of GDP, less than a quarter of the average in Latin America and only an eighth of what Brazil spent on pandemic help (Weber, 2021).

The *colectivos* or *buscadoras* quickly reacted to the potential human devastation of Covid-19 based on their experiences witnessing and denouncing the mistreatment of human remains by the Mexican state. In early April, they called for a "no cremation" order regarding all unidentified remains. The goal was twofold: prevent *additional* human rights violations by cremating unidentified individuals deceased from Covid-19, and find the 60,000 missing individuals (60,000 was the official number at the time of writing; in June 2023, the official number is close to 112,000,000). A few days later, the Mexican government agreed to forbid the cremation of unidentified bodies (Diario Oficial de la Federación, 2020).

In May, I learned through media reporting and social media accounts that the *colectivos* were continuing their searches in defiance of the "stay at home orders, their own fears, and warnings by other family members" (Vizcarra, 2020). One of the *buscadoras* explained, "As mothers of a disappeared [person] we have the need to mitigate our pain. Not going out to search is like doing nothing to find them" (Cruz in Vizcarra,

2020). By October 2020, I was directly involved in a process to alleviate some of these burdens. The leader of one of the *colectivos* in Sinaloa reached out to me for help. She wanted to formally reallocate some funds she had received from an international civil society organization toward buying additional protection equipment. She explained that things were difficult for the *colectivo*; several of the women were at a higher risk of severe Covid-19 due to diabetes, hypertension, or both. I should note that I knew (and know) this *colectivo* and their work very well and have collaborated with other scholars to digitize their archive to ensure their data are protected. Before this, the *colectivo's* information and maps only existed on paper.

During the pandemic, my work entailed discussing issues with the leader of this *colectivo* and drafting a letter addressed to the international organization. In the letter, I recounted the challenges the *colectivo* communicated and requested to use some of the allocated funds to purchase protective equipment, such as facemasks, antibacterial gel, and other disinfectants. At the end of the funding period, the leader had to submit receipts, so it was incredibly important that these purchases were approved before the money was spent. The process of drafting and sending the letter helped me understand the several crises these women and their families faced. However, it would not be until my visit in November 2020 that I understood that, even in the context of a global pandemic, these *colectivos* faced a very different reality than the one crafted by public officials responding to the pandemic in Mexico.

The pandemic heightened sites of privilege for scholars like myself while creating compounding crises for those in conflict settings. In the context of memory studies (Olick and Robbins, 1998; Kansteiner, 2002; Feindt et al., 2014), such assertions build on the notion of memory worlds as conceptualized by Erll (2020). Covid-19 "has subjected people around the world to new rhythms: Work, childcare, home-schooling, family visits, leisure, even eating, sleeping, and taking showers are—temporally—not what they used to be" (Erll, 2020: 862). However, "corona-rhythms look different in other worlds of temporal experience […] and the new rhythms associated with the corona pandemic emerge as a marker of privilege" (Erll, 2020: 863). Similarly, Romania (2020) has proposed Covid-19 as a bolster for interactional anomie, "a condition of uncertain knowledge of what rules of conduct regarding social distance shall be applied to interaction with non-familiar people in public spaces" (Romania, 2020: 59). In this sense, the additional risks of the pandemic for *buscadoras* generated a different corona-memory (Erll, 2020) and will create different interactional anomies (Romania, 2020) than what I experienced, or the ones created by other Mexicans.

Sinaloa occupies a central space in narratives about violence in Mexico. In the collective imaginary, it is regarded as Mexico's cradle of drug trafficking and has seen the most consistent crop eradication against opium poppies and marijuana. Crop eradication in Mexico between 1990 and 2020 focused on a few municipalities. The municipality of Badiraguato, Sinaloa, which lies in the drug-producing region known as the Golden Triangle, had the most marijuana eradication and third-most opium poppy destruction in the last 20 years (MUCD, 2021). Such eradication measures demonstrate how the Mexican state, through its armed forces, has characterized Sinaloa as a drug-producing territory, and particular communities have been consistently targeted and victimized. Crop eradication by the armed forces—through aerial fumigation and by hand—is itself a violent activity. As Frissard Martínez et al. (2023) explain:

> It represents the economic loss of investments in labor and resources that affects only the peasant producers, never intermediaries or drug lords. Moreover, the permanent presence of the Armed Forces in these zones clearly reflects the power schemes that the Mexican State employs to deal, differentially, with distinct territories, and that contributes to "criminalizing" poverty […] the criminalization of emblematic territories of drug production and transport, and the resulting stigma placed on their inhabitants, fuel mechanisms of revictimization that transfer responsibility for violence to those who suffer it […] in this light, the scenarios of the destruction of illicit crops have historically offered fertile ground for serious human rights violations

To accompany these eradication measures, the US and Mexican governments, with varying degrees of intensity, have focused on a kingpin strategy—arresting, extraditing, or killing alleged leaders of purported criminal organizations. As of December 2021, the Drug Enforcement Administration's Most Wanted Fugitives List (2021) featured 10 men, five of whom are from Mexico (with four being from Sinaloa). According to the federal organization charged with enforcing controlled substances laws in the US, the most prominent players in international narcotics are not only Mexican but specifically Sinaloan. Even when the criminal landscape in Mexico has changed considerably (expanding beyond drug trafficking), international law enforcement continues to construe Sinaloa as a Shangri-La of sorts for organized crime.

This is not to say Sinaloa is totally misunderstood or that violence never occurs. Certainly, residents have lived through moments of considerable lethal violence. For example, in 2009, Mexico's homicide rate was 18 per 100,000 (compared to 6 per 100,000 globally), but Sinaloa's rate was 52. It then increased to 86 per 100,000 in 2010 when a purported fight within the Sinaloa criminal organization and between the state and alleged criminals resulted in thousands of casualties. These episodes of violence fuel narratives of Sinaloa as a territory dominated by *narcos*—ungovernable men enriched by an illegal trade, who are all too eager to display their wealth and dominance through big pickup trucks, assault rifles, and women (not necessarily in that order)[7] (Figure 1).

Within this context, *buscadoras* search for their loved ones at great risk to their emotional and physical well-being. As of June 2021, of the official 92,000 disappeared people in Mexico, 10,736 cases (over 10%) were reported in Sinaloa, although only 4638 were officially recorded as disappearances by authorities (Corral 2021). Families who report disappearances often face seemingly never-ending revictimization from the authorities due to two interconnected forces: wilful negligence and a lack of state capacity.

Examples of willful negligence in Mexico and Sinaloa abound. Conversations with members of *colectivos* and journalists reveal how authorities evade responsibility by characterizing disappearances as the result of an individual's behavior[8]. This victim blaming is built on the narrative that men who disappear "had it coming" (and young women who go missing are often said to have run away with their boyfriends). In this logic, people who disappear were involved in criminal activities and have, therefore, surrendered all claims to due process and justice. For some authorities, these are not "real" victims (but individuals who got what they deserved), so there is no urgency to use state resources to locate them. The mothers in Sinaloa respond that whether they knew or suspected their child to be involved with crime, they deserve to know where their child is and

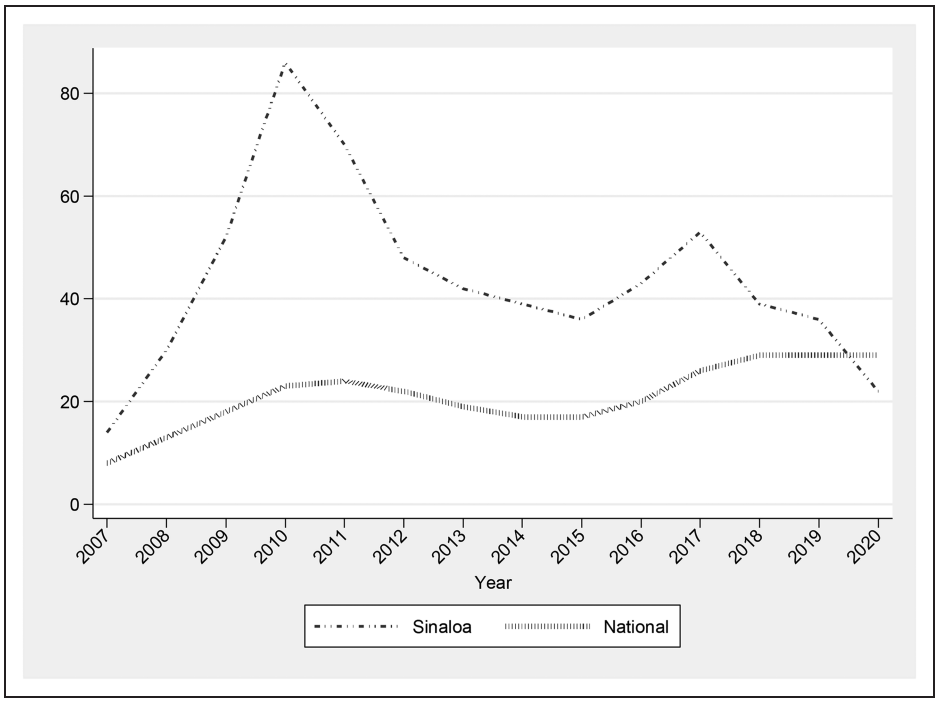

Figure 1. Homicide Rate per 100,000 in Mexico and Sinaloa[1].

give him or her a proper burial and grave that they can visit; it is up to the state to prove they were criminals. Thus, families, particularly mothers, have pushed back against the dehumanizing narrative that seeks to construct two categories: lives that can be grieved and those that are disposable (Farfán Méndez and Porter, 2023).

Investigative journalism on disappearances in Sinaloa also sheds light on this willful negligence. As reported by Vizcarra (2020), freedom of information requests revealed that the Attorney General's office lost records of unidentified bodies and their location in public graveyards during an administrative transfer in 2017 when the Attorney General's office became independent. This shows that the state *can* produce records, but did not care about their preservation. When the records were lost, the bodies buried in mass graves disappeared once again.

Since the authorities either will refuse to search or lose records of discovered bodies, the families are left to search. Revictimization by authorities, however, is not the only vulnerability they contend with. In the least hostile situations, *colectivos* suffer damage to their property and the tools they use to search. For example, a drone purchased using donated funds (to hopefully lessen the security risks for the *colectivo*) was shot down during a search in a potentially deliberate attempt to hinder searches. This *colectivo* also had their van stolen, which effectively prevented them from conducting searches by limiting their mobility, their ability to travel *together* to different search sites, and the loss of the tools inside the van. After denouncing the theft on social media, and with support from local media and NGOs, the van was found. However, the engine and electric circuit

had been significantly (likely intentionally) damaged; no one was ever arrested for the theft.

Additionally, when families search on their own, they are exposed to potential violence and threats from both criminal and state actors. In one instance, the leader of a *colectivo* was approached by a criminal group that warned her against searching in a particular area. When she continued with her search, the criminal group threatened her and her family[9]. Some of these threats result in death. In a 2021 case that made national news, Aranza Ramos, a member of a *colectivo* in the state of Sonora was shot to death in her home. Aranza was searching for her husband, who had disappeared seven months and eight days prior to her murder. In August 2022, Rosario Rodríguez Barraza, a mother searching for her missing son since 2019, was murdered in Sinaloa. Rosario was a member of a *colectivo* in Elota, Sinaloa named "Hearts without Justice" (Corazones sin justicia in Spanish). Tragically, she was killed on 30 August, the International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances. After her murder, the *colectivo* ceased its activities (Nordahl, 2022).

According to a source who works with these *colectivos*, searches are perilous because they often happen with the knowledge or even authorization of the perpetrators. In the best-known case in Mexico, a group of mothers in Veracruz uncovered the largest clandestine grave found to date after they received an anonymous letter indicating the location. At Colinas de Santa Fe, over 22,000 human remains (from skulls to smaller bone fragments) were found (Soberanes 2019). According to the source, perpetrators—linked to crime, the state, or both—revealed this information since the remains were no longer a liability. For instance, the perpetrators may think that if someone was disappeared in 2014, it would not matter if the remains were located almost a decade later.

The source also believes perpetrators sometimes reveal the location of clandestine graves after experiencing some regret and assuming their supervisors will not care about potential discoveries.[10] Notably, *colectivos* have used social media to request that perpetrators not hide and/or dismember bodies. In their plea, *colectivos* argue that murder has already achieved the perpetrator's goal, so there is no need to keep it from the family. It is unclear whether these pleas have any effect on perpetrators. Yet, their existence and publication on social media platforms reveals the difficult interactions *colectivos* must navigate with perpetrators, both from criminal groups and the state.

Members *of colectivos* also experience severe psychological impacts. Research has found that "relatives of a disappeared person are endlessly confronted with uncertainty, exacerbated by impunity" (Bourguignon et al., 2021: 14). The absence of a body is an endless torture that impacts families' grieving process (Bourguignon et al., 2021: 14). I have also witnessed how a disappearance can further fracture families. Dedicating one's time and energy to search for a relative disrupts the quality time she can spend with other family members and may trigger feelings of abandonment. The topic of how individual family members are affected by the disappearance of a loved one deserves further attention so that clinical tools can be developed to assist the relatives of the 111,866 people missing in Mexico as of May 2023.

Describing the conditions under which *buscadoras* exist (perhaps, more accurately, survive) should not be read as an attempt to delineate a neatly demarcated self-contained space or reality. Instead, I hope to show their vulnerability in a context where other lethal and nonlethal forms of violence take place. Consequently, it is difficult to support the idea

that members of *colectivos* experienced Covid-19 as an exceptional crisis. Rather, Covid-19 became an *additional* risk in the process of searching for their loved ones; they adapted their searches to meet health measures (now added to the already long list of security protocols).

According to interviews in Sinaloa from August 2021 (over a year after the lockdown was first implemented), adopting health protocols and continuing with their searches was nothing extraordinary. Per a source who has worked closely with victims, *colectivos* continued with their day-to-day just as the rest of the population adapted to the "new normal"[11]. Just as some dined out with family and friends (to meet social needs) at restaurants operating with pandemic protocols, *buscadoras* pursued their need to search.

Despite a national call for social distancing and lockdowns, searches continued throughout 2020, revealing a total of 559 clandestine graves and 1086 bodies (CNB, 2021). Considering the endless torture these families face, it is unsurprising that continuing their searches became an "essential" activity, in the same way that keeping supermarkets open was essential for those experiencing other "corona rhythms." The concept of compounding crises helps differentiate effects among populations living in contexts of chronic violence and chronic vulnerability. While Covid-19 itself was not the main physical risk for the *colectivos*, it created other burdens.

Interviews conducted in August 2021 revealed *colectivos* sought assistance from government entities. These relationships with the state were considerably different from the state entities linked to criminal investigations. *Buscadoras* often requested financial assistance in the form of small stipends to make up for lost salaries. Most of these families live paycheck to paycheck, so employment loss created significant hardships. When financial assistance was unavailable, they requested small packages with basic necessities and food staples. Help with medical expenses, in particular finding and paying for oxygen (an important input in treating people with medium to severe cases of Covid-19), was another frequent request.

Mexico's Law on Victims allows this type of relief to be disbursed as a one-time payment through reparation of damages or through small stipends that help victims ameliorate the damages of the action that caused them to become victims in the first place. The latter gives public officials who want to help these *colectivos* some flexibility. For example, they can give victims modest amounts of money to help pay for gas in the vehicles used in searches. According to one of my interlocutors, who was directly involved with assisting victims, *colectivos* never attempted to take advantage of these small benefits. He believed there was a shared understanding of the collective challenges; people knew they would be better off with solidarity than by abusing the system. People only asked for what they really needed and, once they got back on their feet (e.g., by finding another job), they would not request additional governmental assistance for Covid-19 relief.

Conclusion

This article engaged in a self-construction (rather than self-discovery) reflexivity exercise to explore how Covid-19 permitted scholars to renew and alter epistemological and

theoretical critiques of research in conflict settings. I built on existing work that examines the positionalities of the researcher *and* local stakeholders as core to ethical research practices. While interrogating the positionality of stakeholders should be part of all research in conflict settings, this task is even more relevant in the context of a global pandemic that created mobility constraints (among other challenges) that were negotiated differently by local actors and outsiders. While reflexivity should not be an end in itself, I contend that questioning these areas of power and privilege ought to be central to the emerging intellectual community working on illicit economies and extralegal actors in the social sciences. As more political scientists, sociologists, and economists research illicit economies and extralegal actors, our work should incorporate reflexive practices and decolonial approaches that have been extensively developed in other fields studying "traditional" conflict settings.

This reflexivity process also centers how Covid-19 bolstered existing sites of researcher privilege, while compounding crises for *colectivos* searching for their loved ones in contexts of chronic vulnerability and violence. I challenge the Covid-19 exceptionalism narrative, for scholars and conflict settings alike. This is not to imply that there were no effects. Instead, it shows that those experiencing sites of privilege through research benefitted while those living in contexts of chronic violence and vulnerability added Covid-19 to a long list of already existing risks to their well-being and lives.

In transparently presenting my research process with Marcos in Sinaloa, I hope to show that it is never too late to engage with reflexivity processes, even when our qualitative training did not teach us how to do it. As Nyenyenzi Basoka (2020) reflects, "the aim of such arguments is to show that, after four centuries, there remains a racist element to the production of who is vulnerable in the field, and more broadly, in the production of knowledge." Covid-19 produced different corona-rhythms for various populations. It offered a window of opportunity for scholars who were able to travel and/or continue with their work; they (unintentionally) mobilized several sites of privilege to research conflict settings, including illicit economies. Unquestionably, these sites of privilege came into sharp focus during the pandemic and are a good starting point for reflexivity. More importantly, research during Covid-19 offered a prime opportunity to advance scholarship that seriously interrogates the positionality of our local partners and improves the transparency, sustainability, and ethics of conducting research in conflict settings.

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ORCID iD

Cecilia Farfán-Méndez https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2757-4832

Notes

1. Preliminary data for 2021 suggest a plateau in homicides in the country. However, additional information is needed to determine whether this is a turning point or if homicides will increase again.
2. Outside of Latin America, but in the context of mass atrocities, as the Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) regained control of the country following the genocide against 1,000,000 Tutsi victims, "hundreds of thousands of majority Hutu fled to neighbouring Zaire (Today Democratic Republic of Congo) […] resulting in an estimated 40,000 revenge killings (Des Forges in Mwambari 2021: 617) and thousands of Hutu, Twa, and mixed Hutu and Tutsi background missing as they fled into Congo's forests and swamps to seek refuge" (Whitaker in Mwambri 2021: 617–618). While these revenge killings and disappearances are not part of official history (Mwambari, 2021), broken families remember through vernacular practices of their own.
3. The project "El color de México" (The color of Mexico) from El Colegio de México examines the relationship between skin tone, wealth, and social capital in Mexico. It offers robust data on what I share as a lived experience.
4. I asked Marcos whether he preferred I used a pseudonym, and he requested I use his real name. In his view, this does not create additional security risks beyond what he already faces as a journalist in Sinaloa. I agree with his perspective and respect his request of using his real name.
5. On several occasions, Marcos and I have discussed our collaborations and the differences and similarities between investigative journalism and academic research. He has mentioned that collaborating with my colleagues and I has helped him reconfigure his work as a "fixer." Learning this was very important as a scholar who strives to refrain from extractivist work (i.e., a system where the South serves as "the field" and the North as the source of funding, analysis, and publication). I avoid practices where I "collect data" in Mexico and only produce and disseminate findings in the Global North, thus perpetuating the North as the center of knowledge production. Awareness alone, however, is not sufficient. As Nyenyezi Bisoka (2020) argues, it is imperative to see this Global North/South research dynamics as a "new form of humanitarianism in which researchers from the North, once again, play savior to researchers from the South." My work with Marcos has also helped me further reflect on my insider status as a Mexican but an outsider in Sinaloa. It has pushed me to pay close attention to local-level dynamics that may get lost in the grand discourse of violence in Mexico.
6. In places where licit and illicit activities converge and even interact, employees of criminal organizations are tasked with watching and reporting movements in a given territory. They are generally called "halcones" (hawks). Being a known entity to these lookouts can facilitate entering *and* leaving a particular territory.
7. For an in-depth examination of interpretations and significance in Sinaloa, see The Battles After the Battle | Mexico Violence (2020).
8. Personal communication with the author, February 2019 and February 2020.
9. Personal communication with the author, November 2020.

10. Personal communication with the author, August 2021.
11. Personal communication with the author, August 2021.

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Author biographies

Cecilia Farfán-Méndez is a researcher at the Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation at the University of California San Diego.

Marcos Vizcarra is an investigative journalist at Revista Espejo in Sinaloa, Mexico.

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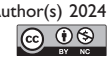

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Embodied reflexivity in voice-only interviewing: Navigating gender in difficult-to-access contexts

Muhammad Salman Khan
Department of Geography, Faculty of Social Science and Public Policy, Kings College London, London, UK

Abstract
This article reflects on my experiences as a male researcher using voice-only WhatsApp interviews to study women's affect and Taliban violence in Pakistan's Swat Valley. It considers the opportunities and constraints posed by doing research in supposedly disembodied online space. It also positions remote voice-only interviews as both embodied and embedded practices. This understanding situates the embodied reflexivity and gendered positionality of the researcher in relation to research participants—a relationship largely absent in online, qualitative voice-only interviewing literature. While internet-mediated settings do indeed offer some opportunities, their ability to circumvent gender boundaries is largely over-celebrated and has not received enough critical attention. I demonstrate why researcher feelings, positionality, and embodied reflexivity should be central concerns in post-COVID online, voice-only interviewing.

Keywords
voice-only interviews, online interviews, qualitative interviews, embodied reflexivity, gender, Covid-19, Pakistan

Introduction

Methodological literature on voice-only interviewing is predominantly concerned with the presence or absence of visual queues, length of words and quality of data, and participants' access to technology (Johnson et al., 2019). Other well-documented practical considerations include platform security features, participant preference for certain mediums (e.g., video, voice or email), and researchers' use of remote interviewing in

Corresponding author:
Muhammad Salman Khan, Room 6.13, 30 Aldwych, Bush House (NE), Department of Geography, Kings College London, London, UK.
Email: Muhammad_salman.khan@kcl.ac.uk

specific contexts (Lawrence, 2020; Mwambari et al., 2021: 4). The literature on remote interviewing (before, during and post-COVID-19) generally overlooks the researcher's gendered positionality in voice-only interviewing (Hall et al. 2021). In contrast, I argue that good interviewing is facilitated by a reflexive awareness of and engagement with the embodied and performed dimensions of the interview (Ezzy, 2010). To support this claim, I offer reflections from my research in the post-COVID researchscape of Pakistan's conflict-affected Swat Valley to examine how embodied gendered experiences (of researcher and participant) influence remote interviews in places with strict cultures of gender segregation.

Knowledge production is deeply embedded in sensory experience, and bodies are always a meaningful presence in research. A body is a material entity whose potential meanings are constituted and circumscribed by cultures through particular discursive systems that privilege certain sets of norms and values that regulate interactions (Ellingson, 2017: 2). Embodiment, as a state, is contingent upon the environment and the context of the body. The literature on conflict-affected regions in Pakistan tends to either accept the methodological inaccessibility of the opposite gender or refuse to discuss gender at all (Khan, 2020). The former tendency is promoted by male anthropologists, sociologists and political scientists, while the latter tendency is prevalent among women scholars in the region.

In this article, I avoid such silencing of gendered bodies—both of the researcher and of the participants (Ellingson, 2017:18)—and position online interviewing as an embodied practice. Voice-only online interviews are often thought to be disembodied due to the physical distance, time zone differences, and a relative lack of interviewer control (Rosalind and Holand, 2013: 48). The physical proximity of bodies in a shared space—which often anchors reflexivity—is absent in virtual space. Therefore, this paper asks how such a disembodied space is embodied and lived through sensory and affective modes (Pink et al., 2016) and how gendered positionality influences the dynamics of interviewing in a virtual environment. These questions are largely overlooked, despite a renewed focus on online interviewing in the wake of COVID-19 and nascent calls for increased reflexivity around researcher positionality in virtual interview settings (Roberts et al., 2021).

The gendered bodies of both the researcher and the participants are important elements of knowledge production (Ellingson, 2012). Space is also important, as lived space surrounds and influences how we act, feel, move, and understand our way of being (Ellingson, 2017: 23). The online interview setting is a disembodied space that only allows for hearing and sight. Such an embodied experience can teach us about our own embodiment and what we take for granted (Turner, 2000). COVID-19 opened the possibility for me to remotely interview Pakhtun women about the affective dimensions of Taliban violence in women's markets. This is not to claim post-COVID methodological solutionism (Fleschenberg and Holz, 2022); rather, I acknowledge a gap in the online interviewing literature around gendered positionalities in the research process. This paper tracks voice-only online interviewing's possibilities, while also warning against its constraints in fragile contexts.

Following Holstein and Gubrium (1995), I consider interviewing to be an active process where two participants (interviewer and the interviewee) generate meanings through verbal and nonverbal communication. It is a co-construction of knowledge.

The researcher's gendered positionality and the mode of interviewing (online or face-to-face) have methodological implications for qualitative fieldwork. However, there is limited work on how gender-marked bodies of interviewer and interviewee shape online interviews as an active process of co-constructing knowledge. Related entries in *Qualitative Research* have only focused on video chat platforms when exploring aspects of embodied reflexivity, including participants' embodied experiences (Lovell and Banfield, 2022), how the researcher's body forges different relationships with participants (Wood, 2021), how the researcher's awareness of embodied affect influences their behaviour during the interview (García-Iglesias, 2021), and how researchers' embodied experiences shape data generation (Lydahl et al., 2021).

The next section offers the study background and situates these reflections within my broader research project. It also explains how I arrived at voice-only interviewing as the most suitable mode for the Swat Valley. Next, I frame the voice-only interview setting as an embodied space. Section four outlines the significance of voice-only interviews for hard-to-reach populations in conflict-affected settings. While acknowledging the benefits of internet-mediated interviewing methods, I also foreground two major challenges. Firstly, interviewing women in the Swat Valley through online methods is difficult without social networks facilitating access to potential participants. Secondly, there are cultural, contextual and gendered limits to voice-only interviewing that demand embodied, culturally sensitive listening.

Methodology and context

The COVID-19 pandemic encouraged deeper and more reflexive engagements with online methods (Johnson et al., 2019). The use of internet or computer-mediated methods is context-sensitive. Certain tools such as Zoom (Howlett, 2021), Facetime (Weller, 2015), Skype (Seitz, 2015), email (James and Busher, 2006), Facebook (Pousti et al., 2021), WhatsApp (Colom, 2021), and telephones (Pell et al., 2020) cannot be proposed *a priori,* without considering the communication mediums used by the communities we are researching. In some contexts, participants may prefer video calls (Howlett, 2021), while in other settings, a voice call is preferable (Khan, 2020). The unequal distribution of technology, socially constructed access to it, and individual competencies for engaging with various online communication platforms are important to design considerations (Farooq and De Villiers, 2017; Ibtasam et al., 2019). Despite these limitations, online interviewing methods not only allow interactions with difficult-to-access populations; they also allow researchers to access parts of interviewees' lives that would otherwise not be open in face-to-face observation.

My reflective account of conducting online interviews—both 'being here' in a basement in Stockwell, London and 'being there' in Pakistan—emerges from my involvement with an ongoing multidisciplinary project. The project titled, (omitted for review) was designed and commenced in 2019, in the pre-pandemic world. The project sought to learn how the communities and landscapes in Swat are healing from and reconciling with the wounds inflicted by Taliban violence more than a decade ago. It covers four thematic dimensions: poetry, historical heritage and archaeological sites, lived heritage (including women's markets), and natural resources. This paper only reflects on the fieldwork related to women's markets in the Swat Valley.

The project team aimed for the conventional (in the pre-COVID world) 'gold-standard' of in-person interviews (Johnson et al., 2019). All four team members from western academic institutions had prior experience conducting fieldwork in the Pakistan-Afghanistan borderland, and everyone visited Pakistan to conduct fieldwork on their respective thematic areas. Initially, we never considered conducting online interviews since the subject matter was so concerned with place, space, objects, memories, affect and feelings. The envisioned data generation techniques included textual and audio-visual analyses of archival materials, interviews, focus-group discussions, observations, participatory photography, participatory sketch drawing and transect walks. However, COVID-19 and its travel restrictions forced us to rethink our research design and incorporate remote interviewing (Sy et al., 2020: 602–603).

Our decision to use online communication was taken iteratively and with some trepidation. We initially contemplated emailing our key informants and adding face-to-face interviews at a later stage (James and Busher, 2006). (NAME), an international expert on community-led heritage practices with extensive networks of collaborators in Islamabad and Swat, was the first in our team to (successfully) email a journalist and local heritage activist in Swat. The interview was in English because (NAME) does not speak Pashto and the interviewee is fluent in English. However, when I conducted a follow-up interview with the same interviewee in Pashto over WhatsApp, he stated, "I think if the same [email] interview was conducted in Pashto [first language] or in Urdu [second language], I could have responded better and of course in more detail" (June 4, 2020). This comment from an interviewee, who has published extensively in English, made it clear that synchronous interviews (either video or voice) in Pashto was our only real option. Furthermore, most of our interviewees lacked the technical competency to write in Pashto on a QWERTY keyboard.

Our choice to use voice-only WhatsApp interviews was informed by practical and contextual considerations. Telephone calls from London to Pakistan were more expensive than voice-over-internet protocols. Zoom was not considered due to concerns over its security lapses and video leaks, and the potential consequences for participants in a conflict-affected region (Mwambari et al., 2021). Such lapses pose a great risk to the participants in Swat, where memories of recent conflict are still vivid, and individuals have been targeted by both sides of the conflict (the Pakistani military and the Taliban) for expressing their opinions. Skype was ruled out to save participants the hassle of installing additional software. The app Signal, which has better security than WhatsApp, was not used since asking participants to install software with enhanced security features could generate distrust about the aims of our project. In the first round of synchronous interviews, I co-conducted 13 (11 male and two female) interviews with poets in Swat (alongside my colleague, NAME). Four of the 11 interviews with male poets were converted into voice (from video) calls to enhance the flow of communication due to the interviewees' unstable connections. The two female interviewees only agreed to voice interviews, not videos.

Voice-only WhatsApp interviews were also used for the women's market interviewees. I conducted 18 semi-structured remote interviews with women participants (between December 2020 and April 2022) and 18 face-to-face interviews with male participants (June–September 2021) in women's markets in Swat. These interviews explored lived experiences of the conflict and post-conflict interactions with human and nonhuman

subjects in these markets. Six of the 18 face-to-face interviews with male participants were conducted by (NAME), our male research assistant. Another six of the face-to-face interviews with women were conducted by (NAME), our female research assistant who lives in the study area.[1] Our research assistants were employed for a year: they were insiders in terms of gender, language and culture, and also outsiders since they had never met the participants nor visited most of the locations. All the interviews were conducted in Pashto, which is my native language. After the eighth interview, we added a closing question specifically about the interviewee's experience with voice-only interviewing.

All the interviews offered interesting non-visual background cues specific to each interview setting (cf. Khan, 2020). In some instances, notes on these background non-visual cues were compared with reflective notes from my female RA, who conducted six face-to-face interviews in Swat in November-December 2020. The following section analyses my reflective notes on the nonvisual dynamics of voice-only interview settings in addition to my field notes from in-person fieldwork in the women's markets in August 2021. I compare my field notes from online voice-only interviews with 'being there' in the women's markets to offer a reflexive account of my own embodied and embedded experience as a source of methodological insight (Hine, 2015: 16). While the online interviews occurred well before my physical visits to women's markets in Swat, the latter helped me to better understand the embodied and embedded nature of technology and its potentialities for facilitating my interviews with women interviewees.

The voice-only remote interview setting as an embodied space

Voice-only interview space entails embodied affects that direct and redirect the flow of communication between the interviewer and the interviewee. Unlike in broader online virtual space, where the adoption of multiple identities allows for a distinction between the corporeal and virtual body (Taylor, 1999), in voice-only interviewing, the virtual body reflects and extends the corporeal body embedded within its everyday social realities. Against this backdrop, I view virtual space as neither disembodied nor decontextualized; hence, gendered bodies and their boundaries shape the dynamics of digital interviewing (Van Doorn, 2011). Gendered and embodied sensibilities of the interviewer and interviewee shape this space and its affectivity. The flow of conversation may be hindered by the conversation topic, the interviewee's embodied experiences, or the interviewee's background setting and cultural context.

When exploring women's conflict experiences in the marketplaces, I was interested in the objects that resurface past memories associated with Taliban violence in the Swat Valley. A 31-year-old woman interviewee (MW12, 15/8/2021) brought my attention to bras, a sensitive but interesting object within the dynamics of conflict (Khan, 2024). Literature on voice-only interviewing often celebrates its usefulness for exploring sensitive topics (over face-to-face interviewing (Scipes et al., 2019)). However, given the sensitive nature and culture-specific practices, these were never easy questions to ask. In particular, questions about sensitive objects like bras generated discomfort in the virtual interview setting. I felt uncomfortable with the choice to either avoid the question or make my interviewee uncomfortable. One interviewee declared, "I do not talk about these things even with every woman." I found myself without words, unsure how to

phrase the next question. I paused, but thankfully, the interviewee, who had a copy of the questions, helped move us along, asking, "question 9?" I replied, "yes" (MW13, 8/4/2022). The interviewee's proactive sensibility in response to my confusion prevented an atmosphere filled with discomfort. At the end of the interview, the interviewee and I agreed that the sensitive questions (about bras) would be easier and more open with a woman interviewer. Thus, voice-only interviews do not always facilitate conversations on sensitive topics (Scipes et al., 2019; Trier-Bieniek, 2012)—gender also determines the ease or difficulty of such work.

Regardless of the topic (gender sensitive or not), embodied experiences shape the visceral dynamics of remote, voice-only interviews. An interview with a 35-year-old university lecturer began with an account of her experience seeing the Taliban marching from vehicle to vehicle with a "man's head chopped from its body" in the busy bazaar. These actions were meant to intimidate women who wanted to come out of their homes—the message was that the next head would be theirs. The interviewee recalled every minute detail of the event, at one point pausing and reflecting, "this memory is so scary that even now when I am describing the event, my body is shivering" (MW11, 2/7/2021). The interviewee's shivering body—as communicated through words—generated an atmosphere of care, and I redirected the conversation. Instead of jumping to a different line of questioning, I asked the interviewee if she wanted to terminate the interview. The interviewee appreciated my concern and stated, "I would love to continue if you want to ask me more general questions related to women's markets" (MW11, 2/7/2021).

Both silences and various noises in the interviewee's background have implications for remote voice-only interviews. For Sipes et al. (2019:212), a lack of background noise indicates a poor internet connection, while silences in the background indicate that interviewees are thinking and shaping their responses to a sensitive topic. In my case, complete silence and a confident tone implied that the interviewee located herself in a space without other people. Disruption to that silence from background noises (e.g., animated conversations, knocking doors, footsteps walking towards the interviewee, someone calling the interviewee's name from outside the room) influenced the flow of conversation and redirected the affective atmosphere of the interview setting. Moreover, these everyday background noises can help us interpret the interviewee's responses. Thus, attention to background sounds is necessary for qualitative interviews, as they help capture the everyday lived social realities of the interviewee.

Scholars conducting online voice-only interviews over Zoom, Skype, or WhatsApp often report major problems like dropped calls, an inability to understand pauses, the absence of visual cues, and uncertainty about when to interject (Sipes et al., 2019:8–9). Indeed, such problems are particularly significant within unequal digital divides. However, the "epistemic limits," to use Thanem and Nights' (2019: 23) phrase, of voice-only interviewing literature becomes evident in its obsession with technological influences, not embodied aspects. The failure to attend to the embodied reality of technology in our participants' lives risks missing what feminist geographer Richa Nagar (2019) calls "epistemic energy" that is out there in the field. This epistemic energy cannot be explored from behind laptop screens in book-studded offices or interviewers' cosy global north living rooms.

The relevance of online research for hard-to-reach populations and conflict-affected regions

The "body is the vehicle of being in the world" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962:82, cited in Sharma et al., 2009:1643). I particularly felt the presence of my body while conducting in-person research in women's market shops and alleyways between June and September 2021. The multiple interactions occurring around me demonstrated the limits and potentialities of in-person research. I felt vulnerable to being misperceived by male interlocutors in the women's market, and powerless due to my inability to speak with women despite their presence all around me in the marketplace. These embodied experiences and emotions provided a rich physical context for my ongoing use of voice-over-internet protocols.

In the Pakhtun cultural context, male researchers find it difficult to access women for face-to-face interviews in a shared physical setting. Therefore, the potentialities of internet-mediated tools for interviewing women cannot be fully grasped unless the researcher's body is centred in reflexive accounts (Sharma et al., 2009: 1642–44). The promise of technology for facilitating interviews with difficult-to-access populations is not disembedded from the cultural context within which technology use is socially constructed. Yet, the cultural embeddedness of technology use by research participants receives little attention in the literature on telephone interviews and voice-over-internet protocols (which often celebrates how these modes help recruit difficult-to-access participants (Holt, 2010; Scipes et al., 2019; Self, 2021; Sturges and Hanrahan, 2004)). Furthermore, most methodological texts about WhatsApp as a mediated means of communication consider text-based messages (Colom, 2021; Gibson, 2020:15).

Online methods literature is often silent about intersubjective communication that co-produces knowledge in specific cultural contexts (Ellingson, 2017). Certainly, technology's affordances are valuable; however, without a nuanced discussion about how virtual interactions are connected to the material worlds of the researcher and the research participants, they are meaningless (Morrow et al., 2015: 534). The extant literature on telephone interviewing (Farooq and De Villiers, 2017; Holt, 2010) and voice-only Skype interviews (Sipes et al., 2019) rarely goes beyond its advantages in facilitating discussions about sensitive issues (Mann and Stewart, 2000)) and benefits vis-à-vis face-to-face interviews (e.g., accessing hard-to-reach populations and regions, such as war zones (Obdenakker, 2006), travel costs and time savings (Irvine, 2011)).

One often unstated advantage is that online interviews allow interviewees to select and adjust their interview settings (Self, 2021). This is important in contexts where present male family members may start responding on the interviewee's behalf, dismiss the interviewer's questions, or constantly stare at the interviewer and interviewee (Ibtasam et al., 2019:11). Even my interviewees (not in a face-to-face setting) were concerned about being overheard by male family members with whom they do not want to share their experiences (Khan, 2020; Seitz, 2015). To avoid such a situation, some respondents suggested a meeting time when "the male family members are not at home," others closed the doors of their rooms, and some preferred to be interviewed in their office. One of my interviewees stated, "I can talk in a more relaxed environment there [in the office] because no one from my family will be listening to what I am saying about my experiences in the market" (field note, 3 December 2020). When the home was the only

option for the interviewee, I relied on background auditory cues to understand the setting and contextualize her responses rather than ascribing short responses or non-richness to the voice-only interview format (Johnson et al., 2019).

In this case, the interviewee's physical setting was more important than factors associated with unequal digital divides. For instance, a 34-year-old university lecturer speaking to me from her residence in a girls' hostel suddenly took a 45-s pause while talking about her experiences with Taliban crises. I did not interject, assuming her internet connection was bad. However, once we reconnected, she quickly stated, "a student came into my room, and you know, I cannot talk about these things [memories of conflict] in front of others". In another instance, a 21-year-old university student speaking to me from her home was providing very short responses with long pauses. Later, when I probed about her memories of coming home after four months of displacement in 2009 due to military conflict, she narrated the story of a beheaded militant without any pause. I was confused by how she narrated this "scary memory" compared to her earlier, guarded responses to more mundane questions. She later clarified, "my elder sister [mashra khor] was here earlier and hence I could not talk openly".

Can internet-mediated methods work without an added layer of mediation?

Recruiting strangers for non-face-to-face interviews (Sturges and Hanrahan, 2004) often involves social media pages, message boards, organizational leadership, and emails (Crowley, 2007; Scipes et al., 2019; Self, 2021; Trier-Bieniek, 2012). In some instances, researchers directly recruit participants using chat services (Lawrence, 2020). However, none of these methods were useful for this study—my internet-mediated interviews required an added layer of mediation, that is, contact through existing social networks.

COVID-19 amplified the problems associated with using internet-mediated methods for interviewing women. Limitations on women's time and space at home increased due to lockdown measures, especially in Pakistan (Kirmani, 2020). Women's already constrained use of the internet and smartphones was subjected to increased surveillance (Ibtasam et al., 2019; Mwambari et al., 2019). Women could rarely answer phones in isolation, and they often hand phones to their husbands or other male relatives when speaking to a male stranger (i.e., the researcher) (Shah, 2022). In a context where online hate speech, harassment, and privacy breaches characterise women's access to communication technology and conversations with stranger men (Ali Aksar et al., 2020:9), how could I contact women interviewees who I did not know?

In Pakistan, the majority of women internet users access social media platforms and communicate using mobile phones (Ibtasam et al., 2019). Pakistan has recently narrowed the gender gap in South Asian adoption and use of mobile technology (Shanahan, 2021). Nevertheless, Pakistan has one of the widest gender gaps in internet use and mobile ownership. Women are 38% less likely than men to own a mobile phone and 49% less likely to use mobile data. Only 50% of women own a mobile phone, compared to 81% of men (with only 20% of women owning a smartphone, compared to 37% of men) (Shanahan, 2021). Of the women in Pakistan who own a smartphone, 16% do not use mobile internet (Shanahan, 2021: 10–12). COVID-19 restrictions (e.g., lockdowns, working from home)

further curtailed women's ability to use the internet without family surveillance in offices, educational institutions or libraries.

Despite these inequalities, I avoided using social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to recruit potential participants. Firstly, the Pakistani state considers social media to be a threat to the national image (Kirmani, 2021). Since our project examined conflict and counterinsurgency operations (Marsden and Hopkins, 2013), there was a potential risk to our participants from the national security forces and Taliban alike. In addition, the Pakistani internet landscape is awash with fake social media accounts, and women do not feel safe sharing information on the internet. This left WhatsApp voice-only contact as the most practical option for carrying out our interviews. The reliance on WhatsApp—and exclusion of Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, IMO chatrooms and Clubhouse—meant that we could not recruit respondents randomly, without the mediation of locally embedded social ties. However, WhatsApp offered a safer interview setting, which allowed the interviewees to reflect in detail.

The random recruitment of women participants for voice-only remote interviews was highly impractical. Records of women as mobile phone owners do not exist. Moreover, cultural family norms limit women's ability to speak to male strangers over the phone. Male family members are often discomforted by women's interactions with men beyond their nuclear family. Therefore, women's mobile phones—the enabler of such interactions— are always under scrutiny. Women either do not respond at all, or do not respond positively to calls from stranger men (Khan, 2020). It is presumably possible to access women interviewees through their male family members but, as Shah (2022) demonstrates, these interview settings do not facilitate free expression, as male family members are present.

Therefore, none of my women interviewees were randomly recruited. Access was negotiated by my personal and professional contacts (men and women) in the region who had personal ties with potential interviewees. Both men and women were helpful in negotiating access with women in professional settings; access to non-working women was only possible through other women. All these women interviewees were educated, so my claim that internet-mediated methods can facilitate a male interviewer's access to women interviewees in hard-to-access populations remains untested with uneducated women in the region. Internet-mediated methods in contexts like the Swat Valley are unlikely to succeed without an additional layer of mediation through locally embedded personal ties (e.g., trusted colleagues, friends, teachers, or students). Interestingly, family ties (both men and women) were not helpful in negotiating online interviews with women participants. The locally embedded personal ties bridged the trust between the women interviewees and a male interviewer who were complete strangers. None of the online interviews featured a male family member lurking in the background. In fact, many women deliberately selected a time or setting where they could elude male presence.

Cultural, contextual and gendered limits: Challenges and solutions

Background sounds during the interview were significant for contextualizing the interviewee's responses. For example, a 23-year-old Master's student was cheerful and confident until a sudden knock on the door. As soon as the interviewee heard the knocking, she

asked me to excuse her so that she could attend to the door. The knocking deprived her of a private space, which she had created for the interview, and resulted in a sudden change in tone. I realized that the interview would be challenging; immediately handing up the call would have generated suspicions that could have been harmful in her family setting.

> I could hear a male voice calling the interviewee's name while knocking, and some steps walking towards the interviewee when the interviewee started talking again after a 10-s pause. The interviewee re-started the conversation with a completely different topic by saying that "I will be in the final year now once the exams are conducted". I told the interviewee, "You can opt out of the interview any time, even now" (interview notes, 9 December 2020).

I wanted to make her feel comfortable and alleviate any guilt from leaving the interview due to family pressures. I felt uncomfortable exposing my interviewee to the continuous discomfort of a visible male family member suspiciously staring her down while she spoke to an invisible male researcher. Her loss of space meant that the conversation could not flow as it had started; she would likely not respond to my questions about her experiences in the marketplace during the conflict. This active, culturally-sensitive listening proved key to confidence-building since ten minutes after we decided to end the call, the interviewee texted me to confirm the date of a follow-up interview that was never requested in our brief conversation.

Audio interviews are often considered the 'second-best choice '(Holt, 2010) since they lack paralinguistic cues and non-verbal communication (Weller, 2015:23). As Deakin and Wakefield (2013:605) note, all the subtle visual and non-verbal cues that help contextualize the interviewee in a face-to-face scenario are lost. However, in my case, audio interviews were the only (not 'second best') option. Even when I allowed the interviewees to choose which internet-mediated methods (video or audio) they preferred (Weller, 2015), they favoured audio-only interviews.

Online voice-only interviews require going beyond "effective listening". As Farooq and De Villiers (2017: 307) suggest, interviewers must pick up on changes in verbal cues like "pauses, hurried answers, tones, etc. And indicate if interviewees are confused, hesitating or experiencing frustration." These conversational elements need to be contextualized within the cultural dynamics and the physical settings where the interviewee is located. The interviewer's invisibility is juxtaposed with the interviewee's visibility to the people surrounding her, potentially reducing the ability to create a positive ambience and establish rapport (Obdenakker, 2006). Therefore, in voice-only interviews, we must attend to the background auditory clues for effective interviewing. The interviewer's ears are the only sensory connection to the interviewee's physical surroundings.

Culturally sensitive listening is a prerequisite. This includes elements of "reflective listening" (Au, 2019: 64), effective listening, and culturally sensitive communications (Brooks et al., 2019). Transformations in the interviewee's physical settings can be detected through close attention to all kinds of background sounds. Changes in tone, pauses, shifts in subject, refusal to open up, and sudden unresponsiveness can all indicate events in the interviewee's physical space. I noted numerous background sounds, including male and female voices, opening and closing doors, complete or partial silence, message alerts and ringing phones, footsteps, ongoing cautious, affectionate, or angry

exchanges between the interviewer and his/her family members, or among other family members.

Culturally sensitive listening may not be possible when there are cross-cultural differences between the researcher and research participant, especially if the interviewer cannot understand the interviewee's home language. This was evident well before I started interviewing women. In our online interviews with male poets (reference omitted for review), a 60-year-old retired schoolteacher told us he could not read the information sheet and consent form because his featurephone did not allow him to open PDF documents from WhatsApp. He agreed that emailing the documents would resolve the problem, but asked us to wait and briefly left the room. He first asked about his son who was "out with his friends", and then abruptly asked his wife, "hey, do I have an email?" Our ability to understand the language in this background conversation informed us about the role of technology in the interviewee's life. With the women interviewees (who had the technological competence to handle emails, text messages and phone calls), these background conversations often prompted me to ask whether we should continue the interview, and helped contextualize her pauses, suddenly short responses, or changes in her tone.

Conclusion

The literature on voice-only interviews—both with telephones (Holt, 2010) and internet protocols (Crowley, 2007; Self, 2021; Trier-Bieniek, 2012)—calls for increased reflexivity. My engagement with online interviews was forced by COVID-19. Nevertheless, it highlighted the absence of gendered reflexivity in voice-only interview settings and dynamics. In this sense, COVID-19 was "not an event, [but] a reminder of the actuality of such debates" (Nyenyezi Bisoka, 2020: 2). Beyond being a mode of communication, voice-only interviews involve an epistemological researcher standpoint. Such reflection is either entirely absent (cf. Deakin and Wakefield, 2013) or not thought to affect online interview dynamics (Lorence 2020; Weller, 2015). Technology can facilitate access to distanced and geographically dispersed populations; however, a reflexive engagement with the body (of researcher and participant) is needed to capture fragments of epistemic energy 'out there' across geographic regions. Our reflections on online interviews will remain incomplete until the embodied gendered and lived realities of the participants and cultural positionality of the researcher are evaluated (in telephone interviews (Farooq and De Villiers, 2017; Holt, 2010) and voice-over-internet protocols (Scipes et al., 2019; Self, 2021; Trier-Bieniek, 2012)). Therefore, it is important for researchers to recognize what they are doing, when they do it, and what it means to take data at face value (Sandelowski, 2002).

The context of the researcher and research participants matters (Self, 2021). Online, voice-only interviews appear disembodied to those who do not reflect on how gendered relations embedded within the participant's cultural context shape the intersubjective dynamics of knowledge production through remote interviewing (Deakin and Wakefield, 2013; Seitz, 2015; Sipes et al., 2019; Weller, 2015). Practicing such an embodied reflexivity has broader methodological implications for qualitative interviewing. Reflexivity around internet-mediated tools calls for attention to their emergent, virtual and contextual features (Pousti et al., 2021: 357). Such reflection should be critical

in the Arendtian sense, where context is viewed as "irreducibly 'reflexive space,' within which, reflection is inevitably shaped by the context in which it occurs" (cited in Pousti et al., 2021: 365). Bids to utilize the opportunities of internet-mediated research often overlook embodied reflexivity. While the importance of gendered bodies in voice-only interviews is recognized (Crowley, 2007; Farooq and De Villiers, 2017; Holt, 2010), there is insufficient reflection on how it shapes the interviewing practice and the data generated. Embodied reflexivity—in conjunction with attention to unplanned mundane occurrences in the interviewee's background—is important to writing the larger political and social world in which the interviewees (and the researcher) are embedded.

This reflexive account has demonstrated how technologies like WhatsApp can help us overcome gender barriers and reach a difficult-to-access population. However, it has also highlighted limitations in terms of who can be included in internet-mediated research. The voice-only interview setting is an embodied space; cultural roles may hinder access to participants, with implications for remote interviewing recruitment. I have also shown how culturally sensitive listening in the absence of visual and paralinguistic cues can improve interview analysis. This article is not yet another entry to the protracted debate of online vs. in-person interviews, nor is it prescribing how to use technology and voice-only interviews with difficult-to-access populations in conflict-affected regions. Instead, I call on qualitative researchers to continue critically engaging with the embodied and embedded aspects of voice-only interviews.

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ORCID iD

Muhammad Salman Khan https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7894-4819

Note

1. Our research assistants were sent to the field in November and the first week of December before the second wave of COVID hit Pakistan. From 5 December 2020, to the time of writing (May 2021), our research assistants have been working from home.

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Author biography

Muhammad Salman Khan is a lecturer in development geography at the Department of Geography, King's College London. As an economic and institutional sociologist, he is interested in local political economy with special interest in informal economy, institutional analysis, local governance and trust, borderland markets, cultural production (with a special interest in affect theory), and geopolitics. He is currently working on a project aimed at capturing, through engagement between academic and non academic mode of thinking and expression, the affective and emotional dimensions of development policies in Pakistan.

Article

North-South research collaboration during complex global emergencies: Qualitative knowledge production and sharing during COVID-19[1]

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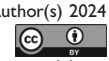

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Adriana Rudling
William & Mary, US / Chr Michelsen Institute, Norway / Instituto Pensar, Colombia

Mohamed Sesay
York University, Canada

Eric Wiebelhaus-Brahm
University of Arkansas at Little Rock, USA

Angelika Rettberg
Universidad de los Andes, Colombia

Abstract
Large multinational teams of academics and activist-practitioners that span the Global North-South divide have become common in qualitative research because of the reliance of field of peace and conflict studies on "local" knowledge and expertise. Complex global emergencies, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, present the opportunity to (re)shape and (re)consider these endeavors in key some ways. This article focuses on the involvement of South-based activist-practitioners in three large North-South collaborations, one pre-pandemic (Beyond Words: Implementing Latin American Truth Commission Recommendations), one ongoing when the pandemic began (Gender, Justice, and Security Hub), and one launched during the pandemic (Truth Commissions and Sexual Violence: African and Latin American Experiences). Drawing on center-periphery framework, we adopt an autoethnographic approach, to reflect on how the pandemic has not only reinforced existing structural and institutional asymmetries through reduced funding, professional uncertainty, and personal loss and insecurity but also added some new ethical concerns. This reality has tested both our capacity and commitment to work toward

Corresponding author:
Adriana Rudling, William & Mary, US / Chr Michelsen Institute, Norway / Instituto Pensar, Colombia.
Email: adriana.rudling@gmail.com

the decolonization of knowledge in the field. In making this argument, we seek to contribute to the discussion on research ethics and the politics of knowledge production and sharing in qualitative peace and conflict research.

Keywords
research collaborations, academics, activist-practitioners, COVID-19, epistemic justice, fieldwork, qualitative research

Introduction

The field of peace and conflict studies has historically relied on networks of (inter) national professionals, activist-practitioners, policymakers, academics, and victims (Larivière et al., 2015; see also Keck and Sikkink, 1999; Zvobgo, 2021). These relationships, which often span the Global North-South divide, are increasingly important for qualitative research since a connection to field sites is (perceived to be) the gold standard for rigorous and reliable work (Adams, 2012).[2] Yet, tensions arising from power differentials and hierarchical relations inevitably affect such collaborations (Cronin-Furman and Lake, 2018; Roll and Swenson, 2019). Post/decolonial critiques of knowledge production have emphasized how the field is marked by knowledge imperialism (Kagoro, 2012) and agents of knowledge production and dissemination are stratified, and their expertise—valued based on how they are perceived by members of the system (Demeter, 2019). Thus, many researchers and commentators see Global North scholars as a "cadre of 'foreign' experts, specialists and scholars…let loose on the Global South" (Dei and Anamuah-Mensah, 2014: 30) to the detriment of locally based activist-practitioners, whose insights are sidelined at best or appropriated without due credit at worst (Bacevic, 2021; Mwambari, 2019).

In this article, we deploy an autoethnographic approach to jointly reflect on the challenges and opportunities of decolonizing research arising from the COVID-19 pandemic for qualitative fieldwork-based projects in this field (Jiménez Arrobo and Beltrán Conejo, 2021; Krause et al., 2021; Mwambari et al., 2021; Myers et al., 2020; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2017; Reed-Danahay, 1997). We recognize that the pandemic (like other sustained global crises) primed the field for deeper conversations about knowledge production and sharing (Jones and Lühe, 2021b; Rudling, 2021), but remain skeptical that it will represent a positive inflection point for long-term changes in research scripts, relationships, and practices. The "distanced research" (Mwambari et al., 2021) imposed by the social distancing measures and travel restrictions in the pandemic's first phase (re)newed concerns about positionality, contrasting uses of agency, and uneven capacity for voice, given the power differentials associated with disparities in healthcare provision, socioeconomic positions, and research roles. However, the latter phase of the pandemic (starting in 2021)—dominated by a global vaccine inequity—created intensified skepticism about the possibility of achieving more horizontal and equitable center-periphery partnerships in research.

We draw on our experiences with three large collaborative endeavors that engaged Global South-based activist-practitioners and partners. Each project (broadly speaking) involved qualitative "conflict fieldwork" (Browne, 2020) and, like much collaborative

research in peace and conflict studies, drew on a variety of personal and professional entanglements (Bacevic, 2021; Orellana Matute, 2021). These projects were each at a different stage when the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the COVID-19 outbreak a global pandemic. Our use of the term activist-practitioner highlights the mixed identities of our collaborators as well as the situational nature of these identifiers (Cabanes Ragandang, 2021; Dickinson et al., 2020; Sultana, 2007). The pandemic revealed that many divisions in this type of research are highly porous and temporary in this age of globalization (Eggeling, 2023). Nevertheless, the pandemic's primary (and most worrying) long-term effect is that it reinforced preexisting structural and institutional asymmetries. Reduced funding, professional uncertainty, and personal loss and insecurity tested the capacity and commitment of those involved in research in the field to work toward the decolonization of knowledge. Ultimately, the pandemic's radical transformative potential was undermined by the position that field-based qualitative research should "wait out" the emergency for an eventual "return to normal."

The article unfolds in five sections. The first discusses our use of autoethnography as well as how we conceptualize the decolonization of knowledge production in this context. The next section reviews ongoing debates about research ethics and the politics of knowledge, as foregrounded by the pandemic (Jones, 2015; Villamil, 2021) and introduces the three collaborations. The following two sections use the center-periphery framework to reflect on activist-practitioners' "local" knowledge (Mitchell, 2012) and on how the pandemic affected these collaborations where they were involved in (Asiamah et al., 2021). The final section offers lessons for future collaborations.

Decolonizing research and autoethnography

Decolonial scholars, such as Maori anthropologist Smith (1999: 2), invite us to see "research as a significant site of struggle between the interests and ways of knowing of the West and the interests and ways of knowing of the Other." Peace and conflict studies have been historically linked to Western imperialism, colonialism, and globalization, which defined non-Western people as objects of study in need of civilization. Thus, the commitment to decolonizing research is an ontological, epistemological, ethical, and political project (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2017; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2019; Smith, 1999). It relies on a simultaneous deconstruction and reconstruction of knowledge that goes beyond the veneer of "objective and technical issue[s] of research procedures and technologies of gathering data" to view research as "always shot through by complex questions of power, identity, values, and ethics" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2019: 481). Deconstructing the imperial model of research centers and respects non-Western ways of thinking and doing. To achieve such epistemic freedom, we must abandon straitjacket methodologies handed down by Euro-American scholars via the European Enlightenment tradition of a science of knowability (Smith, 1999). We must "shift the identity of [the] object [of research] to reposition those who have been objects of research into questioners, critics, theorists, knowers, and communicators" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2017: 4). Decolonization recasts knowledge production as an enterprise to improve the human condition of the researched over that of the researcher.[3]

Auto-ethnography—while not a decolonial methodology—enables us to self-reflexively ask what decolonizing knowledge production means in the context of

North-South collaboration. Reed-Danahay (1997: 4) describes autoethnography as a "variety of genres of self-representation" that are crucially concerned with "questions of identity and selfhood, of voice and authenticity, and of cultural displacement and exile." For her, the main features of autoethnography are the perspective of a "boundary-crosser" and auto-ethnographers' "dual identity." The practice of autoethnography allows us to "zoom backward and forward, inward and outward, [making the] distinctions between the personal and cultural…blurred" (Ellis and Bochner, 2000: 739). Autoethnographic writing is varied (Spry, 2001), but generally draws on the writers' own life experiences to reflect on problems affecting a wider group they are involved in and its practices (Denzin, 1989).

As scholars who occupy an array of interstices between different (types) of boundaries, autoethnography allows us to peel back our "multiple layers of consciousness" (Ellis and Bochner, 2000, 739). In different personal and professional circumstances, we may be best characterized as insiders, outsiders, or something in between (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009). We have (repeatedly) crossed the borders between North and South and those between academia, activism, and practice. The resulting mesh of entanglements was critical during the pandemic. Since the four of us were differently situated throughout the pandemic, with the travel restrictions physically isolating some of us from the "field" and essentially entrapping others there, this article allows us to discuss how we reconsidered our fieldwork practices throughout this period. As we struggled to morally and ethically adapt to this complex global emergency, our values, the meaning(s) associated with peace and conflict research, and the engagement of local activist-practitioners and other partners in fieldwork were called into question.

Knowledge production and sharing

There are several perennial debates on research ethics and the politics of knowledge in peace and conflict research, including concerns about the racialized distribution of roles and vulnerabilities of colonial knowledge production (Bisoka, 2020: 1) and the need to center non-European modes of thinking, doing, and representing (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020). Post/decolonial critiques—including our classic rendering of the center-periphery framework[4]—utilize geographical and social understandings of the institutions and individuals who populate them (Demeter, 2019) to challenge knowledge production systems where "the center of knowledge…about people or community is located outside the community or people themselves" (Nobles, 1976: 16).

Formal roles as PIs or activist-practitioners mainly involved in data collection in collaborations often take advantage of members' institutional links as they personally and professionally transition across the North-South divide. Organizational arrangements made in grant applications routinely formally acknowledge and use, rather than challenge, the unequal privileges of North-based academics' in accessing and managing research. Project leaders' attentiveness to the politics and processes of knowledge production and how they collectively *act* to recognize and position the contributions of South-based activist-practitioners is key for post/decolonial scholars (Mwambari, 2019). Unfortunately, North-based academics are commonly situated at the center of collaborations that produce knowledge *about* and *for* the periphery. Funders driving peace and conflict research agendas are both physically proximate to North-based academics

and share common discourses (Jones and Lühe, 2021a: 247; Jamar, 2017; Krystalli et al., 2021). Colonial and imperialist notions of (scientific) respectability render South-based activist-practitioners less visible to funders and the international institutions promoting interventions in conflict-affected Global South areas (Demeter, 2019). This means that North-based participants generally provide theory and make project decisions (Jones, 2015; Jones and Lühe, 2021b; Jones et al., 2021), while South-based counterparts contribute personal and professional networks, experience, local reputation, and (everyday) knowledge of context—all of which are assumed to be atheoretical unprocessed insights (Cronin-Furman and Lake, 2018; Mwambari, 2019). In extreme cases of epistemic positioning, North-based academics may even appropriate South-based activist-practitioners' work through erasure; however, the more typical practice of nonattribution has equally damaging consequences (Bacevic, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic lent renewed importance to these discussions. For instance, Krause et al. (2021: 264) discuss the importance of "contingency planning…how cyberspace has increasingly become 'the field'…and how scholars can build lasting, mutually beneficial partnerships with 'field citizens'." Similarly, the US Social Sciences Research Council supported a dialogue on pandemic-related disruptions.[5] Some qualitative researchers wondered whether fieldwork "needs to be reinvented, hands-off modes need to be found to replace face-to-face research, or ethnographers need to reskill as they shift their research away from in-person interaction" (Eggeling, 2023: 2; see also Boéri and Giustini, 2024; DeHart, 2020; Hjalmarson et al., 2020; Howlett, 2022; Kim et al., 2023; Marzi, 2023). Other observers feared that "journals, fellowships, and hiring and tenure committees will continue to increase their expectations with regard to quality and quantity of scholarship" despite the COVID-19-related disruptions, a weak job market, and dwindling research funds (Krause et al., 2021: 264).

Some researchers considered this crisis to be an opportunity to ask more fundamental questions (Fontes, 2020; Hall et al., 2021; Rechsteiner and Sneller, 2021). For instance, Bisoka (2020: 1) wonders "why COVID-19 has not become an 'event' for Western social researchers to radically reverse the normal order of things," including the exploitation of "certain bodies for research purposes." Similarly, Krause et al. (2021: 266) ask whether the pandemic could be "an opportunity for collaborative agenda setting and knowledge production; designing more nimble research; and rectifying practical, structural, and labour inequalities that have been overlooked for too long." As Cronin-Furman and Lake (2018), Mwambari (2019), and Scerri et al., (2020: 1571), we argue in this article that "we can do better" for activist-practitioners involved in qualitative peace and conflict research if we use this "tragic serendipity" (Eggeling, 2023: 2) to fundamentally (re)consider our research practices and advance the collective political project of decolonizing knowledge.

Certainly, the events since March 2020 have "take[n] the world to a crossroads where crucial and difficult decisions have to be taken so as to find a way out" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020: 378). To better understand what this complex global emergency might mean for the peace and conflict studies, we conceptualize the pandemic in two stages, with the widespread availability of vaccines in the Global North in early 2021 being the dividing line (Watson et al., 2022). In the initial stage, the pandemic illuminated how divisions between North-based academics and South-based activist-practitioners were more porous than the classic renderings of the center-periphery model would suggest

because such identities and locations are more transient in this age of globalization. Travel bans and lockdowns restricted access to field sites and necessitated an increased reliance on South-based members. The "digitalization" of fieldwork of this phase also imposed a double burden on South-based collaborators to leverage their expertise and creativity to deliver on new targets and outcomes agreed with project funders in the midst of extensive budget cuts (Allam et al., 2020; Dodez, 2021; Hall et al., 2021; Rechsteiner and Sneller, 2021; Reynolds, 2021; Mwambari et al., 2021). This created a subtle shift in power relations between North and South and academics and activist-practitioners. Yet, unequal access to communication technology, personal insecurity, government surveillance (Allam et al., 2020; Mwambari et al., 2021), and limited domestic mobility affected South-based partners' willingness and ability to participate in research in this new format on equal terms.

Once vaccines became widely available in the Global North and travel restrictions were gradually lifted, we entered the second phase of the pandemic. The conversation in qualitative peace and conflict research moved away from digitalization and North-based scholars' ethical responsibilities to a field they were forced to exit (Knott, 2019). Instead, we began to reflect on accepted and acceptable research scripts and relationships in light of vaccine inequality (Rudling, 2021). Paradoxically, this phase also opened space for analysis and reflection on our initial responses to the pandemic. While long-standing professional relationships, personal ethical commitments, and fluctuating identities went some way to challenge the (most pernicious) effects of the pandemic, they could also be counterproductive to the long-term goal of decolonizing knowledge. As some of the most dramatic effects of the pandemic were gradually contained, at least in the Global North, due to the availability of vaccines, this phase of the pandemic allowed the peace and conflict studies field to better question "essentialist infantilizing portrayals" that cast "the locals" "as ubiquitously powerless vis-à-vis the researcher…the only powerful actor in this dyad" (Schulz, 2021: 552). We then realized that our rushed coping strategies of the first phase, even when most well-meaning, threatened to depoliticize this global emergency and divert attention from the long-term *actions* required for the commitment to decolonization to become a reality.

Overall, the pandemic reminded us that the decolonization of knowledge is a political undertaking that requires fundamental transformations, particularly in relation to the redistribution of research resources, horizontalization of decision-making, and the valuation of South contributions to qualitative research. These issues are inextricably linked to global structures of inequality, so reflexive research practices alone can do little to alter them. Unfortunately, commitments to Global South struggles and solidarity were rarely backed by substantive action in peace and conflict studies throughout the pandemic. Many North-based qualitative researchers' vows of solidarity and mutual support to their South-based partners gradually crumbled under the weight of personal and professional crises and COVID-related stresses and uncertainties. Eventually, the field began waiting to return to prepandemic normalcy, further undermining the task of decolonizing research.

These issues played out in the three North-South collaborations we were involved throughout the pandemic. The first collaborative project, *Beyond Words: Implementing Truth Commission Recommendations in Latin America*,[6] was a prepandemic examination of truth commissions' recommendations. The second, the *Gender, Justice and Security*

Hub[7] (or, the Hub), encompassed 32 projects aiming to understand how gender justice and inclusive security can be promoted in conflict-affected societies; it was ongoing when the pandemic began. The final project, which began during the pandemic in late 2021, examined how truth commissions engage with conflict-related sexual violence under the title *Truth Commissions and Sexual Violence: African and Latin American Experiences*.[8]

Beyond Words (launched in 2015, with fieldwork completed in 2017) was an ambitious endeavor to empirically trace the fate of nearly 1000 recommendations issued by 13 Latin American truth commissions. The project was funded by the Norwegian Research Council and led by three North-based scholars who utilized long-standing relationships with three Latin American organizations dedicated to sociolegal research and transformation. The fieldwork primarily consisted of semistructured interviews and archival research. Additional academic researchers Adriana Rudling provided further support. The project was in the publication stage when the pandemic began.

The Hub was launched in 2019 after receiving a five-year grant from UK Research and Innovation (UKRI). This collaboration, which was based at the London School of Economics (LSE) Centre for Women, Peace and Security, emphasized direct engagement by South-based scholars and activist-practitioners. Its diverse projects addressed governance, the (in)direct victims of forced disappearance, reconciliation, land, and women's rights across four thematic and two cross-cutting streams. The Hub's commitment to feminist research methods and advocacy sought to amplify the voices of women and marginalized groups and affect policy change in its priority countries (Afghanistan, Colombia, Iraq, Lebanon, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka, and Uganda). Around 80 researchers (local and global civil society, practitioners, governments, and international organizations) from North and South-based institutions are responsible for the research. These projects were at different stages in early 2020 and, therefore, were affected in different ways, as will be further discussed below.

The *Truth Commissions and Sexual Violence* project was also funded by the Norwegian Research Council and launched in October 2021. The three PIs are split between North and South. The project examines the (lack of) connections between more than 30 African and Latin American truth commissions and the development of international norms on conflict-related sexual violence. It uses secondary data to build a database of these truth commissions complemented by thick descriptions, which necessitates select qualitative data collection. As with *Beyond Words*, the South-based organizations and activist-practitioners have long-standing professional relationships with the PIs and long histories of research and campaigning for peacebuilding. Although funding was approved in December 2020, the pandemic delayed the project's official launch and ultimately extended the project to December 2024.

Activist-practitioners in the three collaborations

Activist-practitioners and academics involved in the same research collaborations often respond to different (sometimes conflicting) concerns and may possess divergent standards of knowledge production and sharing. This is a result of a number of factors, including the formal roles specified by funding applications for each of these two groups, their different personal and professional circumstances and their different

formal training and backgrounds. Activist-practitioners, especially when working in civil society organizations, must respond to a variety of stakeholders beyond the research project, work within their organizational structure and mission, and navigate local political developments. Academics' institutional contracts also specify a variety of other activities, notably teaching and administration. Thus, for both groups, research collaboration is but one responsibility that must be harmonized with other priorities, including reassessed personal and safety concerns during COVID-19.

The majority of PIs in these three collaborations are (currently) best understood as academics situated (if temporarily) in the Global North, while the majority of data collection work was carried out by South-based activist-practitioners. From the moment of application, many of those involved (including us) made *strategic* use of our multiple and overlapping identities (e.g., professional roles, race, nationality, political ideology) and drew from personal and professional networks to access the dense lattice of relationships beyond and above the state. For instance, some Hub members began collaborating through the Justice, Conflict, & Development Network, which brought together 18 academics, practitioners, and civil society partners from Colombia, Sri Lanka, Syria, and Uganda.[9] The North-based PIs of both *Beyond Words* and *Truth Commissions and Sexual Violence* had long-standing relationships with their South-based partners and each other. Such professional entanglements and fluctuating identities laid the groundwork for expectations, norms of interaction, and rich and trusting relationships (Jones et al., 2021: 49) that helped challenge some (pernicious) effects of asymmetries (Datta, 2019) in the first stage of the pandemic, as will be further explained below.

Beyond Words had the starkest North-South divide and deepest chasm between "local" activist-practitioners and North-based academics of the three collaborations we discuss. Both *Beyond Words* and *Truth Commissions and Sexual Violence* were largely devised without input from South-based activist-practitioners. However, the latter's research design showcases more complex institutional arrangements, collaborator identities, and dissemination activities that aim to empower partners and transcend the minimalist (oftentimes extractivist) logic of "do no harm" (Blee, 1993). Conversely, South-based activist-practitioners' contribution to *Beyond Words* was largely confined to a mid-project workshop in Peru that resulted in small adjustments to the research strategy.[10] Additionally, one of the two books from *Beyond Words* (Skaar et al., 2022a, 2022b) consisted of country case studies written by collaborators, including activist-practitioners. To date, the follow-up studies have not involved South-based partners (Centeno Martín et al., 2022; Wiebelhaus-Brahm and Wright, 2021; Wiebelhaus-Brahm et al., 2023). The language barriers that prevented more horizontal relationships and the inclusion of South-based partners in publications will likely also affect *Truth Commissions and Sexual Violence*. Peace and conflict fieldwork must further reflect on how to avoid this situation, whereby knowledge of local languages—an expertise necessary for North-South collaborations (Datta and Sigdel, 2016)—becomes an obstacle to the decolonization of knowledge.

The Hub is the most complex collaboration. While North-based academics are still largely responsible for the design, findings, and dissemination, some projects are directly led by South-based researchers. Similarly, the Executive Group, which periodically meets to discuss the project direction, is composed of PIs from around the world. Following its feminist ethics, the Hub consciously pursues more horizontality in decision-making and

research practices and paid special attention to the well-being of *all* partners involved (Levy Paluck, 2009). Some working relationships in the Hub originated from members' prior personal affinities and professional contacts, while others were established during a prepandemic in-person planning session that boosted relationships and gave partners insights into each other's personal and professional commitments (Ansoms et al., 2021). Importantly, it is worth keeping in mind that even before the pandemic such in-person meetings were affected by burdensome immigration proceedings that disadvantaged participants from the South, particularly when seeking entry to the North.

All Hub projects involve work with policymakers, government officials, and civil society organizations, so collaborators often leveraged personal and professional histories of activism and practice. Activist-practitioners were part of the research design, data collection, and analysis, so the resulting publications carry the names of all those involved regardless of their Hub role. Training and mentoring schemes—senior-to-junior, North-to-South-to-North, and intra-South—were also developed. One of the Hub projects, titled "Land Policy, Gender and Plural Legal Systems," on which Mohamed Sesay is a PI, exemplifies these multiple entanglements. From the design phase, this project relied on the personal and professional relationships the two Sierra Leonean PIs developed long before they received PhD training and became academics in the Global North. The project sought to promote Sierra Leonean women's tenurial rights through engagements and inclusive collaboration with the local NGO Timap for Justice and other local researchers, activist-practitioners, policymakers, and conflict-affected communities. From the conceptualization stage, ideas were balanced between ongoing debates in the country, the needed policy changes, and secondary academic literature advanced by the PIs. Their established relationships helped overcome some of the structural and institutional barriers that became more pressing during the first phase of the pandemic, as will be shown below.

The pandemic's effects on the three collaborations

By the time, the WHO officially declared the pandemic, activist-practitioners were no longer actively involved in *Beyond Words* beyond occasional clarifications for the final book edits. Like many North-based academics (Krause et al., 2021), the PIs welcomed the availability of this data until digital research was introduced in the first phase of the pandemic (Hall et al., 2021; Mwambari et al., 2021; Schick, 2020). Nevertheless, differences in caring responsibilities and variations in professional duties and incentive structures tied to career stage and affiliation imposed different burdens on both sides of the divide. For North-based academics, online events, digital research, and remote teaching reduced health risks but increased workloads, particularly for women (Ali and Ullah, 2021; Allam et al., 2020). However, time not spent on fieldwork, conferences, and speaking engagements allowed for follow-up studies that benefited the North-based coauthors. For the South-based activist-practitioners, reengagement with these outputs nearly four years after they were drafted imposed unexpected burdens. This first phase of the pandemic was dominated by an acute sense of uncertainty. Social distancing and rolling lockdowns were coupled with unrelenting imagery of mass death and illness that made the future hard to imagine and the present haunting

even in the Global North (Han et al., 2021). South-based partners' efforts were particularly noteworthy given that many civil society organizations were also affected by funding cuts, job losses, and shifting objectives and activities (Linc, 2020), not to mention rising poverty levels and widening inequality between North and South (Egger et al., 2021; Sánchez-Páramo et al., 2021). Thus, it is safe to say the pandemic reinforced North-South power differentials for *Beyond Words*.

Despite being finalized three months after the pandemic began, the funding application for *Truth Commissions and Sexual Violence* (where Adriana Rudling is a postdoctoral researcher) did not explicitly mention any mitigation plans. Yet, most of the proposed research was desk-based and embraced the digital approach (Eggeling, 2023; Howlett, 2022; Kim et al., 2023; Silverman, 2020; Marzi, 2023). Once travel restrictions were rolled back, rapidly shifting, strict, and country-specific rules for entry were added to the usual visa requirements, imposing even higher burdens on South-based activist-practitioners. The conversion of local vaccine certificates (if and when vaccines became widely available in the Global South) to internationally accepted passes was challenging, especially for those who received Russian or Chinese-produced vaccines. This added to the already apparent and sustained problem of vaccine inequity between North and South (Pilkington et al., 2022). Travel costs also increased as flights became more expensive (Glusac, 2021), COVID-19 tests were required, and strict, lengthy quarantines were imposed. Additionally, carer responsibilities and competing professional obligations did not always allow for lengthy stays abroad. The extension from the Norwegian Research Council, which deferred the end of *Truth Commissions and Sexual Violence*, offered some sensitivity to the concerns of activist-practitioners at the periphery.

Arguably, the Hub was most dramatically affected by the pandemic, as its research was in full swing by March 2020. In the first phase of the pandemic, travel restrictions interrupted the periodic Hub-wide conventions—one of its main activities and an important space for reflection, exchanging ideas, and developing relationships inclusive of South-based activist-practitioners. Notably, digital competencies facilitated more frequent and inexpensive exchanges in some cases. However, UKRI also cut funding by 75% in early 2021 for the 2021–2022 fiscal year. This left the Hub Executive Group in the difficult position of determining which projects to pause. UKRI eventually reinstated most of the funding after the pandemic entered its second stage but made the final year of the collaboration contingent on meeting some modified targets. Finally, Hub projects (including those we were involved in) were forced to substantially reimagine themselves (Kim et al., 2023; Marzi, 2023) and identify unexpected funding sources to salvage ongoing research while adapting methodologies to virtual and desk-based formats (Mwiine and Ahikire, 2022). Perhaps the most creative methodological adaptation in the pandemic's first phase was in a small Pakistani community of weaver women who kept research going by speaking to neighbors from their roofs to comply with social distancing (Hussain, 2021).

The Hub project on donor funding and transitional justice processes (where Eric Wiebelhaus-Brahm is a PI) shifted to secondary data, as it was still in the early phases in March 2020, reflecting the feasibility concern of *Truth Commissions and Sexual Violence*. This project also abandoned an ambition to establish partnerships with Southern activist-practitioners, turning instead to an alliance with a North-based NGO

to survey Northern donor governments. Angelika Rettberg's project on the political economy of reconciliation in Colombia dropped the implementation of a nation-wide representative survey due to funding cuts and instead utilized data collected by a complementary project funded from a different source. Outreach, impact, and dissemination work with policymakers, journalists, and civil society organizations occurred through numerous online workshops, social and news media outlets, and other avenues. A bilingual Spanish-English edited volume was published in print and online to reach audiences across the North-South divide (Rettberg and Ugarriza, 2023). While original plans had to be altered, the virtuous collaboration and cost-sharing with North-based Hub scholars allowed this project to go ahead and meet the funder-adjusted targets in 2022.

Fieldwork was ongoing for the Hub project on land rights and gender justice in Sierra Leone and Uganda (where Mohamed Sesay is a PI). Most of its data collection and dissemination activities were canceled or significantly scaled back during the first phase of the pandemic. Converting to virtual events or digitalizing fieldwork was not an option since internet access was too poor across the different categories of stakeholders. Uganda was dropped as a comparative case and the planned research relationship between local activist-practitioners and the North-based PIs in Sierra Leone was altered. The data collection effort in Sierra Leone (almost 130 interviews) was nearly complete by the second stage of the pandemic thanks to the commitment, capacity, and sustained efforts of the locally based Timap for Justice and other research assistants. Such reliance and confidence in local partners demonstrated that activist-practitioners "are not only and always in a subordinate position in relation to researchers [and] can negotiate and challenge conventional and uni-directional axes of power," even in the midst of crises (Thapar-Björkert and Henry, 2004: 273).

The Hub took the most decided steps toward more equitable working relationships of the three collaborations discussed here. However, even its promise was jeopardized as the pandemic complicated collaborators' aspirations and commitments to bridge divides. The pandemic, particularly in the first phase, exacerbated preexisting concerns and asymmetries around known "practical" coordination dilemmas. While the Hub's public virtual panels kept attention on the Global South partnerships, opportunities were limited by language barriers and unequal access to funding, health care and decision-making spaces. These issues—which were also present during the in-person prepandemic meetings—were amplified by connectivity issues that affected South-based attendees and audiences. South-based collaborators saw their voice and agency restricted by these new expressions of structural disadvantage (Bradley, 2007). Moreover, collaborators were confronted with additional ethical preoccupations arising from COVID-19-associated personal hardships that were equally difficult to talk about and difficult to abstract from (see Han et al., 2021). While North-based academic collaborators certainly drew some benefits from their location, images of mass graves, mobile morgues, and funerals with no attendees illustrated their *relative* safety and security (Shammas, 2021). Many South-based partners dealt with loss on a larger scale, which was compounded by the conflict-related harms they were studying, some governments' denial of the crisis, and related security problems (UN WFP and IOM, 2020). The most dramatic example of the adversities faced by South-based partners during this time comes from one of the countries of research for the Hub. The pandemic's second phase also marked the 2021 Taliban

takeover of Kabul, which prompted serious efforts to support the emigration and asylum of locally based Afghan colleagues.[11]

Overall, the crisis and its differentiated effects were slowly depoliticized in the second phase of the pandemic, revealing the difficulty (if not implausibility) of decolonizing center-periphery relations. The unequal distribution of COVID-19 vaccines, which was at least initially understood as political, gradually gave way to calls for a return to prepandemic normalcy in the field of peace and conflict studies. However, it is incumbent upon collaborators in these projects to go beyond merely "waiting out the crisis" and incorporate reflections on it into their work, especially in those countries where research in ongoing for the Hub and *Truth Commissions and Sexual Violence*. For instance, *Truth Commissions and Sexual Violence* sought new opportunities for activist-practitioners to affect the design and outcomes of the project despite the generally acknowledged dimming prospects for shifts in research scripts and relationships in the field in the moment of writing. Notwithstanding the exhaustion of the last years, this project reshaped its research and joint media strategy to include the recent truth commission from The Gambia, as advised by the Global South partners.

Final reflections and recommendations

This article described three collaborations to understand how, if at all, COVID-19 drove more equitable qualitative research, data collection, and analysis in peace and conflict studies. Despite the pandemic being the focus in the article, we believe that the first step in reassessing the geopolitics of knowledge should be to deexceptionalize the COVID-19 crisis by recognizing the Global South's long history of resistance to natural and human-made disasters (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020). It is virtually impossible to achieve horizontality in research collaborations that straddle the center-periphery divide and bridge activism, practice and scholarship without displacing the North as the center of power and knowledge. As long as knowledge and expertise are located in the North and experience and data are positioned in the South (Madlingozi, 2010: 226; see also Menzel, 2021), peace and conflict studies risks reinforcing the knowledge/power relations critiqued by post/decolonial scholars. Even the well-meaning coping strategies and long-term personal and professional relationships that mitigated the worst effects of the North-South asymmetry in the first phase of the pandemic may unwittingly have contributed to this by depoliticizing the crisis. Until we see thoroughgoing *actions* aligned with the commitment to decolonization, we will remain skeptical about whether COVID-19 will be a positive inflection point for qualitative research and the field of peace and conflict studies.

It is still too early to fully grasp the pandemic's long-term effects (Han et al., 2021) on the geopolitics of knowledge. Nevertheless, tracing the way *Beyond Words*, the Hub, and *Truth Commissions and Sexual Violence* adapted to it offers a preliminary impression of its dramatic effects on the Global South activist-practitioners. All three collaborations suffered from the unequal North-South access to resources that plagues mainstream research in peace and conflict studies. We argued that the pandemic renewed existing ethical questions and raised additional concerns for collaborations involving activist-practitioners situated (even temporarily) in the Global South. Moreover, it tested our commitment and capacity to work toward the decolonization of knowledge in the field.

The first phase of the pandemic—when travel restrictions forced North-based collaborators out of "the field"—exposed South-based partners to a double burden. Inequalities in access to health care, communication technology, and decision spaces put them at a greater disadvantage, even as Global North colleagues became more reliant on their work. Security concerns (Datta, 2019; Jones et al., 2021), including growing risks of digital surveillance, were added to the list of risks during this phase.

For some Global North peace and conflict scholars, initial fears and frustrations about delays and new research strategies gave way to concerns that qualitative and fieldwork-based research would be (further) devalued in the second phase of the pandemic (Allam et al., 2020: 7). Others hailed the resulting slowdown as a generally positive opportunity for more thoughtfully supported interventions in the field (see Krause et al., 2021). Indeed, taking strategic advantage of project members' complex identities and professional entanglements went some way in adjusting both research and impact strategies during the first phase. Now, as the pandemic's effects linger and become entrenched in the Global South (echoing previous crises, Rutazibwa, 2020), we must fundamentally (re)consider our research practices and processes.

Our valuation is that Global South contributions will continue to suffer and go by without due acknowledgement if research questions, methodologies, and outputs (1) remain tailored to Northern audiences, (2) support the careers of North-based academics, and (3) are predominantly funded by Global North entities. Therefore, we end with several recommendations directed at Global North scholars involved in research collaborations with South-based activist-practitioners (see also Álvarez Rivadulla and Luna, 2019; Datta and Sigdel, 2016).

1. Respond to the needs and interests of local participants and collaborators in grant applications (Krystalli et al., 2021) in addition to those of the funding bodies. Resist the notion that theory is firmly situated in the North and data (or experience) come from the South.
2. Consider the shifting political and security dynamics throughout the collaboration beyond simple concerns for collaborators' well-being. Doing this acknowledges that this field produces and disseminates knowledge about conflict-related harms, and there is rarely a clear line between conflict and post-conflict.
3. Offer spaces for South-based partners in decision-making and professional development opportunities created by collaborations. Create avenues for personal and professional growth through mentoring and training as well as spaces for activist-practitioners to inform the course of the research at different stages, including outputs relevant for them or their organizations. Consider carer responsibilities and competing professional obligations to ensure South-based partners can realistically seize such opportunities.
4. Communicate results and recommendations locally and globally. "Giving back" does not only entail vernacularizing for Global South use; since impact is a nonlinear process, both the Global North and Global South audiences should be considered in dissemination work. This additional work (and its costs) should be planned from the start, and the workload must be distributed equitably.
5. Collaborators come in all shapes and sizes. Assumptions about capacity tempt us to turn to established organizations and well-known activist-practitioners. However,

acting on our commitments to the decolonization of knowledge should drive us to reach beyond such circles.

6. Transparency is key, especially if the collaboration is new. While established collaborations may have been calibrated through prior exchanges, new collaborations should offer multiple opportunities to clarify limitations, expectations, and norms. Realism and honesty should guide these exchanges.

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ORCID iD

Adriana Rudling https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5758-0531

Notes

1. In the first instance, we would like to thank the participants and the research teams involved in these projects without whom this article would not have been possible. We would also like to thank the special issue coordinators and the anonymous reviewers. All mistakes are our own.
2. While qualitative research encompasses a variety of methods, we focus on researchers who "refer to the sites they study as a 'field' and the work they do there as 'fieldwork'" (Eggeling, 2023: 1).
3. The hyphenation signifies that research—contrary to its redemptive meaning in modern science—is a "dirty word" for indigenous people globally, who were objects of European voyages of discovery, imperialism, and colonialism (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2017, 2019; Smith, 1999).
4. While the center-periphery dichotomy can be misleading for identities that straddle core and periphery, we are interested in the dynamics between the two worlds, not their distinctiveness.
5. See: https://covid19research.ssrc.org/
6. For more information, see https://www.cmi.no/projects/1827-latin-american-truth-commissions-recommendations
7. For more information, see https://thegenderhub.com/
8. For more information, see https://www.lawtransform.no/news/new-project-on-truth-commissions-and-sexual-violence/
9. See: https://justiceanddevelopment.com/
10. Spanish-language country reports for El Salvador, Guatemala, and Chile were disseminated online before Skaar et al. (2022b) were published to improve accessibility. See: https://www.cmi.no/projects/1827-latin-american-truth-commissions-recommendations
11. See, for example, https://thegenderhub.com/news/gender-justice-and-security-hub-statement-on-afghan-researchers-and-high-risk-individuals-in-afghanistan/

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Author biographies

Adriana Rudling is a post-doctoral fellow in the International Justice Lab at William & Mary's Global Research Institute, Williamsburg, US and a post-doctoral researcher at the Chr. Michelsen Institute, Bergen. Norway. Previously she was a visiting researcher at the Instituto Pensar and the Universidad del Rosario, Bogota, Colombia. Her work spans policy reports, public engagement and advocacy, and peer-reviewed publications on victims of massive and systematic human rights violations and the state bureaucracies established in (post-)transitional societies to respond to their harms.

Mohamed Sesay is an Assistant Professor and Coordinator of the African Studies Program in the Department of Social Science, York University, Canada. He is also the President of the Canadian Association of African Studies (CAAS) and member of the Gender, Justice, and Security Hub based at the London School of Economics. His work has appeared in several peer reviewed journals. He is the author of an award-winning book, Domination through Law: Internationalization of Legal Norms in Postcolonial Africa (Rowman and Littlefield 2021).

Eric Wiebelhaus-Brahm is a Professor in the School of Public Affairs at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. He is the author of three books and over two dozen articles and book chapters on transitional justice (TJ), human rights, and peacebuilding. Specifically, he is interested in evaluating the impact of justice and peacebuilding policy interventions, the political economy of TJ, diasporas and TJ, and TJ in the USA.

Angelika Rettberg is a professor at the Political Science Department and the dean of the School of Social Sciences at Universidad de los Andes (Bogotá - Colombia). She is also a Global Fellow at the Peace Research Institute of Oslo (PRIO) and a codirector of the Gender, Justice, and Security Hub at the London School of Economics. She serves as co-editor-in-chief of World Development journal.