Navigating and Reimagining Community Engagement amidst COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

Community engagement is a critical manifestation of a humanising approach on how to respond to various psychosocial and structural violence challenges in the context of a pandemic. Community engagement within the context of the current global coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) requires creative and innovative responses. Institutions have had to reconfigure their community engagement due to restrictive measures instituted by governments to curb the spread of the virus. This paper aims to reflect on the conversations and experiences of community activist researchers in implementing creative ways of engagement to address pertinent psychosocial and structural violence issues affecting communities during COVID-19. Through a qualitative reflexive approach, we identified the following themes: (1) Challenges in community-engaged research during a pandemic; (2) Structural violence and psychosocial issues; and (3) Innovative opportunities to bridge gaps and confront community realities. The pandemic has produced challenges but has also allowed for opportunities to reimagine community engagement. It has created opportunities and novel ways of collaborating with multisectoral social actors to address the psychosocial challenges during the pandemic and to remain actively engaged with communities.

Keywords: Community engagement, community activist researchers, COVID-19, conversations, reflections

INTRODUCTION

The novel coronavirus, commonly referred to as COVID-19, has drastically changed the way that individuals, communities, businesses and society operate. Due to a rapid increase in infections, the South African government was compelled to implement a national lockdown, leaving many resource-constrained communities and their members in crisis, as existing social ills and inequalities became even more apparent during this unprecedented time (Al Jazeera, 2020; Shaban, 2020). Mutisi (2020), however, emphasises that *people* are located at the centre of this crisis, and should therefore not be forgotten in any decision-making and strategic planning, and that these activities should be aligned with community interests. In this regard, Black (2020) and others (Lazarus, Bulbulia, Taliep, & Naidoo, 2015; Tindana, De Vries, & Kamuya, 2020) highlight the necessity of recognising the value of focused community engagement in safety and health prevention and promotion strategies, which should be congruent with and responsive to community needs and priorities. Consequently, it is necessary for institutions, relevant policymakers and government structures to engage directly with communities and civil society, and to keep a finger on the pulse of community needs and assets that can be mobilised in under-resourced contexts, particularly during times of crisis.

Community engagement (CE) can be defined as an umbrella term that encapsulates academic activities in partnership with communities and is guided by key principles including: respect for community dynamics, aligning the research agenda with the needs of the community, democratising knowledge production through the inclusion of community members in all phases of the research project, and a focus on strengthening and sustaining communities (Glandon, Paina, Alonge, Peters & Bennett, 2017; Lazarus et al., 2015; Lazarus, Taliep, Bulbulia, Phillips, & Seedat, 2012; Reynolds & Sariola, 2018). There are various models of operationalising and implementing CE and the model chosen usually depends on how CE is conceptualised by an institution (Bhagwan, 2017; Hashagen, 2002; Reynolds & Sariola, 2018). This paper aims to reflect our experiences as community activist researchers at the University of South Africa's (UNISA) Institute for Social and Health Sciences (ISHS) and the South African Medical Research Council (SAMRC) and UNISA's Masculinities and Health Research Unit. Our conversations and reflections on CE in this paper are embedded in the Transformational Community Engagement Model, which serves as a guide to our research unit's community engagement work (Taliep, Lazarus, Bulbulia, Ismail, & Hornsby, 2018).

The CE model set out by Taliep et al. (2018) can be seen as a transformational approach to engagement that draws on a critical public health framework alongside the principles of a Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) approach. This transformational model of engagement is differentiated from conventional engagement through mutually beneficial processes, necessitating authentic discussion, cooperation, critical reflexivity, co-construction and co-learning, as well as co-ownership of projects. In concordance with the principles of CBPR, this process of engagement echoes a collaborative participatory paradigm that underscores building on existing strengths and resources within a community, praxis, and optimum participation of community members in decision-making processes throughout the research process (Taliep, 2016; Taliep et al., 2018). This form of engagement further stresses an intentional focus on social and epistemic justice, reflexive engagement of power differentials, tackling issues of race, racism and social class, engendering agency, and fostering sustainability (Lazarus et al., 2015; Taliep, 2016; Taliep et al., 2018). Moreover, this model affirms communities having agency to initiate change and transformation, autonomy, and sustainability.

The value and benefits of CE have been recorded by various studies. In South Africa, Bhagwan (2017) found that CE allows academic institutions to get in touch with communities, which are often very removed from the external environment. Rather than imposing interventions on communities, CE scholars create a space for co-designing interventions based on community needs, and ensure that the community's voice is central when developing solutions; learning takes place bi-directionally (i.e. both

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50

academics and communities learn from each other); and it provides a platform where local knowledge outside of academic institutions is valued (Bhagwan, 2017). In a study by Musesengwa and Chimbari (2017) with community members, schools, health workers and policymakers in Zimbabwe and South Africa, participants acknowledged that they felt respected to have been part of the decision-making processes and that the continuous canvassing of their opinions in the various stages allowed for true engagement which, in turn, acknowledged and enhanced their agency (Musesengwa & Chimbari, 2017). As such, CE allows for a space of co-learning, where both communities and researchers have something to offer to each other, and ultimately aims to foster community ownership and sustainability. The importance of involving community members in ensuring the success of initiatives that aim to build and transform community contexts has been highlighted by many CE scholars (Brown-Luthango, 2013; Lazarus et al., 2015; Taliep, Bulbulia, Lazarus, Seedat, & the Building Bridges Team, In Press). Specifically, these authors raise the importance of relationship building and consultation with the community which, if neglected, can lead to negative outcomes for community members as well as research institutes. To have a successful university-community partnership, there needs to be mutual beneficence. Brown-Luthango (2013), for example, highlights a major limitation in their project as the lack of consultation with members of communities and the gap between the academic institution and community that was never bridged. This alludes to the imperativeness of community involvement in every stage of the research process, managing power imbalances, and ensuring that the community receives (sustainable) tangible benefits from the project for meaningful collaboration between universities and communities to occur (Brown-Luthango, 2013). Community members should thus be viewed as more than mere research participants in a study; they have power and should be centrally involved in the production of knowledge.

During the pandemic, trust as a value of CE became paramount in addressing the felt needs of the community in this time. Holzer, Ellis and Merrit (2014) contend that engaging with a community is a sign of respect and acknowledgement for community interests, needs and values which could lead to enhanced community trust, an increase in participation and an improvement in the uptake of research results. During the Ebola epidemic in Liberia, Barker et al. (2020) found that CE enhanced health system resilience and that it assisted in managing the health crisis. The authors found that true CE assisted in building trust among communities and ultimately led to a more effective response to the crisis. Involving communities strengthened health systems by providing important information, strategies and feedback to improve the ability of the system to respond to the immediate needs of the community during the pandemic (Barker et al., 2020).

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51

Another important aspect of CE is establishing and maintaining a presence in the community, which normally requires face-to-face interaction (Magaço et al., 2020; Taliep et al., 2018). In this regard, Bowen (2011) indicates that a community's unfamiliarity with a research institution could serve as a barrier to full participation, and Lazarus et al. (2012) found that regular face-to-face communication facilitates participation and active involvement of community. Having a face-to-face presence in the community and attending events that are important to community members creates a space for engagement and enhances research efforts (Bowen, 2011; Scruby, Canales, Ferguson, & Gregory, 2017). This facilitates relationship-building, mutual respect and trust between researchers and community members – a vital element for such collaborations. Regular face-to-face meetings with community colleagues and network structures further provide a safe space where everyone can share their experiences and challenges and where updates can be given on community projects, successes and collective planning can occur (Taliep, Ismail, Bulbulia, & Louw, In Press).

In light of the challenges and possibilities for CE during COVID-19, this paper aims to present the personal experiences of our community activist research team. The team consists of four members: a novice researcher (research intern), two community psychologists and the community engagement coordinator of the research institute. Three of the members are experienced community researchers who have been active in the field for a significantly longer period than the novice researcher (15–25 years of experience). As activist scholars, we are actively engaged with communities and the current realities they encounter. We are committed to the ethics and basic values of social justice, including being attentive to structural and social inequities and bridging the separation between theory and practice and between researcher and participant (see Lennox & Yildiz, 2019). Our work is therefore embedded in the values and principles of CBPR, placing community at the centre, and foregrounds community engagement throughout the research process.

COMMUNITY PROFILE

Our CE activities mainly revolve around communities located in the Strand, Western Cape, South Africa, and prior to the lockdown, required us to physically meet regularly with community colleagues. The Strand area consists of a population of about 55 558 residents (16 109 households), of which 22.4% are children (aged 0-14) and 10.5% of residents are considered elderly (65 and older) (Statistics South Africa, 2011).

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52

OUR APPROACH TO COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Our community-engaged work is primarily located within the research unit's Erijaville Demonstration Programme and we have been working collaboratively with community colleagues (nine community members who have been part of our CE team for the past five to ten years and our network partners) to develop the Building Bridges youth intervention and Building Bridges non-profit organisation (NPO) (see Cutts et al., 2016; Lazarus et al., 2012; Taliep et al., 2020). The programme is primarily geared toward youth violence and focuses on the promotion of safety, peace and health. Over the last few years, we have been actively engaged with a core group of community members (the community research team) and have been physically present on a regular basis to ensure a presence in the community. These operations include, but are not limited to, weekly team meetings, the attendance and hosting of training and capacitation workshops, awareness campaigns planned and co-hosted by us and our community colleagues from the Building Bridges NPO, meetings with various community stakeholders, and a monthly community network meeting as part of the Local Network of Care (LNOC) Strand, which we co-host. We also, prior to the lockdown, planned the network's activities for the year 2020, which included monthly meetings and training and capacitation workshops. Our weekly meetings commence with a check-in session, which creates a space for all members to share and hear concerns, to address emerging issues and challenges, and collectively plan for future events (Isobell, Lazarus, Suffla, & Seedat, 2016; Taliep et al., 2020). As part of our continuous CE and sustainability planning and capacity, we envisaged a variety of capacity development training as well as the evaluation of the programme itself.

This, however, has not been possible during the COVID-19 lockdown and has required our team to change our CE strategy. Our conversations and reflections will attempt to outline some of the challenges experienced by the research team, with specific reference to CE during COVID-19. The paper will also focus on how some of these challenges were overcome and how our team adjusted our CE strategy. It is important to note that the aim of our CE work did not alter, though our way of engaging with the community did, and our work was still guided by the principles of our CE model. The paper will therefore further attempt to explore new and innovative ways of carrying out community engagement under restricted circumstances through our reflections.

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53

COMMUNITY ACTIVIST RESEARCHERS: CONVERSATIONS AND REFLECTIONS

Our reflections are structured according to themes based on our experiences of CE during this time. These themes are: (1) *Challenges in conducting community-engaged research*; (2) *Structural violence and psychosocial issues*; and (3) *Innovative opportunities to bridge gaps and confront community realities*. Our conversations took place primarily via project meetings on Zoom, Microsoft Teams and in conversations via WhatsApp as these were our only modes of communication during lockdown. Our meetings focused on planning and managing ongoing community projects, as well as navigating our way through the pandemic while working from home. Our personal conversations among our community activist research team, as well as our continuous communication with our community colleagues, were thus what contributed to our reflections and collective identification of the most pertinent themes. It is of importance to note that we had an existing relationship with the community prior to the pandemic and this allowed CE to occur more smoothly since we had regular contact with community members and stakeholders. It has been argued that pre-existing programmes that promote ongoing communication and relationship-building facilitate engagement during times of crisis (Cattapan, Acker-Verney, Dobrowolsky, Findlay, & Mandrona, 2020). These themes will show the value of continuously working with communities and how both a novice researcher and more experienced researchers re-imagined CE during COVID-19.

CHALLENGES IN COMMUNITY-ENGAGED RESEARCH DURING A PANDEMIC

There is no perfect guide that could have prepared us and other academics and collaborating communities for the coronavirus and its consequences. The pandemic has us in what Roy and Uekusa (2020) characterise as a scholarly challenging time and, as part of this, social distancing has caused its own challenges for many researchers, including a lack of daily interaction with colleagues and the inability to engage with gatekeepers, community members and stakeholders. It has also prevented scholars from entering communities in the traditional manner (Greeff, 2020; Hendrickson, Anderson, Schaumer, Amador, & Vieira, 2020). Due to the restriction on movement put in place as part of the national lockdown, in-person physical CE has been hampered, and we have encountered various challenges (as have many community stakeholders) in engaging and reaching community members and the colleagues we work with. Many academic institutions were required to physically close during the national lockdown. Academic operations have continued remotely, and staff and students have been

required to work from home. The situation also introduced the risk of additional miscommunication due to distance and not being able to physically meet and clarify misunderstandings.

Our community engagement, as a team of researchers, has thus undoubtedly been affected. Questions such as the following arose:

1) How do we maintain operations without being able to physically meet and discuss problems?

2) How do we assist in bringing forth marginalised voices when the pandemic has created a "loud silence" where inequalities are highlighted but not addressed?

3) How, under new circumstances, do we maintain the strong relationships that were previously established?

4) How do we valuably engage with our community colleagues and facilitate the process of co-learning and knowledge production when we, as researchers, have all the resources readily available but when many of our community colleagues do not have access to electricity, internet, smartphones or laptops?

5) How do we assist in mobilising community resources, knowing that we are far removed from the communities concerned?

Similar to what was experienced by Magaço et al. (2020), many of our research activities had to be deferred. Some of these activities include the final outcomes evaluation of the Building Bridges Mentoring Programme (BBMP), as well as the evaluation of our Transformational Community Engagement Model. We could not continue with "business as usual" or collect data from people whose primary goal was to get a meal for the day. With the social crisis brought on by the pandemic, it was necessary for our research team, along with our community colleagues, to re-think our CE research and prioritise relief initiatives, while still adhering to some form of community engagement.

STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE AND PSYCHOSOCIAL ISSUES

The untimely advent of the COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare the pre-existing injustices and inequities that disadvantaged communities in South Africa have been experiencing for generations. The result of this has been that these communities now face a double onslaught and their people bear the brunt of the pandemic's effects. The communities with whom we engage were classified as 'coloured'[2] by the apartheid regime. Structural violence is visible in the everyday existence of these communities

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[2] The term 'coloured' refers to one of the racial classification categories, specifically referring to individuals of mixed heritage, used under the apartheid regime. Although still socially recognised, the use of the term in this paper is purely for research purposes.

characterised by various disparities, lack of access to service delivery, and concomitant socio-economic and spatial inequalities (Taliep, Lazarus, Seedat, & Cochrane, 2016). Galtung (1969, p. 171) defines structural violence as violence that is built into or constructed as part of the very "structure and shows up as unequal distribution of power and consequently unequal life chances".

Low-income communities, within which our CE activities occur, are plagued by unemployment, poverty, limited infrastructure and a high incidence of injuries (Taliep et al., 2020; Van Niekerk & Ismail, 2013), which has contributed to the psychosocial issues being experienced within them. These issues, however, have become even more visible during the COVID-19 lockdown. Navigating structural violence had already proven to be difficult under 'normal circumstances' (prior to the pandemic) but has intensified due to the pandemic. Many people in the community became unemployed due to establishments being forced to close down during the strict lockdown (for example, Early Childhood Development centres [ECDs], or people being laid off from work. This resulted in an abrupt lack of income to support themselves and their families. One of our LNOC members, an ECD forum coordinator, indicated that the crèches have been closed since the beginning of lockdown and that teachers had not been paid and were struggling to survive. [Name] *indicated that she must connect with us by providing the contact details of the teachers for food vouchers.* The lockdown also caused many people to spend more time at home, which in itself brought on many challenges.

Adhering to lockdown measures was often, and at best, impossible for some. While the home was a means of protection against the virus, the dwellings in some parts of the community have quite confined spaces (for example, shacks) that often need to house more than one family. They are, therefore, not conducive under such restrictive circumstances such as the lockdown. The dwellings are also short on space, such as backyards or front gardens, for recreation. There were often inconsistencies between the government's instructions under lockdown and the reality of the community members (for example, having to wash/sanitise hands regularly or wearing masks, but not having access to running water or being unable to afford personal protective gear). Thus, people in these communities were not afforded the same comfort and safety which this space provides to others.

As community activist researchers, we witnessed these harsh realities and acknowledged our position of privilege and being able to work remotely from home. We, along with our community colleagues, therefore tried to address some of these structural challenges by continuously engaging with the

community. Our efforts during this time, albeit remotely, were thus focused on alleviating some of these challenges.

Drawing on our existing community collaborators, we set up numerous virtual engagement meetings. These, initially, were beset by many obstacles that required innovative solutions (see below). At one of our virtual meetings, a community member noted that, *the first imperative would not be adhering to lockdown regulations, but rather not to starve because many children, who normally were fed at schools, and the elderly were going hungry*. Spurred on by this, we collectively initiated a plan to focus on food security and started four soup/food kitchens in the areas in which we worked.

Within the confined spaces, loss of employment and gender-based violence (GBV) emerged as key challenges to be faced during the COVID-19 lockdown in many impoverished communities. The unintended consequence of confining victims of domestic violence to their homes was that these individuals were then at the mercy of their abusive partners. Through our engagements with the Building Bridges NPO in Strand, it was noted that women active in their respective communities were not given the opportunity to voice their daily struggles or express the anxieties they were experiencing as they carried out their emotionally intensive work. Collectively, we decided to co-host a virtual grassroots community conversation (we usually host one every quarter), this time involving women from multiple communities and specifically focusing on COVID-19 challenges and GBV. This workshop/conversation was very successful, and the attendees requested that we host another conversation.

INNOVATIVE OPPORTUNITIES TO BRIDGE GAPS AND CONFRONT COMMUNITY REALITIES

CE remains a vital tool to be used to ensure an effective response from communities and to address the health and safety of communities (Black, 2020; Oxfam, 2020). Notwithstanding the loss and devastation of the pandemic, as well as the disruption it has caused in various areas of life, we concur with Mashiapata and James (2020) that COVID-19 has presented new possibilities and opportunities for innovation and has highlighted the important role of universities in the creation and implementation thereof. This has provided an opportunity for the hosting of a range of national and international online seminars, or webinars, by various organisations and institutions, in addition to fast-tracking new and

innovative means and technologies of engaging with communities. The subsequent sections will explore initiatives that we have used to guide continued CE activities under the COVID-19 lockdown, as well as challenges encountered and suggestions for community engagement during COVID-19.

Ground-up approach

Given the conventional way we have performed CE in the past (guided by the principles of CBPR) and through the respective reflections of our research team, it was important for our team to continue engagement by means of processes that were reciprocally beneficial. This required genuine, trustworthy conversations, collaboration, cooperation, critical reflexivity, co-learning, co-creation of solutions, and the co-ownership of initiatives (Lazarus et al., 2015; Taliep et al., In Press). In addition, several studies have outlined the mistrust communities often have of researchers as some exploit communities for information with no regard for their needs, values and beliefs, and without any tangible benefits for the community (Brown-Luthango, 2013; Holzer et al., 2014; Lazarus et al., 2015; Musesengwa & Chimbari, 2017). Building trust and relationships, and maintaining that trust and relationship with a community, is vital. Keeping the principles and importance of CE in mind, we strongly motivate that a quick and effective response to any social crisis requires continuous CE to build trust and gain community perspectives, as it is often the most vulnerable groups that are most affected, even if this approach requires us to make use of complex online platforms (Cattapan et al., 2020).

We have found that, in order to maintain our CE activities during this time, it has been important and necessary to employ digital platforms. James (2020), a representative from an institution's community engagement division, emphasises this, indicating that, as we are unable to do work on the ground, it has been necessary to create a strong digital presence. This includes online meetings and seminars, social media, electronic communication and the facilitation of online workshops.

Initially, we took some time to find our feet while working from home, at the same time remaining in contact with our community colleagues, as the lockdown called for immediate responses and relief initiatives. We had to maintain a mutually beneficial relationship where co-learning could take place so as to not hamper the growth and sustainability of existing initiatives. It was necessary to decide collectively which platform would be best to communicate with – a platform which would be suitable for our community colleagues and for us. Prior to video-call platforms becoming available to us, all communication took place via WhatsApp. As the WhatsApp group chats (with both the NPO and

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58

LNOC) already existed prior to lockdown, it was easier to continue using this platform to communicate. However, this brought about its own challenges.

Relief initiatives had to commence as soon as possible, and it was thus necessary to separate WhatsApp groups for the various initiatives (for example, separate groups for the soup kitchen, financial matters, NPO activities and so on) to prevent any interference between groups and to aid in staying focused on the task at hand. The use of WhatsApp communications alone also created conflict among group members, and it was decided that a virtual face-to-face meeting would need to be held in order to address any issues arising and to plan an adjusted strategy for the continuation of the programme. The NPO team indicated that their preference would be to come together via Google Meet. Institutionally, however, we were compelled to use safer platforms, such as Microsoft Teams and Zoom. We provided training on the use of these platforms and our engagement has since continued on these platforms. We have since had weekly meetings with the NPO team during which updates are provided regarding the operations of the NPO, and where any challenges or issues are addressed. Despite initial challenges, these meetings have proven fruitful as the team has been able to discuss the way forward in respect of the activities of the NPO.

The community network's WhatsApp group has also remained active. Here, requests, updates, job opportunities, information regarding the community and relief initiatives continued to be shared by various organisations and community members. This allowed us to be cognisant of what was happening in the community and to know where we could assist while being unable to be there physically. We have also managed to re-establish our monthly meetings via the Zoom virtual meeting platform. The use of this platform was collectively decided upon among network members through WhatsApp messages and emails. This has allowed our communication and engagement to extend beyond the WhatsApp platform. It was also decided that all training and capacitation workshops would take place via Zoom. Although attendance at the virtual meetings has been small, the WhatsApp group has remained active. These platforms have facilitated continuous engagement with community colleagues under the current circumstances.

Notwithstanding the benefits, some barriers have made these platforms difficult to use for community members. Various authors speak of the digital divide which has highlighted contextual issues that may complicate the effectiveness of digital communication. This includes high data and airtime costs, devices with software and hardware inadequate to use online meeting platforms, poor internet connections as well as unreliable electricity connections (Cattapan et al., 2020; Greeff, 2020; Tindana

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59

et al., 2020). Initially, some attendees were unable to join the meetings due to not having enough data to connect to the platforms, while electrical load shedding caused unstable internet connections or, in some cases, an inability to connect at all. Some of the attendees on the online platforms had never previously used this type of technology and required specific training on how to do so. In such instances, we took the attendees through the steps to download and use the applications, and the team decided that we would connect 10 to 15 minutes before the start of the meeting to sort out possible technical difficulties. Our unit provided participants with data vouchers, and data mobile modems for the NPO. The NPO was also successful in securing a free Wi-Fi router and data for their office. Aware that not everyone might be able to participate online and that this might exclude important groups from our meetings (Cattapan et al., 2020; Tindana et al., 2020), we circulated minutes to those who could not attend (on WhatsApp and via email) to include them in some manner. These barriers were indicative of the limited technological resources and infrastructure and, as noted by James (2020), it is important to network with various community stakeholders in order to communicate with communities who have limited access to the internet, phones, Wi-Fi and laptops.

Despite these challenges, often indicative of the resource-constrained context we work in, CE and operations have been able to continue. Workshops have been held and community conversations have been offered by the NPO with these being attended by community members and someone from our research team. These workshops were based on information provided by our community colleagues. A need was identified within the NPO for improved workplace etiquette, internal communication and dealing with emotions within the workplace. Our research team then offered to host these workshops with the NPO team. The NPO themselves also hosted virtual community conversations based on the need expressed by community members as to how to deal with the challenges of COVID-19 and GBV.

This accentuates the importance of learning taking place bi-directionally, as we learn from our community colleagues by engaging with them. Co-learning further takes place through planning together, learning from our mistakes, and finding solutions collectively with our community colleagues. There have also been offers from community colleagues to host computer skills training. This is a beacon of hope for our CE as community members can identify their own needs, where growth is possible, where we can assist and how they can assist us in connecting with community members. We learnt that, despite COVID-19, we could still make a difference through collective CE.

Although our team had a turbulent start to establishing a virtual connection with our community colleagues, as the lockdown period was extended and the wider team became accustomed to our new, adjusted way of working, some "normalcy" set in. The use of digital platforms has allowed us to stay in contact and has provided an opportunity for digital capacity development, as well as continuity of thought in terms of research process and praxis.

Mobilising and consolidating assets and resources

In addition to food relief initiatives, as there have been financial constraints on many households during this time, our team also developed an information sheet concerning nutrition on a very low budget (Louw, Taliep, Ismail, & Bulbulia, 2020). The information aimed to provide community members with a "shopping list" for healthy, nutritious food items that would be affordable and could go a long way. Our community colleagues also identified that many community members struggled to apply for the Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF). We then collectively decided to develop a flyer detailing the steps of the application process. These flyers were then distributed within the community at focal points, i.e. the soup kitchens. As suggested by one of our NPO community colleagues, *the distribution of information while feeding the community was aimed at education and creating awareness*. Although it has been a matter of trial and error, both for our team and for our community colleagues, we believe that our collective efforts thus far, have allowed us to explore new ways of engaging with communities and, with the necessary commitment and communication, could provide sustainable CE initiatives for the future. Another institution has also indicated that funds that were reserved for travelling, catering and venue bookings will now be used for digital CE activities (James, 2020).

Participatory coordination and communication

Various studies have highlighted the importance of communication during times of crisis, even more so during a pandemic (Vaughan & Tinker, 2009). As stated by Ahmed and Palermo (2010), for CE projects to continue effectively, bi-directional continuous communication needs to take place. Communication also allows any myths, stereotypes, fears and misinformation surrounding the virus to be diminished (Goodwin, Haque, Neto, & Myers, 2010) and is deemed more effective if it is not rooted in misconceptions (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as cited in Vaughan & Tinker, 2009). As stated by Holzer et al. (2014), communities are the best spokespeople when it comes to the concerns and issues that affect their members. Another important aspect of communication under pandemic

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61

conditions is being aware of the different phases of that pandemic and being aware what information should be communicated and in which phase (Reynolds & Quinn, 2008; Vaughan & Tinker, 2009). Communication has always been an important tool for us as community activist researchers when engaging with communities under conventional circumstances, but even more so while working remotely.

A further important aspect that should be emphasised is the compatibility of communication strategies and messages. To ensure that vulnerable populations effectively understand and adhere to health and safety messages that are communicated, the messages need to be fit for information priorities, reasoning strategies and cultural beliefs of the affected community (Vaughan & Tinker, 2009). Additionally, Kapucu, Garayev and Wang (2013) contend that not having sufficient technological capacity could hinder the effective management of disasters and could cause detachments from network actors, updates and activities. It was thus important for our team to have virtual communication (in the absence of being able to meet physically) with our community colleagues to continue to practice meaningful CE and guide each other through the new way of working while also keeping in mind the structural and technological deficits that might be present.

Aside from online platforms, we have also made use of online message tools to continue engagement. As was done by Goodwin et al. (2010) during the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) outbreak, we used various communication techniques to empower and mobilise communities in Strand. This included the dissemination of updated COVID-19 information in the language of local communities and the development and distribution of fridge magnets (via the NPO) with a safety message and emergency numbers (for example the GBV hotline and the National COVID-19 hotline). Our research unit has provided various messages on social media (Facebook and Instagram) and in our community WhatsApp groups which have been distributed among our community groups and colleagues. Schonfeld, Meadows and Harington (2020) argue that social media has an important role to play and that choosing the appropriate channel for your demographic is vital. It was, therefore, important to share our messages on WhatsApp, in addition to the other two platforms, as more of our community colleagues have access to the WhatsApp platform and do not necessarily have Facebook or Instagram accounts.

The messages focused on various aspects of health, safety, and well-being for families with young children during COVID-19 (CARP Facebook, 2020; CARP Instagram, 2020). A pandemic has different phases and messages therefore need to be adapted accordingly (Reynolds & Quinn, 2008). Our

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62

messaging started with the dissemination of tips on how to explain the circumstances around the pandemic to children, how to keep safe and how to create daily routines while children are still at home. Messages then had to shift to the return to school (how to keep safe while at school and how to navigate emotions once returning to school) as schools gradually started to reopen under strict measures during the lockdown. Messaging has thus assisted in communicating with communities, but it has had to remain flexible, depending on the communication provided by the government and the current circumstances.

Strengthening relationships

As technology and more advanced forms of digital communication are restricted in some communities, it is suggested that contact be kept with community members, such as community leaders, influencers or faith-based groups that do have access to these platforms; they can ultimately serve as key information providers (James, 2020; Oxfam, 2020). Oxfam (2020) further stresses the fundamentality of advocacy efforts and the role CE plays when doing such work. The aim is to heighten community voices and these efforts should thus be based on feedback and consultation with communities that are most affected by the pandemic (Oxfam, 2020).

The LNOC Strand consists of a network of organisations and community members that aims to strengthen organisational capacity to address local challenges and improved service delivery to the community (Gordon, 2018). The network and our network partners, many of whom actively operated and assisted within the community during this time, served as key informants as to what the community needed, what efforts were being made, and where we could collectively assist. In addition to maintaining and strengthening relationships via digital platforms, the LNOC collective found innovative ways to ensure that support and essential care was provided to vulnerable groups through the coordination of task teams, the operation of soup kitchens and distribution of food hampers (Taliep et al., In Press). Furthermore, the Building Bridges NPO, despite all the challenges brought on by the pandemic, found other ways to continue their engagement activities to assist the community where possible and to continue reaching the objectives of the NPO. The Building Bridges team also resorted to virtual platforms, not only to meet with us as their community colleagues but also to navigate their activities within the NPO. As part of addressing the issue of food security within the confined spaces that community members have access to, we organised a virtual vertical gardening workshop with our community colleagues. We also shared information on an external gardening workshop with them and

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63

provided financial support for two of them to attend the workshop.

The aim was to promote food security by first teaching them the necessary know-how and then having them teach what they learnt to the rest of the team and community members. The team also used the WhatsApp platform to constantly be in contact with the mentors and mentees of the programme, asking them how they were experiencing COVID-19 and regularly checking in with them to assist them to cope. The team members themselves also used their own resources and contacts to navigate their way through the pandemic and its accompanying challenges. One member used his contacts to organise and set up the soup kitchen, which now occurs every week, whereas another member, who works as a home-based carer, used her platform to distribute soup to the elderly who are unable to access the soup kitchens. One member also used her contact with the local mayor to organise and navigate solutions when problems arose within the surrounding areas of the community. These acts of collaboration and the use of existing relationships to strengthen community resilience serve as examples of how continuous community engagement can be a key mitigating factor in addressing multiple challenges during a time of crisis.

CONCLUSION

This paper reflects our experiences and conversations as community activist researchers in implementing creative ways of engagement to address pertinent psychosocial and structural violence issues affecting communities during COVID-19. Concurring with Mashiapata and James (2020), we echo that the pandemic has created opportunities and novel ways of collaborating with multisectoral social actors to address the challenges of the pandemic. In addition to fast-tracking new and innovative means and technologies of engaging with communities, the pandemic encouraged us to reimagine and reconfigure the ways in which we conduct community engagement, research and praxis. This has provided opportunities for a range of accessible online engagements, including training opportunities, regular meetings, capacity development of community structures and dealing with challenges, as well as collaborating and planning multiple strategies to address the immediate needs of our communities.

Even though the pandemic forced us to use digital platforms, we remained reflexively conscious of the digital divide between us as privileged academics and our community colleagues. Every effort was made to bridge this gap by trying to proactively foresee and address challenges through the provision of training, portable modems, and data vouchers in the beginning phases of the lockdown. Future

research will benefit if it reflects multiple voices and perspectives on CE during a pandemic through additional mediums such as the documentation of narratives through song, plays and poetry, and developing CE knowledge bases that are available to both academics and community colleagues (James, 2020). Nonetheless, it is hoped that our reflections will serve as a stepping stone for future CE practices, not only to explore possibilities of CE during times of crisis, but also for a more effective use of digitised engagement. Our conversations and personal experiences as a research team have highlighted the humanising and creative responses to community-engaged research and praxis during the pandemic.

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