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Navigating Power Dynamics in Virtual Interviews with Sex Workers during COVID-19: A Researcher-Participant Perspective

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Abstract

Sex workers may show extreme sensitivity to power relations during qualitative research due to the previous experiences of stigmatization and marginalization. The purpose of this article is to analyze how technologically mediated communication between researchers and participants during an interview may influence the scope of control exercised by the interactional partners. During the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, I conducted 16 qualitative phone and videoconference interviews with female sex workers in Poland discussing the social stigmas they encounter. Each interview was followed up with extensive field notes that were analyzed using the procedures of grounded theory methodology. These very field notes serve as the basis for the paper herein. As a result of the analysis, I distinguished areas of power negotiated by the interviewer and interviewees in successive phases: before, during, and after the interview. The sense of control over the respective aspects of a study may contribute to the establishment of a more democratic power relationship between the researcher and the participants who belong to a population bearing a stigma.

Keywords

researcher-participant power relation, videoconference interviews, Skype, qualitative methods, stigma

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Navigating Power Dynamics in Virtual Interviews with Sex Workers during COVID-19: A Researcher-Participant Perspective

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Sex workers may show extreme sensitivity to power relations during qualitative research due to the previous experiences of stigmatization and marginalization. The purpose of this article is to analyze how technologically mediated communication between researchers and participants during an interview may influence the scope of control exercised by the interactional partners. During the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, I conducted 16 qualitative phone and videoconference interviews with female sex workers in Poland discussing the social stigmas they encounter. Each interview was followed up with extensive field notes that were analyzed using the procedures of grounded theory methodology. These very field notes serve as the basis for the paper herein. As a result of the analysis, I distinguished areas of power negotiated by the interviewer and interviewees in successive phases: before, during, and after the interview. The sense of control over the respective aspects of a study may contribute to the establishment of a more democratic power relationship between the researcher and the participants who belong to a population bearing a stigma.

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Introduction

In mid-2019, I launched a study on the experience of stigma (Goffman, 1963) by women in Poland who were involved in different types of sex work (e.g., escort, striptease, erotic massage, erotic webcamming, recording porn videos, and shooting photo sessions). I collected data through in-depth, individual, face-to-face interviews carried out in places indicated by the interviewees. This method of conducting research worked well in my previous project on the social organization of the work of escort agencies in Poland (Ślęzak, 2019). Unfortunately, my research plans were thwarted by the COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions introduced in Poland regarding mobility, face-to-face contact with unrelated people, and university regulations, which, in the early days of the pandemic, basically banned and, later, significantly restricted the possibility of conducting face-to-face research. In this situation, I decided to change my research focus and conduct technology-mediated interviews (via phone, videoconferencing, and email). Like many researchers at the time (Falter et al., 2022; Marhefka et al., 2020; Newman et al., 2021; Roberts et al., 2021), these methods were an alternative way for me to collect meaningful data, but I would not have resorted to them had it not been for the pandemic. This is because I shared the belief (firmly established in the process of professional socialization) that face-to-face interviews are the gold standard for conducting interviews (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Jenner & Myers, 2019; Krouwel et al., 2019; Oltmann, 2016). For this reason, I initially viewed mediated interviews as a hindrance

and a potential threat to the quality of my research. Having said so much, I quickly noticed that interviews conducted in this way can be saturated, deep, and very long.

Remote interviews have proved useful in many qualitative studies (including pre-pandemic) on difficult and sensitive topics (Bouchard, 2016; Gruber et al., 2020; Krouwel et al., 2019; Peach, 2021; Roberts et al., 2021; Sipes et al., 2019; Whale, 2017). Researchers who have resorted to them indicate that the data thus obtained are in no way inferior (and often superior) in quality when compared with face-to-face interviews, that there are no major problems in establishing rapport, that participants are satisfied with the way the interview is conducted, and that some participants prefer them over traditional forms of research (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Gray et al., 2020; Jenner & Myers, 2019; Lo Iacono et al., 2016; Valdez & Gubrium, 2020). Nonetheless, I wondered what drove the high performance resulting from the use of over-the-phone and online interviews for my research. What I regard to be a key factor is the participants' more robust agency in exercising control over the setting and course of the interview. This changes the power relationship between me as the researcher and the interviewees.

As played out amid an interaction, power proves situational and is shaped by several factors (such as cultural background, language, gender, age, and social standing of participants). Much as I acknowledge the significance of all the aforementioned factors, I intend to focus on one of them exclusively – technological mediation of the communication between a researcher and the participants. There is a rising trend for research to be based on technological mediation. Hence, it may be useful to consider what such mediation may alter in the way the researchers and the participants control the research situation and express their power. It is for this reason that the purpose of this article is to analyze how the power relations between myself, and the interviewees (female sex workers) were shaped during the different phases of our exchange via videoconferencing, and phone, namely, from the moment of establishing contact for project enrollment until the actual interview and its potential validation. I examine this process by analyzing who of the parties involved had control over aspects of the interview and how they gained control. I embrace an interactionist approach in recognition of the fact that all the power tensions and negotiations under analysis are subtle in nature and unfold in the background of the interactions between the researcher and the participant. All the while, the parties to the conversation strive to maintain a discussion, answer questions, and solve technical problems. I also adopt a constructivist approach, in which the researcher and the interviewee jointly construct the interview situation (Anyan, 2013; Holstein & Gubrium, 2003; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). It is also my assumption that an interview is a hierarchical form of conversation. I acknowledge the significance of fostering such interview conditions to elicit power shifts between interactional partners. The said conditions should engender a framework for the participants to boldly demonstrate their active attitude and display the scope of their power. Face-to-face interviews might readily meet such criteria. However, it is my intention in this paper to bring out those aspects of indirect interviews that help accommodate the requirements of those participants who shun direct interviews that do not provide them with safety and comfort, as was the case of my own study with sex workers. Although it takes far more than merely holding a remote interview for the relationship between the researcher and the participant to reach affinity with an egalitarian exchange, I consider the remote profile of an interview to be facilitatory in this regard. The conclusions disclosed in the article are particularly relevant to interviewees who experience stigmatization and marginalization, and, thereby, show greater sensitivity towards control and power throughout the study. It is precisely for these participants that indirect communication may prove to be an essential pre-requisite for an active co-creation of the interview situation in terms of their specific needs (e.g., as far as the timing and venue of the interview are concerned or regarding their privacy protection; Brownlow & O'Dell, 2002).

In this article, I focus on the power issue in technology-mediated qualitative interviews, which is still under investigated in publications (Brownlow & O'Dell, 2002; James & Busher, 2009; Jenner & Myers, 2019; Linabary & Hamel, 2017; Reich, 2015; Roberts et al., 2021). This is because other authors mainly pay attention to the advantages, disadvantages, and practical issues associated with the use of this type of interview, only mentioning in passing that it can contribute to power equalization between the researcher and the interviewees. The article can facilitate a better understanding of how power relations are shaped during qualitative over-the-phone and online interviews and, as a result, help to make informed decisions about their application, not only in situations "forced" by a pandemic, geographic dispersion of participants or lack of finances but also because of what type of power relations the researcher wants to foster in the study.

I begin the article with a consideration of power in qualitative interviews, with a particular focus on mediated interviews. In the next section, I present the study I conducted on the social stigma experienced by female sex workers in Poland, which is the basis for my further reflections. I then discuss how I and my interviewees acquired/shared/gave up of control over aspects of the interview situation in its subsequent phases. The article concludes with discussion sections and remarks on the limitations of my research.

Power Relations in Qualitative Interviews

A qualitative interview is not a conversation between two peers on equal terms. It is influenced by cultural constructions of similarity, difference, and significance (DeVault & Gross, 2012, p. 215, as cited in Linabary & Hamel, 2017). The uneven allocation of power in an interview can be traced to differences in socioeconomic status, educational or professional background, gender, age, sexual orientation, and ethnic identity of the parties involved (Anyan, 2013; Vähäsantanen & Saarinen, 2013). While these do not necessarily reflect the researcher's advantage over the interviewee in every case (e.g., the status of the researcher may be lower than that of the participants), in many studies the interviewees may feel that they are on the weaker end of the interaction. As a result, the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee is conceptualized as a power relation with an inherent power imbalance (Kvale, 2006; Vähäsantanen & Saarinen, 2013).

A traditional positivist account of the (qualitative) interview assumes that (explicitly or otherwise) the researcher should hold control or power over the respective aspects of the interview. An interview is usually viewed as a one-way dialogue in which the role of the interviewer is to ask, and the interviewee's role is to answer (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003; Kvale, 2006). Thus, the active party in the interaction is the researcher; it is the researcher who designates the venue and topic of the interview, initiates the exchange, poses the questions (disclosing minimal personal information), critically follows up the answers, and closes the conversation (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002; Hoffman, 2007; Kvale, 2006). It is the researcher, as the "expert" (Frost & Elichaooff, 2014; Linabary & Hamel, 2017), who decides what data are incorporated into the research report - and who predominantly benefits from the interview (Hoffman, 2007; Kvale, 2006). This facet was heavily criticized by feminist scholars, who noted that the researcher-interviewee interaction can be potentially exploitative, while traditional methodological approaches reproduce unequal power relations and reinforce the researcher's epistemic authority (Linabary & Hamel, 2017; Reich, 2021). The objections gave rise to research modes with a more participatory profile that, by definition, depart from the traditional positivist concept of the relationship between the researcher and the subject. The use of positionality statements also inclines researchers to reflect on power imbalances and to take more informed actions towards study participants (Reich, 2021). To shorten the distance between the researchers and the participants, many researchers also employ various strategies,

such as self-disclosure, sharing their experiences and knowledge, answering questions, and expressing feelings (Fontana & Frey, 2005; Hoffman, 2007). However, regardless of these actions, the interviewee may still perceive the interviewer as possessing greater power (Anyan, 2013; Ellis, 1999, as cited in Hoffman, 2007).

New approaches to qualitative interviews recognize the active role of the interviewee (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002), who is also in a power position and can tip the situation towards the success or failure of an interview (Anyan, 2013). Power shifts in an interview can be viewed through the lens of the concept of three dimensions of power proposed by Lukes (1974). The first dimension refers to a situation where control is explicitly displayed, and power is overt. This can be seen, for example, when the interviewees refuse to answer a question, interrupt the interview, or start asking the researcher questions themselves (Anyan, 2013; cf. also Bengtsson & Fynbo, 2018; Hoffman, 2007; Vähäsantanen & Saarinen, 2013). The second dimension pertains to an indirect contest of power between parties through commanding, controlling, setting, and influencing rules of the exchange; dissuading actions; and agenda setting. The interviewee may resist the agenda and, for example, respond in a way that discourages the researcher from continuing a particular thread, veer off-topic, or remain silent (Anyan, 2013; Bengtsson & Fynbo, 2018; Kvale, 2006; Vähäsantanen & Saarinen, 2013). Finally, the third dimension touches on what the parties value, which stories and perspectives are privileged and reified, and what is understood as "the truth" (Hoffman, 2007, p. 321).

Thus, in a qualitative interview, power shifts back and forth between the interviewer and the interviewee, who "are constantly seeking to (dis)equalize their respective authorities" (Nunkoosing, 2005, p. 699). This "conversational dance" between the interviewer and the interviewee (Hoffman, 2007) unfolds through interaction: in the process of adjusting to each other, interpreting each other's actions, and, on that basis, taking subsequent actions, which make up the process of negotiating power during the interview (cf. also Vähäsantanen & Saarinen, 2013).

Power Relations in Mediated Interviews

Researchers who relied on mediated interviews for their qualitative projects repeatedly made a point of such interviews having the potential to democratize the research process and equalize power relations between partners (Burns, 2010; Kaufmann, 2020; Melis Cin et al., 2023; Weller, 2017). In effect, they can foster conditions for empowering interviewees (Oltmann, 2016). While it is difficult to point to a comprehensive discussion of this issue, I discuss the changes in power relations between the researcher and the interviewees in qualitative interviews via phone and internet, drawing on the available literature. The key factor is the flexible setup of mediated research that allows for greater accommodation of the diverse needs of participants and their preferences in terms of the means of interaction (Linabary & Hamel, 2017; e.g., interviewees can choose whether to be interviewed by phone, email, or VoIP, with or without camera), as well as the timing and venue (Lo Iacono et al., 2016). This facilitates an opportunity to engage those categories of interlocutors who, due to busy schedules or limited mobility, usually decline to participate (Hanna, 2012; Janghorban et al., 2014; Jenner & Myers, 2019; Meho, 2006; Sipes et al., 2019).

Most remote interviews are conducted by interviewees in the privacy of their own homes - in their own private space, while sitting on their bed, or at their own desk (Lo Iacono et al., 2016; Whale, 2017). Thanks to physical distance, virtual and phone interviews are less intrusive than when the researcher enters the participant's home environment (Hanna, 2012; Whale, 2017). This is by virtue of a lower likelihood of the researcher accidentally or intentionally violating the interviewee's established boundaries between private and public zones (Peach, 2021; Sipes et al., 2019).

As observed by Quartiroli et al. (2017), the interviewee's presence within a space they are comfortable with turns the odds in favor of their involvement with the interview, which proves challenging in an environment where structured hierarchies of power are embedded (Melis Cin et al., 2023). The researcher can also designate the venue of the interview according to their liking and choose one they find most agreeable, an opportunity that might not be available with face-to-face interviews. However, should the interviewee be reluctant to turn on the camera, the researcher may not have any input regarding the interview space. The researcher also has no control over the factors that may breach confidentiality (be it objects or persons), distract the interviewee, or cause the interviewee to focus on certain threads and overlook others (Lo Iacono et al., 2016). The researcher also has limited control over the technical side of the interview, as there typically is no way of determining which equipment (microphone, webcam, the quality of the computer, and internet connection speeds) the participant employs (Weller, 2015).

The change in power relations derives from a stronger sense of anonymity on the part of the interviewees as opposed to face-to-face interviews. In remote interviews (especially in audio-only settings), participants have more opportunities to withhold certain information (such as appearance, easily observable features of socio-demographic status, and personal information) from the researcher (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Hanna, 2012; Holt, 2010; Jenner & Myers, 2019; Peach, 2021). The fact that not all information can be gleaned from tone of voice or manner of speech can be interpreted as limiting the potential for both parties to confront issues of privilege and power within the research setting (Holt, 2010), or, alternatively, an opportunity to conduct unbiased research (Brownlow & O'Dell, 2002). Above all, interview participation may be encouraged by a sense of anonymity for those who tend to avoid involvement in research for fear of revealing their identity (even to the researcher). This is why mediated interviews make some interviewees feel more comfortable and confident than in face-to-face interviews (Bouchard, 2016; Weller, 2015; Whale, 2017). This is especially evident in those studies where there is a particular risk that the researcher can be seen as a figure of authority and control (Whale, 2017), e.g., in research on youth and sensitive topics. The physical absence of the researcher during the interview allows for reducing participants' perceptions of risk of exposure or embarrassment (Melis Cin et al., 2023).

Reliance on mediated interviews diminishes the researcher's control over the course of the study. Some researchers experienced an increased likelihood of alterations, sometimes at short notice, as well as participant absenteeism (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Holt, 2010; Janghorban et al., 2014; Weller, 2015). However, this does not mean that interviewees notoriously shorten, reschedule, or cancel interviews over the phone and via VoIP, as this has not been the case in many studies (Jenner & Myers, 2019). Nonetheless, physical distance certainly makes it easier for the participant to exit the interview (Bertrand & Bourdeau, 2010; Janghorban et al., 2014; Whale, 2017). They thus have a high degree of control over how much they contribute to the research under way (Hanna & Mwale, 2017; Melis Cin et al., 2023; Sipes et al., 2019). This is particularly evident in remote interviews that are text-based, in which interviewees can respond at their own pace and on their own terms, often ignoring researchers' requests (Burns, 2010; Gruber et al., 2020; James & Busher, 2009; Kaufmann, 2020; Linabary & Hamel, 2017; Meho, 2006). However, the shift in power from researcher-driven, semi-structured interview schedules to a more collaboratively constructed one can result in improving the quality of participants' reflections (Bertrand & Bourdeau, 2010; Burns, 2010; Linabary & Hamel, 2017; Parker, 2008; Weller, 2017).

A remote study may also be more ethically transparent. The use of phone and online communication makes researchers more accessible (Parker, 2008). To obtain informed consent, researchers can send research information sheets and consent forms (via videoconference chat, email, or dedicated website) before the interview, giving participants

more time to read about the study and the opportunity to ask questions before the interview begins (Sipes et al., 2019). During a VoIP interview, both parties have access to the recording, which changes the arrangement of power, since usually, only the researcher has access thereto. Similarly, the interviewees have complete access to the data they generate in an email interview as well, so they can continue to revisit and (re)construct their narratives throughout the process (James & Busher, 2009).

In other words, mediated interviews promote settings that are more conducive to various modes of power expression by the participants (Lobe et al., 2020; Weller, 2015). This, in turn, may imply greater participation comfort, an increased willingness for in-depth reflections, and better data quality.

Materials and Methods

I am a sociologist who has conducted qualitative research on various aspects of female sex work in Poland for 16 years. Initially, embracing the perspective of sociology of work, I was mainly concerned with the social organization of independent and managed indoor sex work (Ślęzak, 2019). However, I gradually became increasingly interested in the topic of stigma, which regularly came up during interviews and conversations with female sex workers. Upon becoming familiar with the stories of the women who participated in my research, I came to acknowledge the severity of the negative impact of stigma on various aspects of their lives. This holds true for the researcher-interviewer relationship as well, since stigma (even if not experienced but anticipated) can affect the course of interactions in this context as well, as my experience shows (Ślęzak, 2013). Hence, I decided to start research on the various dimensions of sex worker stigma in order to better understand its mechanisms and thus contribute to its mitigation.

I conducted the research that serves as grounds for this article as part of a grant (supported by the National Science Center, Poland, DEC-2018/02/X/HS6/02419)- on social stigma experienced by female sex workers in Poland. Although I started the project in 2019, I scheduled its main empirical part for the first half of 2020, which, as it turned out, was the time of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the project schedule, the precarious situation related to the unpredictable development of the pandemic, as well as the contacts already established with several potential participants, I decided not to discontinue the project, merely changing the form to virtual interviews. When arranging the details of the interview with the participants, I offered them a choice of interviewing modalities - either by phone, via e-mail, or via videoconferencing Skype (depending on their preference with or without a webcam). I wanted the interviewees to choose for themselves whichever modality of contact they felt most comfortable with, in order to create the most agreeable environment for them to talk about their difficult experiences of stigmatization. A similar strategy was also adopted by other researchers who, because of the pandemic, changed their research plans from face-to-face interviews to a mixed-mode design that included remote types of interviews (e.g., Gruber et al., 2020).

As it turned out, the women with whom I negotiated the terms of their participation in the study readily agreed to mediated interviews, especially online. This may have been because there was a lockdown in Poland at the time, and educational pursuits at all levels and professional activities (in occupations where this was possible) took place online. Thus, virtual interviewing may have been seen as the obvious solution in this situation. Another reason may have been that most of the participants had past or current experience with online sex work and were comfortable with this mode of communication. Out of the 16 interviews completed, two participants chose to be interviewed by phone, with one additional virtually initiated interview

but continued over the phone due to difficulties with the internet connection. The remaining participants chose videoconferencing, with either the camera on (8) or off (5).

I opted for Skype for videoconferencing purposes as it was the most familiar platform for me (and, as it turned out, for my interlocutors as well). All the participants already had a Skype account, which they used for private and/or business (sex work-related) purposes. In fact, Skype proved to be the most common communicator used in social research (Archibald et al., 2019; Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Given & Saumure, 2015; Janghorban et al., 2014; Lobe et al., 2020; Weller, 2015), although Zoom or Microsoft Teams may be on the rise as they were universally used for telework and online education during the pandemic (Archibald et al., 2019; Falter et al., 2022; Gray et al., 2020; Greenspan et al., 2021; Halliday et al., 2021). In no instance did any of the interviewees choose to be interviewed via email. Nonetheless, we exchanged numerous emails before and after each Skype or over-the-phone interview. These emails established the terms of participation and clarified or expanded on themes raised during the interview. Thus, I used email not to conduct the actual interviews, but as a supplementary method of data collection.

I adopted a two-pronged approach to recruiting participants for my study: using the snowball technique (Patton, 2002) and through a sex workers-led organization. The selection of interviewees was followed by a theoretical sampling procedure (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Thus, I interviewed women from different segments of the sex work landscape (erotic masseuses, escorts, cam models, porn actresses, strippers), with different seniority in sex work (from a few weeks to a few years), and of different ages (from 20 to 30-odd years). During the period of my research, the interviewees lived and performed sex work in five major Polish cities. It is also worth noting that most of the participants were students or had higher education and exhibited high communication skills (including for online exchange).

The interview questions dealt with experiences of stigma in particular segments of sex work in relation to different categories of interaction partners. The interviews conducted lasted from 100 to 235 minutes. In keeping with the quality criteria proposed by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), I rate the quality of the interviews as high. The interviewees provided elaborate, rich, descriptive answers that were relevant to my questions, with the interviews constituting complete stories with many details and in-depth reflections that became the focus of interpretation throughout the interviewing process. Some interviewees were compensated for the interview, as mutually agreed. Out of these, some asked to donate their compensation to an Emergency Fund organized online by the Sex Work Poland collective to financially support the sex worker community during the pandemic.

The article is based on an analysis of my field notes, which I drafted from the time I first contacted each of the interviewees until the last email exchange. The notes were used to record my observations and interpretations of my and the interviewees' words and actions (but also, for example, to record body language and tone of voice). I fleshed out my notes in conjunction with the transcription of the interviews when I carefully reviewed the recording (either audio and/or video). Revisiting the video or audio for scrutiny multiple times allowed me to notice many interaction nuances that I had missed during the interaction itself. In total, I collected 58 pages of notes. I treated the notes as a further type of collected data and subjected them to open coding according to the procedures of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), which I adopted throughout the project. After generating detailed open codes, I proceeded with axial coding, centering around codes related to categories of power and control during the interview. The main category that emerged from the data was the negotiation of power between me (as the researcher) and the interviewees. In this article, I present the category of negotiation of power in chronological order as it emerged (before, during, and after the interview) and by pointing out its subcategories and properties.

Results

I define the category of negotiation of power between me (as the researcher) and the study participants, as derived from data analysis, as the mutual attunement occurring during the interactions involved in planning, conducting, and analyzing a remote qualitative interview. I construe the term "negotiation" broadly, both as verbal explicit communication (e.g., persuading, proposing solutions, asking, pressuring, demanding, requiring something, controlling, agreeing, refusing) and implicit communication (e.g., by subtly steering the conversation towards or away from a particular theme, choice of words, refraining from asking questions, delaying answers, remaining silent). I also construe "negotiation" through non-verbal messages (e.g., facial expressions, body movements reflecting emotions) or the specific actions (e.g., breaking up a conversation, turning on background masking) of each interaction partner. Negotiations pertain to individual elements of the interview situation and are subject to situational and temporal changes. Their result is the acquisition/sharing/giving up of control over a particular aspect of the interaction by its participants (me as the researcher and the interviewee). As a result, the power in the interview situation resembles a mosaic, as the partners have different degrees of control over different aspects of the interview situation (e.g., they may be particularly interested in gaining control over a certain facet thereof, whereas they may not be interested in gaining control over another) in its successive phases.

Negotiation of Power Prior to the Interview

The negotiation of power between me and the (still potential) participants began with our first contact and proceeded through two subprocesses: mutual identification of the position held and negotiation of the terms of the interview.

The first contact was via email: the women would respond to my email interview proposal, or they would initiate contact themselves, either by writing to my email address (which they received from someone whom I had already interviewed) or from the sex workers-led collective. As it turned out later, potential participants usually browsed for my name on the internet before contacting me to see how I had previously spoken and written about sexual services. If possible, they would also discuss prospective engagement in my research with friends I had already interviewed. Thus, by the time we exchanged even one email, the interviewees usually already had a lot of information about me and my study. This was somewhat uncomfortable for me as I had limited control over what information was shared in the conversations and what the interviewees came across on the Internet themselves. I also had no means of reacting to or correcting any misconceptions about me. Nonetheless, the findings of the potential interviewees' examination (screening) of who I am may have been crucial in their decision to enroll in the study (see Reich, 2015). They sought to minimize interview risks by assessing whether I could be trusted, whether I adopted the right (from their perspective) research assumptions (e.g., rejecting the concept of sex work as deviant) and whether the results of my research would be useful to them (if only as an argument in the prostitution vs. sex work debate).

Gathering information about the researcher before deciding to participate in the study seems to be particularly important for representatives of stigmatized groups who are afraid to participate in the research process because they do not want to be judged. They are only willing to participate on their own terms, upon verifying that they will get along with the researcher (see Reich, 2015). In my study, if the women were knowledgeable (e.g., as instructed by colleagues, my previous interviewees) of how previous interviews played out, the negotiation stage was shorter. However, if this information was insufficient for them, potential participants engaged in multiple email exchanges in which they inquired about issues of importance to

them. Compared to the interviews with sex workers I had conducted face-to-face in earlier years, online interviewees asked (both prior to the commencement of the interview as well as thereafter) far more questions about me and my views on sexual services, my motives behind launching the study and its purpose, the rules governing its execution, and plans for disseminating the results. I never heard many of these questions from interviewees in traditional interviews. At the same time, the potential interviewees took strategic positions towards me. Although they asked me many questions, they themselves were reticent to reveal information about themselves, which worried me, as I was concerned about their openness during the interview. I could not find out much from the email and Skype addresses the interviewees chose to contact me. Typically, they shared the email they used for sex work. If it was a private address, it was one of several they had, seldom used, and rather not for conversations with friends or family. In some cases, the address contained first and last names, giving the impression of real data disclosure, but the names turned out to be pseudonyms, as revealed during interviews. The Skype account usually contained a different pseudonym than the email and involved current or past sex work usage. Some accounts sported an (erotic) profile picture, but usually, the woman's face could not be seen. At this stage, there was a clear disparity of background knowledge between the interaction partners: while the participants gathered information about me directly from me, my previous interlocutors, or by internet searches, I relied solely on what they themselves were willing to tell me, hoping to learn more during the interview.

During the exchange of emails, we also negotiated the terms of participation in the study. Because of the participant-centered approach, I did not prepare a uniform agreement for everyone. We negotiated the terms of the interview individually to make it comfortable for the participants (within the guidelines of the ethics committee that approved the study).

The timing of the meeting was also a subject of negotiation. The women usually came up with the date and time of the meeting themselves, arranging it so that they could give the interview in conditions that were comfortable for them (in the absence of third parties or in the presence of someone supportive) or scheduled around their working hours. Thus, interviews were held at very different times (e.g., before noon, but also late at night). I adjusted my work schedule to these times and looked for a suitable place where I could conduct the interview.

By comparison with the face-to-face interviews completed earlier, I discussed ethical issues much more thoroughly with the participants. The dynamics of an in-person meeting, sometimes in not-so-intimate conditions (e.g., a workplace or public place) meant that the participants usually listened to the information, but rarely asked anything. Now it was different – many interviewees inquired about various aspects of the study, including anonymity, interview authorization, data storage, and use. It was advantageous that all our arrangements were archived in an email, especially since I did not employ formal agreements due to the interviewees' concern for anonymity and obtained consent for participation by email or verbally during the interview. Meanwhile, the interviewees tended to take their time responding to my emails, leaving me unsure whether they were pondering the reply, had opted out, or were simply busy. I was under the impression that I was constantly waiting for emails, and although I responded promptly, it was the interviewees who determined the pace of the exchange, its content, and the outcome.

The prolonged stage of decision-making by the women on whether to participate in the study was also the testing ground of the first subtle interactional negotiations between us. It was the women who decided whether they would continue the contact when they would send a response and whether my proposals suited them. Irrespective of whether the numerous questions from the participants were driven by their sense of insecurity about the interview or by the fact that they felt safer asking questions online, I perceive it as an advantage of the

mediated communication that this stage proceeded at a pace set by the participants and in a setting that was safe for them.

By my willingness to clarify and negotiate, not pressing for an answer, and accept their pace of communication, I let the interviewees know that they had the time and room to decide. In my opinion, such an unhurried pace of terms negotiation enhanced the women's agency and allowed them to feel confident about their participation.

Negotiation of Power in Over-the-Phone and Skype Interviews

During the interview stage, there were key power transitions within the relationship between me (as the researcher) and the participants. I describe them in terms of control over specific dimensions of the interview.

Control over the Technical Side of the Interview

In an online interview, researchers are often concerned about the interviewee's equipment and internet connection quality. In my research, however, this asymmetry was reversed. The interviewees had better equipment and faster internet than I did. This was because many of them, at least some of the time, worked as camgirls and had a high-quality camera, computer, and connection. They were also more proficient in using VOIP. In my opinion, this made a big difference in our relationship, as the interviewees assumed the role of competent participants in the interaction, which reduced the power distance between us from the outset. Along the same lines, any technical troubles were an opportunity to "activate" their expert role. For example, one of the interviewees helped me solve an audio transmission problem that prevented us from starting the interview since she had similar situations in the past. Such incidents brought us closer together because they required a shared commitment to making the quality of the interaction the best it could be (cf. also Krouwel et al., 2019; Weller, 2015). So, while neither party controlled the technical aspects of the interview, both were involved in the ongoing monitoring of call quality and troubleshooting, regardless of which side was affected. Likewise, delays, especially in vision transmission, which did occur and were related to the speed of the internet connection, required some work, attentiveness, and focus on both sides to properly interpret our non-verbal responses. This fostered greater democratization of the research, as both sides struggled with analogous difficulties.

Selection of and Control over the Interview Venue

The research participants had control over where they were interviewed. In most situations, I didn't know where they were because they didn't explain whether they were in their apartment, at their workplace, or, at a significant other's home. With their camera turned off, I was left clueless. However, the interview location was also a variable for me. I conducted interviews from whichever place was available (including my car) in view of the current family situation, pandemic restrictions, and non-standard interview times. Neither did I always keep the interviewer in the know as to where I was currently located. It is my opinion that handling the interview location helped bridge the power distance and made us alike in our often subcomfortable residential circumstances.

Skype interviews afforded the interviewees control over what I would and would not see, from deciding whether to turn on the camera during the interview. In hindsight, there was a rule in place that, once the women would not turn the camera on when answering my Skype call, they would leave it off till the end of the interview. In consequence, none of the reluctant interviewees was prompted to change their original decision to conceal themselves or their

surroundings, regardless of how the interview progressed. If the camera was turned on at the beginning, it remained on throughout the interview. The interviews during which my camera was on and my interviewees remained unseen made me feel uncomfortable. For this reason, I usually followed the interviewee's decision to turn the camera on or off, and, as a result, our positions were symmetrical.

The interviewees who did use the camera did not apply any background masking software; they were usually seated on the bed or at the table showing wide frame views (not just their faces). So, I could see the interiors of the room they were in, notice the furnishings, and assess its size. One of the interviewees gave me a tour (going around all the rooms with a laptop in her hand) of the apartment she was staying in, which she rented for her sex work. The interviewees were eager to show their pets, which was a relaxing break from talking about difficult issues. Unlike some researchers (e.g., Whale, 2017), I didn't ask the interviewees questions about what I saw in their apartments unless they started talking about it themselves. In this way, I wanted to respect their right to give me as much information as they saw fit, especially since a sense of anonymity was important to them. I didn't use background-masking programs myself either. My only interference with what the interviewees would see was when I removed the notes containing the interview guidelines from their fields of view. This allowed me to discreetly access them without distracting the interviewees. It is worth noting that none of them asked me questions about my space. Thus, it can be said that we tacitly and independently adopted the assumption of "not noticing" the space, which "only came forth" when one of the individuals wanted to pay attention to it.

Although it was the interviewees who chose the venue and timing of the interview, in 6 cases there were other people (siblings, partner[s], roommate[s]) in the apartment during the interview. There were also several occasions when they interfered with the interview (e.g., a roommate entered the room to borrow something, and a brother swung the door open to see if the interview was over). From my perspective, third-party interruptions provided additional information (e.g., whether that person knew about sex work). There were also instances when the persons interrupting contributed to the interview, providing additional information on some thread of the interview, as they were also sex workers. Initially, I interpreted these occurrences as limiting the participants' control over the interview situation. However, upon reflection, I realized that all the appearing subjects had been advised by the interviewee about the fact of pursuing sex work, the interview, and its topic. Thus, it can be assumed that, by arranging a specific day and time for the interview, the interviewees were aware that there might be a virtual meeting between me and these individuals, and this was not a problem for them. From this perspective, therefore, the risk of curbing their control was negligible.

Control over Interview Engagement vs. Multitasking

Some of the interviewees, especially those who had the camera on, were completely focused on the interview. However, some of those who had the camera off or were on the phone were perhaps engaged in other activities apart from answering questions (cf. also Falter et al., 2022; Lobe et al., 2020). In the case of one interview, the sound of nails being filed could be heard in the background, while during another the sounds of dinner being prepared could be heard. It is difficult to determine conclusively whether these activities were indulged in by the interviewees themselves or by those in the room with them, and why they were occurring specifically during the interview. Contrary to appearances, this did not negatively affect the answers given, which were extensive and saturated. For this reason, I did not respond to these actions. In another interview, during a prolonged conversation with me, the interviewee postponed her next meeting, a fact of which she informed me after the conclusion of our interview. Since it was a phone interview, I was completely unaware of the moment and the

way she contacted her next appointment. The fact that I did not know exactly what was going on in the interviewee's room makes it difficult to interpret such situations and showcases the fact that I had very limited control over the interview situation. Then again - if the results are excellent in terms of data quality, perhaps one should just accept such diminished control.

Controlling the Temporal Dimension of the Interview

As I have mentioned, the interviews were lengthy, and since we were not constrained by commuting issues, we treated the interview time flexibly. The timing of the end of the interview (unless we saturated the topic beforehand) was usually determined by another scheduled activity of the interviewee (not mine, I sought to ensure ample time to take the most out of the participant's involvement) or by her roommates' return. On several occasions, we arranged for a follow-up meeting at another time, and all these meetings came to pass. There were no instances of cancellations or unjustified postponements of interviews. The two instances of postponement related to unexpected circumstances on the part of the interviewees and the interviews were held at the closest available date (e.g., the same day, albeit late at night). Thus, the interviewees did not abuse their power, although they were the ones who had more control over the temporal dimension of the interview. It was an area of flexible negotiation, though with more sensitivity to their needs and abilities.

Control over the Course of the Conversation

Throughout the interviews, I assumed the role of an apprentice by design, trying to inquire and learn as much as possible from the interlocutor - an expert with respect to her experience. In view of the theme of the interviews - the stigma around sex work experienced by the interviewees - I asked open-ended questions, carefully deepening them and dropping topics that the interviewees were not ready to answer. I followed the same approach in my previous face-to-face interviews with sex workers. In consequence, I gleaned in-depth data, containing personal confessions and disclosures regardless of whether the interviews were held in audio only or mixed audio-video modality.

What distinguished the remote interviews from the in-person interviews I had previously conducted was that throughout the interview, the interviewees posed multiple questions about my motivations, experiences, or opinions, which upended the traditional polarity of roles (the researcher asks, the interviewee answers). This may have arisen from the rapport established. In my opinion, however, this was also due to the mode of the interview and the fact that there was not much power asymmetry between us. The interviewees defined themselves as peers in the interaction.

The intimate ambience of the interview, with each of us remaining in our own private spaces, while being able to see each other's faces rather closely (akin to facing each other in face-to-face interviews; Weller, 2015), was also conducive to my own disclosures. In many of the interviews, I spontaneously talked about myself in passing on various themes. This helped build rapport and made me feel at ease, although it was not a planned or thought-out strategy and could lead (both sides) to over-disclosure.

Thus, the interviewees embarked on various actions to tailor the interview situation to their needs. This corresponded with my efforts to carry out interviews of the highest possible quality in such a way that the interviewees felt comfortable. It is worth noting, however, that I was the one who initiated the recording and brought it to a close. The attribution of specific interactional measures to the researcher may result in the interviewee's expectation of direction and control of the interaction on the researcher's part, even if only at certain times. In no

instance did an interviewee ask to stop the recording (for a moment or altogether), or, alternatively, ask to delete a portion of the transcription at the authorization stage.

Post-Interview Negotiations of Power

At the post-interview stage, the interviewees were unlikely to actively negotiate the power relationship in our interactions and were willing to exercise it passively (e.g., by refusing to write back to an email). I interpret this as an expression of their ability to decide for themselves how much they would remain involved in the project.

Post-Interview Contact

After each interview, we exchanged emails for interview authorization in the most sparing version, and, in the most expanded version, for coverage of additional threads not raised during the meeting. This stage varied greatly, depending on the interviewee. Although I followed up with all of them in a similar manner, I exchanged numerous emails with some participants, while the contact broke off quickly with others, and it is hard to say whether they were discouraged by a particular question, lost interest in the study, or perhaps did not have time to continue participating. As a result, it was difficult for me to say at which point the contact ceased. This is all the truer given that the interaction can still be potentially resumed (cf. also Gruber et al., 2020). Indeed, it was not uncommon for me to receive an email, even a long time after the interview, from a participant, in which she would revisit a thread, follow up on it, or solicit information. Our research relationships can thus be considered suspended, rather than definitively terminated, although it is up to the interviewees to decide when to revive them.

Control over the Collected Data

Because the interviews were recorded using a dedicated Skype functionality, both parties had equal access to the interview recording (including emails, of course), which would be rather rare in traditional research conducted face-to-face. Thus, the data was not the sole property of the researcher (me) who would exert ultimate control over it. However, while I did ask the interviewees for permission to use the data for research purposes, I did not agree with them on how they would use the recordings and transcriptions. Neither did the interviewees at any stage address the issue. I also have no knowledge of whether they used them at all, and if so, how they used them. Potentially, they could have compared the recordings with my transcriptions (and thus controlled my work), shared them with relatives, etc. Each interviewee was given a file with the interview transcription for authorization, and some of the women sent their comments regarding the removal of certain information they had revealed in the interview. We agreed on the wording of these passages in email communication. However, some of the interviewees did not send the interview authorization, although this was usually an important part of negotiating consent for the interview. It is hard for me to ascertain whether they grew so trusting of me during the interview that they no longer felt the need for authorization, did not want to go back over their statements, or did not regularly check the accounts (email, as well as Skype) they used for the study, which were usually not their main accounts. The lack of feedback may also have simply been an expression of the desire to discontinue contact.

Control over Data Interpretation

By continuing remote communication, participants can also be included in data analysis. I have not done so (yet), but I asked some of the interviewees about my interpretations

of the content from the interviews. I exchanged a few more emails with some women in this regard, while others did not respond. Contact thus ceased gradually, either through decreasing frequency of email exchanges, or suddenly, without explanation or notice.

It should be noted that involving participants in the interpretation and analysis stage is difficult, even in fully collaborative research (Bröer et al., 2016). It is usually up to the researcher alone to decide what and how much to include in the report and publication (Ross, 2017). Thus, it remains a challenge (for me, but also for the research community more broadly) to break the asymmetrical relationship between the researcher and the participant during data analysis.

In summary, the power relations in the interviews changed dynamically - from intense negotiations at the beginning of our interactions to power shifts during the interview, to passive rather than active use of power in the final stages of our interactions. On neither side were their open expressions of power imposing the party's will. Rather, there were more subtle shifts, based on negotiating, proposing, asking, and suspending contact (on the part of the interviewees). Both sides also manifested their vulnerability through disclosure, joint work and solving technical difficulties, interpretive efforts when social cues were limited, or mutual recognition of each other's roles (mine of the researcher-apprentice, theirs of the research participants-expert). In my opinion, the interviewees did not feel that they were the weaker side of the interaction, as evidenced by their sense of agency, self-awareness, and active profile during interviews (although it is possible for the participants to have interpreted our relationship differently).

Discussion

Many researchers who adopt VoIP technology for interviews note that participants are appreciative of "rapport, convenience, and simplicity and user-friendliness" of remote interviews (Archibald et al., 2019, p. 4; Gray et al., 2020; Valdez & Gubrium, 2020) and even prefer online interviews when given a choice of methods (Archibald et al., 2019; Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). This is especially true for participants with pre-study experiences of using a specific platform for synchronous videoconferencing (Halliday et al., 2021). An interesting interpretation was put forth by D. M. Hoffman (2009) in conceptualizing the types of communicative preferences of participants. D. M. Hoffman (2009) notes that it is up to the researcher to decide which method to use to collect data. Whenever the project allows for the implementation of several methods for the achievement of the desired results, researchers choose the one that is most convenient for them, consistent with their communicative preferences, which are often unarticulated and undiscussed (Hoffman, 2009).

Providing interviewees with a choice of communicative channel is thus an action towards changing the power relations in the interview. It is an expression of the fact that the researcher recognizes the diversity of communicative preferences of the participants and is willing to account for them in the design of the study for the sake of the participants' comfort. Like communication preferences, interviewees potentially also have preferences in terms of the distribution of power in the interview, and for at least some of them, the ability to negotiate it flexibly in remote interviews might be crucial to consenting to and being comfortable with participation.

It is my contention that it is advantageous to consider the diverse communication preferences of interviewees and their different sensitivities to the balance of power in an interview upon deciding on a data collection method for a project. Although mediated interviews may not play out equally well in all projects, they may be the preferred mode of participation for some participants, including groups experiencing stigmatization and marginalization (Gruber et al., 2020; Hanna, 2012; Jenner & Myers, 2019; Sipes et al., 2019).

The flexible form of technology-mediated qualitative interviews, in which participants can engage on their own terms, may not only be important within the context of the interview but also more broadly in terms of their empowerment and recognition of participants' right of self-determination. It can be of importance to bring the "moments of empowerment" of the interviewees also to other stages of the research process over which the participants have less influence (Ross, 2017). Such actions can particularly give them an edge in negotiating and enforcing the ethical terms of the interview, which is valuable for researchers who wish to put the ethics of care into practice.

It is advisable to point out some limitations of my research that may have influenced the results. Many authors note that limiting factors for participation in online research may include age, financial situation, health, or, more broadly, digital exclusion of potential participants (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Foley, 2021; Lo Iacono et al., 2016; Melis Cin et al., 2023; Self, 2021; Sullivan, 2012). Enrolled in my study was a specific sample of interviewees, i.e., young, well-educated, and technologically literate women with expertise in online sex work. The freedom with which they navigated the online world helped to maintain the "contextual naturalness" of the study (Linabary & Hamel, 2017). At the same time, they may have felt more comfortable communicating online than other groups of interviewees and, as a result, were more likely to participate in the study (Falter et al., 2022). Also, the recruitment methods I used (snowballing and the support of a sex worker-led organization) may have been more effective than other ways of finding interviewees online.

The research participants were very sensitive to the issue of power distribution in interactions and had extensive experience in negotiating it (including in online settings) with clients. They also suffered repeated violations of pre-negotiated rules and were familiar with interaction partners' attempts to impose their power. They did not explicitly associate phone and Skype conversations with private chitchat, as is often the case with other categories of participants (Weller, 2015), but also associated such conversations with the context of dealing with clients. Remote interviews may therefore have reinforced their willingness to negotiate power in their interactions with me. Perhaps, then, my interviewees proved more assertive than other categories of interviewees, and from the outset of our interactions braced themselves to determine the terms of the interview that suited them, ask for details, and make a conscious decision to participate. Such negotiations were a staple for the participants (practiced when negotiating the rules of interaction during sex work). I was the one who had to come to terms with it. Likewise, the elaborate phase of profiling my position may also have resulted from the interlocutors' professional experience and desire to gather as much relevant information about me as possible in order to decide whether it was worth agreeing to a meeting (analogous to when interacting with potential clients). This phase might have proceeded otherwise had my own and my interviewees' experiences of negotiating power in interactions been different.

I conducted this study under distinct circumstances, during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in Poland, marked by the most stringent restrictions on movement and social contact that were later gradually relaxed. The positive reactions of the participants (their agreement to participate in the study and their great openness during the interviews) may have been related to the fact that some of them were not providing sexual services during this period (and thus had time to talk), and all of them wanted to share their thoughts and experiences during this difficult time. The interviewees also enjoyed a robust internet connection and the residential freedom to be interviewed in conditions that they felt comfortable with. At a different point in time, and with less favorable venue conditions (Self, 2021; Valdez & Gubrium, 2020), the results of the online interview could have been different.

On a closing note, drawing on my research experience and the literature, I would like to offer the observation that researchers have become more reliant on remote communication and mediated interviews in research practice. It is advisable to consider such a scenario in

advance and obtain the ethics committee's clearance for both in-person and virtual interviews, depending on the preferences of the research participants. In effect, at least some interviewees will feel more comfortable and secure throughout their interaction with the researcher, which may also translate into the quality of the data collected.

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