Togetherness in Separation: Practical Considerations for Doing Remote Qualitative Interviews Ethically

Abstract

This discussion paper considers some of the practical and ethical aspects of doing qualitative interviews using synchronous online visual technologies within a shifting research context. It is argued that the immediate access to potential participants and subsequent data collection necessitate adjustment to the ways in which qualitative researchers understand and apply ethics, accountability, and responsibility in their data collection processes. We examine the parallels between interviewing face-to-face and interviewing using technology from a practical and integral perspective. In the online environment researchers require a heightened sensitivity and awareness of their attitudes, knowledge, and skills before, during, and after the interview to ensure that the process is safe, rigorous, and meaningful for collecting comprehensive qualitative data. To do this, we consider how to plan, conduct, and end online interviews using voice over internet protocol (VoIP).

Key Words: Data collection, Methods, Online, Interview, Qualitative, VoIP

Introduction: Reconceptualising 'social distance'

This discussion paper was instigated from the necessity to move qualitative interviewing data collection to online platforms when face-to-face contact was suddenly prohibited during the outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020 in the United Kingdom (UK). The authors of this paper are researchers, doctoral supervisors, and PhD students, all working on differing projects at a UK university. Through collegiate conversations and peer-debriefing we noticed both opportunities and challenges arising when using online interviews as a method for qualitative data collection. Our approach to this paper recognises the dynamic context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the accelerated advancements in digitisation. We therefore aim to use our collective experience and insights to contribute to the evolving online data collection scene.

Initially the advantages quickly became apparent: online interviews offered speed in the recruitment of participants (Allen, 2017), and a quick and convenient space for participants and researchers to meet for interviews without travel (Opdenakker, 2006). In addition, the facility for instant voice over internet electronic transcription of the interviews transpired as an unanticipated bonus. Yet, when sharing our individual experiences of online data collection our conversations became increasingly reflexive as we developed awareness that the 'gap' between the research, the researcher, and participants was shrinking

into a smaller, faster, and more immediate space: we could swiftly recruit and interview sooner than meeting in person, which was warranted by the rapidly changing situation of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our qualitative research projects all employed semi-structured, non-standardised interviews which provide the "opportunity to establish a rapport with the interviewee before exploring potentially personal and difficult material" (Morris, 2015, p.8). However, when discussing our separate projects, we noticed a shared observation that the interviews themselves 'felt' quicker because the interaction in the preamble leading to the interview was not as personal, and importantly, the closing of the interview 'felt' more sudden. As previously thought, building rapport and intimacy without human presence may indeed be more difficult (Bloom, 1998). When the 'leave the meeting' button is clicked the interaction abruptly closes, and that taken-for-granted space of physically leaving a one-to-one interview, with the usual farewells, the checking that the participants are well, and the researcher reflecting on the experience on return to their usual workplace, are erased and replaced with a swift sense of separation and finality. We became aware that the shrinking "technoscape" (Appadurai, 1996) needed more thought, that our research protocols needed revisiting and adapting, considering the new 'virtual' space (Irani, 2019) or else we were at risk of unintentional accountable carelessness.

"Carelessness" in this context is inadvertently overlooking the implications of transferring the principles of good research practice directly into technology assisted modes of interaction. While there are several ethical frameworks (such as utilitarian, deontological, and feminist, amongst others), as researchers, we centralise the principles of respect for persons, beneficence and non-maleficence, justice, and confidentiality. However, how we apply them in a virtual research environment is nuanced. Importantly, the researcher needs to bear in mind there is always a real-life individual who may be affected by our research (Markham & Buchanan, 2012), whom we have a duty to treat with integrity. This is not a new consideration, but one that can be inadvertently disregarded by the speed afforded by new technological spaces. Research in the online sphere therefore raises various ethical points for consideration (Berinsky et al., 2012; Franzke et al., 2020) because the distance between researchers and participants in online communication platforms may reduce the researchers' sense of sensitivity toward the participants (Duggan & Brenner, 2013). Detailed advice about the ethical issues relating to online research is available from several sources, such as the Association of Internet Researchers (Franzke et al., 2020). Such sources demonstrate the wider thinking needed to adopt technology-assisted qualitative interviewing. Therefore, this paper has emerged from our collegiate and reflexive conversations arising from the transition to methods of

online qualitative interviewing and will explore the practical and methodological considerations of inquiring into the life of another remotely.

Thinking about conversations at a distance

Undertaking face-to-face interviewing requires forethought and planning. In this process, communications are likely between the research team and potential participants to discuss the research and if they wish to be involved and negotiate the interview appointments. As such, pre-interview information contributes to the research risk assessment, as required by a comprehensive process of ethical approval prior to commencing the research. Arrangements are then confirmed regarding time, place, and attendees. On meeting, introductions are made, formalities of introductions and small ice-breaking talk occurs within the normal human interaction that falls outside the data collection activity. Upon commencing the interview, the research purpose, consent, and how information will be used is discussed to check the participants' understanding. The next step is to ensure their comfort and start when they are ready. This accommodation procedure extends the time spent with the participants for data collection. However, in our experience, interviewing online is more rapid, not only in terms of organising interviews, but also in how the interview is conducted. The immediate closeness

can mask our assumptions about access and privacy because the "safety net" afforded by physical human presence while exchanging information in a personal space may be less obvious.

A technology-imposed gap between the researcher and participant can emerge in both obvious and subtle ways. Matzner and Ochs (2019) argue that participants often perceive the nature of online research differently than researchers. A heightened awareness of the differences in perception between researchers and research participants, and an acknowledgement of the issues of privacy and research disclosure is needed (Salmons, 2016). Online entry into the private space of the participant is partial and incomplete. What is viewed and accessed by the researcher on screen is determined by the participant, while the wider inhabited domain remains concealed. This point is important, especially when investigating sensitive issues, because the presence of others (either known or unknown to the researcher) may influence disclosure and have a bearing on the potential consequences of disclosure. Therefore, a new conversation is required about consent and recording, with the terms of participation clearly negotiated and identified throughout the data collection process. Privacy is also at risk when identifiable information is shared, which might lead to gathering additional information about research participants online or the ability to trace them, especially in relation to sensitive topics. It is, as Nissenbaum (2004) argues, a

framework of contextual integrity that researchers take upon themselves in all stages of conducting a research project. Privacy assumes a constructed awareness of the information and context, directly and indirectly shared in the online space and the researcher's consistent mindfulness when obtaining, analysing, and presenting research data.

When thinking about methods of collecting qualitative data, we must examine the often-held assumption that remote interviewing limits the quality of the data. Krouwel et al. (2019) compared video calls and face-to-face interviews using a variety of measures. Face-to-face interviews were 33.3% longer in duration and had a 4.6% longer word-count than video interviews. When comparing measures of breadth (number of nodes generated) and depth (number of statements linked to each code), face-to-face interviews were slightly more comprehensive (2.9% more open nodes and 5.1% more secondary nodes) and as a result, it can be inferred that remote interviewing does not limit research rapport. Whilst differences above highlight the slight benefit of face-to-face interviewing, they are not significant enough to discount remote interviewing as a useful research technique. Researchers must weigh up the relative merits of remote versus face-to-face interviewing alongside other factors, such as time, cost, reach, urgency of research, and accessibility.

However, remote interviewing technology can inadvertently make it easier for the researcher to collect meta-data beyond speech, whether this was intended to be collected or not. While text content might be sought, new technology can also be used for participant observation and visual analysis. Clarity is needed about the function, purpose, and limits of the data to be gathered during the planning phase, rather than after the interview has taken place. For example, does the researcher need to video record the interview when only audio data is required? Who has access to the recording? How is it stored and shared? At what point is the recording deleted? In all circumstances, researchers must be aware of what data they are collecting and how they plan to analyse it. Most importantly, they need to ensure the technology is appropriate and set up for the purpose of the research, rather than relying on the default settings of VoIP platforms.

Re-positioning the researcher and participant interaction

There is a growing array of theorizations of the qualitative interview and researchers must demonstrate the quality of their work in ways that are commensurate with their assumptions about their use of interviews as a human encounter (Roulston, 2010; Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). We agree with this position and add that focussing on the position of the 'other' is the main mark of

effective interviewing, rather than emphasizing the methodological nuance. This is argued based on the overarching epistemology of qualitative research which is to move beyond everyday ways of knowing (Flick, 2020), and to find out about other people's experiences via their attitudes, motivations, perceptions, and actions in relation to our research purpose. Whilst we can apply methodological slants, all qualitative research seeks to gain a glimpse into the world of the other, hence "the how" becomes of secondary importance.

To counter the apparent ease of access, researchers still need to recognise themselves as outsiders to the participants' social world. The agreement to meet represents entry into a privileged place to gather shared understandings from our 'conversation with a purpose' (Burgess, 1984, p.102). The idea of gaining 'distant rapport' may appear paradoxical, however physical separation does not necessarily translate into a lack of togetherness (Hanna & Mwale, 2017). A sense of closeness can be experienced remotely through a conversational transaction to share one's thoughts and feelings with an empathic listener without physical proximity. The ability of researchers to build rapport in an online environment encourages mutually respectful relationships in a safe and positive atmosphere with the intention of cultivating trust, communication, and cooperation to bolster the task of eliciting rich data to develop deeper understandings.

However, VoIP technology does not provide the same peripheral information or visual prompts as face-to-face interviews, which limits and influences the researcher's own assumptions, the types of questions asked, and the approach taken in the interviews. The enclosed screen view of the participant (and conversely of the researcher) can remove the possibility for the immediate appraisal of their surroundings. Researcher bias cannot be eliminated in either face-to-face or online research, but we argue that the reduced environmental data in online data collection allows the participants to present themselves closer to the way in which they desire to be perceived. Indeed, the restricted online visual field modifies and possibly narrows the assumptive frame and requires the researcher to ask more attentive and expansive questions about place, person, and the things connected to the research purpose and questions. The researcher may have to 'work harder' for the data and be more perceptive to the subtle, non-verbal cues. This increased attentiveness, noticing, and checking can result in a more rigorous shared understanding by centring the participant's experience (Flick, 2020). However, the tension between usefully probing and maintaining participant's comfort needs to be sensitively and skilfully managed.

Conducting VoIP interviews using: Practical strategies

The following section outlines how we, as academic colleagues, prepared and undertook online data collection methods across different research projects, spanning PhD and externally funded research projects. Our understandings developed as we engaged in our individual research activities during the Covid-19 pandemic. Collegiate conversations strengthened shared scholarly insights about decision-making and the practicalities of applying interviewing via online platforms. Therefore, we were learning in practice, reflecting on practice, and sharing our practice. Our understandings have developed because of applying interviewing via online platforms and are a result of us learning in practice and reflecting on our practice. Examples are presented to demonstrate our applied point of view towards rethinking preparedness, online engagement, online interviewing, and closing the interviews.

Rethinking Preparedness

The initial obstacle of accessing participants in terms of geography is removed for online interviews, along with considerations of travel to the interview location, and its associated financial and time costs (Salmons, 2016); however, other concerns remain. Accessing hard-to-reach people is often problematic in

research. Without careful consideration, how do we access those whose voices may not be heard? How do we ensure that we are not only accessing those who have the confidence to be heard, the 'interested' persons' perspective?

Online data collection involves the complex issues of digital skills and digital poverty. While this article refers to our research conducted in the UK, the matter is even more pertinent when considering the realities of the Global South. World Bank data shows a substantial divide in terms of access to the internet (measured by % of population that have access) between the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) (21%) and OECD member countries (85%) (World Bank, 2019a). Additionally, where recent data is available, digital skills data show higher levels of digital skills in High Income (HI) countries than LDCs. For example, the Global Competitiveness Index's *Digital Skills among Population* indicator, which ranks countries on a scale of 1-7 (best), shows higher levels of digital skills in US (5.33), Australia (5.02), or the UK (4.94), compared with Chad (2.89), Guinea (3.35) and Cambodia (3.57) (World Bank, 2019b). Indeed, Chen's (2021) study of mobile internet access in the Global South reveals that poor digital literacy was the most common reason for not using the internet.

Consideration of digital poverty not only refers to the resources needed to access the internet, but also the digital skills to safely participate online. In the UK, 96% of UK adults have access to the internet and an estimated 75% of the population

can communicate using video tools (Office for National Statistics, 2020). Data from Lloyds Bank (2020) shows that 78% of the UK population can complete tasks in each of the digital skills categories needed for modern life (communicating, being safe, legal and confident online, problem solving, transacting, and handling information and content). Yet these percentages differ across various groups in UK, associated with level of education, physical ableness, and age (Lloyds Bank, 2020, p.48). However, researchers cannot assume that their intended population is digitally active or has the capacity, or willingness to be so. An added layer of participant preparation is needed to ascertain the technical viability of accessing online modes of communication, and to find out how comfortable the person is to engage in this method of data collection.

Therefore, researchers must make informed decisions about the appropriateness of online interviewing regarding the population of study, and whether face-to-face avenues could be incorporated alongside online research to ensure samples are representative and include those who are not digitally connected. Furthermore, digital poverty is also relevant in the recruitment process which is often reliant on social media and other online communications. For example, in one research project of the authors, older-age veterans were invited to participate. To reach this population who may not be digitally active, online invitations to participate

were complemented with paper mail drops. This was achieved in collaboration with organisations who support older veterans and are aware of the digital skills of this group. The project team also provided alternatives in the form of telephone interviews.

However, this experience also revealed that some participants who have both access and digital literacy refuse to engage with remote methods of data collection because of their lack of trust in online platforms. As such, our shared reflexive discussions revealed that a deeper level of consideration is required. The issues of digital skills and digital poverty are complex and reflect the contextual circumstances as lived by the participants.

Re-thinking online engagement: Questions about the remote interview

From our joint experience of using remote interviewing, we identified a series of points to enhance the researcher's self-reflection and offer these as triggers for further deliberation. By no means exhaustive, the points made are intended to stimulate deeper reasoning and more informed decision-making about the relationship between the research and participants when interviewing online.

When, how, and what to ask

Research questions or problems guide the type of research that is undertaken, the existing knowledge, and the methodological lens directed toward the development of interview questions. To start, we need to consider why the data is being collected and check that the core questions align to the core purpose of the research. This means actively thinking about the research approach and the purpose of the interview questions to maximize the knowledge that can be gained from the participants' answers. The aim of a qualitative interview is thus to enable the participant to express their own narrative, in their own terms and offer opportunities for 'gifts of chance' (Brinkmann, 2020, p.3). As such, responses may take time to be revealed, and researchers need to be prepared to carefully manoeuvre through the layers of conversation in terms of the questions that they would like to ask, while also being prepared to wait, listen, and respond with a sense of openness and wonder. Silence is a powerful tool in interviews and can be used strategically to manage the interpersonal dynamic in the interview situation (Bengtsson & Fynbo, 2018), whilst also allowing the conversational ebb and flow to provide hints about aspects that are significant, challenging, or in/consequential to the participant. Yet silence can be more uncomfortable to manage in online context because of the faster pace of the interview, therefore gentleness is needed to know when to pause and wait, when to interject and

check what is happening for the participant, and when to move on. The online screen view often results in the researcher and participant looking directly at each other and the more intense level of eye contact can infer the expectancy of a response, when time may be needed for memories and thoughts to gather, or for the right words to be found, or to have a short respite in the conversation.

Often novice researchers can take a linear approach to their interview schedule, whereas a flexible stance offers the opportunity to follow the participant, rather than adhere to the interview schedule. The ability to work with the developing data generates a more thorough and sensitive examination of what people say and how they say it. To avoid misunderstanding, clarity is essential, and researchers may have to check that both the question and the answers are understood. As a starting point, core questions provide an outline structure to steer the interview and tend to be deliberately open-ended and followed with probing and supplementary questions to seek greater detail to the description (Roulston, 2013).

Conducting VoIP interviews: Practical strategies

To build on our applied experiences and ideas about preparing and conducting online interviews, the following individual researcher accounts, extracted from our

differing projects, exemplify some of the issues we noticed as we explored the transition to online interviews. This type of reflective example encouraged further noticing and deeper conversations, moving from what we did towards identifying lessons learnt. Our observations transformed into reflexive considerations for future online interviews. As such, we are not presenting our thoughts as data to be analysed, but as instances of us learning within a supportive and scholarly environment.

TK (PhD student): '*I began the engagement with participants before the interview. In the initial communications, I tried to be as friendly as possible and allowed participants full control of the time and date of the online meeting. I was keen to remove some of the sterility of screen-based interviewing. We used Zoom as the VoIP and I started by greeting the participant, we then discussed how their day or week had been so far, what they had planned for the coming week, and other similar introductory conversation. This warming-up talk, where you try to become acquainted with the participants, is essential and replicates the process of a face-to-face interview. In my experience, it yields better data than launching straight into the interview process since the participants feel valued. I was keen that participants did not feel like a source of data to be mined, allowing engagement beyond the interview theme. This ran through the whole of the interview – I*

allowed space for the participants to be themselves and go off topic within reason'.

HE (Associate Professor): '*I always logged onto the online meeting room 10 minutes before the meeting, just in case the participant was early, as it would show that I was keen to meet them. Initial introductions were about us, our surroundings and features of interest, often a house pet and I explain that this introductory conversation was not part of the interview or being recorded. I offered both a chance to get a drink because often when visiting participants in their home environments hot drinks are offered. I would check their physical comfort prior to beginning the interview and reminded them we can take a break at any point. I was clear as to when recording of the actual interview was to start, and asked participants to prompt me to hit the "record" button. This was to replicate my placing a recording device between us if it was a face-to-face interview. The visibility of a recording device reminds us that we are meeting for a specific purpose, with choice for the participant to continue or not, and as a reminder that what they say will be retained. I found the interviews themselves flowed with little difference compared to face-to-face, however, what I did not capture was body language below the shoulders, so I made checks on their comfort and how they were feeling*'.

AW (Research Assistant): '*I made it explicit when the interview began by starting to talk through consent to check understanding and then asked permission to begin recording. I always started the interview with simple, unintimidating questions*'.

MI (Research Fellow): '*We informed potential participants about the research and consent terms using a Participant Information Form and a Consent Form. Both were emailed for the participants to either digitally sign them, or alternatively to print the forms, sign, scan, and then email them back. On request, we posted paper-version of consent forms for the participant's return. Before the interview started, we went through these with the interviewee to ensure they had a chance to ask any questions and that they fully understood them. A verbal consent was recorded on a voice recorder as an extra layer of confidence. To ensure the interviewee understands what information belongs to the research project and what detail is collected by the online host (e.g., the individual's IP address), a slide was shared and discussed with each participant, explaining clearly how their data will be used*'.

TK: '*I had a number of visually impaired participants and if they were unable to fill in the consent form, they gave a verbal consent which was audio recorded*'.

Lessons learnt from reflections:

Time is needed to develop rapport and 'warming-up talk' is a useful way of helping the participant and interviewer to settle into the interview. Therefore, building rapport requires diligence, planning, and skill. In addition, the way we initially correspond enables the participants to 'know' something of us and our commitment to ethical research, and the way we value the participants' time and input. Regular signposting in the stages of the interview empowers the participant to ask questions about the interview process, and time needs to be factored in for participants to check the purpose of the interview. For example, "to start, I have a few questions about…"; at mid-point, "we've been talking for half an hour now, and just want to check you are feeling ok and happy to continue"; towards close, "I have a few aspects I would like to clarify before we close"; and "to close, thank you for your thoughts and time, I have very much enjoyed meeting you and learning from you. Is there anything else you would like to add before I stop recording our discussion?" Signposting throughout the interview offers opportunities to slow the pace of the interview and becomes an integral feature of an interview protocol. The centrality of the participant experience involves promoting autonomy, so the researcher must consistently consider their actions and check that the purpose of the interview remains the focal point throughout

the interview. We may also need to work with the advantages and limitations of the technology.

Practical future strategies:

- Prepare for 'warm-up talk', identify topics to open informal conversation, and set the scene for the interview

- Consistently signpost the key stages of the interview to empower the participant to ask questions about the interview process and manage the pace of the conversation

- Frame questions in a way that identifies the progress of the interview

- Factor in time for participants to check the purpose of the interview

- Be prepared to check understanding and alter vocabulary to help the participant.

Through discussing such examples, we developed a practical guidance for our conducting of online interviews, with ethical considerations mapped alongside, as shown in Table 1. This starts at the point of first online contact with the participant, following appropriate consent gaining procedures, prior to the interview commencing, through the interview, and on completion. The ethical considerations are intentionally not boxed into stages of the interviewing process, because ethics is the central spine that runs throughout the interviewing process.

Table 1. Guidance for conducting an online interview

	Format for Core Questions	Purpose	Ethical considerations
1	Factual, scene setting Tell me about… (who, when, what, where)	**Context building**	Access: Ensure researcher and participant are familiar with the technology, include time to pre-test the system and establish a 'Plan B' mode of contact.
2	Descriptive What happened when…	**Experience definition**	
3	Observations What were your thoughts about... How was _____different for you?	**Reflection**	Informed consent: Remind participants about why the data is collected, what is recorded, how data is used and stored.
4	Specific examples	**Establishing detail**	Confidentiality: Confirm that participants understand the reasons for information

			sharing. Be aware that the participants' responses may be overheard which could have implications for the participant / others.
	Can you give me an example of… You said _____, walk me through what that was like for you.		
5	Appraisal What is your view about...	**Consequence of experience**	Beneficence to manage well-being: Pre-determine strategies to alleviate distress. Pick up cues such as reluctance, discomfort, fatigue. Respond to information that may be detrimental to emotional state.
6	Significance and consequence You mentioned _____, tell me what that was like for you. You mentioned _____, describe that in more detail for me.	**Descriptive impact**	Maintain focus on the overall research question(s) / purpose rather than probing for personal curiosity.

			Have the necessary IT skills, equipment, and time to ensure the safe transfer of recording and its storage.

Recognising the importance of endings in VoIP interviews

We also identified that closing interviews remotely needed considerable thought. The closing phase of an interview is described as 'one of the most difficult things to do' (Mathers et al., 2000, p.125) and its relevance can be often overlooked. Just as the participant can suddenly appear on the screen at the start of the interview, they can leave just as quickly. Unlike face-to-face interviews, VoIP interviews do not include the subsequent exchange when the interaction can wind down on the way out of a building and well-being can be checked in a social milieu. Instead, a process of closure is enacted in the same frame as the interview, and without clear direction from the interviewer, may go unnoticed.

The planning and delivery of secure endings to online conversations demand that researchers remain agile and attentive. Several features may signal that an interview is coming toward an end, along with decisions based on theoretical

issues, such as the collection of sufficient data relating to the topic areas (Thompkins et al., 2008) or factors associated with participant's well-being. Therefore, decisions about when to enter the final phase of the conversation require researchers to not only listen carefully to what is said, but also how is it expressed. Below are thoughts we recorded in our discussions about our experience of ending interviews. Again, these are intended as descriptive and through future practice, our analysis has developed.

TK: '*I wanted to render that this does not have to be a final ending of my interaction with the participants. I was careful to thank participants for taking the time to talk to me and reiterated that should they have any questions; they can reach me by email. Also, I informed them that I would share my preliminary findings with them, should they wish to see them. I have continued conversations with some participants, who wanted to read my previous publications*'.

AW: '*I ended the interview questions circling back the positives of the discussions with the aim of easing the shift back to daily life for the participant. I finished up by asking if they have any questions about the project or about the usage of their data*'.

HE: '*Most VoIP interviews lasted for over an hour and usually provided personal, significant details for the research. On closing the interviews, I felt responsibility*

that participants had chosen to share their experiences with me. In the face-to-face context I would make it obvious that data is no longer recorded by physically turning a recording machine off, so when using VoIP I stated to the participants that I had stopped recording on the computer. However, I continued conversation with them about other non-research topics. Saying goodbye always included a reminder that their participation in the research is important. After undertaking face-to-face interviews, I would go back to my car, where I would reflect on the conversation and verbally record my initial thoughts. After VoIP interviews I made written notes because I was in my home office and in no rush to get back, which allowed me to make more thoughtful reflections. Yet VoIP interviews left an uncanny thought that I might have not captured all information that I could have had if meeting the participant face-to-face. Equally, I pondered about how I can ensure the immediacy of interactions does not unintentionally cause distress that I cannot perceive through the screen'.

Lessons learnt from reflections:

Endings signal respect, gratitude, and care, and we need to consider the temporal structure of the interview. The interview questions may take people back to challenging moments in their life, therefore, the ending of an interview is as

important as the beginning. We need to carefully think about how the participant may feel after our interviews, and check what support they have immediately around them, and/or signpost to external support as identified in the pre-interview participant information and consent forms. We need to factor in time to say goodbye, ask what they may be doing for the rest of their day, and reiterate that should they wish to say more about the interview discussion they can write an email or request another meeting.

- Make time for interview endings in your diary. Do not book remote interviews back-to-back, as the conversation could be extended and should be allowed to end naturally

- Check well-being of the participant throughout, but particularly signal how many more questions are likely to be asked

- Give cues about the process of ending the interview

- Bring the participant back to the present moment and purpose of the conversation.

The final questions of an online interview therefore must be carefully considered and structured because they can extract additional insightful information, for both the researcher and the participant. However, the type of questions selected, the pace, and the phrasing must be appropriate for the sample and have an explicit intention to direct the conversation to a position where researchers leave

participants in a safe, calm, and positive mindset. One strategy is re-orientating back to the present by manoeuvring to an informal chatter mode, which formed the start of the online interaction, mirroring strategies used in face-to-face interview contexts.

The concluding moments of an online interview are important and have the potential to highlight significant methodological and ethical issues. The last moments of the exchange are more than a formality, it is the time when a lingering impression about the experience of being interviewed is forming. For this reason, the process of concluding is inherently linked to maintaining the participant's wellbeing. In preparation, researchers are encouraged to ask themselves questions such as:

• How will the interview end and what message might this give?

• In what ways will the impressions about this interview experience be checked with the participant?

• Are there ways to find out and understand what the participant gained from the interview experience? Was it as expected?

Conclusion

This discussion paper has considered the contingent ways in which we can inquire into the life of another one without face-to-face interaction, with consideration to the accountability and responsibility of remote data collection. The paper aims to instigate our thinking, as researchers, about the immediacy and indirectness of interviewing using online platforms by providing practical examples to illustrate how we can think about and conduct online research practice.

The continuous evolution of digital technologies, alongside with the blurring of private and public boundaries demand that researchers constantly re-examine their research methods, standards, and behaviours. We have argued that ease and immediacy of online access can unintentionally result in carelessness which in turn could induce harmful consequences for the participants. This paper has considered how strategies can be used to enhance and protect participant well-being in relation to online interview techniques by suggesting a series of points to mitigate against potential harms that we might not be able to readily discern when working remotely. Using these, we aim to promote togetherness in separation while placing carefulness at the centre of our data gathering activities and interactions.

Remote data gathering does not warrant a new set of ethical approaches since most concerns in online interviewing are similar to those in face-to-face contexts. However, we argue for "an increased awareness of and commitment" (Thomas, 2004, p.187) to the already established ethical principles that apply across social research. The advancement of online technologies providing various modes of communication is continuing, with more and more people becoming digitally connected. While there are practical and ethical challenges to adopting VoIP, there are also tantalising opportunities to rethink and reframe traditional face-to-face methods of data collection. Research in the qualitative paradigm is in a prime position to explore how technology can influence and drive a new era of creative, inclusive, and ethical methods for remote data collection.

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