

Collecting social data: Adapting to the COVID-19 pandemic

Agenda

Tuesday, 28 July 2020

10:00-12:00

**Dr Mokhantso Makoae, Human Sciences Research
Council and HSRC Research Ethics Committee Member**

*Research ethics reviewing during COVID-19: adaptation,
responsiveness, support*

**Dr Abigail Hatcher, Wits University School of Public
Health and University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill**

*Ethics and practice of asking about intimate partner violence in
COVID-19 surveys*

Mr Mfundo Majola, University of Western Cape

*The Lockdown Diaries Project: Exploring remote research in the
time of COVID-19*

Reflection:

*What are we compromising
and what are we gaining?*

Dr Mokhantso Makoae, HSRC– Q/A

- 1) Julia de Kadt: I'd love to hear your thoughts about how some of these adaptations might play out in the longer term?
 - Thanks Julia. As I pointed out in my closing remarks I think that these adaptations mark the beginning of shifts in how social scientists and health researchers will pursue primary data collection. The major challenge continues to be fair selection of participants (inclusion/exclusion) and balancing that with feasibility from the point of view of the technologies in use. RECs will still be interested in this criteria of ethical research. The stakeholders can see that REC processes are adaptive and they will demand a certain degree of flexibility and responsiveness to be continued. REC leadership will monitor the effects of shorter turn-around time (burnout) on members.
- 2) Tara Polzer Ngwato: How is the REC dealing with technical adaptations of informed consent when doing remote engagement with respondents (e.g. online survey, WhatsApp survey, telephonic survey), where it is not possible to hand out a hard copy information sheet or get signed consent form?
 - Technical adaptation of informed consent is evolving. What we have seen so far is simplification, shortening and phasing of consenting process. They do it piecemeal and allow step by step consenting by potential participants. It works but concerns that it might be tedious. The approach seems to work even with simple techniques such as USSD and less tedious with online survey.
- 3) Lebogang Shilakoe: Not sure if you can share this, but it would be great to get an example of one of those methodologies for including children (avoiding using parents' opinions as a proxy for children's experiences)
 - Sorry Lebogang, this is a tricky one. I have an example in mind but because the pool of these studies is small, it will be easy to identify this one on children (confidentiality). I hope the researcher will share soon...but please my response to Abbey below.
- 4) Abigail Hatcher: May you please offer concrete examples of “creativity” in studies with children?
 - Researchers use adult dominated platforms to reach children and to initiate parental consent. They negotiate possible child involvement and explore the best way of reaching the child in a safe and private way to obtain assent and arrange for participation in study activities.
- 5) Benjamin Roberts: Well done, Mokhantso. It would be useful to hear briefly what the protocols the HSRC REC is advocating in terms of safety measures for field teams resuming face-to-face interviewing, whether for clinical studies or more general surveying. Protecting participants and field staff is a key principle that has to guide research in this time.
 - Thanks Ben. I agree safety of everyone key and under different levels researchers will be able to do different things. REC avoids being prescriptive, instead the committee encourages researchers to be cognizant of the COVID context and develop their plans accordingly and the committee will assess the adequacy of the researcher's measures in mitigating harm.
- 6) Ragi Bashonga: Could you please share some of the creative ways researchers have begun to approach focus group discussion in particular?
 - Researchers arrange chatrooms. I guess they differ according to the communications technology systems they use. We are learning and we request them to report to REC how their techniques work.
- 7) Angy Hammond: How does POPI affect the REC's work?
 - The committee observes POPI by ensuring that even with telephonic surveys, identifying information is not recorded and it is stored separately from responses and consent documents. One is watching this space with interest... Anticipating some creativity when the current socioeconomic interventions are evaluated.

Dr Abigail Hatcher, Wits and North Carolina – Q&A

- 1) Julia de Kadt: I'm curious what your thoughts are around potential recall bias, with thinking back to the 12 month period before COVID?
 - It is really hard to ask people to “anchor” time frames without specifying a certain event. I think you do not have worry about recall bias during COVID because for most of us this is a pretty obvious thing. But it is going to be hard for people to know what “a year before that” meant. I would recommend that you do not analyse the “past-year” response or treat it as a prevalence marker but rather think about as an indication that someone was already in a violent relationship. So use that item as a control variable as you assess “during COVID” levels of violence.
- 2) Tara Polzer Ngwato: Re-confirming identity of respondent, would one need to get a 'secret question' answer from the respondent in the original consenting discussion and then ask it again to reconfirm?
 - This works better if you are doing a panel data or following up a cohort. You could ask a secret question when consenting them for the first time on the phone to ensure that you speak to the right person during the day of the interview.
- 3) Ragi Bashonga: How do you go about accessing contact details? How do you choose your sample?
 - This is a great question but I'm not the best person to answer that. Please access this link and follow presentations on Seminar 1: <https://www.gcro.ac.za/news-events/news/detail/seminar-series-collecting-social-data-adapting-covid-19-pandemic/>
- 4) Lebogang Shilakoe: Regarding the data gap, I know on our side we have done some studies that touched a bit on VAWC during the lockdown, and I think this might also be true for a number of organisations represented here today. It might be worth exploring co-creating a data hub of sorts (collating all the bits of data we all have in our coffers) so more papers can be put out on this in our region/ country
 - Yes, great point! There are some great literature and data that currently exist. I will reach out to you after this seminar, so we can create some sets of documents for the data that already exist.
- 5) Pascal Richardson: Does this research address any aspects of male victims of intimate partner violence?
 - Certainly, you can ask about men being victims of IPV because they also do experience it. I often speak about women experiencing IPV because 96% of the survivors of partner violence are of women and men experience it much less. But not to say it does not happen among men. I think you can also explore this using experiences of family violence to understand how young boys and men might be victims of violence. I think the lessons I've presented can apply to any type of violence, but my own experiences is about male to female IPV - particularly in South Africa.

Mr Mfundo Majola, Uni Western Cape – Q&A

- 1) Kim Ingle: How long will data collection continue?
 - Data collection ended in July 2020. The project started in early March, as soon as the president announced the national lockdown. Data collection took for 3 months and a couple of weeks.

- 2) Julia de Kadt: Any thought about following up with the participants that undertaken the study in the future?
 - Yes there is a plan in terms of following up. We are looking into interviewing participants in their homes. However, at the moment we are still monitoring how that can happen under Covid-19 regulations.

- 3) Lisa Vetten: What kind of quality of data you got from WhatsApp? Did you think this was a useful way to ask people to provide rich qualitative information?
 - Yes it was quality data. We gave people options to send us voice notes and asked questions about (i.e. access to information or access to food parcels), so people could tell from their own experiences or the experiences around the neighbourhood. It was clear that some participants were more sharing and some were not because some of them faced the challenges first hand. So I would say the information we received from participants was quality and rich data. Also, WhatsApp is a private setting, people were able to chat to us about the things they were going through.
 - *Answer from Shirley Joeffreys-Leach:* Based on some online qualitative work I have done (similar to WhatsApp) I have seen very rich detailed answers where people even use emojis that add to richness. of course you do also get short and unusable answers but you get more richness than answers that are “transcribed” by telephone interviewers.