



NAVIGATING ELEMENTS OF COMPLEXITY, REFLEXIVITY AND FLEXIBILITY: REFLECTIONS ON RESEARCH ETHICS DURING GLOBAL PANDEMICS

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Launched in March 2012, the African Peacebuilding Network (APN) supports independent African research on conflict-affected countries and neighboring regions of the continent, as well as the integration of high-quality African research-based knowledge into global policy communities. In order to advance African debates on peacebuilding and promote African perspectives, the APN offers competitive research grants and fellowships, and it funds other forms of targeted support, including strategy meetings, seminars, grantee workshops, commissioned studies, and the publication and dissemination of research findings. In doing so, the APN also promotes the visibility of African peacebuilding knowledge among global and regional centers of scholarly analysis and practical action and makes it accessible to key policymakers at the United Nations and other multilateral, regional, and national policymaking institutions.

ABOUT THE SERIES

The APN Lecture Series provides an avenue for influential thinkers, practitioners, policy makers, and activists to reflect on and speak to the critical issues and challenges facing African peacebuilding. This publication series documents lectures given on the platform of the African Peacebuilding Network (APN) program, and its institutional partners. These lectures provide an analysis of processes, institutions, and mechanisms for, as well as the politics of peacebuilding on the continent, and contribute towards broadening debates and knowledge about the trajectories of conflict and peace in conflict-affected African countries and regions. The APN Lecture series seeks to address knowledge gaps in African peace and security, including its links to local, national, and global structures and processes. These publications also provide critical overviews and innovative reflections on the state of the field, including new thinking critical to knowledge production and dissemination in overlooked or emerging areas of African peacebuilding.

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INTRODUCTION

In general, conducting research in conflict-affected African contexts can be a complex endeavor. It is laced with multifarious challenges and a variety of ethical minefields that can be harmful to researchers; participants in their studies; data collection, storage, and protection; and the integrity of their final output. It is not always easy for researchers to anticipate, plan for, or to respond to all the challenges they will encounter over the duration of a research project. As many scholars have argued, researchers need to be reflexive and creative in the field while ensuring observance of research ethics and not doing any harm.¹

The same can be applied to contexts affected by major global disease outbreaks such as the 2013-16 ebolavirus (EVD) epidemic in the Mano River Union (MRU) sub-region and the ongoing coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.² Just as in the case of violent conflicts, these outbreaks have produced death, sickness, and much human misery. They have also been severely disruptive to societies and the lives of people. Given that EVD and COVID-19 spread mainly through social interaction and contact, they strike at the heart of many research methods and data collection activities. Researchers and participants face the risk of contracting and spreading diseases with potentially debilitating or fatal consequences.

Public health measures and resources mobilized to contain these transnational disease outbreaks have had a paradoxical effect on research activities and

scholarship. On one hand, they have disrupted, delayed, or constrained certain research activities, especially those involving travel, fieldwork, social interaction, and transnational collaboration.³ On the other hand, they have led to significant funding for research on various aspects of EVD and Covid-19 in the biomedical and health sciences, humanities, social sciences, and other fields of knowledge.

The EVD and COVID-19 outbreaks forced some researchers to postpone or abandon their research projects. Others have had to become creative and flexible to ensure that they move forward with their research. They have had to tailor their research activities to circumvent or incorporate different public measures and mandates. They have had to utilize—as we now doing—available communications technologies and tools to overcome some of the pandemic restrictions, collaborate with others, and collect data. Yet some of these adaptations come with new ethical issues, which I will examine in this presentation.

EPIDEMICS, PANDEMICS, AND THEIR DISCONTENTS

As conscientious African scholars and citizens of the world, our attention should not solely be focused on how the two disease outbreaks have affected research projects. We must be attentive to what they have revealed about the state of our contemporary world. On the positive side, they have exhibited resilience, compassion, and heroism, especially from health personnel, caregivers, and workers who have borne the brunt of the outbreaks. On the negative side, they have exposed pervasive prejudice, ignorance, and deep-rooted inequities within and between different nations or regions of the world. They have forced us to confront and reflect deeply over the power hierarchies, unequal relations, and cynical political calculations that produce and sustain social prejudices and inequities.

EVD and COVID-19 are radically different diseases in many ways. EVD is far more lethal, and its symptoms are more dramatic and frightening.⁴ While the two viruses spread through physical contact, COVID-19 also spreads through droplets in the air, making it more contagious. COVID-19 has spread to virtually every part of the world. EVD, despite a few cases reaching Europe, the United States of America, and a few other African countries, became mainly an epidemic of the MRU sub-region. Even with the delay in mobilizing a meaningful public health response to the epidemic, EVD seems more readily containable than Covid-19.

The 2013-2016 EVD outbreak in Sierra Leone, Guinea, and Liberia presaged some of the experiences of people and societies in Africa and in many parts of the world during this COVID-19 pandemic.

First, *rumors, myths, half-truths, and conspiracy theories ran rampant* throughout the outbreak even after the initial ignorance about the disease had been replaced by verifiable scientific knowledge. Incorrect and highly problem pieces of information were amplified and rapidly circulated via social media.

Second, *perceptions of the disease outbreak became racialized*, with some western media outlets carrying reports and analyses that were often laced with racist and colonialist tropes of Africa and Africans.

Third, *respectable organizations like the World Health Organization (WHO) and US Center for Disease Control offered deeply problematic apocalyptic models* that projected the infections and deaths of millions of Africans from Ebola. It clearly illustrated the persistence of skewed knowledge of Africa and Africans.⁵

Fourth, Ebola revealed that *major disease outbreaks have complicated and sometimes unpredictable trajectories*. Though fear, insecurity, and vulnerability can become all-pervasive, some groups and regions were *more vulnerable than others*. Ebola had a heavy toll on health care workers, but it also wreaked considerable havoc amongst impoverished rural and urban communities in Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone.

Fifth, the political and public health measures used to contain the Ebola outbreaks were *unprecedented, expansive, and costly*. Most of the world, except for a few countries, effectively isolated Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Liberia, stopping planes and ships from traveling to and from the country. The three MRU governments imposed curfews and quarantines, limited international and domestic travel, curtailed the movement of people, restricted social gathering, activities, and interactions, and shut down many institutions. They also mandated certain public health measures including social distancing and hand washing. Some of these measures were effective. However, their implementation became terrains of struggles between the governments, which acted with autocratic tendencies, and their publics, who resisted these tendencies.

Sixth, despite evidence of the immense human suffering being created by the epidemic and repeated appeals from the three MRU governments, non-governmental organizations, the Economic Community of West African States

(ECOWAS), and the African Union (AU), international efforts to help contain the outbreak were painfully slow. The international community only intervened significantly after WHO declared EVD a public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC) and the United Nations Security Council resolved that it was a global security threat. This was well over a year after the EVD epidemic had started. Cynically, it seemed that the rich countries had only acted when the pandemic became “securitized” and when their own national interests and the welfare of their “homeland” were at stake.

For some African countries, especially those in the western and central regions of the continent, the COVID-19 pandemic offered a familiar playbook on what to expect in terms of impact, attitudes, and reactions at local, national, and international levels. Predictably, the pandemic came with rumors and racism, dire prognosis, uncertainties, vulnerabilities, quarantines, restrictions, international marginalization, and widespread hardships.

Yet, there has been an unexpected snag with the playbook. The COVID-19 pandemic seemed to have had a rather different impact on African countries in comparison to some countries in Europe, the Americas, and Asia. Despite having weaker public health systems, the majority of African countries have so far escaped the worst impacts—mass infections, debilitating illnesses, and high mortality—of the pandemic. A plethora of explanations that will not be examined in detail here, including demography, geography, immunity, genetics, and inaccurate data, have been proffered for this outcome.⁶

Though the majority of African countries have weathered the pandemic relatively well, their economies and societies have experienced major disruptions like the rest of the world. Unlike wealthier countries, African governments have not been able to provide substantial financial resources to minimize these disruptions. The development of vaccines for COVID-19 in early 2020 merely underlined the unequal power and access to the resources between wealthier northern countries and those in the southern hemisphere. African countries and other Southern hemisphere countries have been subject to what the Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus labeled as “vaccine apartheid.”⁷ Despite discussions of equitable distribution and access and the creation of COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX) Facility, internationalism soon gave way to nationalism. Wealthier northern countries bought and hoarded different COVID-19 vaccines as soon they became available without much consideration for Africa and the rest of the world.⁸

It is not only in the access to the therapeutics and vaccines against COVID-19 that the resource gulf between the wealthier northern countries and Africa has been exposed. Collaborations between African researchers in the continent and those based in northern countries during the pandemic were also exposed as problematic.⁹ African researchers, out of economic necessity, have had to continue to collect data in risky situations, which are then utilized by their northern counterparts who are usually working remotely and in safer conditions. There has been much criticism and protest against this unethical, unequal, and exploitative relationship. Aymar Nyenzi Bisoka emphasizes that we must:

“...take these criticisms seriously, as they pose not only ethical questions (regarding the choice of research topics, fieldwork, and the racial distribution of the roles they produce), but also political (in the fight against the geopolitics of knowledge, the power relations structuring it, and its epistemological, political and symbolic consequences) and epistemological ones (to criticize the scientific validity of data produced in the southern fields in these conditions).”¹⁰

FIELDWORK, TECHNOLOGY, AND NEED FOR REFLEXIVITY

Epidemics and pandemics, because of their extensive disruptions and the ethical issues they generate, necessitate deep ethical reflections. Researchers, funding agencies (if the research is externally funded), and oversight institutions have to think seriously about the nature, value, and efficacy of their work in a world where containing a deadly disease outbreak usually trumps everything else. For researchers, this usually boils down to a basic question: should they continue with existing projects, or should they start new ones? The nature of the topic, feasibility, risks, concreteness of research plans, compliance with international, national, and institutional regulations and guidelines, and knowledge of research terrain are crucial elements in reaching an ethical and meaningful decision. Sometimes, the most ethical decision is to cancel or postpone the research.

However, neither the EVD epidemic nor COVID-19 pandemics precluded the start of new research projects. In fact, they have necessitated extensive research and production of knowledge to understand various aspects of these major disease outbreaks, including their impact on different populations and societies. We started our anthology, *Understanding West Africa's Ebola Epidemic*, in the middle of the EVD outbreak. I also participated in the process of nominating grantees for the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) Rapid-Response grants to explore the wide-ranging impacts of COVID-19 in the US and around the world

in 2020. In short, EVD and COVID-19 provided serendipitous opportunities for researchers to investigate issues of power, justice, equality that they had exposed.

Once the decision to proceed with a research project in an epidemic or pandemic has been made, the next important ethical decision is for researchers to contemplate how to approach fieldwork and data collection. Their options include postponing or continuing with data collection. Postponing has its benefits. It can allow researchers to work on other aspects of their projects as well as prepare better for fieldwork.¹¹ Continuing with data collection could be as “planned,” through digital means, or in a modified fashion. If researchers decide to proceed as planned, it is imperative that they thoroughly assess the conditions under which they will collect data and ensure the possibilities for harm are very minimal.

Conducting field research as planned should only occur when there is no alternative and when it could be done in the safest and most responsible way. It must begin with a clear affirmation of consent from all participants in the data collection activities. Consideration must be given to the make-up and number of participants, settings, and duration. Most important, researchers must incorporate the different public health measures—hand washing, masking, and social distancing (and probably now, testing and vaccination)—into their research activities. All involved in the research must be aware of these measures and willing to be compliant with them. These protocols are sometimes in flux or contested. At times, people may be distrustful of them as they are of the researchers.

Tapiwa Madimu, a 2020 APN fellow who conducted in-person interviewees with zama-zamas (informal gold miners) in South Africa, explains how he responded to their fear of COVID-19 and distrust:

“One of the ways to get them to acquiesce to a meeting with me was a firm promise to strictly adhere to social distancing and other COVID-19 regulations. Apart from the writing materials, I usually take to the field, I also took protective materials such as face masks, plastic face shields, and hand sanitizers, which I offered to informers. Furthermore, I enlisted the help of a colleague’s relative who was a teacher in Odendaalsrus and was trusted by the *zama zamas*.”¹²

For Madimu, this research activity was necessary because of the virtual impossibility of interviewing the zama zamas via phone, Whatsapp, or Zoom.

In-person fieldwork is the ideal for most social science projects. Nonetheless, there are instances during disease outbreaks when the most ethical and viable

way for researchers to continue data collection is to switch to information communication technologies (ICTs). Most social scientists usually utilize one or more of the following data-generating activities: documents, records, and artifact collection (desk research); oral histories; interviews; questionnaires and surveys; focus groups; participant observations; experiments; photography; and collection of digital data. With proper planning, some of these activities can now be conducted fairly efficiently with existing ICT tools (computers, phones, tablets) and software programs like Skype, WhatsApp, Zoom, MS Chat Rooms, Hangouts, etc. Surveys are now routinely created, distributed, and collected via different electronic mailing lists and social media platforms, using a variety of software programs. There are companies, which in fact specialize in conducting specialized surveys for researchers.

Many research sites like national archives and libraries shut down or operated with limited hours and many restrictions. However, intrepid and conscientious researchers found ways to conduct research in these institutions while adhering to COVID regulations. They had to be flexible in their methods. For example, Tapiwa Madimu had to use a hand-held scanner to capture as many documents as possible in archives in Pretoria and Johannesburg without going through entire documents.¹³ In June 2021, I had a similar experience of having to photograph over 700 documents within a week, using an iPhone at the national archives of Sierra Leone in Freetown without carefully going through each document. In the 1990s, under relatively normal circumstances, I would have had to spend two months in the archive going through a similar volume of materials. Then, I took extensive notes and only copied about 100 documents for further analyses in the end.

The benefits of these archival research experiences were obvious. The scanner and iPhone enabled Madimu and me to limit our time in an enclosed and restrictive environment. The tools also helped limit the amount of physical interaction and contact with others in that environment and thus minimized the risks of contracting or spreading the COVID-19 virus. Equally important, the technology saved travel, lodging, copying, and other research related expenses. However, it did not necessarily mean that, in the overall project, the technology necessarily saved time in reading, assessing the content and value of the different documents, and developing the analysis. It merely meant that I had to do this work in a more private location rather than the public archive.

The value of ICTs is also evident in social science research activities that necessitate sustained social interaction between researcher and participants in a study. Take the case of an ethnographer, who, during the Ebola crisis, continued

their research in Liberia through “chatnography,” and “social media and instant message apps.” The ethnographer was able to establish contact with participants in their research project in Liberia before being on the ground and to continue interactions after they had left. While ICT was valuable in enabling the ethnographer to continue their research, there were limitations in what could be communicated or narrated over mediums that were clearly being monitored.¹⁴ While the Ebola epidemic and COVID-19 pandemic were not solely responsible for the creation of the different ICT tools, software or social media platforms, they have definitely increased global dependence on them. ICTs are already radically restructuring the ways the world works. They have eliminated or reduced travel time for many researchers and participants, and have enabled many researchers to be in contact with participants over vast distances.

Yet, the use of ICTs in research has raised serious ethical issues that researchers cannot ignore.¹⁵ Some of these issues include access, costs, privacy, rights, online behavior, data ownership, storage, and security for all of those involved in a research project. Just like EVD and COVID-19, the use of the new technologies has highlighted the challenges as well as the opportunities for researchers in Africa. Even though there is a ubiquity of tech tools and millions are connected to the grid, the reality is that millions more remained unconnected and high-quality tech tools, software, and data are very expensive and cannot be equally accessed by all. The infrastructure to support and power the new technologies remain uneven and unreliable in many parts of Africa.¹⁶

Researchers have to think about the ways in which ICTs affect social interactions, psychological behavior, and the quality of the data being collected. Attitudes and perceptions of ICTs and their use vary across society, groups, and individuals. Some people are adept and comfortable using particular ICTs, others are not. For some participants, ICTs may facilitate voyeuristic behavior, for others it may encourage reticence. ICTs may also limit the ability of researchers to catch the broad range of non-verbal cues, interactions, and emotions, which may be crucial part of their data and analysis.

Furthermore, researchers should be attuned to how differences in the quality of the technology available to participants affect their interactions and the quality of the information they provide. These differences can signify as well as amplify the differences in power, resources, and status between the researcher, research assistants, and participants. I have noted above the protests of Africa-based research assistants against their northern-based counterparts during this epidemic. ICTs have played a key role in enabling this problematic and

exploitative relationship, which consigns many scholars in the Africa and the Global South to mere data collectors. Northern-based scholars need to consider how their partnerships with scholars in the Global South may be reinforcing global hierarchies and inequalities in knowledge production.

The more researchers use ICTs, the more they should wrestle with issues of privacy, storage, ownership, and protection of electronic data. Many ICT companies that produce the popular tools and software used by social science researchers boast about their end-to-end encryption and the security of their users' data. Yet, software has been hacked, and encrypted data breached. African governments in countries like Ethiopia, Eritrea, Rwanda, and Nigeria have demonstrated their strong control over ICTs in their country. Researchers should have a clear plan of how to securely store their research data so that it is not breached or, even more distressing, lost. Many institutional research boards and ethics review committees require researchers to state how they will store and secure data. In the age of Zoom, I have opted to store my recordings on my private device rather than on the cloud. Whatever option you choose, make sure it is secure.

Modifying in-person fieldwork and using ICTs to facilitate data collection research activities during global public health emergencies, conflicts, and natural disasters requires creativity and flexibility, but not ethical shortcuts. If you are utilizing ICTs, learn about them, how to use them effectively, and their shortcomings. It is the ethical thing to do. Follow the basics of research ethics. Protect yourself, your assistant(s), participants in your research project, and the integrity of your data. Always ensure that participants in your search project provide informed and verifiable consent and that they can withdraw at any given moment. Make sure they fully understand the nature and parameters of your research and how the data would be protected. Be alert and sensitive to people's circumstances and disposition; try not increase their vulnerability, stress, or (re)traumatize them. Treat everyone fairly and with dignity and respect, including reimbursing them for costs related to your research. Above all, be attentive to the changing public health dynamics and the situational complexities.

CONCLUSION: MORE THAN JUST RESEARCH ETHICS

It seems that we are living in a time of recurrent crises. In the last decade, wars, Ebola, COVID-19, intensifying wealth gaps, national discord, dangerous geopolitical posturing, destructive weather events, and environmental degradation have filled the news headlines. These crises have generated tremendous uncertainties,

risks, vulnerabilities, and suffering. The competing visions and struggles of how to respond to these crises and the ICTs that are being used to mediate them have affected and are restructuring the way we live, work, and do research. Research, especially in-person fieldwork, has sometimes been circumscribed. Yet, the crises and the responses have also demanded conscientious research and the production of efficacious knowledge.

In times of significant global disruptions, researchers and scholars must have a heightened sense of ethics and cultivate an ethical disposition. They should approach their work with rigor, responsibility, and reflexivity. They must endeavor to do no harm to others; to demonstrate sensitivity, solidarity, and compassion for those close to them, as well as all around them. As the venerable Cheikh Anta Diop, at end of his seminal work, *Civilization or Barbarism*, aptly reminds us:

“Ethics stem from philosophy as the practical behavior comes of the idea that one has about things... Humanity's moral conscience progresses, slowly, but surely, and that is an opening towards others and a powerful element of hope foreseeing tomorrow the blooming of an era of genuine humanity, a perception of humanity without ethnic coordinates... It is the worldwide dissemination of information that forces the ethical conscience of humanity to stick to 'acceptable' limits, in the absence of radical change.”¹⁷

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Rashid also mentors graduate African students and rising faculty colleagues in various African universities through his voluntary service as an adjunct faculty for African Leadership Center of King's College London and the University of Nairobi. He has served as Chair of the Advisory Board of the African Peacebuilding Network of Social Science Research Council (APN-SSRC); Vice President of the West African Research Association (WARA); and a co-editor of Afrika Zamani, the journal of African History, produced by the Council for Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) based in Dakar, Senegal.