

[UCL-IOE Doctoral Community] Research in Reality I: Data collection and Ethics

The session aims to provide insights and practical tips for PhD students preparing to collect data during the pandemic, and mainly, ethics issues they have faced.

1. Share experiences about ethics application and how they adjust approach during the pandemic
2. Offer valuable advice on how to conduct interviews, questionnaires, observations, focus groups, and any other research methods
3. Provide tips on how to deal with the collected data, from processing to presenting
4. Share experience about online data collection amidst the challenging time of COVID-19

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- Introduction

Hi everyone, nice to e-see you. My name is Luna. I am a PhD student at the Department of Culture, Communication and Media, UCL Institute of Education. I had my MAs in comparative education and music education, also here at the IOE. Thanks very much to the wonderful doctoral community, for giving me this opportunity to share some experiences on research ethics and data processing. I hope these would be of some help for your research.

- The research

First, I would like to briefly introduce my research and data collection method.

My research focuses on the educational and professional experiences of female musicians. My study has invited prominent composers, conductors, and producers in six countries.

Historically, there have been outstanding women in these musical areas, yet their music works, and voices are not heard, recorded, let alone being written in educational publications. Therefore, my research aims to fill in this gap for historical, educational, and professional purposes.

So, I am interviewing female musicians about their experiences, which, you can imagine, will be descriptive, narrative, and in-depth. As far as I know, there hasn't been any such interviews remotely conducted with professional musicians before.

The interview method for my project is ‘Life history interview’, a research method derived from the Chicago School sociologists in the 1920s. The life history interview is usually lengthy – the longest one I have had is over two hours and a half, and the shortest one is forty-seven minutes.

I had my upgrade in early 2020, one month before the pandemic started. By then, my ethics application had been approved, but I had never heard of any remote life history interviews with professional musicians. Therefore, I was completely startled when the pandemic hit. How was I supposed to do this type of interview online, and what about the ethical considerations, do I need to re-consider everything?

While I was panicking, I did some search into ‘how to do online interviews’. Luckily, there are resources about online in-depth interviews, and I will include some for your reference at the end of my presentation.

Now, I will talk about how the interviews unfold, and the ethical issues I encountered.

- Ethics

My reflection is that the ethical issues are intertwined with your whole data collection process. For example, I included consent forms into all the email invitations sent to musicians who might potentially be interested in participating my research.

They are professional musicians, so at most cases I contact their agents or managers. Some responded with a firm yes quite quickly, and some replied with interest yet asking further questions, mostly in an attempt to know what the interviews would be about.

Through email communication, I explained the nature of my research without disclosing my interview questions. Among the twenty-six musicians contacted, ten accepted my invitations. For a qualitative life history study, five to six interviews would be sufficient to reach theoretical saturation (Goodson and Sikes, 2001).

However, a few participants signed the consent forms before the interview, some did it after the interview, and two of the participants didn’t sign until I chased them down for two months. Therefore, during the data collection, the ethical issues I encountered include research consent, confidentiality, and rapport, i.e., mutual trust between you and your participants.

For research consent, my advice is to make it clear and being sincere from the beginning. At the beginning, it is vital that you and your participants can build mutual trust. And you as the researcher, who is responsible to initiate the communication to build this trust or rapport.

An example is that you can prepare a written material about your research project design, or a document that covers the plan and purpose for your research. In the slides, I have listed some points you can make in this design, and you can improvise it after talking with your supervisors and research colleagues.

If you’re doing focus group, or other types of interviews, the rapport is also important to be established as early as possible; and shall be considered carefully.

- Data collection

Prior to the formal research interviews, I did two pilot interviews, one with my friend who is a female musician and lives close to me. We did the pilot in a big park on a weekday, sitting on the two edges of a long bench. Then, I did another pilot with my friend who was in China, using three different online platforms during our talk.

By doing the pilot interviews, some differences between in-person and online interviews can be revealed.

Firstly, there can be time differences, depending on the physical locations of you and your participants. I advise checking the time zone and difference in various ways and lay out both times in your email communication. For example, I had a participant living at the east coast of the United States, and she told me a time zone that was one hour different from its exact time. So, I was half an hour in advance there, or let's say, in my understanding, I was half an hour earlier; however, in her understanding, I was half an hour late. She had an appointment after the interview, therefore, we had to reschedule the interview.

A second issue is quite important for the interview: the setting, or the environment. In an in-person interview, if you meet your interviewee in a restaurant, the background noise might be too loud; so, a library or a classroom would be more ideal. Similarly, for the online interview, you also need to consider the stability and functions of the digital conferencing platform. My advice is to try out the software in a quiet place, if possible, with friends in different places. You will also need to remind your participants of their environments, especially if they have pets, children, or they might be in offices or schools – do ask them to find a quieter corner. This is also to make sure that the interview will not be easily overheard.

Another essential consideration is the recording. You will need to get familiar with the recording functions on the online platforms beforehand. If possible, you can also run an external recorder during the interview. After the interview, download and keep the recordings in a 'hard drive' storage as soon as possible.

For interviews, the data will be the conversations between you and your participants. So once there is the data, you will need to keep it safe and confidential. For example, you can put all interview recording copies in several places, such as in recorders, USB storage, or your laptop-with a password, etc. Then, I recommend using a system to make the interviews organised, such as numbering them according to the date of each interview. Finally, if you have any thoughts, such as reflections, right after the interviews, write them down immediately – it can be very helpful when you write up the thesis.

Above all, for data processing, these are my suggestions. The overall principal would be to create a reliable and comfortable environment for you and your interviewees – to let them feel that you are connecting with them, even virtually; and to keep the data confidential and complete.

- A framework and references

Now, these are my experiences to share with you. I am sure your project is not exactly the same with mine, so I recommend asking advice from your supervisors, your PhD colleagues, as well as looking at the

methodology part of the existing research in your field – all of these will give you good ideas of what you might encounter and how you can handle them during the data collection process.

Among the relevant research I have read, there is a framework for qualitative e-research, which I found quite helpful when thinking about doing data collections remotely. If we think about these questions, then what preparations are necessary can be quite clear. This framework is in Dr. Janet Salmon's book 'Doing Qualitative Research Online'. I also include some further studies on doing online interviews, which might be interesting to read.

Thank you very much! I hope these are helpful and my best wishes to your PhD research.

- References

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