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The Research Imagination During COVID-19: Rethinking Norms of Group Size and Authorship in Anthropological and Anthropology-Adjacent Collaborations

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ABSTRACT

This article explores some of the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic has served as a collective critical event for anthropologists and other social scientists, examining how it has promoted new configurations of the research imagination. We draw on our own experiences of participating in a team of 17 researchers, hailing from anthropology and anthropology-adjacent disciplines, to research social life in Aotearoa/New Zealand during the pandemic, examining how our own research imaginations were transformed during, and via, the process of our collaboration. When our project first began, many of us had doubts reflective of norms, prejudices and anxieties that are common in our disciplines: that the group would be too large to function effectively, or that it would be impossible to develop an approach to authorship that would allow everyone to feel their contributions had been adequately recognised. In practice, the large group size was a key strength in allowing our group to work effectively. Difficulties with authorship did not arise from within the group but from disconnects between our preferred ways of working and the ways authorship was imagined within various professional and publishing bodies. We conclude that large-scale collaborations have many points in their favour, and that the research imaginations of funders, journals, universities and professional associations should be broadened to ensure that they are encouraged, supported and adequately rewarded.

Introduction: (Re)imagining Research During a Pandemic

As Susanna Trnka (2022) notes in her introduction to this double special issue, the COVID-19 pandemic in Aotearoa/New Zealand (hereafter Aotearoa/NZ) was a 'collective critical event' that forced members of the public to reconfigure and reimagine various states of social, economic, and cultural life. While other papers in the collection present anthropological research that examines the political imaginations, moral imaginations, and the (re)imaginations of 'the social' of people who lived in Aotearoa/NZ during the pandemic, this article turns its attention to the ways in which the challenge of investigating social relations, cultural life and political experience in Aotearoa/NZ since the onset of the pandemic has led to novel ways of imagining what it is to do (anthropological) research.

In his seminal work on 'the research imagination', Arjun Appadurai (2000, 9) posed what he described as 'the deliberately naïve, anthropological' question of 'what do we mean when we speak today of research?' Writing at the turn of the millennium, Appadurai considered such a question to be necessitated by the troubling disconnect that he observed between the concerns and questions that global publics had regarding the dynamics and consequences of emergent forms of globalisation and those that dominated the research agendas of 'the global professoriate'. By looking at research 'anthropologically, as a strange and wonderful practice which transformed Western intellectual life perhaps more completely than any other single procedural idea since the Renaissance', he sought to reveal how it was neither a timeless nor transcendentally superior mode of intellectual life. Instead, research was a 'special practice of the academic imagination', embedded in cultural presumptions, and amenable to being 'deparochialized' and imagined otherwise.

Such reimaginations could concern what is researched, how research is practised, or the very ethic of research itself. For example, Appadurai suggested that the contemporary preoccupation with systematically producing reliable new knowledge in relation to a prior citational world was a radical departure from the virtuoso works of pre-research-era intellectuals whose work was shot through with their political projects and moral signatures. Recognising this, he suggested, invited consideration of how the methodological rigour of 'research' might be retained whilst also restoring some of the 'prestige and energy of earlier visions of scholarship, in which moral and political concerns were central' (2000, 14). However, even if one were to continue with 'research' in its conventional contemporary form, Appadurai's analysis also highlighted the need to continually revisit and reimagine the practices and procedures through which that research is organised and conducted. A Cold War era framework of 'Area Studies', for example, was simply not appropriate in an era of global mobility (2000, 7–8). Different methods and epistemes were required.

Building on both Appadurai's insights and those of the special issue introduction, we see the COVID-19 pandemic as a collective critical event for academia that calls into question many of the established ways of imagining what 'research' looks like and how it should be conducted. Such reimaginations can occur on a variety of scales. Many researchers have found that new research questions have emerged as a result of the pandemic, while some have had to accept that their previous research interests have either been rendered obsolete by the pandemic or impossible to research due to

pandemic control measures. Anthropologists in particular have been adversely affected by travel bans and lockdown restrictions, which have made it very difficult to achieve the embodied co-presence and participant observation that has long been considered the cornerstone of ethnographic research (Blum 2020). Many have shown great creativity – although sometimes encountering unexpected challenges – in turning to alternative methods, from online surveys and Zoom interviews to the analysis of their interlocutors' 'COVID diaries' and the creation of 'pandemic comics' (see *e.g.* Blum 2020; Long 2020; Porter et al. 2022; Spray, this issue). However, questions persist about how publications deriving from such research will be viewed vis-à-vis more conventional ethnographic writing when competing for space in journals and applying for promotion, and whether PhD students whose fieldwork was disrupted by the pandemic will be at an inevitable disadvantage on the anthropology job market (Abram 2022; Gazzotti 2020). In other words, the question of what 'research' could and should look like is not only a matter that individual researchers are having to confront, but also in need of active debate within academic departments, professional associations and in the pages of scholarly journals.

This article contributes to such a debate, although less with reference to the question of methodological innovation than to a parallel shift in the imagination and practice of research, namely, collaborations between relatively large groups of academics to conduct and write up anthropological and anthropology-adjacent research. It should be stressed at the outset that, like the use of non-traditional methods, large-scale collaboration is not a phenomenon that is novel to the COVID-19 era: it has long been common practice in many disciplines, including the biological and archaeological branches of anthropology. However, it has been rarer in the humanities and social sciences, where research is often viewed as a 'solo pursuit' (rather than, say, a shared venture amongst members of the same lab): it remains relatively unusual for work in these disciplines to be authored by more than three researchers (Macfarlane et al. 2017, 3). In their historical overview of collaboration in social anthropology, Boyer and Marcus (2020, 1–4) note that a 'lone ranger' model of field research and writing not only became dominant but also normative during the twentieth century, 'celebrated for the transformative qualities of participant-observational immersion [and] reinforced by neoliberal audit procedures in higher education'. Today, social anthropologists are perhaps most likely to work and publish in large teams when part of large interdisciplinary projects housed in the natural sciences. They may sometimes originate large group projects, such as the 'Why We Post' project at UCL, and the Matsutake Worlds Research Group. Nevertheless, although the members of such projects may publish collectively on questions of methodology (Choy et al. 2009; Miller et al. 2019), they often conduct research independently, and typically default to the norm of single- or dual-authorship when presenting their ethnographic findings and theoretical arguments. Indeed, there are sound pragmatic reasons for doing so. As Choy et al. (2009, 383) observe, 'collaboration is difficult in cultural anthropology for material and symbolic reasons that have nothing to do with research, analysis, or writing per se. Institutional requirements get in the way'.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, however, the extraordinary circumstances of methodological constraint and a desire to develop rapid responses to a fast-moving crisis meant that some of the material, symbolic and institutional factors inhibiting collaboration amongst anthropologists seemed to exercise less force. While some excellent

work has, of course, been produced by solo researchers and small research networks during this time, the pandemic has also seen anthropologists making important intellectual and policy interventions as members of large social science research teams. Some of these teams pre-date the pandemic; others emerged in response to it. Examples include: a team at the James Henare Maori Research Centre that has conducted important work on older people's experiences of lockdown in Aotearoa/NZ (Dawes et al. 2021); a team at the Northern Arizona University's Social Science Community-engagement Lab investigating narratives of risk and blame during COVID-19 (Hardy 2021); the Covid and Care Research Group at LSE, of which a number of us are also members (Bear et al. 2020); and our own group, CARUL (Care And Responsibility Under Lockdown).

We are a team of 17 researchers with backgrounds in anthropology, criminology, Pacific Studies, linguistics, public health, and law who have investigated various aspects of life under lockdown in Aotearoa/NZ, including bubble regulations, homeschooling, funerary restrictions, policing, ethical life, the experiences of frontline workers, and trajectories of social recovery once regulations were lifted. Although some of us had worked on collaborative projects prior to the pandemic, none of us had done so in such a large interdisciplinary group. Indeed, as we collectively reflected on our experiences of working together, we found that many of us had been apprehensive about the size of the research group, its interdisciplinarity, and the potential quandaries and conflicts that could arise from such matters as the attribution of authorship – especially given that few of us had any experience of having worked together (and many of us did not even know each other) before this collaboration. We had not necessarily imagined a large group endeavour to be a way of doing research that we would find enjoyable. In practice, however, we found that the very things that had led us to feel doubtful about CARUL were part of what made it rewarding. Our research imaginations were reconfigured such that we would now actively consider undertaking similar forms of collaborative research in our future endeavours. Unfortunately, however, the research imaginations of those holding power within universities, journals, publishing houses and funding processes have not always experienced a comparable reconfiguration, leading what has been both a rewarding and productive scholarly venture to sometimes be viewed with unwarranted suspicion and disdain.

In the remainder of this article we therefore tell the story of how our own research imaginations were reconfigured through our participation in CARUL, hoping to encourage a broadening of how research is imagined, incentivised and rewarded in anthropology and related disciplines. We limit our discussion to an analysis of our own collaborative venture not because we consider it to be metonymic of anthropological collaborations in general, but precisely because research collaborations can be organised in such a wide variety of ways. Restricting our remit to a discussion of how the 17 members of CARUL came to reimagine research as a result of our collaboration allows a focused analysis which speaks critically to regnant norms, prejudices and anxieties that have a chilling effect upon collaborative endeavours, while also affording us scope to identify aspects of the collaboration that worked particularly well for us and that might be productive possibilities for our readers. Indeed, an in-depth account of a single collaborative research project stands to be of particular value given that, as Baguley et al. (2021, 185) observe, there remains a 'significant

gap in the literature' on research collaborations, with 'very little attention … paid to capturing the experiences, values and attitudes of research actors directly involved in [them]' (Parker and Kingori 2016, 2).

To produce this account we have drawn on over two years of conversations and correspondence regarding the experience of working together, as well as a qualitative survey and two focus groups inviting a more sustained and systematic reflection on the positive and negative aspects of being involved in CARUL. These materials were collated and thematically analysed by our 2022 summer research student, Amanda Hunter, and used to identify key lines of argument for the final article. The remainder of the discussion proceeds as follows. We begin with a short outline of how CARUL came into being and the way in which the collaboration was conducted. This establishes the context for the remainder of the discussion, which centres on two aspects of our normative pre-pandemic research imaginations that came to be reconfigured via our experiences of working together in CARUL: concerns about working in such a large group, and fears that the project would be derailed by conflicts over authorship. We show how the experience of CARUL actually led us to conclude that a large group size was a strength and that the most stressful conflicts over authorship arose not within our research team but rather at the interface with institutions that cleaved to competing imaginations of how research should be published. Although CARUL was a collaborative experiment that may not have been undertaken had it not been for the COVID-19 pandemic, we conclude that working in large teams warrants a more prominent place in the research imagination of both individual social scientists and the institutions that employ and support them.

Introducing CARUL

The origins of CARUL lay in an exchange of Facebook messages between two anthropologists – Nick Long, based at LSE, and Sharyn Graham Davies, then based at AUT – who knew each other from their shared background in Indonesian Studies. Nick was living in London in March 2020 and subject to measures requiring everyone to restrict social contact to household members, except in cases of urgent medical need, immediate risk of harm, or when parents were sharing custody of children. He had been intrigued to discover that the New Zealand government – which had implemented one of the strictest lockdowns in the world – nevertheless allowed those living alone, with complex childcare needs, or with other vulnerabilities to form multi-household 'bubbles' with a local 'buddy'. Thinking that a qualitative study of such buddying arrangements might shed valuable light on their capacity to support isolated and vulnerable people in other jurisdictions, he immediately reached out to Sharyn:

> Nick   : Hey Sharyn! Bit of a random idea, but I've been really impressed by the NZ government's 'lockdown buddies' scheme as a much more flexible and relationally sensitive policy (for single-person households, at least) compared to the UK's mandate to 'stay at home' and the US's emphasis on 'sheltering in place'. I was thinking it would be cool to do some comparative research across the UK and NZ … Any chance this might be something you'd be interested in collaborating on?

Less than two hours later, Sharyn replied.

> Sharyn: yes yes yes!! I have been thinking a lot about doing something in relation to everything and specifically about NZ stance re well-being. So, the lockdown buddy fits perfectly in that.

Nick and Sharyn constructed an online survey investigating lockdown experiences. After Sharyn contacted anthropologists across Aotearoa/NZ, encouraging them to distribute the survey to their friends, colleagues and students, several expressed their interest in joining a collective research endeavour. It was decided to hold an online meeting to see what kind of collaborative venture might be possible. Nick invited several anthropologists at the LSE who had an ongoing interest in relations of care and social policy during the pandemic, while Sharyn invited other social scientists in Aotearoa/NZ whose research afforded insights into how the pandemic was affecting Māori and Pacific communities.

Our initial meeting took place via Zoom on 23rd April 2020, during which we agreed that our shared interests were well-captured by the rubric 'Care And Responsibility Under Lockdown'. Several attendees suggested other scholars who might be interested in joining, to whom we extended further invitations. At this point, all work on CARUL was being done voluntarily, either as part of our contracted research duties, or as an additional project outside of paid work. Surveys were advertised on Facebook – a cost supported by Nick's annual staff research allowance. In mid-May 2020, Sharyn was able to secure institutional funds totalling NZ$5000 to employ some research assistants to help with interviews and data analysis, and Edmond and Nelly joined the team, continuing to be involved even when their funding had expired. Two other members – Reegan and Amanda – joined us for shorter periods, supported by AUT summer studentship funding that allowed Masters students to gain first-hand research experience.

Since that first meeting, CARUL convened every Monday (notwithstanding a few public holidays) until April 2022, at which point pandemic control measures had been significantly relaxed in both Aotearoa/NZ and the UK, and the project consequently began to wind down. Members were assured that they could attend as frequently or rarely as suited their circumstances: some of us have thus been a regular presence at the meetings, while others have had more intense periods of attendance followed by periods of stepping back to focus on other professional or personal matters. An email thread, MS Teams channel and Facebook chat group ensure that everyone can stay up to date with developments in the project.

From the outset, we decided that each team member would pursue whatever research questions had been sparked for them by the pandemic, adding questions to CARUL surveys accordingly. For example, the anthropologists had questions about bubble arrangements, personal relationships, and the experiences of frontline workers, while the criminologists were interested in participants' interactions with police. Follow-up interviews were conducted by team members using a common interview guide. Research data were shared online, allowing everyone access to original materials; they were also summarised and shared in debriefs at each weekly meeting. So, while the NZ 'bubble' arrangements had inspired the team's formation, the research theme allowed for a much wider range of questions and thus stretched beyond any individual academic's research imagination. As Megan highlighted:

> By far the most positive/rewarding aspect of being part of the CARUL Collective was the opportunity to develop and lead papers on issues that were most important to me or that I felt I could answer. While I did not do this in the end, it seems to me to be an effective way of both organising and motivating group research.

Individual team members drafted research manuscripts and discussed developing ideas in the meetings. Once any given manuscript draft was complete, the lead author invited feedback from all members of the group, which could be provided as comments via email, tracked changes and suggestions on the draft, or verbal feedback in meetings, according to preference and time demands. Sometimes the group was focused entirely on a single piece of writing; at other times, multiple drafts were in production and being discussed at each meeting. While individual team members took responsibility for their own lead-authored articles, Nick took on the role of 'group leader', sending out meeting invites, putting together an agenda, chairing meetings by taking us from one agenda point to the next, and keeping track of how the energies of the group were being deployed. Have we heard anything from the journal yet? When is the deadline for revisions? How far has this manuscript progressed since last week and how can we help?

Reflecting on the way in which CARUL came together, two points about the research imagination can be observed. The first is that Appadurai was perhaps a little too hasty to suggest that the modalities of 'research' prevailing during the early twenty-first century are devoid of the political and moral impetus that could be seen in earlier forms of intellectual life. Few CARUL members had a research background in studying respiratory pandemics (however, see Holroyd and McNaught 2008; Trnka 2017), but when the COVID-19 pandemic began, we could all imagine ourselves using our skills and knowledge to uncover insights that could inform present and future public health policy. We have thus come to understand ourselves as having exemplified what Mills (1959, 5) termed 'the sociological imagination': an 'awareness of the relationship between personal experience and the wider society' that is both moral and political at its core because people who possess it seek to understand their own biography (and that of others) in the context of time and place *in order to change it*. Our research imaginations could also be characterised as what Ruha Benjamin (2019, 9), drawing on science-fiction writer Octavia E. Butler, calls 'radio imagination', or 'the kind of imagination that hears'; a mode of research 'where the zeal for making new things is tempered by an ability to listen to the sounds and stories of people and things already made'. It was important for all of us to understand exactly how people's lives were being affected by the new arrangements implemented to curb the spread of COVID-19 – and, in particular, to excavate and understand perspectives and narratives that were being overlooked in mainstream discussions of the pandemic. Of course, these are not the only valid or worthwhile ways of imagining or undertaking research during the COVID-19 era. We simply note that, for us, the pandemic, and the measures put in place to control it, served as a problematic that stimulated our research imaginations and to which we felt morally compelled to respond.

A second point worth highlighting is that none of us had initially imagined conducting research on the pandemic as part of a large interdisciplinary team. The collaboration that ultimately proved to be such a productive and rewarding aspect of our professional lives emerged largely by happenstance, as various people expressed an interest in joining and our ranks grew steadily larger. It was only some time into our experience of working

together that we discovered that many of us had actually had grave reservations about such an endeavour – our 'research imaginations' had led us to fear this would be an ineffective and unsatisfying way to work, doomed to almost certain infighting and failure. In hindsight, such fears can be seen to reflect the grip that prevailing norms and assumptions about how to do anthropological and anthropology-adjacent research had upon us. In what follows, we tackle each norm in turn to show how the experience of working in CARUL has reconfigured our own research imaginations and points to the need for the research imaginations of disciplinary and academic institutions to be similarly reconfigured.

Size Matters

It can be hard for social scientists to imagine working in large groups. One CARUL member reported going to a job interview in which they were asked about their involvement in the project. The panel's reaction had been one of befuddlement. 'But how does it work?!' an interviewer had asked. Sharyn similarly shared how she had once applied for a research grant with a team that was 'half the size' of CARUL, and the feedback had been that the team was 'too big'. With such reactions emanating from institutions that have power to award jobs and funding, it is not surprising that large social science research collectives remain rare.

Indeed, when CARUL first began, many of us had been apprehensive about working in such a big team. Nick recalled how he used to 'balk at the prospect', thinking it would involve constant disagreement and unhappy compromise. Likewise, Antje revealed how she had 'very low expectations when joining the CARUL team', partly because she knew barely any of her prospective collaborators, partly because most other group members were quite far away from her own academic field, but largely because 'the sheer size of the group I thought would set it up to fail'. Her apprehension stemmed from difficulties she had experienced during some previous, smaller, collaborations, which had either lost momentum or been beset by tensions.

The editors of a *Handbook for Team-based Qualitative Research* similarly caution that 'the implications of team size … need to be carefully considered. Larger groups require significantly more resources to support and manage—not because there are more people but because there are more relationships' (MacQueen and Guest 2008, 6). They expand on how large group size can be counterproductive as follows:

> The larger the group, the larger the resulting coordination network will be, and the less amenable it will be to informal coordination. […] For example, spontaneous conversation is difficult to sustain when more than four people are present, which means that people are more likely to feel excluded in even moderately large groups. A common way in which this reality gets expressed is via the domination of the group by a few vocal members. […] If the team works largely through informal coordination, the tendency towards exclusion and biased domination increases […] Inattention to such group dynamics will ultimately undermine the effectiveness of a team, by limiting the contributions of its members. (MacQueen and Guest 2008, 6)

These are important considerations for prospective collaborators to consider, and there were certainly times at which our large group size presented challenges. Susanna noted it could present challenges when writing:

> This is the first time I have co-written with such a big group and I found when I was the lead author, it was initially hard to know how to balance all the different perspectives and requests. There were so many different takes on things! And some from people I had not met, not even on Zoom! Not knowing everyone and the personalities and perspectives involved made it a hard juggle – but we got there in the end. It was a bit of a learning exercise for me, in attempting to project a collective voice when there were so many different interests and needs.

Overall, however, we found the size of the group to be a distinct strength – especially during the circumstances of a global pandemic. Thematic analysis of CARUL members' comments about working together identified three main benefits of a large group size: the value of having many different perspectives to help tackle problems and provide intellectual stimulation; the sense of fellowship and company that the collaboration afforded; and the way the arrangement allowed us to act on our research imaginations in a manner proportionate to our availability whilst still sustaining momentum. These benefits, we argue, would also be of value in non-pandemic times.

Benefit 1: Many Hands Make Light Work

Our collaboration undoubtedly benefited in numerous ways from there being such a large number of people with whom to develop research questions and with whom to discuss any methodological, analytical or writing challenges we encountered. Part of this benefit was linked to the diverse intellectual and personal backgrounds of the group members, which allowed these matters to be thought about from different angles. Many members noted how the different backgrounds and experiences of the research team had fostered intellectual and personal growth. As Edmond said, '[you] sit alongside other scholars, and see what the thinking is out there and then unpack it some more from your own perspective. We all bring that individual expertise into this amazing collective, I almost call it an incorporated society.'

At a more prosaic level, having many people involved in the collaboration had helped us to surmount practical challenges with relative ease, as seen in Laumua's reflections on a meeting where we were discussing how best to respond to reviewers' comments on our manuscript on pandemic policing (Deckert et al. 2021):

> After discussing for about fifteen minutes, all of a sudden, Nick was just casually talking about something and then Antje said, 'That's the one!' and the problem was solved. Why? Because there were a lot of people talking about one point at the same time. So, that's the benefit of having all of these minds coming together. When they're pouring their eyes and their minds over something, it just enlightens everything. That's the benefit of numbers to me.

The large group size, which led to different team members working on particular projects at any given moment in time, also helped to create a sense of excitement and intellectual stimulation amongst team members when we convened on Mondays to take stock of our progress. As Eleanor noted:

> There were all these overlays that kept coming and kept drawing you in, which wouldn't have happened with a smaller team, they might have been focused just on one aspect, then move to the next. But there was a lot of sequencing and sliding and overlaps going on that just kept moving the momentum.

Our experience was thus that, far from 'undermining the effectiveness of [the] team' (cf. MacQueen and Guest 2008, 6), the large group size helped to make CARUL both effective and exciting.

Benefit 2: Company and Fellowship

Such excitement was especially valuable given that other aspects of our lives were being badly affected by the pandemic. Whether based in Aotearoa/NZ, the UK, or elsewhere (as Nayan, Nikita and Sharyn have been at times), we all had to experience long periods of confinement within our homes or multi-household 'bubbles'. Even when restrictions were less severe, it was often difficult to access activities, places and people that had once been a big part of our lives, whether because of border closures, ongoing restrictions affecting the leisure and hospitality sectors, anxieties around catching COVID-19, or relationships becoming strained during lockdown – difficulties that were also widely reported by our research participants (Long et al. 2022). CARUL, however, afforded a space where we could all meet in a group and use our discussions to either escape from or gain new perspectives on matters that were troubling us. Susanna noted the fitting irony that, set up to examine responsibility and care under lockdown, CARUL had given 'a sense of solidity and care' to its members. 'When [my] university was shut and we were unable to meet up with others, it naturally felt very isolating', she elaborated. 'The CARUL Collective was a way of countering that.'

Important here was not just the size of the group and the fellowship it afforded, but also the regularity of our meetings and the sense that they brought us together in a common purpose. Eleanor shared how, for her:

> being in the collective provided a regularity, commitment, uplift and respect that was absent in many aspects of daily life. Monday became the Collective night – like church on Sunday from my childhood … I liked that weekly ritual. I called it bubbles night. I like protecting the time … And you look forward to it, I think, you know, dealing with all the lockdown and stuff. And that's a product of its regularity.

Sharyn observed that 'regular meetings with a place to unload and reflect on COVID changes each week was therapeutic', while Antje observed how CARUL had become a 'safe space', where she 'felt she could be herself', 'vent' if she needed to, and know that she was in a group of people who would 'have her back'.

Benefit 3: Enabling Flexible Involvement Whilst Sustaining Momentum

While some of the benefits mentioned above (such as the sense of social connection) resulted directly from our large group size, others (such as the structure provided by weekly meetings and the therapeutic dimensions of thinking about the pandemic intellectually) could, in theory, have been achieved even had the group been much smaller. However, our experience is that such benefits were also facilitated by the large group size. Collaborating *en masse* helped to prevent anyone becoming excessively pressured by the work demands of CARUL, allowing it to become a safe, therapeutic, and rewarding space.

A key theme in literature exploring academics' experiences of the pandemic has been the proliferation of work demands, such as the need to master online teaching methods

and provide unprecedented levels of pastoral support to students, often whilst also taking on increased caring responsibilities at home (see *e.g.* Chattopadhyay 2021; Godber and Atkins 2021; Winnington and Cook 2021). The often-unwritten corollary to this point is that, although the pandemic has stimulated many social scientists' research imaginations – raising important questions about how the people with whom we work and who live around us have been coping with its challenges, and fostering a desire to use our skills to help make a difference – a large number of us have simply not had the time or energy to act on those imaginations. As Elizabeth Chin, the editor of *American Anthropologist*, noted in a recent issue, 'I do not know the stories and struggles of each and every author. Regardless, I'm in awe of their ability to get anything done in this most challenging of times' (Chin 2021, 740). Difficult as the pandemic has been for everyone, it nevertheless bears noting that the erosion of time and energy for research has played out unequally, and often in highly gendered ways (Walters et al. 2021). This has been an important axis of disenfranchisement during the pandemic, not only because of the opportunities that such research work would offer for one's career, but also because of the moral satisfactions that can arise from researching a major public health crisis and feeling that one is making a difference.

The way that CARUL was organised aimed to help everyone to make a contribution even when there were intense pressures on their time. Everyone with a research idea was able to draw up a draft (however preliminary or polished) at their own pace and then share it with the group, at which point other CARUL members could give as much or as little feedback as their schedules and situations allowed. Those with more time could take the lead on publications, while others could still make meaningful contributions through their involvement in data collection and critical review of manuscripts. Some members, such as Michael and Pounamu, have full-time careers outside of academia and could not commit to intensive regular involvement. Commenting on drafts nevertheless allowed them to make valuable contributions, ensuring that their distinct perspective as Māori scholars was represented in the final publications.

This system was not a perfect solution to the challenges of pandemic workloads. One prospective CARUL member withdrew after just a few meetings because they needed to focus on teaching. Others reported feeling guilty, sad or frustrated about not being able to attend meetings regularly or about not 'pulling one's weight' when unable to lead-author an article, give detailed feedback on a draft, or follow through on an idea. Such feelings of not having done enough reflect a broader phenomenon of 'academic guilt', in which contemporary academics feel constantly haunted by potential work that they have yet to do (Lobo 2015), a pattern that was certainly intensified by the demands of the pandemic, and that CARUL was not able to overturn completely. However, the sheer size of the group meant that CARUL was flexible enough to assuage some of these difficult feelings. Even if someone had to step back for an unforeseen reason and be less involved in developing or revising a manuscript than they might have liked, there would still be plenty of other team members looking at the manuscript to ensure the lead author received in-depth feedback on their work. Regret at limited personal involvement did not need to translate into guilt that a project had been derailed by one's non-participation, or that important work was being left undone.

This flexibility was essential given the multiple challenges that CARUL members faced as a result of the pandemic. Nayan noted how CARUL

has, because of the very nature of its organisation, allowed most members a certain level of flexibility – to lead a publication or not, to come to meetings, to participate fully or marginally at any given time, to be part of a publication or not, etc.. It's thus lived up to a true politics of 'from each, according to their (time) availability!' Which is vital, given that the pandemic has been experienced differentially along particular stratifications (class, gender, etc.).

It is important to note that this flexibility did not just result from our politics but was directly supported by the large group size. It was easy to accommodate individual circumstances without the research project as a whole losing momentum. 'An extraordinary situation can be adjusted for with such a large group,' Antje observed,

> whereas with a smaller group it might have collapsed. If [a group is composed of] two or three people, especially in a pandemic, you have to expect that people cannot continue for one reason or another … I think that the larger size actually guarantees survival. Strength through numbers.

The result of this flexibility was that involvement in CARUL rarely felt like yet another burdensome work task that had to be 'juggled' alongside other commitments. It could instead exist alongside them synergistically. Indeed, it was precisely because CARUL was not an additional stressor that it was able to achieve its therapeutic benefits for team members, even alleviating the burden of other responsibilities that it existed alongside: Laumua shared how he had felt that 'Monday evenings were very special … You have this consistency going. Week in, week out. And I think that's keeping me sane given the multiple tasks that we have to attend to.'

Final Reflections on Size

Our experiences of CARUL reveal the more positive flipside to MacQueen and Guest's anxieties about unequal contributions in a large-scale collaboration. It is true that some CARUL members participated more than others at various points in the group's journey, but this should not be seen as 'biased domination' or as 'undermining the effectiveness of the group'. Rather, by removing the assumption that contributions should be equal and instead allowing them to be reflective of individual availability, we were able to maximise the effectiveness of the group. Those encountering challenges could receive ideas and feedback from others, while the pressure to over-extend oneself was held in check, allowing CARUL to be a supportive and even therapeutic space. All of these benefits were directly linked to the large group size about which we had initially been so sceptical. And while the flexible collaborative approach was especially helpful in the extraordinary circumstances of the pandemic, it would be no less valuable when navigating the many vicissitudes of post-pandemic life. Provided there is open and regular communication, working in a large group promises to be an effective and rewarding way of undertaking research. Institutions should do more to help their students and staff hold such a possibility within their research imaginations.

The Ambivalences of Authorship

Further concerns that some of us had about collaborating in such a large group concerned questions of authorship. Would our contributions be fairly credited in our

research publications? Would the group descend into bitter in-fighting over authorship credits? These were reasonable fears. A survey commissioned by Taylor and Francis found that authorship issues – including both one's inclusion and one's position on the author list – presented 'clear challenges' for many respondents working in the Social Sciences and Humanities (Macfarlane et al. 2017, 8). Anecdotally, we know of many instances in which such issues have turned previously rewarding collaborations into wellsprings of conflict and grievance. Our enthusiasm about getting involved in CARUL was thus tempered by an awareness that the project could culminate in a slew of resentments and injured feelings.

Anthropology has been relatively slow to grapple with the ethical challenges presented by co-authorship, although a recent piece by Alice Tilche and Rita Astuti (2020) in the *EASA Newsletter* lays out several suggestions for 'best practice'. Tilche and Astuti argue that the insights derived from fieldwork and interviews cannot be separated from the relationships through which the material was gathered, and as such any researcher whose empirical materials are being drawn on has an automatic right to (co-) first authorship. They suggest, moreover, that 'giving assistance during research design and implementation or providing feedback on draft publications do not grant members of the research team, including the PIs [Principal Investigators], automatic right to appear as co-authors' (2020, 15). These proposals ensure that junior anthropologists working as postdocs on large research projects can produce the first- and single-authored publications needed to bolster their CVs. However, they risk creating resentment on the part of Principal Investigators and other team members who may feel that their contributions have not been adequately acknowledged. The proposals also stand at odds with the policies of many journals and publishing houses, whose authorship criteria are less restrictive. Although the disciplinary conversations about authorship have now begun, this remains a murky and contested issue, with much potential for injured feelings.

As Tilche and Astuti themselves acknowledge, much of the difficulty regarding the authorship question in anthropology stems from 'the dominant publishing culture in anthropology, which prizes single-authored publications' and is 'out of sync with the current funding model, which prizes large team grants' (2020, 16). For 'genuine collaboration to be possible', they elaborate, either the preference for large collaborative grants should be abandoned, or such a publishing culture needs revisiting. Our own preference was to enact the changes that we wanted to see in the discipline's publishing culture. We resolved to be as inclusive as possible in authorship attributions, recognising that individual members might not have the time to contribute directly to particular drafts, but had nevertheless made important contributions to generating our datasets and analytic framework in ways that warranted acknowledgement as an author. The question of authorship order would also follow clear principles: the team member who had lead-authored the piece would be first author, any team members who had made major contributions to data collection or writing would be listed next, and all others would then be listed alphabetically. Anyone who preferred not to be listed as an author on any publication, for any reason, could opt out at any point prior to submission. Agreeing on this approach from the outset worked very successfully to defuse any potential conflicts. Nevertheless, as the project proceeded, the matter of authorship did come to be a source of stress and tension in ways that we had not wholly foreseen.

By 2021, when most of our publications were being written up and submitted for publication, some members had needed to step back from regular participation in CARUL to focus on other personal and professional responsibilities. As far as the rest of us were concerned, these people were still our co-authors, having made vital contributions to both our research agendas and datasets, conducting interviews, honing our survey questions, and helping distribute the research surveys through their personal networks. However, attributions of authorship could sometimes generate complicated feelings for those who had scaled back their involvement. One member who had stepped back for personal reasons expressed discomfort with being listed as an author on an article, saying that 'this [inclusion as author] is very generous of you and the team because I feel like I hardly did anything'. Others also spoke of the team's 'generosity' or confessed to feeling like 'frauds'. Clearly, the ambivalence around claiming authorship could make some people's involvement in a large-scale, purposefully flexible collaboration, less comfortable than it could have been.

Such feelings of ambivalence are not, in our view, intrinsic to the process of collaboration but rather reflect unresolved issues within academia and anthropology. As Nick Rule observes in his contribution to Jaremeka et al. (2020, 528), academic culture is founded on 'skepticism, doubt, and stringent criteria for survival' and characterised by 'repeated rejections'; it thus helps to foster the forms of impostor syndrome and self-doubt that could lead to one's inclusion on an author list being seen as an artefact of collaborators' generosity rather than one's rightful entitlement. However, such dynamics are exacerbated by the current uncertainties and inconsistencies surrounding the ethics of authorship. Viewed from the perspectives of the *EASA Newsletter* proposals, some of our authorship choices may indeed be viewed as 'generous'. Even though the journals to which we submitted viewed them as legitimate, the lack of a clear consensus on authorship in (and beyond) the discipline can make it hard for one's recognition to feel truly deserved.

Indeed, journals themselves are currently highly inconsistent in their authorship policies. At the most inclusive end of the spectrum lie journals such as *Medicine Anthropology Theory*, which declares itself 'committed to inclusive authorship and to recognising all contributions to published articles' and encourages collaborators who have made substantial contributions to research design to be listed as authors, even if they have not had an opportunity to contribute to the drafting or revising of the manuscript. The least inclusive journals arbitrarily cap the number of authors (typically at around six), effectively ruling themselves out of consideration as possible venues for our work. The majority, however, set specific authorship criteria. The International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) guidelines that prevail in the public health journals to which we submitted, for instance, require an author to have made 'substantial' contributions to research design and/or the acquisition, analysis or interpretation of data for the work and also to have drafted or critically revised the work for 'important intellectual content'. While these criteria seem reasonable at first glance, we found them problematic in several regards. Firstly, they are vague: who gets to determine whether a contribution is 'substantial', or whether the content of a revision is 'important'? When group authorship is challenged by an editor (as happened to us on one occasion), the criteria by which the matter can be resolved are stressfully murky. Moreover, they are inflexible. They give little room to acknowledge the contributions of team members whose work or caring

responsibilities meant they could not attend the meetings in which a survey was designed, but who gave valuable feedback on a draft resulting from that survey, or to recognise the work done by someone who conducted multiple interviews for the project but was unable to work on the resulting manuscript for personal reasons. With some manuscripts, specific team members either did or did not qualify as authors depending on the journal to which we submitted, a situation that could heighten uncertainty around whether theirs was a 'legitimate' contribution worthy of formal recognition, whilst confronting the rest of us with unpalatable dilemmas about whether to press ahead with submitting certain pieces to journals that seemed well-suited to our interventions, but required us to relegate some team members' contributions to an acknowledgements section. We appreciate that guidelines such as those of the ICMJE have been developed in response to unethical practices such as guest authorship (Aliukonis, Poškutė, and Gefenas 2020). Nevertheless, especially given the challenges of working during the pandemic, an inclusive approach seems to be a more equitable and ethical way of ensuring work within large teams secures adequate recognition, especially if accompanied by a contributorship statement outlining what each named author contributed to the project and manuscript, thereby ensuring maximum transparency.

Attempting to reach audiences beyond academia could also raise challenges. Given that our research spoke to issues of public interest, we were very keen to write pieces for newspapers, blogs, and other mainstream media outlets. While these activities could provide a welcome opportunity to express our own personal views, informed by the joint research project, but without any need to express a 'collective voice', we found it challenging to publish as a group when we wanted to. Several publications limited the by-line for their articles to a single author, sometimes allowing the co-authorship to be noted as a caveat at the end of the text. Others allowed co-authorship, but cautioned us against it, warning that a long list of authors would be off-putting to other outlets and reduce the chances of our work being picked up for republication. Evidently, there is still a dominant norm favouring single-authored op-eds and articles, even though digital publishing formats make it easier than ever for long lists of authors to be included alongside written work. Consequently, collaboratives have to make difficult choices between either acknowledging the collective effort that has been put into developing an argument or maximising the reach of their insights. Faced with such trade-offs, the experience of publishing is bound to feel somewhat unsatisfactory. Yet, although such compromises would not have to be made by a solo scholar-author, the frustration and disappointment are in no way intrinsic to the process of collaborating. It rather derives from a publishing culture that is not yet ready to facilitate and recognise the value of collaborative work.

Previous work has highlighted that collaborative research can lack legibility even to the very institutions that incentivise it, especially when it crosses disciplinary boundaries. It can be viewed with suspicion by scholarly journals and is not well accounted for in the promotion and tenure process (Boyer and Marcus 2020; Choy et al. 2009; Lanterman and Blithe 2019). We were lucky that our CARUL outputs were well-received by most journals to which we submitted – perhaps reflecting the timeliness of our material. Within internal career reviews, however, we received mixed feedback. While some of our institutions actively encouraged the collaboration, several of us also had conversations with colleagues (both within and outside formal career development meetings) reminding

us that it was single-authored articles that would be most important for promotion or establishing a reputation. One member attended a job interview, described our team-based mode of working, and was asked, 'But what did *you* do, specifically?' Evident in such reactions to our collaboration is a phenomenon well-captured by Griffin, Bränström-Öhman, and Kalman (2013, 12) when they describe a 'precarious dynamic of incitement to teamwork for the purposes of research and identification of individual contributions in the context of assessment'. It is understandable why, in such circumstances, colleagues might feel hesitant about getting involved in research collaborations – especially those who are at a precarious point in their careers. Having experienced the benefits of collaborative work first-hand, however, we believe what is needed is for universities, scholarly organisations, journals and publishers to reconfigure their own research imaginations regarding collaborative ventures, so as to more effectively support and recognise a modality of research that has considerable potential to not only be productive and personally rewarding, but also accommodating of different availability constraints and competing responsibilities.

Conclusion

A key insight of Appadurai's work on the 'research imagination' was that whilst academic imagination is a faculty that has the potential to transform the world, its capacity to do so is often constrained by unreflectively adopted norms surrounding what 'research' is and how it should be conducted. By asking what we mean when we speak of research, he sought to unsettle these norms and stimulate new imaginations of how research could be conducted. In similar fashion, reflecting on our process of working together over the past two years has led us to revisit our own implicit understandings of research and to call for a broadening of how research is imagined within contemporary universities. Such a call is especially important in the context of Aotearoa/NZ, home to 'one of the most neoliberalised tertiary education sectors in the world' (Shore and Davidson 2014, 12), where university managers increasingly 'prescrib[e], rather than recognis[e]', the behaviours and attitudes of their academics (Amsler and Shore 2017, 133).

We do not deny there can be advantages to working alone or in small teams: different formats suit some researchers and some enquiries more than others. The benefits of the way CARUL was organised were, undoubtedly, especially welcome during the difficult circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, they are also valuable in post-pandemic times, offering the insight that comes from multiple perspectives, company and fellowship in a profession that can sometimes be lonely (Choy et al. 2009, 383), and flexibility when life throws unexpected challenges one's way. In addition to the theme of 'the imagination', this double special issue invites its contributors to think about the forms of life that emerged during COVID-19 in relation to the concept of 'the extraordinary' (see Trnka 2022); it is a sad irony that a collaborative venture which strikes us as having been 'extraordinary' in the sense of being wonderful, should be so widely viewed as 'extraordinary' in the sense of deviating from the norm. Given that institutions have much sway over what and how research gets done, we suggest that universities, scholarly associations, and publishing houses do more to recognise the value that large-scale collaborative ventures such as CARUL can have for their staff's intellectual growth and moral fulfilment and take steps to support such ventures in future. Possible measures could

include: actively rewarding involvement in large-scale collaborations during hiring and promotion; developing methods for adequately appraising staff's involvement in multi-authored publications, rather than foregrounding single-authored research work; encouraging inclusive approaches to authorship; and disseminating evidence of good practice in large-scale collaborations to support staff in their collaborative endeavours.

It also warrants noting that the flexibility that was integral to our successful way of working is a poor match for the sharply delineated responsibilities and time allocations necessary for most funding applications. Although we were able to conduct our research successfully simply by drawing on small pots of institutional funding, access to larger sums would be essential for a more expensive project, for enabling researchers who did not already have academic jobs to maintain high levels of involvement, and for supporting open access publication. We would thus also encourage funding bodies to develop schemes that would help to support or sustain flexible collaborative ventures.

Introducing the very first volume of the journal *Collaborative Anthropologies*, Lassiter (2008, vii) noted how 'expanding collaborative possibilities … between and among researchers and their interlocutors [and] anthropologists and other scholar-practitioners … are stimulating new theoretical and methodological approaches that promise to transform our anthropologies in new and exciting ways'. Rappaport (2008) adds that collaboration should be seen as a theoretical innovation vital for the field of anthropology. It is indeed exciting to reflect on how collaborative praxis shapes not only the research output, but also the individual and collective research imagination – if frustrating to then acknowledge how the research imaginations of academic institutions and professional bodies sometimes remain wedded to unnecessarily constraining norms, albeit norms that many of us had also subscribed to before the pandemic began. By sharing our experiences of collaborating during the pandemic, we hope to have encouraged any readers (whether researchers or their managers) who are sceptical about the benefits of working in large teams to reconsider their position, whilst also outlining a prototype of effective team working for anyone interested in embarking upon a similar undertaking. We hope that your collaborations will be as extraordinary as ours have been.

Disclosure Statement

Ethics Statement

Ethics approval for the research underpinning this article was granted by the Research Ethics Committee at the London School of Economics and Political Science (refs 11.08a; 11.08b; 11.08c) and the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee [ref 20/142]. It was further approved and ratified by the University of Auckland and Victoria University of Wellington's Human Participants Ethics Committee.

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