The Sociological Confessional: A Reflexive Process in the Transformation From Face-To-Face to Online Interview

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Abstract
This aim of the article is to reflect on a new quality in the researcher-participant relationship caused by the transformation from a face-to-face to an online interview (on the Zoom platform during two first waves of the COVID-19 pandemic). It reports methodological learnings from autoethnography. The concept of an interaction order (Goffman) provides a theoretical lens through which the researcher-participant encounter is being analysed. The study is based on the reflections referring to 31 online in-depth interviews with women (mothers in an ‘empty nest’) conducted by a team of five female researchers. Online research was depicted in literature as an option of a second choice for conducting qualitative studies before 2020 and an online methodology as one in need to be tested. In order to provide the context of our methodological learnings, we will present an overview of our study. Our study consisted of 31 online in-depth interviews with women (mothers in an ‘empty nest’) and was conducted by a team of five female researchers. After having reflected on our experience from the field, called ‘the sociological confessional’, we claim that online interviews have potential to be the option of the first choice to conduct in-depth interviews. We do not see the lack of immediate presence in remote interviews as a setback. On the contrary, we believe that thanks to introducing practices of care about the participant, the revised methodology not only meets the criteria of the qualitative IDI standards, but diminishes emotion work (Hochschild, 1983) on the part of the researcher as well. We find our ‘report from the field’ unique: (1) our study was not planned to be conducted online and (2) it has succeeded in gathering equivalent data during the first stage of the pandemic.

Keywords
autoethnography, emancipatory research, methods in qualitative inquiry, micro-ethnography, virtual environments, qualitative evaluation

Introduction
This aim of the article is to reflect on a new quality in the researcher-participant relationship caused by the transformation from a face-to-face to an online interview (on the Zoom platform during two first waves of the COVID-19 pandemic) and to present an overview of methodological insights from autoethnography. We present an interactional order (goffmanian theoretical frame) of the researcher-participant encounter as seen from the interviewer’s perspective. It answers the question what is going on in the online interview situation without the essential co-presence of a face-to-face encounter. The answer to the question is crucial because it challenges the view of knowledge production as independent and objective (Berger, 2015) and an analytical attention to the researcher’s experience is necessary to gather high-quality data (Hoffmann, 2007). The new quality we do observe in the researcher-participant relationship means specific practices of care...
towards the interviewee and a different form of the presentation of self on the part of both the researcher and the participant.

Our methodological insights are built in the context of a research project that at the onset was not supposed to use online interviews. However, we were forced to implement the online data collection in the primary project ‘Till death do us part... Everyday life practices of 50-64 years old couples with at least 20 years of common life experience’ which led us, the female researchers, to undertake an autoethnographic approach to our experiences (the substudy, which became a starting point and a frame to the article) and to share insights from a new online methodology of running in-depth interview. To our knowledge, this is a first such attempt in the literature. Before 2020, online research was depicted in the literature as an option of a second choice for conducting qualitative studies and a methodology in need to be further developed and tested (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; James & Busher, 2016; Johnson et al., 2021; Jowett et al., 2011; Salmons, 2012). Our conclusions shed lights on online interviewing and present it as potentially first choice of researchers who are setting off to conduct in-depth interviews with individuals.

The autoethnographic account of the study, from the moment of the first mediated contact as part of the recruitment process, to thanking and saying goodbye to the participant when concluding the interview, shows a new quality of conversation, its arrangement and on-line communication forced by the realities of life during the COVID-19 pandemic and its restrictions. In this order, the conversation takes place in two different physical locations (where the interviewer and the interviewee are, respectively, present), which means that the roles of the host and the guest of such a meeting are reversed. We propose also to transpose practices of care used in the new paradigm of family studies (Finch, 2007; Gilligan, 2008; Gabb & Fink, 2018; Sikorska, 2019) to relations associated with the interview situation.

We claim that conducting online interviews and on-line data collection (1), sharing knowledge and good practices (2) and understanding the process of online study (3) enhance the quality of the remote method and may make it the first and not the second-best choice.

Challenges for Online Interviewing

The fact that interviews are now (the COVID-19 pandemic) to be held online involves considerable challenges – from the risk of digital or technological exclusion of potential participants (O’Connor et al., 2008), to the need to obtain their consent to be recorded as ‘talking heads’ (Licoppe & Morel, 2012; Krouwel et al., 2019) in video format. On the other hand, there are some practical advantages of this form of meeting – it means less of a time investment for both parties involved (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014: 613) and it gives more control over self-presentation (Rettie, 2009: 433–434) and over personal space (blurred, virtual or non-virtual background of the camera view – as in zoom.us 2020) which is presented.

Online Interviewing: Background, Challenges and Profits

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Keeping all the pros and cons in mind, we have introduced a number of practices improving the setting of the meeting, increasing the comfort of the participant sharing her story and making her a co-author, a person co-responsible for the course and the result of the interview. We believe that such practices, at the level of both the setting and the interview itself, can be characterized as practices of care and may become useful for introducing new standards of conducting not only online but also face-to-face interviews.

Conducting research during which the interaction between a researcher and a participant occurs through on-line communications has been getting more and more attention for the past 20 years (Salmons, 2012). Previous publications on Internet-mediated research (IMR) (including the use of the Zoom platform, Lobe et al., 2020) have been focused on such aspects as pros and cons of particular tools (Denissen et al., 2010; Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Horrell, 2014; James & Busher, 2016; Archibald et al., 2019), efficiency, cost-effectiveness and flexibility (Horrell et al., 2014), new opportunities, for example, international respondents (Lo Iacono et al., 2016), better replication and improvement of data collection (Cater, 2011; Braun et al., 2017), flexibility in terms of the time and location of data collection (Cater, 2011; Johnson et al., 2021); they have also described IMR as a highly researcher form of interaction (Joinson, 2005). Although we were aware of both the advantages and disadvantages of online interviewing and additional technology tools and their influence on the research (Nordstrom, 2018; Rutakumwa et al., 2020), this was not the reason why we switched from face-to-face encounters to Zoom meetings. The reason behind our decision was the restrictions caused by COVID-19 pandemic, strongly influencing the fieldwork (Howlett, 2021).

Context of Our Methodological Insights

We write from the perspective of ‘qualitative researchers [who] face unique opportunities and challenges’ (Lobe et al., 2020: 1). Indeed, we have had the opportunity to face the
challenge of a quick implementation of ‘socially distant data collection’ (Lobe et al., 2020: 6). We have also experienced benefits and challenges to reflexivity (Berger, 2015), demonstration of researcher’s ‘listening’ (Jowett et al., 2011) and potential of online fieldwork (Howlett 2021) and from our experience, we see the pandemic not only as a medical problem but also a social event that changes social order (Teti et al., 2020; Leach et al., 2020) and researcher’s perspective (insider and outsider status in interaction – see Jowett et al., 2011) not just data collection procedures.

Although there is an extensive literature on Internet-based data collection (James & Busher, 2016; Fielding et al., 2016; Pang et al., 2018; Lobe et al., 2020), we find our ‘report from the field’ unique for two reasons: (1) our study was not planned to be conducted online, (2) it has succeeded in gathering equivalent data during the first stage of the pandemic. We had to take into consideration possible costs and methodological differences between two different realities of data collection. Since the ‘golden standard’ of qualitative research is based also on body talk, co-presence and communication efficiency (Tracy, 2010; Janghorban et al., 2014; Weller, 2015; Kreouwel et al., 2019), we selected a technique that most closely resembles face-to-face meetings – Zoom platform interviews on camera, which we decided to record (both audio and video) (Lobe et al., 2020; Archibald et al., 2019). The autoethnography of the study might be of use to understand how technologies challenge the basic assumptions of the traditional face-to-face interview (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). Including our own perspective as five female interviewers we answer the call of Sarah J. Tracy: ‘In demonstrating methodological excellence, we need to take care of ourselves in the process of taking care of others. The most successful researchers are willingly self-critical, viewing their own actions through the eyes of others while also maintaining resilience and energy through acute sensitivity to their own well-being’ (Tracy, 2010: 849).

The Interaction Order in the Context Online Interviewing

The term interaction order was coined by Erving Goffman (see Manning, 2011). The interaction order is the kind of regulation ‘that governs a person’s handling of himself and others during, and by virtue of, his immediate physical presence among them; what is called face-to-face or immediate interaction [is] involved’ (Goffman, 1966: 8). As such, then, the interaction order is essentially founded on co-presence (Goffman, 1967), which occurs when the participants of direct interaction are close enough to be able to observe their partner(s) and feel that they are being observed by them.

The main rule of interaction order essentially boils down to the conviction that an interactant presents himself or herself to others and tries to guide and control the impression that others form of them (Goffman, 1956: 8–9). Impression management engages various senses. The actors not only listen but also watch closely – the sense of sight enables them to recognize facial expressions, to notice gestures and attempts to control them. How the body gets involved in the interaction process is as important as verbal statements. Although the participants can stop talking, communication between them continues as co-presence is imbued with embodied messages. In-depth interview in the traditional face-to-face formula (conducted, e.g. in the participant’s home) is an example of this type of encounter: the communication process requires constant monitoring of the impression that the actor makes on the interaction partner.

Some researchers claim that the concept of co-presence can be adapted for studying mediated encounters (see Rettie, 2009). Although the participants are not physically co-present, the awareness of mutual monitoring makes them submit to the rules of the interaction order. There is a form of interaction order in the multimodal pattern of interaction that is characteristic of video mediated communication (Licoppe & Morel, 2012).

In the case of internet mediated communication, the control of her or his own image by the researcher has become an important element. Thanks to the technique, a researcher can observe herself or himself as an actor involved in the exchange with the respondent. The multimodality of this interaction therefore might lead to a deep reflection on his or her own attitude, image, the techniques used and the emotional work done by the researcher.

Referring to Goffman’s theory, Arlie Hochschild suggests that people spend a good deal of an effort on acting which involves emotion management (Hochschild, 1979: 557–558). Hochschild (1983) distinguishes surface acting from deep acting. The first one occurs when people try to display socially accepted feelings, the second one requires even more effort as it aims to change feelings that actors actually feel. Surface and deep acting constitute emotion work.

The Context of Our Study

The project entitled ‘Till death do us part ... ’ is a 36-month longitudinal qualitative study of individuals and couples whose adult children have left home. At the time of recruitment, a total of over 200 participants aged between 45 and 64 had a varying number of dependent children who had left or were about to leave their households.

Methodological observations on conducting online video interviews are based on the group experience revealed in five autoethnographies after having conducted 31 individual in-depth interviews. Respondents are women from couples with over 20 of marital experience in which male partner refused to take part in the study (17 women) and women who have experienced divorce or separation; some of them are in a new relationship (14 women). They were video-interviewed on the Zoom platform during the COVID-19 pandemic. Online interviews on the Zoom platform were conducted in the period April–October 2020.
The Authors of the article are at the same time 5 female researchers who conducted between 4 and 8 interviews each (31 in total).

The methodology of our analytic work – autoethnography – consisted of four steps:

1. Shortly after each interview (the same day), we drafted a study note template.
2. We went over the video material we had recorded and analysed it individually to prepare the second version of study notes (see Annex 1).
3. We analysed all study notes.
4. During 10 group meetings we formed conclusions about the interviewer perspective.

After our analytical work, we decided to present the conclusions about the new quality of interviewer’s work according to the changes in the interaction order of the interview, using Erving Goffman’s concept as a theoretical lens.

Respondents were given a gift voucher to the value of PLN 150 (about 30 euros) for an interview which took between 60 and 90 minutes.

There were standard ethical rules (Mizielińska et al., 2018) used in sociology introduced as the project was accepted by ethical commission – we have also added additional points as described in 1.3 Transparency part of the article (c.f. Deakin & Wakefield, 2014).

Our approach needs to be seen in the context of the anthropological discourse on the researcher as a guest in the participant’s home or in their space. One issue considered in contemporary qualitative research drawing on ethnographic and anthropological studies is the ethical side of this relationship (Horolets, 2016; Mizielińska et al., 2018; Nowicka, 2016; Rancew-Sikora & Cymbrowski, 2016). Diagnosing contemporary changes in the social role of the field researcher and in the interview situation, Ewa Nowicka observes as follows: ‘The distance between the two parties becomes considerably reduced. The respondent is becoming more of a social, political, intellectual and, last but not least, emotional partner. This does not change the fact that the researcher, using information, time, and, inevitably, the hospitality of the respondents, without which the study would often not be possible at all, feels obliged to be loyal’ (Nowicka, 2016: 49).

The autoethnographic perspective of a visit to the participant’s home in the context of online interview on the one hand, and the principle of empowerment of the participant, provide a good summary of a change which occurred under the circumstances of this new/reversed interaction order.

The Sociological Confessional: Steps of a Reflexive Process in Online Interviewing

We use the metaphor of ‘the sociological confessional’ to depict the process of auto-reflection over the changes of methodology caused by the COVID-19 restrictions. The situation forced us to act in an experimental way, which we approached in a reflexive way. Following Goffman’s theory and his theatrical metaphor, we use the attendant conceptual framework to discuss our subjective experiences of qualitative online research. It needs to be stressed though, that the type of interaction which we describe takes place without co-presence, and thus does not meet the basic condition set by Goffman. It is the lack of co-presence that endows this interaction with a new character, sets a different order to it and subsequently influences emotion work.

In our case, the structure of the online research process did not differ significantly from that which we had followed in face-to-face interviews, and included: (1) initiating the relationship with the participant, making arrangements about the interview on the phone or using electronic means of communication; (2) conducting a one-to-one interview using a scenario and emotion maps; (3) concluding the research process and closing the relationship with the participant by email and post (remuneration for participation in the study). Consequently, we know that the changes that occurred in the research process were related to the switch from face-to-face to online reality. The COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown restrictions meant that it was conducted remotely from start to finish – technological devices (smartphones and computers, microphones and cameras) played an important role in the researcher-participant relationship and had an impact on the nature and quality of the meeting. The use of these devices in our encounters transformed the interaction order as we knew it.

(1) Making arrangements for the interview as constructing engagement and providing a sense of security

Arrangements include: (1) invitation – information about how to draft emotion maps and about the Zoom meeting, explaining the use of camera, establishing and maintaining the relationship (care about making the interviewee feel safe and about her comfort, fear of losing the participant, emotion work, technology from the point of view of the researcher and the participant); (2) dealing with technology – technical support, link to the meeting, technological requirements, ensuring proper conditions for conducting the interview on the part of the researcher – care about ethical issues; (3) transparency – informing the participant about each next step so that she does not feel taken by surprise (ensuring comfort); the need to take care of the participants (on the part of the researchers); (4) designing the virtual interview space – video recording, securing data, arranging a private space to talk, taking care of the image (choice of outfit, camera position, interview space, background view, etc.); impression management.

Invitation

Building the relationship between the researcher and participant started from the first contact, during which the
researchers were often introduced to the family situation of the participants. The interactions that took place between them before the interview played an important role: they shortened the distance between them and made them get to know each other a little, which meant that they found it easier to talk later on. Moreover, it gave a chance to ‘dive into’ the interview, with the personalized beginning of the scenario where, by means of an invitation the researchers could refer straight to information that appeared during the first telephone or email contact (e.g. regarding the family situation, the relationship within the couple or the references to the home space). However, mostly the personalization of interview’s questions was possible by given homework task the day before the interview, that is, emotion maps. The analysis of the homework tasks helped interviewers to refer directly to the material and emotional changes that took place within the transformation from full nest to empty nest in each case. It also confirmed the intimate boundaries that should be kept during the interview as an interviewee pointed out practices and emotions important for her to be discussed.

**Dealing with Technology**

Within the arrangements a sense of security was assured, as well as the assistance in case of any problems with technology offered. It was provided either during the meeting by researchers sharing their screen and showing how to use the functions that were problematic, or the instructions were given by an assistant on the phone before the interview.

**Transparency**

Interviews often concluded with a conversation about the next stages of the study, sometimes mentioning articles on related issues and the website of the project. All participants were informed that they would be contacted by email to provide their mailing address where the gift vouchers should be sent. The researchers considered this procedure to be safer and more comfortable for the participants (they could provide their address by email or on the phone).

At the beginning of each interview, all researchers carefully explained the rules of confidentiality, the methods of data recording and processing, and the code of ethics applicable to sociologists. They were all aware that this introduction required special attention and more time than in the case of a face-to-face meeting. In addition to technological and security issues, during the interview the researchers often reminded the participant that they can stop talking about a topic which they find emotionally difficult and they may refuse to give answers.

**Designing the Virtual Interview Space**

When arranging the meeting, the researchers asked the participants to take care of the space around them. Stimulating their reflection on the need to properly prepare their home space aimed to minimise the risk that other people might appear on camera or interfere in the conversation. On the other hand, it was also important that the researcher should prepare her own space to make the respondent feel at ease:

I asked the interviewee to take care of her space before we had met online. But I have also organized my own space properly, so that others would not disturb me. Interviewee could not feel uncomfortable with other people around, listening to the conversation. (Researcher note)

When preparing for online interviews, we faced a decision about the choice of the setting. There is the “setting”, involving furniture, decor, physical lay-out and other background items which supply the scenery and stage props for the spate of human action played out before, within, or upon it (Goffman, 1956: 13).

We were aware of the choice between the university and the home perspectives – the choice of (virtual) background played an important role in what Goffman calls impression management. Setting the virtual background with the university logo or an office or library space favoured the image of speaking from the position of a scientist. On the other hand, an ordinary view of the flat (with washing, part of the kitchen, a bookshelf, or just living space in sight) was conducive to the home perspective:

Being the host of the online meeting meant that instead of several hours of cleaning all I needed was the right setting of my screen. I didn’t want to present myself in front of my books (as the background of the screen) or other objects that suggested a scientific situation. My interviews were accompanied with a view of my half-kitchen and a part of my hallway. I also did not prepare my appearance in any particular way. I chose to be casual; as a host, I greeted my guests in a sweatshirt and bundled hair. This choice was obvious to me, since, after all, this was to be a conversation about a someone’s private world. I also wanted to be recognized in my own authenticity. (Researcher note)

Here, we can notice a very important difference in relation to the interaction order of a face-to-face encounter. On-site the setting is stable, whereas in Zoom it is possible to change the background and thus manage the setting even during the meeting. The researcher can therefore propose a formula which will increase the sense of comfort of the respondent; he or she can also change the background to switch from formal to informal setting and vice versa:

On the other hand – however, in terms of the lack of immersion in the natural environment of the interviewees – they often with great precision chose the place where they felt most comfortable, where they wanted to share their story (and it provided: relaxation, peace, ‘their place’, her place). (Researcher note)

**Interview: Time and Space of the Meeting**

The interviews we held online turned out to be more focused and shorter than those we had conducted face-to-face. The
ensuring conducive environment and under lockdown. It was no longer just about an atmosphere conducive to intimate narratives in the Zoom environment and under lockdown. It was no longer just about ensuring confidentiality, but about creating the ‘reality of the screen’ in which it is ‘safe to make confessions’. In the online mode of qualitative study, the presentation of self (an important element of the interaction order in face-to-face interviews) becomes a dynamic tool which, used consciously, is vital for making performances convincingly real (see Goffman, 1967). The researcher acts as a guide to the technicalities of Zoom, she is the person who ensures the comfort of intimacy during the conversation by making certain that it is undisturbed by other members of her household, she presents herself as an attentive and open person, and as someone aware of the position she is in thanks to her knowledge and experience.

Within the interview phase few crucial issues are discussed: (1) initial greetings and starting the conversation – taking care of the front (choice of outfit and place); choice of formal or informal language; (2) emotion maps – being in the here and now and in the past at the same time; mediating role in the interaction order, interviews happen through maps, maps regulate the order, map as a materialised paraphrase (including the impact on the partnership, the possibility of personalising the scenario); (3) relationship management – situations of embarrassment, avoidance and distance and the emotion work.

Initial Greetings and Starting the Conversation

The opening position gives the right to start interaction (see Goffman, 1967). While in our face-to-face interviews this was the position of the participant, the host of the household, in the online interview it is the researcher who starts interaction (sends the link to the meeting). She is responsible for creating an atmosphere of intimacy, in which the respondent feels comfortable and confident.

Stepping into the role of a host was done autonomously, it allowed the interview to start smoothly, while reducing the rituals involved. It also gave a different dynamic, allowing us to communicate more freely about how many issues we had ahead us. In fact, such an interview turned out to be easier to control than those implemented before the pandemic. (Researcher note)

In our research experience, what happened in the initial stage was sharing technological experience, setting the screen and the speaker, eliminating interference, making coffee, all of which gave time to get used to the interview situation and the latency of data transmission (sound and image). Sharing and constructing the meeting space enabled the researcher to switch to the listener mode. The starting phase also included obtaining the respondent’s consent to participate in the study and to being recorded. This moment provided transition to the interview proper, where the researcher is entitled to ask questions. In this constructed space, we used a strategy of sharing who we are, sharing experiences and knowledge about parenting so that the respondents would not feel limited or overwhelmed by the ‘scientific’ nature of the meeting.

One factor important in online meetings is the synchronisation of the pace of speech. Due to technological issues (data transmission), many interviews in our study were disrupted: the respondent and the researcher interrupted each other, backtracked on what they said and asked for clarification. The technical dimension of online interview has an impact on the quality of listening and on attendant practices of care (Brown & Gilligan, 1993: 27). Although listening and its quality are an important element of any interview, they are a particular challenge for the researcher in the online interview situation (Woodcock, 2016). The same is the case with regard to maintaining eye contact, which, according to Goffman, ‘opens one up for face engagement’ (Goffman, 1966: 95). In the online interview situation, eye contact is performative in nature: the experience of ‘face’ is mediated by the frame of the camera, which depends on its technical capacity (image quality) and positioning.

Due to the difficult real eye contact (Gemell et al., 2000; Hietanen et al., 2020), the respondents talked into space, trying to focus on the screen or/and on the camera. Although this experience on the part of the researcher was the case especially at the beginning of the interview and wore off later on, it initially made the meeting resemble a monologue rather than an interview based on dialogue. This experience intensified when it was visible that the respondent was staring into space beyond the screen. The ‘monologue’ nature of narrative passages influenced the level of ‘involvement’ of the researcher: she had to do body work to assure the respondent of her engagement, to control the situation of engaged listening. In our study, this involved moving the face closer to the camera, smiling at the screen, using phrases indicating active listening, referring statements to the emotion map tool, or voice modulation conducive to phatic communication. The fact that the researcher could see her own image in a screen window meant that she was able to control ‘acting’ with her face and voice, to adjust to the respondent or create her own image.

In a traditional face-to-face interview, the situation involves a sense of co-presence, and control of one’s own facial expressions is ‘natural’. On the other hand, in online interviews the lack of co-presence becomes a considerable challenge: body control in general, and face control in particular, are subject to constant reflection (we keep watching our own face
on the screen or sneak a glance at it every now and then). This is where emotion maps can come useful as what Goffman calls ‘involvement shields’.

Talking ‘through the screen’ is a situation that resembles looking into a one-way mirror – you can see your own image and at the same time the image of a person behind it/on the screen. On the one hand, conducting an interview with another person with the mirror image of your own face in front of you disrupts the ‘looking-glass self’ mechanism, which is a basic mechanism of interaction (see Cooley, 1964). On the other hand, this gives extraordinary opportunities for conscious impression management, where facial expressions, grimaces, glances, moving your head closer to or farther away from the screen are subject to control and can become tools for building the context for the ongoing research project. Thanks to Zoom technology, the researcher’s body language becomes a research tool which we can consciously adapt in our work, even though the view is generally limited to the upper torso and face. Of course, this reduced the satisfaction of making a good impression (the participant’s and/or the researcher’s sense of pride). On the other hand, however, this also eliminated negative feelings (e.g. shame) which may result from the perceived assessment of one’s own behaviour by significant others. Cooley’s ‘looking glass’ becomes a one-way mirror – we no longer read the impression we make only in the participant’s eyes: we supplement it with our own assessment, our own reflection on what the camera says about us and how this resonates in the participant’s look and gestures. We have an opportunity to adapt and control the influence of our facial expressions on the interviewee, and, thanks to recordings of interviews, we can improve our research tool kit: we can focus on something that so far remained invisible to us.

Screen management, in turn, enables us to control what we see, which is a significant difference of the online interview. The fact that the interview is mediated by the computer screen (sometimes, in the case of the participants, the smartphone or tablet screen) favours the emergence of new strategies of focussing the topic of conversation and strategies of story management. The interviewer and the interviewee can hide their face or the face of the partner from view, enlarge and minimise view (gallery view and speaker view), divert attention from ‘talking heads’ and turn it towards a conversation about the house/flat and the emotion map, which can be shown in full screen view.

The reality of the screen involves different principles of impression management. When we talk on the Zoom platform, we can largely forget about impression management because we do not have sufficient indications to do much about it. We do not focus on non-verbal messages, etc. because we simply do not have them: we cannot see that someone’s hand is shaking or that someone is swinging his or her leg, there are no smells, and so on. This situation relieves us from playing other social roles, which we do in face-to-face interviews, and is conducive to focussing on the role of the researcher. Impression management in scientific terms is no longer dominant: we do not have to act as a person representing ‘something more’: it is my home, my space. This makes it possible to focus on a meeting between the listener and storyteller, and not one between the world of science and the world beyond it. As researchers, we can choose an impression of ourselves (and check it on the screen all the time) which is the most comfortable and effective when it comes to creating a space conducive to a good conversation. Consequently, we also consider such important practices of care to be more constructive in the space of online interview.

### Relationship management

During an online interview, the sensual contact is reduced to the senses of sight and hearing. The space and the sense of smell are suspended. This new ‘here and now’ resembles a ‘confessional’. It cleanses my conversation from the effect of space and social place. It personalizes the narrative more, because the person on the other side of the screen shows herself to me from the place where she can be herself at this very moment (from an empty bedroom – which is an oasis and an escape from her grandson, or from a well-kept living room, which is a representation of her personality. (Researcher note)

The situation of a meeting without ‘co-presence’ involves a number of barriers and risks which differ in terms of their intensity or likelihood from those characterising an interview conducted in a shared space. On the one hand, we had a feeling that the online interview situation was more formal: it is difficult to be late for an online interview, for instance, and more time is spent on explaining the principles of anonymisation (Baez, 2002; Saunders et al., 2015), etc. On the other hand, we noticed the need to shorten the distance. There was often a sense of embarrassment, which, as Goffman (1956) explains, is contagious: a person becomes embarrassed because his or her interaction partner is embarrassed, and the partner, in turn, may be embarrassed because his or her partner is embarrassed by his or her embarrassment. Goffman argues that embarrassment can be dealt with by applying (1) the corrective process: the actors engage in corrective practices when they lose face; (2) the avoidance process: often the best way to save face is to apply avoidance practices at the level of non-verbal gestures. In our case, when we employed these two types of practices (e.g. avoiding looking into the camera, avoiding looking at the screen), we additionally applied a number of practices of care about the respondent and about her story.

Embarrassment sometimes occurred at the beginning of the interview, when we asked for permission to record our meeting. This may indicate that the opening is a critical phase in which the researcher-respondent relationship is established. Embarrassment when formulating this request (laughter, slips of the tongue) may indicate that the interview situation has not been defined well enough. The issue concerns not so much
explaining the aim of the study, but most of all the lack of a ritual which would enable the researcher and the respondent to enter the role of partners cooperating with a view to obtaining the most valuable data possible. In the on-site interview situation, entering the roles in the framework of ‘partnership cooperation’ is an outcome of the ritual of welcome, where mutual trust is built ‘naturally’ – the researcher entering the respondent’s territory recognises ‘conventional situational closure’. Communicating respect to this closure requires particular skills. The researcher makes it clear that he or she knows where he or she is not allowed to enter and thus, on a symbolic level, assures the respondent of his or her discretion and attachment to the rules of confidentiality. However, Zoom interviews do not make it possible to rely on this element of the interaction order, which means that the researcher should be aware of the need to build trust in other ways, and, most of all, do emotion work (Hochschild, 1979) in order to avoid embarrassment at this point. Embarrassment on the part of the researcher is always uncomfortable for the respondent.

However, the emotions felt online were less intense. In comparison with in person interviews conducted by female researchers, on-line relationships were less demanding as far as emotion work on the part of the researcher was concerned. All of us felt less obliged to display, suppress or evoke certain emotions.

Complimenting the hosts, engaging in space and hospitality arrangement (e.g. helping to make coffee), switching to first-name terms during the conversation (the blurring of boundaries between the professional and private relationship occurred much more frequently in the face-to-face interview situation) showing great enthusiasm (immediate displays of empathy while the interviewee is talking). These and a number of other practices may often be perceived as oppressive both to the researcher and the participant: they are not only part of social exchange systems (e.g. how best to show cordiality, how to repay kindness without going to excess), but also impose on the actors the burden of (un)balanced emotion management.

The online meeting reduces the emotional and time expense, and eliminates embarrassing situations or awkwardness from face-to-face interview, which is very often held at the intersection of hospitality, social gathering and therapy. I think the neurotic researcher will appreciate this technique, especially while dealing with the topics that may be challenging and difficult. (Researcher note)

Concluding and the Interview Overview

The last phase of an interview orbits around (1) work on commitment: maintaining the relationship after the meeting, giving thanks, post-factum reflections, care about making the respondent feel safe and about her comfort, emotional work, technology, care about the respondent (COVID – online meeting, the researcher as the host).

Working on Commitment

The fact that building the relationship between the researcher and the participant took place in the online environment had some influence on its nature. The situation involved maintaining or extending it also after the meeting. The participants received personalised thank you letters for sharing their experiences and stories. They also had the opportunity to share their follow-up reflections later on.

I ensured safety with email contact after the meeting, showing that I remembered not to leave the respondent ‘alone’ and creating opportunities for her to contact me again if she needed to complete her story. (Researcher note)

Maintaining the relationship after the interview provides a closure to the process of exchange between the researcher and the respondent. It also comes as a confirmation that the interview has been a meeting between partners. In the online interview order, it is not clear who concludes the meeting and who closes the relationship. The availability of online contact is much greater than the possibility of organising repeat visits in the respondents’ homes: the researcher and the respondent can meet again online, again without co-presence. What is more, an accidental meeting in the street or at the university does not mean that they need to come into contact – in our opinion, their online interaction does not require a continuation in face-to-face reality.

When contacting the respondents by email after the interview, the researchers tried to give them an opportunity to share their impressions about the meeting and made it clear that they were welcome to get in touch any time if an issue they considered particularly important had not been discussed. A number of respondents took advantage of this opportunity. Some of them wrote that ‘there was nothing to be afraid of and it was very nice’ or ‘our conversation made me think and talk to my husband’, and others sent a kind of summary of their thoughts, revolving around what it ultimately meant for them that their ‘nest’ had become ‘empty’. It was a special moment – the respondents had the opportunity to close their narrative about their experience, often very emotional, and thus to structure it. Meanwhile, the interviewers had an opportunity to leave the meeting and the researchers’ roles:

And when it’s over...when I finish the conversation, I’m the host again. I wait for HER to leave the meeting. I start the procedure of downloading the recording to my computer disk, stand up, stretch my back, pet my dog and my cats. I’m at home, my place. I’ve been at my home this whole time. I call my family. They can come back (Researcher note).

Other Techniques to be Used During Online Interviews

In order to extend and improve contact with the non-co-present respondent, we used a homework assignment as our
study tool. We asked our respondents to draft schematic maps of their ‘full’ and ‘empty nests’ which would reflect the changes (e.g. concerning emotions) that took place after their children left home; we asked them to send their maps in advance. This tool played a specific role in the online interview situation. In the first part of the meeting, it helped us focus the conversation – the meeting was held online, and the situation was new to both parties. The maps became an object of joint focus of attention, an important element in interaction ritual (Goffman, 1967; Collins, 2004). They made it possible to focus thoughts and visual attention, they had an impact on coordination used to ascertain mutual interest, and they fostered mutual understanding between the partners of interaction not only at the mental but also the emotional level; they supported the mutual reading of the partner’s intentions and feelings:

The tool we constructed – the empty nest and full nest emotion maps – proved to be an organizing tool. The ability to revisit the narrative allowed us to complete the story or begin a new journey into the nest. [...] The map was a pretext for asking questions. The spaces marked by the interviewees were filled with meanings. Spaces not physically accessible became more visible. They revealed the history of the most essential objects in the nests. (Researcher note)

Recommendations for conducting qualitative interviews often include observations on the important role of paraphrase (Kvale, 2006), which enables attentive listening and verification of the interlocutor’s intentions. In the face-to-face interview situation, paraphrase is often supported by non-verbal communication (e.g. nodding, smiling, attentive look). In our online interviews, emotion maps turned out to be a tool supporting the reading of the respondent’s intentions (from the beginning of the interview, they guaranteed the possibility of direct reference to the story of her ‘nest’ presented in her drawing, asking detailed questions based on reflections made before the meeting) and an ongoing interpretation of what she said (using the screen sharing function and modifying the text of the task). Like paraphrase, then, emotion maps turned out to be a valuable tool to enhance the respondent’s reflexivity and to clarify the meaning of what she said by referring to ‘evidence’ they provided (‘That’s what it looks like a bit in this picture’, ‘I’ve just noticed on your map that your husband took over as a helping hand in preparing meals’, ‘I can see that family life in your home used to revolve around this table, mostly’):

Reflexivity of the interviewee began with maps, through practices, connections, and emotions. The paraphrasing method not only made the interviewee reflective by materializing or making her thoughts visible. It was also a proof that I was listening carefully, was trying to understand what she had to say. It stimulated the partnership nature of the interview. (Researcher note)

Moreover, thanks to emotion maps spatial memory had a chance to materialise and thus reveal various everyday practices inherent in particular perceptions of materiality by the respondents. For some of them, conversation on topics related to intimacy and sexual life turned out to be easier when they could ‘anchor’ it in a particular place (e.g. in the bedroom). The maps played an important role also because they provided the researchers and the respondents with easier access to tacit knowledge encoded in practices performed in particular spaces, which served as their reminder. The maps, then, were conducive to their extraction as they provided a kind of mirror confirming ‘what it was like’ when you entered the children’s room, for example.

It is also worth noting that ‘drawings offer a different kind of glimpse into human sensemaking than written or spoken texts do, because they can express that which is not easily put into words: the ineffable, the elusive, the not-yet-thought-through, the subconscious’ (Weber & Mitchell, 1995: 34). The emotion map tool was conducive to taking care of the interlocutor’s sense of being important and listened to in interaction, building the relationship between the researcher and the respondent. ‘The photograph or drawing-based interview uses participant-produced images as a guide. This suggests strong collaboration between researcher and participant’ (Kearney & Hyle, 2004: 363). We were exploring the maps together. The respondents used different colours, made annotations using icons and drawings, or limited themselves to brief descriptions.

In addition, emotion maps performed three more functions in our online interviews. Firstly, they provided a substitute for a tour of the flat/house. When conducting face-to-face interviews in respondents’ homes, we had the opportunity to have a ‘guided tour’ of the room they prepared for the occasion, and most couples showed us around the children’s room. Sometimes this caused embarrassment, and sometimes the respondents did not agree. In the case of a virtual tour using emotion maps, the respondents were not surprised that they were to talk to us about changes in space, and thus also talk about emotions. They had control over what we would see and hear. Such control is more illusory when the researchers are actually in their homes.

Secondly, the emotion map tool made it possible to explore the space of their homes and tell stories about their family practices in the past, when their ‘nests’ were ‘full’, and in the present, when they are ‘empty’. Following a story of home where all family members lived together was very much like watching a journey in space on the screen. In face-to-face interviews, the ‘present’ or ‘co-present’ space dominated the space of the past. One similarity, however, was that when the respondent showed the researcher around the house, she became the host of the meeting for some time.

Thirdly, displaying the maps using the ‘share screen’ function provided a distraction from ‘talking heads’ (Licoppe & Morel, 2012; Krouwel et al., 2019) and from the impression of talking to yourself in the mirror (Cooley, 1964). The function which enabled both participants to add comments and make annotations using symbols (hearts, arrows, etc.) gave the
researcher the opportunity to express active listening and show that she followed the respondent’s story, a sign that she understood what she said and what she meant. The emotion map tool we applied also had its drawbacks: the respondents drafted various kinds of maps, from architectural to artistic drawings, and provided various types of descriptions, from accounts of activities to emotional confessions.

**Conclusions**

The interviews we conducted online gave us the experience of a new quality of research work and were a source of important methodological insights as our autoethnography continued. In our self-reflections about the study, we all shared the impression that ‘something different’ happens in an online interview: there is something different about the interaction order, the roles we play, its dynamics, the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee mediated by the technological research tools.

One of the considerable challenges was recognizing the participants’ space through the emotion map tool designed for the study. The dimension of the space changed because the family nest was not visited and observed by the researchers, it was narrated by the participants and heard in their stories. The researcher was not present in the space which was discovered and did not play the role of the guest anymore. Additionally, the participant did not have to play the role of the host as assigned before. While conducting the study online we did not use the hospitality of the participants because we did not visit their homes.

In this article, we have tried to show how the experience of unexpected switch of our study from face-to-face encounters in the home space (involving co-presence) to online meetings on the Zoom platform (“talking heads” on the screen) – a major change of plan caused by the pandemic restrictions – influenced the development of a method of conducting in-depth interviews online. Our experience indicates that moving interviews to the online environment can bring certain positive effects if the researchers maintain resilience, energy and balance (Tracy, 2010: 849). In that case, an interview conducted on the Zoom platform becomes a space of partnership and inclusiveness.

A major change in the context of an online interaction is the disappearance of overlapping interaction orders present in a face-to-face encounter (e.g. the order of hospitality, of a social occasion, of a therapeutic conversation, of a date). Manoeuvring between different interaction orders involves a considerable risk of losing face (performing a behaviour that is inconsistent with a particular role), and the materialisation of this risk requires strenuous effort to repair it, including negotiation or fetishization of the role of a researcher.

At the same time, we noticed the abandonment of certain practices of emotional labour that may be considered ‘female’ (see Hochschild, 1983). Oversensitivity to the interaction context – practices which particularly women are socialised to follow (e.g. taking care of the space in which, the partners interact, ensuring the sense of comfort, attention to principles of friendly conversation or paralinguistic communication) – becomes less of an issue in the online interview situation.

Establishing a new order of the meeting results in liberation from too many roles which belong to different interaction orders in face-to-face encounters. The role of the researcher becomes the dominant one; the role of a woman (of a certain age and status) and quasi-therapeutic or expert roles disappear from the repertoire of roles often undertaken in face-to-face interviews (Mason-Bish, 2019). The interviews we held online turned out to be more focused and shorter than those we had conducted face-to-face. The technological frame made it possible to maintain time discipline. This came as a combined result of the use of technological equipment, the nature of the meeting and the lack of traditional forms of hospitality on the one hand, and the use of technological tools (emotion maps) on the other. We have also met ‘last minute’ cancellations due to the problems with hardware or unwillingness to take part in this type of interview – it wouldn’t be possible in a standard situation of entering the respondents’ house.

We are conscious that for ethnographic research the space is of great importance. Thanks to IMR (Internet Mediated Research) we have met the space that ‘was told’. The researcher was not tangibly present in the space explored in the project – she ‘heard the space’ and saw it on a map. Nevertheless, we believe that the narrated space might be a source of credible data within the framework of interpretive sociology.

Consequently, we gained focus on the conversation itself and we kept distance both from the side of the researcher and the participant. Our online study functioned well with the described distance and gave the opportunity to reduce emotion work.

What needs to be highlighted clearly is the issue of the interview situation, which was always played out in a 1:1 formula – a female researcher versus a female participant. Research conducted in dyads (of both participants and researchers) can be much more difficult to replicate online due to the group dynamics.

Last but not least the changing world of qualitative methods has implications for changing terminology. We have encountered problems with the glossary of online interviewing: isn’t the online interview exactly a ‘face-to-face’ interview?

Our study shows that online interviews are potentially more difficult to replicate online due to the group dynamics.

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Notes
1. The research leading to these results has received funding from the Polish National Science Centre (Narodowe Centrum Nauki) in the frame of Project Contract No Pol- UMO-2018/30/E/HS6/00159.
2. There are also studies question the primary role of the face in communication, cf. Kraus 2017.
3. According to Goffman, ‘involvement shields’ allow us to maintain an impression of involvement when in fact we fail to fulfil our interactive duties, for example, when interaction is difficult due to a lack of eye contact. Goffman stresses that ‘the mere exchange of friendly glances is perhaps the most frequent of our interpersonal rituals’ (Goffman, 1966: 101).
4. Conventional situational closure determines the rules of access to a territory and concerns symbolic boundaries which limit the meeting. It is visible in face-to-face interviews. Thanks to conventional situational closure the researcher, for example, becomes aware of how to move around the participant’s flat/house (Goffman, 1966: 151–153).

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