


Building Resilience in Qualitative Research: Challenges and Opportunities in Times of Crisis

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted qualitative researchers, especially those whose research involves face-to-face interactions with the community in the field. Implementing various mitigation measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 entailed modifying, postponing and/or cancelling many research projects. Based on the attributes of the COVID-19 pandemic, which are unpredictable and pose serious threats, developing a highly structured and tested data collection approach that can reflect experiences and social realities from 'below' during a crisis is necessary. As the latest global crisis marker of this millennium, the extent of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the knowledge production process in marginalised indigenous communities is largely unknown. This study contributes to the debate on how to ensure qualitative research methods possess the flexibility and adaptability to study such communities during a crisis.

Keywords

COVID-19 pandemic, qualitative research, digital platform, critical reflection, research resilience

Introduction

The 2019 Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has significantly impacted qualitative researchers, especially those whose research involves face-to-face interactions with the community in the field. Various mitigation measures were implemented to control the COVID-19 pandemic, such as enforcing laws to control citizen's movements, border closures, and strict compliance instructions towards health protocols (e.g., physical distancing, ban on public gatherings, and stay-at-home orders), forcing many research projects to be modified, on hold, or even cancelled. Based on the COVID-19 pandemic attributes, which are difficult to predict and pose a threat, a more structured and tested data collection approach that can reflect the experience and social reality from 'below' during crises needs to be developed.

The latest debates on the relationship between crisis and research design have mainly focused on developing a research approach and methodology suited to research crisis events (e.g., Oya, 2013; Harvey, 2011; Lund, 2012). These research studies, among others, intend to find the best method to better understand crisis effects on humans and society (Salvad'o et al., 2015; Lund, 2012). Crises in the context of those studies

are translated into multiple dimensions: natural disaster, economic instability, political unrest, and open crime, including crises related to dangerous threats to health such as severe acute respiratory syndrome, swine-origin influenza A, and the latest being the COVID-19 pandemic. As the latest global crisis marker for this millennium, the extent to which the COVID-19 pandemic impacts the process of producing knowledge on marginalised indigenous communities is still largely unknown. This paper will contribute to the debate and practice on ensuring qualitative research methods possess the flexibility and adaptability to study indigenous communities during a crisis.

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Even though qualitative methods have been widely used in the field of Indigenous Studies, the specific changes in the indigenous social reality during the COVID-19 pandemic have created a new void that requires a special insight, particularly on the process of how knowledge is produced. Therefore, this paper has been written with the perspective that a qualitative research method that can be utilised to access indigenous communities, especially the less-fortunate ones during crises, needs to be developed. This idea is based on the awareness that the indigenous people's contributions as co-producers of knowledge can only be accessed with research methods that are resilient against crises. Moreover, it will create a new path for researchers to further strengthen their knowledge of indigenous communities by developing a tested platform for data collection activities amidst a crisis. The strengthening of qualitative research methods will significantly contribute to developing methodology and also epistemology.

This paper is based on the qualitative research (case studies) that I carried out in Telupid, Sabah, East Malaysia, from December 2020 until June 2021 through a digital platform, when countries were still fighting against the COVID-19 pandemic. In this paper, I will specifically discuss three crucial points: [1] the need and ways to develop research resilience for qualitative research in order to enable researchers in the Indigenous Studies discipline to adapt to changes and proceed with their research activities in an unpredictable research environment, [2] some aspects of qualitative research procedures that require pragmatic considerations in researching indigenous communities during a crisis, and [3] several challenges, limitations, and ethical issues in conducting qualitative data collection on indigenous people through a digital platform.

Methodological and Ethical Issues

In designing research resilience (in method and practice) and developing a more grounded, ethical, and flexible qualitative approach, I became concerned regarding the importance of considering two critical recurring methodological problems in the process of co-constructing knowledge with the indigenous communities, namely: [1] power imbalances in 'researcher-researched' relationships (Alburo-Cañete, 2020; Fustukian & Zwi, 2008; Gaillard & Peek, 2019; Hugman et al., 2011) and [2] the ability, flexibility, and adaptability of the qualitative research instruments and platform to produce knowledge 'from below' and 'from the South' during a crisis (Rahman et al., 2021; Alburo-Cañete, 2020).

Criticism over the issue of power imbalance in the 'researcher-researched' relationship is related to the trend of Western domination over indigenous culture and knowledge, especially in the Global South. The indigenous cultures and lifestyles will be scrutinised through a 'lens' that allows many misconceptions without a broad understanding of the researchers regarding the local context (Gaillard, 2019; Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

Studies & Lowitja, 2013, p. 4). The problem of misconceptions requires special attention as it will potentially create a contradiction in perspectives and agendas underlying the research project, a fundamental issue that must be addressed primarily in qualitative research (Råheim et al., 2016; Karnieli-Miller et al., 2009). Therefore, to do scientifically rigorous, locally and culturally grounded research activities, researchers need to understand relevant policies, customs, and traditional practices applied to the research areas and the language used by the local community (Gaillard, 2019, p. 441). Integrating knowledge produced by the culture or common sense of subaltern masses (the indigenous communities) in knowledge production requires more than just a researcher fully equipped with an 'ethical toolkit'. The researcher needs to address the unequal share of power within the 'researcher-researched' relationship through critical reflection on their positionality, roles, and responsibilities during the knowledge production processes and to whom the knowledge is produced (Alburo-Cañete, 2020).

The recent methodological debate has indicated the importance of qualitative research instruments and platforms to be flexible and adaptable to an unprecedented crisis. In the context of environmental sociology, attention has been given to research instruments and platform effectiveness in capturing the experiences and relationships of the communities with their surroundings and environment where they 'live and play' during the research. More specifically, Alburo-Cañete (2020) points out how word-based instruments in qualitative research methods can be utilised in obtaining information based on narrative storytelling among the participants. This issue is also closely associated with the ability of qualitative research instruments and platforms to capture the participants' emotions (on the phenomenon of being studied and the research activities) during the research that seems to be often overlooked in the research on marginalised indigenous communities (Grove, 2014; Lund, 2012).

Lately, these methodological problems have become the centre of debate in an attempt to search for alternative methods to study marginalised indigenous communities, especially during a crisis. Addressing these issues will meet the ethical demands for low or more than low-risk research, typically a category of research involving indigenous communities. This paper shows how I deal with these problems in my data collection activities.

Using Critical Reflection to Build Research Resilience

Resilience is a criterion that must be embodied by a research project to ensure knowledge development through research activity is not halted during a crisis. The concept of resilience refers to the ability of the research project to thrive during peaceful times and crises (Hamborg et al., 2020, p. 3). This idea aligns with the school of thought that considers the concept of resilience as the ability to retain the actual function

(under normal conditions) during the entire period of interruption (Doern et al., 2019). Retaining the actual function of the research methods requires research to possess a detailed and robust contingency plan that can adapt to potential changes. This plan can be produced by adopting critical reflection.

To determine and develop the best alternative to proceed with my data collection during the COVID-19 crisis, I need to critically reflect on my initial research design. Drawing upon the views of local leaders and experts, and my experiences in researching indigenous communities, basic assumptions to perceive the relationship between the researcher and the existing social context have been built. Such assumptions are essential in identifying the practical questions and detecting the possibility of 'blind spots' in every level of upcoming data collection. Based on these assumptions, at the second level, a new research procedure, more responsive and suitable to the current social realities in the field, was rebuilt.

Building multiple assumptions through critical reflection produces generic principles that guide and improve professional practices (Fook, 2011). *Critical reflection* is a fundamental skill that enables researchers to critically perceive their roles and actions in line with ethical principles and becomes the basis of providing a new meaning to their research experiences (Mortari, 2015; Sampson et al., 2008). Critical reflection towards the research design will increase the research ability, flexibility, and adaptability without compromising the data quality, thus, among the resilient research attributes (Rahman et al., 2021). It is also a vital process in complying with the need to respect the affected individuals' local customs, traditions, privacy, and rights and achieve 'high standards of professionalism' (Gaillard & Peek, 2019). Reflections are also meant to determine some aspects of the newly formed research procedures that need ethical consideration and an alternative solution if an unexpected situation occurs during the research activities. Critical reflections towards research design, among others, provide a solution to the first problem highlighted in this paper related to the 'researcher-researched' relationship in building integrative knowledge.

Building research resilience is crucial as a strategy to absorb the risk of research failures. However, how far research possesses this resilience is influenced by systematic and structural problems within the research environment (Hart et al., 2016). Therefore, in building resilience for my research project, I have paid attention to scrutinising the various systemic and structural aspects of the subjects and research area (e.g., covering internet accessibility and skills in using technological communication devices). Furthermore, the ability to conduct research during a crisis provides added value to the research findings, which also has positively impacted knowledge construction, be it from a theoretical or empirical aspect. How digital platforms can be utilised to build research resilience will be discussed in the next section.

The most recent and prominent manifestation of debates surrounding the politics of access in East Malaysia tends to focus on land-related issues (i.e., land grabbing, ownership, conversion, and encroachment) (Suadik & Shrestha, 2020). These debates have rarely extended to food access — the region's current emerging food security concerns. In addition, many contemporary debates on food producer empowerment in most countries of the Global South, including Malaysia, continue to discuss development in conservative terms compared to a dominant neoliberal discourse (Fraser et al., 2014, p. 56). With such trends and limitations, I need, to some extent, to depend on lessons that I have learnt during my data collection activities to appropriately modify relevant sections of my research instruments. Therefore, to study the influence of neoliberal policies on the politics of food access in Sabah's indigenous communities, I have been adopting an inductive approach by conducting a qualitative case study design as it provides the flexibility to modify the contents of my research instruments during the data collection activities. Active participation from the participants in qualitative research methods has provided me with an opportunity to build rapport with them that will, in the end, ensure that they are comfortable in sharing their views and experiences, hence, enabling me to have a deeper understanding of the complexities of the phenomenon on the ground. Furthermore, it also enables the participants to collectively contribute to producing knowledge in their communities. This research design also has proven suitable to be adopted in social research during crises (Doern et al., 2019).

My interest to study and delve deeper into the lives of the Indigenous communities in Sabah was initially influenced by my experience as an Indigenous Sabahan and subsequently as an anthropologist in one of the local universities in Malaysia. As a local scholar with over a decade of experience researching indigenous communities, I began to understand that the persistent poverty and malnutrition problems that we faced in Borneo are among others correlated with the spread and adaptation of neoliberal ideas, values, and policies in our Indigenous ways of life. Thus, both personal and professional experiences have urged me to critically reflect and engage in the evolution, manifestations, and domination of neoliberal ideologies and policies in the predominantly agrarian society in Sabah, as well as the processes of legitimation, contestation, and resistance as indigenous survival strategies to 'make a living' within the broader context of neoliberal austerity.

Given the limitations imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, I had to change my initial plan from face-to-face interactions to digitalising all my research methods. The usage of digital platforms is relatively new, especially in field-based research, if compared to face-to-face interactions, which are rarely questioned in terms of practice or even research culture. However, during a crisis that does not allow face-to-face data collection activities, the usage of digital platforms is now gaining attention. In the case of undertaking research activities during an unprecedented crisis such as the COVID-19

pandemic, some scholars (e.g., White et al., 2006; Mezirow, 2000; Fook & Askeland, 2006) place importance on, first, doing critical reflection towards the existing research procedures to allow them to be modified and adapted before they are enforced through new methods. Through this technique, the alternative research procedures used during a crisis can be ratified.

After critically making a scientific, ethical (the potential for interference and risks arising from the research),¹ and systemic and structural (ability to access the participants through phone networks as well as the internet) consideration, I finally decided to proceed with data collection through digital platforms. Four data collection methods were implemented under the qualitative research paradigm, covering semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions (FGD), survey interviews, and observation. Current alternative approaches and methodologies view digital research methods as highly adaptable to communities with stable internet networks. However, most indigenous communities in the Global South lack such infrastructure. Consequently, this alternative platform has often caused marginalised communities to become further disadvantaged in the process of knowledge production, especially during a crisis.

The challenges faced by the researchers during the COVID-19 pandemic could go beyond systemic and structural problems. Remote-based approaches to data collection can contradict the principles and values of community-based participatory research with indigenous communities — namely, principles focused on building trust, relationships, and reciprocity —, which the researcher can only establish by being present and through extensive community engagement. Achieving this kind of relational work can be challenging in the virtual environment. For many indigenous people, conducting research through digital platforms interferes with the human connection and relational aspects of conducting community-based and engaged research. To overcome this setback, a Field Research Assistant (FRA)² was appointed to manage the relationship between the participants and me, smoothen the data collection process on the ground, and help me deal with unforeseen circumstances during digital data collection activities. The role of an FRA is also crucial to enable more convenient remote-based research activities for the research teams that have only started to build relationships with the community during the fieldwork. He would be the mediator and meet face-to-face with the participants on my behalf before the data collection activities began; thus, I, first, held a briefing and intensive training session³ for the FRA, ensuring that he had sufficient information, especially on the research protocols and data collection procedures, prior to the data collection.

Survey Interview

The household survey interviews involved 213 research participants. This encompassed over 50% of household representatives over the age of 18 who were chosen using purposive and snowballing sampling techniques. This sample size was

needed to obtain a broad representation of perspectives from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds of the local population to meet the research aims and answer the research questions. Furthermore, with a large target audience, I needed to ensure the interview sessions could gather the data needed and that the process went well. Consequently, a pilot study was conducted to reflect on the research instrument and test the clarity (particularly, the use of local lingo), appropriateness of the type and format of questions, and the time required to complete the interview session. In the training session with the FRA, survey interview procedures had been highly emphasised to forestall problems by identifying possible challenges and options to overcome them, especially when the FRA carried out structured survey interviews on the field.

I had administered questionnaires through the Qualtrics survey software as a research instrument. Qualtrics ensures that the data from the survey interviews are stored securely and accessible at any time. The questions in the questionnaires were mostly close-ended, which required the participants to choose from a list of pre-defined responses (e.g., multiple answers and yes/no using the Likert scale). Once ensuring that the survey questions are appropriate to answer the research questions, community-friendly, fulfil all the ethical demands, and the FRA has shown confidence in handling the interview sessions alone, it is only then that the survey interviews begin. Upon request of the participants, I have conducted interview sessions via voice or video call lasting between 20–30 minutes. While the interview session through the digital platform was underway, the FRA had been conducting face-to-face interviews mainly with participants in areas with low access to phones and stable internet connections. It was my responsibility to ensure that the FRA would always comply with the research ethics principles and strict health protocols while organising data collection in the field. Thus, this survey was successfully done through constant and consistent interactions between the FRA and me.

To ensure the participants could easily understand the survey questions, I used some Kadazandusun terms. I also did most of the interviews (including obtaining consent from the participants) in local lingo, as some participants were illiterate and had limited fluency in Malay and English. With the use of the local lingo, it provides clarity to the questions and more sense of comfort to the participants in sharing their experiences in relation to the questions asked, as shown in the participant's response below:

Oh, kau Kadazandusun kah pula? "kita-kita juga baini" kan. Om, kangaam nogi do momoros yati do Dusun osinang nogi [Oh, are you a Kadazandusun too? "It is just us, after all" (a popular solidarity tagline among the indigenous Sabahan). In that case, we'd better use our Kadazandusun language, so it's easier.]

The use of the Kadazandusun language and culturally accepted terms in local lingo in the questionnaire is crucial in the research of indigenous communities to protect their sensitivity, avoid problems of misconceptions, and ensure data

quality, among the most critical aspects emphasised in the research ethics. Using local lingo in obtaining consent is also vital to avoid coercion in the community's participation, especially during a pandemic that hugely affects people's mental health and well-being.

This survey interview was conducted to obtain information on the villagers' trends, attitudes, and opinions from the aspect of demographics, socioeconomic, eating patterns, access (economy, physical, and resources), coping strategies, and their involvement in food security activism. In addition, the questions focus on collecting information on household affairs, particularly on what happens in the household, among households, and between the household and the community at a village level. With these types of questions, the confidence level of the participants towards the research project must be built to ensure that they are more comfortable in sharing their personal and household details. Consequently, I had to build rapport with the participants by working closely with the local partners, specifically the Village Chiefs. Furthermore, the research advertisement, which includes the inclusion and exclusion criteria⁴, was made known to the residents through the Village Chiefs to ensure that they had ample time to decide on their participation, ensuring that it was voluntary.

FGD

The second method that I used in my research was the FGD. A total of 28 participants were involved in FGDs divided into six groups such as 'only females', 'only males', and 'only youths', and each group had four to six members. Gender has been used as the FGD inclusion and exclusion criteria, considering that the different roles played according to gender in the food production system will form different experiences and views about the food access phenomenon in the Indigenous community. Early findings from the male and female FGDs show that the youth is the most active group involved in searching for and collecting food to meet the needs of the family (e.g., hunting, fishing, and collecting honey); thus, I decided to conduct two more FGD sessions only with youths.

FGD seeks to obtain participants' perspectives at the group level on issues surrounding food production, access to resources, local knowledge of food security, and commercial agriculture and marketisation. The FGDs had been carried out for approximately 2 hours per group, guided by a list of themes and questions in an open-ended format. The open-ended questions allowed the participants to share their experiences and views in more detail. It also enabled me to ask the following questions based on their answers. The data gathered from the FGDs were recorded in audio and video formats with the consent of all participants.

Most participants had limited skills in using online platforms, such as Microsoft Teams and Zoom, weak and sensitive internet networks due to the changing weather, adhered to the now-effective social distancing of 1.5 m, and other interferences (e.g., ambient noise and poor audio quality); thus, I

faced difficulties in handling the FGD sessions through the digital platform. Therefore, an FRA moderated most of the FGD sessions in the field, and I attended every session virtually. I introduced myself to the participants at the start of each FGD session to make them comfortable. My presence in every FGD session enabled me to experience the whole process of collecting data through FGD, forging a closer relationship with the participants and understanding the discussion's gist better, which made the transcription process easier. In addition, participation in FGDs was critical in addressing the problem of misconceptions and misinterpretation during the writing process.

Observation

The third method that I conducted was observation, which is an established and suitable method to study indigenous communities in their natural settings. It involves transect walks across the research areas to locate important food and livelihood security resources. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I had to conduct my observation through a digital platform with the help of the FRA. To ensure the observation went smoothly, I needed to reflect carefully on the observation procedure prior to the activity. This process is essential to obtain perspectives on possible challenges and solutions during data collection.

Guided by the observation checklists, I had observed aspects including, but not limited to, the villages' surrounding areas (e.g., road facilities, river, and forest), commercial agriculture and food production activities (e.g., at the paddy field and rubber and oil palm plantation areas), and other strategies for food security among the local residents (e.g., gathering honey and hunting). Observation enabled me to obtain a clearer picture from the emic and etic perspectives, especially on how the changing environment in Telupid influenced the Kadazandusun practices and behaviours. In this paper, I argue that the descriptive process, which only represents the emic⁵ perspective, cannot comprehensively cover all the possible events that could have been observed in a field setting. Despite the ongoing debates on the emic and etic⁶ perspectives, I perceive the divergence between both perspectives as an opportunity in addressing the issue that qualitative researchers usually confront during the data collection events, in which what has been shared by the participants during the interviews is inconsistent with what can be observed in their everyday practices.

With the participants' consent, data from the observation were recorded as images and videos. From the collected data, it can be concluded that there are significant elements in my research that can only be understood clearly through this method. For example, by observing how the honey was collected, I could better understand the emotions expressed by the participants who had successfully gathered the honey from the tree after experiencing such a gruelling process. Furthermore, observing through an interpretive lens enables me to learn and better understand the study setting and the group dynamics.

Semi-Structured Interview

The last method that I applied was semi-structured interviews. It allowed more in-depth discussion on, in particular, relevant topics for each key informant, which cannot be done during FGDs. Semi-structured interviews in my research mainly aim to explore the participants' feelings and perspectives (Guion et al., 2011) on the politics of food access in Sabah. Specifically, I sought to obtain information from informed participants on the current situation of food security at the district and state levels, neoliberal marketisation and food policy decisions, and the political economy surrounding indigenous access to resources and food (including the extent to which contestation incidences affect food access to the people concerned). Information from semi-structured interviews has been able to describe, in more detail, the descriptive data extracted from survey questionnaires and enrich and strengthen the data obtained from the other data collection methods.

For the semi-structured interviews, I recruited 14 key informants who have experience dealing with and managing issues related to the topic being studied. Participants in semi-structured interviews consisted of five individuals representing indigenous community leaders, two from non-governmental organisations, one from the palm oil company, two government officials, and four oil palm smallholders. To narrow down and gain an introduction to the individuals who meet the inclusion and exclusion criteria of the research, I identified and recruited key informants through purposive and snowballing sampling methods. I began by systematically mapping out experts on food security in Sabah from the University Malaysia Sabah and University College Sabah Foundation; from this mapping, I identified and contacted two experts who expressed their interest in participating. During the initial contact, I provided the Participant Information Statement and Consent (PISCF) to the experts, asked for their suggestions for further contact, and forwarded the PISCF to anyone they thought was suitable. Thus, participants were given enough time to decide their involvement to ensure that the data collection process did not violate ethical principles. I also initiated contact with and recruited most of my key informants through a third party to avoid coercion or pressure for them to participate.

Before each interview session, I performed a screening process to ensure that the selected participants met the inclusion and exclusion criteria. With the participants' consent, every interview session was done through video calling and Zoom meetings for about 1 hour and was recorded in field notes and also in the digital voice recorder. At no point, the participants deemed the questions to be too sensitive to answer during the interviews as the list of themes and questions were revised by the experts from the local university before they were used. The electronic data were, then, transcribed before I did data analysis. Similar to the FGD, the questions for the semi-structured interview were open-ended. Such questions

motivate the participants to state their views about the issue more freely and in more detail (Yin, 2009). This process allows the project to obtain rich data, which are necessary to answer the research questions.

Data Analysis

In qualitative research, the researcher's role as the primary data collection instrument necessitates the identification of personal values, assumptions, and biases at the outset of the study (Roulston & Shelton, 2015). Bias is a serious concern in research as it can cause distorted research validity and simultaneously misrepresent findings.

As an indigenous Sabahan, I am aware of my position to bring certain biases to this study, especially about the way I view and understand the data I collect and the way I interpret my experiences during my fieldwork if I do not put myself on the right position as the 'insider and outsider' in the community being studied. Thus, self-reflection and objectivity are critical throughout my research process. I commenced this study with the perspective that the experiences and perceptions of the Indigenous people in Sabah related to food access differ depending on their relationship with the place they live in and play (Majid Cooke & Johari, 2019). Different political, social, and economic environments and the fast-changing nature that the indigenous people have encountered lead to their different experiences and views on the subject being studied. Based on this critical standpoint, at the end of the research, I found that the unique characteristics of the Kadazandusun community in Sabah generated different views and interpretations on issues surrounding the politics of food access.

As a strategy for overcoming biases in qualitative research, Yin (2009) emphasises the importance of having a set of operational measures covering multiple sources of evidence. Using all four data collection methods in my research has enabled me to gather more in-depth data in answering the research questions. It has also helped in maintaining the quality of data collected through digital platforms. I also applied triangulation techniques in analysing the data as a validation strategy to address the issues of misconceptions and misinterpretations. The triangulation techniques allow weaknesses in a given method to be offset by strengths in another method (Yin, 2009).

I stored and analysed the data from survey interviews in Qualtrics. I used this software to answer the research questions by generating descriptive statistics from the questionnaires. Using the NVivo software, I did content and thematic analyses of the data that I had obtained from semi-structured interviews, FGDs, and observation in the forms of videos, photos, field notes, and transcripts. NVivo facilitates coding processes, making it easier for me to link and organise the data into thematic categories based on my research questions. This software also helped me identify useful information, filter out unnecessary data, and perform data analysis procedures more systematically, efficiently, and explicitly.

Conclusion

As a reflection of the social world that is constantly changing and sometimes faces unexpected changes, this paper shows the importance of having research resilience, especially for fieldwork-based research. Building research resilience requires research to have adaptability, flexibility, and a contingency plan to absorb risks should any unexpected crisis occur. Based on my experience of conducting qualitative research on the indigenous people in Sabah through a digital platform during the COVID-19 pandemic, the critical reflection technique has enabled me to better understand and integrate resilience into my research design and practice. The pandemic has taught me that to build resilience in a research project, I must look beyond established practices. The digital platform has provided me with a way out instead of the face-to-face approach and enabled my research activity and knowledge production based on participation to continue in a different form during the pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a global crisis faced by every social class all over the world. It forms a somewhat mutual understanding between the participants and me. Familiarity with the local culture and languages, a broad understanding of the other elements of local context, and working closely with local partners (Village Chiefs and the FRA) have formed a robust relationship between the participants and me (a crucial value in qualitative research). These similarities have forcibly brought the power imbalance gap and structures of inequality, which often entails a 'researcher-researched' relationship, closer (the leading cause of misconceptions in data interpretation). It has eventually enabled the data to have the same, or better, quality as it had before the crisis or in normal conditions.

I have deeply committed to adhering to the principles of ethical conduct before data collection to ensure research integrity. Conducting qualitative research through a digital platform, for instance, requires me always to be alert to the participants' reactions and statements that are likely to indicate their discomfort that I cannot observe directly. In agreement with Crow et al. (2006), I believe ethical research practice will lead to better-quality data. In other words, the quality of the data gathered during a crisis is determined by the amount of information obtained and adherence to the principles of ethics.

Overall, my data collection activities have enabled me to significantly contribute to the development of evidence-based knowledge for social practices and the debate on the politics of access, food security, and Indigenous Studies. Moreover, the indigenous communities' commitment to take part in my data collection through digital platform enables them to contribute to the new knowledge construction, be part of the process of developing research resilience for social research, and allow subaltern ideas to be further developed, a space where the voice from 'below' and the contribution of the local

epistemology can be put forward in the process of knowledge construction.

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Notes

1. To ensure the research project did not bring about risks of pressure and disturbances to the research participants, I had sent the research proposal and instruments to several experts specialising in indigenous communities of Sabah for assessment. I only used all the research instruments after receiving a positive response from this group of experts.
2. I recruited the Field Research Assistant (FRA) by advertising the position through the Village Chiefs. As a result of the interview sessions, the FRA, who is a local, was appointed. The appointment of the FRA among the locals is vital to facilitate movement on the research sites, while the movement restrictions beyond the 10-km radius are still in place. The FRA was chosen based on his ability to use the local language, good and extensive network in the research areas, familiarity with local culture and lifestyle, academic qualifications, skills, and working experience. These attributes are much needed to address misconceptions and misinterpretations of the data obtained from the field.
3. In the briefing session, I provided the FRA with detailed information on the research protocols. I also supplied him with important contact numbers in case he had any questions regarding research matters or to report any emergency in the field (Telupid Health Clinic, the Befriender Kota Kinabalu, Telupid Police station and Village Chiefs). I also held an intensive training session to train the FRA on the research protocols and data collection procedures from recruitment activities to data handover at the end of every data collection session (including how to conduct the data collection procedure using the research instruments, data storage guidelines, risk assessment and management,

privacy and confidentiality issues, and other ethical concerns). To ensure the FRA activities always comply with procedures and research ethics, I have been occasionally in contact with the FRA, either through phone or Zoom.

4. The inclusion and exclusion criteria for the survey interview participants are as follows: native Sabahan and aged 18 or above.
5. Understanding a phenomenon through the eyes of members of the culture being studied (Wills, 2007, p. 100).
6. An external view on culture and real-world events (Olive, 2014).

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