

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 beings¹

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 challenges^{3,4}, 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*

project. Also in the UK, the oral history project *NHS at 70: The story of our lives* had to switch from in person oral history interviews to telephone interviews. Here, volunteer interviewers talking with NHS patients, frontline staff and policy makers found reciprocal care and support was part of the process⁷. Phone interviews have also been particularly useful in Covid-19 as part of rapid qualitative research to inform evidence-based public health responses⁸ and as an alternative interview mode in survey research⁹.

For researchers working in remote regions, in the global South or with people who are digitally disadvantaged, phone interviews may be the feasible option, especially when phone credit is a value commodity to give as a thank you for participation. Phones can be used for direct messaging and sending email responses even when bandwidth and larger devices are out of scope.

For many researchers in Covid-19 times, the **video-based online interview** has been the more obvious option. Lobe et al.¹⁰ provide a useful guide to the videoconferencing platforms available to researchers together with the technical requirements and logistical considerations. While the situation with the service providers is dynamic, their paper flags the data security, which is crucial to the ethics requirements of social research, that is offered by each platform. Whatever the platform, the video option is good when it is important for the interviewer and interviewee to be able to see each other as they talk as it was for Ellis and Rawicki¹¹ who write about this: This was not the easy option for the 93-year-old interviewee for whom the technology aspect was hugely challenging, but it was important for the deeper connection they needed as they discussed emotional subject matter.

Group interviews bring additional challenges and Dodds and Hess¹² report on moving their group interviews with family groups online due to Covid-19. They found advantages in the comfort of the interviewees being in their own homes, which meant they did share sensitive information and that while responses were shorter they were more in-depth. Unlike pre-Covid-19 times, participants were familiar with talking online. The researchers appreciated being able to communicate with each other during the interview using the private chat function. They did miss some cues and context and had to attend carefully to privacy, setup and access issues, but the experience was successful. For a comprehensive analysis of online interviewing see work by Salmons¹³.

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' project¹⁴ and the very diverse and increasing population who contribute to the Mass Observation Archive.

The NCRM rapid evidence review¹⁵ 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 Gratton¹⁶ 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/>

<https://pim.cgiar.org/2020/04/11/using-mobile-phones-to-do-research-covid-19/>

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National Centre for Research Methods
Social Sciences
University of Southampton
Southampton, SO17 1BJ
United Kingdom.

Web	http://www.ncrm.ac.uk
Email	info@ncrm.ac.uk
Tel	+44 23 8059 4539
Twitter	@NCRMUK