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Abstract

When conducting online video interviews, researchers must be prepared for disruptions with the technology. In this essay I present reflections on my own decision-making processes during technological disruptions while conducting over 36 hours of online video interviews using the videoconferencing software, Zoom. I argue that researchers must consider the severity and frequency of technological disruptions, their research design and goals, and what is happening at the moment a disruption occurs in order to make the best decision possible for how to proceed while still maintaining the integrity of the data generation process.

Keywords

video interviews, internet interviews, online interviews, Zoom, technological disruption, qualitative methods

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Responding to Technological Disruptions During Online Video Interviews Conducted Via Zoom

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When conducting online video interviews, researchers must be prepared for disruptions with the technology. In this essay I present reflections on my own decision-making processes during technological disruptions while conducting over 36 hours of online video interviews using the videoconferencing software, Zoom. I argue that researchers must consider the severity and frequency of technological disruptions, their research design and goals, and what is happening at the moment a disruption occurs in order to make the best decision possible for how to proceed while still maintaining the integrity of the data generation process.

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Introduction

Like many researchers, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in the early months of 2020 forced me to redesign a study that I had originally intended to conduct face-to-face. I had been preparing to conduct a school ethnography to investigate cross-cultural educational relationships among teachers of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and their students. I planned to embed myself in a secondary ESOL classroom for a school year as a participant-observer. I would observe, interact with, speak informally with, and formally interview the teacher and students throughout the duration of the research project. Yet as the spread of the virus became recognized as a global pandemic, many colleges and universities instituted indefinite bans on face-to-face research activities, mine included. To move forward with my work, I decided to redesign my study as a phenomenological ethnography. Rather than embed myself in a classroom, I would conduct a series of in-depth phenomenological interviews (Seidman, 2019) with secondary ESOL teachers about their experiences and understandings of cross-cultural relationships with students and interpret these data through a cultural lens. These interviews would need to be conducted online via Zoom; the videoconferencing platform contracted by my university for online operations.

Much needed to be considered in terms of adapting protocols and processes of the research design to make the shift to an online medium (Walker et al., 2021). While preparing for this change in research design, I reviewed the burgeoning online interview literature to prepare myself for the medium. I found much that was helpful in terms of translating the norms of face-to-face interviews into a virtual format. What I found to be lacking, however, was a discussion of how to approach disruptions caused by the technology while an interview is in process. I describe here an approach I developed during the research process for handling technological disruptions as they arise during interviews in a way that maintains the integrity of data generation.

Synchronous videoconferencing software, such as Zoom or Skype, allows participants to both see and communicate with each other in real time. The use of this software to conduct

research interviews had been gradually expanding over several years until the COVID-19 pandemic caused its use to explode. While preparing to conduct interviews via Zoom, much in the literature helped me to think about how to adapt the principles of face-to-face interviewing to this new medium. For example, researchers must carefully think through the consent process because of the difficulty in obtaining a traditional signed consent form (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Sullivan, 2012). It is also a good idea to request that participants choose a space where they are both comfortable and free from distractions (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Hanna, 2012; Irani, 2019; Lo Iacono et al., 2016). Researchers should consider how to build rapport with participants when not in the same physical space (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Lo Iacono et al., 2016; Mirick & Wladkowski, 2019; Santhiago & Barbosa de Magalhães, 2020; Weller, 2017). They must also pay closer attention to facial cues as body language is often out of the video frame (Gray et al., 2020; Irani, 2019; Lo Iacono et al., 2016; Seitz, 2016). Such counsel was instrumental in being able to shift quickly from a face-to-face to an online research format.

However, once I began conducting interviews and encountered a few technological disruptions, I revisited the literature and found that it inadequately addresses how to respond to these disruptions, which seem inevitable in a virtual research medium. While the disruptions to the interview process caused by technological issues are routinely acknowledged (Adams-Hutcheson & Longhurst, 2017; Archibald et al., 2019; Gray et al., 2020; Irani, 2019; Mirick & Wladkowski, 2019; Seitz, 2016; Sullivan, 2012), such difficulties are generally characterized as unfortunate inconveniences that can disrupt the flow of an interview, make rapport more challenging to achieve, or result in a bit of lost data. The literature's treatment of technological disruptions went no farther than merely pointing out these consequences. A few authors suggested preventative measures to minimize disruptions, such as verifying a stable internet connection and removing other devices from the network (Gray et al., 2020; Seitz, 2016). While certainly advisable to avoid disruptions as much as possible, these measures cannot guarantee that all disruptions will be prevented. There is simply too much that is out of the researcher's control. Others suggest collecting participants' phone numbers during the onboarding process so that phone interviews can be conducted in the event the videoconferencing technology fails (Gray et al., 2020; Mirick & Wladkowski, 2019). It's certainly important to have such a contingency plan in place but only as a last resort for dire circumstances. Surely there are more measured steps that can be taken to address technological disruptions before needing to abruptly end and subsequently restart an interview. The current treatment of the possible technological pitfalls of online video interviews falls short because it leaves unaddressed how best to deal with such problems "in the moment." When technology disrupts an interview, the researcher must make split-second decisions about how best to proceed while still maintaining the integrity and trustworthiness of data generation. As I conducted my research, I documented my responses to technological disruptions during interviews and my rationale for these responses. In the remainder of this essay, I explicate how I approached technological disruptions in online video interviews with an eye towards maintaining the integrity of the data generation process.

Addressing Technological Disruptions as They Occur

I conducted 36 hours of online video interviews via Zoom between November 2020 and January 2021. Over the course of my study, I experienced technological disruptions of varying levels of severity and frequency. Examples include distorted sound, temporary freezes, soundless video, desynchronization of sound and video, and dropped calls, which are in line with the types of disruptions reported in the literature (Archibald et al., 2019; Irani, 2019; Mirick & Wladkowski, 2019; Seitz, 2016). In each instance, I needed to make an immediate decision for how best to proceed with the interview. In making such decisions, I considered the

severity and frequency of the disruptions, my research aims, and the idiosyncrasies of the moment, which might include how far into a response the participant is when the disruption occurs, the state of researcher-participant rapport at that moment, or whether the interview is at its start, middle, or end, among other possibilities.

It is important to note that one's research design and goals will influence one's definitions of "severity" and "frequency." I conducted three 90-minute interviews with each participant, meaning I spent 4 ½ hours with each person. I reasoned that my extended time with participants would yield rich data if disruptions were not too drastic. What I considered a minor disruption in this study, I might consider much more severe in a research design with interviews of shorter duration. While I hope this discussion of my own experience helps researchers think more clearly about how to proceed with disruptions in online video interviews, it should not be interpreted as an ironclad protocol. The specific research and interview context must drive choices about how to respond to technological disruptions during videoconference interviews. Researchers must determine for themselves how best to proceed when the technology interferes with data generation.

In my research, through a process of trial and error, I came to rely on three options for addressing a technological disruption:

- Option 1: Do nothing and allow the interview to continue.
- Option 2: Pause the interview and request the participant repeat an utterance.
- Option 3: Pause the interview and make a change to the technological set-up prior to continuing.

I found that a set of three options offered a degree of flexibility in determining how best to proceed while still allowing for quick decisions. Too many options to consider can be paralyzing. These three options also seemed to be the least disruptive to the interview process because any interruption made was straightforwardly explained to the participant. In one instance I tried furtively adjusting the technology while allowing the participant to continue speaking in hopes of fixing a disruption without alerting the participant and interrupting the interview. This attempt backfired. When the participant noticed the change (I had turned off her video), she believed she was experiencing a problem with the technology on her end. She stopped speaking and began trying to start her video again, forcing me to explain what I had done. It was a mistake that I took pains not to repeat.

I came to consider the array of technological disruptions I encountered to be minor, moderate, or severe. From my perspective, minor disruptions do not affect the flow of the interview, nor do they degrade the quality of the data being generated. They are brief and isolated. Examples of minor disruptions include brief sound distortions or cutouts, where the few words affected can still be deciphered or easily inferred from context. For minor disruptions, I always ignored the problem and allowed the interview to continue.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, severe disruptions completely interrupt data generation and threaten to continue doing so if ignored. Examples of severe disruptions in my study include the video and sound completely freezing for an extended period, the sound cutting out for an extended period while the video continued, and participants being dropped from the call and having to log back in. When a severe disruption occurred, I always paused the interview and adjusted technological settings before resuming. Generally, I instructed the participant to disable their video, which usually stabilized the call. I would then prompt the participant to continue, either by repeating the question or mentioning what they had been saying when the disruption occurred. We continued at that point with an interview that was more like a phone interview from my perspective, but my video remained on, and the

participant could still see me. If problems persisted, I disconnected my video and, if necessary, initiated a phone interview contingency plan (Gray et al., 2020; Mirick & Wladkowski, 2019).

Despite the headaches they cause, I find dealing with minor and severe disruptions to be relatively straightforward. Moderate disruptions are much trickier. Moderate disruptions interrupt data generation somewhat, but not as acutely as severe disruptions. They feel less dramatic than a severe disruption, and it is not clear that they will continue. Examples of moderate disruptions in my research include distortions and freezes that last long enough to impede understanding of what the participant is saying for brief periods of time and momentary distortions that become so frequent they begin to hinder comprehension. In my mind there was no definitive pathway to follow to resolve a moderate disruption. My choice of action depended heavily on the context of the moment and my research aims, and over the course of my research I used all three options for moderate disruptions—do nothing; pause and request the participant repeat an answer; and pause and adjust the technology. There was much to consider in the moment of disruption. Would stopping the interview interrupt the participant's train of thought and prevent further data generation on a topic important to my research question? Was stopping the interview necessary because I had missed too much of what the participant had said? Would interrupting the participant damage rapport? Were disruptions picking up in frequency or becoming more intermittent?

Three distinct examples help illustrate how the specifics of the moment can guide the researcher's decision-making process in confronting moderate disruptions. In one interview, the participant's sound cut out for approximately 15 seconds in the middle of a lengthy anecdote. When the sound returned, I opted to do nothing because she was in the flow of speech and what she was saying at the moment the sound returned was directly relevant to my main research question. I felt it was more important to have what she was saying in the flow and to let her build on her own thoughts, rather than interrupt her train of thought and potentially miss something important by putting it out of her mind. In another instance with a similar disruption, I opted to act differently. On this occasion when the sound cut out for about 15 seconds, I chose to stop the participant and have her repeat herself because she had just begun to answer a question. I had missed the set-up of the anecdote, so her narrative was not making sense. She was also just beginning her thought process for that topic, so I felt that asking her to start over would not risk losing an important line of reflection. In a final example, small audio issues began to occur during an interview. It began with momentary distortions, then progressed to a dropped word or two. These problems picked up in frequency and started to interfere with my understanding of the participant's speech. At that point, I paused the interview and requested that the participant turn off her video to prevent the problem from worsening. In each instance of moderate technological disruption, I had a distinct reason for responding to the disruption in a particular manner, always considering my research goals and always with the aim of maintaining the integrity of the data.

Conclusion

Videoconference software is a tool that holds much potential for conducting interviews in ways that can advance qualitative research. It allowed me to move forward with my planned research during the pandemic rather than stagnate and wonder when I could get out into the field. For that fact alone, I am incredibly grateful that this medium can be used to conduct research. I believe, as well, that participants and I were able to generate high quality data during our online video interviews. We were able to establish a strong rapport, and they were quite forthcoming about their experiences and perceptions. Multiple participants even chose to share highly personal and sensitive narratives, becoming emotional in the process. That I perceive the data generated via an online platform to be of high quality is in line with Jenner and Myers

(2019), who find negligible difference in the quality of data produced in online video interviews and in-person interviews held in a private setting.

My experience with online video interviews also suggests, however, that researchers conducting online video interviews must be prepared to respond to technological disruptions. This is true for any platform that may be used. While I have exclusively used Zoom for research interviews, I have used other platforms such as Skype, Webex, and Google Meet in my personal and professional life and have encountered technological disruptions with all of them at one time or other. It is simply a problem of the medium that researchers must be prepared to handle. In addition to any mitigating steps, they may take in preparing to conduct online video interviews, they should also anticipate such problems as an inevitable aspect of this interview format and develop a plan for how they might proceed in various circumstances. Such a plan might include parameters for when to ignore and when to address a disruption, various actions to take in response to disruptions of different severity, a consideration of what constitutes a minor or severe disruption given the study design, a phone interview contingency, how the researcher will document decisions made in response to technological disruptions, and any context-specific issues that might need to be considered. Researchers should also think over how they will report technological disruptions and the rationale for their approach to addressing such disruptions, as transparency in reporting is important to establish trustworthiness.

The decisions researchers make to address technological disruptions in online video interviews will depend on the purpose and design of the research as well as the situational context in the moment a disruption occurs. I hope that my description of the various ways I approached minor, moderate, and severe technological disruptions can aid researchers in how to think about these issues and create a plan of attack to deal with them that is appropriate to their research goals and conditions. As online video interviews become more commonplace in social science research, further consideration of how to manage inevitable technological difficulties is needed to help anticipate solutions that maintain the integrity of the research process.

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