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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Combining remote and collaborative research: A critical reflection on large-scale, comparative, and interdisciplinary research in times of a global crisis

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Abstract

This paper examines the methodological and ethical challenges of conducting remote research on child-animal relationships across thirty communities in 17 countries during the COVID-19 pandemic. It critically assesses remote research as a mode of collaboration informed by decolonial aspirations, highlighting the complexities of navigating temporal and geographical distances, mitigating global inequalities, and addressing political and methodological tensions at the intersection of psychological anthropology and cross-cultural developmental psychology. By engaging with these challenges, the paper fosters critical dialogue on research ethics and methodologies between anthropology and psychology, advancing a broader intellectual engagement toward translocal equity.

KEYWORDS

child-animal-relationships, collaboration, interdisciplinarity, psychological anthropology, remote research

Artikel ini membahas tantangan metodologis dan etis dalam melakukan penelitian jarak jauh mengenai hubungan anak dan hewan di tiga puluh komunitas yang tersebar di tujuh belas negara selama pandemi COVID-19. Artikel ini secara kritis memeriksa penelitian jarak jauh sebagai bentuk kolaborasi yang diinformasikan oleh aspirasi dekolonial, dengan menyoroti kompleksitas dalam menavigasi jarak temporal dan geografis, mengatasi ketimpangan global, serta mengangkat tegangan politis dan metodologis di persimpangan antara antropologi psikologis dan psikologi perkembangan lintas budaya. Dengan menghadapi tantangan-tantangan ini, artikel ini mendorong dialog kritis mengenai etika dan metodologi penelitian antara antropologi dan psikologi, serta memperkuat keterlibatan intelektual yang lebih luas dalam upaya menciptakan keadilan lintas lokalitas

Este estudio examina los retos metodológicos y éticos de llevar a cabo una investigación a distancia sobre las relaciones entre niños y animales en treinta comunidades de diecisiete países durante la pandemia de COVID-19. Este estudio analiza críticamente la investigación a distancia como un modo de colaboración basado en aspiraciones decoloniales, destacando la complejidad de afrontar las distancias temporales y geográficas, mitigar las desigualdades globales y abordar las tensiones políticas y metodológicas en la intersección entre la antropología psicológica y la psicología del desarrollo transcultural. Al abordar estos retos, el artículo promueve un diálogo crítico sobre la ética de la investigación y las metodologías entre la antropología y la psicología, fomentando un compromiso intelectual más amplio hacia la equidad translocal.

INTRODUCTION

Psychological anthropologists have long engaged with remote research, particularly in the discipline's formative years during the first half of the 20th century. In response to the challenges of conducting fieldwork in (post)war conditions, Margaret Mead and Rhoda Métraux developed an interdisciplinary approach to studying culture at a distance, which was intended to enable trained scholars to research spatially or temporally inaccessible communities (Mead & Métraux, 1953). However, the mid-20th century saw increasing criticism of the culture and personality school, particularly its essentialist and Eurocentric tendencies. By the 1960s, the reliance on remote research conducted by trained assistants in the field and overseen by professors in the Global North was largely abandoned in favor of in-situ ethnographic and comparative studies, such as the Six Cultures Study of Socialization (SCSS) initiated in 1954 by John and Beatrice Whiting. The study produced dozens of monographs and handbooks on the role of culture and context in child development that have since become classics in collaborations between psychologists and anthropologists (LeVine, 2010). In addition, since the collaborative and decolonial turn transformed anthropology in the early 2000s, remote cross-cultural research collaborations became a symbol for colonialist and extractive knowledge construction. Rightfully so, we might add, considering questionable working contracts and

conditions of so-called "field assistants," whose names were made invisible once research outcomes were published.

Given this history, remote research has often been viewed as a relic of colonialist anthropology. However, the COVID-19 pandemic and its restrictions on mobility necessitated reconsiderations of research design, leading to the emergence of new forms of remote and large-scale collaborative research. In light of these shifts, this paper critically examines the potential and limitations of remote *collaborative* research as a means of countering extractive knowledge construction. Drawing on ongoing debates surrounding decolonizing methodologies (Alatas, 2022; Alatas & Sinha, 2017), particularly those emphasizing community-engaged research (TallBear, 2014; Todd, 2014), we assess whether such research designs can ever truly align with decolonial approaches. While the relationship with children, as the primary research participants, runs as a thread throughout the analysis, in this paper, we turn our attention to the *internal* dynamics among differently positioned researchers, examining how power imbalances *within* research teams affect the decolonizing potential of collaborative efforts

From the outset of the pandemic, this vision has been hampered by increasing pressure from funding agencies to adopt more remote research, driven by limited mobility, travel restrictions, and halted collaboration with and funding of "field assistants" and research partners. Many researchers found themselves in a dilemma as to whether to stop collaboration and funding or find ways of translocal and transnational research that did not withdraw from previously agreed commitments and ethical and financial responsibilities to our research partners in the "Global South."

To bring the admittedly opposing ideas of *remote* research as a colonial project and *collaboration* as a decolonial practice into conversation, we employ the term "*remote collaborative research.*" Because we are uncomfortable with examining others' projects, we reflect on the limitations and potentially avoidable errors of our own research as it unfolded during the COVID-19 pandemic with its restrictions on scholarly mobility and impaired access to in-situ collaboration. Thus, this paper does not present research outcomes, but it reflects on the limits and potentials of academic research as a collaborative practice across disciplines and field sites.

Our study emerges from an interdisciplinary and international research collaboration titled "Children and Nature," based at Leipzig University, Germany. Initially designed to explore children's and adolescents' relationships with animals in urban and rural areas of Zambia and Germany, the project originally sought to employ participant observation, interviews, and natural experiments. However, as the pandemic unfolded in early 2020, it became necessary to shift toward a more flexible and exploratory research design that maintained engagement with on-site collaborators. This shift resulted in the formation of an extensive collaborative network utilizing remote data collection methods, including semi-structured interviews, free listing, and card sorting tasks. Over 2 years, the project expanded to involve researchers from 30 communities across 17 countries, many of whom had previously collaborated with the LeipzigLab's team members and were now facing employment precarity due to the pandemic.

In the first step, the core research team, consisting of anthropologists and psychologists, trained collaborators via online sessions to ensure methodological consistency in data collection, storage, and transfer. Over time, the project evolved from a small-scale cross-cultural comparison to a broader initiative aimed at creating a diverse database while maintaining continuity in collaboration amid the pandemic. The involvement of on-site researchers, often termed "local assistants" in academic literature, was central to this process. We remain acutely conscious of the historical power imbalances entrenched in such terms while also acknowledging that collaborators' participation in the project reflects diverse forms of agency. Some sought involvement based on long-term partnerships, particularly former research collaborators and their families who suddenly lost scholarly opportunities to collaborate and generate income due to the pandemic. Others joined due to the alignment of goals, overlapping research priorities, and the project's relevance to their academic or professional pursuits.

This paper intends to direct questions at both anthropologists and psychologists (and most of all to ourselves) and critically reflect on new digital opportunities and continued methodological limitations of remote and large-scale comparative research through our collaboration. Such self-reflexive critique stems from the observation that, with few exceptions (e.g., Alber & Kölbl, 2023; von Poser et al., 2019;

Scheidecker et al., 2022), such formats have become a "last resort" for scientific collaboration between psychologists and anthropologists in Germany in recent years. From where we stand as psychological anthropologists and cross-cultural developmental psychologists, we observe an increased inwardness and isolation of both disciplines, with the former gravitating exclusively to narrative and cultural phenomenology and the latter drifting off towards mostly narrative-deprived experimental methods. This paper does not advocate the return of remote research as a colonialist endeavor. Instead, we interrogate how remote methodologies can be reimagined in the 21st century through decolonial and collaborative research ethics.

Due to limited space, this paper focuses on an open and self-reflexive critique of the semi-structured interviews with differently positioned researchers (PIs, on-site researchers and assistants, data coding assistants) of the project and uses the method as a magnifying glass to discuss the potential and limitations of *remote collaborative research* in the time of crisis. The semi-structured interviews are conceived as an explorative study to create standardized sets of comparable data on children's attitudes towards animals that would later be extended through in-situ fieldwork with the collaborators once pandemic insecurities waned. Between 2020 and 2023, the team conducted 1762 semi-structured interviews with children, adolescents, and adults. The corresponding data were transcribed, translated, coded, and analyzed by our team at LeipzigLab in collaboration with on-site researchers. Despite the challenges posed by the pandemic, the project worked towards a collaborative platform of conversation, work, and care, and by the end of 2023, ultimately involved nearly 50 active researchers across multiple sites.

Drawing insights from feedback sessions with collaborating researchers, we reflect on how power asymmetries shaped the development and management of *remote collaborative research* amid the pandemic's logistical and technological constraints. We examine (a) how our collaborating researchers' diverse perspectives intersect with global inequalities in academic knowledge construction and explore the challenges these disparities create for decolonized collaboration. In addition, we focus on (b) how the diversity of academic conventions and hierarchies influenced researcher-participant dynamics and ethical concerns, especially in research involving children.

We convey significant critiques from both on-site and remote researchers, who openly discuss the project's shortcomings, scrutinize missed opportunities, and hint at the many paths yet to be taken. By doing so, we seek to contribute to the decentralization of research through collaboration and offer insights for those working in teams and at the intersection of anthropology and psychology. There is a difference, after all, whether anthropologists work *on* psychology and deconstruct its essentialism from a detached standpoint or whether they work *in* psychology and try to find compromise and collaborate with larger teams despite sometimes fundamental differences in methodological and epistemological viewpoints.

The first section of this paper outlines these agreed-upon epistemological and methodological foundations of our collaboration. Rather than presenting a singular narrative, we adopt a collaborative mode of reflection that incorporates insights from various on-site and remote members of the research team. Following a discussion of the diverse roles and responsibilities within the project, we explore how *remote collaborative research* can serve as a productive site for disciplinary boundary work between anthropology and psychology. The final section critically examines the challenges encountered throughout the project, including infrastructural barriers, team management complexities, language differences, and ethical considerations. By addressing these issues, we aim to contribute to ongoing discussions about the viability of *remote collaborative research* as an ethically and methodologically robust approach in times of (pandemic) crisis and beyond.

RESEARCH POSITIONALITIES

We build our critical assessment on audio recordings of interviews conducted by Ferdiansyah Thajib, one of our remote team coordinators, with 15 researchers who assumed various roles within the project. These individuals are categorized into two groups: (1) on-site researchers and (2) remote researchers, based on their distinct roles in the research process. The on-site researchers, numbering nine, were responsible for recruiting participants at their respective sites and conducting semi-structured interviews with children

using a predefined interview guide. They provided feedback on the interview questions' clarity and were involved in tasks such as transcribing and back-translating children's responses. The second group consists of six remote researchers, including one co-principal investigator and five student assistants. Their responsibilities included coding interview transcripts, coordinating data collection efforts, conducting interviews in Germany, transcribing and/or translating interviews, and collaborating on research publications.

The interviewed on-site researchers are based in China (Tongtong Meng and Wanting Sun), Ecuador (Sandra Masaquiza), India (Jahnavi Sunderarajan), Indonesia (Monika Swastyastu, Desri Julita Taek), Italy (Ariana Abis), Namibia (Disney Tjizao), and Zambia (Dennis Shishala). The remote researchers are based in Germany (Bernardo Arroyo-Garcia, Magie Junker, Ljubica Petrović, Blanca Striegler, Janina Weyrowitz) and the United Kingdom (Patricia Kanngiesser). All interviewees provided written informed consent before the interview, and they agreed to become co-authors of this paper.

The audio-recorded interviews for this paper were about an hour in length and took place via Zoom in June 2022. The first author, Ferdiansyah Thajib, who was working as a postdoctoral fellow at the Children and Nature project during that time, conducted the interviews in English, except for the interview with one on-site researcher that was carried out in Indonesian and then transcribed and translated to English. The interview with the Italian researcher took place with the assistance of Federica Amici (a researcher affiliated with the team), who provided English-Italian and Italian-English translations during the Zoom session.

The interview questions, developed by Ferdiansyah Thajib, Thomas Stodulka, and Katja Liebal, addressed topics such as the reasons and timing of the interviewees' participation in the research project, their experiences working on the project, the challenges they faced, and their critical feedback on the project's collaborative aspects. By representing their reflective accounts, we aim to foreground the diversity of perspectives on the possibilities and limitations of this remote collaborative project without glossing over uncomfortable feedback. Moreover, although we recognize that contributors have varying degrees of input in this paper, we have chosen to grant visibility and acknowledgment as co-authors to everyone.

Our approach follows calls for unsettling practices of authorship attribution (Dunia et al., 2020; Long et al., 2022; Urassa et al., 2021) that have often considered contributions of fieldworkers or on-site researchers as "unworthy of authorship status" (Urassa et al., 2021, 668) based on standards set by the principal investigators and social science journals, mainly based in the Global North. In addition to ethical and political considerations, we welcome such collaborative practice as an opportunity for co-theorizing (Rappaport, 2008) and for incorporating feedback loops from diversified positionalities and extended collaborative temporalities in the entire research process.

REMOTE COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH IN CONTEXT

We propose the term *remote collaborative research* to encapsulate the fusion of two contrasting research approaches. This term encompasses "remote research," which hinges on the guidance of on-site researchers stationed at field sites and, in our context, emerged from restricted researcher mobility during the pandemic. It also integrates the principles and methodologies of "collaborative research," rooted in decolonial aspiration. As mentioned in the introduction, we aim to initiate a dialogue between these established yet distinct methodologies.

Although remote research is often considered a product of the digital age, it has been utilized for decades, particularly in psychological anthropology, to supplement or replace in-person interactions (Postill, 2016). The advantages of remote research include mitigating security risks faced by both researchers and research participants, particularly in conflict areas and protracted war zones (Douedari et al., 2021; Mena & Hilhorst, 2020), and minimizing safety hazards and overcoming travel restrictions such as those during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic (Hensen et al., 2021; Lupton, 2021). Remote research also responds to bureaucratic challenges, declining research time and funding, and reducing ecological footprints while facilitating broader participant inclusion across geographical and epistemological boundaries.

Conversely, issues such as technological disparities, privacy and data protection concerns, management and control of data quality, difficulties in establishing trust and rapport, limited insight into the contexts and daily lives of research participants, and variations in local ethical clearance policies are among the challenges frequently mentioned in implementing remote research (Banks et al., 2022; Dean et al., 2021; Nguyen & Stodulka, 2020). Furthermore, decolonial scholars (Bisoka 2020; Dunia et al., 2020; Urassa et al., 2021) have compellingly highlighted how the pandemic, with its call for online ethnography from a distance, has amplified tendencies for remote cross-cultural research to reproduce unequal and exploitative research relationships. Remote research, shaped by colonial legacies, has long fostered exploitative dynamics between researchers in the field, who regulate knowledge flow, and those based in the Global North, who often retain control over funding, authorship, and dissemination. On-site researchers frequently face unfair compensation, lack of co-authorship, and disproportionate exposure to fieldwork risks, reinforcing barriers to equitable collaborative research (Dunia et al., 2020; Urassa et al., 2021). Addressing these disparities is crucial for building research infrastructures that reject extractive practices and promote horizontal collaboration (DeHart, 2020).

Anthropologists have ascribed mainly two different meanings (Clerke & Hopwood, 2014) to collaborative methods: collaborative ethnography and team ethnography. Lassiter (2004) defines collaborative ethnography as an approach that emphasizes how the interactions between the researcher and the research participants take place as knowledge co-productions. This approach foregrounds the ethical and political values of conducting research *with* the research stakeholders rather than *about* them. In its numeric extension but not necessarily as a collaborative engagement with interlocutors, team ethnography refers to a joint venture of scholars who carry out ethnography as a research team (Erickson & Stull, 1998). While team fieldwork has become an increasingly common practice in disciplines such as primatology, comparative psychology, archaeology, and health-related research, collaborative *team* ethnography continues to challenge the anthropological archetype of the ethnographer, exposing the lack of recognition for team-based publishing and career tracks. In fields like psychology, for example, team-based research is encouraged for its interdisciplinary engagement (Mauthner & Doucet, 2008; Wasser & Bresler, 1996). Our approach to *remote collaborative research* is one that emerged from the situatedness of the study and was continuously adapted to emerging needs and challenges rather than following a pre-defined methodological script.

In practice, this study was not limited to online data collection but also included so-called proxy fieldwork (Stodulka, 2021) through the integration of in-situ interviewing and documentation conducted by on-site researchers. While online components were essential in contexts where in-person interviews were not feasible due to pandemic restrictions, on-site researchers played a key role in conducting in-situ interviews with child participants wherever possible. Thus, the remote collaborative study was facilitated by a combination of digital methods, the multi-sited presence of on-site researchers across various locations, and the collaborative engagement of all involved, which manifested in regular online meetings and "data sessions."

This exploratory study aimed to broaden inquiries into the psychological and sociocultural dimensions of human-animal relationships, particularly at the intersection of psychology and anthropology, while striving to mitigate Eurocentric biases (Amiot & Bastian, 2015; Henrich et al., 2010; Nielsen et al., 2017). To address the challenges of Eurocentrism in this study, we critically examine the biases that arise from treating the experiences of Western populations as the universal norm. Such an approach can limit the scope and applicability of research findings, particularly in psychology, where deviations from this assumed standard can be deemed "abnormal" and less generalizable (Medin et al., 2017). This is where psychological anthropology comes into the picture, with its continued plea to "provincialize" (Chakraborty, 2000) psychology's Eurocentric theory and diversify its research themes, collaborators, interlocutors, and epistemologies.

As the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded globally, our project evolved as a platform for research reflection, with anthropology collaborators joining the effort. Addressing concerns about sample homogeneity and Eurocentrism in large-scale comparative research, one of our goals was to diversify research samples and teams to generate less homogenous data (Schnegg & Lowe, 2020). The initial phase focused on team

meetings with remote researchers at LeipzigLab, but it quickly expanded to include a diverse range of on-site researchers at various locations. A central aim was to diversify research teams and samples to create a broader, more representative dataset, which in turn would allow for more meaningful and contextually grounded analyses and insights.

PIVOTING RESEARCH MID-PANDEMIC

The interview guide for the cross-cultural study on children's views on animals was finalized in March 2020, just as the pandemic's first wave led to travel restrictions and physical distancing protocols. These challenges necessitated a shift to online data collection, which was feasible in Germany due to reliable internet but caused delays in Zambia due to connectivity issues. In response, the project's principal and co-principal investigators expanded the study's field sites, embracing remote collaboration to sustain research relationships, knowledge production, and financial support for collaborators during economically challenging times. Pune, India was the first addition, facilitated by a strong working relationship between co-principal investigator Patricia and Jahnavi, alongside reliable urban internet access. As mobility restrictions eased, data collection plans resumed in Chimfunshi and Chingola, Zambia, and expanded to Peru and Yogyakarta, Singaraja, Pangkalan Bun, and Kupang in Indonesia, where other fieldwork had come to a halt and research partners became unemployed. These locations were selected based on established personal and professional ties, with key team members—Katja, Magie, and Thomas—leveraging their prior experience and connections to integrate new collaborators.

As explained by one of the remote researchers, Patricia who is based in the United Kingdom:

> One is that I think remote research can work well in settings where you have worked before. Where you have been there in person, or you have local collaborators that know people, that know what works and what doesn't work. I think it would be really, really difficult to do this in a setting where you have never worked before or where your collaborator has never worked before.

In well-established settings, where researchers and local collaborators understand the local context, cultural norms, and logistical challenges, the research process can benefit from mutual trust and shared knowledge. This streamlines decision-making and adaptation, as remote researchers can anticipate potential obstacles, while on-site researchers—who are directly engaged in the field—can actively navigate these challenges through close communication with the remote team. However, in unfamiliar settings where both parties lack prior experience working together, these dynamics can shift. Establishing trust, understanding local norms, and navigating logistical and ethical complexities require greater time and resources. Without an existing foundation of collaboration, the process becomes more challenging, increasing the risk of miscommunication and cultural misunderstandings.

Furthermore, the pandemic highlighted resource-sharing as a primary driving force behind the project. Many of our colleagues worldwide faced significant income disparities, often due to job loss, halted research projects, or lockdown measures. We saw the project's potential to provide some form of financial relief. However, we also feel that it is important not to overstate this point, as we do not want to reproduce Global-North-savior narratives, nor do we intend to gloss over the fact that the collaboration is indelibly based on working relations rather than a social enterprise. The observation made by Monika, the on-site researcher in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, aptly captured this second aspect:

> I don't necessarily see the financial aspect of collaboration is about sharing resources. Isn't it actually the case that the team in Germany needs the support of local researchers because of COVID didn't allow them to travel here? If there is no pandemic, would you still be collaborating with local researchers? Unless of course the aim from the start is to share the resources.

At first glance, expanding research sites based on familiarity and/or previously established working relationships with on-site researchers may narrow the scale of a study; however, the opposite happened in our project. As the project garnered increased attention and additional colleagues joined in various roles, they also brought along their networks, which extended to specific locations, individuals, or institutions that could be integrated as research sites or collaborators. Connections with on-site researchers and research institutions at the field sites were no longer exclusively managed by Patricia, Katja, Magie, or Thomas but were distributed among various individuals working closely with the team. The project's serendipitous dynamics and extensive commitments have facilitated its large-scale scope, finally involving nearly 50 team members and collaborators working with almost 30 different communities in 17 countries. In the following, we illustrate four significant challenges of such a large scope.

CHALLENGES #1: INFRASTRUCTURE COMPLEXITIES

The participation of researchers in various roles like interviewers, transcribers/translators, and coders significantly impacted those coordinating data collection across multiple sites. Remote researcher Magie notes that guidelines for data collection could not always be communicated uniformly due to the diverse and intersecting roles and commitments of the researchers involved. For example, not all on-site researchers received or acted on the most recent updates from their remote collaborators due to time constraints. This issue was not simply logistical but also reflective of hierarchies in knowledge flow within the research team. As Magie explains:

> Because also different people organize the contact with different communities (…). So I guess we could really find a better system for how we communicate because, in the beginning, it was very easy because it is small groups, so you can always talk to people directly. At the beginning, it seemed stupid to create a communication system because you can just talk to someone directly. But then we grew over time, and we noticed without a clear system of communication, things started to get lost in communication as there were more people involved.

While the expansion of the research team led to inevitable challenges in coordination, a more pressing concern arose when communication breakdowns contributed to an uneven distribution of interpretive authority, with some team members shaping the study's scope while others handled logistics with a limited say in methodology. Those closer to decision-making hubs had more control over research protocols, while those in the field navigated evolving expectations, sometimes without immediate support.

This uneven distribution of authority also shaped the challenges of ensuring data quality across sites. Patricia, one of the remote researchers, who has been involved in remote research numerous times, underlined that:

> Losing data from one participant, or video data was corrupted, well these things happened. I think it's just part of the process. With a project of that scale, that's almost expected that things are not going to go according to plan…When designing large-scale cross-cultural projects such as this one, try to build some buffer room, some redundancies, and alternatives if something goes completely wrong. So, they are not going to jeopardize the entire project. Because, I mean, you spend so much time and money and effort to get that data.

Discrepancies in technological infrastructures, compounded by pandemic restrictions, also imposed significant burdens. From the start, the on-site researchers had the choice to conduct the interviews with children online or offline. While varying accounts of how the different interview modes affected the research interactions will be discussed later in this paper, the reasons for conducting online or offline

interviews were mainly shaped by technological issues or lockdown restrictions. One of the on-site researchers in Beijing, China, Tongtong explained:

> I feel one of the biggest problems for us was the internet and the usage of the online meeting software, especially for the participants in rural places. They seldom use this kind of software and sometimes their internet would be poor. We actually told them to go and find a place with a good internet signal, and we wrote a kind of instruction to help them know more about how to use the online meeting software.

While Tongtong could still solve issues around the availability of good internet connections and unfamiliarity with online meeting software, the same problems led Dennis to conduct his interviews in Chimfunshi and Chingola, Zambia fully offline. These differences highlight an important yet often overlooked aspect of remote research—methodological flexibility is not just about navigating logistical challenges but also about recognizing how the conditions of data collection shape the research process, determining what is studied, how knowledge is produced, and whose perspectives are prioritized.

On the remote researcher side, technical challenges were mainly experienced through logistical difficulties, or what Patricia described as "logistical nightmare." Magie provided further details, explaining that due to specific requirements for the interview recordings, certain equipment had to be procured locally by the on-site researchers. The coordinating team then reimbursed these expenses. However, in some areas, such equipment was unavailable, necessitating shipments from Germany, which involved navigating complex local customs regulations. These delays were more than bureaucratic inconveniences; they highlighted dependencies on external institutions and supply chains, influencing the temporal rhythms of research in different ways for both remote and on-site researchers.

As the project grew in size and complexity, the division of labor became essential for managing various tasks. However, this division also introduced challenges in ensuring equitable participation in knowledge production. As sociologists Natasha Mauthner and Andrea Doucet (2008) note, team-based research often stratifies researchers into those who gather firsthand knowledge in the field and those who produce textual knowledge in office settings. In this study, remote researchers had greater oversight of data interpretation, while on-site researchers engaged more directly with participants. The question of who had access to which forms of knowledge—and how this shaped the framing of research outcomes—remains central to understanding the epistemic hierarchies embedded in collaborative projects. In the next section, we explore how researchers in different positions worked to address these tensions in their research relationships.

CHALLENGES #2: RESEARCH TEAM DIVERSITY

The goal of identifying more diverse study populations might naturally align with diverse team compositions. However, as Medin et al. (2017) observe, while many researchers in the Global North are enthusiastic about more diverse study populations, some see diversity in research teams as a burden, claiming it disrupts rather than advances scientific progress. In our project, we found the opposite to be true. We define researcher diversity as team collaborators whose sociocultural backgrounds and experiences provide unique perspectives on the research process. Following Medin et al. (2017), "This form of diversity is almost surely correlated with social class, race, gender, and ethnicity, but it is not guaranteed to be, especially in fields or subfields with strong training models (and/or culturally narrow epistemologies) that tend to emphasize a single perspective or in fields and subfields plagued by culturally narrow epistemologies" (1). In our collaboration, the inclusion of diverse researchers from various cultural and professional backgrounds was crucial, bringing in new perspectives and approaches that were essential to the project's development. This is not to say that collaborating through diversity was ever easy.

For example, a research project of this size created a level of opacity that caused uneven insights and understandings into what was happening in the research settings, despite frequent online data

sessions and team discussions. This was expressed by one of the remote coding team members in Germany, Bernardo:

> Because I am not that involved in the communication with different field sites and colleagues in the other countries. I haven't met most of the colleagues abroad, I only know them by names, when there is a presentation (…) So far, there have been two presentations by you [Ferdiansyah] and Jahnavi and I think this is nice and hopefully will continue. First you get to know the person, you know who did all the work, get first-hand information on the process of their experience when working with the kids. I know that they did all the work, when I see how many countries and interviews have been conducted. But I only have better knowledge on the research process that took place in Germany, which is a pity, because so many more things were done across the globe.

A similar account was also shared by another remote coding team member in Germany, Ljubica, as well as the on-site researcher who collected data in several locations in Italy, Ariana:

> This is not really a complaint, but I am really curious to know what the other people are doing. I know I am a part of a big team but I want to know what the other people are experiencing. For instance, sometimes I asked Federica[1] if there is some interesting answer from children in Colombia. What do people come up with?

To enhance transparency across research locations, Katja (as the project leader) organized online presentations where both on-site and remote researchers could share progress, feedback, and interact. However, communication was largely mediated by remote core team members, leading to partial knowledge of the project's entirety. The research project thus manifested as a rather patchy form of collaborative engagement. This model of collaboration exhibited a patchwork nature, aligning with the concept of "patchwork ethnography," which redefines research as collaborative work embracing constraints and partial knowledge (Günel et al., 2020). This approach contrasts the notion that collaboration inherently enhances research quality and effectiveness (Fox & Faver, 1984). Moreover, team size and team structure can affect the novelty and disruptive potential of team research, with smaller and/or more egalitarian teams generating more novel/disruptive ideas (Wu et al., 2019; Xu et al., 2022). Collaboration always entails complex asymmetries that require reflexive examination from all involved.

Such asymmetries have led Monika, who interviewed children in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, to describe the study as "semi-collaborative." This perception stems from two considerations. The first one is based on her prior experiences of working in other internationally-led research projects:

> (In former projects) where I became "research laborer" (*buruh riset*), there was a protocol for everything, and they were quite strict. As a research laborer, I just had to do what was asked, collect, and submit the data when finished and that's all. It's different with this project. There were a couple of times when you [Ferdiansyah] and I discussed several things prior to the data collection. We talked about what words to use, how to engage with children, so that they understand the question and feel comfortable. I sent you some samples first and then we discussed them, about the interview situations, before I fully started the process. Here, I felt more humanized than just being a laborer.

Monika found her previous research engagements dehumanizing due to her lack of influence over the work process and exclusion from the results (see Braverman, 1998 [1974]; Briken, 2023). Her interactions with the remote researchers in the current study made her feel more "humanized," giving her work a greater sense of purpose (see Laaser & Karlsson, 2022).

However, Monika's characterization of the project as "semi-collaborative" reflects the limitations of this collaboration. Despite her involvement in the early stages, Monika remained disconnected from significant parts of the research process, especially the analysis and writing stages. As she notes:

> I call it semi-collaborative because apart from this is being a new subject, theme, and approach, other than that, I did not learn anything much about what happens after. I don't have access to this part. I am curious after doing all these interviews with the children, how will it be analyzed? How will it be turned into writing? I was also not involved in the question formulation or methodological development.

Monika's reflections on the structural challenges that shaped her involvement in the project revealed power imbalances in this remote collaborative research. Her experience shows how some participants are more central to decision-making while others, like her, remain on the periphery. This imbalance is not about ideological marginalization but speaks to the structural and logistical constraints of the project itself, despite the aspirations to create more equal partnerships. The "semi-collaborative" nature of the project highlights how difficult it is to truly decentralize knowledge production and establish equitable collaboration, even when this goal is actively pursued. These limits are not just theoretical but lived realities that affect both the ethical and practical dimensions of the research, revealing how deeply ingrained power asymmetries persist, even in the most collaborative settings.

An uneven inclusion in the different steps of knowledge production not only influences diverse senses of belonging and commitment to the project but can also affect the quality of the data collection. For some of the on-site researchers, involving them from the onset of the research design stage would have made the interview process easier, Jahnavi in India, tells us:

> I know the project comes with pre-prepared questions, but it might be quite nice if the collaborators are also involved in the design. Not necessarily changing the questions or even changing the content but just maybe making it a little bit more culturally appropriate. Because otherwise, sometimes you do have to do some quick thinking on your feet.

Jahnavi's comment speaks to a broader concern: while researchers recognize that some questions may not fully align with cultural contexts, the specific ways in which these questions fall short are often not anticipated. For instance, in some of the interviews conducted in India, standardized questions about animals as food risked framing meat consumption as a moral dilemma, given that children are often taught to view animals with reverence. In contrast, in Indonesia, meat consumption is not often viewed in the same way, as it is a culturally normalized practice tied to family traditions, economic necessity, and religious rituals. None of these are anticipated in the interview questions, hence requiring on-site researchers to "think on their feet."

These concerns reflect an ongoing debate about the balance between structured questioning for comparative analysis and research approaches that are attuned to local conditions (Helfrich, 1999; Hofstede, 2001; Sidaway & Waldenberger, 2020). The remote team prioritized standardized questions to ensure methodological rigor and facilitate cross-cultural comparison, given the constraints of time and resources. However, the challenges faced by on-site researchers reveal how rigid standardization can obscure the nuances of lived experience, underlining the need for greater flexibility in adapting research instruments. While dialogue and collaboration with on-site researchers to translate these questions into culturally relevant terms have been essential for ensuring their effectiveness during both the interviews and data analysis, it is clear that this alone is not sufficient. This issue is further elaborated upon in the following section.

CHALLENGES #3: LANGUAGE AND TRANSLATION

Interview questions underwent a multistep translation process, starting from German to English and then into 11 languages spoken at the field sites, including Indonesian, Italian, Spanish, French, Turkish, Japanese, Arabic, Hai//om, Chinese, Lingala, and Maya. Jahnavi highlighted the challenge of translating conceptual terms, which may not have equivalents in all languages or cultures. Patricia recalled the extensive

effort to adapt English translations from German to fit the Indian context. To minimize confusion, there was ongoing communication between team coordinators like Katja, Patricia, and Ferdiansyah and on-site researchers to provide contextualization and clarity for the questions. However, some on-site researchers noted that these measures did not eliminate ambiguities. Disney, who interviewed the children at Farm 6 in Mangetti West, Namibia, illustrates:

> The interview guideline has this particular language, some terms we don't have them in our local language, and others we borrow from other languages. Farm animals can be many things in our language, cows, wild animals, it's not specific. Pets is also a problem; we don't have a specific word for it. We can say 'dog', but we don't say pet. As hunter-gatherers, people here just know animals are there to be killed for eating. The only animals kept are dogs, for hunting. They are also treated differently; they don't receive that much love. Maybe what we can improve is to have more precise questions so the children can give more elaborate answers.

Similar accounts are echoed by Sandra, who interviewed the children on Galapagos Island, Ecuador; Tong-tong, and Wanting in Beijing and rural areas in China; Monika in Yogyakarta, Indonesia; as well as Dennis in Chimfunshi and Chingola, Zambia. Some members of the remote coding team also noticed such language discrepancies. Blanca, for instance, detected during the coding process that the meaning of interview questions was transformed for some of the transcriptions that had been translated back to English from local languages:

> I don't know where this starts. Because there is a guideline and briefing for translating and transcription. But sometimes the words just don't exist in the local language so this will definitely affect the next stage in the process.

Due to the project's epistemological paradigm, concepts that were not readily translatable to other cultural contexts, such as "farm-animal" and "pets," were included in the interview questions. In retrospect, as someone who was also involved in the design process of the interview questions, Magie explained that this approach was taken for comparative purposes, that is, to learn whether concepts such as "pet" and "farm animal" existed and whether children had some understanding of them. However, as mentioned before, this particular set of questions quite often generated confusion in the interaction between the on-site researchers and child participants. This speaks for a stronger need to co-design interview questions with on-site researchers from the very start. Real-time translation or phrasing adjustments do not address the deeper issue of research instruments failing to capture the complexity of participants' lived realities. A more integrated approach to research design is needed, where local cultural nuances are embedded in the formulation of research questions rather than being treated as afterthoughts to be addressed during fieldwork or analysis.

A set of related dilemmas was also encountered by some members of the remote coding team in Germany upon finding that the interview transcripts, while often rich in cultural inflections, were mainly coded by European researchers, such as described by Ljubica:

> I was curious about how translation happened because there are so many steps between what the participants said to what we are coding. So far, the transcription is okay, but with translation already we encountered so many things that are really related to culture, language, and the way things are being said. It is an ethical concern in a way, am I qualified to interpret a Namibian proverb and what it implies?

Such a dilemma was addressed by another coding team member, Janina. She observed that the so-called "data sessions" where the on-site researchers shared their fieldwork and findings had been very helpful in providing deeper cultural contextualization. However, apart from having more data sessions with on-site

researchers, Janina felt that the coding process could have benefited from having more culturally diverse coding team members.

Language barriers do not only prevail in terms of international/local differences or conceptual/practical dimensions but can also be colored by the different disciplinary backgrounds among the team members. As the person responsible for coordinating the team of coders, Magie reflects:

> What is working really well is that we talk to each other a lot. I really like talking to all of them because I have the feeling that we all appreciate the work everybody else is doing, and we are all really interested in the data. So it's really nice, and also with so many different perspectives. But it can be super overwhelming because then you, for example, when Janina joined the coding team, her background is in pedagogy for special needs education, and she brought up some aspects that we have never thought about before. Which can be sort of disheartening, but it also is so nice because in the long term, it really improves your work because every new person thinks a new perspective and new ideas to the project. I think generally, it makes it better, even though it can sometimes be overwhelming.

The difficulties of navigating language differences can be addressed by piloting standardized methods (surveys, interviews, experiments) with more native speakers before data collection to identify linguistic discrepancies and involving regional anthropologists in coding to ensure accurate interpretation. While these checks can be expensive, simpler methods, such as reviewing interview instructions with a few native speakers or having on-site anthropologists assess a sample of the coding, can nevertheless improve validity.

CHALLENGES #4: RESEARCH ETHICS WITH CHILDREN

Cross-cultural research projects with children and adolescents can pose ethical challenges that often do not occur when exclusively working with adult research participants (see, e.g., Broesch et al., 2020, 2023, for ethical considerations when doing cross-cultural research with children). Research with children usually requires caregivers to consent to children's study participation as well as children's assent (usually verbal assent) (Broström, 2012; Siagian et al., 2021). Study aims and procedures hence need not only to be explained in a manner that adults understand but also in a child-friendly manner (usually using simplified language).[2]

To train on-site researchers in the project's interview guide, the team of remote researchers (mostly in the person of the research coordinator Katja) introduced the project, the interview questions, and procedures, and discussed the ethical and data protection issues in online meetings. For some of the on-site researchers, interviewing children was a skill that they honed throughout this project. Dennis, who conducted interviews in Chimfunshi and Chingola, Zambia, described his first days of joining the project as filled with nervousness:

> My first time it was a bit tough, I was anxious and I remember I troubled Katja quite a lot. I was so scared of making mistakes. Every time I was unsure, I would contact her. She gave me her WhatsApp line for fast interaction, so I bothered her a lot.

Respect, voluntariness, and upholding children's rights to be heard were integral parts of the interview procedures and aimed to ensure that the children felt comfortable in expressing their views. Sharing her experience in conducting interviews in multiple locations in Italy, Ariana told us:

> Each single interview is like entering a whole different world. If I have to say everything it will take hours. But something that I remember a lot is that this was a chance for a lot of children to have their space, to offer the opportunity to talk about things. During normal

educational interaction this is not the case. And here children really have the space to talk about what they think.

In retrospect, Magie considered the involvement of on-site researchers in the data collection involving children as a key component in implementing these values, as this approach is not commonly used by psychologists, who often spend less time in the field sites and have more of an outsider position as a result:

> It is really good to work remotely, because you have someone who knows the culture to also interact with the children. So it is not an outsider asking them the questions, and most of the time, the children knew the researcher directly, or at least they knew that the researcher is from their own community, although perhaps they had never met before (…) Having local researchers interviewing them is also to ensure that the situation is more natural for the children, and then don't feel as stressed if it's done by outsiders. Because normally, when we go into fieldwork, it's a really big deal to have an outsider come, and that can make the children more nervous.

Several on-site researchers observed that many children from younger age groups (i.e., ages 5 to 7 years) tended to be initially shy and/or nervous when answering the questions. This observation is not unique to the field settings in our study but will be confirmed by any developmental psychologists (irrespective of whether they work in the lab or the field): younger children can be shyer and may take longer to "warm up" to the researchers or research setting. The on-site researchers often relied on strategies conveyed during the preparatory meeting with the remote researchers to make children feel comfortable. The on-site researcher in Pune, India, Jahnavi, summarizes the strategy as follows:

> I try to make it clear to the children at the outset that this is not an exam or a test because one thing I've noticed is whether I do face-to-face testing or online testing, they often associate me with a face of a teacher, and I think it's important at that time to tell them that this is not an exam. That there is no wrong answer and that I'm just here to collect your opinions. I cannot underestimate the importance of the first 5 minutes. When you establish the rapport with the child and get them started. Even if it's online, those nods, or those words of encouragement to say 'well done', or 'you are doing well.' or 'carry on'. Just to add to that, I try not to use the word 'interviews', I said I'm just asking you some questions about animals, and feel free to express your opinions.

These seemingly unconscious attempts to lighten up the overall tone of the interview fit the project's emphasis on promoting a jovial atmosphere throughout the interview to build meaningful interaction, especially with younger children (Koch, 2021). Magie captured the epistemological reasoning behind this approach as follows:

> You need to keep the children engaged because it doesn't work as well to say, 'oh, this research is important because of this and this.' I mean, they might realize this, but they don't participate because they think it's important. They participate because it's fun.

Meanwhile, Jahnavi observed that participation in the study generated a sense of pride among the children she interviewed and by extension among their parents and even schools:

> The fact that there is a collaboration with a foreign university, even if the children are not going to be specifically acknowledged as individuals, it is a matter of honor, a matter of pride for themselves and their parents. I think the same goes for the schools because, in every school that I have worked with, they've all been really happy to collaborate with this kind of research. So, I think they see the value in the research.

Another key factor that complicates the research interaction with children is the use of online and recording technology as data collection tools. These challenges are not necessarily exclusive to research with children but extend to remote ethnographic methods more broadly (Liebal, in press). A key concern is the inability to physically access the field, a fundamental aspect of ethnographic research, raising questions about whether remote methods allow for meaningful researcher-researched relationships. De Sousa (2022) argues that conducting ethnography without direct presence shifts the emphasis away from participant observation. Asynchronous remote data collection further complicates matters, relying on intermediaries and delaying data retrieval. Unlike live interviews, it also lacks opportunities for immediate clarification (Lupton, 2021). While synchronous online sessions provide real-time interaction, they come with their own challenges, such as limited screen space and variations in participants' access to equipment and software (Sandberg et al., 2022).

In our research project, online meeting platforms were used for data collection in locations in China and India, and each of the interviewers reported that the children seemed to feel more comfortable giving the interviews online than in person. This is in contrast to popular opinions that view in-person interviews as necessarily providing socially conducive interactions. Restricted mobility and sociality during the COVID-19 pandemic influenced these contrasting insights. Tongtong and Jahnavi, respectively, ascribed such tendencies to the fact that the children felt more comfortable talking to them from the familiar environment of their homes while being close to their parents, siblings, caretakers, or peers. Furthermore, the children they interviewed were also used to interacting through online meeting platforms, as they would attend school through similar platforms during lockdowns. It is worth considering how anthropologists and psychologists differ in their respective research approaches to this issue. Anthropologists typically interview or talk with children in familiar settings like their homes or in peer groups while playing or taking care of chores, aiming for comfort and naturalness (Chapin, 2014). Psychologists, however, often use formal environments with more controlled settings, such as labs, which may require familiarization with the novel setting, particularly for younger children. Comparing remote settings to these formal environments, rather than simply remote versus in-person interactions, reveals nuanced comfort levels experienced by children and adjustments needed.

Remote research with children across different cultural communities comes with a unique set of challenges, some of which we have outlined in this section. Ethical guidelines can provide a general framework (e.g., Graham et al., 2013) but are—per design—not meant to cover all eventualities and the unique circumstances in each research site. Strong values, open lines of communication between members of the research team, sensitivity to local circumstances, and flexibility to adjust research protocols are key to ensuring ethical research when working with children in diverse settings (e.g., Bruno et al., 2022).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper attends to the perspectives of researchers who collaborated in a large team across disciplines and geographies. Moving along different themes through which remote collaboration was experienced and understood, we conclude by reflecting on some lessons learned from navigating a large-scale research project that might prove helpful for other researchers and team-based projects at the intersection of anthropology and psychology. We summarize the complexities of dealing with diverse social, cultural, and disciplinary perspectives and the dynamics of research engagement with children. While online technologies enable broader possibilities of remote collaboration, this project has learned how uneven access to internet connections and devices, as well as the heterogenous consequences of COVID-19 in different parts of the world, complicated perceptions, expectations, and takeaways from the collaborative experience. Furthermore, language asymmetries of working trans- and cross-culturally and in interdisciplinary teams and incongruous commitments informed by the researchers' personal and professional lives have compounded this complex dynamic.

Along with ensuring a robust dataset, we have maintained regular communication and implemented standardized methods to foster commitment and a sense of belonging to this longitudinal

collaborative project. Consequently, organizational and conceptualization tasks were centralized around core team members rather than being evenly distributed among all involved actors. Principal investigators provided (almost) around-the-clock support for those facing administrative, logistical, and methodological challenges. Project coordinators, who support researchers and manage routines of communication, feedback, and data handling, are key to large-scale projects, especially if conducted remotely.

The conversations that emerged in writing up this paper foregrounded several pressing ethical questions, not only concerning research encounters with children but also issues around equity, fairness, and transparency in transcultural collaboration. The diversity of the research team—comprising members from varied backgrounds and positionalities—brought these concerns to the forefront, as it became evident that cross-cultural research is not merely an exercise in data collection but must also address underlying power dynamics that shape how knowledge is produced and validated. These challenges are inherent in any *remote collaborative research* effort, but they are particularly pronounced when such research operates within an epistemic framework that privileges knowledge production processes established in Western academic settings.

As many collaborators have pointed out, ensuring fair compensation, establishing open communication systems, and adopting a caring leadership style are crucial steps in fostering a more equitable and decolonial collaborative environment. These practices not only signal a commitment to inclusivity and fairness but are also essential for building stronger, more balanced partnerships within research collaborations. However, while important, these efforts alone are insufficient to dismantle the deeply entrenched hierarchies that continue to shape scientific knowledge production.

In light of these challenges, our reflections lead us to at least four significant recommendations for ourselves and others involved in large-scale and comparative projects:

First, we will integrate research collaborators throughout the whole research process from conception to design, data collection, interpretation, analysis, and writing up. This is beneficial for the development of cross-culturally appropriate research protocols, and the presentation of results furthermore provides opportunities for all collaborators to create deeper intellectual engagement with the project on their terms.

Second, we will make more explicit efforts to strengthen local capacities in conducting and managing remote scientific research. This includes holding methodology labs together at the field sites, conducting (online) workshops on data interpretation and analysis, and organizing short fellowships for mutual exchange between on-site and remote researchers.

Third, we will continue creating dialogic avenues for research collaborators to reflect on power dynamics in research relationships. In a sense, the writing process of this paper has been a part of this effort, where some of those involved in the project, notwithstanding their different roles, could critically examine the conditions and constraints that shaped our collaboration.

Fourth, by decentering Eurocentric forms of knowledge production, which are often predicated on individual contributions and dehumanization of its Other, we seek to build a common ethics out of the complexities that constitute our remote collaborative project and emphasize its methodological and epistemological values of promoting equitable dialogue and exchange. Although we aimed to embrace decolonial aspirations in adopting remote collaborative research, we recognize that many of our actions are still shaped by colonial biases deeply ingrained in scientific practice (Tuhiwai-Smith, 2021). However, as proposed by Stein et al. (2020), attempts to decenter and decolonize inevitably entail mistakes, and it remains crucial that we hold ourselves accountable for them. By acknowledging these shortcomings with humility and actively working to address them, we can engage in decolonization as an ongoing learning process.

Considering the progress of digital and online ethnographies at the intersection of anthropology and psychology, the advancement of artificial intelligence methodologies, and related remote applications on mobile and smartphones, we anticipate that remote collaborative research as an approach will not expire anytime soon. Instead, it might continue to stay and further develop as an integral part of producing knowledge globally. We invite colleagues working at these intersections through either psychology or anthropology to take a step back, join our reflexive mode of self-critical research assessment, and

continue dialogues between anthropology and psychology on designing ethically fair and epistemologically sound collaboration in the future.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Federica Amici, one of the affiliated researchers at the research team, who also supported with the consecutive translation during the interview with Ariana Abis.

[2] Regulations about the age at which children are considered able to consent themselves can vary between countries (e.g., in Germany children aged 14 years and older are deemed able to consent to study participation and do not require parental consent).

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