The NCRM wayfinder guide to adapting interview practices for Covid-19

The Covid-19 pandemic has necessitated considerable changes to research practices. This includes a dominant method for the social researcher – the in person interview – made impossible when social distancing is mandated for public health protection. This guide considers alternative ways of conducting interviews in Covid-19 times (walking interviews, telephone interviews, video-based online video interviews) plus alternative to interviews altogether (such as writing and podcasting). Readers are pointed towards examples from the research literature and research community that can support planning for research in the pandemic.

Why interview?

Interviews are a staple of qualitative social research and there is no shortage of advice in the methods literature on how to use this method. Interviews afford researchers opportunities to explore in depth the experiences and perceptions of interviewees. Researchers often choose an interview method when they seek to understand participants’ subjective perspectives, ideas, experiences or unique biographies.

> interviewing is one of the most common and most powerful ways we use to try to understand our fellow human beings

Why interview in person?

Novice researchers may choose to interview in person because methods texts steer them that way. Hesse-Biber & Leavey2, for example, assert that ‘the quality of the interview decreases significantly when the interview is not done in person’. We might say - that was then and this is now - when a decade later we are forced to examine such claims more closely and when we are all more used to conversing using technology. The in person interview is well suited to the primary facets of interview - dialogue and conversation with a purpose. It suits an interest in producing situated knowledge by asking people and listening actively to what they have to say. We may be at our most comfortable when conversing directly, which is again why in person interviewing can feel like a natural choice even when we could converse (perhaps just as) well through the mediating tool of a telephone or computer. This is reality that the Covid-19 pandemic has brought to the fore.

The interview must go on!

Alternative interview modes

Across the globe Covid-19 has made it sensible or necessary to maintain physical distance from others. This has brought into question the viability of the kind of in person interview we are all so familiar with. The least changed, but also least well-documented alternative permissible in some Covid-19 conditions is conducting interviews in person but outdoors and at a safe distance and with face coverings. This is a familiar sight in television news for example. While there is little evidence on the impact of such measures on the interview quality, there is a useful literature on walking interviews1. This shows the benefits of moving away from the face-to-face format while being in person, alongside and in movement. Getting away from in person contact altogether there are options to conduct interviews by telephone, online with video options, or a combination of the two.

Phone interviews are easily overlooked despite a good literature on their affordances and relative benefits compared to other interview mediums3. Evidence suggests that data of comparable quality is possible4. Even rich narrative data on sensitive topics2 while rapport building and interactional issues with the lack of visual cues are challenges3,4, there are benefits of logistical convenience as well as the feeling of anonymity and lesser intrusiveness5. Glogowska et al6 provide useful guidance on how to conduct phone interviews effectively.

In Covid-19 times, phone interviews have been a good option when this is a medium that participants can readily access and are at ease with. This was for the case with recent UK Following Young Fathers Further
Looking beyond the interview – Alternatives to interviewing

In finding a way forward when in person interviews are not possible, an alternative to the interview altogether is another option. The interview is such a big part of social research that is easy to neglect other ways of generating data, such as writing letters which may suit older participants particularly well. Evidence indicates that during lockdowns people have been particularly responsive to opportunities to write, both in unstructured ways as part of sense-making in challenging and stressful times, and in response to researchers’ prompts. This was true of the many academics who participated in the ‘Massive and Microscopic Sensemaking’ project and the very diverse and increasing population who contribute to the Mass Observation Archive.

The NCRM rapid evidence review of methods successfully used or adapted for Covid-19 times found that researchers have been pushed to look at ways of asking questions and seeking participants’ perspectives other than interviews. These ways included diary writing, collaborative reflective writing, sentence completion written tasks, digital story-telling, digital podcasting and self-recording with mobile probes. Sometimes, as in the case of Gratton et al., researchers have turned to creative methods when telephone interviews and group video calls did not work for them in the social conditions. It is likely that among the lessons for social researchers to come from the pandemic will be that the in person interview as a research method is here to stay, but that the research community can be extremely resourceful when alternatives are needed.

Useful links

https://www.ncrm.ac.uk/research/socscicovid19/


References

2. Hesse-Biber SN & Leavy P. 2011. The Practice of Qualitative Research. SAGE.


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