'Excuse me, I have a delivery'

The [re] construction of interview 'space' in the Covid-19 pandemic

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Abstract

Covid-19 has transformed the qualitative interview process, as remote video methods have become mainstream, challenging the domination of face-to-face interviews. In the pandemic churn, researchers' focus was on ensuring participants' safety and care in the virtual interview environment. There was more limited consideration of what this 'new normal' meant for the researcher. This reflection draws on two qualitative research projects conducted during the 2020/2021 pandemic period in the UK. We propose that assumptions of 'space' in the qualitative interview process have been (re)constructed in remote interviews during Covid-19. To be present virtually creates geographic freedoms of participant access, but subjective risks from interviewing in the virtual space. Context can no longer be understood through the shared experience of an interview space. There is a delineation of what is 'public' or 'private' as participants and researchers share their domestic spheres. Using ethnographic reflections, we explore the changing notions of geographic, public and private space in the Covid-19 interview.

Introduction

Covid-19 has challenged our qualitative interview practice in the move to remote methods but provides a unique opportunity to reflect on long-held assumptive practices of value and researcher insight from face-to-face qualitative interviews (Mason, 2018; Silverman, 2005). There has been an extensive discourse of remote interview processes in Covid-19, expounding the ease of accessing participants and the gaining of time to create new parameters for sampling including geographic freedoms or possibilities of access (Lupton, 2020). The primary focus in the move to remote methods in Covid-19 was the care of participants. But the practical reality of virtual interviews created changes to our researching experience which we had not anticipated or planned for. Our retrospective analysis of remote interviewing in Covid-19 suggests that as researchers, our assumptions of geographic, public, and private space in the interview process have been tested, suggesting that remote interviews adjust or create new analytic possibilities. We propose that these changes are under-recognised or planned for in qualitative methodologies.

This reflection draws experiential reflections from two Covid redesigned PhD studies, utilising thirty remote qualitative interviews. Gemma Carr (GC) explores the challenges and barriers of Service parents choosing and accessing schools for their children; Karen Tatham (KT) explores how vocational education, employers, and policymakers plan for progression in vocational pathways.Participants were key stakeholders and parents, interviewed via Teams and Zoom platforms.

Howlett (2021, p3) suggests "fieldwork is a form of inquiry that involves researchers entering a new context, a 'field' site (or sites), to carry out their investigation". The pandemic necessitated rethinking previous research designs, utilising remote methods which had not been previously considered or trained for. Remote interviews are nothing new; telephone and Skype interviews have long been a staple of the qualitative researcher (Irani, 2019; Burnard, 1994). Empirical studies of remote methods suggest difficulties for the researcher in building participant rapport, non-verbal cues, tacit knowledge acquisition and interviewer reflectivity in a remote context (Howlett, 2021). Pre-pandemic, video-conferencing remained a niche, professional focus, rather than a mainstream experience for researchers and participants (Lobe et al., 2020).

We feel there are three areas worthy of further methodological exploration from using remote access rather than entry to the physical field. First, we argue that geographic virtual freedoms remove insights into our participants, their communities, and daily lives. Context can no longer be understood through the shared experience of an interview space. This has challenged our understanding of the partial view of researchers, and how physical presence ascribes knowledge about our participants (Mason, 2018). Secondly, assumptions of public and private 'space' in the qualitative interview process have been (re)constructed for the researcher. Remote methods in the pandemic context have constructed new forms of interview space, but also reconstructed previous social scripts and norms as Zoom and Teams become mainstream (Howlett, 2021; Lobe et al., 2020). Finally, to be present virtually creates subjective risks for researcher privacy, through the inadvertent sharing of our context. These three factors mean that in reflectively analysing our Covid-19 interviews, we reframed our notions of context and participant relationships in the virtual interview space.

Pre-pandemic face-to-face qualitative interviews

Face-to-face qualitative interviewing is perceived as the gold standard enabling the researcher to gather a much deeper source of data collection (Irani, 2019, p.3; Jenner and Myers, 2019, p.165). This is through three main factors: social-emotional perceptions of body language, and rapport building; tacit and contextual knowledge through experiencing a shared space and event; and geographic understanding from the interview location (Irani, 2019; Jenner and Myers, 2019; Mason, 2018). In essence, face-to-face interviews, and their execution follow extensively researched interview scripts and social norms (Mason, 2018; Silverman, 2005). The ability to ask questions face-to-face is said to facilitate the research process as the interviewer can build rapport, and read non-verbal signals, such as body language, and can therefore change the flow or focus of questions when required (Irvine et al., 2012). That said, telephone interviewing has been utilised pre-Covid-19 to ameliorate geographic distance (Irvine et al., 2012; Burnard, 1994). Scholars (cf. Holt, 2009; Irvine et al., 2012; Novick, 2008) recognise some limitations for the participant and interviewer when interviewing via telephone. These include a lack of rapport and difficulties in creating a personal interview connection, technical issues, misreading visual signals and cues, or misinterpreting tones of voice. These difficulties can affect participants and researchers (Irvine et al., 2012). However, there are well-documented constraints of face-to-face interviews. Geographic presence incurs high time and financial costs and limits the sample population and geographic reach of a study (Edwards and Holland, 2013). Participants can feel the intrusive nature of a face-to-face interview, and the need to find a relatively private space for discussion can constrain, or affect the interview dynamic (Edwards and Holland, 2013).

Nevertheless, when postgraduate researchers were challenged with moving face-to-face interviews online, it was considered that remote methods were complex and hindering for data collection (Lupton, 2020; Mason, 2018). The use of video conferencing in pre-pandemic research was a niche area. In Covid-19, video communication has become normalised, challenging previous social scripts and conventions of the virtual interview process. Remote methods create new barriers to interview interaction. Howlett (2021) argues online video interviews lose the *in-person* dynamics. Zoom fatigue is now entering the Covid lexicon (Lobe et al., 2020). These factors were under-recognised in remote methodologies from a researcher perspective.

Negotiating the interview space in Covid-19

To understand how as researchers, we are negotiating the interview space remotely, we draw on three lines of inquiry: how virtual geographic freedoms affect our partial view of our participants; how notions of the public space change and provide new insights into participants lives; and finally, how the boundaries of private space have become transformed in the shared space of a virtual interview that the interviewer and participant now share. These factors create a reflection of space where we can explore our own and theoretical assumptive practice in how we frame and contextualize the qualitative interview experience (Mason, 2018; Edwards and Holland, 2013).

Geographic freedoms and boundary changes in the virtual world

In moving to remote interviews, there are unintended consequences of physical space that we have not previously considered because to be present in familiar communities was the norm in face-to-face interviewing. Mason (2018) argues that being present physically builds up a relationship with the community in which you are researching. However, remote interviews are challenging the notions of how we understand a community. Hughes et al. (2021) suggest the absence of previous norms provides analytic possibilities, yet as researchers during Covid-19, we are questioning how we capture a sense of place during remote interviews.

> In not travelling or visiting I am not 'living' the connectivity, the infrastructure, the geographic place, or the community of my participants. What is my participant's world? I do not know (KT, 2021)

This led us to reflect whether our perceptions of our participants geographic 'place' pre-Covid added a layer of subjective reflections. We understood these as *tacit knowledge*. In reality, Greene(2008) suggests researchers have limited empirical evidence for the insights they assume face-to-face interviews give into communities. We suggest that during virtual interviews, although we lose a visual triangulation to support contextualisation, we remove some potential researcher bias (Mason, 2018; Silverman, 2005).

Greene (2014) suggests researchers prefer to research communities that are already known. This is a form of bias to particular communities but can be argued to support participant access. Pre-existing connections and building relationships with gatekeepers can be key to engaging participants and communicating researcher trust and credibility (Greene, 2014). However, in the pandemic, the importance of prior networks and insider community

knowledge was heightened as face-to-face networks and physical connections were removed through lockdowns.

> As a military community spouse, or an 'insider', I had pre-existing connections and community knowledge. My personal and academic network gave me credibility and I built trust quickly with participants despite being in a virtual interview. My knowledge of pandemic pressures as a parent provided empathy and insights when organising interviews (GC, 2021)

Here, despite geographic dislocation, the researcher-participant relationship was supported through insider connections, building rapport and trust. But this raised reflective questions of how we recognise the often complex networks by which we have gained access to participants, and our unique position in being able to research in this community at this time (Greene, 2014).

Public and private space

The virtual world blurs the boundaries between public and private space. In considering how notions of public and private space change in the virtual interview, our research experience suggests that we are creating new forms of online scripts with our participants where we co-create and negotiate the virtual interview experience (Lupton, 2020; Mason, 2018).

Public space

Jenner and Myers (2019) observed the sharing of space with participants is considered to influence the interviewer participant relationship, insofar as, the milieu in which space is shared creates a form of intimacy between both. Nevertheless, they argue public face-to-face interviews do not generate the same data as those conducted within the private space using online methods (Jenner and Myers, 2019, p.169).

> In face-to-face interviews, the social script is often physical as well as verbal … the coffee, the physical signing of consents, the presence, the facial recognition, body language…. pauses…. time to think. But we don't pause on Zoom…
>
> Instead…. feelings of fatigue, detachment and rush characterise my online interviews (KT, 2021)

In the virtual pandemic reality, new public forms of social scripts for online conversations are emerging. The environment for the interviewer is at once familiar from hours spent on Zoom, and novel from the uncertainty of the virtual encounter:

> Am I in the right room? Are they turning up? Waiting to see if the 'admit' window shows…. What is the etiquette of late...do I email? The relief of connection as introductions are made, backgrounds examined, and small talk whilst checking

'recording' is on. Consent gained. Oh no… is my Wi-Fi stable …? (KT,2021)

We have found that a lack of technological or personal connectivity, is hard to pull back on screen. Lobe et al(2020) describe this as participants feeling an interview is playing out on a screen. 'Zoom fatigue' can lead to feelings of detachment from the interview process. This raises questions of whether participants recognise or are affected by this, or whether in reality, our data collection is unaffected because of the corresponding difficulties of participants 'reading' how the interviewer is feeling (Knapik, 2006).

Hanna (2012) illustrates the advantages of online methods with the key element being that of participant choice. Covid-19 has changed the constraints of choice in many cases the pandemic both removed choice of interview location and enhanced choice for participants. In the lockdowns, the majority of interviews took place in participants own homes, because travel was prohibited and working from home was the new normal (Howlett, 2021; Lobe et al., 2020). Working from home provides advantages for the interviewer and participant to *fit in* an interview. (Howlett, 2021).

As the remote interviewer:

> In my own home, I am familiar with the surroundings, I do not need to access the space or prepare hours in advance to familiarise myself with the location, my materials are easily available to access during the interview, and most importantly I am at ease within my own home (GC, 2021)

Pre-pandemic, participants who wished to attend a face-to-face interview would have been invited to attend a neutral location such as a coffee shop; a neutral public space or a private office (with employer's permissions) at their place of work (Edwards and Holland, 2013; Krueger, 1994). In selecting a neutral location, it is assumed in some cases that the relationship of power between interviewer and participant can be counteracted (Edwards and Holland, 2013; Krueger, 1994). However, this is not without other limitations such as the issues of confidentiality and privacy when public space is accessed (Elwood and Martin, 2000, p.651). We suggest that conducting interviews in participant's space has indirectly empowered participants in the research process:

> As a result, my participant posed the question 'how would you like to do this? Telephone or teams?' (GC, 2021)

This demonstrated that participants retained power in posing the question (Elwood and Martin, 2000; Hanna, 2012, p.239). In this regard, online methods facilitate the relationship of power insomuch as, interviewer and participant may appear as expert as essentially the private spaces they are occupying are neutral to one another. Similarly, this is likely to be a shared consensus from the participant as they too will be familiar with their space, and it is most likely that this facilitates uptake in participation (Howlett, 2021). The pandemic has forced many participants to work remotely from home and upskill during this process. This has empowered participants in remote interviews in a way that would not have occurred in education careers pre-pandemic.

Private space

Elwood and Martin (2000, p.649) illustrate that much of the detail in a socially shared space is determined by perceptions of the physical research location. In turn, they state 'the interview site provides a martial space for the enactment and constitution of power relations' (Elwood and Martin, 2000, p.649). This *power* refers to the notion that either the interviewer or the participant can be considered as the expert within the dynamics of the interview, depending on where the interview site is (Elwood and Martin, 2000). Removal of the interview site to a shared virtual space rebalances this power dynamic.

> The 'professional' workplace interview space has become domesticated. Participants would say 'I just need to …let the dog out…. get this parcel ….my (child) has brought a cup of tea …Professional participants share domestic detail (KT, 2021)

These interactions equalise relationships between participants and interviewers, as office spaces are replaced by dining rooms, and professional work attitudes tempered by working from home.

Insider tacit knowledge of participant lives from being part of that community can be reversed online. Interviewing within a private space as an insider researcher presents some issues when you are essentially inviting a participant into your home (Howlett, 2021). Dissimilar to accessing neutral space, when the researcher can maintain some level of anonymity, interviewing in a home does not provide such privacy (Edwards and Holland, 2013; Krueger, 1994).

> My interviews were conducted from my own office which is situated in the back bedroom of my military home. Military housing is distinctive. It does not take much guesswork from those who have occupied military housing to easily identify a military home. A quick scan of the various bright carpets and patterned curtains is the only requirement to open up a dialogue that ultimately enables participants to cross over into my private sphere. Although I have been open regarding my position as a military spouse, Covid denoted that in some respects I was inviting participants to *know* more about me through interviewing them in my home (GC, 2021)

Participants are likely to make some assumptions about us before an interview takes place, and during the discussion (Knapik, 2006). Researchers are likely to try and maintain and protect a level of privacy in their private domain. The use of social media can raise privacy issues for researchers, where the pandemic crossover of interviews into the researcher's home has increased forms of scrutiny.

> I am a community member of many social media pages in which I access informal information. My social media accounts are private but this does not deter

individuals in the community from viewing photos, reading my posts or making connections through mutual friends (GC, 2021)

This means that the home-based remote interviewer, working in their community, faces increased privacy risks in the pandemic which need ethical consideration.

Remote interviews have always carried the risk of invisible participants (Edwards and Holland, 2013). Invisible participants are in effect those who are present in the background where interviews are undertaken online and this is something that is outside of both the researcher and participants control. In transferring to online methods from face-to-face, this was an area as researchers which we under-recognised until the interview process commenced. Enforced working from home, and the shutdown of face-to-face education led to family members being present at home during interviews, with interviewers having little knowledge of who else was in the interview space (Chung et al., 2020; Edwards and Holland, 2013).

> My participant smiles at someone off-screen…- who else is in this space-in my space? I don't know who is listening -or if responses are affected by who is there- and anyway, how would I know? (KT,2021)

This is problematic in terms of the information which can be unwittingly provided:

> For instance, if my participant engages in a conversation or is distracted by whoever is in the background whilst the session is ongoing, this opens up an insight into their personal lives. It may be the participant has a delivery or a contractor present and any conversations about this can be heard by me. Likewise, I may be interrupted in my office or my family may be heard in the background (GC, 2021)

In effect, this presents a crossover into the private space which goes beyond the parameters of polite conversation when an interview is conducted in a neutral space (Edwards and Holland, 2013; Krueger, 1994). Some other challenges such as interruptions could not be foreseen or addressed from interviewing in the home environment, in part because these situations had not existed pre-Covid, so there was no way of foreseeing them:

> "Excuse me…I have a delivery" …the conversation pauses as they go to answer the door …., there was no way in which I could foresee this, and I can hardly ask participants not to answer their own front door (GC, 2021)

> My interviews… building work…. fire alarms…. police sirens…. dogs barking (always dogs) …and the ubiquitous Amazon delivery (KT, 2021)

If the participant allows interruptions, this ultimately presents some issues with confidentially. As researchers, we are limited in some regards to what level of confidentiality we are offering

(Wiles et al., 2012; Wiles et al., 2006). Confidentiality pertains to maintaining the privacy of information which is further enhanced with participant anonymity (Saunders et al., 2015). However, there is some argument regarding what confidentiality is within research and how this is maintained. When an invisible participant is invited into the background of the interview there are no assurances of confidentiality because the invisible participant has not consented to the terms of the research (Chung et al., 2020; Edwards and Holland, 2013). Therefore, there is no way of assuring that confidentiality and anonymity can be upheld in this respect (Tolich, 2009).

Concluding reflections

In the disruption of the pandemic on prior research plans, fieldwork has felt a rollercoaster of research design uncertainty, and constant adaptation to the Covid-19 context for our online interview approaches (Howlett, 2021; Lupton, 2020). It would be easy to focus on what has been methodologically lost in the pandemic reality. But as researchers, the removal of face-to-face approaches has forced us to consider in new ways our rationales for research design, and our assumptive practices in how we construct the interview space (Howlett, 2021).

We suggest that as researchers we have reconstructed the geographic, public and private space in virtual qualitative interviewing during Covid-19. This provides new insights as to our positionality, how we navigate this novel interview space and build and apply tacit knowledge in the interview process (Mason, 2018; Edwards and Holland, 2013). Methodologically, our research design needs to capture and reflect on how we form contextual insights through either geographic presence in face-to-face interviews or geographic absence in a virtual interview process (Lobe et al., 2020). How our community access, networks and insider knowledge affects our sampling, researcher positionality and possible bias need more explicit consideration in our research rationales (Greene, 2014).

We contend that remote interviewing has made prominent considerations of participant care, but consideration of the research space in terms of public and private space allows aspects of privacy and power balances to be more carefully considered for researchers as well as participants. In face-to-face interviews, the delineation of the public-private view is under-recognised but equally valid in ameliorating any harm through the interview process on participants and researchers. Reflecting on how as interviewers we construct our geographic, public and private interview space as a shared experience for participants and researchers can only strengthen our methodological approaches.

Acknowledgements

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