

# BIOGRAPHICAL RESEARCH THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS OF PANDEMIC TIMES: CHALLENGES AND POSSIBILITIES OF ONLINE INTERVIEWING

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In biographical interviewing, building strong relationships characterised by rapport and trust with our participants, through direct face-to-face interactions, is critical. However, the emergence of Covid-19 calls into question the continuity of co-presence research as researchers increasingly adopt online interviewing techniques. The mobilisation of digital inquiry is by no means new in social scientific research (Fielding et al. 2017; James and Busher 2009) nonetheless, the need for Social Distancing to control virus transmission means that cloud-based video conferencing is being more frequently utilised in qualitative research (Dodds and Hess 2021; Lupton 2020). This presents serious challenges in how we ‘do’ biographical research, how we forge trusting bonds with participants whilst negotiating unprecedented social and temporal distancing that characterises the current context.

Given that the switch from co-presence to mediated presence happened rapidly, it is crucial for researchers to question if this transition changes the very nature of biographical research. Is it still possible to do biographical research in a pandemic context under the same theoretical principles? As previous practices of studying biographies are replaced by technologically-mediated approaches, what kinds of opportunities and challenges emerge? Also, is it ethically permissible to do research that frequently evokes complex and sometimes negative emotions among

participants in online spaces when we are more physically distant from interviewees than ever before? In this article we reflect on these questions by highlighting some limitations, possibilities and challenges to biographical research in pandemic times.

## **TRANSFORMING RESEARCH REALITIES IN THE COVID AGE: NEW ENTANGLEMENTS AND SOCIAL DISTANCING**

The new Covid realities irrevocably transform our research praxis. The SARS-CoV-2 virus creates novel discursive, emotional and physical entanglements, transforming our understandings of non-human impacts on human sociability and interspecies relationships. The word 'Covid' became embedded in people's daily conversations, infiltrating how we travel, work and move, in a short space of time (Nurse and Moran 2021). Policies to curb the spread of the virus based on Social Distancing transformed human-to-human touch; skin coverings like personal protective equipment regularised 'touch avoidance' everyday (Moran and Green 2020). As a result of Covid-19, researchers now face serious challenges with regards to accessing participants and communicating with them. Unlike pre-Covid times when we could explore people's lived spaces, we are now substantially limited in terms of circulation. This is even more pressing for studies that usually rely on direct face-to-face human contact, such as ethnography and biographical research.

In these changed and challenging contexts, mobile technologies have come to the fore as the most viable (and sometimes the only) solution to qualitative data collection. They offer greater flexibility in how, when and where we enter into participant's 'lived lives' (Wengraf 2001). Videoconferencing software (e.g. Skype and Zoom) and social networking platforms shorten the distance between researchers and participants and enable connections to be established during severe restrictions which regulate physical co-presence and distancing. Similar types of mediated communication were widely used in research pre-Covid, so its possibilities and limitations are already identified and reflected on (Fielding et al. 2017; Jenner and Myers 2019). Nevertheless, on-going research in a pandemic context that switches to technological data collection tools faces different challenges from studies that originally plan on applying digital methodologies. Methodological research strategies are intrinsic to study design, in theoretical, epistemological and analytical terms. Thus, a (forced) methodological switch may imply fundamental

changes to the research design itself, thus affecting all stages of the research.

## **HOW FAR CAN WE REACH? THE HAZARDS OF BIOGRAPHICAL ONLINE INTERVIEWING**

Conducting interviews online removes the tactile, as well as some visual and shared elements of our work which is fundamental to biographical research. As biographical researchers, we can recount multiple instances where a shared glance, a seemingly uncomplicated exchange or comment led to the elicitation of narrative that not only provided valuable information on protagonists' biographies, but increased the emotional connection. There are significant relational questions emerging from online technologies in biographical research too, which scholars are already engaging with (Lobe et al. 2020). Building rapport, displaying empathy and establishing trust are central aspects of our ethical commitments to our participants and to our praxis as researchers. However, this may be more difficult in online spaces, when our exposure to participants' body language, and thereby, our 'making sense of' the specificities that characterise each research encounter, is more limited. Even in video interviews over Skype or Zoom, that more closely resemble face-to-face interviews, we usually see people's faces and upper bodies, which narrows our observation of the rich palette of gestures and postures that characterise autobiographical encounters (Seitz 2016). The same is true for participants, regarding their interpretation of our body language too. Network connection problems can also impact negatively on the flow of the interaction (Howlett 2021), thereby causing 'disruptions' in the narration, which can adversely impact data analysis and reliability.

The situation is even more complex when engaging in ethically-sensitive research involving experiences of domestic violence, the meanings of complex incidents of abuse and/or neglect, and biographical crises in general which affect how participants make sense of previous life events and expectations about the future (Seitz 2016). While ethical protocols regulate our research encounters in virtual and face-to-face settings, we are limited in what we can do if a participant becomes emotionally upset or if they divulge that they might harm themselves or others because they relived traumatic memories in an interview and cannot cope. Extant methodological literature makes practical suggestions on what researchers can do to alleviate emotional harm; explaining the purpose and scope of the research prior to interviews, stopping the recording

altogether, showing empathy, or explaining to participants that they might experience uncomfortable emotions (Bryman 2016). However, methodological strategies appearing in textbooks which were written pre-Covid frequently rely on face-to-face engagement and do not correspond fully with the present research context.

It is also more difficult for researchers to display empathy in online forums and even when they are empathetic their display of positive emotions may be limited if the internet signal is weak or if they must switch off their cameras. This does not mean, however, that empathic relationships cannot be built with participants. Rather, alternative strategies are required that are cognisant of the current context. Cameras may also be unreliable but they are the primary method by which we come to see and know our participants in pandemic times. Empathetic displays need to be anchored in different interactional strategies, more focused, for example, on facial rather than bodily expressions in video interviews, and vocal cues in audio interviews.

Another important issue emerging from online interviewing is that the researcher loses a substantial degree of control over the interview environment in terms of location, external interferences and privacy. In face-to-face interactions we are able to see what surrounds us and what may affect the encounter. In online interviews we can only see what participants and their electronic devices permit us to observe, or in the case of audio interviews, we are not able to see anything at all. We cannot ensure that the location of the interviewee is the most suitable and comfortable place to share intimate matters and we cannot be certain that there is no one else in the room, which raise concerns over privacy, data reliability and if interviewees are under duress. Also, we cannot offer an alternative place to conduct interviews with current restrictions which vary markedly across countries. Anonymity and confidentiality are problematic in recorded video interviews, as participants are exposing more than their voices; they also share the privacy of their homes, private spaces, and appearance (Lobe et al 2020). Even if we ensure anonymity and confidentiality in research design, through Informed Consent protocols, participants may feel they are at risk of (inadvertently) revealing intimate aspects of their lived experiences that they may not want us to know if we can see the interior of their homes, their partners, children or pets.

Access to technology and online interviewing platforms is also critical (Deakin and Wakefield 2014). The use of videoconferencing during Covid-19 may further exclude populations with limited, or without any, internet access, as well as individuals less familiarised with social

networking apps and software. This has serious implications for research and necessitates utilising alternative ways of contacting people, for example, through phone calls or even postponing research.

## **CLOSING DOORS, OPENING WINDOWS: THE POSSIBILITIES OF VIDEO ONLINE INTERVIEWING**

Despite being, in many research contexts, a forced alternative, online interviewing should not be exclusively regarded as negative. Recent accounts from the field suggest that researchers and participants are adapting well to the new context. Pre-Covid-19, biographical interviews were frequently conducted in participant's homes so that interviewees might be more comfortable in environments they could control, and was a way for researchers to observe their living contexts. During lockdown, biographical interviews still take place at participants' homes; the main difference is that the researcher is not physically present, but instead is in their own home. This can have two interconnected effects. First, it can reinforce the informal, relaxed nature of the interview context, making interviewees feel more comfortable to share their lives and intimacies with the researcher (Jenner and Myers 2019). Second, it may be pivotal to developing more symmetrical relationships between researcher and participants (O'Connor and Madge 2017). They are both confined in their homes, experiencing the pandemic's impacts, albeit in different ways, and they are both exposing, at least partially, the privacy of their living spaces. Additionally, the researcher cannot interfere directly in the interviewee's material space. This can increase rapport and deepen emotional connections. The domestic environment may also have important triggers, facilitating the flow of biographical narrations and may allow researchers to observe biographical elements that would remain concealed using audio interviews (Howlett 2021). Furthermore, the use of videoconferencing enables participants to share relevant materials to understand their life stories, including photographs, videos or other relevant objects they may wish to show us. Platforms like 'WhatsApp' and other messaging applications can extend contact with the interviewees through the exchange of short messages (e.g. saying hello, showing concern) that sometimes require minimum effort, but can exert powerful emotional impacts, strengthening research relationships in and across time. This is particularly important in biographical, longitudinal research designs.

There are several ethical issues in conducting interviews during Covid-19. Researchers may consider it 'risky' to interview people in such difficult circumstances, considering that participants or someone close to them may have contracted the virus, or passed away. However, ethical obstacles can also transform themselves into timely research opportunities. In the face of crises, people tend to be more reflexive as they lose major points of reference, inciting greater reflection on life events, subjectivity and behaviours (Caetano 2019). This increased reflexivity can manifest in biographical interviews, as a space for people to make sense of current contexts. Instead of being a burden, interview encounters can, therefore, be enjoyable moments of sharing and unburdening. In the same way, the negative limitations of domestic confinement can positively affect research because some people (e.g. youth, retired, unemployed people) may have greater availability to share their experiences and subjectivities, with fewer time constraints.

## **WHICH BIOGRAPHICAL RESEARCH?**

The answers to the questions posed throughout this paper will only be realised in the medium to long-term. In the immediacy of this pandemic moment however, researchers need time to process, observe and experiment (Nico, 2020), remaining mindful that there are many ways of adapting biographical research methods, whilst staying faithful to the core principles of biographical interviewing (e.g. rapport, trust, empathy). Even in these changed research circumstances, we have at our disposal a myriad of scientific tools to analyse relationships between individuals and society. However, we must adjust how we observe and understand these relationships. Online interviews via videoconferencing platforms are still interviews, despite the differences in format and place (O'Connor and Madge 2017: 428). We can still interact meaningfully with participants, establish rapport and develop empathic relationships. Nonetheless, the changed context requires increased reflexivity on our part to monitor our practices, as an epistemological surveillance tool (Bourdieu 2004). We must be aware of the implications of Social Distancing to data collection processes in online environments; what videoconferencing tools enable us to observe and what is potentially hidden from view.

We face unprecedented challenges as biographical researchers. However, the immediate changes and our responses to them, appear to be more methodological in nature, in how we connect and form rapport with participants. There is no way of knowing now if, in the long-term, the increased adoption of online platforms becomes an established trend

after Covid, or how the pandemic might substantially change biographical research in other ways. For now, we can only testify how novel and creative biographical research is (Caetano and Nico 2019), enabling us to adapt methodological toolkits to understand how human and non-human lives are entangled in new ways in these complex and risky times.

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