

Biographical research through the looking glass of social distancing: Reflections on biographical interviewing and online technologies in pandemic times

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Abstract

This paper asks critical questions about biographical interviewing during the coronavirus disease 2019 era and the age of social distancing. How do we ‘do’ biographical research when we are more physically distant from interview participants than ever before? What kinds of challenges and issues emerge when doing biographical research in online spaces? How do we form rapport and strong trusting bonds with interviewees in the current context? This paper provides a critical commentary on these questions, focusing on the limitations and possibilities of online interviewing during pandemic times.

Keywords

Biographical research, social distancing, interviewing, online technologies, pandemic

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Introduction

In biographical interviewing, building rapport and trust with participants, through direct face-to-face interactions, is critical. However, coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) calls into question the continuity of co-presence research as researchers increasingly adopt online interviewing. The mobilisation of digital inquiry is by no means new (Fielding et al., 2017); nonetheless, the need for social distancing (SD) means that 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.

As the switch from co-presence to mediated presence happened rapidly, researchers must question if it is still possible to do biographical research in a pandemic under the same theoretical principles? What kinds of opportunities and challenges emerge? Is it ethically permissible to do research that frequently evokes complex, negative emotions when we are more physically distant from interviewees than ever before? We reflect on these questions by highlighting some possibilities and challenges to biographical research during COVID-19.

Transforming research realities during COVID-19: New entanglements and Social Distancing

New COVID realities have been transforming our research praxis, creating novel emotional and physical entanglements, and changing our understandings of non-human impacts on human sociability. As a result, researchers face serious challenges with regards to accessing and communicating with participants. Unlike pre-COVID times when we could explore people's lived spaces, we are substantially limited in where, when and how we do our research. In these challenging contexts, mobile technologies are the most viable solution to qualitative interviewing. Digital communication was widely used in research pre-COVID, so its possibilities and limitations are already identified (Fielding et al., 2017; Jenner and Myers, 2019). Nevertheless, ongoing research in pandemic contexts that switch to technological data collection faces different challenges from studies that originally plan on applying digital methods.

How far can we reach? The hazards of biographical online interviewing

Building rapport, empathy and trust are central to our ethical commitments. However, these processes may be more difficult online, when our exposure to body language, and the specificities of research encounters, is limited. Even in video interviews that more closely resemble face-to-face interviews, we usually can see only people's faces and upper bodies, which narrow our observation of the rich palette of participants' gestures and postures (Seitz, 2016). The same is true for interviewees, regarding their interpretation of our body *hexis*. Network connection problems can also impact negatively on

interactional flows (Howlett, 2021), causing ‘disruptions’ in narrations, which can adversely impact data reliability and analysis.

The situation is more complex when doing ethically sensitive research (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 upset while reliving traumatic memories, with which they cannot cope. Extant literature makes practical suggestions on what researchers can do to alleviate emotional harm. However, these strategies, formulated pre-COVID do not account for SD. It can be more difficult to display empathy online and even when researchers are empathetic their emotional displays may be limited due to weak internet or if they switch cameras off.

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. With audio interviews, we are not able to see anything at all. We cannot ensure that the interview location is the most suitable place to share intimate matters and that there is no one else in the room, which raise concerns over privacy issues. Anonymity and confidentiality are problematic in recorded video interviews, as participants are exposing more than their voices; they share the privacy of their homes and other private spaces (Lobe et al., 2020). Even if we ensure anonymity and confidentiality, participants may feel they are at risk of revealing intimate aspects of their experiences that they may not want us to know about.

Access to online platforms is also critical (Deakin and Wakefield, 2014). The use of videoconferencing may further exclude populations with limited or no internet access, as well as individuals less familiarised with social networking apps and software. This implies alternative ways of contacting people, for example, through telephone or even postponing research.

Closing doors, opening windows: The possibilities of online interviewing

Despite being, in some contexts, a forced alternative, online interviewing should not be exclusively regarded as negative. Recent accounts from the field suggest that researchers and participants build strong, empathetic relationships. During a lockdown, interviews take place at participants’ homes. The fact that researchers are not physically present, but instead are in their own homes can have two interconnected positive effects. First, it can reinforce the informal, relaxed nature of the interview, making interviewees feel more comfortable to share intimacies with researchers (Jenner and Myers, 2019). Second, it may be pivotal to developing more symmetrical relationships between researchers and participants (O’Connor and Madge, 2017): they are both confined to their homes, experiencing the pandemic’s impacts, albeit in different ways, and they are both partially exposing the privacy of their living spaces. Domestic environments may also have important triggers, facilitating narrative flows which could allow researchers to observe biographical elements that would remain concealed using audio interviews (Howlett, 2021). Videoconferencing enables participants to share biographical materials

with us, including photographs and videos. Messaging applications can extend contact with participants through exchanging short messages (saying hello, showing concern) which can strengthen research relationships in and across time.

There are several ethical issues in conducting interviews during COVID-19. Researchers may consider it 'risky' to interview people in such circumstances, considering that participants may have contracted the virus or family members may have passed away. However, in the face of crises, people tend to be more reflexive as they lose major points of reference, inciting personal reflection on everyday life events (Caetano, 2019). This can manifest in biographical interviews, as people make sense of current contexts. Instead of being a burden, interview encounters can be enjoyable moments of sharing and unburdening. Similarly, the negative limitations of domestic confinement can positively affect research because some people (e.g. youth, retired, unemployed persons) may have greater availability to share their experiences, with fewer constraints.

Which biographical research?

The issues addressed in this paper will incite further discussion as this pandemic continues to unfold. In the immediacy of this moment, however, researchers need time to process and step back (Nico, 2021), remaining mindful that there are many ways of adapting biographical research, whilst staying faithful to core principles of biographical interviewing (e.g. rapport, trust, empathy). Nonetheless, the changed context requires the increased reflexivity on our part to monitor our practices, as an epistemological surveillance tool (Bourdieu, 2004). We must be aware of the implications of SD to data collection; what videoconferencing enables us to observe and what is hidden from view.

We face unprecedented challenges as researchers. There is no way of knowing now if, in the long term, the increased adoption of online platforms becomes an established trend, or how the pandemic might change biographical research in other ways. For now, we can only testify how novel and creative biographical research is (Caetano and Nico, 2019; Moran et al., 2019), enabling us to adapt methodological toolkits to understand biographies in new ways in increasingly complex realities.

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