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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 crisis has placed unique restrictions on social researchers in terms of how they conduct their research. It has also created opportunities for adaptation and critical reflection on methodological practice. This article considers how the unanticipated use of remote qualitative methods impacted processes of research *connection* and *connectivity* in qualitative (longitudinal) research. The reflections are based on fieldwork conducted for a qualitative longitudinal study about the parenting journeys and support needs of young fathers. We elaborate our key strategies and provide worked examples of how the research team modified their methods and responded in the crisis context. First, we consider questions of *connection* when seeking to (re)establish and retain connections with project stakeholders and marginalised participants through the pivot to remote methods. Second, we reflect on how processes of maintaining participation and interaction were impacted by practical and technological issues associated with the digitally mediated forms of *connectivity* available.

Introduction

Punctuated throughout the data generated for wave one of the 'Following Young Fathers Further' study are comments like the one used in the title of this article. 'Oh sorry, I've muted you!', 'I can only see the top of your head', 'can you hear me?, Are you still there?' have become definitive discourses of 2020 and 2021, signifying the conduct of relationships virtually at a time of irrevocable social change in working and personal lives. Indeed, these are years that have necessitated the increased usage and dependency on technology to communicate and retain social contact in context of the COVID-19 pandemic and globally implemented lockdowns, the main public health policy enforced to curb the spread of the virus. Not only has the widespread and intensified use of technology inevitably altered everyday parlance, but the pandemic has also shaped the substantive focus of social sciences research. Social scientists have a vital role to play in advancing understanding of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in a multitude of empirical contexts by tracing their uneven and unequal impacts as they unfold. A key concern among researchers has been how new social conditions are being fashioned and what these might mean in terms of inequalities. A burgeoning body of rapid scholarship, for example, attests to the exacerbation of existing inequalities, as well as the emergence of new ones (e.g. The British Academy, 2021).

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As this article explores, greater reflexivity and engagements with questions of the methodological have also been triggered among the social sciences community, prompting attention to the practicalities and ethics of doing qualitative research in times of crisis. Despite national and regional variations in public restrictions, the measures that were first introduced in March 2020 in the UK placed unique constraints on primary qualitative research methods. This included curbs on the mobility of researchers and participants and the prohibition of small and large gatherings of people and face-to-face interactions. Yet the pandemic has also created new and important opportunities for methodological and epistemological insight, including reflection on feasible alternatives to face-to-face fieldwork, as well as space for reflexivity about the values and assumptions that underpin existing methodological practice. Notwithstanding the rapidity at which the social sciences community has adapted to these changes, in both their personal and professional lives, researchers have also been inclined to attend to heightened ethical questions and adhere to core ethical principles, requiring due attention to the potential impacts that continued research at a distance may have on the communities with whom we research (Tarrant & Hughes, 2021). However, in many of the methodological discussions among the social science community to date, few have considered the impacts of the pandemic on researchers conducting qualitative longitudinal (QL) research, including that involving marginalised populations and communities.

In this article, we draw on lessons from the UK Research and Innovation funded research study, 'Following Young Fathers Further' (hereafter FYFF) to document and explain how our experiences of conducting QL and sensitive research, including with an otherwise marginalised population of young fathers, adds to existing work on remote and digital methods, which became the main mode of conduct in the pandemic context. In so doing we invite and enable readers to consider and reflect on their relevance and application to their own research. FYFF, which commenced in January 2020, just three months prior to the first lockdown in the UK, employs a multiple perspective approach (Vogl et al., 2017) to trace change and continuities in the parenting journeys and support needs of young fathers, as well as the dynamic and evolving relationship between individual young fathers, support services and policy. The pandemic has impacted young fathers and the professionals that support them in diverse ways but has also created new opportunities around collaborative research with them. As face-to-face interviews were no longer possible, the FYFF team were prompted to consider how to modify the proposed research strategy. Researching from a distance therefore enabled experimentation with new methods and critical reflection on methodological practice. Our particular focus in this article is on the unanticipated use of synchronous (or real-time) remote methods using telephone and VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) technologies (Lo Iacono et al., 2016), including Zoom and Microsoft Teams. These technologies ostensibly enable researchers to achieve similar outcomes to the methods used in face-to-face fieldwork but have distinctive practical and ethical implications for managing researcher/participant relationships, data quality and integrity, and research practice more generally. In switching to remote methods as a primary method of research, we investigate anew these key issues for qualitative research, for methodological practice in research with young fathers (Davies & Hanna, 2020), as well as for researchers engaging with participants longitudinally.

Our empirical reflections are organised around the themes of *connection* and *connectivity*, which we foreground and elaborate as a framework through which to explore their distinctions and overlaps. These themes synthesise existing literatures that focus on the relational in QL research (connection), with research conducted synchronously using technology mediated forms of communication (connectivity). The first, *connection*, regards adaptations required to both establish and sustain relationships with participants at a distance and to facilitate longitudinal processes of connectedness, sampling and access. Using examples from fieldwork conducted during the first lockdown and the months after it was enforced, we consider the possibilities and issues that arose when seeking to (re)establish and retain connections with participants and project stakeholders. Second, we consider questions of *connectivity*, or how these processes of maintaining participation and interaction were impacted by practical and technological matters, linked to the remote and

digitally mediated forms of connectivity available. For each theme, we elaborate our key strategies and their practical and ethical dimensions and provide worked examples of how the team conducted the research remotely in this unprecedented crisis context. The article concludes by considering the importance of our reflections on QL methodology and sensitive research with a marginalised population, for qualitative research both through the pandemic and beyond. We begin with an overview of the study, its design and sample as context to the methodological reflections and conclusions.

Following Young Fathers Further: adapting research design

As an established QL study, FYFF presented a rare opportunity to capture the emergent social implications and changes wrought by the pandemic, as understood through the biographies and accounts of young fathers and the professionals who support them. In their attention to temporal processes, QL research and methods represent powerful and flexible forms of fluid enquiry with designs that enable the exploration of social change as it unfolds in 'real time' (Neale, 2021). Data generated through multiple waves of engagement with participants have the power to provide unique insights into diverse lived experiences and their dynamic character and have previously been employed to capture evolving family lives and relationships, as well as policy change and their effects (Cordon & Millar, 2007), including at times of rupture and/or crisis and through periods of extreme adversity (Edwards & Irwin, 2010; Vogl et al., 2017). Given that the pandemic has driven significant and fast-moving global changes, researching prospectively as it unfolds means that QL research is especially well placed to trace, capture and interpret developments as they happen. The pandemic, lockdowns and their myriad impacts therefore became substantive objects of inquiry for FYFF and we updated the focus of our interview questions to explore them.

The FYFF project is also nested within an extended programme of QL research, comprising a baseline study called 'Following Young Fathers' (FYF) (Neale et al., 2015, funded by the ESRC in two separate periods, 2008–10 and 2012–15). The fieldwork for FYF concluded five years prior to the pandemic although further linked projects, and associated outputs, have been conducted and disseminated since then that take forward the key findings and collaborations established (e.g. Tarrant, 2021; Tarrant & Neale, 2017). FYF followed a cohort of thirty-one young fathers (aged 25 and under) and established close collaborative relationships with professionals working to support them (Neale et al., 2015). FYFF therefore advances shared theoretical, substantive and methodological themes, builds directly on legacy data that extends back to 2008, and sustains existing relationships with participants and project partners. Two members of the FYFF team also had specific connections to the FYF project, of whom one was involved in conducting face-to-face interviews and fieldwork with some of the young fathers who participated in that phase of the research. In combination, the FYF and FYFF studies comprise a unique, linked and evolving QL dataset that is evidencing the impacts of broader socio-historic, and policy and practice developments on young fathers over more than a decade.

In line with existing research practice and training we intended to conduct our first interviews for the study face-to-face. Instead, the first wave of interviews with seventeen young fathers and seventeen professionals working for family and youth support agencies, took place between July and December 2020, using remote methods. The decision to switch from the planned face-to-face interviews to telephone interviews with young fathers, and to online interviews using Microsoft Teams and Zoom with professionals, not only reflected the renewed fieldwork context produced by the lockdown and researcher preference, but also participant preference and proficiency. The interviews with the young fathers were conducted synchronously and predominantly using telephone, which they said that they preferred. Project partners and the professional participant group had adapted quickly to using Microsoft Teams and Zoom in their work lives, and for some, in their ongoing collaborations with us as a research team, so we predominantly used these VoIPs with them.

To establish the cohort of young fathers for the first wave of interviews, we employed different strategies and engaged with stakeholders in different national contexts. This included re-accessing participants based in a Northern English city, who were already known to us through existing research engagement via FYF. Demonstrating the strength of relationships built up over time with multiple members of the evolving research team, some of these young men agreed to participate in this extended programme of research for the sixth time. Developing new relationships with professionals, we also sought to sample boost and identify and access young fathers in a seaside town on the East Coast of England and another city in the North East of England. The seaside town is an area where deprivation is high, with correspondingly high regional rates of teenage pregnancy. In the North East city, young fathers were identified and accessed via a specialist, community-based support group for young fathers. These are the main FYFF study locations and are localities where support for young fathers is well established or has risen on local policy and practice agendas.

The interviews were semi-structured and enabled exploration of young men's and professionals' experiences both prior to and through the pandemic through prospective and retrospective accounts. Given their timing, the interviews captured the short-term consequences of the pandemic with a predominant focus on the first lockdown enforced in March 2020. This lockdown was distinctive in that the policy measures instigated around requirements for social and physical distancing, wearing face masks in public spaces and providing care and education for children, were stricter, more widely enforced and intensified in terms of their social consequences. Interviews that occurred later during this wave began to document how the easing of measures and then recurrent and regionally imposed lockdowns were experienced as the pandemic, and associated policy measures, progressed and changed. The questions for the young fathers focused on the impacts of the pandemic on some of the key thematic domains examined in the baseline study, FYF, namely parenting, partnering and employment trajectories, and support needs and provision (Neale et al., 2015). The questions for professionals explored how they adapted their support offers through lockdown. This enabled the capture of change and continuities both in experiences of young fatherhood, as well as professional support and their intersections, against the backdrop of policy change and global crisis and rupture. Early analyses of the first wave of interviews, indicate that young fathers continued to navigate existing inequalities, linked to employment precarity, financial insecurity, and relationship instability, but also experienced 'new' ones. There were specific gendered impacts of the pandemic for young fathers, for example, including new barriers to contact with children for non-resident fathers. We also observed effects on their familial and community lives and reports of loneliness and isolation linked to reduced access to services who were themselves initially hampered by the requirements of remote working (Tarrant et al., 2020a, 2020b, 2021).

While these points pertain to the substantive focus and design of the first wave of interviews, the pandemic context also enabled us to explore participant views about the use of, and shift to, remote research methods. With all participants we asked; 'Why did you decide to take part in this project?', and 'What are your views on doing interviews via phone/online?'. We draw on and refer to responses to these questions later in the article to elaborate the connection/connection framework. First, however, we detail the early responses of social researchers to prohibitions on face-to-face fieldwork as context to the practical, ethical, and technological questions navigated.

Qualitative longitudinal research at a distance: researching remotely

In the early days of the pandemic, many social researchers, ourselves included, questioned whether it would be feasible or even desirable to continue to conduct fieldwork at all, let alone remotely. These discussions were driven in part by the pragmatics relating to the kinds of technologies that were available and accessible both to researchers and participants but also ethical imperatives including whether research would constitute a further burden on already crisis impacted participant communities (Garthwaite et al., 2020). The 'ethical compass', published in January 2020 by the

Nuffield Council on Bioethics (2020) for researchers conducting studies in the context of global health emergencies, was a timely and fortuitous intervention providing a useful guiding framework for researchers in the early stages of the pandemic. Comprising three key components or values, the compass supports researchers to address the balance between tricky ethical dilemmas that can arise when researching in emergency contexts with inclusive approaches to research. These are *equal respect* (including treating others with dignity and as moral equals), *helping to reduce suffering* (e.g. helping those in need of suffering from disease), and *fairness* (including non-discriminatory practice and equitable distribution of burdens and benefits). These considerations constitute important guiding principles for determining the value of producing new knowledge during a time of upheaval, whilst also meaningfully including and balancing the needs of participants in research. This resource aided the FYFF team in managing our own trepidation and ambivalence both around re-accessing and re-interviewing participants from the baseline study and seeking to identify and contact new participants at a time of high stress and disruption. We determined it was important from an ethical perspective to hear and understand the voices of marginalised participants whose experiences are often rendered invisible and to ensure their preservation for the historical record (Tarrant & Hughes, 2021). Furthermore, at the heart of all decision-making, remained a core commitment and responsibility of care towards the participants, informed by feminist approaches to research that aim to consider and address power imbalances and empower participants (see also Trier-Bieniek, 2012).

Researchers also turned to an established methodological literature about the value and praxis of remote qualitative methods to determine how they might feasibly continue their research. Even prior to the restrictions on face-to-face fieldwork and data generation, the use of remote, online methods was nothing new in qualitative research. These were well established as part of the wider gamut of qualitative research methods long before the lockdowns were enforced (e.g. Braun et al., 2017; Vogl, 2013; Weller, 2017). Testament to the strength and breadth of the field and its key approaches, the early days of the pandemic saw a concerted effort among the research community to crowd source existing academic resources explicating the value and practicalities of remote and digitally mediated qualitative methods. These reports identified physically distant modes of connection and connectivity using mediated forms and documented them as rigorous, peer reviewed methodologies that were implemented and evaluated prior to the pandemic (Tarrant & Hughes, 2021). The LSE Digital Ethnography Collective Reading List,[1] Deborah Lupton's Doing Fieldwork in a Pandemic[2] list and the Nippon Foundation Ocean Nexus Centre at the University of Washington, or EarthLab (2020), are notable examples. These resources were developed and shared rapidly to support those whose qualitative fieldwork was already planned, or in process, and who therefore needed to change their study designs quickly. Significantly, they collated links to a wealth of resources about methods that are not uncommonly used but are often framed as inferior to face-to-face approaches. A variety of challenges and disadvantages in conducting remote interviews have been reported and examined in existing literature, including the potential for reduced data quality because of issues with technology (Pearce et al., 2014) and potential for interruptions (Barratt, 2012), internet accessibility issues (Wong et al., 2009), and inequalities around computer and information literacy (Mann & Stewart, 2000). While a growing body of literature has questioned the inferiority of remote interviewing (e.g. Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Holt, 2010; Nehls et al., 2015; Novick, 2008; Vogl, 2013), these otherwise distinctive challenges mean that face-to-face interviews are still often considered the 'gold standard' of data collection (McCoyd & Kerson, 2006, as cited in Nehls et al., 2015). This prevalent view remains despite the increasing accessibility and acceptability of virtual communication in people's everyday lives (Trier-Bieniek, 2012).

In the FYFF study, the flexibility afforded by the QL research design meant that we were able to adapt to online, internet and telephone methods deftly and to assess the wider benefits and challenges of remote research both with professionals and young fathers, an under-researched population that are marginalised in social narratives of parenting and fatherhood (Davies & Hanna, 2020). We elected for remote interviews for two reasons; first, as a matter of 'methodological

pragmatism' (Lamont & Swidler, 2014) and second, because of a commitment to archiving the data for future re-use. In terms of methodological pragmatism, the team are experienced at qualitative interviewing and were poised to conduct face-to-face interviews before the first lockdown was enforced. Doing interviews remotely enabled an ostensibly comparable approach to fieldwork to what was already planned, albeit via digitally mediated modes of communication. In terms of data archiving, we also determined that interview data could be generated that was of cognisant style to those produced in previous stages of the broader programme of QL research.

Nevertheless, to anticipate and navigate potential challenges and issues proactively, prospectively and ethically, we engaged with established methodological literature and drew on this to make a case for remote interviewing in an amendment to the original ethics application for the study. The work of Weller (2012) and Neale (2021) confirmed that innovation and adaptation are trademarks of QL research designs, which, by their very nature, are characteristically dynamic in and of themselves and often need to evolve. As noted, given the early emphasis on collating resources for researching remotely, there was limited consideration at the time of the implications of conducting the research through digitally mediated forms for ongoing research conducted longitudinally. However, it is important to acknowledge that all research has longitudinal components and temporal frames that span different timescales (e.g. Hughes et al. 2021), thus highlighting the potential for adaptation and change in qualitative research design more generally. Weller's (2017) reflections on the relative successes and challenges of conducting virtual video calls using Skype with children and young people in the 'YourSpace' QL study, were also formative. Weller (2017) observes that while the use of digital communication technologies has become increasingly commonplace in social research, sparse attention has been paid to their potential in QL research (Weller, 2017). Weller (ibid.) identifies both practical and interactional issues and their implications for processes of sample maintenance, research relationship continuity and rapport, which she argues are some of the central tenets of qualitative (longitudinal) research quality. In highlighting the possibilities and pitfalls of remote modes, she found that the study became more accessible for some participants but concluded that it made it more challenging to explore sensitive or traumatic experiences with this participant group.

We further consulted an emergent methodological literature involving remote interviews conducted to research sensitive topics (Mealer & Jones, 2014; Trier-Bieniek, 2012), including with young people (Whale, 2017). McDermott and Roen (2012) argue that while no means a panacea, online methods, including remote interviews, can be valuable in research about sensitive topics with groups who are disadvantaged, hidden and marginalised. In their study of LGBTIQ youth, McDermott and Roen (2012) were able to access a more diverse participant group and to explore sensitive topics, including experiences of emotional distress. These discussions were facilitated by the anonymity of the methods used. In synthesis, these literatures assured us of the potential of remote and digitally mediated interviews for facilitating researcher/participant relationships, including with marginalised communities and their capacity to produce rich data.

Drawing on empirical examples from the research process and participant responses to it, the article now moves on to consider some of the methodological challenges that we responded to, focusing particularly on the implications of the decision to conduct the interviews remotely, what this meant for our ongoing relationships with participants, and the insights generated. We expect that our observations will resonate for those engaging both in QL forms of enquiry, as well as qualitative research more generally.

Connection and connectivity in QL research

In the early days of the first lockdown, we navigated a complex range of methodological and ethical issues that cohered around the themes of *connection* and *connectivity*. In terms of ethics, we were mindful of balancing the capture of participant voices with research burden (as discussed above). Methodological questions about attrition and relationships with participants also arose, in line with

more pragmatic questions about technology use and software choice (including implications for data quality), and issues of privacy and security (for the researchers and the participants). This prompted the team to begin with a series of questions: 'How do we ensure inclusivity and adhere to a core ethical principle of care towards the participants?', 'Which technological formats are accessible to young fathers and professionals?', 'How do we (re)access participants and build relationships at a distance?'. Via our conceptualisations of connection/connectivity, we elaborate our processes and responses to these questions next.

Connection

Our focus on connection regards the adaptations made to support longitudinal processes of connectedness, sampling and access at a distance. Like any QL study, we were attentive to how to establish, maintain, and sustain relationships (or *connections*) with participants. Attrition, rapport and trust are significant methodological components for ensuring quality in all qualitative research but are heightened in QL approaches (Weller, 2017) and more so in socially and physically distanced contexts and conditions. While QL research designs can facilitate productive ongoing research relationships because of the inherently relational nature of the research process (Miller, 2018; Neale, 2021), we had anticipated a higher level of attrition, whereby participants cease their involvement in a study, because of the need to conduct the interviews remotely. Deakin and Wakefield (2014) argue that there is a higher likelihood of participant withdrawal from research involving remote interviewing, often with no or little notice. These early worries were unfounded. Despite the need for some negotiation to secure a date and time for interviews in some cases, especially with the young fathers who were navigating more complex and precarious circumstances in their family and work lives, we were able to recruit a sample of seventeen young fathers and seventeen professionals, a large sample size for one wave of a QL study. The ability to re-access seven young fathers from the baseline study and one from a linked doctoral study (Ladlow, 2021) also meant that we had an adequate safety net in terms of well-established research relationships to mitigate against high rates of attrition.

The reasons given by the young fathers for rescheduling interviews reflected their increasingly precarious circumstances and provided additional, rich insights about the evolving and uneven impacts and new social conditions produced by the pandemic. The researchers also navigated participant preference about participation each time they contacted the young fathers, by providing them with the opportunity to be clear about whether they intended to continue to be involved with the study or whether they no longer felt they could. Interviews were therefore only pursued if participants suggested they could be contacted again later. The eight young men already known to the research team via their involvement as interviewees for the baseline studies were already aware of the longer-term commitment necessary, having given informed consent to the longer-term storage and use of their contact details each time they were interviewed for FYF.

As raised earlier, like other social researchers at the time (e.g. Garthwaite et al., 2020) we were initially preoccupied with questions around whether we should do research at a time of emergency, particularly with vulnerable participants and families. We had our own ethical reasons to continue but to assess this, the team asked the young fathers why they decided to participate:

Adam (aged 16): 'It makes me feel like I'm making a bit of a difference.'

Craig (aged 18): 'Because we don't hear it often enough, you know, people wanting a perspective from a father's side. People always want it from the mother's side so I thought it'd be really good for me to get my point across as a father.'

Jock (aged 20): 'I just think it's important that, you know, dads, they don't feel like they go through it on their own. Just to listen or hear or see the experiences of other people that might be going through a similar situation, it's quite comforting to know that you're not on your own with it.'

The reflections of these young fathers confirmed our view that researchers have an ethical responsibility to preserve, rather than silence, the voices of participants who are under-researched (Tarrant & Hughes, 2021). Participant engagement in research is often motivated by the intention to ensure that otherwise invisible voices and perspectives on social phenomena are heard, while also feeling part of a wider community that is created through a shared identity. These perspectives were no different in the context of the pandemic where community ties and opportunities for coming together as young fathers were all but eroded (Tarrant et al., 2021).

We also reconnected with professionals from family support organisations who were known to us, as well as creating new connections with others. Via their involvment in the FYF study, several of the research team already had established relationships with project partners in the key localities. While some of these were formalised through the funding that was awarded for FYFF prior to the pandemic, others were established and formalised during the pandemic. These relationships enabled access to a wider group of professionals and young fathers than were hitherto known to the research team. Indeed, one of the professionals commented in their interview that the shift to remote working provided the opportunity to connect with more professionals than they were able to prior to the pandemic. As researchers we also felt more able to connect to a wider range of professionals than might have been possible through face-to-face fieldwork, facilitated by the ease and speed of meeting online.

Despite these opportunities for collaboration and relationship building with professionals, processes of access and recruitment to identify and interview the first cohort of young fathers were by no means straightforward. Recruitment was more time consuming in the new localities where the study fieldwork was planned and it took time to identify and connect with young fathers in areas where our connections with professionals were embryonic. This was especially relevant to the seaside town where the formalisation of relationships with project partners was still recent and we were seeking to access young fathers for the first time. While working collaboratively with project partners and organisations proved vital to the identification of young fathers in the FYF study conducted before the pandemic (Neale et al., 2015), the essentialness of the role of these 'comprehensive' gatekeepers (Emmel et al., 2007) for identifying and accessing young fathers in this new locality was heightened given the reliance on digitally mediated communication. 'Comprehensive gatekeepers' have a remit to deliver specific and comprehensive services to marginalised communities and through their work, generally have trusting, long-standing relationships with service users that can be instrumental in either enabling or blocking research participation (Emmel et al., 2007). They arguably played an even more important role in this context where we were limited to online recruitment. In comparison with those participants with whom we had established relationships, these insights confirm the benefits of long-term relationship building in QL research both with participants and professional stakeholders who become invested in, and advocate on behalf of, the research. Identifying and engaging with young men via the support of professionals continued to be the most effective means of doing this despite the challenges that organisations themselves were navigating in a context where their work time was more constrained (Tarrant et al., 2021).

Overall, because of the strength of existing relationships with participants built through the longitudinal process of QL research, it was easier to re-access participants than it was to identify and access new ones. However, while slower in the new localities because of the need to build relationships with

professionals first, they nonetheless played a pivotal role in facilitating access to young fathers. The pragmatics of access and relationship building at a distance were therefore mitigated by working with gatekeepers, re-accessing known participants, and, as we explore in the next section, producing and using a variety of digital resources to create connections with participants in new and creative ways.

Connectivity

The connections that we were investing in to engage with participants were also inevitably impacted by questions of connectivity, which encapsulates the kinds of technologies and software used and their impacts on data generation and quality. Here we also consider how the processes of connection and relationship building described in the previous section were impacted by practical and technological issues, linked to the remote and digitally mediated forms of connectivity available. In pragmatic terms, we quickly learned about new software and considered which platforms would be accessible to participants while also supporting us to generate data at a distance and sustain ethical relationships. As an example, we adapted our demographic questionnaires using survey programme Qualtrics to generate demographic data. Participants were therefore directly involved in generating the metadata required to contextualise and analyse the qualitative data.

Ethical responsibilities to participants also remained paramount and influenced decision making. Reflecting the dynamic nature of QL research processes, ethical approaches need to be both *proactive*, and tailored to the needs of the participant group through the establishment of broad ethical protocols, and *reactive*, involving management of unanticipated issues that arise (Neale, 2021). In seeking to sustain relationships over time with a marginalised group, alongside the additional challenges of establishing new relationships while also using a different medium for the research than anticipated, we therefore engaged in a process of 'longitudinal ethics' (Neale, 2021). Navigating this process of heightened ethical reflexivity, we were proactive in developing digital resources about the study based on our understandings of the lives of young fathers. These explained the study accessibly and supported the process of seeking informed consent at a distance. Overlapping with our intentions towards maintaining research connections, and as evidence of a broader commitment to feminist approaches throughout the research process, the team filmed themselves delivering a video version of the information sheets for young fathers, prompted by advice from project partners, that lengthy pdfs of project documentation may overburden them with information and create potential literacy/language barriers. The video was sent to participants in advance of interviews via their mobile phones and a link was also posted on Youtube.[3] It also facilitated the acquisition of informed consent and aimed to engender trust and rapport prior to entering the field because participants could 'see' and get to know us before the interviews. In addition, each member of the research team posted an introduction to themselves on the study Facebook page complete with photographs. By sharing a snippet of something biographical about ourselves before the interviews, as parents and as participants in the global crisis, we aimed to develop trust via transparency (Willis, 2011) both prior to entering the field and while conducting the interviews. We continue to be in touch with the participants and have sent digital Christmas cards and informal text messages where appropriate to sustain relationships for future waves of interviews. While remaining vigilant about balancing reciprocity with professional boundaries (Neale, 2021), each of these mechanisms has supported relationship building via the variety of remote methods of connectivity available.

These approaches were largely reliant on young fathers having access to internet or mobile technologies. Yet our project stakeholders suggested we remain mindful that digital and data exclusion erect accessibility and connectivity barriers for some young fathers:

'So particularly during lockdown, it's harder to get access to public wi-fi. Normally you can stand outside a café and pick up their wi-fi on your phone, and data is really expensive, so just being aware of if you want to do video interviews, whether you can buy the data that allows that to happen [...] the dads that we worked with mostly weren't digitally excluded but were data excluded. So they had the smartphone but weren't always able to use it ... I think there is a bit of digital exclusion, you know, some people don't have devices, but that feels less common than the data issues'. Head of Policy, national childcare charity.

To reach as wide a constituency of young fathers as possible we drew on knowledge gained from the professionals we interviewed and incorporated this into our practical, reactive strategies to navigate potential impediments to the fieldwork for individual young fathers. The research team always rang the young fathers first to avoid burdens on their data and an over-reliance on wi-fi and internet connection. In instances where internet connections were poor or inaccessible, verbal consent was sought for participation via the telephone.

We also learnt early on from some of the young fathers that they were suspicious of 'withheld' numbers to their mobile phones and were unlikely to answer those calls. Taking a participant centred approach (Trier-Bieniek, 2012), we therefore purchased project specific phones with their own numbers to use specifically for fieldwork. This had the added benefit of ensuring privacy for the researchers. The purchase of phones was enabled by the resources available to this funded project, but we also considered the option of buying sim cards that could be used and swapped out of existing phones with numbers that were recognisable for the participants. These responses were underscored by attention to ethical concerns around researcher/participant relationships and ensuring that as diverse a group of young fathers could participate as possible. Participant responses to the methods like these also engendered epistemological insights and told us something further about the character of low-income life and the marginalisations young fathers experience, in this case expressed through their mistrust of external calls that may have carried specific risks for them and their families (see also Tarrant & Hughes, 2020).

Overall, however, the fathers elected for interviews using the telephone, rather than face-to-face using VoIPs, even despite accessing the project information online. In comparing telephone to face-to-face interviews, Jayden (aged 28) said:

I think it's just easier because you can do it anywhere then can't you? I think if I'd had to meet you face-to-face I don't think I could have talked to you to be fair. I think I'd have cried, yeah.

Jayden's comments responded to our question which sought to elicit views from re-accessed participants on the shift from physical co-present interviews to distance interviews. Few identified a clear preference, but many commented that they liked telephone interviews because they afforded greater flexibility in terms of participation. Telephone calls were easier to arrange and required less travel commitment (which may also levy a financial cost on participants) and less time was lost for the researchers when participants needed to reschedule, which was common. The remote methods were also viewed positively in the context of the pandemic as they considered them to be safer. They also offered flexibility around participating, providing participants with more control over the time and spaces where the interview took place. Confounding some of our original assumptions around how we might build trust and rapport at a distance, Jayden's comments suggest that the anonymity afforded by telephone interviews increased his comfort around discussing his personal life, experiences, and emotions. Here, Jayden identifies the benefits of 'pseudanonymity' (Glogowska et al., 2011; Wilson et al., 1998), whereby telephone interviews afforded him a level of anonymity. This meant he felt more comfortable broaching sensitive issues that he had not felt as comfortable addressing face-to-face. Notably, the young

fathers who engaged in FYF were observed as discussing more sensitive topics about themselves and others only once they had built sufficient trust and rapport with the research team through several waves of interviews already (Neale et al., 2015).

There are points in the transcripts with both the young fathers and professionals where connectivity issues were apparent, like those noted at the start of the article. Contrary to arguments that data quality is generally reduced when conducting telephone interviews and rather than undermining the overall quality of the data, these comments created what McDermott and Roen (2012, p. 567) conceptualise as an 'in-the-moment' data quality. In the circumstances of these synchronous interviews, these were reflective of the shared social contexts of the participants and research team. Moments like these also created unanticipated opportunities for insight. In one case, a father reported feeling able to roll a cigarette to calm his anxieties and in another, a father was feeding and playing with his baby. This prompted reflections about his identity and responsibilities as a father and created space for novel insights about key study themes including gender roles, caring responsibilities and fathering practices. Thus, these alternative forms of connectivity, provided additional opportunities to cultivate connection and were reflective of context; namely the generation of data through remote forms of connectivity at a time when this was mandated.

Conclusion

In this article we elaborate how we sustained a QL research study with young fathers and family and youth support professionals in the context of a global health crisis that prohibited physical co-presence via remote interviewing. Our decisions about how to modify the study design using remote and/or virtual communication were underscored by an ethical imperative to preserve the voices of these otherwise marginalised young fathers and support professionals at a time when the burdens and inequalities produced through macro scale processes and events were paramount. Remote interviewing enabled us to produce both fluid and time-sensitive accounts of individual experience when understanding rapid social change was of vital importance. Particular attention has been paid to the effects of the pandemic on the methods-based research that we conducted at a distance in the context of the FYFF study; an approach that has provided unanticipated but nevertheless rich substantive insights about the uneven and evolving impacts of the crisis and the contexts from which these emerged.

Through a framework of connection and connectivity we first considered the implications of remote qualitative methods for (re)establishing and retaining connections with our project stakeholders and an otherwise marginalised group of young fathers. The QL design of the study meant that we were able to sustain mutually beneficial connections with participants, although we developed a variety of digital resources to cultivate ethically sensitive relationships through this extended QL programme of research. Second, we reflected on how processes of maintaining participation and interaction like this were facilitated and shaped by practical and technological issues associated with the digitally mediated forms of connectivity available. A multitude of methodological challenges and opportunities arose as we adapted our methods for remote and virtual communication. For the purposes of FYFF, the shift to synchronous (real-time) interviews using telephone and online technologies enabled us to produce quality data comparable to interviews that were conducted face-to-face prior to the pandemic. There were some technical difficulties and the data generated contains the occasional reference to a researcher being muted or a loss of connectivity that interrupted the flow of conversation. Yet, the young fathers in this study preferred the flexibility and anonymity of telephone interviews, thus making them feel more comfortable, at ease and willing to disclose about the more intimate and emotional aspects of their lives. The telephone interviews therefore yielded honest accounts that were simultaneously 'in the moment', providing additional substantive insights that are typically assumed to be lost in lieu of co-presence. For the research team, technology mediated methods also facilitated the establishment of new and

productive relationships with family support services across the UK that will be taken forwards through future waves. These relationships facilitated access to young fathers not hitherto known to the study, as well as insights that informed both proactive and reactive ethical strategies.

Going forward, we intend to use a blend of approaches informed by participant preference even when physical co-presence is allowed again. The use of remote methods was not a straightforward replacement for face-to-face methods but it enabled us to continue the research and maintain an extended longitudinal picture of young fatherhood and family support both prior to, during, and through a crisis. We also remain committed to archiving the data generated in the Timescapes Archive, a UK data repository for QL datasets, ensuring that the experiences captured via these remote forms of connection and connectivity are documented and maintained for the historical record.

Notes

1. https://zoeglatt.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/LSE-Digital-Ethnography-Collective-Reading-List-March-2020.pdf
2. https://docs.google.com/document/d/1clGjGABB2h2qbduTgfqribHmog9B6P0NvMgVuiHZCl8/edit
3. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a0LIJjOk6R0

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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