THEORY AND METHODS

Participatory Action Research in Times of COVID-19: Adapting Approaches with Refugee-Led Community-Based Organizations

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ABSTRACT:

Background: The COVID-19 pandemic has had a greater health impact on ethnoracial minorities, including migrants. Migrants in marginalized communities are harder to reach for health information sharing. Meanwhile, the pandemic has impacted in-person, community-based research. Such research is important during a pandemic, warranting the adaptation of engagement methods.

Objectives: This study analyzes methodological processes for adapting community-based research to a virtual environment due to COVID-19 restrictions. Our participatory action research (PAR), with refugee- and immigrant-run community-based organizations (RI-CBOs) in a U.S. midwestern metropolitan area, sought to understand organizational activities, including COVID-19 responses, and foster organizational capacity building.

Methods: Partnered with one RI-CBO, we co-developed three methods. Netnography facilitated non-participant observation of the RI-CBO's online meetings to inform the community about the pandemic. Online surveys were designed to document the RI-CBO's activities while serving as a foundation to develop a sustainable record-keeping system. Remote interviews sought to contextualize the data.

Results: The methodological transition to an online environment prioritized interaction, focusing on user friendliness and efficiency. Community partners intensively engaged in the adaptation process. Netnography captured how the RI-CBO used multimedia to connect community members with COVID-19 information and resources. Surveys and interviews provided data about organizational activities as the pandemic spread and community needs increased.

Conclusions: Adapting to online modalities drew on four priorities: ease of access, time sensitivity, capacity building, and co-production of data. Methodological insights may be

applicable to PAR with RI-CBOs and other CBOs in the face of challenges similar to those prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: Community-Based Participatory Action Research; Refugee- and Immigrant-Run Community-Based Organizations; Virtual Research Methods; COVID-19 response; Migrant Model of Care.

The global health crisis due to COVID-19 has restricted human subject research and severely constrained researchers' ability to sustain participatory action research (PAR). PAR involves community partners in the coproduction of knowledge to improve community conditions.[1,2] PAR is context driven and primarily based on the physical co-presence of researchers and community partners.[3,4] As the COVID-19 pandemic made fieldwork untenable, it has become necessary to transfer PAR to an online platform.

The pandemic has also had a greater health impact on ethnoracial minorities and other vulnerable socioeconomic groups.[5,6] Among them, it is important to note, are resettled refugees and immigrants.[7] This article focuses on how an ongoing PAR with refugee- and immigrant-run community-based organizations (RI-CBOs) adapted its methodology during the pandemic.

Ongoing Partnership and Rationale for Methodological Change

Globally, RI-CBOs do not receive adequate recognition or support for their crucial work with refugee communities.[8-11] RI-CBOs are unrecognized in research; for example, official data repositories, such as the list of 501(c)(3) organizations, does not include one-third to one-half of all immigrant organizations.[12] Furthermore, many RI-CBOs receive limited external funding and operate on a volunteer basis with small donations from their members. In a study of 16 RI-CBOs in a midwestern U.S. city, only three had annual budgets greater than US$25,000.[13] However, RI-CBOs provide a wide range of direct assistance and play an indispensable role in connecting their communities with available support services.[14] They also provide ancillary services in health care, such as language assistance, systems navigation, hands-on support, translation, transportation, and advocacy.[13]

Our multistage PAR, which started in 2018 and is based in a midsized metropolitan region of the Midwest, seeks to document and examine RI-CBOs' activities, structure, and

institutional links, with the added goal of building organizational capacity. In the first phase, we conducted surveys and key informant interviews with 21 RI-CBOs about the scope of their activities. During the current phase, we partnered with four RI-CBOs to delve more deeply into organizational processes and culture, aiming not only to examine their activities but also to co-develop strategies and tools to increase organizational capacity. The Institutional Review Board evaluated both phases of the research as exempted from regulation. This PAR is continuously driven by community priorities. As a result, we submit special projects such as the Refugee Education Pathways Program, to separate Institutional Review Board approval process.[15]

In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent stay-at-home orders led to adjustments in processes and protocols. RI-CBOs were at the forefront in assisting their communities in coping with the emerging public health crisis, leading much of the emergency response work proactively, without compensation or systematic guidance. Rather than pause the PAR, we adapted our methodologies to capture RI-CBOs' time-sensitive work in response to the public health emergency. The newly developed methods were co-designed with community partners not only to document the activities of RI-CBOs during the pandemic but also to strengthen organizational capacity to document and report their activities.

METHODOLOGY

Participants and Partnership

This study focuses on our partnership with one RI-CBO, with which we have been working since 2018. This RI-CBO has served its community members since the earliest phases of resettlement in 2010 (to retain confidentiality, the country of origin is not specified). It was formally registered as a nonprofit organization in 2014. Its seven executive board members volunteer their time, providing individual and family-level support and organizing small-scale

programs, such as youth sports and classes for the elderly. This RI-CBO conducts activities on a minimal budget relying on donations from within their refugee community, and the organization recently secured a small amount of external funding. The RI-CBO does not have a system to record and report activities. Seven organization members participated in our project and were compensated for it. The Institutional Review Board placed the research on a distinct exemption category to allow for community partners participation in the human research incentives program. All seven participants are fluent in English. Six participants engaged in all stages of the PAR reformulation to an online format. We refer to them as *community partners* in this article.

Developing Online Methods

Through ongoing engagement, we learned that during the pandemic RI-CBOs were widely employing virtual means to communicate with community members and respond to requests from individuals and families. In the first weeks of social distancing restrictions, we joined their weekly board meetings to observe and gauge opportunities and feasibility for conducting action research remotely. While deliberating on the need, purpose, and feasibility of the methodological adaptation, we considered accessibility to technology, time effectiveness, capacity building, and coproduction of the tools, especially for the online surveys. In collaboration with the community partners, we adapted three data collection methods: online ethnography, online surveys, and remote interviews.

Online Ethnography, or Netnography

Netnography is "the ethnography of online groups, [which] studies complex cultural practices in action, drawing our attention to a multitude of grounded and abstract ideas, meanings, social practices, relationships, languages, and symbol systems." [16] Netnography can
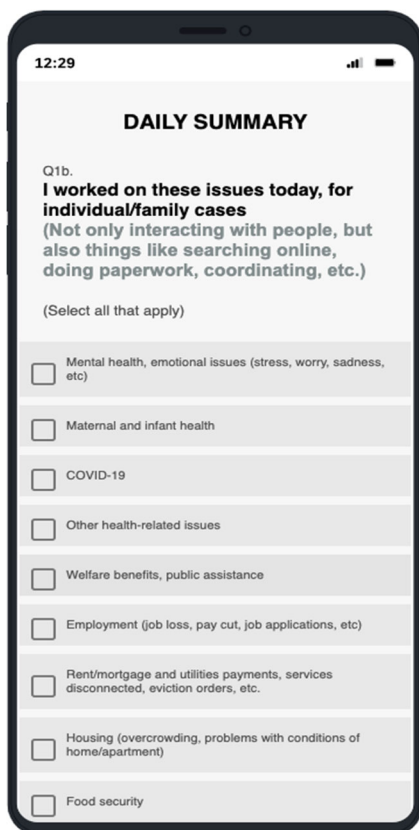
involve active interface with research subjects, typical of participant observation, or passive observation and non-obtrusive participation.[17-19] Some scholars, prominently Kozinets, call for definitional clarity in using the term netnography to include only active and engaged online ethnography.[19] Passive and non-obtrusive practices – methods we employ in our study – are defined as online ethnography, especially when supplemented by other methods. Other terms are often used interchangeably, digital or virtual ethnography, which is sometimes specifically used to discuss offline digital material. We use the terms netnography, virtual, digital, and online ethnography interchangeably in our study clearly identifying the passive or active nature of our involvement on online or offline platforms where necessary. We use passive practices, since they help in understanding a phenomenon by entering an online community while not actively being involved in the activities being observed.[20-22]

The PAR team deployed netnography for non-participant observation at the beginning of the pandemic, when community partners invited us to their online meetings held via Facebook to observe the actions of the community partners. We sought the RI-CBO's explicit approval to use any information shared on its Facebook page, while agreeing that we would not record or store any user-specific information without anonymization. We also conducted non-participant observation of board meetings via Facetime. The Facebook and board meetings took place in community partners' native language and English as well, and the researcher fluent in the language conducted the non-participant observation.

Online Surveys: Daily Summary and Weekly Highlights

We developed two online surveys: Daily Summary and Weekly Highlights. The Daily Summary captured each community partner's casework—daily activities in direct service to specific individuals or families as well as organization-related and community outreach work

(see Figure 1). The survey sought to document the number of cases and hours worked and the type of issues the RI-CBO addressed in a single day. Meanwhile, Weekly Highlights asked community partners to provide descriptive details for three different cases for the week: the most common, the most unique, and the most difficult (see Figure 2). This survey contained multiple-choice questions aimed at capturing community partners' perceptions and assessments of their activities.

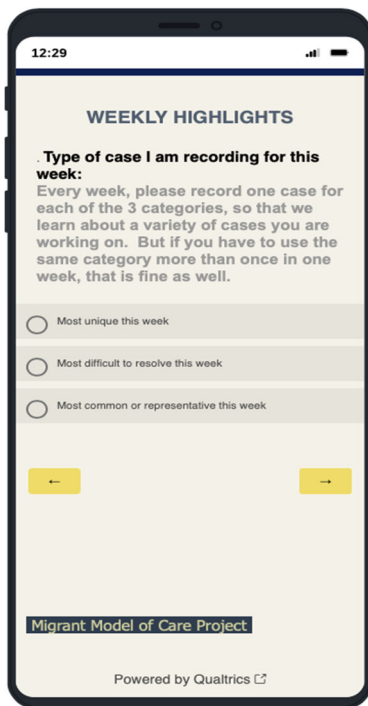Figure 1. Snapshot of Daily Summary of Activities' Mobile Interface

Figure 2. Snapshot of Weekly Highlights' Mobile Interface

The two surveys were designed for both mobile and computer viewing. In developing them, we focused on mobile-friendly design. Starting from informal discussions with community partners about length and medium, we developed and piloted the surveys and revised both their content and design multiple times based on community partners' feedback. Importantly, revisions focused on lessening community partners' burden, enhancing user-friendliness, and shortening the survey length. To familiarize community partners with the operation, we prepared user-guide videos and shared the videos with survey links. Since community partners are fluent in English, the user-guide videos and surveys are in English as well.

Synchronous Remote Interviews

Finally, we conducted individual interviews using online meeting platforms. The semi-structured interviews were aimed at providing context to data gathered via the other methods,

thus helping with data triangulation to better capture RI-CBO activities in general, and those during the COVID-19 pandemic in particular. The interviews used information from Weekly Highlights as an entry point from which to understand the details of the RI-CBO's organizational arrangements, activities, and services. Interviewers (faculty members and graduate research assistants) underwent extensive training on interviewing techniques and ethical issues. While each community partner was invited to provide an interview ideally every two weeks, this proved to be difficult given their increasingly demanding schedules. Thus, we strove to interview each community partner at least twice during the methodological adaptation. All interviews took place in English.

RESULTS

Preliminary results presented here are based on data collected with the partnering RI-CBO between March 2020 and August 2020.

Netnography

We conducted non-participant observation of the RI-CBO's social media page, through which community partners stayed in touch with community members and provided critical information regarding COVID-19. The social media page documented the distribution of food and essential supplies to families. Additionally, 13 live transmissions via social media discussed health education, sanitary and food supplies, and application for unemployment benefits, all related to COVID-19. Netnography also captured evolving relations between the RI-CBO and government agencies. The RI-CBO held one live chat linking community members to the county health department to discuss the symptoms of COVID-19, answer questions, and break the stigma surrounding the disease. Community partners provided live translations. Also, we

observed five executive board meetings from March 28 to April 30, at our community partners' invitation.

Daily Summary and Weekly Highlights Surveys

Calibrating these two survey tools for user-friendliness and effectiveness in capturing community partners' activities was time consuming and labor intensive. Community partners emphasized the need to ensure that the surveys fully captured the work of their RI-CBO. Between May 1 and August 31 (123 days), six community partners completed 583 records as part of the Daily Summary surveys, each respondent on average filling out daily entries for approximately 97 days. Follow-up communications with community partners regarding the gaps in daily entries revealed that in most cases, the gaps represented days on which they did not undertake any relevant activity. Together, they reported responding to 659 cases, thus helping slightly more than one individual or family per day on average. When asked what issues they addressed that day (multiple responses were allowed), 22.4% of the responses indicated issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Other topics included welfare benefits (11.4%), unemployment benefits (13.1%), food security and distribution (9.5%), and schooling/education (7.6%). The Daily Summary survey captured the fundamental role this RI-CBO played in helping individuals and families apply for welfare and unemployment benefits. The upsurge in need for these benefits was related not only to the economic crisis associated with job loss but also to the contagion, quarantine, and increased childcare burden associated with the pandemic.

Based on the Daily Summary responses, about 44% of the 583 records indicated that the community partners had engaged in organizational activities such as discussions with other organization leaders and outreach activities with external agencies and collaborators. On average, each community partner spent one hour per day on case management-related activities

and one hour and 20 minutes on organization-related work. Furthermore, the Weekly Highlights survey provided details on the main weekly activities, as selected by respondents. Through brief qualitative descriptions of three weekly cases, community partners described COVID-related requests as the most common. Therefore, Weekly Highlights surveys included qualitative data, which are currently under analysis and may provide insights about the RI-CBO's cases occurring simultaneously or within the same week of engagement. Community partners mainly provided material support in the form of finances, computer use, COVID personal protective equipment (PPE) kits, and transportation in 21% of the cases reported. They also provided emotional support (18%) frequently to community members and connected them to other agencies for appropriate resolution of issues.

Remote Interviews

We conducted 20 interviews between March 30 and August 31. Remote interviews complemented the surveys and illustrated community partners' hands-on assistance, such as translating, providing emotional support, and processing unemployment claims for community members who lost their jobs. Remote interviews provided crucial contextual information for the Daily Summary and Weekly Highlights surveys, adding details and reflections. For instance, during interviews, community partners described how their organization took the initiative to research and translate COVID-19 health education materials from the county health department into their native language. Given the high rates of positive COVID-19 cases, the RI-CBO advocated for universal testing for the community with the county health department (May 12 interview). Community partners also reached out to a food processing plant to advocate for better PPE in a workplace where many community members work (June 8 interview). Additionally, community partners emphasized that they were struggling to establish a systematic record of

both their case management and organization work, emphasizing the importance of efficient record-keeping tools (June 8 interview).

CONCLUSIONS

The methodological adaptation from an in-person to a remote setting presented the challenge of developing new online methods without compromising our dual goal of documenting and examining the RI-CBO's activities and strengthening organizational capacity. Adapting PAR to an online platform furthered the goal of advancing community partners' capacity for organizational record keeping. The completion of online surveys increased the PAR's sustainability and impact.[23] Reporting on performed activities is an important step for any CBO to take to increase accountability and recognition, which can contribute to the likelihood of receiving funding and establishing partnerships. In the summer of 2020, two African-origin RI-CBOs joined this online-based PAR and began using the online surveys and participating in remote interviews.

The online survey tool was a first attempt to codevelop a socio-culturally appropriate, practical, and feasible system that could aid RI-CBOs in documenting their activities. While online surveys generally yield higher response completion rates than paper-based mail surveys,[24,25] some studies have reported that online surveys generate low-quality data and bias.[26] Self-selection and sampling bias occur when potential participants lack access to technology.[27,28] However, as we administered recurring online surveys after training a closed group sample of community partners, we offset the pitfalls while leveraging its advantages. We recognized that our community partners were positioned to adapt to this transition, given that their CBO used a social media page and an online phone app to communicate with fellow resettled refugees prior

to the pandemic. We recognize these circumstances may not hold true for other PAR, which is a limitation of this online approach.

While phone-based surveys and social media-based methods have been increasingly used in refugee studies, we were also keenly aware that RI-CBO leaders are often overstretched.[29-31] With no or limited funding, they volunteer their time to assist their communities as discussed above, and documentation processes and research participation adds to their work. Ultimately, in designing the data collection methods, especially the ongoing surveys, we were mindful of the need to minimize the time required for survey completion and avoid diverting time from community partners' work, while also aiming to document organizational activities and help lay the foundation for their record-keeping system.

Online interviews are a natural extension of telephone interviews and allow researchers to record and observe a video recording to obtain rich information on participants' visual cues.[28] Loss of personal rapport and issues of privacy in such interactions are an important factor in virtual interviews.[32] Most community partners talked via their personal cell phones from their homes, from their cars, and, as the days became sunnier and warmer, outdoors. Community partners did not express concerns about loss of personal rapport or privacy. While we conducted non-participant observation of Facebook community meetings with explicit approval from the RI-CBO, focusing on the organizational actions, rather than those of community members, the issue of consent and right to privacy warrant continued attention, as we were careful not to retain information about individual community members.

While deliberating on desirability and feasibility of the methodological adaptation to a virtual environment, the PAR team prioritized shared objectives to guide implementation. Development of these online methods of data collection was based on four priorities: ease of

access (technology, financial equity, and network access), time sensitivity (quick and timely capture of information), capacity building (in record keeping specifically), and coproduction of data by researchers and community partners. These priorities may be potentially applicable not only to PAR with RI-CBOs, but also to PAR with CBOs in other marginalized communities. We suggest that scholars looking to adapt PAR methods to virtual methods consider the following before adopting online tools:

1. prior engagement with community partners to develop adequate trust

2. community partners' availability of time and resources

3. community partners' access to IT resources and ability to bridge technology barriers

4. an ongoing feedback loop in co-designing methods with partners

5. data protection and privacy considerations

6. reliable data-handling capacities and shared resources for team collaboration.

Once restrictions on in-person human subject research are fully lifted, our PAR team will return to face-to-face fieldwork methods. However, we plan to further adapt the online surveys so that this or similar survey tools and training videos can be readily available to any RI-CBO. It is not uncommon for RI-CBOs such as our community partners and other grassroots organizations to lack a systematic record-keeping system. The capacity to document and report on performed activities can support RI-CBOs' efforts to establish new partnerships and apply for external partners. Stronger RI-CBOs translate into stronger refugee communities, as well as greater access to care and government services for migrants. Drawing on our collective experiences, we will continue to work with this RI-CBO to develop a record-keeping system that is feasible and meaningful for them to use on an ongoing basis.

In terms of knowledge generation and dissemination, the adaptation to an online format prevented interruptions in data collection, thus allowing us to capture the fundamental role that community partners played at the peak of the pandemic. As health care providers struggled to reach refugee communities, RI-CBOs provided critical services to community members, distributing food and PPE, providing live educational and informational interpretation, and providing initially unpaid translations of county health education materials. Dissemination of these findings may increase the visibility of RI-CBOs' work and the role they play in building a more inclusive model of care in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

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