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Introduction: Journaling and Mental Health during COVID-19: Insights from the Pandemic Journaling Project

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we introduce the SSM-MH Special Issue “Journaling and Mental Health during COVID-19: Insights from the Pandemic Journaling Project,” which presents findings from the Pandemic Journaling Project (PJP). PJP is an online journaling platform and mixed-methods research study created in May 2020 to provide ordinary people around the world an opportunity to chronicle the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in their lives—for themselves and for posterity. The essays in this collection demonstrate how journaling via an online platform can help illuminate experiences of mental wellbeing and distress, with important implications for both research and clinical practice. We begin by introducing the Pandemic Journaling Project and describing our procedures for generating the data subsets analyzed in the papers collected here. We then outline the principal interventions of the special issue as a whole, introduce the papers, and identify a number of cross-cutting themes and broader contributions. Finally, we point toward key questions for future research and therapeutic practice by highlighting the three-fold value of online journaling as a research method, a therapeutic strategy, and a tool for advancing social justice. We focus in particular on how this innovative methodological approach holds promise as both a modality for psychotherapeutic intervention and a form of grassroots collaborative ethnography. We suggest that our methods create new opportunities for confronting the impact of pandemics and other large-scale events that generate radical social change and affect population-level mental health.

I’m tired. It’s been more than two months of being home and I am so tired. I am trying to balance working from home full-time, being a surrogate teacher to a high school student and middle school student, and special education student. I am the hunter/gatherer for all household provisions, the bill payer, the chef, the best friend to my 13-year-old daughter, the therapist for my son, and the sounding board for my husband. I am the end-all-be-all for everyone and I am tapped out.

On June 3, 2020, “Susan,” a woman in her early 50s from the US state of Rhode Island, recorded these thoughts in her first journal entry with the Pandemic Journaling Project (PJP), a combined online journaling platform and mixed-methods research study that two of us (SSW & KAM) created in May 2020, with the support of an interdisciplinary team of researchers and students. Susan (a pseudonym) goes on to describe the guilt she feels in not embracing the opportunity created by forced isolation to spend more time with her family. She continues with a laundry list of emergent responsibilities that impede any chance of enjoyable family time. Susan must coordinate remote health services for her son, who has autism. She spends hours on the internet ordering basic supplies that cannot be found in her local grocery store. And she finds herself “dusting off” her sewing machine to make cloth masks with filters—all while maintaining her full-time job and keeping her family fed. As the weight of pandemic life grows heavier with the passage of time, she reaches a point of mental exhaustion. “I’m just so tired,” she writes. “I’m tired of working, Tired of schooling. I’m tired of this whole coronavirus. I remember when I thought being a working mom was tough. Now I am a working everything.”

Susan’s account sheds light on the two core issues at the heart of this special issue: the profound and far-reaching mental health impact of COVID-19, and the role that journaling can play in helping people...
confront the challenges that the pandemic has posed to their everyday wellbeing. The papers in this special issue examine different aspects of these core issues by analyzing journals created on the PJP online journaling platform. PJP was designed as a way for ordinary people, anywhere in the world, to chronicle their experiences of life during the COVID-19 pandemic. From the start, we designed PJP as a form of grassroots collaborative ethnography, which we define as a research approach that emphasizes both broad public accessibility and the co-production of knowledge with our interlocutors.

In the first phase of PJP (PJP-1), which launched in May 2020 and continued for two full years until May 2022, anyone with access to a smartphone or computer could participate, including teens aged 15–17 with permission of a parent or guardian. After signing up and completing a baseline survey, participants were presented with the opportunity to create two journal entries, following suggested narrative prompts. Each week, they then received a weekly email or text message inviting them to create a new set of weekly journal entries. Responses could be submitted in any combination of written, audio, or photo formats. Between 2020 and 2022, over 1600 people in 55 countries contributed nearly 27,000 journal entries on the PJP platform. PJP is now initiating its second phase (PJP-2) which takes a longitudinal approach to charting the long-term impact of the pandemic. The PJP team also is conducting a number of targeted research studies using an adapted form of the PJP platform.

The papers in this special issue make use of PJP-1 journal entries to explore the near-term mental health impact of the pandemic on diverse groups and in various domains. A growing body of research has begun to demonstrate that the mental health impact of COVID-19 is wide-ranging, profound, and also variable. Clinically, pandemic-related distress is manifesting in a wide range of symptoms, including higher rates of anxiety, depression, and sleeping difficulties (Nagata et al., 2022; Stephenson, 2021; Vahratian, Blumberg, Terlizzi, & Schiller, 2021). As in earlier historical moments of collective crisis and disruption, these consequences affect not only people with prior histories of mental health concerns, but also those without. The pandemic has affected individuals across a range of social positions, life stages, and competing obligations. Some groups, however, have been especially affected, including adolescents and young people (Campione-Barr et al., 2021; A. K. Cohen and Cromwell, 2021; Racine et al., 2021; van der Laan et al., 2021), students (Gazmararian et al., 2021; Rudenstine et al., 2021; Wieczorek et al., 2021; Xu, 2021), people with family caregiving responsibilities (Beach et al., 2021; S. A. Cohen et al., 2021; Russell et al., 2020), people experiencing pregnancy and/or new parenthood (Hanetz-Gamliel et al., 2021; Shafer et al., 2020; Suzuki, 2020), and people in professional caregiving roles, including health care providers among others (Abdalla et al., 2021; Freidus et al., 2021; Galbraith et al., 2021; Marvaldi et al., 2021).

For many groups, structural and interpersonal forms of vulnerability exacerbate physical and mental health risk (Prohaska, 2020; Vickery, 2018). This includes people of color (Hawke et al., 2021; Kormendi and Brown, 2021; Mladenov and Brennan, 2021), people with disabilities (Breaux et al., 2021; PETZOLD ET AL., 2020; Wagner et al., 2022), members of LGBTQIA+ communities (Dominy-Howes et al., 2014; Ramirez et al., 2018), and people living in poverty (Drescher et al., 2014; Patel et al., 2020). While evidence of resilience is emerging in certain groups (Breaux et al., 2021; Killigre et al., 2020; Kumar et al., 2021; PETZOLD ET AL., 2020; Scheffers et al., 2021), the long-term mental health impact of the pandemic is likely to reverberate for years, if not decades, to come. Indeed, evidence from earlier periods of population-level crisis and disruption suggests that for some (Hong et al., 2009; Mohammed et al., 2015; Reardon, 2015), the impact of the pandemic may persist over the life course.

Robust evidence has shown that journaling can be an important tool for improving emotional and psychological wellbeing (Bandini et al., 2021; Choi et al., 2018; Dwyer et al., 2013; Emmons and McCullough, 2003; Kini et al., 2016; PENNEBAKER, 1997; PENNEBAKER AND CHUNG, 2011; Redwine et al., 2016). For instance, it can serve as a “vehicle for inner dialogue that connects thoughts, feelings, and actions” (Hubbs and Brand, 2005: 62), thereby providing a creative way to process difficult life events and increase self-awareness and self-understanding. In this collection, we expand and innovate on this literature by examining the promise of journaling as a front-line tool for confronting mental health distress, including forms of distress that may not readily be addressed through other therapeutic strategies. Journaling may be a particularly powerful intervention when access to conventional therapeutic services is constrained including, for instance, in times of crisis and in resource-limited settings. Findings from this collection also point to the potential benefits of journaling as a way of both framing conversations about shared experiences and promoting social connectivity, especially in conjunction with other strategies and approaches like structured dialogue and opportunities for public engagement.

In this introduction, we begin by describing PJP, the data archive it has generated, and our procedures for generating the data subsets analyzed in the papers collected here. We then outline the principal interventions of the special issue as a whole, followed by summaries of each paper and a discussion of cross-cutting themes. Finally, we point to several key questions that PJP raises for future research in mental health fields and beyond, including questions about the three-fold potential of online journaling as a research method, a therapeutic strategy, and a tool for advancing social justice, for instance through “archival activism” (Carney, 2021; Flinn, 2011; Zhang et al., 2020). We focus in particular on how this innovative methodological approach holds promise as both a modality for psychotherapeutic intervention and a form of grassroots collaborative ethnography that can create new opportunities for confronting the impact of pandemics and other large-scale events that generate radical social change and affect population-level mental health.

1. Methods

The unique data set created in PJP-1 offers an unprecedented opportunity to gain immediate insight into the unfolding mental health impact of the pandemic using a mixed-methods lens, and in rich first-person detail. Participants were introduced to the project in a variety of ways, including via social and professional networks, public presentations, social media accounts, and popular media coverage of the project. The PJP-1 interface ran fully in both English and Spanish, and participants could submit their journal entries in any language they chose. Participants could create entries using writing, audio, and/or images, and no limitations were placed on the content they created. Text entries ranged in length from a single sentence to many pages of text, with or without an accompanying audio or image file. Participants completed a baseline quantitative survey when they first joined that employed validated as well as original survey items addressing demographics (e.g., age, gender, income, country of residence, etc.), COVID-19 exposure, self-reported physical and mental health status, and loneliness/social isolation, among other topics (see Appendix A). Several sets of questions, including bi-weekly physical and mental health questions, were then repeated periodically, yielding quantitative measures of change over time that can be analyzed in conjunction with participants’ qualitative entries.

Participants received invitations to contribute each week via their choice of email or text message. Each weekly link delivered two opportunities to create qualitative journal entries. The first, recurring prompt asked in broad terms how the pandemic had affected journalers in the past week. For the second entry, journalers were offered a choice of two prompts, typically one with an external focus (e.g., level of trust in government, key sources of scientific information, or the economic impact of COVID-19) and another focusing on subjective experience (e.g.,

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1 The baseline survey (see Appendix A) was created in collaboration with Abigail Fisher Williamson, political scientist and PJP research consultant, to whom we owe a particular debt of gratitude.
the impact of the pandemic on close relationships, sense of social connectedness, or mental health). PJP-1 employed a cohort design such that all participants received the same questions in the same order, regardless of when they joined (i.e., Week #1 questions followed by Week #2, etc.). Participants could access and download their entire journals at any time, and with each entry they had the option of granting permission for their anonymized responses to be shared on PJP’s Featured Entries webpage. After two weeks, weekly journaling came to a close in May 2022. The full PJP-1 dataset has been cleaned to remove all identifying contact information and deposited in the Qualitative Data Repository (QDR) at Syracuse University, where it carries a unique DOI (Willen and Mason, 2022). Twenty-five years following the deposit, the dataset will be released as a publicly accessible historical archive.

Overall, 1839 individuals joined the project between May 2020 and May 2022, including 1692 participants who used the English-language platform (92%) and 147 who used the Spanish platform (8%). The platform was particularly embraced by women and the young: of the total sample, nearly 80% (1460) identified as “female” (n = 1460), and almost half were between 15 and 29 years old (n = 875). PJP was designed to privilege participant accessibility over the creation of a representative sample. Nonetheless, this large trove of material captures a significant degree of internal diversity and highlights noteworthy patterns that we begin to explore in the papers collected here (see also Willen et al., 2020). The demographic features of the overall sample are shown in Table 1.

Each paper in this collection analyzes a subset of PJP-1 data, focusing on a specific mental health dimension of the COVID-19 pandemic. We invited contributors to request datasets based on specific quantitative and/or qualitative parameters of the overall PJP-1 archive. Contributors could request a dataset defined by demographic criteria (or other quantitative survey responses, such as bi-weekly mental, physical and emotional health questions); qualitative responses to specific journaling prompts; and/or designated keywords. Contributors specified their preference of English and/or Spanish language data. When selection criteria generated a data subset of more than 100 participants, a random sample of journals from 100 participants who met the designated criteria was provided. Only text-based journals (no audio or images) were requested and included in the analyses presented here.

Most papers in the collection focus on the full journals created by a subset of participants between May 2020 and July 2021. Since participants joined PJP-1 at different points in time, and since participation each week was optional and many journalers skipped weeks, the length of participant journals varies widely. Some journals cover a limited number of weeks, while others present a continuous narrative over time.

PJP received ethics approval from the Institutional Review Board at the University of Connecticut (Protocol #H20-0065), and all contributors requested and included in the analyses presented here.

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2. The Papers

2.1. Facing crisis and disruption

Each essay in the collection explores a different emotional or psychological dimension of the COVID-19 pandemic. The first four papers

![Table 1](https://www.pandemic-journalingproject.chip.uconn.edu/)

| Gender   | #    | %   |
|----------|------|-----|
| Female   | 1460 | 79% |
| Male     | 319  | 17% |
| Other    | 39   | 2%  |

| Age      | #    | %   |
|----------|------|-----|
| 15-19    | 428  | 23% |
| 20-29    | 447  | 24% |
| 30-39    | 255  | 14% |
| 40-49    | 207  | 12% |
| 50-59    | 200  | 11% |
| 60+      | 283  | 16% |

| Race/Ethnicity | #    | %   |
|----------------|------|-----|
| Asian/Pacific Islander | 111 | 6%   |
| Black           | 102  | 6%   |
| Hispanic/Latinx | 151  | 8%   |
| 2 or more listed/Other | 170 | 9%   |
| Not available   | 398  | 22%  |
| White           | 907  | 49%  |

| Educational attainment | #    | %   |
|------------------------|------|-----|
| Less than high school  | 26   | 1%  |
| High school or equivalent | 196 | 11% |
| Technical or vocational school | 51 | 3%   |
| Some college           | 417  | 23%  |
| Associate or Bachelor’s degree | 487 | 27%  |
| Post-graduate degree   | 643  | 35%  |

| Household Income (in US$) | #    | %   |
|---------------------------|------|-----|
| Less than $15,000          | 43   | 2%  |
| $15,000 - $50,000          | 311  | 17% |
| $50,000 - $99,999          | 351  | 19% |
| $100,000 - $149,999        | 240  | 13% |
| $150,000 - $199,999        | 104  | 6%  |
| $200,000 - $249,999        | 73   | 4%  |
| $250,000 +                 | 105  | 6%  |
| Don’t know/prefer not to say | 461 | 25%  |

[^2]: For further reference, see the PJP homepage ([https://pandemic-journalingproject.chip.uconn.edu/](https://pandemic-journalingproject.chip.uconn.edu/)) and Featured Entries page ([https://www.pandemicjournalingproject.org/archive/featured](https://www.pandemicjournalingproject.org/archive/featured)).

[^3]: Following a two-year embargo period, researchers will be able to apply for permission to access and analyze the anonymized PJP-1 findings via QDR. Requests will be evaluated on a case-by-case basis.

[^4]: The total percentage in each category does not add up to 100% because some participants left one or more survey questions blank.

[^5]: Given the difficulty in translating U.S. racial/ethnic categories for global audiences, we asked about racial/ethnic background in two different ways. Participants who listed the U.S. as their country of residence were asked a closed-ended question based on U.S. census categories. Additionally, all participants, regardless of country of residence, were offered an opportunity to name the “racial or ethnic group(s) that best describes you” in a separate, write-in question. Here we report only responses to the closed-ended question.

[^6]: Black women caregivers (Kalinoski et al., 2022), healthcare workers (Ansari, 2022), and college students in New York City (Baines, 2022). The final three take a thematic focus, tackling topics of agency (Parson et al., 2022), loneliness (Parsons, 2022), and “languishing” (Willen, 2022). Larotonda and Mason’s essay (“New Life, New Feelings of Loss: Journaling New Motherhood During COVID-19”), focuses on the experiences of PJP participants who were pregnant or gave birth during the pandemic. The authors examine the considerable emotional distress that perinatal women experience when they are unable to engage in the critical relationships and events that they deem necessary for integrating their babies into their families and completing their transition into motherhood—a process called “kining” (Howell, 2003). Drawing upon the journals of thirty-two mothers and prospective mothers who were pregnant or gave birth during the first eighteen months of the pandemic, Larotonda and Mason foreground the subtle feelings of loss that occur when practices of care and belonging during the perinatal period are disrupted or completely derailed. Their findings have important
implications for how perinatal mental health struggles are conceptualized and addressed during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

Caregiving also features centrally in the essay by Kalinowski and colleagues (“Shouldering the Load Yet Again: Black Women’s Experiences of Stress during COVID-19”), but in a different context. The authors examine experiences of stress among Black women in the US who reflected in their journals on their struggles to navigate increased caregiving responsibilities, work-related challenges, and disruptions to social connectedness resulting from the pandemic. The article underscores the importance of deploying an intersectional lens to understand the cumulative impact of stressors that emerge in overlapping domains of social experience, such as race and gender. For Black women, the Superwoman Schema (Woods-Giscombé, 2010), or the sense that one must appear strong and prioritize care for others over one’s own personal needs, may exacerbate mental health distress produced by the pandemic, particularly for women who carry heavy caregiving responsibilities. Kalinowski and colleagues highlight two critical questions that require future research. First, future studies will need to investigate the long-term impact of COVID-19-related stress on the physical and mental health of Black women. Second, despite strong evidence regarding the positive mental health benefits of journaling—both in general and in relation to specific health conditions—the authors call attention to the paucity of research on whether these findings hold true for Black women in particular. The authors assert that further research is warranted on whether journaling can help reduce stress and/or mitigate physical and mental health harms that are consequences of racism for Black women.

Ansari’s essay (“An Accumulation of Distress: Grief, Loss, and Isolation among Healthcare Providers during the COVID-19 Pandemic”) explores the distinct mental health challenges faced by healthcare providers (HCP) as they contend with the suffering and death of patients and their patients’ loved ones while also navigating loss and grief in their own lives. Ansari shows how HCP’s capacity for processing and coping with grief is often constrained both by stressors within the workplace (e.g., staffing shortages, uncompensated overtime) and by feelings of guilt about lamenting social losses (e.g., lost time with loved ones, or missing out on important life events) that may seem trivial compared to the losses of life they encounter at work. Ansari illuminates wider themes that cut across the papers in the collection, including the distress of living “life on hold,” as well as the need for recognition and validation of divergent forms of loss and grief in clinical workplaces. Ansari’s findings also underscore the importance of carving out spaces for social connection and shared experience in coping with the isolating conditions of crisis, a point that is taken up in the next two essays as well.

In “It’s Normal to Admit You’re Not Okay”: First Generation College Students Defining Health and Finding Wellness through the Journaling Process in New York City,” Baines offers a first-hand perspective on how classroom-based engagement with PJP served as a therapeutic resource for multiple cohorts of community college students in New York City, an early epicenter of the pandemic in the US. Baines describes how she integrated PJP into her teaching, and how students in her classes found meaning and value in opportunities for guided reflection that were structured around both PJP prompts and material posted on PJP’s publicly accessible Featured Entries page. She shows how these opportunities helped students reframe their own experiences of heightened mental distress during COVID-19, especially by recognizing their experiences as part of a widely-shared phenomenon rather than a reflection of personal inadequacy. Classroom engagement with PJP helped students recognize not only which assistance professionals could offer them, but also how they may struggle and be struggling with others, but also how their own encounters with structural inequality intensified their experiences. Baines concludes by suggesting that journaling may hold promise not only as a means for collecting narratives about pandemic life, but also as a powerful source of collective or community-based therapeutic intervention for marginalized young adults—a population that often is overlooked in discussions of unmet mental health needs.

The final three essays explore different analytic frames for thinking about the mental health impact of the pandemic. The theme of agency is the focus of Parson, Wurtz, and colleagues’ piece, “Life Will Go on with the Beauty of the Roses: The Moral Dimensions of Coping with Distress through Autobiographical Writing during COVID-19.” Drawing on scholarship about the therapeutic power of self-narrativization, the essay illustrates how the deeply uncertain and disruptive nature of the pandemic can also create new opportunities for self-growth. The authors focus on an illustrative case study involving a Guatemalan woman named Crescencia (pseudonym) who, like the students in Baines’ essay, finds ways of coping with the mental health distress of COVID-19 through processes of both self-reflection and social connectivity. In the crucible of pandemic conditions, Crescencia finds new meaning in her relationships with herself and others and creates a moral roadmap for navigating the “new normal” of life during COVID-19.

Parsons’ essay (“I Miss My Friends, But I Also Miss Strangers’: Pandemic Loneliness and the Importance of Place and Practice”) explores how one common effect of the COVID-19 pandemic, the abrupt and sustained interruption of “weak ties,” or informal or random encounters with strangers and acquaintances, has contributed to a widespread sense of loneliness. Parsons contends that weak ties have materiality, and that loneliness is not simply a longing for people, but also for the places and social practices that draw people together, even in ephemeral ways. By examining journalers’ accounts of missed activities, such as reading at the library or singing in the church choir, Parsons shows how experiences of belonging often are generated through non-intimate spheres and relations. Her findings show how a deeper understanding of loneliness as lived and managed by ordinary people during COVID-19, including experiences of interrupted weak social ties, can yield new insights into overlooked aspects of both loneliness and belonging.

In the final essay (“Languishing in Critical Perspective: Routes and Routes of a Traveling Concept in COVID-19 Times”), Willen traces the social life of a scholarly concept—“languishing”—as it began the academic and entered the sphere of public discourse following the publication of a newspaper article that became the “most-read New York Times story of 2021” (NY Times staff, 2021). Drawing on PJP journalers’ engagements with this term as it began circulating in public discourse, the essay explores its subjective value for people struggling to name and navigate the disruptive impact of the pandemic in their lives. Putting “languishing” in conversation with other concepts like depression, anxiety, and trauma, the essay also explores the kinds of definitional slippage and cultural work that occur when psychological and psychiatric concepts become detached from their origins and take on new forms of meaning and significance as they become vernacularized. Overall, Willen cautions that languishing—like its countervailing concept in positive psychology, flourishing—may have strong cultural resonance in the present historical moment, yet risks distracting us from the urgent work of confronting the root causes of the profound mental health burden precipitated, and now exacerbated, by the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.2. Journaling as research method and psychosocial intervention in times of crisis

Taken together, these essays show how PJP participants’ journals offer a timely and qualitatively rich window onto the mental health burdens imposed by COVID-19, especially during the first 18 months of the pandemic. As the mental health impact of COVID-19 continues to unfold, this special issue provides unique insight into facets and domains of mental health that are not easily accessed through more conventional research approaches. For example, the mental health challenges described in these essays include feelings of emotional fatigue, boredom, loneliness, stuckness, disappointment, fear, and existential angst—all of which influence mental health, but none of which is necessarily diagnosable as a particular illness. Such struggles emerge in the broader context of people’s quotidian lives, and they involve a complex interplay of competing life demands, relational obligations, moral commitments, and personal aspirations and desires amidst the deep uncertainty and isolation of pandemic life.
In Larotonda and Mason's essay on perinatal motherhood, for instance, we meet a Native American woman in her 30s from Texas who mourned the absence of her family and friends during early stages of new motherhood, saying, "I have a baby who has never met his relatives ... nor has he been baptized ... The door[s] are shut for us in many ways and I don't know how long my world can live like this." In her essay on loneliness, Parsons introduces a nonbinary single white person in their late 20s in Colorado for whom the loss of public life and social engagement weighed heavily: "My social circle has been whittled down to about 4 people. We ... rarely venture out to a restaurant or bar patio. I miss bars, dancing, and meeting strangers. I miss experiencing new things. The monotony of the pandemic is absolutely numbing."

These accounts highlight a central theme that cross-cuts the essays in the collection: mental distress during COVID-19 has resulted, in large part, from subtle disruptions to the social fabric of everyday life. Missed milestones, stolen moments, stalled aspirations, and the absence of physical touch and other forms of social and communal interaction are significant sources of emotional and existential turmoil for journalers across the lifespan who have lived through, and been forced to adapt to, these turbulent times.

As the essays in this collection suggest, consequences like these may be particularly pronounced among populations and communities already struggling with limited social support, especially those whose life circumstances are constrained by social, economic, and political inequity and injustice. Several papers illuminate the intersectional nature of such burdens. We hear, for example, how psychosocial challenges associated with COVID-19 intersect with other dimensions of vulnerability—for example, race, gender, age, and employment—as well as competing social obligations, such as the need to care for dependent family members or manage economic instability within the household. Intersectional vulnerabilities may compound life stressors that contribute to mental illness (Prohaska, 2020; Vickery, 2018). In addition, such vulnerabilities may limit the tools and resources available to individuals as they struggle to cope with grief, loss, and other life disruptions. As individuals, families, and communities continue to grapple not only with the sequelae of COVID-19 but also with the ongoing threat of future epidemic outbreaks, new ways of thinking about and understanding coping are urgently needed.

Beyond their conceptual contributions, the essays in this collection also foreground two innovations associated with journaling itself. First, we highlight the value of online journaling as an innovative form of grassroots collaborative ethnography. PJP’s approach, which involves journaling on an online, researcher-generated platform, leverages technology to expand accessibility and participation while upholding anthropology’s epistemological commitment to foregrounding first-person voices and "telling social stories" (Murthy, 2008) in the context of participants’ realities and local moral worlds (Kleinman, 2006). We show how PJP journalers produce diverse forms of knowledge and experience that are not easily captured by researchers alone or through other digitally-based methods. Furthermore, we show how online journaling can be part of a participatory research strategy that helps transcend geographical limitations and other physical obstacles to conventional ethnographic approaches.

The result, which we have come to describe as grassroots collaborative ethnography, is made possible first and foremost by the accessibility and ease of use of the PJP model. The platform was designed to be accessible to anyone with a computer or smartphone, and the threshold for participation is low—about 10 min per week. It allows for flexibility in the degree and duration of participation; has broad eligibility criteria; and provides multiple modalities for creating journal entries—including written text, audio recordings, and images. The PJP platform allows participants to download and save their own journals, which ensures that all contributions can be retained by participants for their own purposes. PJP has also made a commitment to sharing material collected with other researchers, and the broader public, through online data sharing (in the near term) and the construction of a publicly accessible historical archive (in the longer-term).

Second, this special issue provides evidence for the promise of online journaling as a form of psychotherapeutic intervention. The journals analyzed here illuminate the everyday emotional struggles of different groups of people as they contend with worlds turned upside down by pandemic conditions. We see people thrust into situations and circumstances they had never imagined, without access to their usual sources of support. We hear about families separated by the exigencies of precaution, celebrations canceled, life plans put on hold. Under these circumstances of deep uncertainty and distress, these journals show how people struggled not only to stay afloat—mentally, physically, and financially—but also to find meaningful ways to name, understand, and process what they were going through. The psychotherapeutic potential of online journaling warrants further investigation—and it has become a central focus of several new targeted research studies in PJP’s second data collection phase.

Certainly, an online platform like PJP cannot replace therapy or other forms of mental health treatment and intervention, as we note with caution on the “Mental Health Resources” page of the PJP website. Yet analysis of PJP data, including the papers in this special issue, shows how PJP became an important quasi-therapeutic space for many of our participants as they grappled with the emotional and psychological struggles of pandemic life. While each story is unique, nearly all participants have been touched, and at times completely shaken, by the disruptive impact of COVID-19. Whether journaling functions primarily as a space for reflection and growth, a vehicle for catharsis, or simply a log of daily activities—or some combination—it seems to have the capacity to serve, at least for some, as a useful medium for addressing psychological threat and distress. This finding bolsters our call for further investigation.

3. Conclusion: directions for future research

Overall, this collection foregrounds the power of journaling as both a research method and a therapeutic strategy, and it points to three primary areas requiring future research. First, as digital technologies become increasingly present in spaces of everyday life around the globe, the need for innovative approaches to online ethnographic research has become increasingly pressing. Future studies should consider how journaling can be used to promote inclusive, participant-driven research approaches that facilitate broad public accessibility while achieving population-level representation and methodological rigor. Furthermore, journals provide a different form of engagement with participants than do traditional ethnographic methods like semi-structured interviews and participant observation. While journaling is by no means a replacement for these other methods, the essays included here show how it can generate intimate insights into a broad spectrum of everyday lived experiences from a first-person point of view. In particular, future research should consider how journaling can complement other research methods and create new opportunities for both knowledge production and collaborative data analysis.

Second, the essays in this collection highlight the need for further research on the potential role that online journaling may play in helping people cope with experiences of crisis and disaster. Our findings suggest that the PJP platform may serve as a model for low-cost, high impact interventions capable of reaching broad populations and promoting social connectivity, especially when more conventional therapeutic approaches (e.g., in-person support groups) are difficult to implement. Given the high demand across the globe for mental health resources that are both inclusive and accessible to diverse populations and communities, research on the potential of journaling as an innovative approach to mental health support is both crucial and timely.

While a large body of scholarship has demonstrated the benefits of certain forms of therapeutic writing—most notably Pennebaker’s (1997) work on “expressive writing”—the papers included here reveal other ways in which a regular practice of producing and preserving one’s experience in writing, voice, and/or images may provide therapeutic benefit. As we have learned from presenting the PJP model to clinical
from Abigail Fisher Williamson (Trinity College) and Alice Larotonda. More information about the project can be found at https://pandemic-journaling-project.chip.uconn.edu/. PJP is supported by multiple sponsors at the University of Connecticut and Brown University, including each university’s Office of the Vice President for Research as well as the Human Rights Institute, Humanities Institute and Office of Global Affairs at the University of Connecticut and the Population Studies and Training Center (supported by NIH center grant P2C HD041020) and Department of Anthropology at Brown University.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

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Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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CRedit authorship contribution statement

HMW: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Project administration. SSW: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Investigation, Data curation, Supervision, Project administration, Funding acquisition. KAM: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Investigation, Data curation, Supervision, Project administration, Funding acquisition.

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