

From Safeguarding and Confidentiality to GDPR and online methods: considerations for researchers during the pandemic and beyond

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From safeguarding and confidentiality to GDPR and online methods: considerations for Researchers during the pandemic and beyond

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The world changed for everyone back in March 2020. The transition to working from home happened overnight, with little time to consider how effectively that would work in terms of the jobs we do every day. As a mixed methods educational researcher with a role as an Information Governance Guardian¹, I was faced with immediate concerns around research data - practically, ethically, and also legislatively. Furthermore, working in the funded contract research world meant that for a while we were unsure whether our clients would want to carry on with projects according to the original timeframe, or whether they would be halting fieldwork for the foreseeable future. What may have mattered to us ethically in terms of not wanting to overload research participants during a world crisis had to be considered alongside the importance of the research we were carrying out and what our funders wanted.

Social distancing meant considerations needed to be made concerning the adaptation of our research methods. For instance, where we had once always been physically present when conducting a focus group this was no longer possible. Suddenly the storage of data which had always felt safe and secure whilst working in our university offices, felt far from it. How safe was our WiFi connection? How much more easily could viruses infiltrate our home systems? Would our sensitive research data remain safe? With the implementation of GDPR a few years previously and its threat of potentially huge institutional fines, these questions felt more pertinent and worrisome than they may have done in the past.

I was invited to sit on a national panel to discuss these issues back in May 2020, and realised that many researchers were simply muddling through, without too much consideration around any implications the move to home working may have on their data collection, handling, and storage. This was not necessarily surprising or questionable considering we were in lockdown and trying our best to deal with everything that came with that. Just trying to keep our heads above water on a daily basis was consuming enough!

Thankfully, modern technology opened up new and innovative possibilities to adapt our research methods in the newly socially distanced world. Virtual options such as social media and video conferencing platforms were being considered, which just would not have been an option had the pandemic taken place a decade earlier. Some of these methods had been explored over the past few years, but were by no means the dominant approach amongst the research community.

A seismic shift from face-to-face interviews to collecting interview data via telephones had taken place in contract research over the previous decade, but this had more to do with ever decreasing funding budgets than a substantive change in methodological mindset. The move to telephones was perceived as the inferior option, with face-to-face being factored in where costs allowed. Concerns around the lack of body and facial cues and difficulties

¹ SHU role to ensure that my local area is adhering to SHU information governance policy.

around building rapport with research participants when using telephone interviews persisted over the years, even though they were logistically straightforward, and less resource intensive.

When March 2020 and national lockdown and social distancing hit, and questions were flying around about the continuation of fieldwork and data collection, the fact that we had been collecting data via telephones for years meant that we already had a methodological card up our hypothetical sleeve. We had not, however, been carrying out these telephone techniques with focus groups, and in the main, children and young people. Focus groups had been thought of as being too logistically and practically complex to be moved onto a telephone, we would maybe interview two people who were physically based in the same room using this format, but not a group who may be in different locations. Focus groups were also notoriously difficult to set up with professionals, due to conflicting diaries, and last-minute dropouts.

The move to online interviewing meant that factors which may not have necessarily been thought about previously, now needed to be considered. The demand and growth of video-conferencing platforms exploded at the beginning of the pandemic, and they naturally felt like the right tool to use for virtual interviews. Compliance with data protection legislation, and in particular EU and subsequently UK GDPR, meant that platforms located outside of the EU or the UK did not have a statutory requirement to adhere to our personal data laws. Meaning that they were not an ideal place to conduct research interviews, particularly with vulnerable participants, including young people or children. I also made the decision not to use the recording function on video-conferencing platforms, using my digital recorder instead, which I would upload to my secure university drive (and not on my laptop) and delete once the interview was complete as this felt much safer.

Safeguarding issues were also of paramount importance here. Research staff have historically been placed in a predicament where they are faced with conflicting concepts around ethics and confidentiality and safeguarding². Lockdown and home-schooling meant interviewing children and young people in their homes rather than their educational institutions and some of the safeguarding assurances that went with that. Whereas once we were mainly looking out for what a young person might verbally tell us, we were now very much having to consider non-verbal cues such as what might be going on in the background at a young person's home.

Guarantees of confidentiality and privacy were now even more crucial, considering that they could be broken unintentionally simply by a member of a researcher's or interviewee's household overhearing an interview, rather than by proactively informing someone about its contents as had been the case in the past. Practical steps such as ensuring no-one else was in the room, or a 'no entry' sign on the door were all well and good, but not always workable, making it difficult to speak on the telephone for any length of time, especially for those at home with children for instance. A decision to shorten intended interview schedules was made for this reason.

² As outlined in a paper I collaborated on: Furey, R., et. al. (2010). Developing Ethical Guidelines for Safeguarding Children during Social Research. *Research Ethics*, 6 (4), 120-127. <http://doi.org/10.1177/174701611000600403>

Practical confidentiality and privacy issues arose not only in people's front rooms and kitchens, but online too, with passwords and waiting rooms being implemented to prevent intended or unintended Zoom-bombing³. The deactivation of private chat and group screen-sharing was also important to eliminate the risk of offensive content by focus group participants and viruses. On the flip side the use of group chat, white boards, polls, the annotate function and breakout rooms, brought a whole new added level to an interview. The new functions enabled participants who were less confident or chatty to contribute in a way they had not been able to off-line, and we were then able to use this new type of data in our analysis as long as this was specified in the project privacy notice. Logistically, focus groups, particularly those run with individuals from differing locations, were far easier to arrange and cheaper to run online than they had been offline.

Ethical sensitivity around participants' ability and capacity to take part were also made more difficult in a social distancing situation. Consideration of the fact that people's normal routines had been disrupted, and that they may be feeling concerned and worried needed to be accounted for whoever the potential participant. More care was taken around what questions were included in interview schedules (e.g. asking school pupils about their plans for the future felt insensitive during lockdown) and there was an understanding around not pestering potential interviewees to take part. However, there was also an awareness that some people were at home and bored and may welcome being part of a research project to ease the daily monotony. It was a case of assessing and treading lightly and giving people options such as allowing them to write their own interview responses and emailing them to us rather than a synchronous interview.

The 'hard to reach' groups also raised questions for me. Were people even harder to access due to the issue of 'digital disadvantage'? The '*even harder* to reach' perhaps? Did the advances in digital research methods mean that some 'hard to reach' participants, who may not have previously felt comfortable coming onto a higher education campus or other kind of educational establishment to be interviewed, felt keener to engage online from their own homes? Would those with bandwidth issues lead to a negative impact on my ability to communicate online and build rapport with the interviewee? The pandemic and social distancing methods also raised questions around whether there has been any effect on researcher-participant power dynamics, and issues such as social desirability bias.

The pandemic and social distancing restrictions have led to rapid advancement within research methodology, just as it has within higher education and teaching and learning. It has required researchers to engage more effectively with data protection protocol and think about their methods more innovatively, particularly as the 'gold standard' of qualitative research, physical face-to-face interviews, has not been possible. This has not been without its challenges though, some of which we are still working through, but there is a newfound confidence to refine and embrace alternative research methods and approaches moving forward.

³ Zoom-bombing is when an uninvited person enters the video-conferencing room, this may be intentionally to interrupt the session, or unintentionally due to session running over/being double booked.

