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Dialling in: Reflections on Telephone Interviews in Light of the Covid-19

Pandemic

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Abstract

Telephone interviews have always been the next best option to face-to-face interviews affecting researchers' perceptions of its use in qualitative research. This article considers the challenges against the use of telephone interviews as a primary mode of data collection posed by the 'gold standard' - face-to-face interviews.¹ With the rapid development of technology in recent years and an increased interest in virtual research, telephone interviews and its benefits as a mode of data collection may continue to be side-lined. The methodological strengths of telephone interviews will be explored by comparing it to face-to-face interviews and considering its use in light of the Covid-19 pandemic. I will be drawing from my legal research study on the role of the education system in informing children aged 7-14 of their criminal responsibility in schools, to provide reflections and examples to make my argument.

¹ Judith L. M. McCoyd and Toba Schwaber Kerson, 'Conducting Intensive Interviews Using Email' (2006) 5 Qualitative Social Work.

1. Introduction

Before the 1960s, telephone interviews were considered an unfeasible mode of data collection in research studies due to the lack of telephone ownership and unfamiliarity with the device.² This would imply that access to research participants was significantly limited using this method, and as a result may indicate why there was little academic interest in telephone interviews as a rigorous mode of research.³ However, with rapid advancements in telephone technology, especially with the advent of smartphones, most of the population are well-versed in its usage and often have become heavily reliant on their telephones; it has become “the primary electronic medium for interpersonal communication”⁴ and has changed the way in which individuals communicate. Presently, we use telephones extensively for a variety of purposes; namely, calls (voice and video), instant messaging, emails, social media, camera etc. yet, the use of telephone interviews is still considered an alternative option to the face-to-face interview in qualitative research. Face-to-face interviews are deemed the “gold standard”⁵ mode of interviews in qualitative research, however, with this shift in our relationship with mobile phones, it has become increasingly important to revisit the use of telephone interviews and consider whether it is underutilised as a primary method of collecting qualitative data. Moreover, with the Covid-19 pandemic forcing face-to-face interviews to stop during lockdown measures, the methodological strengths of telephone interviews in its own right need be better considered. This article will review existing literature on why telephone interviews remain a secondary

² Eloise C.J. Carr and Allison Worth, 'The Use Of The Telephone Interview For Research' (2001) 6 NT Research.

³ *ibid*

⁴ Robert Hopper, *Telephone Conversation* (Indiana University Press 1992).

⁵ McCoyd & Kerson (n1)

option, the methodological strengths of the mode and the impact of the pandemic on this. Finally, it will relate it to my own experience as a legal academic conducting telephone interviews with teachers in my ongoing doctoral research study.

2. Telephone Interviews in Qualitative Research

Since the beginning of the nineteenth century, interviews have been commonly used in anthropology and sociology as a qualitative methodology.⁶ Kvale defines an 'interview'⁷, as a data collection technique where "views are inter-changed between two or more people on a topic of interest to the participants involved".⁸ The focus is on the interaction between the individuals for the purpose of knowledge exchange or production and, simultaneously, takes into account the "social situatedness of the research data."⁹ The most common form of interviews are conducted face-to-face as it enables data to be collected through multi-sensory channels in the form of speech, hearing, visual, and non-visual elements.¹⁰ In comparison, Frey states that a telephone conversation is "an interactional sequence without the assistance of visual cues."¹¹ On this basis, telephone interviews challenge the conventional understanding of the function and purpose of face-to-face interviews¹² as the distance between the researcher and participant removes the visual element of the data collected.

⁶ Max Travers, 'New Methods, Old Problems: A Sceptical View Of Innovation In Qualitative Research' (2009) 9 *Qualitative Research*.

⁷ Steinar Kvale, *Interviews* (Sage 1996) 14.

⁸ Louis Cohen, Lawrence Manion and Keith Morrison, *Research Methods In Education* (8th edn, Routledge 2018).

⁹ Travers (n6)

¹⁰ Cohen, Manion & Keith Morrison (n8) 506

¹¹ James H Frey, *Survey Research By Telephone* (Sage 1990).

¹² Amanda Holt, 'Using The Telephone For Narrative Interviewing: A Research Note' (2010) 10 *Qualitative Research*.

Lechuga¹³ and Novick¹⁴ outline how notable texts, such as Patton's *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods* and Denzin and Lincoln's *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* fail to adequately acknowledge telephone interviews in qualitative research. This is not a critique of these texts, as they are extensive works that cover many aspects of qualitative research, but rather it sheds light on the general position of telephone interviews in qualitative research. The omission of telephone interviews from such prominent and well-cited sources illustrates the lack of recognition given to it as a qualitative research method and implies that it is a mode of interview that has not been fully accepted or used widely by qualitative researchers.

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As Shuy highlights, doing interviews, can be time-consuming and one way to reduce fieldwork time is by doing the interviews on the telephone rather than face-to-face. Hence, telephone interviews being a 'short-cut' to the data collection process¹⁶ contributes to its perceived inferior position to face-to-face interviews in qualitative research. Chapple contends that "while entire books have been written about the advantages and disadvantages of telephone interview for the purposes of social survey work...much less has been written about telephone interviewing as a means of gathering qualitative data."¹⁷ Irvine corroborates this point by highlighting the need for methodological studies on telephone interviews in qualitative research that focuses

¹³ Vicente M. Lechuga, 'Exploring Culture From A Distance: The Utility Of Telephone Interviews In Qualitative Research' (2012) 25 *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*.

¹⁴ Gina Novick, 'Is There A Bias Against Telephone Interviews In Qualitative Research?' (2008) 31 *Research in Nursing & Health*.

¹⁵ Judith E. Sturges and Kathleen J. Hanrahan, 'Comparing Telephone And Face-To-Face Qualitative Interviewing: A Research Note' (2004) 4 *Qualitative Research*.

¹⁶ Roger W. Shuy, 'In-Person Versus Telephone Interviewing', *Inside Interviewing* (Sage 2003).

¹⁷ Alison Chapple, 'The Use Of Telephone Interviewing For Qualitative Research' (1999) 6 *Nurse Researcher*.

on a wide range of topics.¹⁸ In addition, the literature on qualitative interviews tend to focus on the possible negative impact that telephone interviews have on the quality and richness of the data collected in comparison to face-to-face interviews.¹⁹

As such, there is no clear definition of a telephone interview provided in existing literature in this area. This could be attributed to the fact that there is a widespread understanding of the two words that make up the term, thereby inferring an assumed comprehension and acceptance of what it means. Nevertheless, Carr and Worth attempt to clarify that “a telephone interview in research terms is a strategy for obtaining data which allows interpersonal communication without a face-to-face meeting.”²⁰ This definition is broad enough to include telephone surveys as they also use interpersonal communication via telephones to obtain information; the difference being that the data obtained is typically quantitative. In the 1970s, the development of telephone technology encouraged the use of telephones in research, thus making it a useful instrument in market research and political polling.²¹ Telephone interviews in such social surveys aim at keeping the respondent’s inputs short by using highly focused and standardized questions to obtain relevant data.²² Generally, the widespread use of telephones in research was conducted by quantitative researchers and hence, there was a sense of hesitation to use telephone interviews as the main mode of collecting qualitative data.²³ Subsequently, it is often combined with other

¹⁸ Annie Irvine, Paul Drew and Roy Sainsbury, 'Am I Not Answering Your Questions Properly?' Clarification, Adequacy And Responsiveness In Semi-Structured Telephone And Face-To-Face Interviews' (2012) 13 *Qualitative Research*.

¹⁹ Irvine, Drew & Sainsbury (n18)

²⁰ Carr & Worth (n2)

²¹ Frey (n11) 21.

²² Irvine et al. (n18)

²³ Travers (n6)

methods such as face-to-face interviews and questionnaires to make up for any 'missing data' due to the lack of proximity to the interviewee.²⁴

This scepticism towards the use of telephone interviews has been expressed by a few qualitative researchers. For example, Taylor mentions how, as a social researcher with experience of being a respondent in 'telephone interviews' from marketing and research companies, she found that she left "such an encounter feeling suspicious and somewhat frustrated."²⁵ She also suggests that this is because the interviewers were not interested in responding to her queries about the research, instead their focus was on getting the information they needed from her, as quickly as possible.²⁶ Generally, quantitative research surveys or questionnaires conducted over the telephone require short responses from a large number of people²⁷ resulting in experiences similar to Taylor's. Such associations with survey-style telephone calls have contributed to the negative perception that telephone interviews are limited. Holt admits that she presumed the most effective mode for producing narrative data would be face-to-face interviews. However, it was not until she had issues accessing participants that telephone interviews were considered as a viable method for collecting narrative data.²⁸ Hence, it was the practicality of the circumstances that encouraged the use of this sparsely explored method. Taylor also used this method in her longitudinal study with adolescent boys and found it, in some circumstances, to be a compelling tool to elicit rich qualitative data.²⁹ For the purposes of this paper,

²⁴ Lechuga (n13)

²⁵ Anthea Taylor, 'I'll Call You Back On My Mobile: A Critique Of The Telephone Interview With Adolescent Boys' (2002) 25 Westminster Studies in Education.

²⁶ *ibid*

²⁷ Shuy (n16)

²⁸ Holt (n12)

²⁹ Taylor (n25)

telephone interviews in qualitative research will be using telephones as a mode of communication to elicit longer and varied responses from a smaller number of participants, with a particular focus on the information, examples and experiences they wish to share. The terms 'participant' and 'interviewee' will be used interchangeably in this article.

3. Telephone Interviews – Why is it a Secondary Option?

Data collected from telephone surveys/interviews, as mentioned above, prioritises the quantity of responses therefore, calls are kept brief.³⁰ Thus, the data collected through such methods are not perceived to be as rich in quality as qualitative research requires.³¹

Rubin and Rubin state that: “through qualitative interviews you can understand experiences and reconstruct events in which you did not participate.” To do this and understand how the interviewee feels, proximity to them is helpful as, among other things, it allows interviewers to pick up on visual cues and take note of the feeling in the room when information is shared.³² Face-to-face interviews permit researchers to access this information with ease, thereby being heavily favoured in qualitative research.³³ However, this does not necessarily preclude telephone interviews from achieving the same, as illustrated by Holt’s study, where sensitive narrative data was

³⁰ Linda Sweet, 'Telephone Interviewing: Is It Compatible With Interpretive Phenomenological Research?' (2002) 12 *Contemporary Nurse*.

³¹ Adrienne Trier-Bieniek, 'Framing The Telephone Interview As A Participant-Centred Tool For Qualitative Research: A Methodological Discussion' (2012) 12 *Qualitative Research*.

³² Herbert J Rubin and Irene Rubin, *Qualitative Interviewing* (Sage 1995).

³³ Novick (n14)

collected using this method.³⁴ Furthermore, counselling practices like the Samaritans and Talking Therapies would belie any criticism that telephone interviews cannot generate experiential data effectively.³⁵

This section will consider the main concerns for why researchers and by implication, research literature positions telephone interviews as a secondary option to the 'gold-standard' of face-to-face interviews.

3.1 Quality of Data

Most, if not all research literature state that the criteria for determining quality in qualitative research revolve around reliability, validity and objectivity.³⁶ For Kvale, in the context of qualitative interviews, this is determined by, “the extent of spontaneous, rich, specific and relevant answers from the interviewee”,³⁷ “the degree to which the interviewer follows up and clarifies the meanings of the relevant aspects of the answers,”³⁸ and the interview speaking for itself without requiring extra explanation.³⁹ This is further summarised by Kirkevold and Bergland, as creating the conditions for the interviewee to provide, “mostly uninterrupted, well-articulated complete picture of the phenomenon under study.”⁴⁰

Recently, numerous studies have reflected on the quality of data gathered from telephone interviews, and a large number of them concluded that they are “just as

³⁴ Holt (n12)

³⁵ Holt (n12)

³⁶ Uwe Flick, *An Introduction To Qualitative Research* (6th edn, SAGE 2018).

³⁷ Svend Brinkmann and Steinar Kvale, *Doing Interviews* (SAGE 2018).

³⁸ *ibid*

³⁹ *ibid*

⁴⁰ Marit Kirkevold and Ådel Bergland, 'The Quality Of Qualitative Data: Issues To Consider When Interviewing Participants Who Have Difficulties Providing Detailed Accounts Of Their Experiences' (2007) 2 *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-being*.

good” at generating meaningful data, as face-to-face interviews. ⁴¹ Stephens states that in his telephone interviews “excellent data” was collected in all cases and he also comments on how a “friendly rapport” was achieved,⁴² thereby further supporting that telephone interviews can be an equally effective research method, apropos of data quality.

However, Irvine expresses concerns about the conclusions made in these studies as she argues that they make “broad and impressionistic comparisons.”⁴³ This is because there is a lack of rigorous analysis when comparing different modes of interview. To explore this, Irvine conducted a small-scale study which raised concerns about two factors – interview duration and researcher dominance.⁴⁴ When compared with face-to-face interviews, Irvine noted that the telephone interviews were on average, shorter and that the researcher took up more “airtime”, thereby shortening the time the interviewee could have spent talking.⁴⁵

This finding would imply that the quality of data collected from telephone interviews might be compromised as, in Kvale’s view, it would reduce the spontaneity and richness of the responses the interviewee could offer.⁴⁶ However, this reasoning can be countered with a fuller understanding of what occurs during a telephone interview, and one that is not solely focused on the researcher taking up more “airtime”. For instance, like visual cues, aural cues are commonly used to navigate through

⁴¹ Annie Irvine, 'Duration, Dominance And Depth In Telephone And Face-To-Face Interviews: A Comparative Exploration' (2011) 10 *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*.

⁴² Neil Stephens, 'Collecting Data From Elites And Ultra Elites: Telephone And Face-To-Face Interviews With Macroeconomists' (2007) 7 *Qualitative Research*.

⁴³ Irvine (n41)

⁴⁴ Irvine (n41)

⁴⁵ Irvine (n41)

⁴⁶ Brinkmann & Kvale (n37)

telephone conversations,⁴⁷ and therefore, within the context of an interview, making it a crucial way to clarify an interviewee's responses and confirm that they have fully understood what is being asked. Furthermore, as per Kvale's measure of quality mentioned earlier, following up on the responses given by the interviewee would only increase the validity and reliability of the data collected.⁴⁸

3.2 Duration of Interviews

Telephone interviews, when compared to face-to-face interviews, are perceived to be shorter in length by qualitative researchers, as it is associated with polling and surveys.⁴⁹ In addition to this, telephone interviews are oftentimes kept shorter to avoid participant fatigue.⁵⁰ This is a phenomenon that is usually associated with surveys where the participant becomes tired and as a result can negatively affect their participation with the research.⁵¹

However, in a study conducted by Vogl, it was found that there was no significant difference in the interview length, the number and proportion of words spoken by the participants or need for clarification between telephone and face-to-face interviews.⁵² Moreover, other studies have also shown that the mode of the interview does not determine the duration of the interview and in some cases found that interviewees were willing to spend anywhere between one to three hours participating in a telephone interview.⁵³

⁴⁷ Holt (n12)

⁴⁸ Brinkmann & Kvale (n37)

⁴⁹ Chapple (n17); Sweet (n30); Irvine (n41)

⁵⁰ Shuy (n16)

⁵¹ Paul J. Lavrakas, 'Respondent Fatigue', *Encyclopedia of Survey Research Methods* (Sage 2008).

⁵² Susanne Vogl, 'Telephone Versus Face-To-Face Interviews' (2013) 43 *Sociological Methodology*.

⁵³ Stephens (n42); Holt (n12)

Whilst, it is important to note that the duration of an interview cannot be conflated with quality of data, telephone interviews have often faced criticism of producing lower quality data as they are perceived to offer a shorter window of opportunity for the researcher to engage with the participant.⁵⁴ However, this need not be the case as it is found that participants are more likely to engage for longer and share more when they feel comfortable with the interviewer and their role in the research process, thereby offering, richer, in-depth data.⁵⁵

3.3 Rapport

The relationship between the interviewer and interviewee plays a significant role in the way the conversation or discourse is managed.⁵⁶ In order to obtain good quality data in interviews, building a relationship with the participant plays a key role.⁵⁷ Rubin and Rubin state, “given the need to build a relationship and the importance of visual cues in conversations, you’d rightly expect that telephone interviews are not a major way of conducting qualitative interviews.”⁵⁸ Developing rapport through technology is deemed to be less effective than in-person meetings,⁵⁹ as being in someone’s presence can make it easier to connect and ‘break the ice’ with strangers. This is not an uncommon viewpoint as it is assumed that both parties being in each other’s

⁵⁴ Sweet (n30)

⁵⁵ Moira Cachia and Lynne Millward, 'The Telephone Medium And Semi-Structured Interviews: A Complementary Fit' (2011) 6 *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal*.

⁵⁶ Carol Miller, 'In-Depth Interviewing By Telephone: Some Practical Considerations' (1995) 9 *Evaluation & Research in Education*.

⁵⁷ *ibid*

⁵⁸ Rubin & Rubin (n32) 141

⁵⁹ Novick (n14)

physical presence helps to develop rapport, which forms a key part of a qualitative interview.⁶⁰

Lechuga argues that of all the characteristics that make up a successful qualitative interview there is no requirement that they be facing each other in-person⁶¹. In both interview formats, the interviewer has to put the participant at ease by introducing themselves, the study, clarify any doubts the interviewee may have,⁶² and obtain consent. All of the qualities mentioned above can be met in a telephone interview if the interviewer takes the time to have a contact call with the participant to arrange the interview,⁶³ and provides an agenda-based introduction,⁶⁴ which uses a small number of keywords to introduce themselves and the details of the study.⁶⁵ The interviewer can also ask if there are any doubts the interviewee would like clarified and check that they are happy to go ahead with the interview.⁶⁶ Evidently, the use of the telephone does not hinder the ability to achieve these qualities, but it merely changes the way these qualities are achieved. This forms a foundational rapport between the interviewer and interviewee which can then be built upon when the interview begins.

Creating and maintaining a comfortable interview environment helps to increase the rapport and builds trust between the interviewer and the interviewee.⁶⁷ This can also have an impact on the duration of an interview. Participants are more likely to engage

⁶⁰ Andrea Fontana and James H. Frey, 'The Interview: From Neutral Stance To Political Involvement', *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (3rd edn, Sage 2005).

⁶¹ Lechuga (n13)

⁶² Cohen, Manion & Morrison (n8) 537

⁶³ Philip Burnard, 'The Telephone Interview As A Data Collection Method' (1994) 14 *Nurse Education Today*.

⁶⁴ Hanekke Houtkoop-Steenstra and Huub van den Bergh, 'Effects Of Introductions In Large-Scale Telephone Survey Interviews' (2000) 28 *Sociological Methods & Research*.

⁶⁵ Cohen, Manion & Morrison (n8) 537

⁶⁶ Rod Dicker and John Gilbert, 'The Role Of The Telephone In Educational Research' (1988) 14 *British Educational Research Journal*. Dicker & Gilbert (n38)

⁶⁷ Novick (n14)

actively in interviews and share more when they feel comfortable with the interviewer and the research process.⁶⁸ This is influenced by the personality and skill of the interviewer, and the attitude, nature and the personality of the participant.⁶⁹ Some may find meeting and talking to a stranger more daunting than speaking to them on the telephone, especially if they are shy or if the subject of the discussion is sensitive and embarrassing in nature.⁷⁰ Good rapport in this case will allow for the interviewee to share without inhibition, providing richer and more meaningful responses thereby improving the quality of data generated. As the abovementioned interpersonal demands are not dependent on the mode used in the interview, telephone interviews cannot be dismissed as a secondary option in qualitative research.

3.4 Visual Data

The absence of visual data in telephone interviews is a prominently cited concern amongst qualitative researchers.⁷¹ Novick suggests there is a bias towards face-to-face interviews which can be attributed to lack of visual data in telephone interviews.⁷² It is argued that being in the presence of the interviewee allows the interviewer access to cognitive and emotional content which can be vital in providing detail and richness to the data and the interpretation of the interviewee's verbal responses.⁷³ The importance placed on visual data, is one of the factors that keeps telephone interviews in a secondary position to face-to-face interviews.

⁶⁸ Novick (n14)

⁶⁹ Lechuga (n13)

⁷⁰ Burnard (n 63)

⁷¹ Stephens (n42); Novick (n14); Holt (n12); Lechuga (n13)

⁷² Novick (n14)

⁷³ Fontana & Frey (n60); Novick (n14)

Visual cues in face-to-face interviews can help the interviewer gauge the direction of the interview and it allows interviewees to know that the interviewer is present and listening by nodding or smiling when they are not speaking or asking questions.⁷⁴ These visual cues help the interviewer navigate through quieter segments of the interview. From his study with telephone interviews, Stephens notes that in the absence of visual cues there is a greater need to guide the conversation.⁷⁵ For example, to mitigate against silences in the interview, indicators such as ‘umm’, ‘ahh’ and ‘yes’ are used.⁷⁶ Holt corroborates Stephens’ experience and further mentions that there is a thin line between the researcher’s interjections directing the narrative, and, assuring the participants of the researcher’s presence.⁷⁷ Although the use of such indicators could be perceived to interject and guide the flow of the interview or take up “airtime”,⁷⁸ they are also used in everyday telephone calls to indicate one’s presence in the conversation. Therefore, it likely participants would find this to be a natural feature of a telephone call, just as nodding in face-to-face conversations. It is the responsibility of the interviewer to stay within the “line”, as Holt warns,⁷⁹ to create a “mostly uninterrupted” research setting,⁸⁰ to maintain objectivity thereby ensuring increased data quality.

Visual contextual data tells us about a participant’s identity and where they are situated.⁸¹ Depending on the relevance of the research setting and the topic of the

⁷⁴ Cachia & Millward (n55)

⁷⁵ Stephens (n42)

⁷⁶ Stephens (n42); Holt (n12)

⁷⁷ Holt (n12)

⁷⁸ Irvine (n41)

⁷⁹ Holt (n12)

⁸⁰ Kirkevold & Bergland (n40)

⁸¹ Holt (n12)

study, the visual context could indicate possible areas for further probing.⁸² For example, if the research setting is in an interviewee's home, it could provide the interviewer with more context about the individual, giving them the opportunity to ask further questions which are specific to their visual observations, if applicable to the study. This could complement and add layers to the data collected from their verbal responses. In some studies, where participant observation is part of the research objective, not being able to see the participant can be disadvantageous.⁸³ However, in most other cases, the discourse analysis focuses on and stays "at the level of the text."⁸⁴ This is common practice in interviews,⁸⁵ therefore, the absence of visual data in telephone interviews does not necessarily have a negative impact on data quality as it is commonly perceived.

The bias against telephone interviews can be ascribed to the absence of visual data and the implication of this on data quality.⁸⁶ To ensure the quality of data in telephone interviews, there is a need to fully articulate responses and behaviour.⁸⁷ This is because non-verbal behaviour and other visual contextual data can be easily misrepresented.⁸⁸ Therefore, in telephone interviews, participants explaining their behaviour and explicitly stating their perspectives on a topic, would provide richer interview transcripts, which are less susceptible to interpretation issues.⁸⁹ Alternatively, it has been contended that participants could misrepresent themselves

⁸² Novick (n14)

⁸³ Raymond Opendakker, 'Advantages And Disadvantages Of Four Interview Techniques In Qualitative Research' (2006) 7 Forum: Qualitative Social Research <<http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0604118>.> accessed 15 April 2021.

⁸⁴ Holt (n12)

⁸⁵ Novick (n14)

⁸⁶ Novick (n14)

⁸⁷ Stephens (n42)

⁸⁸ Sturges & Hanrahan (n15)

⁸⁹ Holt (n12)

in telephone interviews as the interviewer has no visual data to work with,⁹⁰ making it harder to know when misleading information is provided.⁹¹ The absence of visual cues and contextual data can give more leeway for such occurrences to take place, but there is nothing to suggest that this is more likely to happen in telephone interviews rather than face-to-face ones.

Overall, visual data can be useful in some types of research but generally, the lack of it in telephone interviews does not necessarily diminish the quality of data obtained from them because the words spoken by the participant take precedent.⁹²

4. Telephone Interviews – a viable primary method?

As mentioned earlier, telephone interviews are usually considered and used where face-to-face interviews are not possible. So far, the main reasons for the underutilisation of telephone interviews in qualitative research have been discussed. This section will focus on some of the reasons why telephone interviews can be beneficial in qualitative research.

Accessibility to participants is one of the key advantages of telephone interviews. It broadens the geographical scope of the research study at a low cost, as travel costs are mitigated, allowing for a wider range of participants to take part, including under-represented groups.⁹³ This makes wide-scale research more affordable for all

⁹⁰ Karl Nunkoosing, 'The Problems With Interviews' (2005) 15 *Qualitative Health Research*.

⁹¹ Rob Garbett and Brendan McCormack, 'The Experience Of Practice Development: An Exploratory Telephone Interview Study' (2001) 10 *Journal of Clinical Nursing*.

⁹² Novick (n14)

⁹³ Sturges & Hanrahan (n15)

researchers. It also allows for researchers to speak to participants who are hard to contact due to time constraints, making it more likely and easier for them to participate in research studies.⁹⁴ This way they can do the interview without having to spend extra time, money and effort travelling to and from the interview location.⁹⁵ Thus, telephone interviews are a more cost-effective method with greater access to participants than face-to-face interviews.

Telephone interviews provide more flexibility to both the interviewer and their participants. Interviewees can choose the time and setting of the interview to protect their privacy and ensure their comfort and convenience⁹⁶ by “remaining on their own turf.”⁹⁷ This increased privacy and relative anonymity in telephone interviews creates a conducive research setting for sharing sensitive information.⁹⁸ It also provides an increased sense of safety to the interviewer without having to visit difficult or dangerous environments.⁹⁹ Moreover, it gives interviewers the flexibility to take notes as they wish without distracting the interviewee.¹⁰⁰

Generally, in qualitative interviews the interviewer is in the driving seat, determining most aspects of the interview process. This lack of power within the interview situation can result in participants providing “imperfect, ambiguous, incomplete or otherwise unsuccessful representations of their actual knowledge and opinions” which negatively impacts the quality of the data obtained.¹⁰¹ Telephone interviews naturally allow

⁹⁴ Cachia & Milward (n55)

⁹⁵ Cachia & Milward (n55)

⁹⁶ Holt (n12)

⁹⁷ McCoyd & Kerson (n1)

⁹⁸ Sturges & Hanrahan (n15)

⁹⁹ Carr & Worth (n2)

¹⁰⁰ Carr & Worth (n2)

¹⁰¹ Shuy (n16)

participants to have greater control over the social space in which the research takes place compared to face-to-face interviews,¹⁰² redressing the inherent power imbalance. This reduces the social pressure and improves the rapport between the interviewer and interviewee.¹⁰³

Some types of visual data like one's appearance (class, race, gender, clothing, accent etc.) may influence the interviewee in face-to-face interviews, subjecting the data collected to bias.¹⁰⁴ Although, such observable characteristics can help the interviewer and the interviewee "orient towards each other,"¹⁰⁵ it can also create barriers between the interviewer and interviewee in the form of 'interviewer effect'.¹⁰⁶ Such characteristics can reduce the level of objectivity in the interview process thereby having a negative impact on the quality of data collected. Efforts are made in face-to-face interviews to neutralise 'interviewer effects' by adjusting the interviewer's appearance to suit the research environment, however, it is important to point out that telephone interviews naturally minimise such bias as it does not take into account visual factors.¹⁰⁷ An interviewer's accent is a significant characteristic that could influence power and privilege in a research setting and this applies to telephone interviews too.¹⁰⁸ Nevertheless, 'interviewer effect' is far more prominent in face-to-face interviews. Hence, the increased level of anonymity and reduced social presence in telephone interviews, minimises the influence of the interviewer, creating more effective conditions for the interview to produce higher quality data as previously

¹⁰² Stephens (n42)

¹⁰³ McCoyd & Kerson (n1)

¹⁰⁴ Shannon M. Oltmann, 'Qualitative Interviews: A Methodological Discussion Of The Interviewer And Respondent Contexts' (2016) 17 Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research <<https://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/2551/3998>> accessed 7 July 2021.

¹⁰⁵ Holt (n12)

¹⁰⁶ Novick (n14)

¹⁰⁷ Shuy (n16)

¹⁰⁸ Oltmann (n104)

outline by Kirkevold and Bergland.¹⁰⁹ This diminishes issues with privilege and power imbalance in the interview process.¹¹⁰

5. The Impact of Covid-19 on the Use of Telephone Interviews

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the way our lives are conducted. As Teti et al. outline, the pandemic is a “social event that is disrupting our social order.”¹¹¹ The effects of this have also been felt in research, with researchers having to re-design their methodology due to social distancing and lockdown measures.¹¹² This has meant that alternative methods to face-to-face interviews had to be adopted for research to continue. These circumstances have caused a shift from the traditional way of conducting interviews to include the use of technology. The use of telephones and video-conferencing platforms such as Skype, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Webex and GoToMeeting have become the norm¹¹³ for work, personal and research purposes. This illustrates how the use of technology in social interactions is becoming increasingly normalised, making it more effective for facilitating research than face-to-face interviews, especially during the pandemic. In times like this, our reliance on face-to-face interviews must be questioned and consideration should be

¹⁰⁹ Novick (n14)

¹¹⁰ Holt (n12)

¹¹¹ Michelle Teti, Enid Schatz and Linda Liebenberg, 'Methods In The Time Of COVID-19: The Vital Role Of Qualitative Inquiries' (2020) 19 International Journal of Qualitative Methods.

¹¹² Geraldine Foley, 'Video-Based Online Interviews For Palliative Care Research: A New Normal In COVID-19?' (2021) 35 Palliative Medicine.

¹¹³ Foley (n112)

given to whether other methods, like telephone interviews, should continue to be regarded solely as an alternative rather than a primary option.

It usually takes unforeseen issues of access for researchers to primarily use modes like telephone for conducting interviews.¹¹⁴ This article aims to broaden this perception, so that telephone interviews are considered a primary choice of method. I recognise that the purpose and nature of the research plays a big role in determining the mode of interviews used, and that telephone interviews may not suit some studies.¹¹⁵ For example, ethnographic studies or some highly sensitive topics may not be appropriate.¹¹⁶ However, the methodological strengths of telephone interviews are brought to light even more by the pandemic.

With the implementation of social distancing measures worldwide, access to participants became a key obstacle in research. Despite this, telephones allow for quick, simple, safe and cheap access to participants even in such circumstances. There are virtual research methods that could be equally advantageous for accessibility purposes, like online interviews.¹¹⁷ Nonetheless, as telephones are a form of technology that most participants would be familiar with and have access to without the need for internet, it casts a wider net to gather participants. Telephones ensure the inclusion of a wider range of age groups and participants from different socio-economic backgrounds, as virtual research methods will require more expensive technology such smartphones, laptops, computers and reliable internet connection.

¹¹⁴ Holt (n12)

¹¹⁵ Oltmann (n104)

¹¹⁶ Lechuga (n13)

¹¹⁷ Valeria Lo Iacono, Paul Symonds and David H.K. Brown, 'Skype As A Tool For Qualitative Research Interviews' (2016) 21 Sociological Research Online.

As a result, virtual research methods will only be considered in a limited capacity; especially, in relation to its impact on telephone interviews.

During the pandemic, many people have had to conduct their lives differently with working from home, caring responsibilities, home schooling, and health concerns to mention a few factors. This has increased work and home pressures for some, therefore making them harder to reach due to lockdown measures. For example, in a women-dominated profession like teaching,¹¹⁸ access to participants has become even harder due to added pressures during the pandemic. Studies show that work-life-balance for women during the Covid-19 pandemic has been disproportionately affected by the exacerbation of traditional gender stereotypes and inequalities within families and society as a whole.¹¹⁹ Understandably these are trying times for many people, so gathering participants can be tough even when using methods of data collection that are more conducive to the circumstances. Therefore, the flexibility telephone interviews provide to the interviewee by allowing interviews to be conducted at a time and place suited to them is even more important, and it may make participation in research more agreeable to them.

Research settings for interviews were limited during lockdown measures as people were not allowed to leave their homes. These restrictions meant that for many participants finding the most convenient setting may have been more challenging.

¹¹⁸ 'School Teacher Workforce' (*Ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk*, 2021) <<https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/workforce-and-business/workforce-diversity/school-teacher-workforce/latest#:~:text=Summary%20of%20School%20teacher%20workforce%20By%20ethnicity%20and%20gender%20Summary&text=in%202019%2C%2075.8%25%20of%20>> accessed 22 April 2021.

¹¹⁹ Heejung Chung, Holly Birkett, Sarah Forbes and Hyojin Seo, 'Covid-19, Flexible Working, And Implications For Gender Equality In The United Kingdom' (2021) 35 *Gender & Society*.

External factors such as distractions and disturbances around the participant may be a major cause of concern for the interviewer and potentially the interviewee. This is especially true for those with parental and caring responsibilities. In this case, the both the interviewer and interviewee have less control over the social space in which the interview takes place. Nevertheless, telephones present the option of going outside the home environment to participate in an interview, without having to rely on the internet.

Yet, video-conferencing platforms were heavily-used during the pandemic to conduct online meetings between people.¹²⁰ This established a new 'normal' where interactions with another person could take place with visual data available unlike with telephone calls. Although, video-calls allow the interviewer and the interviewee to see each other, we typically only see the interviewee's face, possibly missing visual cues from the rest of the body.¹²¹ This limits the visual data obtained and its relevance to the study must be considered. Notably, there is strength in "staying at the level of the text", allowing the interviewer to focus solely on the words spoken and the aural cues in the interview.¹²²

In addition, using video during online interviews will subject participants at home to the interviewer looking into their personal space, which could raise issues of privacy. The "researcher gaze" becomes even more penetrating and intrusive in such circumstances, causing some participants to feel more comfortable and safe¹²³ with

¹²⁰ Foley (n112)

¹²¹ Lo Iocono, Symonds & Brown (n117)

¹²² Holt (n12)

¹²³ McCoyd & Kerson (n1)

solely audio communication, especially when interviews may be conducted by a stranger. There are ways to blur or change backgrounds on the various video-conferencing platforms¹²⁴ however, it is notable that telephone calls do not present this issue, thereby requiring less effort on the part of the interviewee to protect their personal space.

Overall, the Covid-19 pandemic has had an impact on the way in which we conduct our lives and this may have lasting effects. This is true for the future of qualitative interviewing as such unprecedented circumstances have required researchers to broaden their thinking and embrace methods that were previously underutilised due to its perceived inferiority to face-to-face interviews. Telephone interviews are one such method, however, with the advent of the internet, online interviews have quickly overshadowed it as a mode of interview. Online interviews have been known to challenge methodological norms, bringing with it an sense of excitement.¹²⁵ It seems like the pandemic has fuelled this further with the advent and prominent use of numerous online platforms. As the trend shows, although telephone interviews provide a simple, cost-effective and widely accessible method of data collection, it may continue to be neglected as a primary method in qualitative research post-pandemic. It is worth noting, however, that all these online platforms are based on traditional qualitative methods like in-person meetings, telephone calls and letters.¹²⁶ Therefore, telephone interviews are a tried and tested mode of interviews, making it reliable and more well-established than online platforms. It also has minimal issues with regard to

¹²⁴ Lo Iocono, Symonds & Brown (n117)

¹²⁵ Novick (n14)

¹²⁶ Reference is made here to video-calls, conference calls and email interviews.

privacy and confidentiality unlike some online platforms.¹²⁷ The next section will be providing an example from my study to show how it can continue to be a useful and advantageous method now and in future research.

6. Reflections From My Study

My research explores the role of the education system in informing children aged 7-14 of their legal responsibilities, with a specific focus on criminal responsibility. The age of criminal responsibility in England and Wales is currently set at ten¹²⁸ which is significantly lower than the average age in Europe, which is fourteen.¹²⁹ One of the key reasons provided by government for the lack of legal change is that children aged ten have the ability to differentiate between right and wrong.¹³⁰ The effect of mandatory education on a child's understanding of their role as legal and moral agents, as required by this law, could have an impact on the appropriateness of the government's reasoning, but is not clearly defined. Therefore, my research aims to look into the primary and middle school national curriculum and what is being taught around criminal responsibility to children in this age group, in order to understand what they actively learn about in terms of their moral and legal responsibility. The aim is to reveal layers to the problem through exploratory research which may highlight a range of

¹²⁷ Bojana Lobe, David Morgan and Kim A. Hoffman, 'Qualitative Data Collection In An Era Of Social Distancing' (2020) 19 International Journal of Qualitative Methods.

¹²⁸ Section 16 Children and Young Persons Act 1963

¹²⁹ Ido Weijers, 'The Minimum Age Of Criminal Responsibility In Continental Europe Has A Solid Rational Base' (2016) 67 NILQ.

¹³⁰ HC Deb 18 December 2012, vol 555, col 3W 56

causes or alternative options, to protect children from the weight of the law. Here reflections from my doctoral research methodology will be discussed, however, empirical comparisons based on the findings of my research will not be considered as the study has not been completed at the time of writing this article.

I decided that the best place to start would be to speak to teachers who engage with children aged seven to fourteen to obtain insight into the legal consciousness of pupils in this age group, and to find out about what schools do to inform children of their legal responsibility. I started planning my methodology with only face-to-face interviews in mind however, due to the initial difficulties I experienced with accessing teachers and poor participation rates, I elected to include telephone interviews as well. Giving participants the option to choose a mode of interview, that suited their personal circumstances, allowed them to feel supported in the research process. This also allowed for flexibility in my methodology, which proved useful when Covid-19 social distancing measures came into place during my study. As part of my research I was able to conduct semi-structured interviews with twelve teachers. Six face-to-face interviews and six telephone interviews were conducted; this was wholly dependent on the option chosen by the teachers.

6.1 Benefits of Using Telephone Interviews

6.1.1 Access and Participation

As with some of the studies mentioned before, I used telephone interviews due to challenges I experienced with conducting face-to-face interviews. I contacted many schools in the North East of England to gain access to primary/middle schools however, in most cases, I could not speak to anyone beyond the reception staff. This made it difficult to cross the first hurdle of getting in contact with teachers. Using snowball sampling, I was able to overcome the 'gatekeeper' hurdle and generate more interest in my study as a contact, made through me or an intermediary, made it more likely for teachers to respond positively to my request to interview them. For example, one headteacher was happy to participate in my study however, with Christmas concerts coming up, she had no time or space to meet in-person. Having the option to do the interview on the telephone made it much easier to work around her schedule thus increasing the participation rate in my study. My sample size would have reduced significantly if telephone interviews were not used as teachers, with their busy schedules,¹³¹ would have found it hard to make time to speak to me in-person.

6.1.2 Costs

Using telephone interviews broadened my sample to include teachers from schools beyond Newcastle-upon-Tyne, which minimised my travel costs and broadened my geographic diversity (to include different types of schools) within the North East of England. Furthermore, as the telephone interviews were conducted using the free minutes on my mobile phone plan, I did not have to incur any costs when conducting the interviews. Only four interviews required me to travel out of Newcastle and they all took place on the same day, as the teachers in the area knew each other, minimising

¹³¹ Helen Ward, 'Teachers In England Work Longest Hours In Europe' (*TES*, 2019) <<https://www.tes.com/news/teachers-england-work-longest-hours-europe>> accessed 15 April 2021.

my travel costs. PhD students like myself who do not drive and those with limited funding will be able to minimise costs with the use of telephone interviews making research more feasible and affordable. Telephone interviews also helped reduce the time spent planning the interview, travel back and forth and conducting the interview.

6.1.3 Conducive Research Settings

Giving participants the choice regarding the mode of interview allowed them to decide on the research setting most conducive to them. The trend that emerged was that teachers who chose to speak to me during work hours preferred doing it on the telephone whereas, those who were able to make time outside work hours chose to meet in-person. Those who chose to do it on the telephone were able to find a time and space that worked best for them, putting them at ease as they were in a familiar environment and they could prepare for the call. As the researcher, although I had control over the interview process, sharing this power over the social space, by allowing the interviewee to determine the interview time and setting, helped those teachers build trust in me.

6.1.4 Redressing Power Imbalance

There was a perceived reciprocity felt from both ends in the interview process; they were doing me a favour by sharing their knowledge and experience with me, whilst I could make the interview more participant-centred by accommodating their needs. The participants were told what they were going to be asked beforehand so that they had some time to think about it. Knowing what would happen in the interview reduced

the uncertainty around the interview process, making the participants feel more equal in status. This contributed towards balancing the power relations in the interviews.

As I was not physically required to go anywhere for the interview, the participants had the possibility to call off or rearrange the telephone interview knowing that it would not be too inconvenient for me. This distance provided by interacting on the telephone gives the interviewee more freedom to participate in the interview as they wish. Furthermore, the 'interviewer effects', with the exception of accent, were mostly mitigated in the telephone interviews I conducted, keeping the interviews more objective and less subjected to bias.

6.2 How Did the Challenges Posed by Face-to-Face Interviews Affect My Telephone Interviews?

6.2.1 Interview Duration

As I carried out both face-to-face and telephone interviews, I was able to make a comparison between the length of the interviews using the two modes. My legal research study has a small sample size and therefore, I cannot make a generalisation, however, I can investigate the general assumption that telephone interviews are shorter using my findings. I found that the average duration of the telephone interviews was approximately 34 minutes, whereas face-to-face interviews were only around 22 minutes long. However, it is worth noting that both my longest interview (50 minutes) and my shortest interview (19 minutes) were conducted using telephones. Thus, from my study it is hard to determine whether telephone interviews by nature will be shorter; it appears to be dependent on other factors which will be discussed below. The longer

interviews (with the exception of one interview) took place outside working hours which allowed the participant to take more time out to share their teaching experience with me. Three out of six of the telephone interviews that took place during office hours stayed mainly within the 20 minute range; this also included the shortest interview.

As teachers are generally quite busy,¹³² the time constraints on them may have had an effect on the length of the interview. I took this into consideration when asking for their availability to participate in the interview. Additionally, I designed the interview questions to take roughly 15-20 minutes if they provided short answers. This was to ensure that the teachers would be able to answer all the guiding questions and time dependent, they could answer any further questions based on information shared in their responses. None of the telephone interviews were stopped by participants because of time constraints. Instead, all my interviews naturally came to an end just as in-person conversations do. Due to the exploratory nature of my research, the preliminary findings suggest that approximately 20 minutes was sufficient for the teachers to share relevant parts of the curriculum, their teaching experiences, and provide specific examples. Hence, the research purpose is important when considering the use of telephone interviews research and the way they are conducted must be tailored accordingly.

6.2.2 Quality of Data

The length of the interview did not play a major role in my research as all the teachers covered the guiding questions and provided some examples to support their

¹³² Ward (n131)

responses; the level of detail in the examples shared was the only difference. For example, a few of the teachers would summarise their experiences to share their main point, whereas some other teachers would explain their experiences further by furnishing their answers with more detail. This was primarily dependent on the personality of the teacher. The talkative participants liked to provide more details whereas the others were happy to respond to the guiding questions and further questions succinctly. During the data analysis process, I found it interesting that I had to sift through the more detailed interviews while the more succinct answers made the thematic coding process easier. Hence, longer interviews did not always indicate that there were more relevant points shared and this was true for both telephone and face-to-face interviews. From my research process so far, there is no notable difference in the quality of data collected through telephone interviews and face-to-face interviews.

6.2.3 Rapport

Cold-calling and emailing schools without a mutual contact gave me the impression they were suspicious of me and my research. Using snowball sampling made it easier to build trust as there was a mutual contact who introduced me to participants favourable towards partaking in my research. Apart from me, the participant also had the mutual contact to deal with in the research process, making it easier for them to speak to a stranger like me. I found that the more unknown the mutual contact was to me and/or the participant, the likelihood of using telephone interviews increased. The telephone provided the distance necessary to make the participant feel comfortable and safe enough to speak to me. Almost all the participants I approached with my inquiry seemed to find it fascinating and were happy to share anything that they knew. This positive outlook and curiosity into my research meant that most of the participants

engaged actively during the interview process. This was the same for both the telephone and face-to-face interviews hence, it added to the quality of responses provided by the interviewees.

Only one of the teachers in a face-to-face interview seemed less engaged but that could be because she only taught language classes, as a result, her responses were usually limited as she must have felt there was not much she could contribute to a discussion on criminal responsibility. There was more engagement from this participant when I tried asking general questions about the students she teaches and their ability to understand concepts like legal responsibility. Other teachers in my sample who did not teach classes/workshops related to legal responsibilities drew on their previous experience teaching British Values or PSHE (Personal, Social, Health and Economic education) to respond to the questions. Starting my interview with questions on the interviewee's teaching background provided me with information that permitted me to frame or order the questions better for each individual. This technique was equally beneficial in both modes of interviews.

6.2.4 Absence of Visual Data

Initially, it was difficult to navigate through the telephone interviews without visual cues that would indicate if the participant was done talking, taking a pause to think, or whether they understood the question from the way I phrased it. However, as I carried out more telephone interviews, it was easier to let the participants take their time in telephone interviews to pause and make indications through aural cues. I also got into the habit of articulating my thoughts and actions clearly which set a precedent for the interviewee to do the same so that we could both discern what was going on. In

addition to the verbal cues I used to replace the effects of nodding, it also helped to ask the interviewee if they had more to share. Additionally, I repeated their point so that I could clarify that my interpretation of what they said was correct. This helped them know I was paying attention, improved my understanding of what was shared and increased data quality.

As highlighted by the literature, the lack of visual data in telephone interviews left me concerned about whether I would be missing key information relevant to my research. However, after conducting my first telephone interview, I realised that the visual data that I obtained in my face-to-face interviews were not relevant to my research. In fact, it helped me listen more actively as I only had to focus on listening and taking notes, rather than making eye contact. Moreover, note-taking can sometimes be unpleasant or distracting for participants.¹³³ As such, I took more notes during my telephone interviews than my face-to-face ones, which proved useful during the transcribing process. The absence of visual cues freed up my attention to engage in note-taking and the interview process better.

On the whole, using telephone interviews in my research proved to be very useful and advantageous, especially with the onset of the pandemic. It provided quality data from a wide range of teachers from different types of schools, which brought out meaningful layers to my findings. In my experience of telephone interviews so far, the advantages have outweighed any factors that could negatively impact the data collected, making it as strong as my face-to-face interviews methodologically. Therefore, in future

¹³³ Miller (n56)

studies I would be inclined to use telephone interviews as the sole primary method of data collection .

7. Conclusion

Telephone interviews are the original synchronous form of interviews using technology. Researchers, including myself, have defaulted to using it when issues such as accessing participants and difficulties conducting face-to-face interviews due to travel costs, geographical distance, time constraints, or health and safety measures, have arisen. In my case, as a legal researcher exploring a non-legal setting like schools, I experienced barriers that affected the participation rate in my study. The use of telephone interviews as a primary mode of research alongside face-to-face interviews helped overcome this, and it proved to be an equally advantageous mode of interview for collecting data. It has methodological strengths that allow it to stand on its own right, rather than being in the shadow of face-to-face interviews in qualitative research. Some benefits are: it is flexible, safer, cost-effective, facilitates higher participation rates without diminishing the quality of data generated. Furthermore, it reduces the imbalance in power relations that may be experienced between the interviewer and the interviewee, and provides an anonymity that could facilitate the sharing of sensitive data, without concerns of 'surveillance.'¹³⁴ Nevertheless, it is

¹³⁴ Holt (n12)

constantly met with scepticism due to the lack of physical proximity to the interviewee resulting in lost visual data. The importance placed on this visual data, may not be necessary in all studies and hence, researchers should broaden their perception of qualitative research by considering other modes of interviews.

Lockdowns during the Covid-19 pandemic made face-to-face interviews impossible, forcing researchers to broaden their methodological approaches through the use of technology. With the advent of virtual research methods such as online interviews, telephone interviews continue to remain side-lined. As Novick states “it seems that telephone interviews neither have the endorsement enjoyed by face-to-face interviews, which are seen as the gold standard, nor the excitement generated by internet interviews, which are seen as ‘challenging methodological boundaries’.”¹³⁵ This suggests that as virtual research methods become more prominent, telephone interviews may continue to be side-lined. This article hopes to remind researchers of the strengths of telephone interviews in light of the pandemic and advocates for its use as an effective, primary mode of qualitative interviews.

¹³⁵ Novick (n14)