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Rébecca Lévy-Guillain, Alix Sponton, Lucie Wicky

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Telephone and video-call collection of personal narratives on intimate subjects. Methodological issues in remote interviewing to collect life histories

Rébecca Lévy-Guillain

Centre de recherche sur les inégalités sociales (CRIS) (Center for Research on Social Inequalities) Sciences Po-CNRS
Campus Sciences Po 1, place Saint-Thomas-d'Aquin, 75007 Paris
Institut national d'études démographiques (Ined) (French Institute for Demographic Studies)
9, cours des Humanités, CS 50004, 93322 Aubervilliers cedex

rebecca.levyguillain@sciencespo.fr

Alix Sponton

Centre de recherche sur les inégalités sociales (CRIS) Sciences Po-CNRS
Campus Sciences Po 1, place Saint-Thomas-d'Aquin, 75007 Paris
Institut national d'études démographiques (Ined) (French Institute for Demographic Studies)
9, cours des Humanités, CS 50004, 93322 Aubervilliers cedex

alix.sponton@sciencespo.fr

Lucie Wicky

Institut national d'études démographiques (Ined) (French Institute for Demographic Studies)
9, cours des Humanités, CS 50004, 93322 Aubervilliers cedex
Centre Maurice Halbwachs (CMH) (Maurice Halbwachs Center) ENS-EHESS-CNRS-
INRAE (School of Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences)
École normale supérieure, Bâtiment Oïkos, 48 boulevard Jourdan, 75014 Paris

lucie.wicky@ined.fr

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The COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting health and social crisis led researchers to conduct semi-structured interviews either by telephone or video call. This methodological note evaluates the implications of remote interviewing when researchers opt for biographical interviews, which require interviewees to talk freely about intimate personal matters. It shows how remote interviewing broadens the social characteristics of potential interviewees by opening up new arrangements. It also shows the advantages of remote interviewing for accessing the subject's inner thoughts, feelings, and processes. Drawing on three studies conducted by young women questioning older men, it is particularly sensible to the potential of this method for cases where power dynamics (particularly gender dynamics) are likely to hinder the interviewer-participant relationship, risking an impoverishment of the knowledge produced.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting health and social crisis comprehensively disrupted the research protocols that sociologists have traditionally used to conduct their inquiries. In particular, researchers were forced to rethink empirical protocols in order to adapt them to social distancing rules. Semi-structured interviews are a notable example, as these were previously usually carried out face-to-face, but became overwhelmingly conducted by telephone or video

call. However, remote communication runs counter to certain methodological assumptions that have long been part of the institution of sociology. There are a number of reasons why the use of telecommunications tools is not commonplace, including the widespread idea that “only the observation of the social setting (places and people) that constitutes the interview provides the means to interpret the interview” (Beaud 1996, 234).¹ This research note is based on the experience of remote communication in three studies on different topics (see Box 1), all of which involved biographical interviews. It offers a detailed reflection on our experiences, covering the methodological and epistemological implications of the use of remote communication within remote biographical interviews.

We use the term *remote interview* to mean an interview carried out over the telephone or by video call. Independent of the chosen method (with or without camera), these have the commonality of being carried out *remotely* (the sociologist is not located in the same spatial environment as the subject) and consequently of being *mediated by a telecommunications tool* (phone or computer).² The reason why we are considering these two varieties of remote interview together is that the visual data available during a video call have a secondary role in sociological analysis, which is centered on recorded speech above all.³ In our work, when video was used it primarily affected the practices adopted by researchers in actually carrying out the interview (management of silences, adjustment of facial expressions, etc.).

We are also making these reflections in the particular context of the carrying out of *biographical interviews*. As these aim to reconstitute the interviewee’s life experiences from their point of view that is, to grasp the sense that they make of them (Dion et al. 2020), creating a relationship of trust, although necessary for any interview, is in this case of central importance. In practice, the quality of the sociological analysis rests on the propensity of those interviewed to make personal disclosures and give access to their intimate thoughts.⁴ We also discuss the benefits of remote interviewing when the aim is to elicit the freest speech possible concerning experiences that are to varying degrees personal or private. Our reflections are not therefore directly transferable to interviews that are primarily of an informational nature (as carried out in public policy sociology or organizational sociology) (Bongrand and Laborier 2005).

BOX 1. – *Studies*

The “Consent” study involves interviews about sexuality conducted with men and women aged between eighteen and sixty-five recruited via around sixty Facebook groups. The interviews sought to capture both practices and understandings connected to sexuality, gender, and consent. To date, forty-two interviews have been conducted face-to-face at the researcher’s home (between April and August 2019) and eighty-four interviews have been conducted via video call (since June 2020).

¹ **Translator’s note:** Unless otherwise stated, all translations of cited foreign language material are our own.

² In this article, various telecommunications tools (telephone, computer, etc.) and software (WhatsApp, Facebook, Zoom, Teams, etc.) were deployed as research tools. For video interviews, the software was chosen based on the research subjects’ preferences.

³ This choice has previously been discussed elsewhere in the literature (Thunberg and Arnell, 2022).

⁴ Any theme that touches on a subject’s inner life and relates to that which is hidden and shielded from the eyes of others is considered to be intimate (Berrebi-Hoffmann 2009). Something is considered more or less intimate based on the perception of the research subjects—and society more generally. What is considered intimate therefore relates to the system of understandings and norms in operation and can vary depending on historical and geographic context. Below, we will use the ideas of “intimate” and “private” interchangeably.

The “Fatherhood” study involves repeatedly interviewing fathers on the use and effects of paternity leave. The participants, aged between twenty-five and forty-two, were for the most part recruited in maternity care waiting rooms, via social networks, or through personal networks. The fathers are interviewed at three stages: during the third trimester of pregnancy, in the three months following birth, and after the child’s first birthday. The interviews took place face-to-face until March 2020 and continued remotely thereafter. Of the thirty-two fathers studied, twenty had participated in at least their first interview in person before switching to telephone or video call.

The “Sexual Violence” study partly consists of interviews conducted with fifty men who stated that they had experienced sexual abuse, mainly during childhood or adolescence but also at (rarely) adulthood. They were recruited from among men who had mentioned experiences of sexual violence in the “Violence and Gender Relations (VIRAGE)” survey (Brown et al. 2021) and who agreed to a follow-up interview. Conducted between 2018 and 2021, these interviews were all carried out by telephone. The research protocol was therefore chosen before the pandemic, as it was considered particularly suitable for the subject matter.

The analyses developed over the following pages are historically, socially, and sociologically situated. First, the restrictions imposed by the COVID pandemic led us, like many of our colleagues, to reflect on the effects of remote communication on the material collected. As PhD students, this prompting of methodological reflexivity was heightened knowing that we would have to defend our theses, and need to discuss our methods at that time. Second, as young women, our disadvantaged position in terms of gender and age relations made us very aware of the patterns of domination that can structure interactions and harm the researcher–participant relationship. Finally, our reflections were enriched by our position within the field of sociology. On the one hand, our involvement in gender studies (Clair 2012) led us to adopt a reflexive attitude as encouraged by feminist standpoint theory (Clair 2016a; Harding [1993] 2004). On the other hand, our familiarity with major quantitative studies and our relative distance from the ethnographic tradition made us more inclined to adopt remote methods. In this way, our reflections were made possible by this specific position within power relations and within the field of sociology but we would hope that they are useful to anyone conducting biographical interviews.

After an overview of existing thought on remote interviews in the sociological literature, the later sections address their epistemological implications. We first examine the impact of this new research tool on the profile of potential interviewees, in other words, on who can be an author of a life story on which analyses are based. Next, we discuss the role of recorded speech in remote interviews, and then the level of intimacy in the discourse that is collected. Finally, we consider the way in which remote communication, by partially reconfiguring the power relations that operate in interview situations, can enrich the material collected in some cases.

Methodological reflections on remote interviews

A lukewarm reception within French sociology

Reflections on remote interviews began in the English-speaking world in the 1990s (for example, Sellen 1995), burgeoning further at the start of the twenty-first century in the context of the spread of “digital methods.” This covers an eclectic mix of methods spanning from

“netnography” (Kozinets 2015) to interviews via email or instant messenger (Béliard and Brossard 2012), as well as online research (Thunberg and Arnell 2022). Remote interviews attracted particular interest as an alternative to the classic method of face-to-face interviews. The majority of these works compare remote and face-to-face methods from a cost/benefit perspective. Based on their own experiences of the method, these authors primarily examine the effect of telephone or video calls on the recruitment of interviewees and on the researcher–participant relationship fostered.

These studies show four major results. They first emphasize the material advantages involved, underscoring the cost reduction (Gratton and O’Donnell 2011) and the flexibility offered to research subjects (Deakin and Wakefield 2014). Many of them also compare remote and in-person methods from the point of view of the researcher–participant relationship and the richness of the material collected. In the majority of cases, they note that remote interviews involve a loss of visual data, impoverishing the analysis (Edwards and Holland 2020; Holt 2010; Smith 2005), but that they allow a better emotional connection to be established (Weller 2017) and anonymity to be preserved (Cachia and Millward 2011; Stephens 2007). Interviewees are thought to be emboldened to disclose things about themselves (Jenner and Myers 2019). This dimension is of particular note in studies relating to intimate subjects such as health (Cipolletta, Votadoro, and Faccio 2017), especially mental health (Mealer 2014) and addictions (Drabble et al. 2016; Huhtanen, Mustonen, and Mäkelä 2016); or conjugal life (Woodyatt, Finneran, and Stephenson 2016), parenthood (Gray et al. 2020), or sexuality (Sipes, Roberts, and Mullan 2019). Other studies draw attention to the technical difficulties that some interviewees can come up against (Jenner and Myers 2019; Weller 2017). Finally, the last group of texts warns of the ethical risks presented by remote methods: the difficulty of obtaining the written consent of interviewees and guaranteeing the confidentiality of what is said are of particular note (Glassmeyer and Dibbs 2012).

In France, this body of work has met with a lukewarm reception. In fact, there is no mention of it in the methodological reference manuals (Beaud and Weber 2010; Blanchet and Gotman 2007; Demazière 2008). Two dynamics may explain this phenomenon. On the one hand, articles discussing the benefits and limits of remote interviewing are for the most part written in peripheral disciplines (criminology, public health, social work, etc.) or specialized sub-fields, which do not necessarily conform to the same academic expectations and whose conclusions—more empirical than theoretical—have not circulated much within sociology. On the other hand, the current weight of the ethnographic tradition within French sociology, in particular inherited from the Chicago School, imported following the translation of certain foundational texts (Grafmeyer and Joseph [1979] 2009), may explain such reticence. In practice, the absence or secondary nature of observations in remote interviews runs contrary to the methodological approach of long-term immersion in the field.

However, the use of telecommunications has not been unanimously rejected within French sociology. It has been quantitative research, and by extension mixed methods research, that has tended to be less reluctant to embrace remote methods. In particular, conducting questionnaires on themes considered to be sensitive via telephone has shown potential to obtain less normative responses than face-to-face methods (Riandey and Firdion 1993), as has been the case for example in major quantitative research into sexuality or sexual violence (Bajos et al. 1998; Bajos and Bozon 2012; Brown et al. 2021; Jaspard and Brown 2003). Nonetheless, these reflections have not often been applied to the practice of qualitative interviewing, with a few exceptions (see, for example, Ancel 2020).

A method that has been reconsidered post-COVID-19

The more widespread use of remote research due to the COVID-19 pandemic has led to the emergence of new thought on the subject, including within French sociology, with methodological works being published expeditiously (in France: Balaudé, Glinel, and Madon 2022; Clouet, Oudot, and Noûs 2021; Milon 2022; Roudaut and Derbez 2022; Theviot 2021). Overall, these articles confirm the major results previously noted, but also emphasize new dimensions such as the possibility of reaching groups seen as dangerous (Clouet, Oudot, and Noûs 2021) or vulnerable—particularly from a health perspective (Milon 2022). This recent literature can be seen as falling into two groups.

The majority of these works, often part of the field of public policy sociology or organizational sociology, are concerned with the consequences that moving online in the pandemic context had on the ethnographic research process (Balaudé, Glinel, and Madon 2022; Clouet, Oudot, and Noûs 2021; Howlett 2022; Theviot 2021). To put it another way, these analyses approach the remote interview as one netnographic method among others, without placing it at the heart of their discussion. Due to the extent to which these studies were initially intended to rely on observations, they seem to have been particularly sensitive to the constraints imposed by remote methods as regards the collection of material (such as the difficulties of getting access to members of overlooked groups without being in the field, of being covertly present for day-to-day interactions, or of building relationships of trust over time).

A smaller number of studies has focused on the suitability of remote interviews for collecting life stories, one concerning parenthood after the experience of cancer (Roudaut and Derbez 2022) and another on women who were either candidates for obesity-related surgery, or who had had such surgery (Milon 2022). These works involved more positive discussion of the liberatory effect that using telecommunications (the telephone especially) has on speech, showing in particular that it reduces the asymmetry of power relations within the researcher–participant relationship by allowing people disclosing things about themselves to be in greater control of the framework of the interaction—a conclusion also drawn by Aliénor Balaudé, Charlotte Glinel, and Julie Madon (2022).

Our research subjects and our methodological practices have aligned us with this second approach. There are still not many published findings on remote biographical interviews, and this existing research merits broadening out to include other topics and most of all other social groups, the studies to date relating mainly to women. As young female researchers interviewing older men, we were particularly aware of the effects of remote communication on gender relations within the researcher–participant relationship. This research note therefore forms part of our wider thinking on the way in which methodological protocols and social characteristics interrelate in the collection of material.

Fresh faces (and relative diversification) in the profile of interviewees

By changing and broadening the social characteristics of people who could be interviewed, the use of remote methods allowed us to collect life stories from people with social characteristics that are different from those usually encountered, which affected the kind of knowledge

produced. These changes are linked to the reconfiguration of material constraints on the one hand, and societal understandings of the interview situation on the other.

Interview constraints reconfigured by remote communication

Our three research projects were shaped by a goal of social and geographic diversification, which a priori required long journeys. This is also why qualitative studies are often still centered on city dwellers even when the subject relates to practices or phenomena that are not limited to particular populations. As remote interviews require no travel, they allowed us to dispense with a number of financial and temporal constraints, offering us the opportunity to listen to people from a wider range of social backgrounds and geographical locations. This diversification of interviewees does however come up against certain limits due to the technological constraints inherent in remote communication (Archibald et al. 2019). Some populations are difficult to contact via digital tools, as they lack an internet connection or are not very familiar with these technologies (Pasquier 2019). Previous studies that sought to interview retirees and loggers have also emphasized this barrier (Balaudé, Glinel, and Madon 2022). While professional context has an effect, the main impeding factor is age: young people are comfortable with digital tools, especially if they use them professionally, but older people can have more difficulty, particularly when it comes to video technology.

Moreover, from the interviewee's point of view, collecting life stories is a time-consuming activity. It is difficult to interview certain types of people whose schedules are very full or who are little inclined to devote several hours to a study. Remote interviews open up the possibility of otherwise inconceivable interview arrangements (virtual meetings late at night or early in the morning, etc.) that are less demanding from a material and temporal point of view for the interviewees, who do not need to travel, or make their home presentable, or prepare themselves physically (Oliffe et al. 2021). These possibilities make a positive response to attempts to negotiate an interview more likely from the outset. A vineyard worker, Baptiste ("Fatherhood" study) refused the timeslots offered, including weekends and evenings, and would only agree to conduct the interview during his working hours, at a time when he would be out in a tractor pruning vines. This task was done in solitude and guaranteed that he would be able to "stay on the phone for two hours, three hours [...] [no] problem," offering unusual but comfortable interview conditions. The move to remote communication thus leads to different kinds of people becoming interviewees because it enables novel research situations. The effects of this on the material we collected—in particular the possibility of being able to carry out additional tasks during conversations—must of course be taken into account and are discussed below.

Societal understandings of remote interviews

The prospect of a call rather than a meeting also has implications for the way the interviewee sees the encounter. Given that a sociological interview is an atypical social situation, those being interviewed try to give it meaning by likening it to interactions that are more familiar to them (Demazière 2008). In this way, using video calls can echo remote working situations and be associated with question-and-answer-style exchanges (Roudaut and Derbez 2022). A telephone call can be associated with a brief exchange allowing a person to reach another in an impromptu way to quickly obtain information (Rettie 2009). Such an expeditious and unplanned characterization makes it easier to see the interview as not particularly constraining,

even as an effective pastime to combat boredom. This was the case for interviews conducted with young parents who took part in the interview while looking after their children (“Consent” study).

The redefinition of the research situation also goes hand in hand with a weakening of the feeling of engagement. Interviewees feel freer to cancel a meeting that has already been arranged if the interview doesn’t involve travel. In our three studies, a higher proportion than usual of research subjects canceled at the last minute or postponed the interview, despite clear interest in taking part in the study. Although these “no-shows” were of course limiting, the possibility interviewees had of avoiding the interaction or relatively quickly bringing it to an end made recruitment easier:

“You know I’m very shy, not at ease speaking, I’m not that good at expressing myself. . . I agreed because your subject interested me. . . and then, if I can be honest with you, I imagined I’d hang up if it was too much for me” (Olivier, fifty-two years old, manager in an insurance firm, video call).

Just as Olivier (“Consent” study) agreed to participate in the interview because he was interested in the subject and above all reassured by the practical arrangements for the study, other interviewees stated that they allowed themselves to be persuaded because they thought that if they felt ill at ease they could extricate themselves without difficulty (Holt 2010; Milon 2022).

Moreover, to take part in a biographical interview, the interviewee needs to feel legitimate in telling a story about themselves. Often, interviewees from more privileged socioeconomic groups are more inclined to tell their stories than those from the working class (Mauger and Pouly 2019; Poliak 2002). Remote communication seems to offer new possibilities for encouraging people outside the legitimate culture to talk about themselves, as it means they do not need to be wrenched from their everyday setting (Roudaut and Derbez 2022):

I have just posted a notice on the Montreuil residents’ page. Nazifa, aged forty-one, public sector employee, currently on maternity leave, sends me a message to tell me that she might potentially be interested in the topic. On the phone, she explains that she is hesitant to take part because she doesn’t know whether her life experiences, which she considers particularly banal, would be useful for my research. She also mentions not enjoying formal “job interview”-style discussions. When I am explaining the arrangements for interviews, I say that the conversation will take place via video call. She cuts me off immediately, suggesting we do the interview on Whatsapp. Being used to talking via this service with her brothers and sisters who are still in Tunisia, she explicitly links her experience to times when she talks with her family, where she can converse at length. The interview ends up lasting four and a half hours.

Field notes, 06/18/2020 (“Consent” study)

This example of interview negotiation leads us to think that working-class respondents’ familiarity with Whatsapp or Messenger can reduce their feelings of being unsuitable to participate and to tell their stories, as these technological supports indicate to them a certain informality.

The role of discourse: The centrality of speech

Conducting interviews remotely also has major implications for the type of empirical material on which we can construct our analyses. In particular, the status of speech changes: recorded discourse takes an even more central role than in a face-to-face interview.

Material centered on the production of recorded speech

With remote communication, the material is more tightly concentrated around recorded speech. On the one hand, the pre- and post-interview periods are considerably shorter as it is significantly quicker to begin and end the interaction. The conversation following the recorder being turned off is traditionally perceived as a “moment of truth” that opens up a “new discussion space” (Barbot 2012, 139) once the pressure is released. On the other hand, when compared with face-to-face interviews, remote interactions offer limited scope for observation, even with a camera present.

This loss of information led us to consider what speech and observations each have to offer as types of material. At what point does a reduction in or total absence of visual material during the interview restrict analysis? The cost of the absence of observations depends both on the subject of the study and the approach taken. Although face-to-face interviews involve observation, what this reveals often has a very much secondary character vis-à-vis the topic being studied. In our research (although this is in fact often the case in biographical research), it is complex or even impossible to observe, during a face-to-face interview, the practices that particularly interest us, either because they are in the past (for example experiences of sexual abuse suffered during childhood), or because they require an immersion in the private lives of subjects that is difficult to achieve—ordinary sexuality, for example, is unobservable (Bozon 1999). It is, however, possible to analyze these subjects through the discourse of the person being studied, by inviting them to relate their daily practices or micro-practices in detail (Lahire 1998). Remote communication thus emphasizes the production of discourse about the self. In this sense, it results less in a reduction in the quantity of the material collected than in an alteration of its nature.

Accessing subjectivity by things being put into words

Likewise, when the three of us compare our fieldwork experiences, we see how the centrality of speech facilitates access to interviewees’ subjectivity. When communicating remotely, the impossibility of demonstrating or showing oneself encourages and normalizes forms of verbalization that are uncommon in face-to-face interactions. It becomes socially acceptable to ask the interviewee to describe what the interviewer cannot see:

M: To start with, I’m not very masculine, so . . .

I: What do you mean?

M: Well, you can’t see me, now, but. . . I’m 1.74 m tall. . . I’ve not got a rugby player’s body. [. . .]

I: So you’re speaking physically then?

M: Physically, but mentally too. [. . .] [Long intake of breath] I’ve never been. . . macho. I’ve never been. . . one to try and pick up women. I’ve never been. . . full of testosterone. I’ve never been. . . sporty. I’ve never been in a fight. In short, I’m a hybrid! [laughs] I’m notta. . . notta bloke, yeah! I’m not a bloke who smells of sweat.

(Martin, aged thirty-two, auditor, phone call)

Martin's response ("Fatherhood" study) implies that the interviewer would have been able to judge for herself the type of masculinity he embodied if she had met him face-to-face. The impossibility of being seen encouraged Martin to expand on his depiction of himself, drawing on standardized criteria of his own accord, and the reasons why he feels out of step with hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995). This self-description unequivocally expresses the subjective relationship that the interviewee has with gender norms.

In the same way, the restriction of non-verbal communication encourages the expression of perceptions: feelings can no longer be conveyed by pulling faces or making expansive gestures. Cut off from other means of communication, thoughts become more verbalized, allowing us to access interviewees' understandings more directly.

Socially situated speech

Across our three studies, the centrality of speech in remote interviews did however exacerbate the challenges connected to the differences in manners of constructing a narrative identity in the social space (Darmon 2021). On the one hand, the verbalization of lived experience varies according to social background and professional situation. On the other hand, proximity to or distance from the language codes used by the interviewee can facilitate or alternatively impede the conversation.

First, the impossibility of using non-verbal communication sometimes made it more complicated for the interviewee and interviewer to understand one another, in particular when we didn't share their language norms, vocabulary, or accent. This difficulty primarily occurs on the purely communicational level: misunderstandings limit the collection of information. But it also has an effect on the relational level. First, because requests to repeat oneself disrupt the interaction. Next, because social distance (linked to class, nationality, or disability relations) conveyed through language makes itself felt all the more in a context where much greater attention is on the voice. In person, recourse to bodily expression can easily compensate for a lack of linguistic connection. This difficulty emerges clearly in the interviews with Mani ("Fatherhood" study), originally from Southeast Asia, whose first interview was face-to-face and whose second was on the telephone. Despite French not being his mother tongue, his skills allowed him to hold a fluent conversation face-to-face, including on relatively technical topics such as the type of leave he took for the birth of his last child. During the second interview, comprehension suffered over the telephone, even though the linguistic level was comparable.

Linguistic barriers do not necessarily preclude the use of remote communication, which is sometimes a necessary condition for hearing the voices of those affected by material and temporal constraints (see above). They may nonetheless prompt the use of video calls rather than the telephone, as the possibility of using gestures facilitates comprehension.

Privileged access to inner life

Beyond the new *status* of speech in the production of material, using remote communication also changes the *content* of the speech collected. It emerges from our fieldwork experiences that in the absence of copresence, interviewees invest less of their identity in the interaction and experience less fear that they will "lose face" (Goffman 1956). They lose sight of our virtual presence and are therefore less sensitive to social control.

Disclosing without feeling exposed

Very often, the sociological desire to address the private dimensions of life comes up against the reticence of interviewees to reveal themselves, for fear of being judged. As the sociologist appears as an unknown figure asking questions about the way in which people think and do things, they can be perceived as a custodian of the social order, perpetuating the forms of control that exist elsewhere. As part of their “face-work” (Goffman 1967), those being asked questions seek to convey a positive image of themselves by exercising constant control on their behaviors and utterances. Such self-control can hold back the spontaneity of speech and lead to certain information or opinions being suppressed. In our three studies, this difficulty was heightened given the degree of intimacy involved in the theme of conjugal life, and perhaps even more so for sexuality and experiences of sexual violence. The deformation of discourse and omission of information are particularly important for us as they inform us about respondents’ relationships with our research topics.

Our fieldwork experiences indicate that remote interviews reduce participants’ fear that they will “lose face” by offering them the possibility to speak without being seen (Novick 2008; Sturges and Hanrahan 2004). The interview via video call with Melvin in the “Consent” study is a clear example. This twenty-six-year-old young man, who works in logistics for a supermarket in a rural area, appeared relatively uneasy talking about himself from the beginning of the interview. However, he eventually relaxed, providing longer and longer responses. Yet his speech became halting and muddled when he started to talk about how his sexual encounters with men unfold. Having grown up in a family that was intolerant of homosexuality, he said he didn’t “embrace that part of [his] sexuality.” His unease was palpable until he altered the direction of his camera. Throughout the discussion of his homosexual experiences, the interview was conducted without the interviewer being able to see him—she instead found herself facing a white wall. Once this section of the interview was over, he readjusted his camera of his own accord and reappeared on screen. He chose this setup to enable him to talk more freely: “As it goes, I’m very shy about this subject, I prefer to hide, you might say, I think it’s better, I’ll tell you more stuff.” Melvin felt able to change his presence and mask part of his identity by avoiding engaging the materiality of his body, leaving him feeling less exposed to the gaze of the other. The interaction is thus “attenuated” (Goffman 1967) by the mediated exchange, reduced to the voice. This example makes visible, via the role of the camera, the mechanisms through which the feeling of anonymity weakens social control. It also highlights the liberating effect of speaking over the telephone, in particular on subjects that are sensitive or regularly subject to normative judgments (Cachia and Millward 2011; Novick 2008; Sturges and Hanrahan 2004). In other words, although the telephone involves a loss of visual material compared with a video call, it seems to offer a greater richness of discourse.

Reducing the feeling of copresence

Along the same lines, our research brings to the fore the fresh opportunities that mediating interview tools can offer to efface our presence. As the interviewees are anchored in a different spatial zone to us, they can have the impression of being alone, facing themselves. This is what is suggested by the interactional dynamics governing certain interviews:

The interview had been underway for around three-quarters of an hour. Marlène, aged fifty-six and recently divorced, had already spoken about her childhood, her adolescence, her marriage, and her first

years as a stay-at-home mother. When speaking about her standard of living as an expatriate in India (accompanying her husband) she said “but at that time it suited me. That’s it, we do things because they suit us, if not we wouldn’t do them. Although I say that, but did it suit me? At any rate, at that time I was incapable of saying no to anything.” Then I asked her what she meant by that. This question marked a turning point in the interview: Marlène began sorting out the table, took a pencil (it appeared that she was drawing but the position of the computer camera meant I could not be sure), and began a monologue that went on for twenty-three minutes, during which she revisited in turn each of the stages that she reconstituted a posteriori as having played a central role in her “awakening”: the death of her sister, her depression, her daughter being bullied at school, her discovery of psychology, her husband’s violence, etc.

Field notes, 09/13/2021 (“Consent” study)

Although Marlène was replying to a question that the researcher had asked, her story was addressed less to her interviewer and more to herself. Taking stock of the events, difficulties, and obstacles she experienced, her words seem first and foremost to be part of a process of self-reconstruction. This research configuration leads us to think that by reducing our presence in the consciousness of interview subjects, using remote methods promotes introspection.

This pattern appears even more markedly where interviewees undertook additional tasks that distracted their attention during the conversation. In the “Consent” study, Melvin explained to the interviewer that he was playing a video game during the interview, as “that lets [me] not get too stressed” and “this way [he spoke] without thinking.” In this way, Melvin pushed the interviewer to the back of his mind and could then relate his experiences with less of a feeling of being judged. The interview in question was conducted by video call, but the possibility of concentrating on simultaneous activities is even greater when interviews occur over the telephone, as they do not require the subject to remain still, facing the camera. Unlike interviews conducted face-to-face that require almost all of the interview subject’s attention, remote interviewees can respond to questions while doing something else (working, taking care of children, doing domestic chores, etc.). These contrasts between remote and face-to-face discourse thus correspond to differences in the “levels of depth of information” (Michelat 1975). In the same way as the principle of non-directivity in interviews allows less stereotyped speech to be obtained and facilitates access to the interviewee’s subjective point of view (Michelat 1975), the absence of visual interactions encourages the production of “deeper” discourse. Just as the interviewer retreats verbally from the discussion in an unstructured interview, they efface themselves visually in a remote interview.

Karine Roudaut and Benjamin Derbez (2022) also observed a propensity for research subjects to find it easier to disclose things about themselves in the absence of visual interaction, but questioned whether these conclusions could be generalized beyond the upper-middle-class women that made up their sample, hypothesizing that these women might be more socialized to produce a discourse about their personal experience. Our results show that the increased room for maneuver compared with the standard interview framework allows interviewees to subjectively escape from social judgments and thereby increases their capacity to act, even when they are in dominated positions in power relations (in the case of Melvin, in terms of class and sexuality). In other words, they facilitate the production of speech that is less constrained by the norms of what can be said, and make it possible to collect more intimate biographical stories from people with diverse social characteristics.

A reconfiguration of power relations in research situations

In comparing our research experiences, we are reminded that the research situation is riven with power relations but that remote communication partially reconstructs them. In practice, without erasing existing power relations, using technology opened up particularly useful margins of maneuver as we found ourselves, time after time, in situations of domination from the point of view of gender or age. These reconfigurations of power relations are not without consequences for the material collected.

Power relations that persist in remote researcher–participant relationships

Despite the changes wrought by remote communication, neither the telephone nor video calling completely subvert the power relationships that structure interactions. The social characteristics of the interviewers quickly became apparent through their voices or through information obtained in conversation. This meant that, across our three projects, the researcher–participant relationship continued to be marked by our social position (young and female) in relation to interviewees (often older and male).

In the “Fatherhood” study, for example, Dorian made particularly explicit the social characteristics he attributed to the researcher and how these influenced his way of presenting himself:

D: You won’t agree with me of course, because. . . I think that a woman isn’t. . . well er [ahhh]—I’m wrong I’m sure eh? But I think that a woman isn’t genetically built to suffer physically, there you go. [. . .]

I: And that’s funny, why do you think that I couldn’t agree with you on that then?

D: [stammering] With the fact that. . . No, that. . . That women are less suited to. . .? Erm, because I think that young people nowadays. . . Well, of course there are feminist battles. [. . .] Well, I don’t know exactly how old you are, but I can try to guess to within a few years. So. . . maybe from where you’re standing you say “but yes, a woman can use a chainsaw!” She can, yes! Of course she can. She can do physical tasks, and other tasks, and everything. [Intake of breath] But erm. . . For me, women, well, erm. . . they don’t have to!

(Dorian, property expert, thirty-three, video call)

Whatever the format of the interview, research participants can project a feminist viewpoint onto the researcher due to her gender, student status, and age, sometimes necessitating significant work to establish trust to encourage them to reveal positions or practices contrary to egalitarian norms.

As for the “Sexual Violence” study, the men interviewed had a tendency to bring home to the researcher her position in the power dynamic. Despite distance, the voice remains a vector of social position, as pointed out by Joël, aged sixty-two, when the researcher asked him why he agreed to be interviewed: “Because you have a young voice, and I like young women!” Age relations and gender relations are interlinked here and remind us of the extent to which remote communication does not erase power relations and the effects of these on the speech collected.

Staying away from the sexual script and avoiding the risks of in-person meetings

Our three studies do however show that the use of remote technology can lighten the load of protective work needed to break sexual scripts that can crop up in the interaction, as the absence of physical copresence distances the interview situation from a romantic date and reduces the risk of the interaction becoming sexualized. Isabelle Clair has detailed several mechanisms through which the interview situation “may seem to mime a lovers’ rendez-vous” (2016b, 35). During the interview negotiation phase, for example, the sociologist shows strong interest in the research subject and makes an effort to seem friendly. Moreover, interviews are usually carried out in an isolated and quiet place. In the case of our research, the dynamic is further reinforced by our own social characteristics, those of the research subjects, and the particular nature of our subject areas: speaking openly about sexuality can be interpreted as a sign of receptivity on the part of the researcher and as a form of invitation.

Such a framing of the interview situation harms the researcher–participant relationship for a number of reasons. First, it can prevent certain interviewees from participating. As an example, some female partners in the “Fatherhood” study initially refused to allow their partner to participate in the study but ended up accepting once they understood that the interview would be remote. Next, the risk of the latent “sexual script” (Gagnon and Simon, [1973] 2005) can in certain cases prevent a female researcher from following her interview guide and asking the questions necessary to her research. In the exploratory phase of the “Sexual Violence” study, for example, a research subject made repeated and insistent sexual propositions during a face-to-face meeting, disrupting the course of the interview. After several unsuccessful attempts at reframing, the researcher was then forced to cut the interaction short. The misinterpretation of the meeting harmed the collection of material.

By keeping sexual scripts at bay, remote options offer the possibility of asking questions that are more direct and of following up more insistently on the most elusive dimensions of conjugal life or sexuality, without the researcher worrying about allowing the interview to slip into a seduction scenario and/or putting themselves in danger. The “Consent” study involved one such example. As the aim was to grasp the precise steps of sexual partners approaching one another and the ways sexual activity is accessed, it was necessary to ask multiple follow-up questions to obtain a sufficiently precise and detailed description:

I: And how do you decide what you’re going to do during sex?

P: Er to be honest it’s like everything, you can’t say it like that, it’s gestures, to be honest you can’t check. At the start you’ll go slow, even for anal sex you see, you don’t suggest it but to start with you tease a little, you use your finger a bit, you see if she makes little noises, if she wants to. [. . .] [The last time], the girl wasn’t all that naughty, she had never done it before. But I licked a little just to see, you see, then, if she liked it, she didn’t like it. But the girl she went “haaa” you see, little noises like that, well then that’s ok, I saw it was in the bag. It’s not that you ask, you try, but at any rate you know. Have you had anal sex before?

I: No. . . So I don’t really see. . .

P: Oh well you know, we were in the doggy-style position, if she gets in position behind, well, with her butt in the air, you make yourself understood, you put your penis up near the top, you see that she understands a bit and then if she doesn’t say anything then go for it, that’s it. Although you can’t go for it like mad because there’s no point either. Otherwise it hurts her and that’s not the idea.

(Pietro, thirty-six, tobacconist, video call)

The interviewer thinks that it would have been more difficult to question Pietro so directly in a face-to-face encounter, as she would have been afraid of the interaction getting out of hand and sliding into a seduction script (in particular with regard to the questions asked by the interview subject, relating directly to the sociologist's sexuality). As a general rule, as speaking about sexual acts in such an explicit way is not a common social practice and is reminiscent of sexual discussions that take place primarily between sexual partners, the scientific goal of the interview risks being misconstrued by interviewees. The experience of one interviewee stroking his own crotch and trying to put his hand on the sociologist's thigh during a face-to-face meeting at the beginning of the "Consent" study is concrete evidence of this risk. As the remote format prevents any demonstrations and any physical contact with the person being interviewed (Arendell 1997), the sociologists censor themselves less and can collect richer data.

Beyond the risks associated with the sexualization of the interaction, there are also dangers relating to meeting with unknown people. During the "Sexual Violence" study, Cristian told the researcher, forty minutes into the interview, that he had been diagnosed with a psychiatric condition, but that he did not accept it and did not take his medication. Throughout the exchange, the research subject was particularly aggressive toward the researcher, showing signs of psychotic delirium. In such circumstances, the use of the telephone is protective, in this case meaning the researcher was not physically exposed to Cristian's aggression. Thus, in cases such as this where it might be dangerous to investigate subjects through face-to-face encounters, remote methods may have potential for researching while staying safe.

To conclude, our research experiences show that remote interviews should be considered a fully-fledged research method in studies that take a biographical approach, in particular when the topic under investigation is particularly intimate. This means our conclusions are in agreement with recent works that emphasize the utility of no longer considering remote interviewing to be a last resort (Milon 2022; Roudaut and Derbez 2022). Neither better nor worse than its in-person version, it has specific characteristics that determine the nature of material collected and the type of analyses that can be undertaken based on it. Therefore, when deciding between remote and in-person methodologies, researchers should reflect on the research question, the social mechanisms under investigation, and the most suitable empirical strategy. By shining a light on the epistemological issues that arise from the use of remote technologies, this research note offers a point of reference for researchers faced with these choices. It shows first that remote interviews allow fresh faces into the socio-demographic profiles of potential interviewees by opening up new arrangements. It then demonstrates that this method is particularly suitable where priority is given to discourse, in particular recorded speech (rather than observation), and where the primary goal is to access the subject's inner life. Finally, telephone or video call interviews are shown to be helpful where the asymmetries of power structuring research situations are identified as involving risks and/or liable to inhibit speech (either on the part of the interviewer or the interviewee), and therefore a risk of impoverishing the material collected.

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