Video-Conference Interviews: Ethical and Methodological Concerns in the Context of Health Research

Nicole Brown

University College London, UK; University of Kent, UK

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Sociology [D1]

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Contributor Biography

Nicole Brown is a lecturer in education at UCL Institute of Education and a doctoral researcher at the University of Kent. She holds the degrees Magister philosophiae, Master of Teaching, and Diploma in Translation and is a senior fellow of the Higher Education Academy. She is a qualified teacher in Austria and the United Kingdom and worked as a secondary teacher of

modern foreign languages before moving into higher education. Her research interests relate to identity and body work, research methods, physical and material representations and metaphors, the generation of knowledge, and advancing learning and teaching within higher education.

Published Articles

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Abstract

Qualitative research heavily relies on interviews, which are commonly recorded in video and/or audio streams. This case study explores the use of Skype as a tool for interviewing. I draw on my research into the lived experience of patients diagnosed with fibromyalgia. Fibromyalgia is a complex and contested condition, is difficult to diagnose, typically varies in its symptoms, and is extremely unpredictable in nature. As research participants come from all over the world and obviously suffer with their health, I had always planned on carrying out Skype interviews. In this case study, I not only outline the benefits of using Skype but also discuss practical, ethical, and methodological pitfalls and concerns. In conclusion, Skype can be a very helpful tool, but requires careful planning and a strong reflexive position on the part of the researcher.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this case, students should be able to

- Understand benefits and issues in relation to the use of Skype as an interview tool

- Identify ethical and methodological concerns regarding Skype interviews

- Apply ethical and methodological concerns regarding the use of Skype to their interview studies

Case Study

Introduction

Although many research guide books explore interviews as a means to collect qualitative data, few such books consider practicalities regarding setting up interviews or the ethical and methodological consequences of particular setups. In this case study, I will explore the use of Skype interviews. Although the case study focuses on Skype, the methodological and ethical considerations will apply to all forms of video-conference interviews and do not represent an endorsement, but merely the fact that I used Skype for my research purposes.

Project Overview and Context

My research investigates the construction of academic identity under the influence of fibromyalgia. Fibromyalgia is a complex condition that is characterized by widespread pain, chronic fatigue, sleep problems, psychological disorders, and cognitive dysfunctions (White & Harth, 2001). Typically, fibromyalgia symptoms wax and wane within days or even within hours and vary equally in their symptoms. The cause of fibromyalgia is currently unknown, and so its diagnosis largely depends on the exclusion of other conditions, which makes fibromyalgia contested even within the medical professions. It appears that fibromyalgia is situated on the

cusp of the physiological, psychological, and somatic. Prevalence of fibromyalgia ranges between 0.66% and 10.5% among the general public (Assumpção et al., 2009), with a male-to-female ratio of 1:9 (Grodman et al., 2011). The majority of patients diagnosed with fibromyalgia are females aged 30-40 years and older from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Research into fibromyalgia commonly focuses on specific aspects of the condition, such as coping strategies and treatment approaches in relation to pain and fatigue. In my research, however, I consider the holistic experience of fibromyalgia in all its variability and with all its facets and symptoms.

Methodology and Methods

Methodologically, I draw on reflective lifeworld research (Dahlberg, Dahlberg, & Nyström, 2011) and interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) to get as close as possible to participants' experiences and to make sense of the participants making sense of their experiences. Both approaches are firmly anchored within phenomenological and hermeneutic traditions. Both approaches call to study a phenomenon as close as possible to uncover the hidden, to make explicit the implicit, and through interpretation to gain new understanding and knowledge of the phenomenon under study. In the reflective lifeworld approach, researchers acknowledge not only their own positionality within the social environment but also their previous knowledge, understandings, and assumptions. Active reflexivity, self-criticism, and self-questioning are therefore pivotal to deal with pre-understandings so that they may not interfere with or bias the exploration of the phenomenon under study. In interpretative phenomenological analysis, the hermeneutic tradition becomes foregrounded in that the researcher is trying to make sense of a participant making sense of a

phenomenon. This double hermeneutics emphasizes the interpretative nature of research, which thereby naturally becomes more participatory.

This participatory aspect of meaning-making results in a collaborative, participatory process to data collection and analysis. As our human understanding is based on metaphorical concepts that we employ consciously and unconsciously, we are bound by and live within a metaphorical environment (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). By actively and consciously drawing on metaphors, artifacts, and material representations, it should be possible to get closer to individuals' experiences and to find means to express the otherwise inexpressible. This is particularly the case when words fail the patients, as their experiences elude specific descriptions (Eccleston, 2016; Scarry, 1985; Sontag, 2003). My research, therefore, applies visual and creative methods. Participants are asked to complete timelines, provide diary extracts, and create material and metaphorical representations of their experiences in the form of identity boxes (Brown, 2017). Interviews are used in connection with these physical representations. The interviews are therefore used for several aims. First, I use the interviews to build a meaningful relationship and rapport with the research participants. Second, the interviews allow me to clarify and verify my interpretations of the material, metaphorical representations. Third, the interviews give participants the opportunity to make sense of their experiences, and so add a layer of interpretation and analysis to their experiences. Finally, through the participants' interpretations and analyses, and my connections with previous conversations and engagement with theory, new knowledge is created. In this sense, interviews allow for the generation of new knowledge and provide participants with space to make sense of their experiences.

Research Design, Process, and Practicalities

After a first stage of creating timelines and providing diary extracts in relation to their experiences, participants take part in an identity box project. In response to a question such as "Who are you?" or "How do others see you?", participants find objects to represent their responses. This reduction–representation–elaboration process results in deep reflections. Participants reduce their experiences to the real essence, find an object to represent that essence of an experience, and subsequently explain their thoughts in interviews. Interviews, therefore, play a crucial role in the meaning-making process, and although they generate new knowledge, they also provide a platform for initial joint analyses between the participants and me as the researcher. As the concept of the identity box is one that I had created, I needed to try whether it would yield relevant data before embarking on the main phase of the research. Therefore, I recruited 20 participants for the pilot phase from fibromyalgia support groups. For the main phase of my research, I used social media, advertising posters and flyers during academic conferences, and direct mailing to recruit participants. I secured the participation of 19 women and 1 man, who self-identified as academics and as having received a formal diagnosis of fibromyalgia. Due to the online recruitment campaigns, participants have been reached not only in a wide range of counties across the United Kingdom but also in countries further afield, such as the United States, Canada, and Australia. This geographical spread naturally led to the organization of Skype video interviews as face-to-face interviews instead of meeting in person. In the following sections, I would like to outline in detail considerations of interviews, more specifically Skype interviews.

Interviews in Action

To specify my approach to interviews, I consulted a range of research methods books, among them *Authoring a PhD Thesis* (2008) by Patrick Dunleavy, *Ethnography: Step by Step* (1989) by David Fetterman, *The Qualitative Researcher's Companion* (2002) by A. Michael Huberman and Matthew B. Miles, and *Doing Visual Ethnography* (2013) and *Doing Sensory Ethnography* (2015) by Sarah Pink. But it was the book *InterViews* (2015) by Svend Brinkmann and Steinar Kvale that captured my interest most. Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) provide a detailed exploration about interview approaches using the metaphors of data miners or travelers on a journey. Their considerations relate to the interviewer's role and the power differential between interviewer and interviewee. The data miners in a way use the interviewees as a fountain of knowledge which needs to be emptied. This is reflected in the concept of knowledge collection. The travelers see their role as a journey together with the interviewees to arrive at meanings, which is a process of knowledge construction (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). In my specific research context, interviews are such constructive interactions between me as researcher and my participants. This is very empowering for participants as it considers the interview as a conversation with the specific aims to achieve new, shared knowledge instead of putting the researcher in the driving seat of a question and answer session.

As I am trying to get as close as possible to participants' lived experience, I decided that a guided conversation as interview form would be best suited. In practice, the roles of the interviewer and interviewees remain problematic, with me as the interviewer driving and steering the conversations, the reasons of which are manifold. First, many interviewees are unclear about how much they could contribute to the conversation by returning questions as the traditional understanding of an interview follows the model of the data miner. Second, as interviewer, I have background knowledge and the experience of wider ranges of conversations with various

participants, which individual participants will not be able to draw on. This means that as interviewer I make connections to theories and other conversations, which in turn influence my line of questioning. After all, my aim is to understand the experiences, and if I uncover similarities or differences, I need to follow these up. And third, interviewees may want to keep the interview succinct for practical reasons, rather than develop the interview into a longer conversation. This is particularly true in the context of my research where individuals experience pain, fatigue, and cognitive dysfunctions. Due to the fibromyalgia symptoms, participants may find lengthy conversations difficult to follow. Simply, answering one question after another, however, breaks the task down into manageable chunks. It is this particular consideration of the participants in my research that led to me to reconsider the setup of interviews in greater detail and led me to use Skype.

Skype in Action

To get acquainted with the concept of online interviews and videoconferences, I referred, among others, to works by Janet Salmons (2009, 2014), Carolyn Folkman Curasi (2001), Bobby Duffy, Smith, Terhanian, and Bremer (2005), and Roksana Janghorban, Roudsari, and Taghipour (2014). For practical reasons, I chose to undertake my interviews via Skype. My research participants all have fibromyalgia, which is quite a variable, unpredictable, and debilitating condition. It would have been inappropriate to ask participants to travel to an interview location, even for those participants who are located within the United Kingdom. The very nature of fibromyalgia, its unpredictability and variability, leads to those diagnosed with fibromyalgia having to pace themselves by responding to their daily state of health and wellbeing. In reality, for many fibromyalgia patients, pacing means canceling pre-arranged appointments and dates.

This obviously also applies to potential interview arrangements. For me, it would have been morally and ethically unacceptable to put additional pressure on my research participants by expecting travels and making complicated interview arrangements.

By arranging interviews online, scheduling and rescheduling became a real option for participants as they would not have made any travel arrangements, but also as they knew that I, too, would not have made any arrangements and therefore would not incur any unnecessary costs. Obviously, the cancellation of a Skype interview could potentially be inconvenient for me, too. But participants felt that they were more able to admit difficulties and reschedule than had I been on a journey to an interview location already. On the contrary, as the interviews were arranged to be via Skype, participants did not need to go through particular efforts as they would be able to remain in their own homes. This meant that for some participants, the interview location was their living room; for others, it was their bedroom, where they would be able to lie down and stretch out. Having the interviews in this home context meant that it was more likely the interviews were taking place, even when a participant was having a difficult time. This is because for many participants suffering a flare-up is usually a solitary experience as not many members of their families or friends would understand their experience. The social contact with me as an interviewer was therefore potentially the only social encounter they experienced within a matter of several days. It was during such sessions in particular, but also in general, that the benefit of Skype interviews became apparent: Participants were happy to arrange for several meetings over a longer period of time. In practice, even on the participants' good days, interviews would not be much longer than one hour as fatigue and cognitive dysfunctions would set in. However, these short bouts of several interviews make data richer and more interesting. This is because participants remain refreshed and do not experience fatigue that sets in when a

research interview takes longer. With participants being more alert, they are also more in tune with their intimate experiences and are able to engage more naturally in a conversation. Also, this has led to a shift in the power differential between me as the interviewer and them as participants, and I am able to build a meaningful relationship with my participants, which in turn allows for a more conversational tone in subsequent interviews.

Carrying out the interviews via Skype also allows for a certain level of closeness, which would not have been achieved in other setups. First, by using Skype, participants use a medium that they know. In a more formal setting with a video camera, it may well be that participants become more self-conscious about being recorded. At the beginning of each conversation, I always ask participants whether they agree to being recorded, but actually they do not see, feel, or experience the difference between being recorded and the conversation not being recorded. Also, as most of the participants would have used Skype or some other form of video calling for private conversations with friends and family members, they feel less self-conscious about the video. Second, "being in the house" and entering their private environment via Skype allow the participants to show as much or as little of themselves as they feel comfortable with. In an interview that is carried out in the participants' home, the participant is forced to lay open his or her personal space. Through using Skype, participants were able to "show me around" by carrying their devices through their homes, but if they did not want to share that private space they would not need to.

Summary of Advantages of Using Skype

- Being able to use known medium, so less intimidating for participants;
- Through third-party software, direct recording of video and/or audio streams;

- Flexibility of arranging and rescheduling meetings;

- Flexibility also allows for several shorter conversations rather than one or two long ones;

- Closeness between researcher and participants;

- Less intrusive: being able to meet in participants' homes, but allowing for privacy within that environment.

Having outlined the benefits of Skype, I would now like to turn to its practical, methodological, and ethical issues, concerns, and impact.

Practical and Methodological Issues With Skype

In practical terms, Skype is a very common video-calling tool, and most participants know how to handle the software. So far, I have only encountered two issues throughout the interviews. On one occasion, this related to the recording software; on another, the problem was the Internet connectivity. As Skype does not have a recording function included, a third-party software package needs to be bought, installed, and applied.

Having trialed several free and demo versions, I decided to acquire Evaer, which worked brilliantly for my purposes. Only on one occasion was there a technical glitch where the software recorded the videos sideways. I am still not sure how that happened, but it was fine for my research purposes as there were no other issues with the video recording. Evaer can be used for videos or audio recordings, which allows for greater flexibility with the participants, for example, if someone does not want to be seen. On the contrary, the video recording enables a more detailed analysis of body language and gestures as in a traditional face-to-face interview.

My true concern relates to me relying on the Internet speed. One participant lives in an area so remote, where Internet connections are temperamental. When we had scheduled our meeting, there happened to be a storm front coming over, which potentially would also affect Internet connectivity. After several attempts to alleviate the technical issues, we finally resolved to type our conversation using the instant messaging function of Skype. Initially, this seemed a perfect solution, particularly so, as I would automatically have a transcript of the interview. However, it was a problematic conversation as both of us missed the nonverbal conversational clues. At times, it was unclear whether the research partner had understood or seen the message or missed it. In conversations, we allow pauses for thinking, but in the written version it was unclear whether the pauses were due to thinking times or technical glitches. Also, not being able to hear the participant's voice meant that I interpreted emphases in her written words, which may not have been in her spoken versions and not meant to be there at all. This automatically leads into issues of authenticity of self.

As mentioned before and as can be seen from the written instant messaging, Skype is practical in the sense that participants can choose how much of their private environment they wish to share. Theoretically, it is possible to have the video call in such a setting that the close-up would only show someone's face. Superficially, this may not matter much. However, it does matter as far as the authenticity of the interviewee's self is concerned. In his dramaturgical model for the analysis of social interactions, Erving Goffman (1959) outlined how humans play specific roles in society to achieve specific purposes. This "acting" includes the management of behavior as well as one's body, the setting of where the interaction takes place, and the props that are used within an interaction. As humans, we need to be able to make sense of the performance someone puts on and to decide whether or not this performance is truthful and trustworthy. If interviewees

can hide behind their faces rather than having to expose their full bodies, it may be more difficult for the interviewer to identify coherence within the participants' actions. On the contrary, however, it could be argued that participants would act more naturally in their personal and private environments than say in an office arranged for an interview. Thus, participants would probably be putting on more of an act in that official, formal, artificial context so that their authenticity of selves could not be considered a truthful reflection either.

In reality, as researchers we can never be sure how honest, open, and truthful our participants are; they may act out of character or be misleading in their answers unknowingly, too. The only answer to this would be for the interviewer to take a more pronounced, reflexive stance, thus making himself or herself fully aware of any possible factors influencing the interviewee, the interviewee's answers, and the depiction of self. In fact, given the importance of the interviewer's role, reflexivity ought to inform the research at every stage in all interview studies. The use of Skype, in this sense, only adds one more dimension to reflexivity. Reflexivity in this context needs to include the interviewer taking note of the contextual and environmental factors presented. As mentioned earlier, the use of Skype may make this more difficult because we can choose what is shown on the video. However, it is, then, the interviewer's responsibility to analyze the conversation as well as the props and setting to be able to probe more deeply in subsequent interactions to verify and validate what has been presented.

Ethical Considerations When Using Skype

Although Skype has proven to be particularly useful and beneficial for my research, I have some concerns about the use of Skype and the potential issues that could arise. Before discussing my personal experiences with ethics and Skype, I would like to refer to some publications relevant to

this topic. Valeria Lo Iacono and colleagues (2015), for example, report that Skype limits rapport and nonverbal cues, although it does offer a time and cost-efficient opportunity to run synchronous interviews. Similarly, Sally Seitz (2016) discusses the loss of intimacy and non-verbal communication in addition to technical issues such as dropped calls. Jennifer Oates (2015), on the contrary, clearly declares that intimacy can still be achieved and does not at all need to be forfeited when using Skype instead of traditional face-to-face interviews. Hannah Deakin and Kelly Wakefield (2014), as well as Dorit Redlich-Amirav and Gene Higginbottom (2014), highlight how Skype could be offered as one of many online synchronous and asynchronous data collection methods to best suit the participants' needs and wants.

For me, Skype is a great way to establish a meaningful relationship with a participant. It is a fabulous experience to be allowed to enter a participant's home and to be shown around that particular environment. On one occasion, a participant proudly showed me a curtain she had sewn herself as part of a sewing course. Her sense of achievement was tangible when she touched the fabric and looked at the completed curtain. On another occasion, one participant introduced me to her husband. This had not been planned initially, but during our conversation her phone rang twice and she asked her husband to come into the kitchen to pick up the phone so that we would not be disturbed again. In this case, the participant proudly introduced us as she had obviously talked to me about her relationship to her husband, and she had also explained to him that she would be part of a research project. To her, the opportunity to be able to introduce us meant that what she had said to either of us became more important and more real. Of course, such glimpses into participants' private lives are exciting and the rich data add a depth that would not be achieved otherwise. However, what happens here is that I take advantage of the felt closeness on Skype and enter houses and homes that would otherwise remain sacred spaces. I

would never personally ask to be introduced or shown around as I would not feel comfortable with such an invasion of space and would feel that I abusing the interview relationship and misusing Skype. On the contrary, I do allow for such disruptions and interruptions as they could potentially reveal more about participants' lived experience with fibromyalgia. This became particularly poignant in one conversation with a female participant. We were talking about the daily struggles with fibromyalgia, its symptoms and variability, and how due to its invisibility other family members would not necessarily understand her needs and would therefore put their needs above hers. Suddenly, our conversation was interrupted as her mum entered the room asking for help. We immediately rang off and she made herself available to her mum. Sometime later, I was informed that her mum had had a panic attack and needed her daughter's help to overcome the issue despite the daughter's own personal, psychological issues and pain.

Being there via Skype and yet not being there for real is therefore a difficult balance to strike. One ethical concern I have relates to the recording of the Skype calls. Every time I ask whether I may record the video before I start the software, and so far, all participants have always agreed to the recording. This is probably because the initial consent form included the information about video and audio recordings but also because the participants understand that it is easier for me to return to the video instead of taking notes during the call. However, if a person was to disagree and not provide that consent, there is no way for the caller on the other end to know whether I honor that decision. The software is entirely inconspicuous and unobtrusive so that callers could be recorded without giving consent, without knowing even. Finally, I am very conscious of the closeness that develops through Skype. Although Skype helps build a close relationship between researchers and participants, we are after all strangers to each other. And yet, that pretend closeness achieved through entering each other's homes could potentially lead

to divulging details that would potentially not be disclosed in a more formal interview environment, a concern I would also have with literally entering a participant's home for an interview.

Summary of Concerns About and Issues With Using Skype

- Skype call and/or recording may not work due to Internet connectivity issues.
- Questions of authenticity: participants choose how much they show of themselves during the Skype call.
- Closeness is deceptive: it is great to build rapport and relationship, but after all researchers and participants remain strangers to each other.
- Potential over-disclosure of private and personal stories in comparison with interviews.

Conclusion

As I have discussed, I consciously decided to use Skype for practical reasons to accommodate participants' health experiences. And so far, this has been successful. In this final section, I provide a brief reflection on key points and practical lessons learned in relation to using Skype interviews:

Skype is a useful tool if it is applied for specific reasons. A researcher may want to use Skype for logistic, practical, or ethical reasons. But it is important to consider Skype as a dimension within the research approach rather than a mere convenience.

Skype affects the research on a methodological, practical, and ethical level. Like every stage of the research process, the use of Skype needs to be considered, and as researchers, we need to be aware of the impact Skype has on the research process, which leads to the following final point.

Using Skype means that the interviewer needs to become more reflexive in comparison with other data collection tools. Within research generally, we need to be aware of our choices and demonstrate that conscious awareness. However, all Skype calls differ in their organizations and setups, and that needs to be taken into consideration.

Exercises and Discussion Questions

Exercise 1:

1. Write down what you are trying to achieve with an interview.

2. Are interviews best suited to achieve these aims or could you consider different methods to better achieve these aims?

Exercise 2:

1. Map out your recruitment strategy.

2. How could your recruitment strategy potentially affect your methods?

Exercise 3:

1. Describe your role as an interviewer.

2. Which role are you planning to play, the role of a miner or a traveler? What is the impact of the role you plan to play on the questions you are going to ask?

3. How do you have to formulate your interview questions to remain consistent with the role you want to play as an interviewer?

Exercise 4:

Consider the following scenarios. How would you react? What would you do? What would your response mean in relation to the bigger picture of your research?

a. You are conducting a Skype interview and during the Skype call your phone rings.

b. You are in the middle of a Skype conversation with your participant, when your participant's children are calling for him or her.

c. Your participant has agreed to a Skype interview, but as you are starting the conversation, the participant says he or she is not happy for the call to be recorded.

d. You are on Skype with your participant, when suddenly the Internet connection breaks down and you cannot continue the call.

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