

Research Ethics Seminar: Evaluating alternatives to in-depth face-to-face interviews
Sally Davis

Q&A Session Transcript

Additional comments from Sally Davis added after the Q&A session are at the end of this document.

SK: Well, thank you so much, Sally, for sharing with us about what you've had to think through changing from face to face methods to online methods. We're gonna move on to questions now. If we haven't met, I'm Sheri, I work in the Ethics Office. And we'll just start off with a question from inside the chat, so let me just pull it up...

You've addressed a little bit about the possibility of domestic violence occurring in your participants' families, and homes as well. And, as you know, during COVID-19 it's especially dangerous, because a lot of people in this area have said there might be an increase in domestic violence during this time. So in the question it says, with WhatsApp, there have been a few groups that have suggested using voice messaging instead of text because there is less data trail, and do you have any thoughts on this?

Q1. CB: Although you are looking at how women keep themselves safe in conflict zones, have you considered that these women may be experiencing violence in their own homes? This adds another layer of risk, and data collection on VAWG with victim/survivors during COVID-19 is dangerous. With WhatsApp, Devex and Data2x have suggested using voice messaging instead of text because there is less data trail. What are your thoughts?

- <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/04/issue-brief-violence-against-women-and-girls-data-collection-during-covid-19>
- <https://www.girleffect.org/>
- <https://ladysmithcollective.com/toolkit/>

SD: With WhatsApp I have - I think I'm kind of deterred by the idea of that sort of asynchronous nature, and not necessarily being able to see my participant and therefore being able to elicit a response straight away. And one of the things that often we don't take into account when we are submitting an ethics protocol - and you might find this too, Sheri, and Bruce will find it as well - researchers don't always think about the harms towards themselves. So I actually read in one of the studies, I think it was a study that was done on WhatsApp focus groups, where a researcher had talked about their experience of doing a focus group by WhatsApp and they made special note of the fact that it was actually emotionally exhausting. Because this focus group did go on for a long time, and the researcher had a lot of outstanding questions and so - they were actually using voice comments as well - and it was the way they had to deal with the lag, the researcher would have to ask the same question over and over again. Because we know, a lot of the time - how many times do we send an email and the person who responds doesn't necessarily just answer our question? This happens a lot in in the experience of researchers who've used WhatsApp focus groups, the question doesn't get answered, and it can be quite tiring. So yeah, I guess that's why I have ruled out WhatsApp, but yes, I'm also seeing that as an option.

SK: Thanks Sally. It looks like there's quite a few different issues that need to be considered. The data trail might be one side, but also as you've mentioned, making sure that the participants are safe - and often that's hard to keep track of if they haven't responded to the message. The person that's

asked the question has linked a few resources for us in the chat, so for those of you who are interested definitely go and have a look at those.

Another question from the chat is:

Q2. SB: Thanks Sally for your presentation. My question related to literacy. My participants would need a translator but would also have low literacy skills and poor internet. What would you suggest for these participants?

SD: What I found was the best way to manage that - I mean, my issue with it is still being able to include these people in the study. So as long as I can get them on to the platform that I need them to be - it might end up just being a phone call. Because if I have to think about that they're going to have to navigate a Zoom link, am I assuming a certain level of literacy? I'm not ruling out having a phone call with a participant, but - I think if I was to do the research in Australia, and have my interpreter able to help with that, it might be a little bit easier. At least I would know that they had the access to the technology or smartphone to make the phone call. But yeah, it's a difficult one, literacy: it definitely rules out WhatsApp; and a lot of the suggestions that appear on the Facebook page in regards to interviewing people in rural communities, a lot of the time they talk about writing to these people and providing them with pieces of paper and saying 'can you draw something?' So there always needs to be a sort of interlocutor there for them to be able to provide that kind of feedback. So yeah there are limitations. As I said, I don't have all the answers.

SK: A couple more questions from the chat:

Q3. P: Thanks so much Sally! I'm wondering what you think is the most important (or difficult) question the Ethics Committee asks when we use online platforms in lieu of F2F?

SD: I think probably, where you have to go through and evaluate the harms, given that we haven't been in this situation before - and prior to the pandemic, we would have found it a little bit hard to defend doing this kind of research online. So I think, as researchers, we have to approach the ethics protocol and look very honestly at the true extent of the harms. And I think that's where I arrived at this principle: that no matter what I used I was still going to have to consider very carefully where my participant was, and not get caught up in the potential of doing research online meaning that I can interview anyone absolutely anywhere. I don't know that that's true, and I think when you think about the potential harms you realize that you are still going to have to take some care in trying to do what you can to ensure that the participant's in a safe environment.

SK: Definitely since COVID's happened the pros and cons have been completely tipped upside down and shuffled and - it's just nothing like what we were working with before, and definitely no method is going to tick all the boxes. It's all about finding that right balance for your participants and your research project, I think.

SD: Yeah, I think we were having this conversation earlier, Sheri. It's about finding the balance, and making all those considerations, and not just sort of saying 'there's no risk, it's all good'. As long as we're thinking about it, I think that's one of the most important things.

SK: Yeah - and from the Ethics Office, we understand that it's really difficult. Like, you need to know your participants really well, you need to know the situation really well and - Sally, for you it's meant learning a whole bunch of computer science stuff which, you know, you probably didn't need at all before this happened!

SD: Don't tell people that - I don't know anything about computer science, I'm a CASS student!
[laughter] I'm gonna get like the - I'm worried I'm going to get data encryption questions!

SK: Not yet, because the next one is:

Q4. KW: What are the ethical issues of having a third party known to both the researcher and the participant who sets up a zoom meeting in a safe place? This would help me with participants who don't have internet access and have poor literacy. Can this third party be paid?

SD: I'm going to relate this to the reading I've done on the interpreter. So there's, I suppose, two ways to approach having an interpreter - who I would probably pay, because I need them to be of a certain certified standard. As far as the ethical issues go, most of it's about building the trust with the participants and making sure that the participant is avoiding any potential discomfort. Because there is actually a lot of research into how governments use interpreters and how the way in which they - in particular, people who are in dependent populations such as refugees - have had to use interpreters to access services like Centrelink. And what they've done as a consequence is, they have developed a mistrust of these interpreters. Because they've been poorly assigned, they possibly haven't known their dialect, and they haven't interpreted the question properly. So what as a consequence actually happens then - and this is where I could potentially have an ethics issue - is the participant then brings their own interpreter. And then I have a situation whereby I've got to say, do you either use my interpreter or you use the person that you've brought with you? Because if I allow them to use the person they've brought with them, this is going to possibly corrupt my data, because that person might not translate as adequately as the professional interpreter. So when you're talking about a third party, that's why I'm thinking the interpreter would do that. And that interpreter I would treat as being very much part of my process, and they wouldn't be just sitting there blank, they would be definitely building rapport with the participant. And that would mean filling the participant in on where they come from, indeed, are they Iraqi? And ensuring that that participant knew that interpreter well, and they are being reflexive and showing empathy - because that tends to be most effective in the interview scenario, in just alleviating discomfort. That's all it is, alleviating discomfort.

SK: Definitely a lot of different things to consider there, like the comfort of your participants, the quality of your data - also potential for social harm if your participant does end up bringing a friend and the friend is doing interpreting - just in case, you know, they end up sharing something that they probably wouldn't have shared before.

All righty, Bruce has sent through some resources in the chat there:

Q5. BS: See the recent paper by Nick Biddle et al on the impact of participating in an online survey about COVID-19:

- <https://csrcm.cass.anu.edu.au/research/publications/improved-wellbeing-or-distress-measuring-impacts-participation-covid-19-survey>

They found "...little self-reported distress, and weak evidence of improvements in wellbeing through survey participation. Certain population groups, such as those with mental health concerns and those living in financial insecurity did report greater levels of distress, and worsened wellbeing through completion of the survey."

Q6. GA: Currently running a survey on greenspace use and COVID 19 impacts. We used a reply paid mail out survey. Not much use for Sally's project, but we have found very useful and generates a good sample. Main limitation is expense of mail, and manually coding

SD: Reply paid mail - what's greenspace?

GA: I might just talk if that's ok - thanks so much for your talk, Sally, it was really, really useful, really helpful; it made me think about a lot of things I hadn't considered previously. Greenspace is parks areas, forested areas, natural spaces - generally any area that's dominated by vegetation.

SD: Oh, I'm thinking - I'm so caught up in the online platforms I'm thinking it's like an app! I do know what greenspace is, thank you.

GA: Yep, no, so we've run this project before COVID happened with the reply mail, and we got a really good sample. We ask people to do participatory maps, where they actually draw where they've visited, and I'm interested in exploring the social equity dimensions of that: which cultural groups and gender groups and that sort of thing are using greenspace. And we've now run this again during COVID-19, to actually examine what are the social equity impacts for this that have rolled on into COVID-19, and potentially maybe gotten better or maybe gotten worse? We think there's good reason to suggest there's lots of gender issues that are going to be happening around this, with particularly women more vulnerable to losing their work and things like that. Maybe some of the psychological impacts of that are mitigated by having local greenspace available, so – anyway, that's what that is, but the mail out survey is a really good tool to get that back. It's a little bit expensive, but yeah.

Q7. JM: How do qualitative researchers go about recruiting participants since COVID-19, considering the issues with contact Sally has raised... I was wondering how difficult it may become for outreach going forward.

SD: My recruiting probably wouldn't have necessarily been as impacted - it would be a little bit. I would maybe use an introductory email, whereas before I would have maybe visited some of the community centres in Fairfield. So it provides me with a little bit more scope in that I can recruit participants maybe from every capital city in Australia, and do it via email, reaching out to religious organizations across all of the states and territories instead of just being confined to Fairfield. But I think it's a shame that I won't be able to do a personal approach to an organization - but in saying that, the timing might work in my favour and we might have alleviated any issues with COVID-19 by the time I do this, which might be - I'd have to wait till after Ramadan next year to do this; I wouldn't be able to do this during Ramadan. But I would probably be maybe doing it this time next year, so it might be all right: I might be able to actually sit in the same room with them. But I designed this talk on the assumption that I won't.

SK: So Sally, for you, you've actually had to go from contact with maybe one religious organization to lots of organizations across Australia to do your recruitment?

SD: Yes.

Q8. AW: A paper by Kaski, Mursau and Maybanks (see the following link) looks at the use of telephone interviews as a technique. Sampling is an issue because people without access to phones can't be included.

- <https://www.dwu.ac.pg/en/index.php/faculty-pages/479-fp-pgrc/research-journal/699-volume-21-november-2014>

A related paper by Benson looks at phone interviews and representativeness:

- <https://www.ifpri.org/publication/can-mobile-phone-based-household-surveys-rural-papua-new-guinea-generate-information>

SK: Amanda, do you want to jump on and just explain or give a bit of a rundown for us on the articles that you've cited there?

AW: So I was saying that obviously sampling is an issue if - I mean, and Sally's already said this, but if she's going to want to interview people on Zoom, they have to have internet access; it's the same with phone interviews, the people have to have phone access and so on, so it becomes a sampling issue and therefore a research quality issue as well.

SK: Yeah, and also a justice issue, because if we're only getting people who are wealthy, have access to technology, then that's not fair -

SD: You'd have to redesign the research project and say you're going to investigate the insecurities of, say, middle to upper-class Iraqis. And it's not - that wasn't the question.

Some additional comments from Sally:

Q2. SB: Thanks Sally for your presentation. My question related to literacy. My participants would need a translator but would also have low literacy skills and poor internet. What would you suggest for these participants?

SD additional comment: *This is essentially about what to do to make the remote interview outreach / opportunity accessible to populations that may have low literacy rate. There's either no easy answer to this and it's going to be dependent on a range of other factors such as location, who the participants are and obviously a preview of the topic under investigation and the interview guide.... in other words, the whole rest of the ethics application.*

Q4. KW: What are the ethical issues of having a third party known to both the researcher and the participant who sets up a zoom meeting in a safe place? This would help me with participants who don't have internet access and have poor literacy. Can this third party be paid?

SD Additional Comment:

Regarding payment - Yes I'd pay the 'third party' but that employment arrangement is up to my college and funding.

As for the rest of the question - I actually can't answer it because there's again not enough info about the rest of the research design (my answer to the above). To answer it I'd need to know: What's the reason for the safe space? Is it a safe space in terms of participant general comfort and privacy? Or are we talking about a relative safe space in the context of an unsafe environment?

Applying this 'third party' consideration to my own research, I don't have anyone who can freely roam around a place like Iraq and find safe spaces. If I did have someone that fit that description, keeping them safe themselves is a whole other rabbit hole. I'd probably be thinking pretty seriously about why I am putting this person in this situation when I can get equivalent data from participants outside the country. So then, if this third party was hypothetically in Sydney and working to setting up a safe interview space - well that may as well be me, because we'd have to assume that for that to happen, social distancing restrictions were completely relaxed, usable venues like community centres were all open and functioning and a remote interview was no longer necessary.