Opening Windows Behind Closed Doors: Reflections on Working Qualitatively During a Pandemic

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The contribution of qualitative evidence in epidemic and pandemic research has been articulated in previous editorials of this journal (Teti et al., 2020) and attention given to the pivotal role of qualitative methods in identifying social responses to COVID-19 (Vindrola-Padros et al., 2020). In addition, we feel it is also timely to explore the concept of “team” during this period and what adaptations pandemic restrictions has brought to how teams organize themselves, interact and the benefits and challenges that this brings. In this editorial, we reflect on our experiences of being part of a team conducting qualitative research during a pandemic, which has affected every aspect of our lives. Something this significant creates an opportunity for new learning. We consider what we have learned during this time and what aspects we can use to inform and enrich us.

No picture is complete without looking at the losses as well as the gains, so we will also reflect on what we have had to surrender in our online world, during this time. This reflection will assist us in identifying what we believe needs to be recaptured when this pandemic is over and what we need to consign to the pandemic vaults of history. In true qualitative spirit we have themed our reflections: accessibility, intimacy, and networking.

Accessibility

Conducting qualitative research during a global pandemic has been challenging for the research community in that the more traditional qualitative methods may have been hindered by social distancing guidelines. These guidelines include, for example, restrictions in relation to conducting face-to-face interviews and limitations in relation to accessing research sites for participant observation (Lobe et al., 2020). As a result of these challenges, researchers have adapted their methods and explored the potential of online platforms to support and continue their qualitative endeavor (Dodds & Hess, 2020). In our experience, we have found that existing in a more online orientated world, has influenced not only how we interact with research participants but also how we have and can interact with each other as research teams.

Our reflections are grounded in our involvement in several qualitative studies over the early period of the COVID-19 pandemic, in particular a rapid Qualitative Evidence Synthesis (QES) published by Cochrane in April 2020 (Houghton et al., 2020). We have written previously about the processes we used and the methodological decisions we made when conducting this QES, providing insights to how we believe the review team (and wider) made it possible to complete and publish the review in a rapid timeframe (Biesty et al., 2020). In our experience, conducting research during COVID-19 meant that researchers, internationally, were willing and able to work together on COVID related projects within very tight frames. We suggest that there are lessons, in relation to the accessibility of the research community, that we have learned in 2020 that may be useful for qualitative teams beyond these pandemic times.

It is perhaps ironic that at a time when we were at home, isolated from our colleagues, sitting at laptops in rooms we had never intended as workspaces, we felt the support of the research community alongside us. We were able to reach out

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to international experts, where perhaps we would have been too hesitant to do so in the past. Was this influenced by the urgency of the research activity; the ease of arranging online work meetings; our strange social existence (how quickly we all seemed to normalize online gatherings with our extended family members); or our need to connect with others and be part of a collective response in some way to the pandemic that was spreading around us? Maybe it was a combination of all these reasons. Our experiences did show us that the virtual space allowed us access to topic specific and methodological experts, not only at speed, but in a meaningful way that contributed to the rigor of our research. Our online verbal interactions with international colleagues were frequent, but succinct. These conversations were supplemented with email. Parallel lines of communication existed in that we, as the core research team, had multiple daily meetings, discussions and peer review sessions. We deemed this double layer of interaction necessary to ensure that the exchange with the wider team was not overly burdensome. We recognized wins and successes both large and small as these increased our “collective efficacy” or belief that the team would succeed despite the challenges (Stajkovic et al., 2009). We consciously boosted team resilience minimizing the impact of potential stressors in the core research team by anticipating and preparing for them, supporting each other, and asking for input when needed from the wider team. We dealt with the challenges by responding, learning and adjusting as a team with open, honest and frequent online communication as our mainstay.

And so, to the future and to a time when we can meet again, host team meetings and invite international scholars to our universities and research centers. How will we choose to do our business; what elements of lockdown life will we hold on to? It is worth noting that we have learned (or perhaps been reminded) that planning and focus will overcome geography and time zones; that we now live in a world that accepts online interactions where people can be themselves and can discuss and think in virtual real-time a final polished presentation of one’s thoughts is not an expectation. And we have remembered that capacity building is key to the future of our community and qualitative researchers can use innovative platforms to access the support of generous experts. However, let us not forget the unplanned moments of “aha” over a cup of coffee, the space for conceptual thinking that happens during silence and breaks in conversation and let us ensure that we marry these interactions with the digital skills we have developed during COVID-19.

### Intimacy

Qualitative research is distinguished by the fact that it places the researcher at the center of the data-gathering phase, as the instrument by which information is collected and analyzed. The researcher’s identity and positionality are central to understanding their role throughout the research. Researcher positionality is influenced by the roles and relationships that exist between the researcher, research participant and the research team (Ravitch & Mittenfelner, 2020), and that has arguably been radically altered in recent times.

Playing out our lives in the forced restrictions that the global pandemic dictated, has led to a blurring of boundaries with our personal, researcher and academic identities. We have moved away from our usual daily routines of getting appropriately “suited and booted” to face our working day. Our usual home to work commute, time that arguably allowed the opportunity to transition from our personal lives to our work lives, has been removed. We now must fast forward that transition into the length of time it takes us to get from our bedroom or kitchen to our work area, and sometimes these are one and the same.

All of our interaction is accomplished remotely, with online contact, allowing an intrusion into our personal lives that we have hitherto never been exposed. We have a certain amount of choice in relation to this intrusion. Do we leave our cameras off or do we turn them on and apply an illusion, a camera generated image (CGI) background that can be anything we want it to be? But the payoff being is that our image also takes on a CGI aspect within this and we appear less than real. Or do we bare our souls and allow our colleagues a “warts and all” view of our reality? This can include unwarranted interruptions from children, animals, barking dogs and the other daily responsibilities such as home schooling, carer responsibilities and everyday family life. The provision of an insider view can be a bonding process or an uncomfortable intrusion into our intimate lives, or anywhere along that trajectory. Online meetings that may need to be conducted outside of our usual working hours because of a need to accommodate different time zones, or differing commitments of team members, can increase family pressures and strain relationships. Initially we thought that the online environment was a short-term solution, however the ongoing pandemic has dictated that these measures will be around for considerably longer than anticipated. We prepared for a sprint but now we need the stamina for a marathon.

As our relationship with our colleagues has changed in this pandemic, so too has that with our research participants. Underpinning all qualitative research is respect and humility for the time that participants are willing to give to tell their story. We practice active listening skills and aim to listen more and talk less. We can also use our body language to convey our interest and understand the research participants’ story, we have strategies to deal with situations when participants get upset as they recount their experiences. In an online environment our honed skills of communication and empathy are dulled, we are unable to fully determine the atmosphere in the room, or the personal energies being generated; we cannot use touch and both parties’ internet quality can radically impact the interaction.

As qualitative researchers, we are interested in shedding light on experiences, while offering visibility to inherent complexities of values and behaviors and the contextual circumstances that impact participants’ lives and stories (Webber-Ritchey et al., 2021). The current pandemic restrictions and enforced social distancing make all research endeavors more difficult; particularly qualitative research as its lifeblood is the human interaction between researcher and...
participants, and between research teams as they analyze data from these interactions. The pandemic has increased the need for researchers to be responsive to the situation and adopt strategies that can assist in addressing newly emerging research issues, and the importance of the “emergent design” and “researcher and design responsiveness” is greater than ever (Ravith & Mittenfelner, 2020). This pandemic has increased our need for adaptability and resilience, constantly having to reset and re-orient to changing restrictions. We are learning the true value of community and connectivity and the importance of family, friends and co-workers in both individual and collective senses.

Let us learn the lesson of gratitude for the people in our lives and the social interaction that is the lifeblood of all humanity and all qualitative research. As qualitative researchers we celebrate the rapport and bonds built with co-workers, team members and research participants through these shared tough times and beyond. We welcome the additional emergent research strategies, while holding firm to our fundamental beliefs in necessary face-to-face interaction.

**Networking**

Sharing our qualitative insights is critical if our work is to have an impact and to encourage positive change for our participants and those who share their stories. In essence, we need to talk about talking and this is best done through networking. Networking is an important activity in order to meet researchers with similar interests. It facilitates knowledge exchange, the opportunities to collaborate on research and scholarly work and most crucially develops professional friendships. As stated by Pulijak and Vare (2014), enhancing collaboration among researchers enables capacity building and opportunities to surpass the limitations of working within a single institution or with scarce resources. One ideal platform for networking is conference attendance and many of us have met and learned from our colleagues in this way. At such events, the formality of workshops and plenary sessions could be off set with more informal networking opportunities; from standing in a lunch queue, to sharing a table at a conference dinner. However, this could also pose problematic as conference attendance required funding for not only the fee, but also for travel and accommodation. This could limit international networking opportunities for many. In addition to funding, people needed to have the capacity to travel, and this was not always feasible for those with caring responsibilities or increasingly challenging workloads.

So, what has changed in our new virtual world? With increasing numbers of conferences and events taking place online, there are new opportunities for those who would have been previously unable to attend; to access new knowledge and meet new people from all over the world. Salomon and Feldman (2020) reflected on hosting a virtual conference during the COVID-19 pandemic and agreed that virtual conferences are more inclusive by reducing or removing financial, travel and time commitments. As an example, the International Institute for Qualitative Methods Thinking Qualitatively Conference to be held in July 2021, will now be held virtually, with seven regions that span the globe. We, like many others, will value this opportunity to meet and engage with so many talented experts in qualitative and mixed methods research in a way that may not have been possible for us before.

There are some downsides to virtual conferencing as highlighted by Salomon and Feldman (2020). One challenge is trying to engage with the event while needing to attend to other family members at home. The other is the reduced opportunity to “mingle” and socialize. They propose one solution may be to set up virtual meeting areas or chat rooms. In saying that, we still have hope for the future that the value of meeting someone, in person, over coffee or lunch, will not be forgotten and that those opportunities may once again present themselves.

This has been a time of tribulation. We mourn those who have died, we comfort those who have said goodbye to loved ones and applaud those who have worked so tirelessly to save the people in their care. We are not bemoaning the fact we have been working from home. It is such a small sacrifice if it keeps people safe. What we have aimed to do in this piece is reflect on some of the experiences we have had, on some of the benefits and well as hope for the return of some of the soulful connections that we, as qualitative researchers, hold as precious. We have spoken of opening windows behind closed doors; of accessing a world we could not have previously reached. We discussed the good and the bad of being fast tracked into a virtual world. We thought about accessibility, intimacy and networking in and from our homes; how we have looked to, and learned from, a wider community, and yet somehow feel more isolated than ever before.

Qualitative researchers have been likened to bricoleurs (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), working to weave a new object from pieces of fragments of other objects, while dealing with the unpredictable, in a complex process of creation. The product of the work is a creative bricolage capturing a moment in time, and intimate weaving of the past and the present never more evident than in our current challenges and uncertainties. By having a broad perspective and a long view, we can be assured that the learning we take from this cataclysmic period, married to our existing qualitative research strengths can enrich the tapestry we create as we blend the old nuggets with the newer insights, born of a time of necessary innovation and creativity. As Warren Buffett said “Someone is sitting in the shade today because someone else planted a tree a long time ago.”

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