Research in times of crisis: Adaptations of research due to the COVID-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

During the COVID-19 global pandemic, many researchers have had to adapt, delay, or halt, their research completely. However, decisions related to adaptations, and the "hidden work" fundamental to such adaptations, often go unreported in research outputs, and are rarely reflected in the methodological literature. Challenges encountered by researchers during crises, and subsequent steps taken to modify research designs, are under-reported (Clark & Sousa, 2020). This leaves a gap in understandings of appropriate research conduct during times of change and uncertainty.

To address this gap, an analysis of the extant literature on research adaptations published since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic is presented, as are lessons learnt from three research projects at Edinburgh Napier University conducted during the pandemic and volunteered as data by fellow researchers. The three projects are: (1) a project initially imagined as a set of information literacy workshops delivered within public libraries; (2) a research project on the information practices of people with diabetes; (3) a PhD study exploring the relationship between culture and public library use.

The main lessons to emerge from the literature review are that adaptations may take place at any point in a project, and multiple adaptations may be necessary. Research ethics, research questions, research design data collection, and findings need to be reviewed concurrently at the time of adaptation, since even a small change in research questions or design will require a re-evaluation of assumptions underpinning the work, and the interpretation of its findings. Specific research adaptation options include: informed consent, delayed consent, and proxy consent (e.g. De Vries et al., 2020); changes to data-gathering-methods with clinically vulnerable groups, minorities, and historically silenced groups (e.g. Townsend et al., 2020); utilizing the assistance of key informants and gatekeepers (Buchanan-Smith, 2021); and changes to participant recruitment and sampling (Bailey et al., 2020).

Variable- and case-oriented analyses were used to develop recurring themes within and between each of the three reported projects. Emergent lessons suggest that the adaptation of different projects conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated the deployment of different strategies. A "one-size-fits-all" approach may not be feasible to employ. In some projects, moving to online recruitment and delivery is straightforward, and in others it is not. In addition, it is evident that research adaptation does not occur at one point in time only; it tends to be an on-going process that requires continued consultation with research collaborators. Here, the importance of support from the research community and collective problem-solving is key.

From the analysis, two main lessons are apparent: (1) adaptations during the pandemic could occur at any stage of the project, and had to be considered at those times; (2) differences in projects necessitated differences in adaptation strategies. From these main lessons, it is concluded that there are several general planning deliberations researchers may want to adopt whenever they adapt their research, during COVID-19 and any future crises. These have been summarized as follows:

• Deploy or delay?
• Add, remove, or modify?
• Consult and co-create
• Evaluate and revisit

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