



Qualitative Interviewing during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Part 2: A Personal Reflection on Video & Telephone Interviewing

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In 2020-21, the COVID-19 pandemic and its associated travel restrictions required researchers to pivot and find creative ways to research from a distance. For me, this meant conducting qualitative interviews using telephone or internet conferencing platforms that enable voice and video calls. While I adopted these approaches out of necessity, I learnt that interviewing at a distance is not entirely negative, and, in some ways, the problem of travel restrictions presents an opportunity to think differently about research.

As Part 1 of this In Brief series highlights, existing research methods literature raises several concerns about telephone interviewing, including the potential for misunderstandings due to a lack of contextual clues; possible problems developing rapport and discussing sensitive topics with participants; and that telephone interviews may provide less depth than face-to-face interviewing. However, advantages with distance interviewing lie where there are potential power imbalances between researchers and their participants. In this In Brief, I reflect on these advantages and challenges and offer some practical considerations by sharing my experiences of conducting qualitative interviews at a distance with women located in New Zealand, Vanuatu, Tuvalu, Bougainville and urban and Highlands areas of Papua New Guinea. The interviews were undertaken for two different research projects relating to seasonal work and climate change that aimed to foreground women's perspectives, as their voices are often absent from these literatures.

Challenges or advantages?

Handing greater power to women by finding small slots in their lives

Women in Pacific Island nations are not only busy, they can be hard to reach. Internet access is limited, and telephone disconnections can last for days at a time. Depending where the women I was calling were located, my telephone calls transported me to various locations; women answered calls while walking on the

side of the road, attending a funeral and in the middle of a peace negotiation. One advantage of telephone interviewing is that control can be placed in the hands of participants to postpone the interview to a more convenient time or when they are in a safer or more suitable interview environment. Telephone interviews also mean that their surroundings are not subjected to a 'professional gaze'; there is no need to invite a researcher into their home, community or workspace (Holt 2010:115). In comparison to a short in-country visit with tight schedules, I was able to place less time pressure on the telephone interview process and put more power in participants' hands to proceed with an interview only once they were in a location that suited them. As I was able to adopt flexible timelines, I could accommodate many reschedules. This process also gave me time to reflect on the data between interviews and think about whether the questions needed adjusting prior to the next interview.

Developing rapport

As Part 1 highlights, conducting interviews in person is considered best practice in research texts, and telephone interviewing is not recommended for qualitative research. Based on this, I assumed that video calling would be the best substitute for face-to-face interviews and that telephone interviewing would be the most difficult format for developing rapport and trust and enabling in-depth conversations. I found that video calls were important to 'put a face to a name' and for non-verbal affirmations, such as smiling and nodding. Yet, when I transcribed the interviews, I was surprised to notice that I interrupted the participants much more during video calls than on the telephone and that my telephone interviews tended to go for longer. Perhaps having visual body language cues meant that I thought I knew when my respondent had finished answering, which led to more interruptions. The lack of visual cues during telephone interviews meant that I compensated by concentrating more intensively on being an active listener. Additionally, for video interviews, I found unstable internet a significant

factor — developing rapport while screens freeze and images go fuzzy can be difficult and create a sense of pressure to finish an interview before the line drops out.

Experiencing less or learning differently?

According to the literature regarding telephone interviewing, one disadvantage is its potential for misunderstandings, particularly due to a lack of contextual clues, yet this can also be a benefit. Participants, knowing that the interviewer lacks contextual cues, may be inclined to offer greater descriptive and explanatory details, potentially resulting in richer data (Holt 2010). I found that participants assumed I knew nothing about their culture or community and went to great lengths to describe how things worked or what their local environment looked like. I wondered if they would have made the same effort if I was there with them and they knew I could see what was going on around them. An additional benefit is that, as a result, my data contains descriptions that have come through participants' eyes and words, not mine.

Practicalities

Chasing up in a void

A downside to interviewing at a distance is the lack of contextual cues to judge how often to follow up with participants to see if they are still interested in being interviewed. After sending messages into what can feel like a void, I was often left wondering what was happening at the other end. Did the message get through? Have they got internet today? With this void, it felt difficult to judge what constituted chasing up and what constituted harassment. On one occasion when I was concerned about this, I suddenly heard back from the participant, who thanked me 'for allowing opportunities for voices from our small part of the globe to be considered'.¹ The exchange reminded me that connecting with women in different parts of the world, especially those who are harder to reach, is worth the extra effort required.

Staying in touch

An unexpected positive of chasing up interviewees is the ongoing connections these practices can facilitate. The extended contact with participants via email to connect, explain the research, find out their interest, schedule convenient times and share and gain final consent for transcripts are all opportunities to get to know each other. In my experience, this has provided the foundations for ongoing long-distance relationships.

Access and consent

Prior and informed consent is crucial to qualitative research, yet sending consent forms for downloading, printing and signing is a problem when data costs are

high. While I typically prefer to obtain written consent, I learned that some of my participants were downloading forms at an internet cafe at great time and cost. I subsequently tried electronic forms, but these used up a large amount of mobile telephone data. Finally, I switched to oral consent, but this meant extra effort prior to interviews to ensure that participants knew what was involved in the research, that it was voluntary and that they could opt out at any time.

Part 1 of this series points out that telephone interviewing may limit participation to only the relatively wealthy. Video calls cost participants data, require technology and can be exclusive. Yet, I found telephone interviewing more accessible, as women had a range of strategies to access telephones and electricity through friends or relatives. Allowing time to find women through word of mouth and to wait for them to let me know when they would be able to access a telephone was an important part of reaching women.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has created great challenges for research, and it may be some time before we return to travel without cancellations or unexpected border restrictions and the golden days of fieldwork. This In Brief aims to offer hope to researchers that some types of research at a distance can be possible and that they may even experience some unexpected benefits.

Author notes

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Endnote

1. Anonymous 6/11/2020. Interviewee, personal communication.

References

- Holt, A. 2010. Using the Telephone for Narrative Interviewing: A Research Note. *Qualitative Research* 10(1):113–21.

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