



# Collaborative Journaling in the Social Sciences: Guidelines and Applications

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The special section featured in this issue on the *Pandemic Journaling Project* (PJP) offers powerful lessons for methodology in the social sciences and highlights some of the potential mental health-enhancing applications of collaborative journaling. This editorial considers potential guidelines and applications for collaborative journaling as a method in the social sciences by drawing on ideas inspired by pieces in the special section as well as my own efforts to create a collaborative journaling project.

In March 2020, at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, I initiated a collaborative journaling project—in no way related to the PJP, which I had not heard of at the time—by inviting three of my key interlocutors from Maasailand in Tanzania to send me journal entries. It seems strange to call them interlocutors because they are also friends of over a decade. I paid them \$8 per entry plus internet connectivity fees to generate some stable income for them during the economic upheavals they reported, and also to help them stay online to connect with loved ones who were unable to return from Kenya to Tanzania (a previously relatively porous border for the Maasai) when the border closed. We connected by Google Docs, email, and WhatsApp. They sent photos and written text. I sometimes asked follow on questions that they responded to in subsequent entries. They shared struggles with children’s schooling, their fears of Maasai culture loss if their elders were lost to the virus, and desperation about the lack of running water to follow handwashing protocols. Ceremonies—the core of Maasai social life—were canceled and then continued despite concerns about contagion. Traditional greetings involving touch came into question. And during an especially trying time, one of my friends wrote from an urban hospital where she found herself trying to care for her brother dying of cancer while also holding an oxygen mask to a dying stranger’s mouth as he succumbed to the “coronavirus.” They told me that the act of writing was cathartic but I could tell it was also at times a challenge emotionally and physically. But we all wanted to make sure the stories, the experience, the moment were not lost. And they all needed

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the money I offered in return—compensation for friends who never take handouts but will always work when they can.

For me, our efforts raised questions about collaborative journaling as a methodology and ethical questions about who owns, extracts, and interprets the data, and to what end—and for whose benefit. I have struggled to write anything from these data. With their help, I did make one short presentation at the African Studies Association Conference during the pandemic in 2021. Since then, I have been paralyzed in my efforts to revisit the entries and photos, much less ask my friends to do the same if we wanted to try and write collaboratively. I wonder if they ever log on to the archive of their materials—What’s App texts, emails, photos—I made on Google Drive to review them. And if not, should I encourage it? I found myself revisiting these questions as I read the PJP pieces, and I think it is important for social scientists to think about this more as we plan future research.

Efforts to have our interlocutors speak on their own behalf about their own experience while amplifying those voices on a global platform with products like journal articles, podcasts, and touring art installations as PJP has done is an exciting idea. Of course, it is important to check in with the people whose data we are using to make sure they do not want to rewrite something, to agree that the framing is correct, to examine the display of their materials, and so forth—a method known as “member-checking” (Charmaz, 2006) that seems critical for journaling to be collaborative. Importantly, this also increases the validity of our findings while giving our interlocutors an editorial or curatorial role. This Special Section incorporated such approaches explicitly in some pieces and even at times had the original journal authors as article authors—likely a best practice in this method.

Another way to enhance journaling projects as modeled by some of the PJP authors and also valuable in my own experience may be for authors to have some ethnographic exposure to the social contexts and persons that have been journaling. I knew my interlocutors from Maasailand for at least seven years before we started the project. In addition to knowing what I was able to read in books and articles about the politics, economics, health care, and religious practice in this region of Tanzania, I also had sensory memories of the roads they traveled each day and could taste the chai tea they shared. I had met multiple generations of their families, which helped me understand more of what was at stake and also helped me ask good follow up questions.

Beyond methodological creativity, I also appreciate how the PJP flags the potential benefits of journaling for mental health. I have argued elsewhere that autobiographical power is an important part of mental health recovery for persons who have experienced a serious breach of one’s life narrative like a serious illness—or, perhaps in this case, a global pandemic (Myers, 2016; Myers & Ziv, 2016). The concept of autobiographical power points to the importance of being the editor of one’s own life story—something journaling methodologies that also utilize the editorial skills, ethnographic context, and member-checking of our interlocutors can make possible.

There are other documented health benefits that result from writing expressively about past negative events, as well, including reductions in depression and anxiety and improvements in physical health and cognitive performance (see DiMenichi et al., 2019 for more). We do need more research to know if these also apply to

“real-time” journaling of traumatic events. Ideally, future researchers can ask and assess the benefits of writing about traumatic events as we plan future studies using the “citizen science” of collaborative methodologies in ways that are both trauma-informed and promote flourishing.

In sum, when working to intentionally empower and benefit our interlocutors, as the PJP has done, mobilizing new technologies to collect journal entries in an international database opens up a new kind of citizen science and the possibility to amplify new voices on a global platform where there has previously been no such opportunity. The social sciences need decolonizing methodologies to evolve and thrive. With some care, as has been taken by authors in this special section, we can make sure that collaborative journaling is one of them. I am excited that the journal can now present some of this work to readers in the thoughtful and fascinating section about the PJP.

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